COMMUNICATION & SOCIETY

José Fernández-Cavia
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5712-7083
jose.fernandez@upf.edu
Universitat Pompeu Fabra.
Barcelona, Spain

Mihalis Kavaratzis
https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5933-0651
mk302@leicester.ac.uk
University of Leicester.
Leicester, United Kingdom

Nigel Morgan
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4804-4972
nigel.morgan@swansea.ac.uk
Swansea University. Swansea,
United Kingdom

Introduction

Place branding: A communication perspective

It is common to introduce special issues on place branding with the observation that the last 25 years or so have seen an impressive rise in its significance as an academic field and its popularity as a practice. Academics in several disciplines are focusing their attention on the ways in which branding can be applied to places, reflecting the complex, cross-disciplinary nature of the field. The valuable work of a number of scholars in recent years has advanced the theoretical background of the discipline. Furthermore, the application of branding strategies to a variety of places has greatly contributed to the popularization and professionalization of the field, something also verified by the founding of the International Place Branding Association.

However, if place branding is no longer an emerging field of study, it has not yet established itself as a mature discipline. This is, at least partly, a result of the lack of consensus as to its theoretical foundations, its 'proper' practical application or, indeed, its effectiveness. Skinner's earlier assessment of the confusion evident in the field (Skinner, 2008) is still accepted as valid (e.g. Kavaratzis *et al.*, 2015). Braun (2012) finds an explanation for this confusion –in addition to the relative youth of the field– in the fact that there is no single accepted definition of brands and branding within the marketing/branding mainstream. Furthermore, places as branded entities present particular challenges and increased complexity (e.g. Morgan *et al.*, 2011). One of the prevailing qualities of place branding is that it critically affects people's lives as residents and citizens. At the same time, one of its most problematic features is that the image and reputation of places depend heavily on factors that are complex and often impossible to control. To further complicate things, another fascinating characteristic of place branding is its cross-disciplinary nature, which makes it necessary to cross-fertilise approaches. In the study of place branding, theoretical underpinnings from many disciplines like economics, urban planning, geography, sociology, tourism, marketing, politics and so forth have all played an important role.

This is, of course, particularly the case for the discipline of communication, whose links to place branding are indeed very strong. In a sense, it could be argued that branding is in essence a form of communication. This is why this special issue on place branding in a communication journal becomes timely and relevant. This special issue deals with place branding from a communication perspective and sets out to provide a starting point for a deeper examination of the relationship between these two fields. To do that, it is useful to go back to the basics of this relationship, which is what this introduction attempts.

1. Branding and Communication

Anholt (2005) asserts that there are three ways in which the terms brand and branding are used. First, there is a popular but inaccurate way that

conflates several ideas and interchanges branding with marketing, advertising, public relations and sales promotion. Secondly, there is a simple way that focuses on the visual aspects of branding such as designed visual identity, names, logos etc. Thirdly, there is an advanced way that includes the simple understanding but is much wider, covering corporate strategy as well as stakeholder motivations and behaviour. This third way, according to Anholt (2005, p. 116), is what helps "navigate through the complex web of relationships between the personality of the company, product or service –the brand itself– and the people who produce and deliver it, as well as the people who consume it or otherwise come into contact with it."

A useful tool that helps us navigate through the vast space of branding studies is offered by Kornberger (2010). He identifies within the study and practice of branding four major distinct strands that approach brands as: a) management tools; b) catalysts for corporate strategies; c) signs; and d) media. The first is the managerial approach to branding, which considers branding a 'management tool' controlled by the company's management and mainly focusing on the company's products and services (e.g. Aaker, 1996). In other words, the brand is seen as a tool that can be used to forge perceptions and guide consumer behaviour (e.g. Kapferer, 2008). The second approach to branding identified by Kornberger (2010) is the 'corporate catalyst' view, which suggests that the brand is what drives the whole managerial exercise. In other words, the brand is here seen as the guiding principle for the company's strategic efforts to aim at (e.g. Hatch and Schultz, 2008) and the brand becomes the central organising function of the company (Anholt, 2005).

Both these approaches focus on the level of the company and its offerings while the next two take branding to the level of the consumer and society. The third approach is the view of brands as signs. This approach views brands as symbols that create and transfer meaning for consumers (e.g. Danesi, 2008). In other words, both organisations and consumers use brands to make sense of their relationships and to communicate within and about them. The final approach according to Kornberger (2010) views brands as media. The brand here is seen to provide an interface for the relationship between companies, consumers and other stakeholders and in doing that, the brand also provides the structure for such relationships (e.g. Lury, 2004). While this also concentrates on the side of the consumer, it adds a relational element to brands and suggests that brands are institutionalised structures and not individual signs, providing new types of communities and new distinctions between social groups (Askegaard, 2006). These four approaches can be seen as the 'four points of the horizon' in the contemporary conceptualization and study of brands. To a lesser or higher degree, all four imply –and some are explicit about– the communicative nature of branding and all differ in the way they approach this communicative nature.

Like all major concepts, communication itself is subject to various interpretations and has been conceptualised in various ways by different people. Arguably, the most common conceptualisation is a linear view of communication based on the traditional model of communication between a sender and a receiver. Marketing communications studies have used this linear understanding of communication to produce explanations of how marketing communications exert their influence, for instance, in the well-known AIDA model. According to this, Attention to a piece of promotion, is thought to evoke peoples' Interest to what is being promoted, which then stimulates in them a Desire that influences their Action. This clearly depicts a one-directional process (Boisen *et al.*, 2018) but the linear model of communication has developed beyond its origins of radio-transmission incorporating the senders' and receivers' realms of understanding, including the noise from other communication sources in the environment and explaining in detail the encoding and decoding processes. The discipline of Communication has, of course, produced many other approaches to communication (from interactional models to transactional models to the 'pool of shared meaning'). They all emphasise the fact that communication is a meaning-making process that is influenced by several actors and factors and is not neat and linear but circular

and rather messy. Willie (2007) describes four different models of advertising and branding campaign design based on different views of how communication might work: the *persuasion* model, which is based on rational messages to shape consumer behaviour (of which AIDA is part); the *sales promotion* model, where the main task of communication is to invite the consumer to explore promotions, deals or sales; the *involvement* model that shifts the focus towards brand values and emotions rather than rationale arguments and benefits; and the *salience* model, which puts the brand at the heart of the communications strategy to make people think more of the brand and to regard it as different and important.

The more recent advancement of the internet and, particularly, social media has brought an increased emphasis on broader and more interactive approaches to communication. In an attempt to incorporate the effect of digital media, Willie (2007) suggests that nowadays communication goes beyond the four earlier models and is more about the ideas of *searching* (exploring the word at our fingertips), *creating* (digital technologies allow everyone to create content), *connecting* (the digital breaks down barriers and facilitates community building), *transacting* (e-commerce opportunities) and *transporting* (the digital allows for never-seen-before portability). These are certainly transforming the way branding is understood and undertaken.

2. Place branding *as* communication

In place branding studies, it is often the case that communication is approached based on the linear view, which leads to an understanding of branding as a simple promotional tool. This has been the dominant understanding of place branding for a long time and, to a great extent, this is still how communication is understood within place branding practice. However, there is a significant discussion of other approaches. For instance, Kavaratzis (2004) has provided a description of the communicative perspective to place branding showing how place branding is concerned with building on the communicative character of all measures taken in a place – even if the main aim of these measures is not communication *per se*. Branding shifts the focus to the symbolic function of all actions, largely implying that everything that constitutes a place, whether physical attributes, organisational structures or social processes, communicates messages about the place and the place's brand.

Recently, Boisen *et al.* (2018) helped clarify much of the confusion with their distinction between the concepts of place promotion, place marketing and place branding. For these authors, place promotion is supply-driven and aims at increasing the attention the place receives amongst target audiences. Place marketing is demand-driven aiming to influence people in choosing to make use of the place offerings. In contrast to place promotion and place marketing, place branding is identity-driven. It represents an inside-out approach that seeks to express selected values and narratives of the place in question (Boisen *et al.*, 2018). This emphasises that branding is really communication; it is about the proposition and management of representations that ultimately relate to identity. If branding is about identity, then it is important to understand the ways in which people relate to places and how places change. Geographers have always known that social processes produce changes in the perceived delimitations and content of a territory. Indeed, as Harvey (1996, p. 293-294) asserts, "place is, like space and time, a social construct. [...] The only interesting question to be asked is by what social process(es) is place constructed?" The same question is posed for the place brand and it is only possible to answer it if we place at the centre of the branding effort the various place stakeholders that participate in such processes.

To address this need to include and engage stakeholders, Louro and Cunha (2001) provide a matrix of different approaches to brand management, based on two axes: the centrality of the brand in the company's strategies and the centrality of the customer in branding strategies. Their analysis indicates four brand management paradigms with different approaches to how the meaning of the brand is created and by whom, starting from

the 'product' paradigm where the consumer is not really 'heard' in the branding process and the brand is really understood as the name/logo. The next approach is the 'projective' paradigm where there is a monologue of the company (with the consumer as listener) and the main element of the brand is the projected brand identity. In the 'adaptive' paradigm the company does listen to the consumer in the branding process with the aim of securing brand loyalty, which becomes the central aim of the process. Finally, in the 'relational' paradigm there is a dialogue between the consumer and the company over the brand and the consumer is considered a co-author of brand meaning. The brand in this approach is understood as the co-created brand experience.

For a branded entity as complex as a place, it becomes crucial to understand the branding process as a dialogue with all stakeholders. In this, not only is communication the heart of the brand management process but it also acquires a wider meaning beyond mere promotion. It is evident that the place brand is created through a series of interrelated processes that are quintessentially communication processes. In other words, branding is a form of communication and the place brand a communication device. The act of communicating a certain place is in itself already a first marker of the place brand and a marker of its identity. This identity is simultaneously the basis for communication and a communication project in itself. Identity is what gives the strategic guidance for all communication and, at the same time, all communication becomes input into the process of formulating this identity. At the same time, branding is also a policy. The relation between identity and policy is also two-way: policy may be built on identity but, at the same time, identity is constructed and reconstructed through policy. In other words, place brand communication inevitably addresses the social organisation of the place in question and suggests a push to reorganize it.

The place brand as a communication device and as a policy instrument affects internal and external stakeholders and how they relate to the place and, importantly, to themselves. Thus, in its construction of territorial concepts, signs and practices, it devises new ways for a local society to identify itself and for external audiences to identify with the place. Precisely because of that, it is necessary to include both the community and external stakeholders in all stages of reorganizing and branding.

3. The questions and the papers of the special issue

The above approaches and ideas are, of course, rather basic and perhaps sound to the seasoned reader too well-established to be of any new use. We do not mention these approaches in order to examine them in detail. Nor do we mention them in order to provide a clear theoretical framework of branding and communications. Why we mention them is to help us think in different ways about place branding, which is one of the aims of this Special Issue. The combination of these ideas helps formulate a series of questions around place brands that seem to us important and timely: Who are the key actors in the construction, communication and management of place brands? Who are the ultimate creators of a place brand and is this creation an individual or a collective project? When are the key actors engaged in this brand creation? What forms and methods of communication help these actors in creating the brand? And what is the role and significance of place brand managers in this? What are the tools and techniques that allow broad projects and narrower interventions to influence the brand creation? What are the brand building tools that places can use better? The list of questions generated could be very long and the answers provided would depend on the approach adopted towards the issues that we have discussed above, namely the degree to which we relate branding with communication and the way in which we approach communication as a process.

The papers included in this Special Issue all revolve around major questions that relate to the communicative nature of place branding. In different ways and to differing extents, all

papers examine the relationship between these two disciplines and offer different understandings of it.

The paper by Skinner deals directly with the question of who creates the place brand, as it analyses the role of social media users in the creation of place identity. Taking the Orthodox Easter festival at the Greek island of Corfu as a case study, the author examines a sample of tourist photographs and compares them to the ones posted by the local municipality. The conclusions show that User Generated Content plays an essential role in place image formation, as tourists love to share their experiences with peers and friends and, in doing so, they contribute to build a place image that escapes the control of official place brand managers. Another relevant finding is that no real interaction exists between the public administration responsible for the destination brand and the social media users. This confirmation poses an uncomfortable question: are social media *really* used in an interactive way by destination and place brand managers? Skinner also proves that the identity of places is created, to a great extent, by anonymous volunteer contributors, who eventually become the unofficial communicators of the place. This, of course, can be seen as a challenge but also as an opportunity.

The second article, 'Geographies of affect: In search of the emotional dimension of place branding', by Jordi de San Eugenio and Joan Nogué provides some conceptual tools to embark on the study of the emotional dimension of place branding. The authors argue that the emotional components should be central to any place branding strategy as societies need to build emotional ties with the spaces in which they live and thrive. One of the key concepts put forward in the article is 'performative authenticity', a term coined to convey the affective connection with the environment. Another one is the 'sense of self-in-place' (Cantrill) that tries to identify the meaning that an individual attaches to his or her surroundings. San Eugenio and Nogué also connect emotional place branding with the 'ecological identity' developed by Thomashow that links our own identity with our experience of nature.

In the third article, 'Engaging citizens in sports mega-events: the participatory strategic approach of Tokyo 2020 Olympics', Olga Kolotouchkina examines how citizens can be engaged in the preparation of the Olympic Games. Communication strategies such as former Olympic participants' visits to the country, educational programmes and participation in decision-making processes can be effectively deployed in order to achieve citizen support and commitment. Following the ancient Japanese consensus culture, the selection of the Olympic mascots was carried out via a popular consultation among schoolchildren of all elementary schools in Japan. Another interesting initiative relates to the Olympic medals manufacturing. They are being made of materials recycled from mobile phones and electronic devices provided by citizens and visitors and collected by all the municipal authorities in the country. All these actions, together with the volunteering programme, reveal a clear purpose of involving the local population in an event that is intended to produce a long-lasting positive legacy. They also entail a clever attempt of building or reinforcing the identification of the residents with their home country.

Laura Ripoll and Libby Lester –in the article entitled 'All for One, One for All: communicative processes of co-creation of place brands through inclusive and horizontal stakeholder collaborative networks'– introduce Participatory Action Research and Sociological Intervention as practical tools for place brand co-creation. Through a case study of Australia's island state of Tasmania, they show how actual decision-making processes lead by governmental officials can make more difficult or hamper real stakeholder participation. Key stakeholders are left with only consultative roles due to authority and political issues. Place branding can no longer be conceived as a top-down imposition but as a network negotiation, closing the gap between those responsible for strategic decisions and those in charge of actually delivering the message. Communication dynamics are extremely sensitive

in the place branding process, and especially when it comes to effectively engage stakeholders.

The fifth contribution, 'Place brand communication as aspirational talk – further exploring the constitutive model of communication', written by Cecilia Cassinger, presents the concept of 'aspirational talk' applied to a sample of two Swedish cities. The paper explains communication as a process that produces and reproduces social order, and uses Searle's theories of speech acts as a way to understand place branding practices. Specifically, the concept of 'aspirational talk' implies contexts in which a large discrepancy between what an organisation does and what it claims to be doing exists. This discrepancy can undermine trust and collaboration among stakeholders. Drawing on a qualitative study, the paper identifies the areas in which actual branding practices –focused on entrepreneurial or sustainable promises– are not duly anchored in social reality, and help understanding of how the distance between reality and wishful thinking can endanger stakeholder involvement.

Sara Vinyals and Leila Mohammadi, in the last article entitled 'City brand projected personality: a new measure to assess the consistency of projected personality across messages' brings our attention to the importance of maintaining a consistent place brand personality. By comparing two official websites of Barcelona –the one used to attract tourists and the one aimed at residents– they highlight the potential problems of incoherence between messages addressed to different target groups. Brand personality is a powerful construct commonly used in branding studies. It is usually defined as the set of human characteristics associated with commercial brands. But, when applied to place brands it may yield interesting results. Applying the brand personality scale to the websites, the findings show that personality talk is far more frequent in the City Council's website, while the personality projected in each website differs widely. This could be deemed a major pitfall for effective place branding, as contradictory personality traits debilitate the brand image. Coordinating place brand official messages is absolutely necessary, and the methodology suggested by the authors reveals itself as a useful tool to assess message consistency across disparate sources.

Overall, this special issue offers a variety of theoretical and methodological approaches to the place branding phenomenon, understood as a communication process, and we, the editors, hope that it feeds the reader with insightful, valuable and useful ideas.

References

Aaker, D. A. (1996). *Building Strong Brands*. New York: Free Press.

Anholt, S. (2005). Some important distinctions in place branding. *Place Branding and Public Diplomacy, 1*(2), 116-21.

Askegaard, S. (2006). Brands as a global ideoscape. In J. Schroeder & M. Salzer-Mörling (Eds.), *Brand Culture* (pp. 91-102). Routledge: London.

Boisen, M. Teerlow, K, Groote, P. & Owenberg, O. (2018). Reframing place promotion, place marketing and place branding. *Cities, 80*, 4-11.

Braun, E. (2012). Putting city branding into practice. *Journal of Brand Management, 19*(4), 257-67.

Danesi, M. (2008). *Why it sells: decoding the meanings of brand names, logos, ads, and other marketing and advertising ploys.* Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield.

Harvey, D. (1996). *Justice, Nature and the Geography of Difference.* Oxford: Blackwell.

Hatch, M. .J. & Schultz, M. (2008). *Taking brand initiative: How companies align strategy, culture and identity through corporate branding.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Kapferer, J. N. (2008). *The new strategic brand management.* London: Kogan Page.

Kavaratzis, M. (2004). From City Marketing to City Branding: Towards a Theoretical Framework for Developing City Brands. *Place Branding and Public Diplomacy, 1*(1), 58-73.

Kavaratzis, M., Ashworth, G. .J. & Warnaby, G. (Eds.) (2015). *Rethinking Place Branding.* Chem: Springer.

Kornberger, M. (2010). *Brand Society*. London: Routledge.

Louro, M. J. & Cunha, P. (2001). Brand Management Paradigms. *Journal of Marketing Management, 17* (7-8), 849-875.

Lury, C. (2004). *Brands: The logos of the global economy*. London: Routledge.

Morgan, N., Pritchard, A. & Pride, R. (Eds.) (2011). *Destination Brands* (3rd ed). Oxford: Elsevier.

Skinner, H. (2008). The emergence and development of place marketing's confused identity. *Journal of Marketing Management, 24*(9-10), 915-928.

Willie, T. (2007). New models of communication for the digital age. *Admap Magazine*, October 2007, Issue 487.