

Confused branding? An exploratory study of place branding practices among place management professionals



Ivo de Noronha^a, J. Andres Coca-Stefaniak^{b,*}, Alastair M. Morrison^c

^a Strategic Solutions (Int.) Ltd., 12 Manchester Court, Victoria Docks, London E16 3GZ, United Kingdom

^b University of Greenwich, Department of Marketing, Events and Tourism, Business School, Old Royal Naval College, Park Row, London SE10 9LS, United Kingdom

^c Purdue University, Department of Hospitality and Tourism Management, College of Consumer & Family Sciences, Room 111A, Stone Hall, West Lafayette, IN 47907-2059, USA

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ABSTRACT

Although the knowledge about place branding and place management is growing, there is a substantial gap in the understanding of place branding among professionals responsible for the management of town and city centres, including private-public partnership formats such as business improvement districts (BIDs). This exploratory study addresses this knowledge gap through in-depth interviews with key professionals in England, Wales, Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. The results suggest that the strategic potential of place branding is negatively affected by a focus on operational thinking, which hinders innovation towards more holistic approaches to place management. Further quantitative research is needed to elaborate on these findings across the UK, Ireland and other countries to enhance the understanding of the uses and interpretations of place branding among town and city managers.

1. Introduction

1.1. Background

Branding is a construct increasingly being applied to geo-political entities at different levels, including retail districts, shopping centres, town centres, regions and nations. Research and practice in the branding of places has emerged from a plethora of associated disciplines. Scholars have drawn meaningful parallels between the branding of places and the branding of products and services (Parkerson & Saunders, 2005), destinations (Pike, 2005), corporate branding (Hankinson, 2007), tourism management (Avraham & Ketter, 2008; Dinnie, 2011), urban regeneration (Kokosalakis, Bagnall, Selby, & Burns, 2006; Tallon, 2013), public policy and governance (Anholt, 2008; Lucarelli & Berg, 2011), urban planning (Costaglioli & Van Assche, 2012) and place marketing (Dinnie, Melewar, Seidenfuss, & Musa, 2010; Gertner, 2011; Kavaratzis, 2004).

Place branding as an emerging discipline has evolved considerably over the last two decades, particularly with regards to the way it communicates messages to different audiences (Braun, Eshuis, & Klijn, 2014; Zenker, Braun, & Petersen, 2017). The increased marketing by governments and other bodies related to tourism, planning and city management has resulted in more sophisticated applications of brand-

ing and marketing, including social media (Zhou & Wang, 2014). Place marketing has evolved from a promotion-based approach to a more strategic and holistic view of the marketing of places (Ashworth & Voogd, 1994; Avraham, 2004; Gnoth, 2002), including the concept of place reputation (Bell, 2016), even if there is evidence that the fallout of the 2008 global financial crisis may have started a period of 'soul searching' in the place branding community (see Eischenschitz, 2010) in terms of the actual purpose of this strategic activity with further calls later to reassess its focus (see Ashworth, 2011; Ashworth, Kavaratzis, & Warnaby, 2015), including doubts with regards to the effectiveness of place branding (Medway, Swanson, Dely Neirotti, Pasquinelli, & Zenker, 2015).

As the concept of 'entrepreneurialism' emerged from the backdrop of a business-like approach to the management of places (Hubbard & Hall, 1998), the ensuing initial rise of city marketing and branding stemmed initially from corporate branding as people's experience of places began to be interpreted through the prism of perceptions and images (Kavaratzis, 2004) irrespective of whether their boundaries comprised those of a whole city or smaller business improvement zones (BIZ) or retail districts (Steel & Symes, 2005). More recently, scholars in place branding have posited that there are evolutionary parallels between place branding and place management (Boisen, Terlouw, & van Gorp, 2011; Kavaratzis & Ashworth, 2008; Kavaratzis,

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: ivodenoronha@gmail.com (I. de Noronha), a.coca-stefaniak@gre.ac.uk (J. Andres Coca-Stefaniak), alastair@purdue.edu (A.M. Morrison).

Warnaby, & Ashworth, 2015) worthy of further investigation, particularly if the management processes involved (e.g. brand management versus place management) are considered, even if it has become apparent that a considerable gap exists between academic discourse and practitioner engagement with place branding. These arguments build on earlier work by Stubbs, Warnaby, and Medway (2002) and Warnaby, Bennison, and Davies (2005), who proposed that place management requires marketing and branding strategies wherein the multi-dimensional interests of varied stakeholders can be fulfilled. Other scholars have developed this argument further by highlighting the need for more integrated area-based public-private sector partnerships that provide a more balanced approach to the management of places (Riviezzo, de Nisco, & Napolitano, 2009; Zhao, 2015).

This research uses these scholarly foundations and recent research on tourist destination managers by Zavattaro and Adams (2016) as well as Oliveira's (2016) exploration of links between place branding and spatial regional planning to explore the construct of place branding with a special focus on how professionals involved in the management of retail-led place management partnerships - including town centre management (TCM) schemes and business improvement districts (BIDs) - interpret its use in practice. The focus of this study on professionals involved with BIDs and TCM partnerships renders it a first of its kind in place branding.

1.2. Conceptual framework for research

The conceptual framework for this research (Fig. 1) builds on stakeholder theory and place branding, including Tasci and Gartner's (2009) framework for the creation of strategic destination brands, Balakrishnan's (2009) framework for branding strategy for destinations, Hannah and Rowley's (2011) strategic place brand management model and Qu, Kim, and Im's (2011) destination branding and image model. It also connects these to recent work by Foroudi et al. (2016) linking place branding, place image and place reputation, as well as Oliveira's (2016) linking of place branding to strategic spatial planning.

1.3. Research aim and objectives

The aim of this study was to determine perceptions of place branding as a concept among TCM and BID practitioners in England, Wales, Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. The specific research objectives were:

- a) To identify the role of place branding in the management of TCM

schemes and BIDs.

- b) To examine the mechanisms used by place management professionals to implement place branding on the ground, including working with local stakeholders.

- c) To evaluate potential avenues for the future of place branding in TCM and BIDs.

2. Literature review

2.1. Place branding

Place branding has been defined from a wide array of perspectives along a spectrum that ranges conceptually from product identity to the very applicability of product branding techniques to places (Kavaratzis & Ashworth, 2006), including spatial interpretations of places, which include countries, regions and cities, among others (Ashworth et al., 2015; Chan & Marafa, 2013).

A meta-analysis of the place branding and place marketing literature over a 20-year period (Gertner, 2011) found that early work was dominated by dissent among academics on the applicability of branding to the hypernym 'place'. A similar lack of consensus existed with regards to (potential) parallels between the branding of places and products (Kotler & Gertner, 2002), especially whether marketing concepts used in services and products could be successfully applied at all to places (see Caldwell & Freire, 2004). However, a growing school of thought emerged in the 1990s for a steady state consensus (Hankinson, 2010) whereby services and product branding techniques should be investigated with regards to their applicability to places (Skinner, 2008). This historical evolution of thought was summarised by Hankinson (2010), as shown in Fig. 2.

One of the more holistic interpretations is that of Lucarelli and Berg (2011), who suggested interpreting place branding as a (relatively organic) process for the development and management of target audiences' perceptions of specific places with the sole objective of influencing their spatial behaviours and ultimately contributing to the development and sustainability of the place's distinct identity (Llinares, Page, & Llinares, 2013). Other scholars (Kavaratzis & Ashworth, 2008; Warnaby, 2009; Warnaby et al., 2005) argued that for marketing and branding strategies to be successful, places need to be managed actively to satisfy the multi-dimensional interests of varied stakeholder groups (Avraham & Ketter, 2008; Jackson, 2008). This issue of place management and its connection to place branding is explored next.

2.2. Place management

The ubiquitous growth of place branding and marketing activity suggests that geographic locations can and should be managed as actively as goods are (Gertner, 2011), regardless of whether places are interpreted as 'marketable commodities' (Kavaratzis & Ashworth, 2008) or as highly differentiable entities able to attract market segments with specific expectations (Hankinson, 2005) even if some scholars have argued that places are not generally 'produced' with explicit intentions in mind (Pryor & Grossbart, 2007). Moreover, consumption patterns for cities as destinations - often reliant on events and specific promotions (Rota & Salone, 2014) - can differ considerably to those of countries, which tend to have more stable and enduring destination images (Caldwell & Freire, 2004). Cities have inherent advantages over countries as destinations as a result of specific attributes that reflect local historical and cultural intricacies (Landry, 2008; Rabbiosi, 2015; Warnaby, 2009).

The management of places has been defined as "a coordinated, area-based, multi-stakeholder approach to improve locations, harnessing the skills, experiences and resources of those in the private, public and voluntary sectors" Scaramanga (2012, p. 74). This concept is far from new and has evolved considerably over the last four decades from an

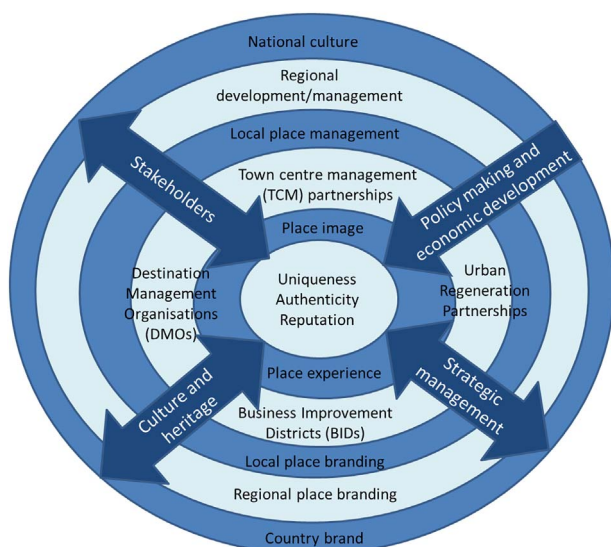


Fig. 1. Conceptual framework for research.

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