Research Paper

Place branding: Aligning multiple stakeholder perception of visual and auditory communication elements

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ABSTRACT

Place branding is complex due to its interdisciplinary nature, the highly competitive market, diverse stakeholder needs, and its ability to influence national priorities. This paper looks at the role of visual and auditory branding signatures in forming place attachment within three groups of stakeholders (nationals, expatriates, tourists). While research has focused on place consumers from either tourism or government perspectives, there is a need to take an interdisciplinary lens to look at new methodologies to see how place brands can manage multiple stakeholders. This paper presents new methodology for place brand studies called causal layered analysis. From a scholarly point of view, the paper presents a unique methodology in destination branding studies that aligns multiple stakeholder views yet still roots visual and auditory signatures of stakeholder perception of the nation's brand through its heritage. The paper justifies the importance of story-telling and collecting multiple brand interpretations to create place attachment. The findings highlight the importance of resolving multiple stakeholder perspectives and the importance of the stories that can link various narratives that are important for nation branding and building, since common visuals have layered interpretations. While this study is qualitative in nature, the findings show that there is a need for more theory building in this field. From a practitioner's point of view, organizations can use the methodology for perception mapping to create a distinct place communication platform. This, in turn, can reinforce a place's identity based on both heritage and modernity.

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1. Introduction

Nation branding is a relatively new area in academic research: the first journal articles on this topic emerged only in the late 1990s (Dinnie, 2004). While much progress has been made in the past few years, this field still remains in its infancy. Studies by Balakrishnan (2009); Dinnie and Melewar (2010) and Pike, Bianchi, Kerr, and Patti (2010) state that the field of nation (place) branding is characterized by an increasingly large amount of real world activity, but relatively little rigorous theory building, hence, the domain of nation (place) branding remains undertheorized.

Place branding is complex due to its interdisciplinary nature, the highly competitive market, its diverse stakeholder needs and its ability to influence national priorities. There is a theoretical gap in current studies as described in detail below. Though sight and sound form almost 99% of brand communication, and these have

to be aligned (Lindstrom, 2005; Spence, 2012), most of the studies published todate look only at visual signatures, while auditory signatures are also considered to be important (Spence & Zampini, 2006). Research often fails to demonstrate how it can help interpret and prioritize salientimages (Hankinson, 2004b). As Hanna and Rowley (2012, p. 473) recommend, 'Focus on specific brand components with the aim of gaining deeper insights into and understanding of the sub-processes of those components, their "agents", relationships, and interactions seek to assess contextual influences such as the wider economy, resources, and the natural environment on place image, brand, and branding'.

While there is general agreement that a multiple stakeholder perspective is required, very few studies look beyond tourists (for example Hankinson, 2004a). Research has shown that place branding needs 'local buy-in' and that one key ingredient is pride (Andersson & Ekman, 2009; Freire, 2009; Katzenbach, 2003; Papadopoulos, 2004; Widler, 2007). Braun, Kavaratzis, and Zenker (2013) highlight that residents play three key roles in place branding: (1) through their characteristics and behavior; (2) as ambassadors for the place, giving credibility to communications about it; and (3) as citizens and voters who are vital for the

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political legitimization of place branding. More research is required to understand how to find a common stakeholder perspective, as place differentiation is low and places often are represented in different ways to different target audiences as their needs are diverse (Balakrishnan, 2008; Braun et. al., 2013; Kavaratzis, 2012; Pritchard & Morgan, 2001).

Most research in place studies focuses on quantitative surveys and cases studies (Chan & Marafa, 2013; Hanna & Rowley, 2008). The field is therefore perhaps ready to test out new methodologies. This conceptual paper is exploratory in nature. Its purpose is to use a new methodology to find a fit between various stakeholder perspectives of place images using visual and auditory branding signatures that are relevant to the citizens. This process should lead to greater place attachment between diverse stakeholder groups of place brands. The paper contributes to the development of brand theory by highlighting the role of mutiple stakeholder perspectives and story-telling in the formation of place attachment. A new methodology is presented to manage the relevance gap in the salience of visual and auditory images. From a practical point of view, place brand managers and policy makers have a common platform from which to build place brand values and align multiple stakeholder expectations.

The paper begins with a literature review looking at the place brand and salience of images (visual signatures), auditory signatures, and the concept of place brand attachment. This is followed by a discussion on the mutiple stakeholder perspectives and the conceptual model of creating place attachment. The context of the study is the United Arab Emirates (UAE). The methodology section introduces the reader to the UAE case context and the causal layered analysis (CLA) methodology. Through CLA, five layers are used to find common representations that are rooted in local heritage. Three target groups were sampled looking at five lenses of interpretation: (1) individual (the national youth); (2) family; (3) national (a social perspective – this culture has a collective cultural perspective); (4) the expatriate perspective (expatriates with valid residence permits); and (5) the tourist perspective (short- and long-term visitors). Salience of auditory and visual signatures were collected from these stakeholders across five categories, namely: (1) lifestyle; (2) celebrations and festivals; (3) artifacts and daily life; (4) wildlife and landscapes; and (5) occupations. In the analysis and results section, the reader is taken through the findings and future areas for further research.

2. Literature review

2.1. Place brand and salience of images

The place brand market is a highly competitive one, with over 200 national economies and two million places competing for a share of tourist attention and spending (Balakrishnan, 2008). This becomes more challenging, as places can be iconic physical sites, virtual sites or even the mundane (Halvorson, 2011; Pearce, Wu, & Chen, 2015). Hanna and Rowley (2008) present an interpretation of the place brand from a multiple theoretical perspective. They find that the unit of analysis can have multiple interpretations, i.e. place, location, destination, country, nation, city, and region. How does a place brand manager attract and retain a place customer? The need for local buy-in and time is apparent in cases such as the 'Guggenheim effect' (e.g. Plaza & Haarich, 2015). In terms of theory, there is a need for a collective understanding of place marketing (Kavaratzis & Ashworth, 2008), since it spills over with other topics than tourism, such as foreign direct investment (FDI), infrastructure development, social development, knowledge capital development and policy management (Fan, 2006; Gilmore, 2002; Papadopoulos & Heslop, 2002). Perhaps place branding

needs a wider lens for studies. In fact, Hanna and Rowley (2008) find that the perspective of studies on place branding has moved away from tourism to business and now marketing.

In business, the intangible value of a brand is about 40–45% of company value (Brand Finance, 2012). Brand value is facilitated by strong communication that delivers the value proposition. Though the perceptions of country images are often vague, due to ignorance or misconception, this also represents a great opportunity to claim a distinctive identity (O'Shaughnessy & O'Shaughnessy, 2000). This makes a study of a place brand, its communication, and the perceptions of it in terms of place/country images of potential interest for academia and practitioners alike. Existing studies in place brand communication focus on slogans, taglines and visuals (Ashworth and Kavaratzis, 2009; Petromilli, Morrison, & Million, 2002). The role of visual and audio in brand building has been long recognized but not systematically studied with respect to place branding. Franzen and Bouwman (2001) state that a brand is a network of associations with a (brand) name in the brain of a person. Brands, according to this view, are pieces of information, meanings, experiences, emotions, images, and intentions interconnected by neural links of varying strength. Lindstrom (2005) states that 99% of brand communication focuses on two senses – sight and sound – but most brand studies center on the visual, and sound studies are rare (Bartholme & Melewar, 2009).

A place brand is a network of associations formed in the consumer's mind, and those that matter to the future of the place are developed from the visual, verbal and behavioral expression of a place (Braun et.al., 2013; Kerr, 2007). Place branding is different from destination branding, which is more focused on attracting tourism (Morgan, Pritchard & Pride, 2002). Identifying the correct images for association with place branding is challenging, as there is much to choose from if one looks only at the tourism market (see Fig. 1). One challenge for managing a place brand representing a city or a country is which image stands out, or will have the most appeal or salience across consumers of specific products. It has been found that a novel brand's recall can be increased through an intriguing logo design (Henderson, Giese, & Cote, 2004). On one extreme of image formation is the fact that they are organic and an accumulation of various perspectives or knowledge accumulated over time through media (print, TV, movies, social), word-of-mouth (WOM) and more formal education, and this has several distinct phases in decision making (Gunn, 1988). These organic images are modified by place advertising (induced image) with the last stage forming a complex image based on a combination of the previous two images (Hankinson, 2004a). A study by Balakrishnan, Nekhili, and Lewis (2011) found that the decision criteria, and hence the importance of various images for choosing places, can also change through the various decision-making stages as hypothesized by Plassman, Ramsøy, and Milasavljevic (2012) or across stakeholders (Hankinson, 2004a). All this adds to the complexity of place-branding research.

2.2. Place communications: Auditory signatures

Auditory signatures are more than brand names. Music can be associated with a brands' uniqueness (Connell & Gibson, 2003; Kemp, Childers, & Williams, 2012) and sounds can have an impact on brand meaning (Franzen & Bouwman, 2001; Klink & Wu, 2014). For example, studies show that a brand's recall can be increased by easy-to-process brand names (Yorkston & Menon, 2004), the ease of pronunciation of the name, and how many syllables it has (not more than four) (Gronau & Adjouri, 2013; Kastner, 2013). However, places cannot choose names, as many are historical and hence inherited names. Sound-branding studies also look at music associated with advertising and branding. For example, the inclusion of sonic or sound logo is one area of future studies for effectiveness