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Cultural intermediaries in place branding: Who are they and how do they construct legitimacy for their work and for themselves?

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HIGHLIGHTS

- Promotional practitioners act as cultural intermediaries in place branding.
- They leverage forms of capital to create legitimacy for their work and themselves.
- Symbolic power is derived from occupational tools of social and cultural capital.
- This taste-making function informs social processes of tourism and urban planning.

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ABSTRACT

This article applies a social constructionist approach to the analysis of the promotional actors in place branding. Previous studies have provided useful conceptual and empirical perspectives on place branding as an emerging practice in urban governance. However, little attention has been paid to the dispositions and occupational resources drawn upon by the promotional actors responsible for the design and implementation of place brand strategies. This article extends Bourdieu's notion of cultural intermediaries to the field of place branding by analysing the promotional actors engaged in it. Through in-depth interviews with 16 professionals in Toronto, Canada, this paper employs a case study approach to identify the habitus, forms of social and cultural capital and field adaptation utilised by various promotional actors to not only construct legitimacy for their work for the city they represent, but also for themselves.

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1. Introduction

Much theoretical and analytical attention in tourism and urban studies has been paid to those cities that came to prominence as centres of global power, innovation and financial control in the latter years of the last century, seen as ‘drivers of globalisation dynamics and metropolitan norms’ (Peck, 2015, p. 163) and upon which competitive benchmarks for global positioning were built (Sassen, 2001). This lent itself to a type of urban entrepreneurialism that reflected the need for cities to position themselves in relation to dominant market forces, resulting in urban policy theories increasingly being driven by tourism, promotional considerations and market-oriented governance.

In a time of increasing competition driven by market forces, the conceptualization of places as brands is now firmly established (Dinnie, 2011; Kavaratzis & Hatch, 2013; Pike, 2009; Ward, 2000; Warnaby, 2009), although subject to contestation on the grounds of potential commodification of places (Medway & Warnaby, 2014) and for over-simplifying the complex, multidimensional nature of territorial space (Ren & Blichfeldt, 2011). Place promotion has attracted scholarly attention from a variety of perspectives including public relations (Gold & Ward, 1994), economic geography (Pike, 2013), public administration (Eshuis, Braun, & Klijn, 2013), political geography (Hymans, 2010), cultural sociology (Cormack, 2008), tourism (Lorenzini, Calzati, & Giudici, 2011) and marketing (Gilmore, 2002).

Critical approaches to the idea of urban subjugation, the “pervasive naturalization of market logics” (Peck & Tickell, 2002) or the problems inherent in creating a ‘market city’ (McCann, Roy, & Ward, 2013) reflect a post-globalist view, and emphasise that

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cities following this path might gear their management more towards markets than people. Place branding scholars also reflect that place branding, as a discipline, is used to legitimize neoliberal urban governance models and the elitist market-oriented strategies that support them (Kavaratzis & Kalandides, 2015).

Thus explorations within geography have moved away from the predominantly global powerhouse and market-oriented theories to consider the multiplex, ordinary city – a shift from big picture urbanism to study the microcosms of cities (Peck, 2015). Cities are conceived as places of everyday practices, or 'unique assemblages' of human/non-human, economic and cultural factors that played out in everyday practice, endlessly renewing themselves according to the actions and dispositions of its actors (McCann et al., 2013). This anti-essentialist and deconstructivist turn in urban studies represents a new, grassroots way of reading a city, through the close exploration of the daily rhythms of the people and their practices (Amin & Thrift, 2002; Peck, 2015). Such an approach emphasises the city 'as a place of mobility, flow and everyday practices, and which reads cities from their recurrent phenomenological patterns' (Amin & Thrift, 2002, p. 7). This perspective opens up multiple avenues for new research in terms of understanding how cities are continually made and re-made in the image of those who promote them, especially from a destination management perspective.

Reflecting Morgan and Pritchard's (1998) assertion that tourism processes have broader cultural meanings which extend far beyond the actual consumption of tourism products and places, and that tourism identities are packaged according to particular dominant value systems and meanings, reinforcing dominant ideologies (p. 3), this paper uses a social constructionist approach and draws specifically on the theoretical lens of Bourdieu's (1984) notion of cultural intermediaries to analyse the characteristics and work of the promotional actors in place branding.

We build upon and extend previous work that highlights the interactive participatory nature of place brands (Kavaratzis & Kalandides, 2015) by examining the professional knowledge, cultural/social capital, and other occupational resources drawn upon by the promotional actors responsible for the design and implementation of place brand strategies. Because 'the product must plausibly resemble the representation, and thus cities often remake themselves in conformity with their advertised image' (Judd & Fainstein, 1998, p. 4), and 'representation of place, the images created for marketing, the vivid videos and persuasive prose of advertising texts, can be as selective and as creative as the marketer can make them' (Holcomb, 1993, p. 54) a cultural intermediary framework is an appropriate starting point from which to explore the means by which such actors construct legitimacy for their work and for themselves. This study contributes to a broader sociological understanding of the occupational functions and impacts within tourism promotion, and opens new avenues for research in considering how the tastes and aesthetic dispositions of marketers might translate into a city's policy decisions and government practices.

This paper will first identify the unit of analysis – the actors who work in a variety of professional contexts, but whose dominant function is the promotion of place. It will highlight that 'place' is a three-dimensional construction, one that is a lived and breathed reality in the minds of those hired to promote it representing a unique set of occupational challenges. Thus, place is paramount in their lives and requires their personal investment of 'taste' in order to succeed at their jobs. The paper then goes on to identify the theoretical foundations that underpin this occupational reality, with a focus on Bourdieu's notion of cultural intermediation. The third section identifies Toronto as an appropriate context for the case study, while the fourth section outlines the methods used in obtaining the data to explore it. The fifth section reports the findings and offers a discussion on how Bourdieu's theories might be applied to practice.

2. Cultural intermediaries

Through the cultural intermediary lens, Bourdieu (1984) addressed the sociology of consumption by identifying those social actors who work at the intersection of culture and the economy, adding value through the symbolic qualification of goods and services in a market-oriented society. Bourdieu sought to establish a *theory of practice* that explored the human interactions and conventions that helped maintain hierarchical social orders; he focused on the behaviours of people within public arenas, exploring how they might hold influence over others and maintain privileged positions of power in society (Bourdieu, 1994; Browitt & Nelson, 2004). Such individuals achieve this through the display of 'autonomy, authority and an arsenal of devices', acting as 'professionals of qualification' who operate on the supply side of markets (Smith Maguire & Matthews, 2014, pp. 2–4). Cultural intermediaries are 'taste-makers' who leverage their own personal experiences into occupational resources to legitimate certain forms of culture over others (Bourdieu, 1984). The central tenet of cultural intermediation is that it places an emphasis on those workers who reside in the nexus between reality and what is *perceived as reality* by the target audience, continually engaged in forming a point of connection, or 'articulation' between production and consumption (Curtin & Gaither, 2007) in the 'circuit of culture' (du Gay, Hall, Janes, Mackay, & Negus, 1997). Bourdieu's notions of *habitus*, *capital* and *fields* focus on the means by which cultural intermediaries are able to do this, and where. Thus his attention is turned towards the taste-making and influential functions of the social actors who work in promotional occupations such as marketing, advertising, design and public relations (Bourdieu, 1991).

Bourdieu conceptualized *habitus* as "a structured and structuring structure" (1994, p. 170). It is 'structured' by one's past and present circumstances, such as family upbringing and education. It is 'structuring' in that one's habitus helps to shape one's present and future practices, and it is a 'structure' in that it is systematically ordered rather than random. This structure comprises a system of embodied social structures such as race, class and gender that are internalized to form one's values, disposition and lifestyle that generate perceptions, demeanor, knowledge and practices within specific *fields* – the various institutional and social structures where people perform their roles and create their identities (Bourdieu, 1990 c.f Maton, 2008, p. 51). These fields are where power is developed and manifested.

The place that actors hold within a field are dependent on the relative weight of their combined capital assets, which derive from a broad range of both personal attributes as well as current social values. Power and identity are not fixed; a field can be created in the intellectual, religious, cultural or social arenas, and an individual's sense of themselves and where they are situated in a given social hierarchy can change depending on the field they occupy at a given moment. Fields are formed from networks of social relations; they are competitive environments in which social actors leverage their own habitus to compete for placement – for economic, cultural, social and symbolic power.

The currency that allows this to occur is *capital*. Economic capital, or the attainment of monetary currency, was not Bourdieu's primary concern. He extends the importance of capital beyond the material and contends that one's social or cultural influence could be just as valuable in determining the amount of power that one has in society. Bourdieu uses these concepts to detail how the social order is progressively inscribed in people's minds through 'cultural products' including systems of education, language, judgements,

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