

FRAMING A GENDER-NEUTRAL PLACE BRAND MODEL: THE CASE OF 'DOLL VILLAGE' IN INDIA

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Abstract

Gender perspective has been widely discussed in scholarly literature in connection with place branding. While assigning personality to 'places as branded entities' the socially constructed gender norms were often used. Empirical studies have showcased the gender power ascribed to places in stimulating decision-making and pulling visitors. However, society, as it is in constant flux, is drifting away from ubiquitous norms governing gender and sexuality and challenging the conventional gender identities and sexual orientation. These perceived value-shift has reflected in the marketing aspects as brands were stripped off its gender identity. Modern brands do not embody the aspirational notions of consumers, but are also reflective of social movements. This study focuses on developing a gender-neutral place brand model with intangible cultural heritage (ICH) as the core place asset. Prior studies have shown that traditional crafts and craftsmanship as ICH could be used to promote a place. However, ICH has not been considered as a place branding element that could neutralize gender perception for a place. The study was conducted at Natungram, a village in the district of West Bengal, India, known for its legacy of crafting wooden dolls. The study used a mixed method research (MMR) approach and used crossover analysis framework to assess the data. Five gender-neutral brand dimensions were identified, namely relational, participative, sensory, behavioural and cognitive with a 16 scale-item instrument being validated through confirmatory factor analysis. The spatial and phenomonal segregation index also confirmed a predominant gender-neutral perception amongst the visitors. Much of this could be attributed to the participation of the stakeholders of ICH of Natungram irrespective of their gender identity. This gender blurring effect also reflected in visitors' engagement in co-creation activities which conformed with the theory of immersive experience. The study implicates In future this study could be expanded to incorporate other place assets which could be moulded into non-binary brand elements and should be conducted in other places with unique assets to check the transferability of the present study.

Keywords: Gender; Heritage; Place branding; Co-creation; Ubiquitous.

ELABORANDO UM MODELO DE MARCA DE LUGAR GÊNERO-NEUTRO: O CASO DE 'DOLL VILLAGE' NA ÍNDIA

Resumo

A perspectiva de gênero tem sido amplamente discutida na literatura acadêmica em conexão com a marcação de lugares. Enquanto se atribui personalidade a 'lugares como entidades marcadas', as normas de gênero socialmente construídas são frequentemente utilizadas. Estudos empíricos têm mostrado o poder de gênero atribuído aos lugares em estimular a tomada de decisões e atrair visitantes. No entanto, a sociedade, em constante mudança, está se afastando das normas ubíquas que regem o gênero e a sexualidade, desafiando as identidades de gênero convencionais e a orientação sexual. Essa mudança percebida de valores tem refletido nos aspectos de marketing, já que as marcas foram despojadas de sua identidade de gênero. As marcas modernas não apenas incorporam as noções aspiracionais dos consumidores, mas também são reflexo dos movimentos sociais. Este estudo concentra-se no desenvolvimento de um modelo de marca de lugar gênero-neutro com patrimônio cultural intangível (PCI) como o ativo central do lugar. Estudos anteriores mostraram que artesanatos tradicionais e habilidades manuais como PCI poderiam ser usados para promover um lugar. No entanto, o PCI não foi considerado como um elemento de marca de lugar que poderia neutralizar a percepção de gênero para um local. O estudo foi conduzido em Natungram, uma vila no distrito de West Bengal, Índia, conhecida por sua herança na confecção de bonecas de madeira. O estudo usou uma abordagem de pesquisa de método misto (RMM) e usou uma estrutura de análise cruzada para avaliar os dados. Foram identificadas cinco dimensões de marca gênero-neutro, nomeadamente relacional, participativa, sensorial, comportamental e cognitiva, com um instrumento de 16 itens de escala validado por meio de análise fatorial confirmatória. O índice de segregação espacial e fenomenal também confirmou uma percepção predominante de gênero-neutro entre os visitantes. Grande parte disso pode ser atribuída à participação dos stakeholders do PCI de Natungram, independentemente de sua identidade de gênero. Esse efeito de embaçamento de gênero também se refletiu no envolvimento dos visitantes em atividades de co-criação, o que se alinha com a teoria da experiência imersiva. O estudo implica que, no futuro, este estudo pode ser expandido para incorporar outros ativos do local que poderiam ser moldados em elementos de marca não-binários e deve ser conduzido em outros lugares com ativos únicos para verificar a transferibilidade do presente estudo.

Palavras-chave: Gênero; Patrimônio; Marcação de lugar; Co-criação; Ubíquo.

CREACIÓN DE UN MODELO DE MARCA DE LUGAR NEUTRO DESDE EL PUNTO DE VISTA DEL GÉNERO: EL CASO DE "DOLL VILLAGE" EN LA INDIA

Resumen

La perspectiva de género se ha debatido ampliamente en la literatura académica en relación con la marca de lugar. Al asignar personalidad a los "lugares como entidades de marca", se han utilizado a menudo las normas de género construídas socialmente. Los estudios empíricos han puesto de manifiesto el poder de género atribuído a los lugares a la hora de estimular la toma de decisiones y atraer visitantes. Sin embargo, la sociedad, en constante cambio, se está alejando de las omnipresentes normas que rigen el género y la sexualidad y desafía las identidades de género y la orientación sexual convencionales. Este cambio de valores percibido se ha reflejado en los aspectos de marketing, ya que las marcas se han despojado de su identidad de género. Las marcas modernas no encarnan las nociones aspiracionales de los consumidores, sino que también reflejan los movimientos sociales. Este estudio se centra en el desarrollo de un modelo de marca de lugar neutro desde el punto de vista del género con el patrimonio cultural inmaterial (PCI) como principal activo del lugar. Estudios anteriores han demostrado que la artesanía tradicional puede utilizarse para promocionar un lugar. Sin embargo, el PCI no se ha considerado como un elemento de marca de lugar que pueda neutralizar la percepción de género de un lugar. El estudio se llevó a cabo en Natungram, un pueblo del distrito de Bengala Occidental, India, conocido por su legado de artesanía de muñecas de madera. El estudio utilizó un enfoque de investigación de método mixto (MMR) y empleó un marco de análisis cruzado para evaluar los datos. Se identificaron cinco dimensiones de marca neutras desde el punto de vista del género, a saber, relacional, participativa, sensorial, conductual y cognitiva, con un instrumento de 16 ítems de escala que se validó mediante un análisis factorial confirmatorio. El índice de segregación espacial y fenoménica también confirmó una percepción predominante de neutralidad de género entre los visitantes. Gran parte de ello podría atribuirse a la participación de las partes interesadas en el PCI de Natungram, independientemente de su identidad de género. Este efecto de desdibujamiento de género también se reflejó en la participación de los visitantes en actividades de co-creación que se ajustaban a la teoría de la experiencia inmersiva. En el futuro, este estudio podría ampliarse para incorporar otros activos del lugar que pudieran moldearse como elementos de marca no binarios, y debería llevarse a cabo en otros lugares con activos únicos para comprobar la transferibilidad del presente estudio.

Palabras clave: Palabras clave: Género; Patrimonio; Marca de lugar; Co-creación; Ubicuidad.



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1 INTRODUCTION

Place branding has got extensive scholarly attention as the competition to lure visitors intensified (Lim, Chung and Weaver, 2012; Pan, Lu and Zhang, 2012;). Apart from the core place attributes, such as landscape, etho-cultural spread, heritage significance etc., gender traits have emerged as useful positioning elements for place branding (Cowan and Spielmann, 2017). Individuals use the 'gender' label to process and assign meanings to the entities around them based on 'self-concept' (Neale, Robbie and Martin, 2016).

Gender branding articulates around 'self-concept', which embeds gender identity, and facilitates product assessments (Carter, 2014). The theory of anthropomorphic branding, too, considered evaluation of brands from gender perspective and observed that brand choice synchronises with gender identity. Empirical studies have also established link between travel motives and gender identity of places (Pan, Zhang, Gursoy and Lu, 2017; Pan, Zhang and Gursoy, 2020) leading to the development of place loyalty (Burkley, Wong and Bell, 2016).

However, the shift in age-old norms governing gender and sexuality demanded a new perspective in brand research (Johnson, 2016; Jourian, 2015). The transhumanistic approach elevated this demand to the technology platform. Facebook, in 2014, introduced a list of 58 gender options which included 'gender neutral' option for possible relationships on non-binary ground (Goldman, 2014; Molloy, 2014).

Gender fluidity emerged as the central brand positioning theme as social influencers (celebrities, reference groups etc.) started rejecting the gender-tags and challenged the socially constructed gender roles. Globally, a number of product categories, namely, toys, garments and personal-care products were ripped off their gender images. The fashion industry, in particular, did not conform to the normative gender roles as renowned models started endorsing unisex/agender cloth-line.

The recreation industry was not far behind as we witnessed Emma Watson winning the first gender-neutral MTV movie and TV award. The stereotypical models of gender-based brands became more culturally complex and the gaps between the identity positions (masculine and feminine) widened (Klasson and Ulver, 2015). The term 'non-binary' or 'genderqueer' disrupted the gender dichotomy and formed overlapping layers of gender identity (pangender), multiple gender (androgynous), genderless (agender), moving gender identity (gender-fluid) and third gender (transgender).

Place branding has yet to make a shift from the traditional form of branding. However, the scope to position places, with unique culture and heritage, on a non-branded platform is immense. The patronization and preservation of culture and heritage does refer to gender inclusivity. Therefore, branding a place using its cultural and heritage legacy demands a gender-neutral interface.

The International Cultural Tourism Committee (2002) has drafted principles to conceptualize branding in the context of cultural heritage. The immersive experience of the heritage customers is at the core of the operational framework for branding based on culture as they pass through the inter-connected stages of the heritage cycle proposed by Thurley (2005).

The Anholt Ipsos Nation Brand Index (AINBI) uses perceived cultural and heritage identity to measure nation brands since 2008. Brand perceptions are constructed out of culturally constituted brand architecture and are transferred through brand interactions and transactions. The diverse mix of value that distinguishes cultural tourism is increasingly channelled through branding efforts and has been acknowledged as an approach that draws on traditional ways of differentiation and signalling the unique culture-driven elements that make a place appealing to prospective tourists (Cai, Gartner, and Munar, 2009).

The operators of tourism industry consider place-branding as the critical measure to augment economic value and to ensure future streams of revenues. Branding, on the other hand, appears to structure value much beyond the realm of economic trade. The fusion of cultural tourism with the analogy of branding brings forth the values in the system-flow of the tourism operations. Culture, as an asset, has increasingly grabbed attention of the marketers, governments and other agencies as a brand element due to its interlocking with the economic value propositions (Yudice, 2003; Comaroff and Comaroff, 2009; Mortensen, 2009a, 2009b).

Cultural value percolates through the transactional exchanges and manifests in the form of know-hows, practices, knowledge and skill. Branding of places envelops these exchanges involving transgenerational craftsmanship, localized cuisines, archeological sites, scriptures and stories. This model posits value as a differentiating dimension in the context of ethnic identity, cultural embeddedness, heritage-roots while developing the reflective branded form of cultural tourism.

The recent anthropological theories revealed proliferative studies in culture-based value propositions which zeroes on dynamic process of creation, negotiation and transmission of values through complex set of exchanges (Eiss and Pedersen, 2002; Graeber, 2001; Miller, 2008). This approach propagates 'value' as 'constellation of action' (Ferry, 2013) which has been institutionalized as culture-based branding. Place brands must be culturally relatable to the target visitors as studies found that culturally similar aspects are instrumental in forming perceptual images of places (Ng, Lee and Soutar, 2007).

Poria, Reichel and Biran (2006) conducted a study in a heritage site in Amsterdam and observed that promotion of place based on its cultural and heritage assets trigger a sense of belongingness exhibited amongst the tourists in the form of greater interest to learn about the culture, emotional involvement and passing on the legacy to their children.

Cultural and emotional elements, are thus, posited as significant to develop brand image for places with cultural heritage. Augmented branded perception of destinations, based on cultural and heritage asset, was observed to be associated with visitors having knowledge of such cultural spread (Kerstetter, Confer, and Graefe, 2002).

Several studies were also taken up to assess the impact of UNESCO World Heritage (WH) branding effort. Su and Lin (2014) found that inflow of tourists increases once the places are enlisted as UNESCO WH sites. This suggested that WH listing enacted as a brand-envelopment for those places. Prior information regarding enlistment of places in UNESCO WH also stimulated choice of visitation and positive referrals.

This notion could be supported with the results of a study by Moscardo, Green and Greenberg (2001) whereby they found that more than 90% of sampled tourists had prior knowledge that the Great Barrier Reef of Australia was on the UNESCO WH list. Adie, Hall and Prayag (2017) identified two site-specific criteria (with ten criterion), namely, environmental and cultural, to assess the impact of the tourists' brand perception of places (USA, Serbia and Morocco) based on cultural identity.

The theoretical pool of place branding has seen a number of models. However, almost all models have tangible elements (tourism products and offers) at the core of the brand architecture. Balakrishnan and Kerr (2013) developed the four-dimensional place brand model with deciding, designing, delivering and determining as the dimensions. Prior to this Kerr and Braithwaite (2011) outlined culture, reputation and strategic alliance as key performance indicators for a place brand.

The Brand Prizm model of Kapferer (2013) was also used to explain place branding with six dimensional factors. The Experience Theory by Wang (2000), which observed authenticity of experience as the major value perception while interacting with abstract cultural resources, could provide a surrogated support to the construction of an ICH-based brand model. The brand-induced decision model is likely to spin around the cultural-core of a place with a manifested marker that could trigger an urge to visit (Leiper, 1990).

ICH can be a potent marker of uniqueness for a place that could be transformed into a branded entity. Cultural heritage, its preservation, restoration and promotion, represents a determinant of branding, competitiveness and soft power. The increasing flow of cultural and heritage explorers are inducing cultural wrap-up of places to form their brand images on one hand and to make it sustainable and resilient on the other. Increasing demand for culturally enriched establishments are prompting the place administrators and marketers to make their places interesting to be discovered, explored, experienced and enjoyed.

2 THEORETICAL REVIEW

2.1 Gendered place branding

Gender research, in diverse perspective, is an extensive field of study that incorporates broad-spectrum human behaviour and manifestations of emotions (Pan, Lu and Zhang, 2021; Pritchard, 2018). The gender schema theory postulates 'gender' as a lateral drag to the 'self-concept' of an individual (Lu and Hu, 2021; Lavin, 2017) which extrapolates in ascribing 'masculinity' and/ or 'femininity' to brands and thus imparts gender-aligned attributes (Ulrich, 2013).

Empirical evidences were found about the impact of brand-genders on personification of brands (Andre and Santos, 2019), cognitive alignment of 'self-concept' with brand-choice decisions (Pan et al., 2021, Andre and Santos, 2019), formation of brand-equity (Azar, Aime and Ulrich, 2018; Schnurr, 2018; Machado et al., 2019;,) and brand positioning (Lieven and Hiedelberg, 2016). Over the years the researchers have explored how gender-cues (embedded brand masculinity/femininity) were used as brand-coding elements and differentiators.

The brand-gender perceptions were triggered by the logo-shapes (angular/masculinity vs. round/femininity) (Lieven, Grohmann, Herrmann, Landwehr and Tilburg, 2015), colours (blue/masculine vs. pink/feminine) (Hess and Melnyk, 2016) and names (rear-vowels/ masculine vs. front-vowels/feminine) (Wu, Klink and Guo, 2013). Going by the gender role theory Pryzgoda and Chrisler, 2000; Burkley, Wong, and Bell, 2016;) and the 'brand-gender' concept (Grohmann, 2009), place gender has been defined as a set of masculine and feminine attributes based on which travellers perceive a place as a man or a woman (Pan et al., 2021).

In the context of place branding, gendered consumptions (both hedonic and utilitarian) have been posited as critical identifiers of the gender-identity of the place (Pan et al., 2017, Berg and Longhurst, 2003) which were observed to be antecedents of place choice Koc, Yayla, Arslanturk, and Gucer, 2018). Empirical evidence linked of Asian's female solo-travellers to risk-bearing attitude to gender identity of places (Yang, Khoo-Lattimore and Arcodia, 2018).

A few studies revealed the masculine and feminine alignment of landscapes which were deterministic of gendered preferences of places. Gendered projections of landscapes to be 'women' are based on conventional posits of 'Mother-Nature' referring to the nurturing and procreation engagements (Liu, Geng, Ye and Zhou, 2019), and are perceived as 'men' (for example the Arctic Tundra) based on the ruggedness of the terrain (Brandth & Haugen, 2005; Pritchard & Morgan, 2000).

The gendered notion of a place and its manifestation on masculine-feminine continuum needs to be decoded on the posit of 'gender' as a socially constructed progressive norm (Kacen, 2000) having strong underpinnings of cultural beliefs and heritage-spread (Palan, 2001; Avery, 2012). It is thus important to examine how culturally diverse consumers perceive destination masculinity/femininity.

However, assigning specific gender roles to places had their adverse impact on consumer behaviour. The brand gender has been deterministic of brand equity, and hence, failure to perceive place brands on a gender scale has resulted in unfavourable place choice. Culturally rich places demand a non-binary branding for its positioning in human minds. Intangible cultural heritage is a critical asset for place branding and needs to be assessed from gender perspective too.

Research have also identified marketers to go 'beyond the demographic' to propagate 'gender-neutral marketing' (Monllos, 2016). Gender identity, from its existing forms of masculinity and femininity, have expanded over a wider spectrum (Rivas, 2015). Gender-blurring has been identified in the list of top-ten consumer trends in 2016 (Alexander, 2016).

Marketers started to use gender-blurring elements for brand communication, and, thereby, disrupting conventional gender perceptions. Place branding is poised to undergo a transition from gender-envelopment to de-genderisation. Places with unique assets, such as, cultural heritage, are more likely to have a genderless image to reflect inclusive involvement of the host community to preserve and promote such assets as tourism products.

2.2 Place branding using intangible cultural heritage (ICH)

Literature has examined the possibilities, specificities, and hazards of place branding in depth (Anholt, 2007; Braun,

2008; Govers and Go, 2009; Lucarelli and Berg, 2011). The complexity involved in embedding a place as a branded entity (Kavaratzis and Ashworth, 2005) and the lack of control over this entity (Braun, 2008) have surfaced in various research. Multi-sensory branding frameworks were tried out to capture the essence of a place as a brand element.

Prior research has also argued that a standardised model of place branding is difficult to adopt considering the uniqueness associated with different places (Kavaratzis and Kalandides, 2015). Study conducted by Mariutti, Giraldo, and Crescitelli (2013) emphasized on cultural diversity and ambiguity while assessing the brand image of Brazil as a place. Legacy-based place branding has shifted from a finance-driven approach toward a more social and inclusive one (Boisen et al 2018).

Places, with its cultural roots and ethnic spreads, are a complex system which integrates the stakeholders with the core offer. Place branding related to urban establishments is a dynamic process and can be considered as a major challenge (Maitland, 2019). Rural areas, with cultural heritage (both tangible and intangible) provide opportunities for authentic, unspoiled, transgenerational practices/ rituals/ festivals (Mitropoulou and Spilanis, 2020).

The perceptual identity of these kind of rural establishments are influenced by its cultural heritage and traditions which can be used as branding elements (Watt, 2000). Creativity and creative entrepreneurship that fosters patronization of culture-based craft practices, traditional festivals etc. are linked with the identity of a place and could play a significant role in place branding (Sarantakou, Tsartas and Bonarou, 2018; Bonarou, Sarantakou and Tsartas, 2019).

ICH provides a cultural content to a place that can be used for constructing the brand narratives. ICH also transforms place branding by shifting the focus from visual interactions to experiential bliss. The ICH repository can lend credibility and an assurance of experiential quality and authenticity to cultural experiences. This could be considered as a new dimension in place branding.

Since ICH takes form through an evolutionary intervention of the people involved as craftsmen or artisans, a major cog-in-the-wheel in the place brand concept. Artisans play a significant role in the value addition. Conceptually, a brand is stretched beyond its product-centred reality, for culturally shaped products, namely crafts, the artisans share a functional purpose with the brands (Upadhyay, 2018). The vehicular impact of artisan in the story-telling aspects of culture and its transgenerational practice could be impactful in shaping an ICH brand specific to a place.

The value of an artisan is reflected in the brand concept which essentially has culture and heritage at its core. Branding of places having significant ICH repository calls for a non-binary view based on artisan (as androgynous entity) and the carried over legacy of craftsmanship. Brand communication under such brand-neutral situation is challenging and demands an equity-based brand model that would substantiate the non-binary stance. Gendered brand personification creates a skewed image of places and intervenes with the hedonic engagement, often repulsive, to places with distinctive cultural and ethnic appeal.

2.3 Gender neutrality in place branding

Non-binary branding initiatives tried to capture the notion of brand neutrality moving beyond the masculine/feminine perspectives on consumers (Catterall, Maclaran and Stevens, 2005; Bettany, Dobscha, Malley and Prothero, 2010). Anthropomorphic branding imparted 'human-like characteristics' in inanimate brands (Van Tilburg, Lieven and Herrmann, 2015) which put brand-gender association in focal position.

The brand-gender association in the context of culturally sensitive place needs an androgynous face to reflect its demography. Contemporary place branding uses the abstraction of 'brands-as-humans' to communicate with consumers and the gender identity gets revealed based on the assets of the place. For example, landscape has been widely used as gender-codes to wrap places with branded identity and consequently it impacted the brand equity (value pool generated by a brand).

Places with strong ICH asset could avoid gender traits and stereotyping while communicating with potent visitors. Study conducted by Stevens and Ostberg (2012) revealed lack of subversive strategies that challenges gender roles ascribed to places and over generalize normative masculinity and femininity. Gendered segmentation continued to be the lens through which the researchers have postulated the branding approaches based on the gender binary (Haryani and Motwani, 2015; Kraljević and Filipović, 2017; Kim and Yim, 2018).

Researches have continued to perpetuate branding approaches based on gendered segmentation and the established stereotypes of normative gender binary (Haryani and Motwani, 2015; Kraljević and Filipović, 2017; Kim and Yim, 2018). Lavin, Yang and Zhao (2017), however, illustrated how culture and heritage were captured and represented in embodied androgyny and non-binary gender in Chinese context. Chao (2017) argued that unisexuality could transform heteronormative codes of gendered performance.

In a study conducted by Rahamani and Messaoudene (2021) the Algerian public spaces were assessed for gender neutrality based on the cultural dimensions of Hofstede, Hofstede and Minkov (2005). These researches raise the awareness of the need of more feminist and different gender approaches to brand places since marketing of these brands is perpetuating inequality. The interconnections between production and consumption of place brands intermediated with gendered labelling are still not clarified.

One of the branding approaches that has started using the non-binary concept, has been grounded on technology. Technology, as an interface, has a gender-neutral appeal. Transhumanism and posthumanism considered alignment of human perception along a 'characterless' (genderless) brand using technology as the intermediary.

While transhumanistic approach propagates the idea of 'singularity' (Smart and Smart, 2021) of machine-laced genderless products and brands (such as use of virtual reality, gamification, augmented reality etc.), posthumanism rejects and transcends the inadequacies transhumanism and anthropocentrism in portraying brands as gender-neutral entity (Curran and Smart, 2020). More (2003) provided an initial scaffold of brand architecture based on transhumanism.

He used the theory of 'extropianism' to identify five principles of transhumanistic brands, namely 'boundless-expansion', 'self-transformation', 'dynamic-optimism', 'intelligent technology' and 'spontaneous order'. The principle of self-transformation expands the theory of self-congruity (Sirgy and Su, 2000) and puts forward the emerging notion of gender-fluidity while exploring synchronization between 'self-concept' with projected brand personality.

Akdevelioglu, Hansen and Venkatesh (2021) observed that wearable technologies are fostering 'quantified self', a cultural phenomenon emphasizing personal development through self-tracking. The use of mobile technology and social media have given rise to a brand-community which is declining to perceive gendered brand. However, both transhumanistic and posthumanistic approaches were not used to assess the possibilities of projecting places with genderless identities.

This study focuses on developing a gender-neutral place brand model for a place of ICH significance. The study, empirical in nature, will identify the dimensions of a gender-neutral place brand and will attempt to bridge the gender divide in the context of place branding.

The theoretical framework for the study is based on the following research questions:

- a) Does places with tourism significance need gendered identity?
- b) Does gendered identity assigned to places play a role in place branding?
- c) Can gender neutrality evolve as perceived brand element for places with cultural and heritage assets?

Review of literature did not reveal much of theoretical constructs that could directly be linked with the research questions. Hence, the theoretical framework was articulated by surrogating a number of theories that could lay the epistemological foundation of the study.

We drew on the theory of anthropomorphic branding (Ahuvia, Batra and Bagozzi, 2009) and theory of transhumanistic marketing (Smart and Smart, 2021) to understand the deviations in branding concept from its conventional practices. Theory of self-congruence (Sirgy and Su, 2012) was also considered to lend support to the self-aspect of the brand user. The gender schema theory, which postulated 'gender' as a lateral drag to the 'self-concept' of an individual (Lu and Hu, 2021; Lavin, 2017) and implicated 'masculinity' and/ or 'femininity' to brands (Ulrich, 2013) was also considered for the study.

2.4 Case study: Natungram – the Doll Village

Natungram, a remote village in the district of Purba Bardhaman, West Bengal, India has evolved as a hub of transgenerational practice of wooden crafts. The wave of Bhakti movement in Bengal during the 15th century introduced the figurines of Gour & Nitai, a pair of male dolls with their hands outstretched over their heads in a dancing pose (Fig. 1).

They represent Sri Chaitanya Mahaprabhu (Gour) and his close disciple Nityananda. Another divine doll, Gopinath, the guardian deity of Agradwip, a town near the Bardhaman-Nadia border. Probably it was the royal influence (Burdwan is a former royal kingdom of Bengal) that introduced the

making of soldier dolls. As a homage to the patronization by the king of Bardhaman, the artisans made the idols popularly known as the 'Raja-Rani' pair.

But the most popular is the 'pair of owlets', with its origin rooted in the Hindu religion as many Hindu families still worship a pair of painted wooden owls to seek the blessings of Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth. The owls are painted with bright red, green and yellow on a white base, with black used to paint the eyes and other features. The pair of owlets symbolises the branded content of the ICH carried over by almost three hundred households in Natungram as their primary livelihood.

The artisans are the Hindus having the surname as **Bhaskar**, meaning sculptor or **Sutradhar**, meaning the story teller. Natungram has been identified as the 'doll village'. Inflow of tourists has increased considerable over the last decade or so. The India State Government has formed a handicraft cluster along with a training workshop and a guest house to accommodate tourists.

The traditional craftsmanship is continuing with the introduction of new artefacts which are in great demand in both domestic and overseas market. The tourists could identify Natungram as the dolls' village and the produce as the Natungram doll. Therefore, the place branding has, in its core, the practice and acknowledgement of ICH and the crafts as the tangible output.

The tourists could interact with the artisans and their family members in their own homes and could see them producing an art-work from the scratch. The manner in which branding serves to organize resources in Natungram under particular cultural forms, namely, delimiting value for focused sets of experience, lived space, narratives of intangible cultural heritage, and cultural discourses, deserve much more attention.



Figure 1. Artisans of Natungram and the produce.
Source: author's pictures.

3 METHODOLOGY

The study used Mixed Method Research (MMR). The deployment of MMR could be justified with the demand of the study which essentially intended to capture the gender-neutral nature of a geo-spatial platform on one hand and intervene the sensory perceptions of the major stakeholders (artisans & craftsmen and visitors) regarding gender neutrality of the place as a 'brand' on the other. Crossover analysis

framework (CAF), developed by Hitchcock and Onwuegbuzie (2020), was used to study the multi-layered inquiry (into social phenomenon. CAF targeted to generate the meta inferences based on vertical analysis of data which ensures intersectionality of qualitative and quantitative data inputs.

For the qualitative phase of the study, interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) was used to identify the dimensional spread of gendered (male/female/neutral) perception of the Natungram place (Dahlberg and Dahlberg, 2019b). The study used phenomenological interviews to gather thick descriptions of lived-in experience of interacting with ICH and the manner in which a pre-reflective, pre-conscious mode of branded entity shaped up.

These interviews were targeted to generate textual content based on in-depth interactions and collect comprehensive descriptions. Semi-structured questionnaires (schedule) were used with probing questions to supplement additional information mining. Participants were free to talk and expand without interrupting.

Taking cue from the conversation the researchers summarized, rephrased, probed and asked follow-up questions and whether there was anything further (Dahlberg and Dahlberg, 2020). The quantitative phase of the study used the content-validated construct derived from the qualitative phase.

The study adopted application-based literature-mining using MaxQda to identify gender-neutral brand elements (based on words/phrases/terms/expressions used by the interviewees) for places having ICH significance (Canli et al., 2017; Hajdas, 2017;; Pasquinelli, 2017). The items for content validation were extracted from previous studies (Lu and Hu, 2021; Pan et al., 2021; Rahmani and Messaoudene, 2021; Pan, Lu and Gursoy, 2020; Azar, Aime and Ulrich, 2018). The two-dimensional brand-gender scale proposed by Grohmann (2009) was used to understand and identify the gender-neutral attributes that could be used to brand Natungram as a place of ICH tourism.

Grohman (2209) measured brand-masculinity using terms, namely, brave, aggressive, daring, sturdy, adventurous and dominant; while brand-femininity was captured through fragility, tenderness, grace, sensitivity and sweetness. The study was focused to identify a model of androgynous brand with high-masculinity/ high-femininity to stimulate a perception of a non-binary image which could confirm a gender-neutral identity.

The first phase, used qualitative method to develop the brand model, was from November, 2019 to March, 2020. The second phase, used quantitative method to test the model, was conducted between November, 2021 and March, 2022.

Natungram has 347 households who are engaged in the traditional wooden doll making. The initial screening for sample selection filtered out all those households who were reluctant to participate in the interview and survey process. Thus 249 household was obtained. Systematic random sampling (SRS) was applied with k=5 and we obtained 50 households as samples. For the quantitative study, considering the volatile nature of the visitors, we used the formula proposed by Levy and Lemeshow (2013):

$$n = \frac{Z\alpha^2 \times P \times Q}{L^2}$$

where,
 n = sample size required
 Z α = standard normal distribution with α at 5% = 1.96
 P = Prevalence of Outcome, 50% for unknown population
 Q = 1 – P
 L = Level of accuracy, 10%
 Computing for the required sample size we got:

$$n = \frac{(1.96)^2 \times (0.5) \times (0.5)}{(0.1)^2} = 96.4$$

We decided to fix the sample size to 100 considering the minimum sample size requirement to be 97.

4 RESULTS ANALYSIS

The demographic details were represented for both the artisans of Natungram and the visitors of the place in Table 1.

Table 1. Demographic details of the samples of Natungram.

Demographic parameters	Artisans		Visitors		
Gender	Male	28	56%	48	48%
	Female	22	44%	52	52%
	Other	00	00%	00	00%
Age	18 to 30 years	11	22%	31	31%
	> 30 ≤ 45 years	19	38%	35	35%
	> 45 years	20	40%	34	34%
Marital status	Married	31	62%	37	37%
	Unmarried	19	38%	63	63%
Education	High school	28	56%	04	04%
	Graduation	19	38%	78	78%
	Post-graduation and above	03	06%	18	18%

Source: own elaboration.

4.1 Analysis of interview transcripts

MaxQda application tool was used for the thematic content analysis of the in-depth interview transcripts. A lexical search was conducted to identify the contexts in which words/terminologies/ phrases were used by the respondents. Lexical analysis offered a link between the in-depth coding of qualitative data and the statistical analysis of quantitative data by offering an semantic means of coding, recoding, and selective interpretations of responses in an iterative cycle.

The coding system was developed as per Morgan and Hoffman (2018). An evaluative and scaling content analysis (Kuckartz, 2014; Mayring, 2019) was deployed to add evaluative codes for measurement. A total of 529 coded segments were created with 32 codes which included 18 sub-codes. The Code Matrix Browser function was used to create a 'Interviewee x Topic matrix' which revealed the distribution of codes across the 50 respondents (artisans and craftsmen).

The intersectionality confirmed the pattern distribution of response amongst the participants in the interview process. The Code Configuration tool was used to identify the combinatorial occurrence of codes which could be used for dimensional/ clustering function.

The major combinations observed for clustering were 'cultural sensitivity + gender detachment' (10.6%), 'co-creation + gender detachment' (6.8%), 'non gender stereotyped communication + self-image' (5.5%), 'brand love + cultural affinity' (4.2%), 'sensory gratification + gender equality' (4.1%), 'heritage rootedness + transhumanism' (3.8%), 'nostalgic attachment + non-gender place perception' (3.3%), 'self congruence + place atmospherics' (2.9%) 'brand love + heritage rootedness' (2.5%) and 'gender detachment + immersive experience'.

Latent dirichlett allocation (LDA)-based topic modeling was done to deduce the latent variables from the dataset (interview transcripts). LDA-based topic modeling was used to understand the response-generated content of gender-neutral perception of Natungram as an ICH tourism destination/ place.

A topic model number was defined by applying the measure of perplexity and coherence parameters and labeling for each topic was selected based on the observed keywords and representative documents. Word tokenization was done to analyze the text dataset (interview transcript) as a morpheme, converting it into smallest unit of meaning using natural language processing (NLP) (Khurana, Koli, Khatter and Singh, 2022). Stop-words were removed following appropriate protocol (Nabli et al, 2018).

Resulting set of text retained nouns and adjectives after word lemmatization, maintaining the basic lexical form of the word after removal of the inflectional endings. The top 25 words were listed in Table-2 based on frequency and term frequency-inverse term document frequency (TF-IDF). The TF-IDF works by calculating the most frequent terms in a document, and then weighting these terms by how "unique" they are to a given data.

Table 2. Text frequency and TF-IDF scores.

Words	Frequency	TF-IDF
Gender	93	3.0
ICH	87	2.1
Equal	81	2.7
Participation	78	3.2
Nostalgia	62	1.8
Transgenerational	51	0.9
Neutral	48	4.1
Story	39	2.4
Advocacy	31	1.4
Social	29	2.2
Practices	27	1.9
Festivals	25	1.8
Initiatives	19	1.9
Relationship	18	3.5
Attraction	17	2.0
Heritage	17	3.8
Root	16	1.4
Cultural	16	2.3
Interest	16	1.1
Preservation	14	1.7
Communication	13	3.1
Message	12	2.9
Memories	12	3.7
Sensitivity	12	2.4
Environment	10	1.6

Source: own elaboration.

The coherence score and perplexity score were assessed to evaluate the optimal number of topics as quantitative diagnostic metrics. The coherence score measures how frequently the top keywords of each topic co-occur to identify which of the top words contributes the most relevant information to the given topic (Blair et al., 2020).

The perplexity score indicated whether the topics are properly classified. It is assumed that smaller the value, better is the probability of data-content reflected by the topic (Ingilis and Foster, 2018). The topics with smaller perplexity and larger coherence values are more semantically consistent. The LDA-based model achieved significance based on coherence and perplexity scores (k=15) (Table-3).

Table 3. LDA based Topic Modeling results.

Topic	Key-words (top 5)	Coherence Score	Perplexity Score
Gender participation	women as designers, decision making, genderless preservation initiatives, customer handling, crafting	0.71	- 6.2
Immersive experience	authenticity, interaction, visits,	0.67	- 6.9
Visitor engagement	co-creation, festivals, rituals, story telling, advocacy	0.59	- 7.4
Visitor-advocacy	recommend, speak, share, suggest, story	0.51	- 8.1
ICH significance	transgenerational practice, heritage rootedness, wooden dolls, history, cultural image	0.44	- 8.9

Source: own elaboration.

The extracted topics were found to be well reflected in the code system. We used MaxMaps to assess the Single-Case Model (Fig.2) which had a document system, namely, Gender-neutral brand perception (constructed on the basis of interview responses from the craftsmen and artisans of Natungram) at the centre of the analysis. The gender-neutral brand perception was found to be connected with the codes, namely, 'brand love', 'self-image', 'co-creation', 'heritage rootedness', 'gender equality', 'gender detachment', 'brand preferences and 'transhumanism'. The maximum number of coded-segments were connected to 'brand love' (34) followed by 'self-image' (33), 'heritage rootedness' (28) and 'co-creation' (24).

A Two-Case Model (Fig.-4) thematically revealed the gender-neutral brand elements and the requirement of a non gender-stereotyped communication to clarify the brand's positioning. While self-congruence and transhumanistic approaches were found to be exclusive to develop brand-neutral character, brand-love, heritage rootedness (for places with ICH significance), self-image, gender equality, co-creation and gender detachment were observed to have antecedent link with gender-neutral brand interface.

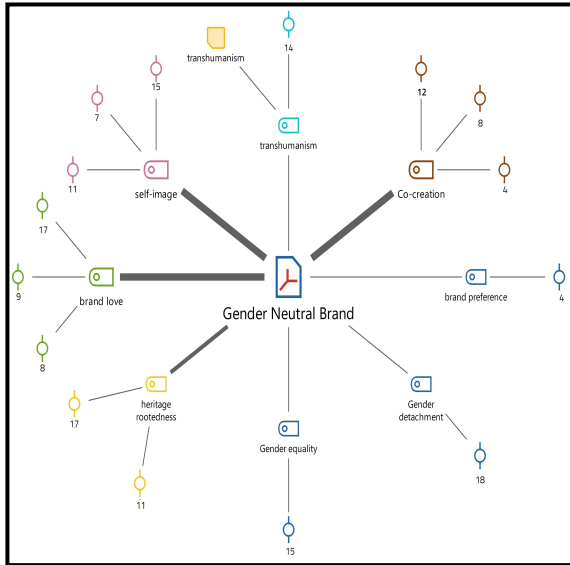


Figure 2. Single-case Model.
 Source: own elaboration.

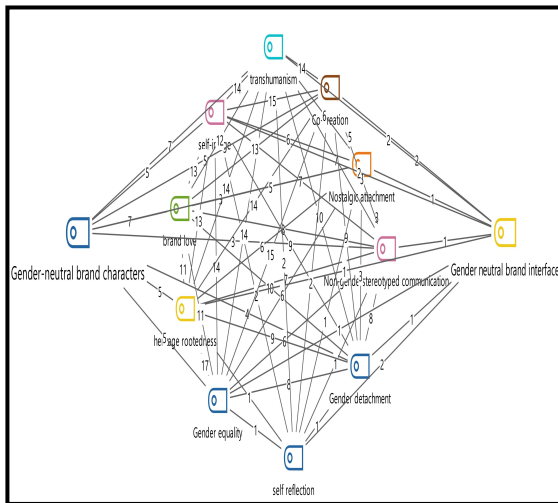


Figure 3. Code-cluster network based on code co-occurrences.
 Source: own elaboration.

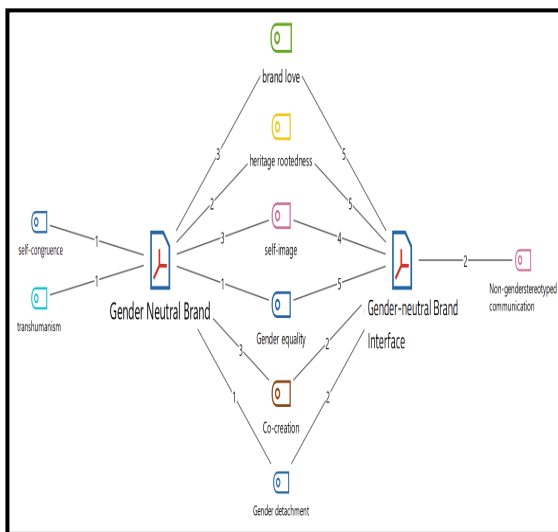


Figure 4. Two-case model linking gender-neutral brand concept with gender-neutral brand interface.
 Source: own elaboration.

Five perceived gender-neutral brand dimensions were finalized based on the qualitative and cross-over analysis (LDA topic modeling), namely, relational (self-image), participative (co-creation), sensory, (brand love), behavioural (gender-neutral communication and advocacy) and cognitive (gender-detachment).

For the quantitative validation we generated twenty-four (24) items aligned with the initially identified perceived gender-neutral brand dimensions. The study used an eight-member expert panel for content validation. The content validation was done using the 'universal agreement' process. Both item-level content validity index (I-CVI) and scale-level content validity index (S-CVI) were found to be significant (0.89 and 0.91 respectively) (Polit and Beck, 2006).

The final construct had eighteen (18) scale items. A structured questionnaire was developed using the 18 scale items fitted with a 5-point interval scale. The scale items were mounted on gendered and gender-neutral attributes to measure the spatial segregation. The survey data was analysed with SPSS.

The internal consistency of the scale was found to be significant with Cronbach's alpha measuring 0.893. Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was deployed to assess the measurement model using AMOS. This operation reduced the scale items to 16. The absolute, incremental and parsimonious fit indices of the model for measuring the perceived brand-neutral argued for good adjustments in relation to generally accepted standards. (Hu and Bentler 1999) (Table-4).

Table 4. CFA results.

Indices	Indices validation scores	Validation thresholds
Absolute indices	CMIN = 349.871	
	P-associated=0.000	1 to 2
	GFI = 0.941	>.0.9
	AGFI = 0.918	>.0.9
	RMR = 0.051	< 0.08
Incremental fit indices	SRMR = 0.048	< 0.05
	RMSEA = 0.044	< 0.05
	CFI = 0.942	>.0.9
	NFI = 0.932	>.0.9
Parsimony fit indices	RFI = 0.903	>.0.9
	IFI = 0.929	>.0.9
	TLI = 0.921	>.0.9
	Normed Chi-square = 1.971	1 to 3

Source: own elaboration.

The spatial and phenomenal segregation was done based on the model of Schelling (1971) and the simulation was performed using Frank's simulation programme, in accordance with McCown's (2014) observations. Hypothesis framed was as follows:

H0: There is no significant difference between perceived gendered and gender-neutral place brand in the context of Natungram ICH tourism place.

H1: There is significant difference between gendered and gender-neutral place brand perception in the context of Natungram ICH tourism place.

To calculate the segregation index of the phenomenal

spatiality for Natungram, we assigned a score of one (1) to the gendered and zero (0) to the gender-neutral scale-items. The index of spatial and phenomenal segregation was calculated by dividing the sum by five (number of identified dimensions). The index ranged from zero (0) (completely gender neutral place brand perception – total inclusion) to 1 (completely gendered place brand perception-toal inclusion). Index score of >0.50 was fixed to interpret Natungram as a gendered place and further study would be recommended to identify the gender orientation (masculine/ feminine).

The result of the spatial and phenomenal segregation index is equal to 0.2 (Table-5) for Natungram which provided the researcher to infer the place gender of Natungram to be more aligned with gender-neutrality rather than gendered.

Table 5. Index of spatial and phenomenal segregation of Natungram.

Dimensional components		Natungram	
		Index score allocation	Retained hypothesis
By gendered/ gender-neutral category	<i>Relational</i>	0	H0
	<i>Participative</i>	0	H0
	<i>Sensory</i>	1	H1
	<i>Behavioural</i>	0	H0
	<i>Cognitive</i>	0	H0
Spatial and phenomenal segregation index	<i>Perceived space</i>	0.20	H0

Source: own elaboration.

We applied spatial and phenomenal segregation indices using Frank McCown's simulation (2014) and Shelling's model (Schelling, 1971) to obtain the spatial distribution visuals of both gendered and gender-neutral place perceptions of Natungram. In Fig. the red, blue and white blocks represented gendered place perception, gender-neutral place perception and empty spaces respectively. The input data corresponds to the responses on gendered/ gender-neutral place perception from the sample (28%/72%)

The empty space is set at 20% for Natungram. The 'similar' parameter was kept at 25%. Fig. represented the simulation output. We find a dominant distribution of blue blocks which was indicative of gender-neutral perception of Natungram as a place of ICH tourism.

Simulation by Frank McCown

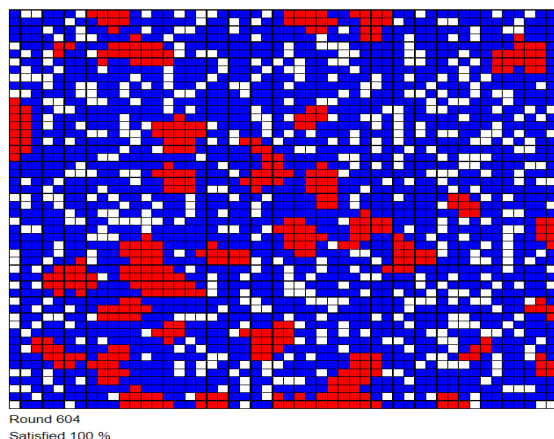


Figure 5. Frank McCowan simulation model for spatial and phenomenal segregation of Natungram.

Source: own elaboration.

4.2 Discussion of the Data

The study intended to develop a gender-neutral brand model in the context of Natungram, the 'doll village' with rich ICH legacy Transgenerational practice of craft and the sense of pride associated with it enacts as a placebo for all such individuals who are engaged with the practice and interact with the same (Russo and Van der Burg, 2010). The epistemological foundation of the study was built on the theories of anthropomorphism (Ahuvia, Batra and Bagozzi, 2009; MacInnis and Folkes, 2017; Tuškej and Podnar, 2018;), theory of transhumanistic marketing (Smart and Smart, 2021) and theory of self-congruence (Sirgy and Su, 2012).

Further, the study considered the implications of gender role in removing gender-stereotyping and promoting gender equality in the context of ICH as posited by the United Nations. We used the LDA-based topic modeling which extracted five latent topics from the corpus of data (interview transcripts), namely, gender participation (coherence score-0.71/ perplexity score- 6.2), immersive experience (coherence score-0.67/ perplexity score -6.9), visitor engagement ((coherence score-0.59/ perplexity score -7.4), visitor advocacy (coherence score-0.51/ perplexity score -8.1) and ICH significance (coherence score-0.44/ perplexity score -8.9).

The extracted models laid the foundation for developing the dimensions of the gender-neutral place brand model for Natungram. The TF-IDF results were also significant in this context as the words and terms with the highest frequency and with maximum uniqueness were considered to frame the brand dimensions.

Thus, we developed five dimensions of gender-neutral place brand having ICH as its core tourism attraction, namely, relational (self-congruence, self-image), participative (co-creation), sensory, (brand love), behavioural (gender-neutral communication and advocacy) and cognitive (gender-detachment).

The relational dimension included the notion of self-image and self-congruence and substantiated the theory of self-congruence in the context. The phenomenon of immersive and authentic experience was reflected in the participative dimension which adequately captured the practice of co-creation and visitor integration with doll making. The sensory dimension was assigned to perceived brand love based on anthropomorphic characterization.

The behavioural dimension embedded the process of gender-neutral communication and advocacy. Gender detachment was reflected through the cognitive dimension. Based on the LDA topic modeling and the TF-IDF scores, 24 scale items were developed for the gender-neutral place brand instrument and was taken through content validation by experts. The S-CVI (0.91) and I-CVI (0.89) scores were found to be significant and 18 out of the 24 items were retained.

A two-cluster model explained the interlinkages between the gender-neutral place brand and the intended gender-neutral interface based on non-gender-stereotyped communication. This reinforced the observations of Monillos (2016) about the proliferation of genderless brand communication. The gender-neutral brand scaffold was also found to be linked with the transhumanistic approaches made by the artisans of Natungram in branding and promoting their place. Through the use of an interactive

website banglanatok.com the artisans of Natungram could portray the practice of gender inclusivity in preserving and promoting the ICH.

The CFA validated the instrument developed in the qualitative phase of the study and retained 16 out of 18 scale items used for the measurement. The spatial and phenomenal segregation results confirmed a gender-neutral perception of Natungram as a tourism place with ICH assets among the visitors.

Synthesizing both from the qualitative and quantitative outputs, a framework for gender-neutral place brand with intangible cultural heritage as place asset can be proposed as follows (Fig.6):

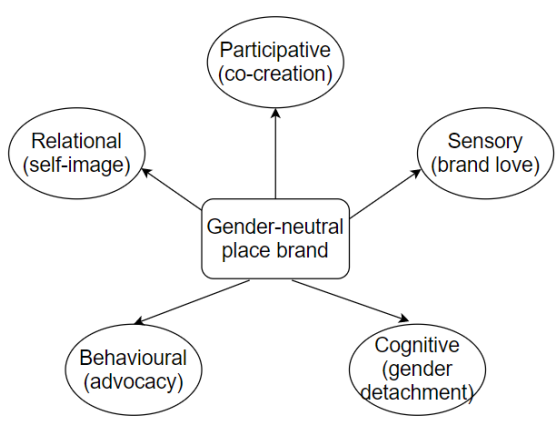


Figure 6. Simulated gender-neutral place brand model.
 Source: own elaboration.

5 FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The study intended to propose a model for gender-neutral place branding and chose Natungram, the doll-village of West Bengal, India, as a case. The core to this brand model was the unique asset of Natungram, its ICH, related to the transgenerational practice and patronization of wooden doll-making. Contemporary theories of branding have always tried to portray brand as a biotic entity and used techniques of brand-personification and anthropomorphisation to assign human-like characters to brands. While doing so, marketers have polarized themselves on the gender scale and brands either donned a masculine or a feminine appearance. Place brands also assumed specific gender roles (Pan et al., 2021). However, with the sweeping changes across the societies about gender concept, the gender-fluid models of marketing started to replace the gendered models.

The results of the case study conformed to the notion of self-congruity (Sirgy and Su, 2000), co-creation (Kavaratzis and Kalandides, 2015), transhumanism (Smart and Smart, 2021), gender-neutral communication (Monllos, 2016) and gender-detachment (Kim and Yim, 2018) which were used as stand-alone attributes in previous studies to ascribe gender-neutral characters to brands. This study focused on developing an all-inclusive gender-neutral place brand with unique place attributes to portray the gender-neutral character.

Natungram was chosen as the place with rich ICH asset which pulls millions of visitors. The thematically developed brand model for Natungram was tested for the

visitors' gender perception and was found to be gender-neutral. Academically this study contributes towards reinforcing the present trend of research and theorization of gender-neutral marketing concepts and expands specifically in place branding. The destination marketing operators/ organizations will find the model extremely useful from communication and positioning point of view.

The study was limited to a single case, namely Natungram. There are several places across the world with ICH and attracts perennial visitation. Future studies could be conducted in those places with the identified brand model to test its transferability and generalizability. The designed brand model could be expanded to cross-cultural brand equity perspective and inclusion of other unique place assets.

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Final Table. CRediT author statement

Term	Definition	Author 1	Author 2
Conceptualization	Ideas; formulation or evolution of overarching research goals and aims	√	√
Methodology	Development or design of methodology; creation of models	√	
Software	Programming, software development; designing computer programs; implementation of the computer code and supporting algorithms; testing of existing code components	√	
Validation	Verification, whether as a part of the activity or separate, of the overall replication/ reproducibility of results/experiments and other research outputs	√	√
Formal analysis	Application of statistical, mathematical, computational, or other formal techniques to analyze or synthesize study data	√	
Investigation	Conducting a research and investigation process, specifically performing the experiments, or data/evidence collection	√	√
Resources	Provision of study materials, reagents, materials, patients, laboratory samples, animals, instrumentation, computing resources, or other analysis tools	√	√
Data Curation	Management activities to annotate (produce metadata), scrub data and maintain research data (including software code, where it is necessary for interpreting the data itself) for initial use and later reuse	√	√
Writing - Original Draft	Preparation, creation and/or presentation of the published work, specifically writing the initial draft (including substantive translation)	√	
Writing - Review & Editing	Preparation, creation and/or presentation of the published work by those from the original research group, specifically critical review, commentary or revision – including pre- or postpublication stages	√	√
Visualization	Preparation, creation and/or presentation of the published work, specifically visualization/ data presentation	√	√
Supervision	Oversight and leadership responsibility for the research activity planning and execution, including mentorship external to the core team	√	√
Project administration	Management and coordination responsibility for the research activity planning and execution	√	
Funding acquisition	Acquisition of the financial support for the project leading to this publication	√	

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