

## The impact of a local thematic focus on community building activities in rural villages

Der Einfluss eines lokalen thematischen Fokus auf gemeinschaftsfördernde Aktivitäten in ländlichen Ortschaften

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### Summary

For some rural villages branding by using a thematic focus has proven a strategy to succeed in the competition of locations, inter alia, by strengthening social cohesion. The present investigation checks whether the effect of consolidating community through concentrating on a subject actually occurs.

Based on document analyses, 6 expert and 260 standardized interviews with inhabitants, three themed and three non-themed places in north-eastern Lower Austria ("Weinviertel") were compared.

Statistical analyses show significant higher participation in associations (2.73 vs 1.84 memberships/inhabitant) and events (25.58 vs 17.50 visits of events per year) among the inhabitants of themed places. Nonetheless this does not say anything about the direction of causality. It remains unclear whether a thematic focus encourages community building activities or vice versa.

**Keywords:** themed places, rural villages, community building activities, participation, place branding

### Zusammenfassung

Für einige Ortschaften bot die Etablierung als Themenort eine geeignete Strategie, um sich, etwa durch Stärkung des sozialen Zusammenhalts, im Standortwettbewerb zu behaupten.

Die vorliegende Untersuchung ermittelt, ob der durch die Fokussierung auf ein Thema erwünschte gemeinschaftsfestigende Effekt tatsächlich eintritt.

Auf Basis einer Dokumentenanalyse, 6 Experteninterviews und 260 standardisierten Interviews mit EinwohnerInnen wurden im Weinviertel (nordöstliches Niederösterreich) jeweils drei Orte mit sowie ohne Themenzuweisung verglichen. EinwohnerInnen von Themenorten beteiligen sich signifikant öfter an Vereinigungen (2,73 vs 1,84 Vereinsmitgliedschaften pro EinwohnerIn) und Veranstaltungen (25,58 vs 17,5 Veranstaltungsbesuche im Jahr). Diese Ergebnisse sagen allerdings nichts über die Richtung der Kausalität aus. Es bleibt ungeklärt, ob ein thematischer Schwerpunkt gemeinschaftsfördernde Aktivitäten nun begünstigt oder ob dies eher umgekehrt der Fall ist.

**Schlagerworte:** ländliche Ortschaften, Themenorte, Standortmarketing, gemeinschaftsschaffende Aktivitäten, ländliche Ortschaften

## 1. Introduction

“Territorial competition” induces regions to keep and attract inhabitants, companies as well as visitors all over Europe. To distinguish themselves various locations develop a mostly similar supply of infrastructural facilities. This leads to a growing resemblance of these places, they become interchangeable (DELAMAIDE, 1994, JENSSEN and RICHARDSSON, 2003, cited in HOSPERS, 2004, 271; HORLINGS and MARSDEN, 2012, 1). A strategy to succeed in this competitive situation would be to focus on the unique identity of a place (CHRISTMANN, 2008, 2f). Thus, the Lower Austrian government launched the initiative “Themed places – villages, towns and regions with future and profile” in 2000 which was implemented by the Village Renewal Association in 2003 and serves as supplement to regional development approaches as e.g. by the LEADER Program (NIEDERÖSTERREICHISCHE DORF&STADTERNEUERUNG, s.a, s.p.). Literature offers different ways of approaching the term “themed places (FRENKEL and WALTON, 2000; TEO, 2003; CHANG, 2000), however, there is currently no overall definition. A central feature, however, seems to be the perceptible preparation of one focal point with a clearly distinguished content, both for the local population and visitors. Representatives of the respective places choose one topic and stage it,

for instance through the scape of the places, marketing elements or themed events (SÄCHSISCHES LANDESAMT FÜR UMWELT, LANDWIRTSCHAFT UND GEOLOGIE, 2010, 4). Places participating in the initiative “themed places” are supported by the Lower Austrian Village Renewal Association, when implementing projects which enable a more in-depth establishment of their chosen theme (BIRKIGT and THIEME, 2006, 6). Besides the term “themed places” also the measuring of the effect caused by their establishing has not been clearly defined yet: “The complex value creation process which characterises place branding also creates difficulties in the measurement of performance” (HANKINSON, 2015, 25). Therefore this investigation focusses on just a small, but easy measurable aspect out of this intricate issue. The central question becomes: How do places with a thematic focus differ from places without one, particularly considering the intensity of community building activities?

Themed places facilitate the identification with a location based on the assumption that identification with something is just possible if an identity was attributed to the object beforehand (STONE, 1962, 90). However, according to SCHRAMM (2003, 21) in most cases the identification with a place is not just a confessing without further consequences, it rather serves as a sort of action premise. Villagers who share a strong regional identity endeavour to express their group identity and loyalty in public, among other things through participating in local community building activities (WEICHHART, 1990, 72). Against this background the investigation aims to examine whether this desired effect actually occurs throughout the localities participating in the initiative “themed places”.

Regarding the definition of community building activities these investigation consults HAINZ's (1998, 149ff) classification of activities inside a village which comprises three basic forms:

- Events of the whole community (e.g. village fairs): organized deliberately; rather rare in most cases annually.
- Events within the group (e.g. internal activities of local associations): organized deliberately; mostly weekly.
- Informal gatherings (e.g. a chat on the street): unorganized, result of incidental meetings in public space.

This study focuses on events and associations, “informal gatherings” were not addressed.

## 2. Investigation area

An area was determined where different sized themed places as well as structurally similar places affected by comparable spatial conditions could be found. The choice fell on the “Weinviertel”, the most north-eastern part of Lower Austria. Based on their number of inhabitants a small themed village, one of themed village of middle size as well as a themed town were selected out of all Lower Austrian “themed places” taking part in the initiative. Subsequently three – preferably near and similar sized – compatible places were chosen (table 1), each of them showing the same distance to Austria’s capital city (about 70 km) based on the assumption that the diverse cultural and leisure program of a big city like Vienna might pull off people from associations’ activities.

Tab. 1: Population size of the investigated places

themed places				non-themed places		
places' name	theme	inhabitants 2011	agricultural quota*	places' name	inhabitants 2011	agricultural quota*
Wilhelmsdorf	herbs	53	9.7%	Reikersdorf	45	9.7%
Hanfthal	hemp	573	3.4%	Obritz	552	10.7%
Poysdorf	wine	2,559	7.8%	Zistersdorf	2,816	5.8%

\*of the whole belonging political municipality

Source: OWN RESEARCH based on STATISTIK AUSTRIA, s.a.

## 3. Material and methods

The empirical collection, consisting of document analyses, interviews with local experts and a questionnaire survey (figure 1), lasted from April 2015 to July 2015. After a quantitative data collection through a document analysis the expert interviews brought in a qualitative approach. Based on a guideline they treated social cohabitation, the future of the village community, the perception of the village by others and community building activities.

The interviews were followed by a standardized questionnaire survey containing four main modules: village life and the personal bonding to ones place of residence, membership and activities concerning local associations, events and sociodemographic characteristics. Questions

were classified in open (12 non-themed respectively 13 themed places), 14 closed and 2 semi-open questions as well as 1 Likert Scale.

A complete survey was conducted in the two smallest villages while in all other places a quota sample of at least 50 participants was picked, based on sex and age. The data analysis was performed by the statistic programme SPSS. Differences between themed places and places without a thematic focus were tested for significance with a t-test.

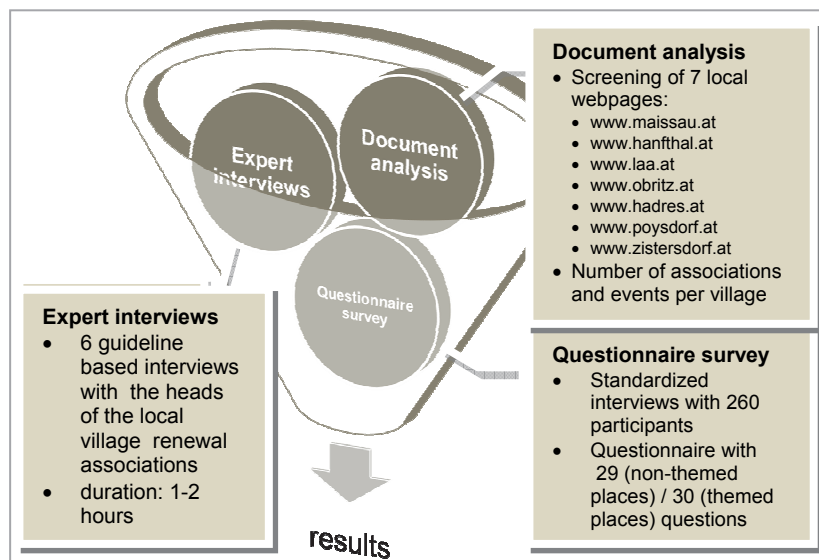


Fig. 1: Applied Methods

The number of associations identified through the webpages was supplemented by associations added in the questionnaire by the participating inhabitants. Every group mentioned was included, that is not only associations with respect to Austrian law, but also more informal groups. The number of events was firstly identified on the communities' webpages and completed by information from the interviews with local experts.

#### 4. Results

Themed places have a bigger supply of associations in relation to their population size compared to non-themed places. Regarding events table 2 shows that in relation to the number of inhabitants more events are taking place in the themed places.

Tab. 2: Number of associations and events 2015 in the case study area

places		number of associations	number of inhabitants /association	number of events 2015	number of inhabitants /event
<b>themed</b>	Wilhelmsdorf	4	13,25	7	7,57
	Hanfthal	21	27,28	60	9,55
	Poysdorf	38	67,34	~ 230	11,13
<b>total</b>		63	Ø 35,96	~ 297	Ø 9,42
<b>non-themed</b>	Reikersdorf	4	11,25	0	-
	Obritz	13	44,08	12	46,00
	Zistersdorf	39	72,21	~ 100	28,16
<b>total</b>		56	Ø 42,51	~ 112	Ø 24,72

Source: OWN RESEARCH, 2015

Also the willingness of the citizens to actually take part in community building activities provided by a place was examined by raising memberships and activities regarding associations. Respondents were designated members of associations if they described themselves as part of it. Being actively involved in an association meant spending time for it, regardless of a formal membership.

Tab. 3: Membership and activity concerning associations

places	Ø memberships of associations/inhabitant			Ø number of associations inhabitants are active in		
	inside the village	outside the village	in total	inside the village	outside the village	in total
themed	1,65**	0,47	2,73**	1,55*	0,31	1,86*
non-themed	0,98**	0,44	1,84**	1,07*	0,33	1,40*
<b>total</b>	1,32	0,45	2,29	1,31	0,32	1,63

“\*”: significant at 5% level, “\*\*”: significant at 1% level

Source: OWN RESEARCH, 2015

People living in themed places show a significant higher number of memberships in associations inside the village as well as in associations overall and are also active in significantly more associations inside the village and altogether. Whereas concerning the activity outside the village the inhabitants of non-themed places are leading (table 3).

Tab. 4: Frequency of activity in associations and of visited events

places	Ø number of associations an inhabitant is active in		Ø number of events visited/inhabitant		
	more than once a month	once per month or less often	inside the village	outside the village	in total
themed	0,60*	1,26	10,72**	14,60	28,58**
non-themed	0,40*	0,99	6,28**	11,02	17,50**
<b>total</b>	0,50	1,13	8,47	12,79	21,50

“\*”: significant at 5% level, “\*\*”: significant at 1% level

Source: OWN RESEARCH, 2015

Inhabitants of themed places are generally more active in associations and also participate more frequently. They also visit significantly more events inside their hometown and also in general than residents of non-themed places (table 4).

## 5. Discussion

The approach for comparing places was selected because of the shortage of data concerning the places' development processes. A reconstruction of the past was impossible, thus not allowing a comparison with the initial situation. The results indicate that the population of themed places is overall more engaged in community building activities. However, this has to be interpreted with caution, due to the fact that the sample collection does not completely fulfil the required randomness.

Already undertaken studies on this subject show similar results. An evaluation project of the Lower Austrian initiative “Themed places” carried out in 2001 showed that in 57% of the participants indicated that the establishment of a themed place induced citizens to an active

involvement in their community. 50% stated that it revived the voluntarily engagement of the population (BRUNMAYR, 2000, 106). Also a German survey stated that thematic orientation causes an intensive civil participation (BIRKIGT and THIEME, 2006, 6). Apart from generally higher activity in community building offers the results show a significant affinity towards activities in their own villages amongst the residents of themed places. These results resemble the statements provided by literature (STONE, 1962; SCHRAMM, 2003; WEICHHART, 1990). However, while there is a significant positive link between places with a thematic focus and the participation in community building activities the cause-effect relationship remains unanswered. While the studies cited above emphasize the positive effect of the establishment of themed places on the activity of their inhabitants, there are statements which underline the importance of an innately active population as success factor in creating a themed place. A German guideline for establishing themed places states that such projects require a lot of willing and perseverant participants as a precondition (SÄCHSISCHES LANDESAMT FÜR UMWELT, LANDWIRTSCHAFT UND GEOLOGIE, 2010, 26). In their statements about place branding KAVARATZIS and HATCH also come to the conclusion that the successful establishment of a brand requires active stakeholders (KAVARATZIS 2009, 27ff; KAVARATZIS and HATCH 2013, 70ff). Members of associations are especially suited as a study by CURTISS and ŠKARABELOVÁ (2015, 374) emphasizes: "With an average score of 4.24 out of 5, the mayors mostly agree with the opinion that members of local NPOs participate more actively in the municipality's social life than do non-members".

## 6. Conclusions

The examined themed places (herbs, hemp and wine) provide more associations and events. Furthermore their inhabitants show a significant higher participation in the offered activities. Compared to non-themed places there are significant more memberships and activities in associations and people also show their activity more frequently. As subject for further research remains the question if greater involvement in associations reflects a denser interweaving of local activities regarding regional development processes.



While this investigation could detect a positive link between an established themed place and the participation in community building activities by its inhabitants, the cause-effect relationship was not explored. However, regardless of the causality's direction, the own findings show that the strategy of focusing a theme as leitmotif of the places' local development, represents an important ideally approach for rural development in general. For apparently themed places develop a variety of effects as supporting participation, consolidating identity, endorsing place marketing and as well as the population's commitment, with a minimal input of public resources.

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