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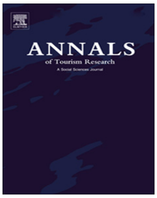

Place branding performances in tourist local food shops

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ABSTRACT

This article adopts a performative approach to analysing encounters between tourists, retailers, objects, architectures, detailing the communication devices inherent in bringing "to life" a thematic selection of a place's multiple identities to promote tourism. It draws on integrated interpretations of performative approaches, illustrating them relative to the place branding enacted at local food & wine shops to address tourists visiting Verucchio, Italy. The study contributes to the literature on tourism by proposing the concept of performative place branding, enabling a more creative, hybrid, and open-ended consideration of the relationship between tourist places and place branding. This contrasts with the "top-down" logic employed in previous studies and policies for promoting tourist destinations.

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Introduction

Local food & wine products are increasingly located at the core of place branding, intending to foster tourism (Blichfeldt & Halkier, 2014; Vanolo, 2015). Their outlet venues are the sites at which the multiple identities of a place are thematically selected and performed, as this article will discuss. In the local food & wine shops that target tourism, co-branding processes occur, connecting the image of a place with a product or vice versa (Kneale & Dwyer, 2008; see also Pike, 2011b). Local food & wine shops are a key interface between visitors and the local environment; sites where place branding is

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brought "to life" through a variety of performative techniques, which extend beyond policy-driven schemes.

Place branding to attract tourism has largely been the domain of management and marketing researchers (Allen, 2010; Kavaratzis, Warnaby, & Ashworth, 2014), while urban studies scholars have typically explored the wider political economic implications of place branding (Anttiroiko, 2014; Evans, 2003; Vanolo, 2008, 2015). These accounts have mainly considered place branding as a "top-down", patronising strategy, whereby marketing and management professionals, paid for by stakeholders, select ideas that then are translated into graphic icons, policy documents, internet portals, and tourists' and locals' opinions (see Kavaratzis & Kalandides, 2015; Lucarelli & Hallin, 2015; Ren & Blichfeldt, 2011 for a critique). Recently, place branding literature has focussed on local stakeholders' narratives at locations highly invested in tourism (Campelo, Aitken, Thyne, & Gnoth, 2014; Lichrou, O'Malley, & Patterson, 2010) to reveal how the associations of meaning that a place brand consists of, relate to place-making elements (Kavaratzis & Kalandides, 2015). Both these streams, however, have directed minimal attention toward how this thematic selection of a place's multiple identities, to which I refer to in this article as place branding, is enacted *on the ground*. Place branding emerges from the entanglement of material, discursive, and embodied performances, which very few studies have pioneered. Among them, Ren and Blichfeldt (2011) provides empirical evidence that images, discourses, performances, physical objects and technologies all articulate a thematic selection of a place's multiple identities at sites where there is no conscious or strategic act of place branding management. Ren (2011) also demonstrates that material objects might be agentic in shaping the selective thematisation of a place, but she reflects on human agency from a distance. In this article, I continue this discussion, as I believe there has been insufficient exploration of how place branding is enacted through tourism performances on the ground. I take this discussion further through a theoretically and empirically informed development of the notion of performative place branding, which concentrates on enactment via objects, images, narratives and people. These performances activate a thematic selection of a place's multiple identities. Differing from previous studies, I question more pointedly whether performative place branding represents an intricate and inclusive acceptance of tourist places, while remembering to underline the flawed and exclusionary implications that this approach also entails.

The aim of this paper is to provide a more fluid understanding of the relationship between tourist places and place branding. It examines how this relationship is mediated by material culture, discourses, and embodied performances. Its secondary aim is to discuss whether a performative approach to place branding could provide a viable framework to facilitate less patronising, albeit not less problematic, forms of place branding for tourist places, than that currently instituted. Moving forward from a post-structuralist position rooted in geography and sociology, this paper will present and critically address the link between tourist places and place branding. In doing so it will discuss extant literature pertaining to the performative turn in tourism studies (Bærenholdt, Haldrup, Larsen, & Urry, 2003; Edensor, 2001, 2007; Giovanardi, Lucarelli, & Decosta, 2014; Haldrup & Larsen, 2010). This approach will provide a more intricate understanding of the multi-layered nature of place branding than that usually acknowledged in management/marketing literature and in critical urban studies, and a sounder understanding of the dynamics occurring between tourism and place branding.

To achieve this, I apply the proposed approach to local food & wine shops in Verucchio, an Italian town centre only recently opened up to tourism. In Verucchio, place branding emerges through the enhancement of shops' interior design, the communicative media outside shops, and retailer/tourist interactions.

Place branding and tourism: the contribution of performative approaches

Tourism and place branding have moved closer in recent decades (Allen, 2010; Kavaratzis et al., 2014; Lichrou et al., 2010). Drawing on a selection of themes to inform the supposed identity of a place (i.e. the meanings that people attach to places), strategies can be implemented to compete with increased regional competition by evoking a distinctiveness of place, with the potential to attract economic resources (i.e. external visitors, potential investors, or wealthy inhabitants) (Anttiroiko, 2014;

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