



Branding the destination versus the place: The effects of brand complexity and identification for residents and visitors



Sebastian Zenker ^{a,*}, Erik Braun ^b, Sibylle Petersen ^c

^a Department of Marketing, Solbjerg Plads 3C, 3rd Floor, DK-2000 Frederiksberg, Denmark

^b Erasmus School of Economics, Erasmus University Rotterdam, Room H16-17, P.O. Box 1738, 3000 DR Rotterdam, The Netherlands

^c University of Leuven, Tiensestraat 102, BE-3000 Leuven, Belgium

HIGHLIGHTS

- Residents are an important target group for destination branding, since they, e.g., work as place ambassadors.
- (Destination) branding often simplifies messages, but this could be not effective for complex brands.
- Residents have a wider knowledge of the place and could disagree with a simplified brand.
- For residents, positive place attitude and place behaviour is increased with a higher brand complexity.
- Positive relationship between brand complexity and place attitude and behaviour is stronger for residents than for tourists.

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ABSTRACT

This article contributes to a broader understanding of how the branding of places affects both residents and tourists. While branding often relies on simplified messages, the effectiveness of such strategies for complex brands remains questionable. Residents in particular possess a confounded knowledge of the place and could disagree with simplified destination brands. To test the role of brand complexity for residents and tourists, we conducted two empirical studies ($N = 765$; $N = 385$), showing that, for residents, positive place attitude (i.e., place satisfaction, identification, and attachment) and place behaviour (i.e., positive word-of-mouth) increase with a higher brand complexity. The second study shows that the positive relationship of brand complexity is stronger for residents than for tourists, supporting the conclusion that brand complexity is relevant for place brands, but that the place brand for residents requires more complexity than a destination brand, while it imperative that both are integrative parts of an overall brand.

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1. Introduction

In response to the increasing competition for tourists, investments, companies, and well-educated residents, place branding has rapidly evolved as a research domain (Gertner, 2011) intended to help cities, regions, and nations become more efficient in their marketing and branding strategies (Braun, 2012; Hanna & Rowley, 2015). Through place branding, place marketers focus on building strong, favourable place brands that can be communicated to diverse target audiences and stakeholders (Merrilees, Miller, & Herington, 2012). While place branding often takes the form of

destination branding in order to attract tourists (Park & Petrick, 2006; Qu, Kim, & Im, 2011), destination branding has also recently widened its focus to include other target groups such as residents (Hanna & Rowley, 2015; Palmer, Koenig-Lewis, & Jones, 2013) showing the close relationship of both concepts. Conceptually, destination branding targets solely tourists, while place branding describes the general branding of places for all target groups such as residents, companies and tourists (Kerr, 2006) – thus place branding could be understood as the family tree, with destination branding as one of the branches (Zenker & Braun, 2010). Having said this, in practice it remains questionable if destination branding can be really seen separated from the residential part of the place brand. In reality, destination branding needs the residents (Freire, 2009) and will at the same time also affect the residents' perception.

Furthermore, residents are seen as an important part of the

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: zenker@placebrand.eu (S. Zenker), braun@ese.eur.nl (E. Braun), sibylle.petersen@psy.kuleuven.be (S. Petersen).

tourism business, since they are not only part of the place as such, but also directly benefit from positive developments or perceive the negative social and environmental effects of tourism. Thus, residents' perceptions of tourism and attitudes towards tourists are often the focus of academic tourism studies (Sharpley, 2014). However, little attention has been paid to how place branding (including destination branding) affects both tourists and residents (with the exception of Palmer et al., 2013), especially in light of targeting both groups simultaneously (Hanna & Rowley, 2015; Zenker & Beckmann, 2012).

In practice, place marketers try to promote the place to tourists and residents at the same time, aiming to strengthen the current residents' identification with the place and thereby transform them into authentic place ambassadors (Braun, Kavaratzis, & Zenker, 2013; Palmer et al., 2013; Zenker & Petersen, 2014). Unfortunately, place and destination marketers often underestimate the difficulties of establishing a place brand (targeting both, tourists and residents alike) by using simplified, corporate branding strategies, since places are highly complex with a great variety of target audiences. For example, the second largest city in The Netherlands, Rotterdam, houses 173 different nationalities (Braun, 2008), to say nothing of the diverse socio-economic classes. This high level of demographical complexity makes it difficult to construct a place brand that is both simple and convincing for the majority of the external and internal target audiences. To add to this challenge, the city targets a wide range of (touristic) target groups, but their perception of a place is often quite different and characterized by simple stereotypes (Zenker & Beckmann, 2012)—reducing, for example, Paris to a city of arts and love, or Munich to the Oktoberfest and people wearing 'leather trousers'. This differentiated perception of a place by residents and visitors may stem from the general Out-Group Homogeneity Effect. This effect occurs when people commonly perceive their in-group to be more variable (particularly on positive dimensions) in comparison to an out-group (Mullen & Hu, 1989).

In cases of high place complexity, the effectiveness of simplified brand messages remains questionable (Anholt, 2009; Qu et al., 2011). Internal target audiences and heavy users have a confounded knowledge of the branded object and could disagree with the simplified brand message. This could result in lower brand identification and less favourable behaviour (e.g., positive word-of-mouth or visiting behaviour).

This research, then, seeks to develop a broader understanding of how place branding affects both residents and tourists, and what role the complexity of such a brand plays in place identification. We will outline the positive outcomes of place identification and how this can be improved through brand complexity (Study 1). In a next step, we will take a deeper look at how the identification process differs for residents and tourists (Study 2). In doing so, we try to: (1) translate new content from related disciplines to the field of tourism; (2) put a spotlight on the close relationship between destination and place branding; (3) show that a place brand profits from more brand complexity (especially for residents), while we argue that destination branding and place branding in general should not be seen as separated entities.

2. Literature review

2.1. Destination branding and residents as focus

Destination branding is a well-established concept in both academia and practice (Park & Petrick, 2006; Qu et al., 2011),

defined as a marketing tool intended to communicate a destination's unique identity and distinguish it from other destinations (Cai, 2002). Other researchers have expanded this concept into a more comprehensive strategy for not only targeting tourists, but also attracting and retaining residents (Hanna & Rowley, 2015)—while by definition destination branding targets solely tourists and *place branding* describes the general branding of places for all target groups (Kerr, 2006; Zenker & Braun, 2010).

However, it is not surprising that residents play an important role in the tourism business and that the borders of both concepts are becoming 'blurred': Residents constitute an important part of the place and, by extension, visitors' experiences (Freire, 2009). They directly benefit from positive developments, as well as perceive the negative social and environmental effects of tourism (Sharpley, 2014). When residents are satisfied, they can function as place ambassadors (Palmer et al., 2013). Braun et al. (2013) also highlight the role of citizens in the legitimization of place planning and development in general. However, tourism research has devoted considerably more attention to residents' attitudes towards tourists (as individuals) and tourism planning (Sharpley, 2014; Wang & Xu, 2015) than their perceptions of a place and how those might affect touristic goals.

Granted, there have been a few notable attempts at exploring this issue: Zenker & Beckmann (2012) showed that residents and tourists harbour different perceptions of a place. Later, Palmer et al. (2013) focused on residents' personal identity and identification with the place, and the influence of such identification on advocacy. Recently, Hanna and Rowley (2015) made a first conceptual attempt at developing a model for a more comprehensive strategy encompassing tourists and residents. These few studies make it generally clear that "residents (...) should be in the central interest of urban tourism planners and managers to ensure that residents are proud and satisfied with the city" (Wang & Xu, 2015, p. 248). A more complete understanding of residents' perceptions would thus be useful for tourism practice (Sharpley, 2014), not to mention relevant to the wider context of place marketing, where place identification (Zenker & Petersen, 2014), place attachment (Altman & Low, 1992; Lewicka, 2011) and place satisfaction (Fleury-Bahi, Félonneau, & Marchand, 2008) are popular concepts.

As it stands, the need to research place brands for all different target groups and uncover potential synergies is slowly entering into the field's priorities (Hanna & Rowley, 2015; Zenker & Braun, 2010; Zenker & Beckmann, 2012). However, it is also becoming apparent that the disciplinary demarcation between tourism and place marketing seems outdated, as a joined approach (either adding the target group of (potential) residents to the tourism brand or incorporating the tourism organization into greater place marketing units) is already quite common in practice. Nevertheless, to make a clear distinction for this article, we keep the definition of destination branding as an activity that solely targets tourists, while place branding includes all activities that target all potential place target groups (making destination branding a component of place branding).

2.2. Place marketing

Place branding (and by this destination branding) is located in the broader field of place marketing. In this regard, we understand *place marketing* as "the coordinated use of marketing tools supported by a shared customer-oriented philosophy, for creating, communicating, delivering, and exchanging urban

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