



The effectiveness of place brand communication



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 7 February 2014

Received in revised form 8 May 2014

Accepted 18 May 2014

Keywords:

Place branding

Place brand communication

Place image

Place marketing

Place communications

ABSTRACT

The study presented in this paper is one of the first quantitative, empirical studies addressing the effectiveness of place branding. This paper assesses whether three different strategies for place brand communication have a positive effect on attracting residents and visitors. The expectation is that this effect is mediated by the place brand image. In order to test the conceptual model that explains these relationships, data was gathered from a nationwide survey of Dutch place marketing professionals and analyzed using structural equation modeling. The empirical analysis shows that both physical place brand communication and word-of-mouth place brand communication have similar positive effects, mediated by the place brand image, on attracting both residents and visitors. There is no evidence that the effects were significantly different for attracting residents and visitors. Finally, traditional place brand communication has neither a direct effect on the place brand image nor a mediated effect by the place brand image on the attraction of residents and visitors.

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Introduction

The number of cities announcing a branding strategy has grown in the last decade. However, the use of branding is not limited to the 'usual suspects' like global cities, capitals, and well-known tourist destinations; a growing number of smaller cities have also made efforts to brand themselves. Turok (2009) positions branding within cities' wider quest to promote their distinctiveness amidst a growing competition for resources, visitors, residents and companies. In response to these challenges, policy makers employ place branding to communicate positive images of their city and position their city favorably in the minds of target groups (Braun, 2012; Kavaratzis & Ashworth, 2007; Zenker & Beckmann, 2013a). Place branding has thus become an urban governance strategy for projecting images and managing perceptions about places (Eshuis & Edwards, 2013; Klijn, Eshuis, & Braun, 2012; Peel & Lloyd, 2008; Zhang & Zhao, 2009). Merrilees, Miller, and Herington (2012, p. 1032) observed that "many cities now understand the value of their brand and to some extent, how it could be designed and managed." This assertion is shared by other researchers: Medway and Warnaby (2008) observed that places are being conceptualized as brands, and Braun (2012) argued that place marketers are keen

on establishing places as brands in response to the competition among places. The emergence of place branding can be related to the rise of "the entrepreneurial city" (Hall & Hubbard, 1998) and a neo-liberal turn in urban governance (Greenberg, 2008; Hackworth, 2007). Consequently, urban governance officials have looked to and adopted private-sector strategies, including marketing-led strategies of urban development (see e.g., Greenberg, 2008).

Despite the growing interest in the field, the application of place branding is not without criticism (e.g., Bennett & Savani, 2003; Evans, 2003; Jansson & Power, 2006). The critiques ranges from the democratic legitimacy of place branding (Eshuis & Edwards, 2013) to whether or not brand management strategies actually fit places (Blichfeldt, 2005). Several authors also point to difficulties inherent to place branding, such as the great variety of target groups, the complexity of different messages, multiple spatial scales, competing interests, and the different institutional context (e.g., Braun, 2012; Giovanardi, 2014; Hankinson, 2001; Turok, 2009). These criticisms and difficulties aside, there are no fundamental barriers to place branding (e.g., Braun, 2012; Hankinson, 2001; Kavaratzis, 2008), but further academic underpinning is needed (e.g., Lucarelli & Berg, 2011).

There are still many challenges in the field of place branding (see Braun, 2012; Kavaratzis, 2008). One prominent issue is the dearth of quantitative empirical research that reaches beyond singular case studies to validate place brand theories. Lucarelli and

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Berg (2011), in their meta-analyses of the place branding research domain, found that empirical research in place branding is “chiefly based upon qualitative studies focusing on one or few cases that draw conceptual and theoretical generalization from studies based on shallow empirical data” (Lucarelli & Berg, 2011, p. 16). Notable exceptions include a quantitative study by Zenker, Eggers, and Farsky (2012) regarding differences in image dimensions, a study by Merrilees et al. (2012) into meanings associated with city brands, and Jacobsen’s (2012) research on the impact of place brand equity on investors’ behavior. That said, empirical studies into the effectiveness of place branding strategies remain especially scarce. Thus, this paper presents an empirical study that investigates the effect of place branding strategies on attracting potential target groups. More specifically, the study focuses on the effect of different types of place brand communication strategies on attracting two different target groups – residents and visitors. The study uses data from a nationwide survey concerning the practice of place marketing and place branding in the Netherlands.

The conceptual model

Some of the most cited theoretical developments for place branding have been based on corporate branding theory: Kavaratzis (2004, 2008) and Trueman et al. (2004), among others, underpin the scholarly analysis of place branding, supplemented by insights from corporate branding inspired by the work of Balmer (2001) and Balmer and Gray (2003). Given the complex nature of place products and hence the place brand, the argument follows that places can learn more from experiences with corporate branding than product branding. Kavaratzis (2008, p. 41) highlights this complexity, arguing that places communicate in many ways: “everything a city consists of, everything that takes place in the city and is done by the city, communicates messages about the city’s image.” The theoretical framework developed by Kavaratzis (2004, 2008) is the basis for the conceptual model developed in this paper. With this model, we aim to test the effect of different types of place brand communication strategies on attracting target groups.

Strategies for place brand communication

Kavaratzis (2004, 2008) developed a place brand communication model that includes three types of place brand communication: (1) Primary communication, which includes not only the architecture, urban design, infrastructure, museums and other real place offerings, but also the city’s behavior – for example, by government agencies and residents (e.g., Braun, Kavaratzis, & Zenker, 2013); (2) secondary communication, which includes the formal and intended communication through all forms of advertising, public relations, graphic design, and the use of logos and slogans, which is similar to promotion in the traditional marketing mix; (3) tertiary communication, which refers to word-of-mouth reinforced by the media and a wide variety of city users, thus serving as a form of communication largely beyond the control of place marketers. Kavaratzis’ approach can be labeled as an inclusive approach, where place branding is not reduced to introducing new logos, catchphrases and campaigns.

In this research, we use a slightly adapted version of Kavaratzis’ scheme to identify three strategies for communicating the place brand. First, physical place brand communication (labeled PHYSICAL) through a combination of physical investments and communication, is included in the model. As argued by Kavaratzis (2004, 2008), the place’s hardware communicates the place brand, yet many places also have deliberate strategies to combine the (re)development of the city’s hardware with dedicated communi-

cation. Thus, place marketers deploy dedicated communication activities to make the city’s investments in iconic architecture (e.g., skyscraper, museum, business park, sports stadium, library, bridge, etc.) known to a wider audience. Second, the conceptual model comprises traditional place brand communication (labeled TRADITIONAL) via way of traditional communication activities similar to the secondary communication in Kavaratzis’ place brand communication framework. Third, we include place brand communication resulting from positive word-of-mouth (labeled WOM), similar to the tertiary communication in Kavaratzis’ framework.

Attracting residents and visitors

The next step in building the conceptual model is to look at the desired results for place branding. Place branding is not an objective in itself: It is instrumental in attaining the objectives of a place (district, city or region), which are either set by the respective governments or jointly decided upon by collaborating public and private stakeholders. The most important driver for places adopting marketing and branding strategies is the competition for a range of target groups, such as tourists, investors, companies, new citizens, qualified workforce, students and others (Anholt, 2008; Hospers, 2003; Van den Berg & Braun, 1999; Zenker et al., 2012). In this study we focus on external groups, which are important to the praxis of place branding. In the conceptual model, the attraction of residents (labeled RESIDENTS) and the attraction of visitors (labeled VISITORS) are our estimates of the results of place branding. This delineation helps to account for the different brand meanings among different place audiences (Merrilees et al., 2012; Zenker & Beckmann, 2013a; Zenker & Braun, 2010) and allows us to assess whether place brand communication works differently among various target groups.

Place brand image

The most straightforward indicator of place branding success is the improvement of the place brand image. Kavaratzis (2004, p. 66) postulates that “all encounters with the city take place through perceptions and images.” Research on place image has been on the agenda since the seminal work of Lynch (1960), who solidified the importance of a city’s image albeit with a focus on urban design. Anholt (2008) observed that places have images just as products and corporations have images, and further that places – metaphorically speaking – have brand images. These images then play an important role in the decision-making process of (potential) place customers (Anholt, 2008; Baloglu & McCleary, 1999; Braun, 2008). The expectation follows that the three types of place brand communication have a positive effect on the place brand image and that a better place brand image will attract more target groups (e.g., Avraham, 2004). Thus, we included the place brand image (labeled as BRAND_IMAGE) in the model as a mediator variable for attracting visitors and residents.

The impact of place brand communication strategies on attracting residents and visitors

The conceptual model is depicted in Fig. 1 and includes the three place brand communication strategies, the place brand image, and the attraction of residents and visitors. This paper analyzes whether these three strategies for place brand communication have a positive effect, mediated by the place brand image, on attracting residents and visitors. The first two research hypotheses are listed below:

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