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Place brand communication as aspirational talk – further exploring the constitutive model of communication

Abstract

This paper introduces the concept of aspirational talk to examine the constitutive features of place brand communication. Aspirational talk builds on a performative view of communication and is characterised by a gap between future-oriented visionary talk and concrete action. The study explores place brand communication as aspirational talk through a qualitative case study of how place branding is used to drive changed in two Swedish cities. Two ideological different aspirations are identified and contrasted. It is argued that aspirational talk helps us to further understand the gap between the political visions and ideals that underpin place brand communication and residents' everyday life in the city.

1. Introduction

Communication is central in place branding. Yet, previous research has not fully engaged with communication as integral to place branding, but predominantly treats communication as an instrument to achieve strategic goals (Kavaratzis 2004; Kavaratzis & Ashworth, 2005; Dinnie, 2011; Braun *et al.*, 2013). Recent approaches to place brand communication involving co-creating meaning and value with stakeholders employ a participatory approach to communication that is more difficult to control by management (Braun *et al.*, 2013; Kavaratzis, 2012;). Previous research may thus be described as characterised by tension between a top-down and bottom up approach to communication. The top-down approach assumes a transmission view on communication and proposes that vision of the city's identity and uniqueness can be transferred to stakeholders. The bottom up approach assumes a more relational view on communication and involves actions and events that anchor the place brand in the views and interests of the place's different stakeholders, to be perceived as authentic and legitimate (Oii, 2011; Therkelsen & Halkier, 2008). The problem with these approaches is that they view communication as a dimension of and *in* place branding processes. Hence, they neglect the institutional setting, situational background, and culture of communication. Understanding place brand communication in broader terms with reference to its socio-cultural

situatedness is important, since place branding both shape and are shaped by the norms and values of the stakeholder groups it addresses.

Today, cities face a diverse set of challenges. Some of these challenges are related to traditional problems of differentiation vis-à-vis other places; building unique place brand identities, and coordinating communication efforts. Other challenges are of a more complex kind and are related to how to make the city more inclusive, sustainable, secure, as well as how to respond to distorted news and rumours about places. Coming to terms with the latter set of challenges typically requires fostering and managing change in behaviour and mindset among publics in and through communication. Change processes involve discrepancies in communication between the vision of the desired change and that which stakeholders immediately accept. For example, Kalandides (2011a) argues that place brand strategy cannot communicate the city as such, but needs to focus on evolving elements of the city's identity. Thus, there will always be a gap between the reality of the city and the way that it is communicated. The question here is how we can theoretically understand the gap between place brand communication and how it is accepted among stakeholder groups in times of change. The question is not so much whether such a gap exists, but when it exists and how big it can become before it negatively impacts the image of the place brand.

This paper addresses this question by way of exploring the value of a constitutive model of communication (Craig, 1999) for place branding. The constitutive model of communication goes beyond the bottom-up and top-down approaches and views the place brand as an outcome of communication. Thus, the focus is here shifted from communication *in* place branding to place branding *as* communication. Furthermore, the constitutive model of communication is understood as closely related to the approach to communication, which means that place brand communication is located in a specific socio-cultural institutional setting. To be able to further understand how place brand communication can accomplish change, it is conceptualised as a distinct form of talk that is aspirational and future-oriented in nature (Christensen *et al.*, 2013). The paper draws on a qualitative study of place branding campaigns in two Swedish cities that struggle with problems that are typical of urban decay in post-industrial cities, such as negative media images, high rates of crime, and urban poverty (Trueman *et al.*, 2008). Struggle with problems that are typically of urban decline in post-industrial cities, such as negative media images, high rates of crime, and urban poverty (Trueman *et al.*, 2008). Hence, the place brand communication becomes aspirational in attempts to generate more positive images of the cities by accomplish change in residents' behaviour and outlook.

In what follows, the paper first reviews the existing literature on place brand communication and identifies three approaches to communication. Second, the concept of aspirational talk is located within the third approach and explained in detail by means of communication theory. Third, the paper demonstrates place brand communication as aspirational talk in two ideologically different place branding campaigns: Two aspirations resting on different political ideals are identified in the campaigns. Finally, the paper concludes with a discussion of the implications of the concept of aspirational talk understanding how change is accomplished in and through place brand communication.

2. Three views on communication in place branding theory

Place branding scholarship has long claimed that communication is a central part of a place brand strategy and an important building block of place brands (cf. Kavaratzis, 2004). Three views to communication may be discerned in the previous literature: the transmission view of communication, the participatory view of communication, and the constitutive views of communication. These views are discussed below.

2.1. *Transmission view of communication*

The first approach to communication involves a top-down approach to communication and is typically found in scholarship that applies a corporate branding framework on place branding. From this perspective, the communication dimension in place branding is described as the total of corporate communication (Kavaratzis, 2004; Melewar & Jenkins, 2002; Kavaratzis, 2009; Ashworth & Kavaratzis, 2009). Kavaratzis (2008) states that the construction and communication of city image is key within the city marketing mix. He outlines three types of place brand communication: primary, secondary and tertiary communication. The types represent three different ways of communicating a city's image and thus shape stakeholders' perceptions of the city. Primary communication refers to indirect forms of communication in and through the city's actions (e.g. urban design, architecture, residents). Secondary communication refers to marketing communication, advertising, public relations, and promotional activities undertaken by the city. Tertiary communication refers to word-of-mouth communication and communication that is beyond the control by city marketers. Secondary communication is underlined by the assumption that corporate communication and corporate branding, in their aim to achieve consistency in messages, can build brands, which in turn add value to places. Boisen *et al.* (2011), for instance, define the process of place branding as "to provide added value and specific meanings to a place by consciously orchestrating and managing this brand" (p. 142). Following the corporate branding framework (Kavaratzis, 2004; Kavaratzis & Ashworth, 2006), place brand communication organises messages so as to make them consistent and enable the place to 'speak' with one voice. The corporate branding framework thus involves a rather top-down view on communication and is underpinned by an assumption that messages can be transferred and accepted close to their original form by an audience (see also Balmer & Greyser, 2006; Kavaratzis & Ashworth, 2006). The top-down view of communication converges with a transmission approach postulating a fairly linear model of communication as a transfer of information to achieve a particular outcome (Craig, 1999). While such a model of communication is useful for mapping the flow of information through systems or how a message attain its intended effects, the view of communication as transmission neglect the socio-cultural aspects of communication and how meanings of communication is constructed among stakeholder groups.

2.2. *Participatory view on communication*

The second approach to communication is identified in research that concerns the active role of residents in the place branding process (Kavaratzis, 2012; Braun *et al.*, 2013; Zenker & Erfgen, 2014). These studies often adopt a stakeholder approach, recognising that there are other actors than place marketers who are important for giving meaning to places. These studies are typically practitioner oriented without much consideration to theory. Kavaratzis (2012) advocates a more participatory understanding of place branding, and stresses the importance of engaging various types of stakeholder, not only consumers, in the place branding process. Failing to engage the local stakeholders may lead to alienating the target groups from the identity of the place, which could make it difficult to gain legitimacy for the place brand. Participatory approaches increase stakeholders' feelings of being respected, which influence place commitment and residential satisfaction (Zenker & Seigis, 2012). Braun *et al.* (2013) propose that existing residents should be the primary target group for place brand communication in order to avoid feelings of alienation when the public imagination does not fit with the brand messages. Informed by a participatory model of communication and the value co-creation paradigm in marketing, Hudson *et al.* (2017) present a community-based model for place brand development. They write that it is important that the "place identity communicated is one that is grounded in reality" and that "consistency in communicating this identity to a variety of internal and external

stakeholders is critical for ensuring the brand's success in the long term" (Hudson *et al.*, 2016, p. 374). Hence, this view on communication partly overlaps with the transmission view in the emphasis on the consistency of communication, whilst underscoring that communication needs to be based in a perceived reality of stakeholders in the local community. According to the participatory view, place brands should be built from the bottom up to ensure that the local community concurs with the image formulation and communication of the place and that they will 'live the brand' (Hudson *et al.*, 2016). Turning residents and citizens into brand ambassadors who will support the brand and enact the vision of the place is regarded important. This means that communication is more centred on the audience and on their engagement in communication. Residents' views are considered as more true and authentic accounts of the city and thus important to legitimise the place brand. Communication thus must proceed from everyday practice and the needs of residents reflecting messages that they can identify with. Participatory branding represents a more dialogue-based view of communication, with the focus on building and maintaining relations with stakeholders. However, Zenker and Erfgen (2014) point out that there is a risk that the participatory approach merely serves as make-up, not creating any real engagement. They therefore develop a participatory place branding method that can involve residents in other ways beyond giving associations and meanings to the place brand. In his study of the place marketing of Bogota, Kalandides (2011a) argues that place branding is useful when there is a discrepancy between the place's reality and the perception of the city. In emphasising the institutional setting of place branding strategy, Kalandides (2011a) study is close to the socio-cultural approach to communication outlined in the next section of the paper. He proposes the term integrated place branding to underscore that place branding strategy is not an isolated strategy, but part of policy making on many different levels and people's everyday lives.

2.3. *Constitutive view on communication*

The third and final approach to communication is located in research that primarily deals with place brand identity based in a socio-cultural tradition (e.g. Kavaratzis & Hatch, 2013; Kalandides, 2011b; Ren & Blichfeldt, 2011). The socio-cultural tradition approaches communication as a process that produces and reproduces social order, that is to say, social systems, structures and institutions. This tradition coincides with the constitutive or ritual metamodel of communication (Craig, 1999; Carey, 1989). The constitutive model of communication may be understood as formulated in opposition to the transmission view in its emphasis on communication as a cultural practice that is constitutive of reality. Craig (1999) argues that the constitutive model offers a conceptual space in which different communication models can interact. Therefore, he views it as a metamodel for all types of communication. There is thus no contradiction between the constitutive view and the transmission view; rather they may be understood as complementing one another. Research on place branding within this approach emphasise on the processual nature of the formation of place brand identity and image. Brand identity is typically viewed as taking shape in a reciprocal relationship to society. Kavaratzis and Hatch (2013) contend that brands are dynamic and their meanings shift in time and space. They develop an identity-based approach to account for place branding as a complex and conflicting construction process in which many different stakeholders participate. The boundaries of the place brand are assumed to be extendable, rendering the place brand dynamic in character (Kavaratzis & Hatch, 2013). Similarly, Ren and Blichfeldt (2011) argue that place brand identity should be viewed as a multiple construct, which actively constructs the place. Drawing on actor network theory and the performativity of everyday practices, they show how the tourist destination of Zakopane is constructed among a range of different actors including humans as well as non-humans and how place branding relates to, and resonates with, different

agendas and interests. A challenge for the post-industrial city is how to counter negative images in media and among residents. Communication efforts to alter negative images may create a gap between the place brand and how stakeholders perceive the reality of the place. Next, the concept of aspirational talk is introduced as a theoretical lens through which to understand the nature of this gap and how large it can become.

2.3.1. Aspirational talk

Aspirational talk is a particular type of speech act (Searle, 1969) premised on the constitutive model of communication. Speech act theory assumes that talk is action and vice versa, and that a communicative reality can be 'talked' into being (Schoeneborn & Trittin, 2013). Aspirational talk has previously been applied in organisational contexts characterised by a large gap between talk and action, due to the low likelihood of stakeholders accepting the speech act. A large discrepancy between what an organisation does and what it claims to be doing usually results in accusations of hypocrisy and low trust among stakeholders. Nevertheless, Christensen *et al.* (2013) apply the concept in a CSR context in order to argue that aspirational talk can create positive change, even though it lacks correspondence with how the organisation acts. Aspirational talk is characterized by future-oriented ideals and visions, rather than corresponding to action. It refers to "communication, which announces ideals and intentions rather than reflecting actual behaviours…" (Christensen *et al.*, 2013, p. 373). However, Christensen *et al.* (2013) do not theoretically explain how they view radical speech acts that are disconnected from a referential reality. Turning to speech act theory can further help us to grasp aspirational talk. It is not the intention of this paper to account for this vast theory. The study limits itself to lending one aspect of this theory in order to deepen the understanding of aspirational place brand communication. All speech acts can be understood as aspirational, since, in Searle's (1969) vocabulary, a speech act is a promise of something that lies beyond the immediate reality. A speech act promises what it states and hopes to accomplish something through speech. It does not refer to things in an extra-linguistic reality; only to itself and other speech acts. An utterance may be described along the two dimensions of *locution* and *illocution*. An utterance is both a message (*locutionary*) and a performance (*illocutionary*) (Cooren & Taylor, 1997; Searle, 1969). From an organisational perspective, Cooren and Taylor (1997) argue that the performativity of, for instance, a board meeting is not merely a function of the illocutionary force of the sum of the utterances that make up the event, but must also be considered in relation to the institutional setting and situational background.

3. Methodology

To be able to investigate place branding as aspirational talk, a study of place brand communication in two Swedish cities was conducted using qualitative research methods. Qualitative research is regarded as suitable when exploratory research is needed and when developing theory. The research was designed to enable the generation of in-depth knowledge. The study was carried out in the years 2015-2018 and concerned how communication professionals understood and experienced working with place branding in the coastal cities of Helsingborg and Malmo, which are both located in south Sweden close to the border with Denmark. Policy documents and promotional material used in the communication of the vision of the city brands were also analysed. Moreover, the media image of the cities in national and international media were analysed during 2015-2017. The selection of cities was motivated by their difference with regards to branding strategy and the problems each city is facing. They also differ in terms of governing and political orientation, which also results in different ways of working with, and relating to, place branding. The cities are particularly useful for analysing aspirational talk due to their continuous efforts to improve their respective images through place brand communication.

The Nordic context is often regarded as suitable for place branding research due to open access to data and the accessibility to communication professionals. Swedish city branding is intimately tied to political decision-making and is typically based on the vision of the city adopted by the city council. Usually, this vision is formulated in broad terms to achieve a broad political consensus.

The primary methods of data collection used in the study were in-depth interviews and document study involving policy documents and promotional material. Qualitative interviews were conducted with ten communication professionals working at the relevant department of communication as well as at the destination and business development offices in the cities. The aim in the interviews was to capture how place brand communication was strategically formulated and executed with regards to promoting the image of the city.

The analysis was guided by an interpretative approach (cf. Cayla & Eckhardt, 2007) directed towards the participants' understanding and experience of the practices and processes of working with place branding. The analysis can be described as taking place in three steps: categorization, comparison, and dimensionalization (Spiggle, 1994). The constitutive model of communication and the concept of aspirational talk guided the analysis and were used for identifying chunks of texts that belonged to the different steps. Narratives of the cities were identified and their differences and similarities were analysed. In order to illuminate aspirational place branding and how it may instigate change in mindset and behaviour among stakeholders, place brand communication is presented as a process consisting of frozen moments along a timeline.

4. Place brand communication as aspirational talk

In the following, the nature of aspirational place brand communication is exemplified by instances of branding Helsingborg and Malmo. The cities have in common that they use place brand communication in order to instigate change, albeit in different ways. In focusing on aspirational talk, attention is directed to how future-oriented ideals, visions, norms, and desired behaviour and mindset are constituted in and through communication (cf. Christensen *et al.*, 2013). Consequently, the overall aim of communication is not to represent the place and its enactments, but to set the aspirations to change the image of the place.

4.1. *Market oriented aspirations*

In the early 2000's, Helsingborg City abandoned its long-term vision, captured by the slogan "pearl of the ocean," and replaced it with a new aspirational vision for the city 2035, captured by the catch phrase, "the city for living your dreams." The shift in vision coincided with a set of challenges facing the city concerning how to attract new residents, segregation, low levels of education among the existing residents, and lack of housing. While the pearl of the ocean once connoted an affluent population residing in the grand coastal villas located in the north of the city, the new vision signified an attempt to change this image of the city by targeting different types of residents. A brand consultancy firm was hired to outline a brand platform for the city. The focus was shifted from the nature and scenic aspects of the city to the spirit of the people living in it. The focus of the new city brand was on attracting people in the creative sector and entrepreneurs (personal conversation, head of tourism, Helsingborg city, 2015; see e.g, Vanolo, 2008 for an account on the creative city). In 2012, the aspirational vision received support from all political parties represented in the city council. The new vision for Helsingborg involves building a "creative, vibrant, united, global and balanced city" for people and business until the year 2035 (Action plan, Helsingborg 2035).

> Vision Helsingborg 2035 guides us in setting our objectives and managing our performance. It inspires us, activates us, and challenges us to articulate and prioritize goals and activities that develop our business and processes. The vision helps us build a

socially, environmentally and economically sustainable Helsingborg for people and businesses. (...) Helsingborg is the city for living your dreams. (Action plan, Helsingborg 2035).

A few years later, in 2015, however, the political consensus around the vision was lost. At present, the city government alone supports the vision. The political agreement broke down when the major local newspaper in the region scrutinised the aspirations of the city brand communication in a series of articles (HD, 2015). On the basis of analysing 400 press releases that the city distributed during the previous year, communication was criticised for only conveying positive information about the city, even masking actual problems of segregation and lack of housing. The brand communication was criticised for being hypocritical and for beautifying the city despite its problems. Another problem was that brand communication was understood as not being anchored in the reality of the city. While the city's communication policy stated that communication was to be based on neutral information and facts, it was argued that the brand communication ran counter to this ambition. Thus, there was a discrepancy between the city's brand communication and the way it was accepted by different stakeholder groups. An alternative way, however, of interpreting this discrepancy is to view it as an enabler of change and new ways of being and doing. Aspiration may sometimes be understood as hypocrisy of organisations; however, aspiration may also be an obligation for organisations in order to accomplish change. Christensen *et al.* (2013) writes:

> ...when an organization, in order to stimulate action, incants a wished-for future, pretending that this future (or parts thereof) already exists. While such behaviour, conceptually speaking, belongs to the sphere of hypocrisy, we argue that it is of a different and more positive nature. In this shape, hypocrisy means to motivate an audience –including the sender itself– through the use of idealizations... (Christensen *et al.*, 2013, p. 378).

Understood as aspirations, then, what is generally taken as hypocrisy may diminish the gap between communication and how stakeholders accept messages. Gaps between talk and action may motivate and initiate new solutions, ideas and practices. Place brand aspirations, even if not yet realised or anchored in practice, inform practice and policies in other ways. Stakeholders may use aspirations as a resource to narrate experiences, or to make sense of oneself and one's identity in relation to a place in new ways.

In 2017, the city embraced a participatory approach to communication launching a digital plattform on which citizens could share their stories of the city. The city's brand communication was redescribed on the official website as characterised by will and action. On the municipality's website it says:

> Two main ingredients of our communication are will and action. In Helsingborg there are 138,000 different wills, all equally important... Our task as an organisation is to be perceptive to these wills. And to do everything we can to turn them into reality. With their help, we can reach our vision of Helsingborg 2035. (https://vm.helsingborg.se/var-kommunikation/).

The communication in Helsingborg is driven by the future goal to realise vision 2035. It is not clear how and by whom this is going to be done, but the vision is tied to individuals in Helsingborg and their will to action. Here, place brand communication becomes focused on changing the meaning of living and working in the city and in part adapting the communication to media portrayals and residents' wills. At the same time, a market survey showed that people moving to Helsingborg were primarily interested in activities relating to improving the quality of life (personal conversation, communication specialist, the Department of Tourism and Business Development, 2017). Thus, the image of affluence and scenic views were reintroduced in brand communication. The communication office also

changed the way of addressing with the residents, making a large number of policy documents available on the website and motivating the decision–making in the city[1]. The example of Helsingborg illustrates how market-oriented aspirations are used to create change in the behavior and mindset of residents by calling out to their will to action. The aim is to foster an entrepreneurial spirit in the city –the will is more important than the intention of the action. The vision aspires to create an entrepreneurial city. While it is not evident what the envisioned city concretely entails, the aim here is to foster aspirations of an ideal entrepreneurial city, which hopefully will be realised in residents' actions in the future.

4.2. *Politically oriented aspirations*

Over the years, the vision of Malmo city has remained vague due to the lack of political consensus. In 2015, the city adopted a vision based on becoming a sustainable city. The plasticity of the term sustainability made it possible to mobilise different political opinions around one vision for the city (personal conversation, brand strategist B, Malmo city, 2017). Still, it is controversial to talk about place brand communication in the city, and the brand strategists worry that the brand communication will be experienced as a cover-up of downsides. During a long period of time, the political majority has been Social Democratic, and that has led to communication being envisioned as tied to an ideal democratic public service mission of the city.

> When we revised our communication policy recently, we were surprised to find a sentence stating that we should convey a positive image of Malmo. Many of us at the communication office find that sentence controversial. Being civil servants, we are supposed to be neutral, but the political majority taints us, I guess. I mean, we should convey an honest image, not beautify and try to hide problems. By contrast, we want to highlight the problems that the city faces and discuss them in a neutral manner. Beautification is not in line with our democratic public service mission. (Brand communication strategist E, Malmo city, 2018).

By contrast to Helsingborg, Malmo city's communication aspires to a communicative ideal of a public service organisation. These ideals involve objectivity, democracy, tolerance and inclusivity in communication. The ideals are present in Malmo city's 2015 destination brand communication campaign "It starts here."

> Malmö is the industrial centre that became an academy that became a city to savour. A place where people come to make their dreams come true. A city where you will experience something new. Welcome to Malmö. It starts here. (http://www. malmotown.com/).

The campaign alludes to Malmo's transformation from an industrial city to a knowledge city (cf. Vanolo, 2008). The shipping industry is now replaced by a newly built housing neighbourhood –involving among others the tallest building in Scandinavia, the Turning Torso, a twisting skyscraper, designed by the internationally renowned architect Santiago Calatrava– as well as incubators for start-ups and Malmo university (http://www.malmo.se).

At the same time, Malmo is a city in crisis struggling with gang crimes and a negative image in domestic and international news media. The negative media portrayal is largely a consequence of being subjected to fake news and used as a symbol by the so-called alt-right movement as a failed multiculturalist project. This narrative has intensified in recent years and is often used to criticize Sweden's migration policies. Today, Sweden is the third largest recipient country of quota refugees (Swedish Migration Agency, 2018). The majority of refugees enter Sweden via Malmo, which has given the city a certain symbolism. During the

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[1] The city has received several awards for its work with communication, including Sweden's best IT-municipality (2015), Sweden's best employer branding municipality (2016), and Sweden's best municipal web (2016).

American election in 2017, Malmo was put in the centre of international news reporting as a consequence of President Donald Trump having misleadingly claimed that a terrorist attack had occurred in the city (Topping, 2017). Malmo' social media platforms were turned into forums where these types of rumours and false information was circulated (personal conversation, brand strategist B, 2017). In order to deal with negative comments on social media, a communication policy was developed.

> We were not prepared for all the negative comments on our social media platforms and the fast circulation of fake news, strange rumours, and myths about Malmo. For a long time, we asked ourselves whether and what to answer. In the beginning it was just my colleague Anne and I... and we thought it was very difficult... we did not know how to act. In the end, we concluded that we had to develop a strategy on how to respond. It is about defending democratic values and, in a way, trying to explain the responsibility of the municipality. We practised and experimented with different tones of voice and that was the start of formulating a communication policy for social media, departing from the idea of fostering a democratic conversation, by providing correct information and facts about the city. (Social media communication specialist, Malmo city, 2018).

The view of communication as being tied to ideals of democratic values and tolerance is underscored in the city's social media policy. Similarly, the city's brand communication aspires to social and environmental sustainability and ideals of civil service. The sustainable and civil city here is devoid of specific meaning, but serves as an ideal that is to be realised in stakeholders' future action.

5. Discussion and conclusion

This paper set out to conceptualise place brand communication as aspirational talk relying on a constitutive model of communication. The focus was shifted from communication as an instrument in place branding to place branding *as* communication. The aspirational approach was demonstrated through instances of place brand communication constituted by ideologically different aspirations in two cities. The cities are located in the same country and share the similar historical circumstances. Yet, they differ between them as regards to place brand communication and developing favourable city images. The first city adopted a market oriented aspirational mode of communication, which aspired to the entrepreneurial city and the will to action. The second city, adopted a politically oriented aspirational mode of communication aspiring to the sustainable city and a democratic ideal of communication typical for public service organisations. In both cases, there was a discrepancy between brand communication and the way stakeholders perceived and accepted messages. In particular, the online news media plays an important role in shaping images of the cities. Aspirational place brand communication was found to cultivate ideals of the city and fosters future actions toward and meanings of the city, albeit in different ways. While in Helsingborg, there is a strong focus on communicating with residents on digital platforms and outdoor advertising, in Malmo the brand communication is much more subtle and implicit. There is a worry among communication professionals in Malmo of being misunderstood and of beautifying the city: In both cases, however, city visions and ideals attempt at transforming and directing enactments of the city brand. The value of aspirational talk for place brand communication is that it unfolds the formation of the image of the city as an ongoing process of becoming. The illocutionary dimension, that is to say the performance of the utterance is more important than the locutionary dimension, that is to say, the message of the utterance. The intended image of the city is not made concrete in place brand communication; instead there is a movement towards an image of the city being constituted by future actions. Branding is about adding value to places by providing them with a symbolic dimension and an aura. In order to provide the offer with an extra dimension of added value, however, branding must distance itself from that which is

branded (Christensen & Langer, 2009). For this reason, it is questionable whether branding practices are ever anchored in an existing social reality. At least the aspirational place brand seems to refer to something evanescent beyond itself that will be realised in a distant future. Further research into this topic may want to further investigate the constitutive model of communication and its implications for place branding, especially in terms of how aspirations may be managed and monitored to foster novel kinds of actions and meanings.

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