

METHODOLOGICAL ISSUES IN THE STUDY OF PLACE MARKETING IN SMALL VILLAGES

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Abstract

Research purpose. Natural and economic changes in recent years have led Hungary to emphasise boosting domestic tourism. There has also been an increase in property prices in settlements near large cities, indicating an increase in the number of people wishing to settle there. These effects are putting increasing demands on municipalities, and municipal administrations need economic, management and marketing skills that are often lacking in the administration of Hungarian cities. In our previous systematic literature review, we identified four clusters of literature on publications in place marketing and place management published between 2018 and 2022. The present research aims to discuss the methodologies related to the research themes in each cluster. We aim to explore the research methods associated with each cluster and highlight the potential of methods that may have yet to be used. Our study aims to develop a methodological model that shows which areas are coupled with which methods and which ones could be used to extend research in the future.

Design / Methodology / Approach. Our research is meticulously grounded in a thematic clustering of literature selected from two reputable databases, WoS and Scopus. We conducted a systematic methodological analysis from this database, ensuring a comprehensive and unbiased view of the research landscape. We categorised the articles into thematic and methodological groups, revealing the research methods employed by the authors in each cluster. This rigorous analysis culminated in the development of a conceptual model, which provides an easily interpretable overview for future researchers.

Findings. Our results show that the research that emerges in each cluster is mainly investigated by researchers who use traditional marketing research tools. Particular emphasis is placed on interview and questionnaire research methods, as well as content analysis in the online space. Little space is given to other non-traditional methods that may also be useful. There is no correlation between the different areas and research methods. Researchers do not adapt their methodology to the field of study; instead, the methodological background of the research is determined by the problem at hand, their research framework, or their methodological knowledge.

Originality / Value / Practical implications. The methodological extension based on our study's results and the model allows researchers to move away from the most common and traditional methods of investigation and explore the field from a new perspective and with new methods. As a result of this new approach, it is possible to explore and interpret new types of results.

Keywords: place marketing, place management, research methodology.

JEL codes: M31, B41.

Introduction

Changes in recent years have led countries to focus on boosting domestic tourism. As a result, people living in large cities have turned to destinations further afield in the country rather than visiting cities and attractions close to home. The municipalities are increasingly competing to attract tourists

(Petruzzellis, 2017). Due to economic difficulties and inflation, a significant increase in house prices has been observed in Europe over the last ten years (Eurostat, 2024). In addition, it has been noted that house prices have increased in rural municipalities. One of the reasons for this is that property prices in the big cities have shifted some demand towards rural settlements.

These effects are increasing demands on local government and the need for economic, management and marketing skills that often need to be improved in small village management. The main reason is that political power relations and personal contacts are more important in the electoral process than professional skills. Thus, the small-scale management of a municipality is often forced to cope with everyday tasks, strategic decisions, project organisation, etc., without management and economic expertise. To carry out their work effectively, the management of small municipalities would need external consultancy assistance covering the areas of management, marketing, finance, strategic planning, etc. However, the fees for such consultancy services are very high, and the financial situation of small settlements needs to allow for their financing (Ott, 2022).

This research aims to map the methodological background of the research of the international studies published between 2018 and 2022. After a systematic literature review, we conducted a text analysis of the articles using NVivo software. After collecting the methodological background of the studies, we carried out single-variable statistical analyses to get a more complete picture of how the methodology of scientific studies is applied. Further visual analyses were carried out with the support of VOSviewer. Our results show that it is difficult for researchers to deviate from traditional primary research methods. Interviewing and questionnaires are still among the most common methods. However, systematic literature review, web page analysis and, in some cases, the use of models are also emerging.

Literature Review

Place marketing encompasses many different dimensions and perspectives. These include place branding, geographic and legal characteristics, and emotional attitudes (Grech, 2019). Settlement marketing is critical to attracting tourists, businesses, and investment, stimulating economic activity, and contributing to regional and urban development. It plays a significant role in sustaining infrastructure and economic growth (Maheshwari et al., 2015). Place marketing and place branding research faces many challenges. Several authors have revealed that studies are often poorly theoretically grounded, the study areas are fragmented, explanatory articles are few or incomplete, and the range of stakeholders is incomplete (Adamus-Matuszyńska & Dzik, 2023; Vuignier, 2017).

Digital marketing plays a vital role in place marketing as a modern marketing theory and methodology. It exploits the potential to influence consumer behaviour and stimulate and explore consumer opinions. Critical strategies for successful place marketing campaigns include understanding the essential characteristics of each stakeholder group. However, special attention should be paid to the fact that different marketing strategies may be appropriate in different regions (Bansal, 2023). Place marketing significantly impacts local economies. Local advertising has a positive correlation with tourism expenditures. Hotels in such locations achieve better economic results than their counterparts without external marketing support (Petrina et al., 2023). Research in any field must comply with specific ethical guidelines. These principles should be applied in the six phases of research, from the conceptualisation of the research to the evaluation of the results and the communication of the results (Ajuwon, 2020).

Research methods include the tools, processes, and techniques to answer a research question (Grech, 2019). They involve steps such as observation, questioning, hypothesis formulation, hypothesis testing, and data analysis to conclude. Several types of research methods are distinguished. We can talk about basic research and applied research. Basic research only sometimes produces results that are immediately applicable at the practical level. Primary research is driven by curiosity and the desire to expand knowledge in a particular field of research. Applied research aims to solve specific problems so that applied research results have direct practical consequences. The best way to describe the differences between applied and basic research is that basic research looks at individual cases without generalising and recognises that other variables are in constant flux. Conceptual research does not involve practical experiments. It is based on observation and analysis of existing concepts and theories. In contrast, in empirical research, the conclusions of the study are drawn strictly from concrete empirical, i.e.,

"testable" evidence. This empirical evidence can be gathered through quantitative and qualitative market research methods (Fairbrother, 2014).

Research methods determine the accuracy and consistency of a research instrument, such as a questionnaire, which is critical to ensuring valid and reliable results (Miller et al., 2023). Researchers have tremendous freedom in formulating hypotheses, designing, conducting, analysing, and reporting research. This can have an impact on the validity and reliability of research findings. Awareness of these choices is crucial to ensure the quality of research (Milewski & Roszak, 2023). In addition, cognitive biases and publication pressures can undermine scientific research's reliability, emphasising methodological rigour's importance (Campos & Pfister, 2023). Careful design and adherence to study protocols, including selecting appropriate methodology, is essential to prevent biased research results and false conclusions (Stapleton, 2019).

Research methods commonly used in settlement marketing research include both qualitative and quantitative approaches (Gonzalez-Padron et al., 2015; Helmold, 2022). Qualitative research methods contribute significantly to place marketing research by providing in-depth insights into consumers' behaviours, perceptions and attitudes towards specific places or destinations (Rauhut & Rauhut Kompaniets, 2020). Qualitative methods, such as field studies, are the preferred methodological approaches in marketing research and provide necessary suggestions for researchers interested in this field (Malodia et al., 2023). The use of qualitative techniques (case studies and qualitative interviews) in marketing research has increased, reflecting the growing interest of marketing professionals in consumers' deeply held opinions and attitudes (Frisbee & Sommers, 2013). Mixed methods research combines quantitative and qualitative approaches, thus providing a deeper and broader understanding of multifaceted phenomena (Adu et al., 2022).

Several research challenges and limitations exist in municipal marketing research. These include the need to understand the complex and dynamic world of marketing, the difficulty of understanding consumer behaviour, and the limitations of standard research methods in identifying the complex factors that influence consumer behaviour (Hailey & Ryan, 2015).

Research Methodology

The methodological basis for our research was a systematic literature review, which provides a reasonable basis for building a literature database with a consistent narrowing technique appropriate for the research objective (Xiao & Watson, 2019). In this research, only literature that meets the study criterion was considered. Based on this, the study was published between 2018-2022 in English, in the field of economics, in a journal listed in WoS or Scopus or as a full paper in a conference publication, open access and was found for the following keywords (based on clusters):

- place marketing - branding
- place marketing - destination
- place marketing - management
- place marketing - tourism.

The previous section of our research takes a unique approach to classifying studies in place marketing, identifying four major clusters: branding, destination, management, and tourism (Kádár et al., 2023; Reicher et al., 2023). Notably, we found that the topic of sustainability is not a separate cluster, but rather, it permeates all clusters (Kolnhofer-Derecskei et al., 2023). Building on these findings, our present study focuses on the last 5-year interval covered by the survey (2018-2022), examining the methodological background of published papers.

We formulated the following research questions and hypotheses:

Q1. Which research methods are used, and which target groups are studied by the researchers?

H1. Questionnaire research is the most common research method

H2. In most cases, the target group of the research is the consumer as a tourist.

Q2. Do researchers use one or more methods to explore the problem under investigation?

H3. In most research, a single method is used to investigate the area.

Q3. Does the chosen method (s) depend on the studied cluster?

H4. The methodology of researchers' studies does not depend on the cluster under study.

Three independent researchers conducted the query and evaluation in parallel. Where discrepancies had been found, they were discussed and resolved.

The first query identified 428 references in the two databases. After reviewing titles, keywords, and subject areas, 60 references were excluded from further analysis. Thus, 368 references that met the criteria listed above were identified. In the next step, it was examined whether the settlement sizes examined met the criteria. On this basis, studies dealing with metropolitan areas, cities and towns were excluded. Thus, 258 papers were published from the two databases in the four clusters. After excluding duplicates, 121 papers remained in the database due to overlap between the two databases for some journals and overlap in the keywords examined. This provided the sample for the analyses, so in the next step, the full text of the literature was downloaded and used for further analysis. For the 121 kinds of literature, the following information was collected: 1) year of publication, 2) title of journal or publication, 3) research aim, 4) research question, 5) cluster/field, 6) target population of the research, and 7) research methods used. Three researchers separately extracted information from the articles for cross-checking. After reviewing some articles together, the researchers reached a consensus on what to extract from the articles.

The analyses were conducted using NVivo 12 Plus software, which used automatic coding to analyse the abstract texts. VOSviewer software was used to perform a visualisation analysis of the 121 literature reviews. Due to the nature of the data, further analysis of the characteristics collected from the studies was carried out using MS Excel and SPSS 29 software, using simple descriptive statistical methods.

Results

Most of the literature meeting the criteria will be published in 2020 and 2022. The decline in 2021 is the effect of COVID-19, as this is a complex area to research from afar (Fig. 1).

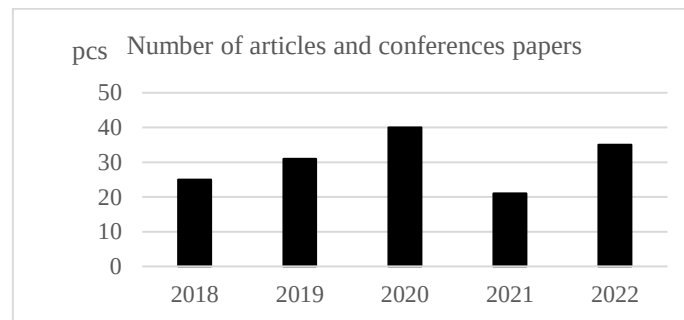


Fig. 1. Number of Articles and Conference Papers (Source: Compiled by the authors)

Most publications examined were in business and tourism journals. Eighteen journals include tourism in their titles, 7 include management, and 6 include business. This shows that the researchers mainly work in these fields and that this is the focus of their research (Table 1).

Table 1. Number of journals (Source: Compiled by the authors)

Journal Title	pcs	%
Tourism Management	11	18%
Annals of Tourism Research	9	15%
British Food Journal	7	11%
Revista Brasileira De Marketing	7	11%
Tijdschrift Voor Economische En Sociale Geografie	7	11%
Journal of Destination Marketing and Management	6	10%

Journal of Place Management and Development	6	10%
Cities	5	8%
Current Issues in Tourism	5	8%
Journal of Business Research	5	8%
Tourism and Hospitality Research	4	7%
Journal of Product and Brand Management	3	5%
Journal of Travel Research	3	5%
Marketing and Management of Innovations	3	5%
Tourism Geographies	3	5%
Environment and Planning C: Politics and Space	2	3%
International Journal of Culture, Tourism, and Hospitality Research	2	3%
International Journal of Religious Tourism and Pilgrimage	2	3%
International Journal of Tourism Cities	2	3%
International Review on Public and Nonprofit Marketing	2	3%
Internet Research	2	3%
Journal of Brand Strategy	2	3%
Journal of Creating Value	2	3%
Journal of Nonprofit & Public Sector Marketing	2	3%
Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services	2	3%
Proc. IEEE Commun. Strategy. Digit. Soc. Semin., Comsds	2	3%
Psychology & Marketing	2	3%
Scandinavian Journal of Public Administration	2	3%
Text & Talk	2	3%
Academy Review	1	2%
Apuntes	1	2%
Asia Pacific Journal of Tourism Research	1	2%
Asia-Pacific Journal of Business Administration	1	2%
Baltic Journal of Economic Studies	1	2%
Business History	1	2%
Economy of Regions	1	2%
European Journal of Tourism Research	1	2%
European Planning Studies	1	2%
Ibima Business Review	1	2%
Informacijos Mokslai	1	2%
International Journal of Sports Marketing and Sponsorship	1	2%
International Journal of Tourism Research	1	2%
Journal of Business Research	1	2%
Journal of Enterprising Communities	1	2%
Journal of Enterprising Communities-People and Places in The Global Economy	1	2%
Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Technology	1	2%
Journal of International Commerce Economics and Policy	1	2%
Journal of Knowledge Management	1	2%
Place Branding and Public Diplomacy	1	2%
Proc. Int. Bus. Inf. Manag. Assoc. Conf., Ibima: Educ. Excell. Innov. Manag. Vis.	1	2%
Proc. Int. Conf. Tour. Res.	1	2%
Qme-Quantitative Marketing and Economics	1	2%
Qualitative Market Research	1	2%
Scandinavian Journal of Hospitality and Tourism	1	2%
Springer Proc. Bus. Econ.	1	2%
Teoria E Pratica Em Administracao-Tpa	1	2%
Total Quality Management & Business Excellence	1	2%
Tourism Management Perspectives	1	2%
Tourism Review	1	2%
Tourist Studies	1	2%
Turyzm/Tourism	1	2%

The 121 literature included studies from several countries. The literature review and model testing studies were not linked to any country. The studies based on primary research presented marketing research in small towns in the following countries (Table 2).

Table 2. Regions and Countries in the Research (Source: Compiled by the authors)

Armenia	Colombia	Germany	Italian	Netherlands	Russia	UK
Austria	Croatia	Greece	Japan	Norwegian	Scandinavian region	USA
Brazil	Espanol	Hong Kong	Malaysia	Pakistan	Slovakia	Vietnam
Central Europe	European cities	India	Mexico	Poland	Sweden	
China	France	Indonesia	Montenegro	Portugal	Switzerland	

Of the 121 papers filtered, 20 (16%) were published in management. 33 (27%) publications are in the destination cluster, 11 (9%) works are in the tourism cluster, and 57 (47%) articles are in the branding cluster. We used the fractional counting method to plot co-occurrence using VOSviewer (Fig. 2). The chosen method differs from the complete counting method only in the strength of the association, which divides the strength of the association by the number of authors for multiple-author articles. The figure shows that the four main clusters are well identified in the 121 literature sources. In addition, some methodological elements appear, suggesting from the first study that segmentation, theoretical studies, qualitative research, and model application will be the most common analysis methods. The figure shows that three target groups stand out after the primary studies: tourists, stakeholders, and consumers.

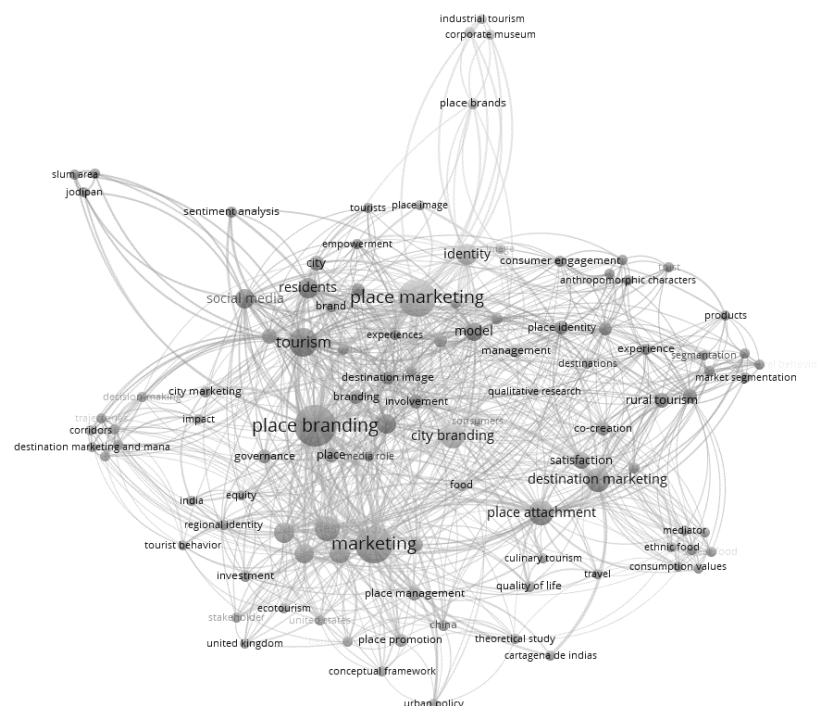


Fig. 2. Co-occurrence with Fractional Counting Method (Source: Compiled by the authors via VOSviewer)

After reviewing the studies, we can identify ten different methodologies researchers have used over the five years under review. Most of the studies had some form of literature review as their primary objective. Of the quantitative analyses, questionnaires were the most frequently used. In the last five years, researchers have paid much attention to analysing the content of different online platforms, such as social media platforms or websites and blogs, focusing on analysing consumers' opinions. Despite the emergence of the term segmentation in co-occurrence research, only three articles among the methods have tried the cluster analysis technique to search for research results (Table 3).

Table 3. Number of applied methods (Source: compiled by the authors)

Applied methods	pcs	Applied methods	pcs
Literature review	27	Expert interview	13
Questionnaire	26	Systematic literature processing	4
Content analysis	21	Factor analysis	3
Case study	18	Focus group	3
Semi-structured interview	17	Cluster analysis	2

In order to test hypothesis H1, a one-simple-proportion test was conducted, the results of which showed a significant difference in the variance of the proportions of values across the methodologies tested ($p=0.01$). That is, the methodologies tested have an element or elements that appear in significantly higher proportions in the research than the others. According to hypothesis H1, the questionnaire was likely to be the most common survey instrument, and the results showed that it was among the most common instruments. The significance level of the Z test confirmed the existence of a prominent group; the hypothesis was considered to be confirmed.

It was then examined how different methodologies intersect within the research and whether any methodology stands out in particular areas. It was found that over half of the 121 articles examined, 73 articles used one methodology ($p=0.042$). For 21 articles, the methodology used was not transparent. In the remaining 27 articles, the authors used at least two methodologies to investigate the research topic. These methodological pairings mainly include qualitative interviews, focus groups and quantitative questionnaire studies. However, content analysis and systematic literature review were sometimes combined with some qualitative methods (Table 4).

Table 4. Number of More Applied Methods (Source: Compiled by the authors)

Combination of research methods	Case Study	Semi-Structured Interview	Questionnaire	Literature Review	Expert Interview	Systematic Literature Processing	Content Analysis	Blank	Sum
Semi-structured interview	2		2						4
Focus group		2			1				3
Questionnaire	1	3			2		1		7
Cluster analysis			2						2
Content analysis	1	1			3				5
Factor analysis			3						3
Case study				1	2				3
Blank	11	7	12	19	5	4	15	21	94
Sum	15	13	19	20	13	4	16	21	121

We have examined the proportion of research methodologies in each cluster and found that the proportion of research using more than one methodology is equal to that of clusters. 43% of the studies in the brand cluster used more than one research methodology. The tourism cluster accounted for 8%, the management cluster for 18%, and the destination cluster for 29%, which appeared to be the most methodology. The composition of methods used was also proportionally similar across clusters. We also examined research that used stand-alone methods but again found similar proportions. We, therefore, found that researchers need to specify methods by area. Cluster affiliation did not influence the appearance of research methods. Thus, we considered hypothesis H4 to be confirmed.

We also examined the abstracts of the studies using text analysis. The analysis of the content related to the methodological term revealed that the abstracts of the articles do not contain explicit knowledge about the research methodology. However, we can still see some critical word-trees in the glossary, such as qualitative and quantitative research methods, analysis, case studies, and modelling (Fig. 3).

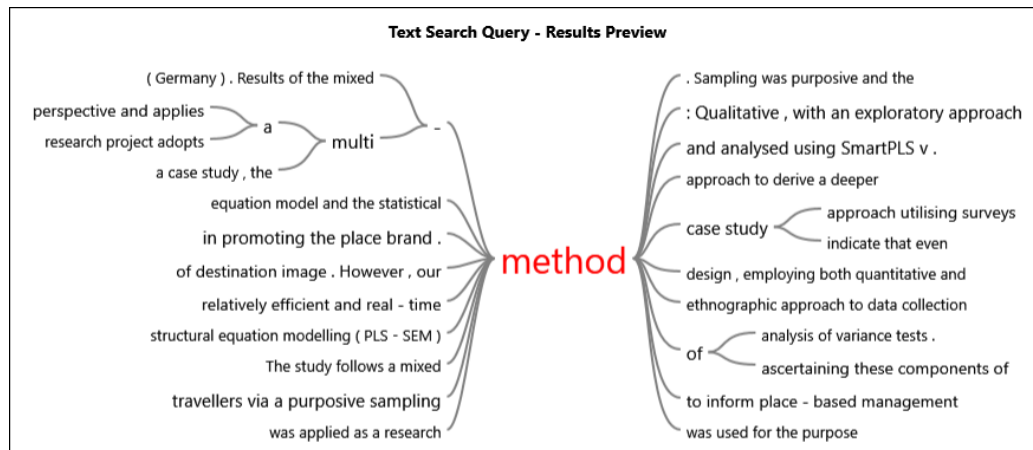


Fig. 3. Word Tree (Source: Compiled by the authors via NVivo)

We further investigated the target population. First, we looked at the target groups that appear in each study (Fig. 4). Of the 121 publications examined, 91 had a target group that could be identified. The remaining 30 publications used a literature review methodology, and one case study was associated with this methodology, where the case study dealt explicitly with athletes. In almost 45% of the cases, the studies also dealt with tourists or tourists. Only 20% of the cases asked the local population, and the same number focused on the service sector. Only 10% interviewed experts with a high professional knowledge of the subject; the exact number dealt with policymakers and municipal leaders.



Fig. 4. Target Group of Research (Source: Compiled by the authors)

While it is true that most studies focus on tourists, there is no significant difference in the distribution, so hypothesis H2 is only partially accepted ($p=0.09$).

Conclusions

Economic changes have led to a renewed interest in smaller settlements. The growth of domestic tourism has been a significant challenge for local leaders. However, small village leaders need more professional support and are often not well-versed in economic and management issues. Municipal marketing plays a vital role in supporting economic activities and their effectiveness. It also contributes to the municipality's infrastructural development. The study of this field offers a wide range of methodological possibilities, which can be used to examine the promotion of the development and sustainable operation of small settlements from several angles. The research focuses on consumer behaviour and attitudes. This mainly refers to the consumer behaviour of tourists, often ignoring the needs of the local population, the potential of the settlement, and the opinions of experts and settlement leaders (Bansal, 2023). According to the literature, the most commonly used qualitative research methods and tools are interviewing, focus groups, and content analysis. Content analysis draws on the

potential of digital marketing to focus on consumer content generated on websites, blogs, and social media. Researchers are increasingly interested in consumers' opinions and attitudes. However, mixed methods research provides a more profound understanding (Adu et al., 2022).

In our research, 121 literature reviews were conducted using the WoS and Scopus databases. Our analysis examines the methodological background of studies on small settlements from 2018 to 2022. Based on our research results, researchers still prefer interviewing as a qualitative methodology and questionnaires as a quantitative methodology. In addition, there is a very high proportion of literature reviews for different periods and research purposes. We saw two different methodological applications in just over half of the studies, and only a few used three different techniques. The target group is still the tourists, and minimal emphasis is placed on the opinions and needs of the local population, policymakers, or stakeholders.

Examining our preliminary hypotheses, we conclude that the methodology of researchers' studies does not depend on the cluster under study (hypothesis H4 accepted). Our research shows that place marketing does not have a specific methodology. Most studies use a single methodology to investigate the area (hypothesis H3 accepted). The most common research method is questionnaire research (hypothesis H1 accepted). In most cases, the survey's target group is the consumers as tourists. However, the difference is insignificant here, so hypothesis H2 was only partially accepted.

Based on the review of the studies, it is recommended to combine different methods and examine the issue from different perspectives. It is worthwhile to include different stakeholders in the field to consider as many aspects as possible when examining the issue.

Further studies are needed to review the models presented in this research. Additional analysis could explore the effects and interrelationships of variables that case studies can identify, which may impact municipalities' functioning.

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