Guest editorial/editorial

Editorial: City marketing and branding as urban policy

The marketing and branding of cities have become important parts of urban governance. In the worldwide competition for tourists, inhabitants and investments, cities apply place branding to develop an attractive image and positive reputation. City marketing, meanwhile, is used widely to influence place-making elements such as a place's representations and policies. Almost all major cities now apply these strategies to improve their image.

In general, city marketing can be understood as the "coordinated use of marketing tools supported by a shared customer-oriented philosophy, for creating, communicating, delivering, and exchanging urban offerings that have value for the city's customers and the city's community at large" (Braun, 2008, p. 43). It refers to the application of marketing instruments to promote – and importantly, *develop* – districts, towns, cities, and metropolitan regions. To this end, practitioners leverage not only routine communication tools such as advertisements, but also social media (to create brand-communities and enhance positive place word-of-mouth) or the city branding itself (to trigger positive associations and position the city in a particular way). However, place marketing encompasses more than just place promotion: It also involves designing policies to improve places and their public management, such as attractive fiscal policies for businesses. This entails that policymakers accommodate the needs and wants of various target groups (ranging from tourists to residents to foreign direct investments (FDI)). In this sense, city marketing constitutes a strategic planning tool that places can use to envision their future and support structural changes in that direction.

For the last decade, urban researchers and marketers alike have grappled with the expansion of city branding, seeking to define it properly in order to harness its potential. Drawing on the branding literature, scholars have arrived at a widely adopted definition of the city brand: namely, "a network of associations in the place consumers' mind based on the visual, verbal, and behavioral expression of a place and its' stakeholders. These associations differ in their influence within the network and in importance for the place consumers' attitude and behavior" (Zenker & Braun, 2017, p. 275). This is not the only view of this concept, as this special issue will affirm, but all (useful) definitions agree that city brands comprise more than simply promotion through marketing communication; they also involve developing urban policies that imbue the brand with authenticity (e.g., spatial policies to become a 'green city'). Because of its relation to urban policy-making, city branding always involves a high number of stakeholders, which necessitates discussions on who is producing and implementing place branding. Thus, city branding often leads to conflicts regarding brand content, which makes it difficult to encourage brand adoption among stakeholders. This special issue specifically addresses these kinds of conflicts, hoping to spur greater academic debate and empirical investigation regarding stakeholder management in city marketing.

1. Overview of the articles

As guest editor, I would like to thank the many authors who worked hard to submit very interesting articles for this special issue. Following some collaboration between the reviewers and authors, we selected seven articles and three commentaries, which are summarized below.

In the first paper "*Reframing place promotion, place marketing, and place branding - moving beyond conceptual confusion*", the authors Boisen, Terlouw, Groote, and Couwenberg offer a holistic view on the conceptual difference between place promotion, place marketing, and place branding. Their intent is to resolve the ambiguity of these concepts for practice and theory. I agree with the authors that our field need this theoretical differentiation (and scientific rigor) in order to develop further. As a researcher who works in both fields (place marketing and branding), I was interested to discover just how much the concepts that I use align with the authors' view. Their article highlights that even in the place branding field, there are different schools of thought (i.e., image and identity focus) that would benefit from a stronger integration and academic debate. In sum, this article provides an insightful conceptualization of the field's core ideas and thereby fosters greater clarity and consistency.

The second paper by Andrea Lucarelli ("*Place branding as urban policy: the (im)political place branding*") discusses the concept of city branding from the political dimension. Lucarelli sees city branding as hybrid form of urban policies (where, for example, economics and politics, and the market and the polis are blurred and co-emerge) and treats the greater Stockholm metropolitan region as an example. Conceptually, the paper contributes to the increasingly prevalent issue of (political) conflicts between relevant place stakeholders. Lucarelli's conclusion – that city branding is 'impolitical' (i.e., that no one stakeholder can claim ownership over the city brand or the branding process) – provides a relevant explanation for such conflicts.

In the third article ("*Improving place reputation: Do an open place brand process and an identity-image match pay off?*"), Braun, Eshuis, Klijn, and Zenker offer a further discussion about conflicts in city branding. They empirically test two strategies utilized in place branding: the first is an open process involving many stakeholders; the second is a branding approach focused on aligning the two branding schools of thought (identity and image focus). The authors show that both approaches lead to a higher place reputation, but the open process specifically galvanizes more conflicts. Although previous authors have discussed this issue theoretically, this paper empirically illuminates the

impact of such strategies. Studies such as this are important to validating the many theoretical assumptions underlying our field.

The fourth paper by Björner and Ye ("*Linking city branding to multi-level urban governance in Chinese mega-cities: A case study of Guangzhou*") investigates how a Chinese mega-city weaves city branding into its urban policies and state strategies. The authors reveal that in the case of Guangzhou, city branding is treated as a 'multi-level governance' issue that encompasses the policies of not only cities, but also regions and the nation as a whole.

In the fifth paper ("*Auckland, New Zealand's Super City*"), Andrea Insch describes a case study of Auckland, the most populous city in New Zealand. Bolstered with a strong country brand, the city represents a case whereby place branding successfully impacted growth and prosperity. To achieve this, however, the city underwent a rapid change in the structure of its urban governance and experienced considerable gentrification. This case underscores that everything comes for a price and that we may need to employ city branding more carefully in order to mitigate negative effects.

In the sixth paper ("*The difference of 'being diverse': City branding and multiculturalism in the 'Leicester Model'*"), Hassen and Giovanardi discuss the issue of diversity, and specifically ethnical diversity, in the domain of city branding. Building on the fact that many cities use their purported diversity as a selling point, the authors show how the well-known Leicester Model can inform urban governance and contribute to a city brand with regard to ethnical diversity.

Similarly, the seventh paper ("*The interplay between urban policies and grassroots city brand co-creation and co-destruction during the refugee crisis: Insights from the city brand Munich (Germany)*") by Vallaster, von Wallpach, and Zenker argues that openness and tolerance are aspects of a city brand that many stakeholders value highly. At the same time, this part of the city brand is highly affected by urban policies and grassroots dynamics, as evidenced by the City of Munich's current refugee crisis. Governance policies and real place behavior interact to either enhance or sabotage perceptions about a place's diversity.

All of these papers share a singular goal: Advancing our field by showing the interconnectivity between place marketing, place branding, and urban governance. In respect of this effort, three of the field's most respected academics graciously agreed to write commentaries about specific papers or this special issue as such. This type of reflection is, I feel, essential to the field's continued development.

In the first commentary, place marketing expert Mihalis Kavaratzis asks the question "*Place branding: are we any wiser?*" After reflecting on all the papers included in this issue, he highlights those areas where we have been successful alongside those that present ongoing challenges.

In the second commentary ("*Taking a territorological perspective on place branding?*"), highly respected place marketing professor Gary Warnaby not only offers a review of this special issue, but specifically addresses the notion of using place as a theme. All of the included papers touch on the territoriality aspect, he notes, but do not often discuss it in sufficiently explicit detail. Warnaby concludes that authors could strengthen their contributions by including more spatial concepts.

In the final commentary ("*Politicising city branding: some comments on Andrea Lucarelli's 'Place branding as urban policy'*"), Alberto Vanolo, the place marketing area-editor of this journal, elucidates how our published articles can form the basis of a strong academic debate. His piece specifically reflects on Lucarelli's paper and discusses the limits to using branding to inform urban policies, showing that we can only progress if we (constructively) discuss our contributions.

2. Further discussion

As a discipline, we must woefully admit that our field underperforms in the areas of academic rigor and theory development. The empirical and theoretical improvements undertaken in other disciplines have raised the bar for publications: For example, while single case studies remain common in place branding, they would be considered sub-standard by high-ranking marketing journals. Such journals expect empirical results that are underpinned by a solid theoretical foundation and generalizable beyond any particular place. In saying this, I recognize that, as a discipline, we are proud of the close link we have cultivated between the practical and academic spheres. However, we often forget about the need to improve our general knowledge and further develop the field. For this reason, I am pleased that the three cases from Auckland, Leicester and Munich together provide a deeper, holistic exploration of diversity in place branding, which adds to our generalizable knowledge.

In fairness, the academic discussion has improved in recent years. In early place branding publications, scholars and others focused extensively on phraseology, definitions and awareness raising. Today, place branding is entering into the domain of common knowledge and thus inviting interdisciplinary discussion. While valuable, this development presents a particular challenge, since researchers and practitioners from different disciplines do not necessarily speak the same language. Unsurprisingly, then, many contemporary articles do not use up-to-date definitions of place branding (e.g., they still misunderstand it as a limited approach to place promotion). Furthermore, there is still insufficient insight and agreement with regard to the overlaps and linkages between: public diplomacy and place branding; place marketing and place branding; destination branding and place branding; place management and place branding; or place making and place branding. As an academic community, we should strive to build knowledge and promote clarity—a goal that we hopefully achieve with this special issue.

Some have asked whether place branding is worth the effort: If, in practice, nobody really owns the brand and policymakers lack the power to really influence it, then why should anyone care? If successes are difficult to measure, but policymakers demand hard numbers to justify the investment of public and private resources, then why should we try? If publishing is impeded by the field's interdisciplinary background and low academic reputation, then why should we suffer? The simple answer is: Because it is worth it. The field is one of the few final frontiers, offering scholars a chance to combine theories from myriad disciplines. It is an area where researchers and practitioners can still help one another in pursuit of a common goal: making places better. It is not a simple or easy undertaking, but we are convinced that place branding can help places become more meaningful and satisfying to the people who use them. In short, we believe that place branding is not a waste of time, but a great field of research with practical utility—as long as we are willing to push beyond our comfort zones.

Science should be a domain for discussion and development, but this is only possible if we work hard to maintain an atmosphere of debate. While there are sometimes unavoidable politics involved in academic publishing, it is important that we embrace the discussion, and sometimes conflict, that grounds scientific advancement. To this end, scholars should try to prompt debate by utilizing the 'commentaries,' 'viewpoints,' or 'opinion pieces' sections offered by many journals. One idea or opinion about a published paper could be discussed within such a section–as we tried to show in this special issue as well. In doing so, we can criticize problems of scientific rigor, broaden discussion, add new angles and create better knowledge. In this way, we might rekindle some of the spirit of the large academic debates that pervaded our field in the 60s and 70s.

Thus, I invite your responses to this special issue: Please use and discuss these articles—their definitions, findings, or propositions. Tear them apart at the seams or expand them with the threads of your own discipline. Only by engaging in critical and constructive debate can we improve our field of research.

References

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