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## Research Paper

## Destination branding and reconstructing symbolic capital of urban heritage: A spatially informed observational analysis in medieval towns

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## ABSTRACT

The primary aim of this paper is to discuss the nature of a spatially informed dual relationship between destination branding and the construction of symbolic capital in heritage sites. Employing a social constructivist approach in an interdisciplinary perspective of multiple-destinations research, the paper attempts to understand how destination branding as a social phenomenon intrinsically draws on the symbolic value of urban heritage and how this connectedness is reinforced by socioeconomic activities located in the heritage space. Based on textual, observational and visual methods and techniques, the research conducted in designated UNESCO World Heritage destinations of former Hanseatic towns identified a number of interconnected spatial dimensions involved in the process of (re)constructing the symbolic capital of historical sites and especially medieval architectural objects. In a broader sense, the analysis shows how the reciprocity between destination branding and the construction of the symbolic capital unfolding in the interrelationship between destination brand identity and destination brand image could be considered in conceptualising practices in the tourism field.

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## 1. Introduction

Although heritage has become a 'commercial product' to be marketed to tourists (Prentice, 1993), the historic environment is acknowledged to add considerable value to the overall tourist experience (Orbaşlı & Woodward, 2009). Specifically, world heritage has become 'a unique aspect of contemporary globalization' (Elliott & Schmutz, 2012). World Heritage Sites (WHSs) are elevated to the 'status of global icon' (Shackley, 1998): they have become a brand, an endorsement with 'a widely accepted stamp of quality and authenticity' (Ryan & Silvano, 2009) and 'priceless' tourism resources' (Vong & Ung, 2011). As such, destinations with a heritage landscape of outstanding universal value, titled WHSs 'to pique the interest of potential tourists' (Di Giovine, 2009) through a compelling statement of the value of the site, are set in a competitive position. Creative branding techniques are then used in an attempt to enable unique selling propositions. Understanding the importance of a destination's unique tourism characteristics from the point of view of destination competitiveness and approaching it as such (Chen, Chen & Lee, 2011; Cracolici &

Nijkamp, 2009) has recently been highlighted by a range of authors exploring destination branding and destination marketing perspectives (Fyall, Garrod & Wang, 2012; Hanna & Rowley, 2011; Hoppen, Brown & Fyall, 2014; Kirillova, Fu, Lehto, & Cai, 2014; Pereira, Correia & Schutz, 2015; Voase, 2012).

Destinations and attractions, more particularly the use of culture and heritage for tourism and its consequences, have, as noted in Tribe and Xiao, (2011), become a major subject area in social sciences research on tourism. Moreover, heritage has recently been identified as one of many important contemporary research issues in 'problem-oriented work at the intersections of tourism and contemporary society' (Cohen & Cohen, 2012). It is, however, notable that tourism-related urban and spatial issues remain theoretically and empirically relatively underexplored (Cohen & Cohen, 2012). Although research on destination branding that centers around cultural and/or urban heritage (Chang & Teo, 2009; Connell & Rugendyke, 2010; Geary, 2008; Ryan & Silvano, 2009; Stern & Hall, 2010) has been enlightening, it only embraces the spatial complexity to a limited extent in regard to the formation of interrelationships between destination branding and urban built heritage. Most work in this field tends to be confined to the analysis of single cases.

A number of papers that challenge urban heritage either in relation to city branding or marketing (Agyei-Mensah, 2006; Chang, 1999; Giovanardi, 2011; Ismail & Mohd-Ali, 2011; Lorenzini,

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Calzati & Giudici, 2011; Rothschild, Alon & Fetscherin, 2012) also tend to be specific about their conceptual focus and place-specific approach. In such cases, the interconnections between the fields of destination branding and tourism remain elusive, as do the complex and durably transforming interrelationships between the spatiality of agents' actions and urban heritage that are inherently present in destination branding.

Understanding this complexity calls for further consideration of the inter-linkages between the ways heritage is used and the symbolic value reproduced on the one hand, and destination branding on the other. In addition, it is suggested that research benefits from an approach that examines and compares multiple destinations. In this vein, the current paper attempts to elucidate the subtle nature of multi-layered dualities between destination branding and the construction of symbolic capital in urban heritage space. The analysis focuses specifically on how medieval urban architectural heritage of cultural value, reproduced by the spatially conducted socioeconomic activities in public and semi-public spaces, participates in the (re)construction of the symbolic capital used in destination branding.

## 2. Destination branding and construction of symbolic capital

In regard to the complex understanding of destination branding (and on a wider scale, of tourism), the research in the field presents an interdisciplinary challenge (Phillimore & Goodson, 2004; Darbellay & Stock, 2012), which is pursued in the current paper. Place branding, as conceived by Kotler and Gertner, (2002) and Hankinson, (2004, 2007, 2009), encompasses a wide perspective of interactions related to a place (e.g. investment, exports, culture, sports, etc). In contrast, 'destination' implies a tourism perspective (Govers & Go, 2009; Morgan, Pritchard & Pride, 2011) in the broad sense of branding a country, a region or a city (Govers & Go, 2009), but also indicates the specific dimensions of a promoted destination. Therefore, branding, as a central element in the strategic positioning of tourism products and destinations (Vanhove, 2011), involves promoting the unique benefits that the tourist will experience while visiting the city rather than the city itself (Kolb, 2006). The holistic and apparently social constructivist viewpoint on the phenomena of destination and destination branding has recently been discussed in Hultman and Hall, (2012, p. 549), who assert that 'places are constituted by social relations and practices'. Saraniemi and Kylänen, (2011) also emphasize the cultural and symbolic aspects of the construction of meanings attributed to a destination.

The symbolic dimension of branding underscores the considerations of destination image, which by contributing to the formation of a destination brand, defines its success in the international market (Tasci & Kozak, 2006). It has been asserted elsewhere that the success of destination branding is based not only on the tourists' point of view of the brand value but also on the local people and entrepreneurs (García, Gómez & Molina, 2012). Both these latter groups play a crucial role (García et al., 2012) in creating the character of a place together with historical buildings, services and events at a particular destination, as is argued in Kolb's, (2006) management-oriented research on marketing places to match tourists' interests.

Likewise, the importance of recognising historic cities and towns in their 'living' sense is underlined in other works on urban heritage and on destination branding. Orbaşlı and Woodward, (2009), for example, accentuate that while retaining the physical character of past times, historical towns with monuments, buildings and landscapes must adapt to remain relevant to contemporary society, today's audiences and markets. This thought was also highlighted in Nyseth and Sognnæs, (2013) from the

preservation perspective. By doing so, physical realities of historic places support or lend credibility to the pay-offs and narratives in destination branding strategies (Hornskov, 2011), as they serve as significant drivers of tourism development, particularly in the case of the presence of noteworthy heritage (Lorenzini et al., 2011). The reuse of the heritage buildings in historic towns creates the potential for dynamism that makes urban areas attractive sites for tourism (Metro-Roland, 2011). The dual nature of dynamism is revealed in the 'tourist prosaic, constituted by the 'everyday sites of tourist practice [... and...] everyday sites of urban life' (Metro-Roland, 2011) that create the quality of the placeness of a destination due to 'the balance between the local culture and local life, the historic and the contemporary' (Metro-Roland, 2011).

As the meanings of a heritage site, rather than its objective attributes, are essential for capturing the tourist's attitudes towards the site's designation (Porja, Reichel, & Cohen, 2013), WHSs have become 'must-see' symbolic attractions in cultural tours and national tourist board marketing in re-presentational forms (Evans, 2001). Moreover, in the case of WHSs, the brand is obvious for its outstanding value (Boyd & Timothy, 2006; Ryan & Silvanto, 2011), and compared to other attractions within the vicinity, WHSs deserve universal recognition as cultural and/or natural heritage (Boyd & Timothy, 2006) that potentially attract visitors (Buckley, 2004; Geronimi, 2006; Jimura, 2011; Su & Lin, 2014). Therefore, in order to enable unique selling propositions, destinations are branded with certain labels and promoted around well-known symbols, such as the WHS logo (Boyd, 2008). The WHS brand, constitutive of the title WHS and its logo (Porja, Reichel & Cohen, 2011), concomitantly emerges with the designation of the heritage property as a WHS (Ryan & Silvanto, 2011) and is mobilised for marketing, promoting and branding places (Ismail & Mohd-Ali, 2011; Marcotte & Bourdeau, 2012; Ryan & Silvanto, 2011).

Heritage architecture, often becoming emblems of city identity (Chang & Teo, 2009), is inclined towards producing signs that are reinforced in spatially identified social practices and socioeconomic activities, which in Lefebvre's terms (1974/1996) become representational spaces with symbolic value. Further, drawing on Bourdieu, (1993) enables the creative interplay between the signs and buildings of aesthetic significance as constitutive of the symbolic capital of buildings via audience recognition and, as such, applied in destination branding. Viewed through the tourist gaze (Urry, 1990), the aesthetic experience in urban landscapes represents the perceiver's direct response to the object of perception (Beardsley, 1958). Acknowledging the combined influence of iconic, indexical and symbolic qualities characteristic of a sign-object relationship on reception, representations are utilised in destination marketing (Pennington & Thomsen, 2010).

As Guttormsen and Fageraas, (2011) claim, WHSs and landscapes are especially vital generators in the production of cultural capital that contributes to the making of other forms of capital such as symbolic or economic forms of capital. More importantly, heritage as cultural capital becomes symbolic capital as a result of using narratives, images and monuments in the construction of urban identity and branding products, places and people (Guttormsen & Fageraas, 2011). Places associated with buildings of significance have powerful symbolic features that have a strong effect on destination image perception (Hunter & Suh, 2007). They are viewed as arenas of action that are 'at once physical and historical, social and cultural' (Casey, 2001, p. 683).

The built heritage environment is therefore considered intrinsically connected to the activities of the people inhabiting the space and indicative of the intertwined and reciprocally evocative nature of the construction of symbolic capital and the practice of destination branding. As Campelo, Aitken and Gnoth, (2011, p. 6) state, the 'destination brand is a channel to represent cultural, social and symbolic capital of places and [...] should reflect and

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