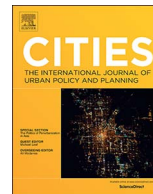




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Reframing place promotion, place marketing, and place branding - *moving beyond conceptual confusion*

Martin Boisen^{a,*}, Kees Terlouw^b, Peter Grootte^a, Oscar Couwenberg^a

^a Faculty of Spatial Sciences, University of Groningen, Groningen, The Netherlands

^b Faculty of Geosciences, Utrecht University, Utrecht, The Netherlands

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ABSTRACT

The literature and practice of place promotion, place marketing and place branding lack a common understanding of what these three concepts mean and through what kind of policies they can be implemented. Although scholars have provided several theoretical frameworks and definitions, both scholars and practitioners (advisors, civil servants, public and private stakeholders, and politicians) often use them synonymously. This paper argues that recent developments in both theory and practice – with respect to place promotion, place marketing and place branding – provide an opportunity to address this conceptual confusion. In the academic debate, a common understanding is slowly emerging and in practice, a more integral approach is gaining ground. To contribute to these advances, we present the outline of a framework to help distinguish between place promotion, place marketing and place branding, along with a discussion on why we believe these differences (should) matter to practitioners.

1. Introduction

Policies to promote, market and/or brand places are nothing new, but they have become more important over the last decades (Kavaratzis & Ashworth, 2008; Ward, 1998). With respects to cities, the basic assumption is that promotion, marketing and/or branding can support urban policies aimed at improving the place to the benefit of residents, businesses and visitors. As an increasing number of cities in countries around the world incorporate these concepts, the confusion about their meaning and their implications for urban policy grow.

The diversity of these perspectives on place promotion, place marketing and place branding is related to the complex set of challenges cities have been confronted with over the last decades and which have stimulated the development of these policies to strengthen the competitiveness of cities (Boisen, 2007; Boisen, Terlouw, & Van Gorp, 2011). We identify four different reasons for this increase: 1) First, the shift from a managerial to an entrepreneurial approach by urban governments that Harvey (1989) identified as a “transformation in urban governance in late Capitalism” (Harvey, 1989; p.3). This ‘entrepreneurial shift’ has brought the terminology, the concepts and instruments and the mechanisms of the corporate sector to the public sector; and competitiveness is a chief goal of nearly all of these. 2) Second, the dominating paradigm of neoliberalism has brought a strong focus on competitiveness onto the agenda of many states and is actively

promoted by supranational organisations (Jessop, 2002). This influence how local governments approach competitiveness and the sense of urgency that surrounds it. 3) Third, the increased pressure local governments and civil servant organisations of cities as a result of what Brenner (2004) described as the rescaling of statehood; a process wherein central governments are withdrawing and leaving more and more responsibility for their future social and economic development to the cities. 4) And fourth, the idea of a growing global network of cities with new urban hierarchies wherein the position of any given city is perceived as much more volatile as compared to the one it holds within its national urban hierarchy (Beaverstock & Taylor, 1999; Taylor, 1997).

Not all cities have reacted in the same way to these competitive pressures. Local governments have mobilised private and public stakeholders in different ways to address this more or less perceived challenge of inter-urban competition - effectively creating new allegiances and promoting governance over government (Brenner, 2004; Cox, 1995; Hall & Hubbard, 1996; Jessop, 1997, 2002). The contemporary policies relating to place promotion, place marketing, and place branding are mainly competitiveness-driven entrepreneurial policies (Ashworth, 2011; Ashworth & Voogd, 1990). Ward (1998) concluded that cities and regions in the United States and the United Kingdom were amongst the first to formalise these instruments as part of local and/or regional development strategies. Countries like

* Corresponding author at: Faculty of Spatial Sciences, University of Groningen, Postbus 800, 9700 AV Groningen, The Netherlands.
E-mail address: m.boisen@rug.nl (M. Boisen).

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the Netherlands swiftly followed suit (i.g. Andriess, 1986; Ashworth & Voogd, 1990; Boerema & Sondervan, 1988; Borchert & Buursink, 1987; Buursink, 1991; Van den Berg, Klaassen, & Van der Meer, 1990). In 2016, a comprehensive study determined that these instruments were a policy issue in 310 out of the 390 Dutch municipalities (79,5%) and that 125 municipalities (32,1%) had established organisational entities explicitly tasked with place promotion, place marketing and/or place branding (Boisen, Groote, Terlouw, and Couwenberg, in press). The same study established that the three concepts are used synonymously by practitioners; both in the description of tasks and in the naming of the responsible organisations.

Despite increasing popularity of these concepts on the part of scholars, it is still a predominantly practitioner-led topic (Therkelsen, Halkier, & Jensen, 2010). Most theoretical frameworks are not based on studies of actual policies of cities but translated from corporate frameworks devised for products, services and companies. The scientific community still struggles with this translation, as reflected in the lack of shared definitions (Gertner, 2011a, 2011b; Kavaratzis & Ashworth, 2005; Warnaby & Medway, 2013). Meanwhile, many researchers continue to use these concepts as if they were synonymous, while habitually hinting that they are not. This lack of conceptual clarity is worsened by the fact that the empirical content of the research domain predominantly consists of single case studies, and that none of the existing theoretical frameworks have been tested empirically (Acharya & Rahman, 2016; Ashworth et al., 2015; Gertner, 2011b; Green, Grace, & Perkins, 2016; Hankinson, 2010; Lucarelli & Berg, 2011; Lucarelli & Brörström, 2013; Vuignier, 2016). With single case studies, there's often no imminent methodological need for establishing comparability, and thus no incentive for employing concepts defined independently from the case in question. This might result in the researcher unquestioningly adopting the terminology used by the practitioners involved in the case in question. As such, theoretical, empirical and practical exercises that build upon the extant literature are likely to suffer from a lack of conceptual clarity. Hankinson (2015) noted that:

“[...] while there has clearly been convergence, there remains a need for tighter specification of the concepts. Thus, it has been noted that some old concepts such as place promotion remain, alongside new concepts such as place branding (Kavaratzis & Hatch, 2013). A clearer understanding of the key conceptual terms is necessary if empirical research is to progress.” (Hankinson, 2015; p. 27).

Even when not being used synonymously, place promotion, place marketing and place branding mean different things to different people at different times and in different situations. This is also the case in the general use and meaning of these concepts (Skålen, Fougere, & Felleson, 2008). One might argue, whether this ‘clearer understanding’ should result in definitions presented by peak bodies, interest organisations, or scholars. Equally interesting is the question, whether the constructs should be defined by academics based on conceptual exercises – such as presented in this article – or by practitioners themselves. In any case, there is a need to further distinguish between the three concepts as argued earlier by Skinner (2008), Hanna and Rowley (2008) and Ashworth et al. (2015). The discussion below of place promotion, place marketing and place branding explores both the distinct and the interrelated character of these concepts. The focus of the practices related to these concepts differs: place promotion is mainly about generating favourable communication; place marketing is mainly about balancing supply and demand; and place branding is mainly about creating, sustaining, and shaping a favourable place identity (Boisen, 2015; p. 14). The next sections discuss in detail how these concepts are being used and how these are related. This provides the building blocks to build a new conceptual framework that helps to differentiate between place promotion, place marketing and place branding.

2. Place promotion

It is difficult to find ‘clean’ definitions of place promotion, as most definitions of place promotion overlap extensively with place marketing and place branding, and therefore use similar terminology – albeit often with slightly different meanings. For example, place promotion is defined by Ward & Gold as:

“the conscious use of publicity and marketing to communicate selective images of specific geographical localities or areas to a target market.” (Ward & Gold, 1994; p. 2).

A closer examination of this definition unveils that ‘marketing’ here is not a reference to a broad conceptualization of marketing (e.g. the extended marketing mix, see Goi, 2009), but refer to marketing communication as something distinct from general publicity. In addition, the definition include terminology inherent to the concepts of branding (image) and marketing (target market) respectively, but with different meaning and utilisation. It should not come as a surprise that a conceptual confusion exists, however. If one was to describe the purpose of place promotion without using terminology from marketing or branding, one might describe it as ‘generating attention for what a place has to offer to certain target audiences in the expectation that this will increase demand’.

One of the most frequently used models for marketing-communication, the AIDA, state that increased *attention* for certain offerings is likely to lead to a certain *interest*, which might give birth to a *desire* that eventually might result in a certain *action* (Garber & Dotson, 2002). It is important to observe that this illustrate a one-directional process, in which *attention* is front and centre. This basic assumption of a straightforward and hierarchical relationship between *attention* and *action* embodies the very reason why both public and private stakeholders launch and/or support efforts of place promotion.

In the marketing mix, ‘promotion’ represents but one of the four (McCarthy, 1964), or seven (Booms & Bitner, 1981) P's. Accordingly, it should be noted that most of the theoretical frameworks in the existing literature, view place promotion as but one of the tools of either place marketing or place branding (see: Ashworth & Voogd, 1990; Bailey, 1989; Gold & Ward, 1994; Hubbard & Hall, 1998; Kavaratzis, 2004; Kotler, Haider, & Rein, 1993). Ashworth and Voogd (1990) define ‘promotional measures’ as one of the four elements in their theoretical framework of place marketing; whereas Kavaratzis (2004) regards such promotional measures as belonging to the ‘secondary communication’ within his theoretical framework of place branding. Although the distinction between place promotion and place marketing is present in most of the theoretical frameworks, the term ‘place promotion’ deserves specific attention because this concept covers most (if not all) of what most practitioners are doing – even when they say that they are doing place marketing and/or place branding.

This is reflected in the practice of place promotion: the responsible organisations often have very limited – if any – influence over the developments that directly influence the development of the offerings of the place in question. They tend to launch promotional campaigns and give high priority to the development and distribution of promotional materials that present much of what the place has on offer to (specific) target audiences in (specific) target markets – according to their tasks, mandates, and the plethora of wishes of the many different stakeholders involved. The use of a visual identity (logo, slogan, colour scheme, font, style) to label the coordinated promotional efforts has become a signature element of place promotion, as well as advertising (Ward, 1998), and the mutually indistinguishable promotional campaigns (Eisenschitz, 2010). Such efforts are also what most stakeholders have come to expect. In our experience, this is not only the case for public stakeholders, but also for private stakeholders, and especially if they are co-funding said organisations. Paradoxically, an instrument aimed at making a place attractive and exhibit its uniqueness often produce homogenous promotional efforts.

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