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Exploring senses of place and belonging in the Finnish, Italian and U.S. craft beer industry: a multiple case study

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ABSTRACT



This paper explores how microbreweries are engaged within the local communities they serve. It investigates whether the relationship between microbreweries and their home localities is driven by microbreweries' senses of place and belonging or by market-driven rationales instrumentally promoted through territorial branding strategies. Drawing from earlier literature the paper proposes a typology of microbreweries' senses of place and belonging based on their place embeddedness and community engagement that functions as the analytical framework for this study. The feasibility of the framework is tested drawing on qualitative data collected via in-depth interviews with representatives of microbreweries in North American and European regions. The data shows that the framework allows for distinguishing between those microbreweries that are highly place embedded and community engaged from those that are not.

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KEYWORDS Community engagement; craft beer industry; microbrewery; place embeddedness; sense of belonging; sense of place

Introduction

The recent growth in the demand for craft beer has been explained in the academic literature by two main arguments: the pursuit of premium quality as well as diversified tastes over homogenized lagers (Elzinga, Tremblay, and Tremblay 2015); and the high connection of microbreweries with a specific place perceived favorably by customers looking to buy local products

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(Flack 1997). The connection between microbreweries and their home locations has largely been studied in terms of marketing strategies (Debies-Carl 2019; Taylor and DiPietro 2020; Ikäheimo 2021) and a focus—mostly on consumers and their perceptions of “local” and commitment to local products, termed as *neolocalism* (Mathews and Patton 2016; Buratti and Hagelman 2021). In contrast, the literature concerning the role of microbreweries in their communities has, thus, far neglected the rationale behind microbreweries’ commitment to their home localities or their utilization of territorial branding strategies (Melewar and Skinner 2020).

The aim of this paper is to address this research gap by investigating microbrewers’ “level” of embeddedness in and engagement with the local communities they serve. To do so, this paper explores the concepts of “sense of place” and “sense of belonging”. The concepts are close relatives, and, in fact, several scholars have used them interchangeably (Fletcher 2016), as they both reflect attachment, either to a certain place or community (Andreotti, Le Galès, and Moreno Fuentes 2013). The concept of sense of place refers to the emotional attitudes attached to places (Tuan 1975); that is, to the characteristics that make places special or unique. As such, it describes the ties and bonds between people and places (Adams 2013) and the resulting embeddedness and commitment of actors (individuals, firms, etc.) to a place. The concept of sense of belonging refers to a membership to a community rooted in the interactions, bonds and relationships between the community members (Mehta 2008). Sense of belonging is, thus, related to community engagement (Barber, Mueller, and Ogata 2013). Therefore, we consider a functional distinction between the two concepts to discover how microbrewers feel attached to their place (sense of place) and how much they commit in favor of their community (sense of belonging). Based on this distinction, the authors present a typology of microbreweries depending on, first, their embeddedness in their home locations (sense of place) and, second, their engagement with the local community (sense of belonging). The typology is tested and contrasted with the territorial branding strategies of microbreweries based on qualitative primary data. The data were collected through in-depth interviews with microbrewers in the San Diego region (California, U.S.), eastern and northern Finland, and Veneto region (Italy). These data are then analyzed to answer the following research questions:

- (1) How place embedded and community engaged are the interviewed microbrewers?
- (2) Are there differences in the degree of place embeddedness and community engagement between the case study locations?
- (3) Do the territorial branding strategies of microbrewers reflect their senses of place and belonging or are they deployed more for marketing purposes?

Recently, a paper by Buratti and Hagelman (2021) with a very similar topic (neolocalism) to ours was published in *Journal of Cultural Geography*. While the paper did not directly influence the data collection phase of our paper (since it was published after we had already conducted our interviews), in retrospect it can be said that there are similarities to the paper at hand. However, the papers also differ from each other in several key points. First, the focus of their paper was on cider production and, in fact, underlined the craft beer industry as an important avenue for further studies on the subject. Second, their paper approaches the issue (neolocalism) through different tangible proximity dimensions, particularly in terms of inputs and distribution. Our paper focuses on, as stated by Buratti and Hagelman (2021, 413), the “equally important” but “less well-known” intangible aspects of neolocalism (namely conservation, social efforts and community involvement). In doing so, we bridge the gap in the existing literature by going beyond the “obvious” forms of neolocalism (such as territorial branding strategies) and expand the discussion by investigating the rarely studied nexus between place embeddedness and community engagement. Finally, the papers differ in terms of their intended scope and visualization. While their paper helps to visually interpret the neolocal product models of individual cideries (or breweries), our proposed framework is meant to allow easy comparisons between several different breweries (or cideries). Thus, it would be fair to say, that rather than contrasting each other the papers complement each other by approaching the issue (neolocalism) from different perspectives.

Literature review

Sense of place – place embeddedness

Traditionally the literature on locational choices of enterprises has treated the issue as a utility-maximization problem where the locational decision of a unit is assumed to be the best available outcome of all available (optimizing) or an outcome that is “good enough” for a limited number of considered (satisficing) alternatives (Malczewski and Ogryczak 1996). Departing from this traditional view on finding the optimal or satisficing location for an enterprise (based on transportation costs, raw materials, labor, etc.), the literature on locational choices and entrepreneurial embeddedness has also extended to explore “softer” influencing factors – such as personal motivations (Saarinen and Makkonen 2022) – that connects the concept of sense of place to locational decisions of microbreweries. As discussed by Tuan (1975; 1977), personal experiences with or in a place construct multiple ties between people and that place, referred to as “sense of place”. In this regard, local craft beer consumption is considered as a practice, which ties

(or embeds) the producers and consumers of beer to a certain place (Holtkamp et al. 2016). It also opens local communities to tourists: visiting microbreweries is considered as a way to connect with local cultures, flavors, and people (Fletcher 2016).

In the literature on craft beer industry, these ties to place have been mainly inspected from the perspective of the clientele of microbreweries. Much less attention has been paid to study sense of place from the perspective of the microbrewers. The study by Sjölander-Lindqvist, Skoglund, and Laven (2019) is a refreshing exception in this regard: they found that brewers in Jämtland (Sweden) consider their business as a social practice which allows them to connect their beer production with their home localities (place). This finding fits the definition of sense place as a subjective perception of one's surroundings (Steele 1981), "involving both an interpretive perspective on the environment and an emotional reaction to the environment" (Hummon 1992, 262). As such, the concept of sense of place includes an emotional dimension, reflecting the attachment (ties) of people to a certain place, but also encompasses an interpretive dimension relating to how people experience places, and the meanings people attach to places. Here the focus is laid on the emotional rather than the interpretive dimension (which is beyond the scope of this paper). That is, sense of place is interpreted here to be a "product" of the ties that the microbreweries have with their home localities. Further, high sense of place can manifest as commitment to a place (i.e. place embeddedness) implying that the (emotional) ties of microbreweries towards their home localities lead them to take an active role in their community (Shamai 1991), as discussed in greater detail in the next section.

The ties between microbreweries and their home localities (places) can, however, be problematized: the rationale for locating a brewery in a specific region or neighborhood can potentially be explained through commitment by brewers to a place (place embeddedness), but potentially also through market-driven rationales. As such, place embeddedness is defined, here, as the nature, depth, and extent of microbrewers' ties to their home locations. Strong ties to a place might rely on personal connections to a specific location, which occur due to the sense of place that the brewers themselves have towards the home locality of their breweries (e.g. birthplace or otherwise significant location). As a result, a place-embedded microbrewery would be unlikely to relocate elsewhere even if it would be economically sensible. On the other hand, the locational choice of a microbrewery might not necessarily relate to place-embeddedness. For example, Wojtyra et al. (2020) have empirically demonstrated how the microbreweries' home locations in Central Europe are closely tied to regional concentrations of wealth, employment, and population. In other words, the examined microbreweries have mostly been set up on the basis of optimal location *vis-à-vis* their potential consumer base. This is also the case of a number of US cities

where microbrewers tend to cluster within certain neighborhoods, or “brewery districts” (Nilsson, Reid, and Lehnert 2018). This discussion raises an interesting question: are the locational choices of microbreweries more a matter of market-driven reasons than place embeddedness?

Sense of belonging

Contrarily to the more extensively discussed concept of “sense of place”, fewer studies have focused on “sense of belonging” *vis-à-vis* the craft beer industry. The topic is, however, receiving growing interest from the perspective of community engagement. For example, as stated by Salovaara (2021) a popular narrative connects microbreweries with their local communities (for example, their role in the revitalization of regions suffering from economic decline) via their positive impacts on local job creation and development of local economies. Additionally, at least compared to large breweries, microbreweries are often found to be more grounded in serving their local communities as their target markets (Alfeo et al. 2020; Jolly et al. 2021). As discussed earlier, microbreweries’ high sense of place can lead to high sense of belonging. Recent studies have indeed shown how microbreweries feel committed to be a part of their local (beer) community which fosters their local cooperation activities and community engagement (Said 2019). This commitment is rooted in the sense of belonging of the microbreweries to a specific local community (Thurnell-Read 2016; Skoglund and Sjölander-Lindqvist 2020). In fact, the relevance of microbreweries for their localities has arguably been growing as they have become actively engaged players in their communities (Eberts 2014). Indeed, microbreweries’ community engagement bolsters their ties with and within the local community (Sjölander-Lindqvist, Skoglund, and Laven 2019) paving the way for a strongly collaborative local environment (Said 2019).

Microbreweries have been seen to focus strongly on the “local” including both environmental and societal goals (Ness 2018). As such, microbreweries are largely found to strive towards utilitarian goals of environmental and social sustainability. Examples of this include efforts to bolster sustainable development by employing and integrating vulnerable people (Sforzi and Colombo 2020), by utilizing local ingredients in the production of beer (Cipollaro et al. 2021), by improving local environmental conditions (Cappellano and Spisto 2018), by reducing waste in the production process (Holtkamp et al. 2016), by minimizing water usage (Gatrell, Reid, and Steiger 2018), and via community engagement (Ness 2018)

As a result, community-engaged microbreweries are creating social capital (Slocum, Kline, and Cavaliere 2018) and spurring (sustainable) economic development in both urban areas (Mathews and Picton 2014) and rural communities (Sjölander-Lindqvist, Skoglund, and Laven 2019). Moreover, there

are plenty of examples displaying microbreweries' community engagement with entities such as local charities, non-profit organizations, artists, and sport clubs (Gatrell, Reid, and Steiger 2018). In short, as discussed by Argent (2018), microbreweries often reflect a desire to foster local and regional development: thus, local microbreweries are playing positive roles in engendering social, symbolic, and also (at least to some extent) financial capital in their home regions. However, community engagement activities are also regarded as strategic means for providing a competitive advantage to microbreweries as they attract clientele, who strive to support businesses that are perceived to "give something back" to the local community (Jolly et al. 2021). Therefore, this analysis aims at addressing: do microbreweries utilize their "sense of belonging" more because of economic interests to boost sales via community engagement activities than commitment to the community?

Territorial branding strategies as a marker of senses of place and belonging?

Another layer through which the relationship between microbreweries and their place can be problematized concerns their marketing and visual strategies, which is disputed in literature. Microbreweries mobilize their ties to places through symbols, images, and nomenclature (Ikäheimo 2021). Several earlier studies have discussed the place-based branding techniques used by microbreweries to leverage the (re-)connection of beer consumption and place (neolocalism) by utilizing local geography, history, folklore, and other distinctive traits (Thurnell-Read 2019). Common branding practices of microbreweries include the integration of inherent local assets such as place names, people, events, landscape features and icons in labels and business and product names to establish a connection between their products and home location (Mathews and Patton 2016). These territorial-based branding strategies seem to pay off as they positively influence customers' satisfaction, perception of quality and trust towards the producer (Melewar and Skinner 2020): i.e. through increased sales and customer loyalty.

In the new food economy (Manniche and Larsen 2013), narrative supplements to food products contribute to enriching their value (Thurnell-Read 2019). Also, microbreweries seem to mobilize sense of place through precise marketing strategies (Eberts 2014): sense of place is assumed to be an active, conscious process rather than a static quality and therefore, closely connected to the branding efforts of microbreweries (Schnell and Reese 2003). However, these branding efforts can be directed towards creating a sense of place only for marketing purposes (Holtkamp et al. 2016). In fact, the evident success of place-based brands has also made room for fake neolocalism: enacted through acquisition of microbreweries by international beer labels (Eberts 2014), by faking a connection to a place that is not the

actual place of production (Taylor and DiPietro 2020) or by fabricating a connection to a place (geographic feature) that does not even exist (Eberts 2014). Therefore, a question arises: do (some) microbreweries advertise their “sense of place” merely as an instrument to promote their sales through territorial branding strategies?

Research strategy

Analytical framework

Based on the literature presented above, we created a typology to differentiate ideal types of microbreweries based on the sense of place and sense of belonging axes (Figure 1). The identified four ideal types of microbreweries are:

- (1) **Local Development Agents** have strong senses of place and belonging. Microbreweries in this category are expected to consider community engagement as a logical and important activity allowing them to give back to the community visible via the role of the microbreweries in hosting or supporting local art exhibitions, sustainability-led community activities, training activities to spread knowledge and expertise (connoisseurship) around the brewing process and civic volunteering efforts which might include donations, cooperation with local charities, participation in advocacy groups to raise funds for community purposes, etc. That is, they are expected to be highly engaged with the local community. The microbreweries in this category are also expected to view themselves as very place embedded with a very weak desire to relocate elsewhere. Their original locational choices to establish their microbreweries into the specific localities they are

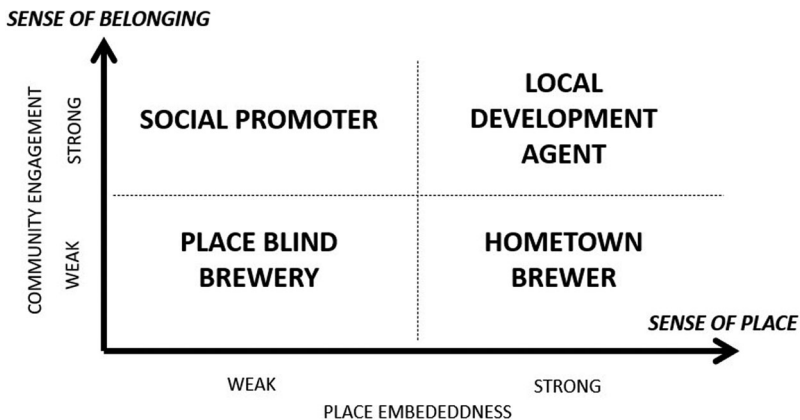


Figure 1. The proposed typology of microbreweries.

based in are expected to relate to a strong place embeddedness rather than to business rationales.

- (2) **Social Promoters** have a high sense of belonging (i.e. degree of community engagement). In contrast to the local development agents, however, the microbreweries in this category are expected to motivate their locational choices mainly based upon market rationale (e.g. access to a potentially large customer base). They are expected to showcase an authentic sense of belonging to their community, but eventually they could also be socially engaged elsewhere. This might mean that their sustainability or social goals are universal rather than local.
- (3) **Hometown Brewers** have a high sense of place (i.e. they are place embedded). The microbreweries in this category are expected to choose their business location upon a relationship with the place based on emotional experience or personal value. These microbreweries are, thus, expected to remain in their current home locality due to other reasons than economic convenience. Although these microbreweries are expected to be very embedded with their place, they are still expected to show a rather low commitment to their community. This might be due to, for example, the small scale of the business.
- (4) **Place-Blind Breweries** combine weak sense of place and belonging. Microbreweries in this category are expected to locate in a specific place for market-related reasons. They are, thus, expected to be rather willing to locate elsewhere if a market rationale for this would emerge. They are not expected to actively take part in relevant community engagement efforts. In short, this category of microbreweries does not showcase a solid sense of place nor a strong sense of belonging to their community. This might be because the microbreweries' engagement is linked to global value chains rather than to the locality and its community.

The presented framework was utilized as a framework for analyzing the collected study material: by “placing” the interviewed microbreweries into different ideal types and discussing the implications of these real-life examples *vis-à-vis* local development and community engagement. Additionally, the (potential) territorial branding strategies of the interviewed microbrewers were contrasted to these ideal types to assess whether territorial branding strategies are utilized equally across all categories of microbreweries or rather exemplify only those with solid senses of place and belonging.

Data and methods

For the purposes of this paper, the authors adopted a qualitative case study approach – recurrent in the literature on the craft beer industry (e.g. Fletchall

2016) – to delve into the relationships linking microbreweries to their home localities and local communities. Consistent with related studies (e.g. Sjölander-Lindqvist, Skoglund, and Laven 2019) the data collection was based on in-depth interviews, which we carried out over the phone or online due to mobility restriction caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. We implemented a multiple case study approach to provide in-depth information on the topic in different geographical contexts (Albats 2018), focusing on three case study regions across Europe and North America, which we selected for their prominent role in their national contexts regarding the craft beer industry. The selected regions are characterized by sharp differences between their population densities and, thus, provide insights from both urban and rural areas.

Interview framework and content analysis

The analysis is based, together with the notion of territorial branding strategies, on the two main concepts discussed in this paper: (1) sense of place and (2) sense of belonging. As questions directly addressing such abstract concepts such as sense of place and sense of belonging might arguably be hard to answer, the concepts were approached via more concrete issues relating to the concepts. First, sense of place was approached through questions related to the rationale behind the locational choices for setting up the microbrewery in a specific place and commitment to stay in their current home localities. That is, through questions related to place-embeddedness. Second, community engagement was used as a proxy for sense of belonging. That is, via questions probing whether the microbreweries feel belonging to the local community and how they engage with it. The interview framework also included questions on the use of territorial branding strategies and the reason behind their use (market-based rationales and/or willingness to represent and promote their communities). As there is no standard delineation for what “local” is (Buratti and Hagelman 2021), each microbrewery was allowed to use their own definition of the geographical scale of their home locality and local community.

Specifically, the interview framework is divided into five main sections. The first two sections were designed to gather the basic information about the interviewees and their microbreweries (volume of production, number of employees, year of establishment, home location, etc.). The third section incorporated questions to explore locational choices and place embeddedness by inquiring about the ties that the interviewees have to the home locations of their microbreweries (why the microbrewery was established there, are the owners born or have other social ties to the location, etc.). The fourth section concerned community engagement by exploring whether the interviewees are committed to community engagement activities and the nature of these activities. The fifth section investigated territorial branding strategies by probing whether the microbreweries utilize local place names, etc. in their branding efforts.

The interview framework was designed in English and translated into Finnish and Italian. It was first tested with a Veneto-based microbrewery to assess the coherence of the questions. Afterwards, the authors made minor adjustments, and finally translated these adjustments also into the English and Finnish versions of the interview framework.

The interview data were assessed via thematic content analysis: (a) the specific sections of the data were assigned codes *vis-à-vis* the two main themes set for the study (sense of place and sense of belonging); (b) the authors reviewed the interview transcripts for identifying common patterns and differences across the data per the identified themes; (c) as a result, the microbreweries participating to the study were grouped and therefore “profiled” according to these two critical themes. To facilitate inter-coder reliability, the rigor of the coding strategy was cross-checked by and the rationale behind coding decisions reported and shared among all members of the research team (Miles and Huberman 1994).

Coding

In order to place the microbreweries into the proposed framework (Figure 1), sense of place was interpreted through the answers given by the interviewees (owner, founder or executive of the microbrewery) to the open questions concerning place embeddedness. The microbreweries were allocated “points” based on our interpretation of the answers:

- Were the founders or current owners of the microbrewery born in the same region as the brewery is located in, or do they have other affectual connections to the region?
 - Affectual connection = 1; No affectual connection = 0
- Was the locational decision of the microbrewery based on affectual meanings attached to the region or was it decided based on market convenience (tapping into large customer bases, cheap rent or land price, synergy benefits from other businesses, etc.)?
 - Mostly due to affectual reasons = 1; Mostly for market-based reasons = 0
- Would the microbrewery be relocated outside its current home region for market-based reason?
 - No = 1; Yes = 0

The points were summarized to get a total “score” from zero (weak place embeddedness) to three points (strong place embeddedness). Likewise, sense of belonging was examined via open interview questions concerning the community engagement activities of the interviewed microbreweries.

The microbreweries were arranged based on the authors' interpretation of the answers from weak to strong community engagement:

- Is the microbrewery active in a wide array of community engagement activities with local charities, non-profit organizations, artists, sport clubs, etc.?
 - Active engagement = 1; Only some or no engagement = 0
- Is the rationale to engage with the local community due to a strong commitment to foster local and regional development or because of economic interests to boost sales via community engagement activities?
 - Mostly due to a strong commitment to the local economy = 1; Mostly due to economic interests = 0
- Is the local community the target market of the brewery?
 - The main target market is the local community = 1; The main target market is national/international = 0

Finally, we inquired the interviewees about the existence of territorial branding strategies (that can in most cases also be verified from company webpages):

- Does the microbrewery utilize territorial branding strategies (brewery name, beer brands, visual branding, etc.) to market its products?
 - Yes (fully neolocal) = 2; Some = 1; None = 0 (fully non-place-based)

The results of the coding exercise are presented in [Figure 5](#). The limitation of the approach is that it simplifies broad concepts into a strict binary (yes/no) format, which does not give much room for degrees of engagement within the categories. It is, however, important to remember that the coding is just a step that helped us in interpreting the interview data. Equal (if not more) weight should be given to the meanings behind the numerical coding that we discuss in greater detail below.

Research sample

The authors identified 150 microbreweries located in the eastern and northern Finland, the San Diego (California, U.S.) region, and Veneto (Italy) region ([Figures 2–4](#)), out of which 38 were interviewed. The individuals interviewed include primarily owners, founders, and executives of microbreweries. Despite differences between the US and European standards in business and beer production sizes, all the sampled breweries are designated as “microbreweries” in their own national contexts. The interviews lasted approximately 30–

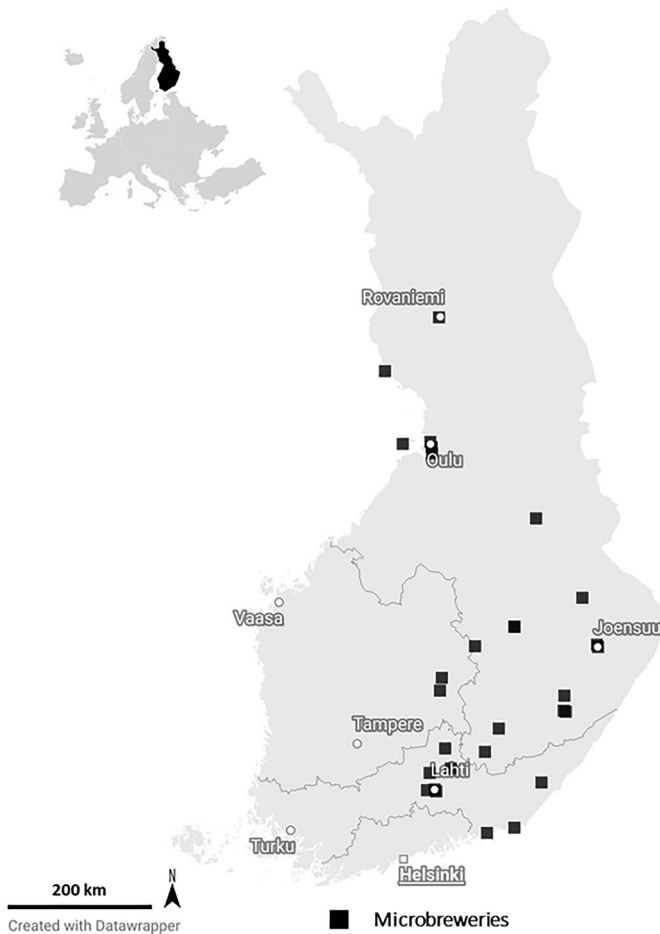


Figure 2. The location of the sample of identified microbreweries in Eastern and Northern Finland.

40 min and were carried out in three different languages (the quotes from the interviews in Finnish and Italian were translated into English by the authors).

Eastern and northern Finland: Finland – the home of Sahti, one of the world’s oldest beer types still in production (Sipilä 2017) – has over 100 microbreweries (Suomen pienpanimot 2023). The majority of these microbreweries are located in the most populous parts of the country in southern and western Finland. In order to give a contrasting view to the data collected from urban centers, such as San Diego, the Finnish sample was built from microbreweries located in the more “peripheral” regions (including Lapland, North Ostrobothnia, Kainuu, North Karelia, Northern Savonia, Southern Savo, South Karelia, Central Finland, Päijänne Tavastia and

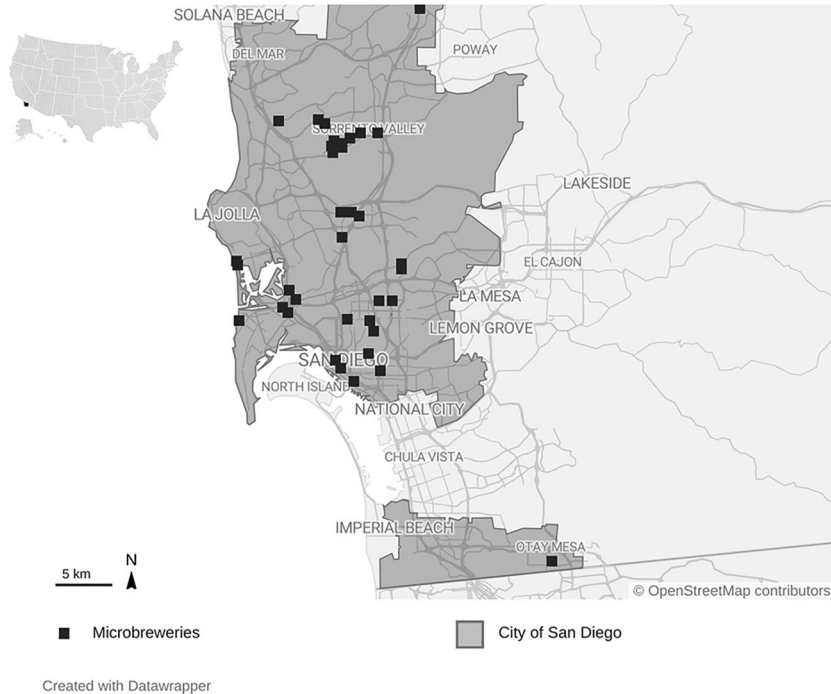
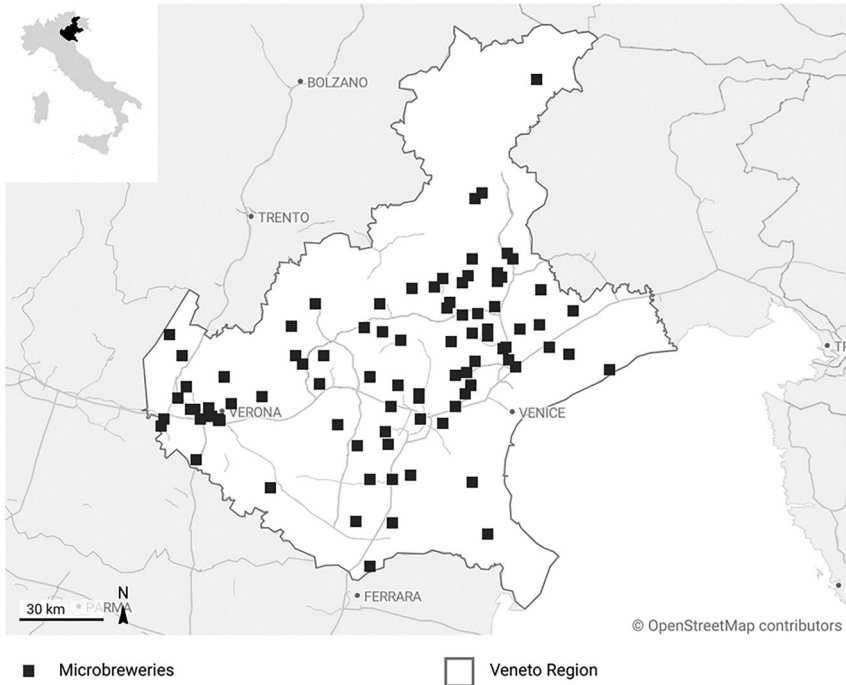


Figure 3. The location of the sample of identified microbreweries in San Diego (U.S.).

Kymenlaakso) of eastern and northern Finland. The authors identified the contact details of 29 active microbreweries located in these regions (Figure 2), out of which 16 replied positively and were subsequently interviewed.

San Diego (California, U.S.): The City of San Diego has been called the capital of the US craft beer scene, since it is the top market in the U.S. in terms of the number of active breweries (Hirsh 2017). The city and the county of San Diego has a primary role in the geography of microbreweries for their long-standing tradition, economic impact, and high quality testified by the awards given for their products (Cappellano and Spisto 2018). The authors identified 51 active microbreweries in the City of San Diego (Figure 3) out of which nine replied favorably to the inquiries and were subsequently interviewed.

Veneto (Italy): Veneto has the second highest number of microbreweries across Italian regions (Microbirrifici 2019). This success is based on a mature development of the food and tourism industries, and the technical and entrepreneurial culture borrowed from the wine industry and the subsequent synergetic relationship between them and microbreweries. As a testimonial of local authenticity, in 2019 the regional government approved a certification to verify craft beer production authenticity in Veneto. The authors



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Figure 4. The location of the sample of identified microbreweries Veneto (Italy).

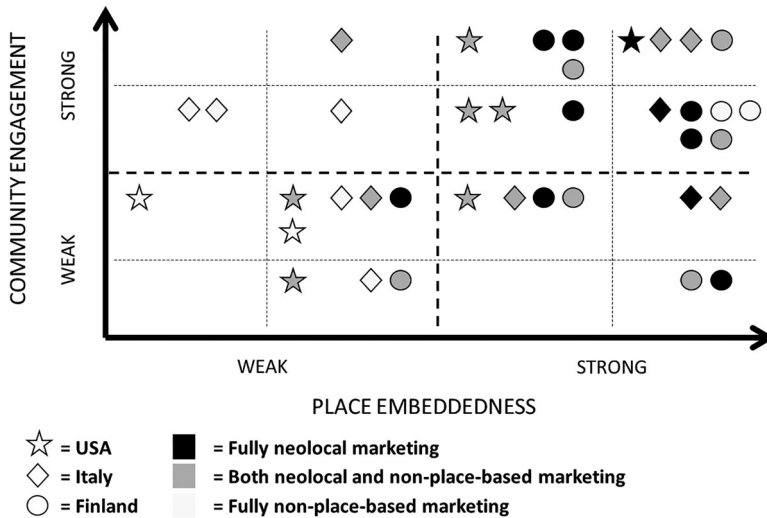


Figure 5. Coding of the microbreweries according to place embeddedness, community engagement and territorial branding strategies.

conducted interviews with 13, out of the 70 identified and contacted (Figure 4), microbreweries located in the Veneto region.

Results

Comparison of the cases

The results of the coding exercise are graphically presented in Figure 5. Interesting patterns emerge from the comparison of the different cases under investigation. The Finnish microbreweries are clearly the most community engaged and the most place embedded. In San Diego there is a clear dichotomy between place-blind breweries and local development agents. With its more even “distribution” Veneto lies somewhere in between the other two cases (Table 1). Similarly, Finnish microbreweries utilize territorial branding strategies more often than their US and Italian counterparts. However, it is important to keep in mind that our approach and the sample size do not allow testing whether the intuitively seen differences in Figure 5 and Table 1 could be verified as statistically significant. In fact, a likely reason behind the results might be the above-mentioned self-proclaimed “scale” of the home locality. The Finnish microbreweries regarded their home municipalities or towns as their “locality”, whereas in San Diego, the interviewed microbreweries identified themselves being more closely connected to neighborhoods, and the San Diegan craft beer community intended as group of both producers and consumers. This differing geographical scale of the home locality naturally affects the coding of the affectual connection to the microbrewery’s home location. Thus, the geographical scale of the analysis matters. While for qualitative studies the chosen approach has been justified in earlier studies (Buratti and Hagelman 2021), for the purposes of quantitative analysis, it would be more sensible to delineate an exact definition of what “local” is. Nonetheless, the illustration in Figure 3 does provide tentative evidence that our approach is feasible for its intended purpose to illustrate patterns and to distinguish between those microbreweries that are highly community engaged and place embedded from those that are not.

Table 1. The share of microbreweries belonging to different ideal types in the case study regions.

Ideal types		San Diego (U.S.)	
Social promoter	Local development agent	0.0%	44.4%
Place-blind brewery	Hometown brewers	44.4%	11.2%
Veneto (ITA)		Finland	
30.7%	23.1%	0.0%	62.5%
23.1%	23.1%	12.5%	25.0%

Local development agents

All three case study contexts display microbreweries that can be labeled as “local development agents”. One such microbrewery comes from San Diego, as it focuses on the local community to shape its identity: “Our name, the artwork, our culture, the brewery’s identity is all part of the people of the neighborhood, reflecting the community”. The microbrewery’s location has been motivated and strongly interconnected with the importance of the neighborhood – which is one of the iconic Latino districts in San Diego. This has prompted the success of the microbrewery “we are based in ... which is not only a street: it is a community project. We were the first business here. We got the support from the entire community”. The microbrewery seems very much connected with the community and deeply engaged with it: “we like to be part of the community-building process. Our brewery reflects a community-based model” that “reflects the unique history, culture and individuals from that specific community”.

Another example, comes from Veneto where a team of ten entrepreneurs and friends, sharing the passion for beer and for their home location, founded their microbrewery “as a local development project, not a business for profit, seeking to promote the territory and to create job opportunities”. The profits of the microbrewery are re-invested into the microbrewery and into other local initiatives such as the re-activation of a closed hydroelectric power plant, the launch of a brewery academy, and other projects. At the same time, the founders have been engaged with the creation of a new certification process to guarantee a high-quality craft brewing, such as “100% renewable energy brewery” and “100% Veneto local beer”. Their sense of belonging is an expression of their place embeddedness, “my parents met in this building”, leading to a solid commitment for community engagement and “commitment for sustainable local development”.

Most of the interviewed Finnish microbrewers belong to the category of “local development agents”. Like the examples above, they have a high sense of place, and they are very active in terms of community engagement. They are, for example, unwilling to relocate even if business rationale would suggest moving closer to larger local markets such as the Finnish capital region of Helsinki. They often support local sport clubs, theater groups, nature protection and cultural associations, and organize music, literature, or beer festivals and art exhibitions, and local artists are used for visual label design. Some of the microbreweries act as social employers by offering internships for, for example, troubled youth. Additionally, several of the interviewed Finnish microbreweries pride themselves for offering a “living room” for the locals via their taprooms and restaurants as well as for favoring local producers and other suppliers. However, while local ingredients such as berries are in common use, the main ingredients, malt and

hops, are rarely available locally.¹ Only a few of the interviewed microbreweries manage to produce (small) batches solely from local ingredients: “Everything is 100% from our region. We use it as our signature beer”. Due to the mainly rural location (where employment opportunities are scarce) of the interviewed Finnish microbreweries, their employment effects spur a significant contribution into the local economy, which has also been recognized by their home localities: “A local Leader group² awarded us for our rural development work. It was the first time it was awarded to a company during the history of the prize”.

Social promoters

The most common category for the interviewed Veneto-based microbrewers is that of “social promoters”. Two of these microbreweries have originated as an add-onto existing farms. They reflect a reasonable sense of place: the microbreweries feel connected to the place culturally and for social roots but at the same time reported to be market-driven as convenient places to attract a larger base of clientele: tourists and locals. Alongside charitable donations and training courses, their efforts to engage with the community include projects aimed to spur a circular economy. That is, they interact with the local community (particularly other local businesses) for creating new food and other products (e.g. bread, muffins, buns, etc. and soap) from the resources (spent grain) used during the brewing process.

In San Diego, while none of the microbreweries get labeled as “social promoters” many microbreweries still reflect at least some aspects of solid engagement with the local (beer) community while their sense of place seems not so much rooted as for the local development agents. In fact, their locational choices are based on reasons concerning personal lifestyle and benefits of being established at a convenient distance to the brewers’ home locations. Moreover, the rationale behind their locational choices relate to the proximity to other breweries. The co-location and the “massive support system through the camaraderie of other breweries” attract other business of similar type and plays a significant role for these microbreweries’ location. Further, the microbreweries showcase a deep community engagement in terms of their target market: “without community outreach we would not exist, it is the cornerstone of any San Diego brewery and most of your customers will be locals”. They are reported to conduct manifold activities including sustainability-led practices (including clean-ups and beautification of the neighborhoods), supporting local charities and training activities (including apprenticeship) to local college students, host events such as concerts, book signings, poetry readings, festivals, and other entertainment activities. Furthermore, these microbreweries support fund-raising and brew special beers to support local societal

projects. In particular, the interviewed microbreweries acknowledge their sense of belonging to the strong collaborative environment between the breweries in the area. In fact, microbreweries tend to “share equipment with other breweries in the area” and to “utilize ingredients from other breweries in the neighborhood”.

In Finland, none of the interviewed microbreweries can be labeled as “social promoters”. This is due to the fact that in addition to strong community engagement most of the interviewed Finnish microbreweries also have strong sense of place. However, some of the interviewed microbreweries did report strong sense of belonging as opposed to a more modest sense of place. The reasons behind the strong commitment to community engagement are related to gaining visibility and the support of the locality: “If we are able to be part of the community, it is easier for the community to support us back” but also because of personal non-market related interest “We enjoy doing it” and “This is much more fun like this”.

Hometown brewers

While in San Diego there is only one microbrewery that could be ranked as a “hometown brewer”, in Veneto and in Finland there are several examples of such microbreweries. Concerning the locational choices of these microbreweries, two intertwined rationales emerge. The first one concerns the roots that the brewers have with the locality (birthplace) and the convenience of working close to home. The second (market-based) one relates to the current surge in the industry (due to legislative changes in Finland³ and the evident rise in the demand for craft beers). The microbreweries are in many cases established to fill a gap in the local market “The town was missing a brewery, and it was clearly visible that the demand for craft beer is rising also here in Finland, so there was a gap that we decided to fill”. Additionally, some of the microbreweries have been established to strengthen existing tourism products and services “The brewery is only one part of the comprehensive experience we offer for tourists”. However, many of these microbreweries listed only rather modest community engagement activities such as donating their spent grain either to local animal farms and hunters (as animal feed for livestock and game), bakeries or biogas plants and actually find, for example, charity work as extremely challenging due to the Finnish alcohol legislation: “The alcohol legislation prohibits it. So, when we have been involved, we haven’t used our company name”. The reasons behind the reported modest community engagement were, however, more often “correlated” with the size of the microbrewery “There’s only the two of us and I manage these engagement activities. There’s just not enough time for everything”.

In line with the Finnish examples, in Veneto one of the interviewed microbreweries is run by a single person who has a very intimate connection with the place as they were born and raised in the same hometown where the microbrewery is located. In part, the microbrewery does not engage with the community due to its limited resources but in fact regards community engagement as “pointless”, since the microbrewery targets an international market clientele.

Place-blind breweries

While only two of the interviewed Finnish microbreweries seem to fit the category, there are four San Diego based microbreweries that can be labeled as “place-blind breweries”. These microbreweries report their locational choices as being solely based on accessibility or for business opportunities. For example, one of the interviewed microbreweries admitted that it was the (large) size of the beer market in San Diego that attracted the business to move into the city and reap the benefits of the vibrant local craft beer scene. In essence, the San Diego based microbreweries belonging to this category motivate their relationship to the place with market-oriented argumentations explaining that they would relocate if economic opportunities were more favorable elsewhere. At the same time, they showcase weak community engagement mainly limited to small donations to local charities or to sustainability practices (e.g. donating the spent grain to local ranchers). The Finnish microbreweries in this category reflect a relatively low sense of place after a move into the locality, as expressed in one of the interviews: “we have drifted here”.

In Veneto a more diverse range of microbreweries can be included in this category. There are microbreweries which contribute to their communities only very modestly through the sustainable practices while their locational choices are mainly based on the convenience to be located in a touristic place, as reported by the interviewees. Other motivations include closeness to high-quality ingredients and acquisition of established microbreweries without any personal sense of place or belonging. One of the interviewed microbreweries is run upon a passion about beer and sports. As being centered around sports and the international fan-base around it, this microbrewery is deliberately avoiding any reference to its home locality and the local community. These microbreweries regard community engagement as a non-critical (negligible) part of their actual/future success.

Territorial branding strategies

Particularly the interviewed Finnish microbreweries rely on territorial branding strategies (fully neolocal), while their partial use is commonplace also in Veneto and San Diego (Table 2). As a general observation the use

Table 2. The share of microbreweries utilizing territorial branding strategies in the case study regions.

Region	Fully neolocal marketing	Both neolocal and non-place-based marketing	Fully non-place-based marketing
San Diego (U.S.)	11.1%	67.7%	22.2%
Veneto (ITA)	15.4%	46.1%	38.5%
Finland	50.0%	37.5%	12.5%

of territorial branding strategies is more commonplace in microbreweries with strong sense of place (as expected). In fact, particularly in Finland many of the microbreweries are named after their home localities. In San Diego, the brewery ranked as local development agent has been pursuing a co-creation process with the local community to shape the name of the brewery and single beers. In fact, the utilization of such local characteristics as place names or neighborhoods, landmarks, local fauna, dialects, or other local iconic elements and symbols in the names and labels of beers is very commonplace. This is seen as a good way to stand out and appeal to local customers and tourists. The minority of the interviewed microbreweries that do not utilize territorial branding strategies expressed concerns that it would prevent them from marketing their products efficiently also to extra-local/international customers: “We wanted the brand to be global right from the start, so that we do not need to change or translate it at some point” or to specific international markets such as sports fans.⁴ “We target a market niche of rugby players and lovers, therefore we avoided territorial references on purpose”. As such, some of the microbreweries have completely refused the idea to adopt territorial branding strategies, since their identity and branding are based on “non-place-based” themes.

While microbreweries that do not utilize territorial branding strategies (fully non-place-based) are the minority among the interviewed sample, they nonetheless raised an important issue: sense of place and belonging are not directly tied to the branding strategies of the microbreweries. On the one hand, some microbreweries that have not adopted territorial branding strategies are nevertheless highly committed to the place and the community, thus, expressing a high sense of place and belonging. On the other hand, some microbreweries rely on stereotypical images – such as the beach, the sun, and the ocean in the case of San Diego based microbreweries – more for business purposes (to attract clientele) than because of a solid sense of place (“as a homage to the city”) or belonging.

Discussion and conclusions

While the majority of the studies on the craft beer industry have concentrated on evaluating the connection between microbreweries and their

home locations from a consumer side of the industry, this study investigated the issue from the supply side, that is, from the perspective of the microbreweries themselves. The main emphasis was laid on investigating the relationships between microbreweries and the places and communities they are “embedded” in. The analysis is based on data collected through in-depth interviews in three different case study locations: San Diego (U.S.), eastern and northern Finland and Veneto (Italy). Based on a novel analytical framework, the interviewed microbreweries were profiled according to the two main characteristics investigated: community engagement (sense of belonging) and place embeddedness (sense of place). As such, our paper complements the framework by Buratti and Hagelman (2021) that concentrates on the product model of cideries (or breweries) by building a typology based on the sense of place and belonging of the breweries in their home localities allowing the mapping of intangible aspects of neo-localism in addition to the more tangible dimensions described by Buratti and Hagelman (2021).

The interview results allow to draw insights about the rationale behind the microbreweries’ locational decisions to establish their business in their distinct locations and why they engage with their communities. The interviewed microbreweries report a diverse set of rationales – satisficing a mixture of affectual motivations and market-based reasons – behind their commitment to a place and its community, including a symbiotic relationship with their home localities, their passion for the craft beer, and personal entrepreneurial expertise. In general, the results support a connection between microbrewers’ high sense of place and high sense of belonging, but high sense of place does not automatically mean high community engagement, nor is high sense of belonging necessarily tied to place embeddedness.

According to the presented typology, the assessed Finnish microbreweries display a higher sense of place (place embeddedness) and sense of belonging (community engagement) than the interviewed microbreweries in San Diego and Veneto. Whereas many of the interviewed Finnish microbreweries can be labeled, according to the proposed typology, as “local development agents” with both high sense of place and belonging, the San Diegan microbreweries display a dichotomy between “local development agents” and “place-blind breweries” who in addition to having only some community engagement activities have chosen to locate in their distinct premises more because of economic rationales than strong place embeddedness. A likely reason behind these differences is linked to the rural–urban characteristics of the two cases: the Finnish microbreweries included in our sample are located in relatively rural settings compared to the microbreweries in San Diego. In line with the literature on rural entrepreneurship (see e.g. Saarinen and Makkonen 2022), we consider that rural entrepreneurs (arguably more than their urban counterparts) combine an intimate knowledge of and

concern for the place their enterprises are embedded in. Therefore, rural entrepreneurs first seek to exploit local networks and exhaust local resources before turning to non-local resources and networks (Korsgaard, Ferguson, and Gaddefors 2015) explaining the differences in the sense of place and sense of belonging between the (mostly) rural Finnish and urban San Diegan microbreweries. The microbreweries in Veneto, including microbreweries from both clearly urban and clearly rural settings, are more evenly dispersed between the four proposed types of microbreweries.

The two categories which express a low community engagement are very different from one another. The first category, that is, those considered “hometown brewers” are microbreweries commonly run by a single (or very few) person(s). It is, thus, mainly the small size, and the associated lack of time and resources, of the microbreweries that impedes their community engagement activities. The second category, that is, those considered as “place-blind breweries” have not been considered in earlier academic literature on the craft beer industry. These microbreweries explain their relationship with the place they are located in mainly in terms of market convenience. Especially in San Diego, where the microbrewery market is highly competitive, there are some examples of microbreweries which would be willing to relocate if this would be economically more convenient. In Veneto, there are examples of microbreweries, which are oriented to certain non-place-based rather than local “themes” and are, thus, oriented towards an international clientele. Therefore, community engagement is not considered economically meaningful for their businesses.

The results of this paper shed light on a very diverse spectrum of microbreweries. Still a larger portion of the interviewees are engaged in community engagement activities which can yield different scale and extent of benefits to the local community: donations and organization of events emerge as basic common initiatives, while sustainable environment-friendly commitment, and apprenticeship or knowledge-sharing programs pertain to a high-end class of activities. The ties with communities are backed by a strong commitment to them. Based on these results, the microbreweries emerge as pivotal actors in their communities’ local economic and social development by employing locals, favoring local suppliers, offering places for socializing, promoting sustainability, supporting local arts and sports, etc. This connection should be thoroughly considered by policymakers committed to increase the social capital in the community. Besides offering venues where community can socialize, the microbreweries are shown to act as local development agents co-creating new local identity together with the community which seems to pay-off in attracting tourists and a loyal local customer base consuming local rather than imported products. This impact is elevated in rural areas and small towns, sparse in other

businesses, where the microbreweries can be major employers and economic actors vitalizing the local economy. Further, the research has shown that many of the interviewed microbrewers are closely linked with their place, and they would not relocate even if this could provide economic benefits (i.e. their current home locations satisfy them).

Generally, the majority of the microbreweries assessed in the three case study regions utilize territorial branding strategies at least in some aspects of their marketing strategies, which is in line with the previous literature on the craft beer industry (e.g. Taylor and DiPietro 2020). However, a portion of the microbreweries mobilizes iconic stereotypes rather than distinct place-specific symbols. On the other end of the spectrum there are those microbreweries that aim for international markets and, thus, have chosen to purposefully avoid using territorial branding strategies as they would not promote their overseas sales. While an exceptional case was found from San Diego, a microbrewery that had co-created its branding strategy with the local community, this analysis demonstrates that in other cases also there seems to be a connection between microbreweries' territorial branding strategies and their senses of place. However, the many exceptions to this observation show that there is no "general rule" between the way microbreweries advertise their businesses and products and their actual place embeddedness and engagement with local communities.

Naturally, our paper is not without limitations. While doing our utmost to facilitate inter-coder reliability, the fact that the interviews were carried out in three different languages and, thus, also assessed by different members of the research team leads to some degree of inevitable subjectivity. Therefore, although all of the categorizations were made based on the same objective criteria, labeling the microbreweries into distinct categories inexorably entail subjective decisions made by the authors in charge of the different case study locations. Similarly, the data are based on interviewees' self-assessments of their microbreweries: the interviewees might have over- or underestimated their "true level" of place embeddedness and community engagement. As a typical disclaimer, these results are based on a sample of three case study locations. Thus, more research in different geographical and institutional settings is needed to verify the points raised here concerning microbreweries' place-embeddedness and community engagement. The novel analytical framework developed in this paper offers tools for such future comparative studies. Additionally, more research is needed to compare microbreweries to mass brewers regarding place embeddedness and community engagement to demonstrate whether the observed characteristics are unique (or ideal) to microbreweries. Similarly, further research on other small scale, neolocal business types (exemplifying the more general "return to the local") would help to demonstrate whether microbreweries are consistent with the larger contemporary societal shifts.

Notes

1. There is one large and only a few micro-malting plants in the country. Due to climate conditions, hops are not grown in Finland in significant volumes.
2. See Rural.fi (2023) for an overview of Finnish Leader groups.
3. Finnish breweries have been allowed to sell their products from their own shops only since 2018 (Ministry of Social Affairs and Health 2023).
4. While sports fans could be considered as a different kind of “community”, the focus of our paper is on groups of people who share a geographic area.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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