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Research Paper

The role of brand elements in destination branding

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ABSTRACT

This article evaluates the contribution of commonly used symbolic elements – namely destination name, logo and tagline – to the establishment of the destination brand. The conceptual framework is developed combining suggestions on the role and significance of symbolic brand elements for commercial brands with the literature on destination and place branding, drawing particularly on the recent identity-based approach to place brands. The article reports on field research that operationalized the theoretical framework to examine the perceptions of visitors to Greece. Although the name is clearly more influential, the overall contribution of the symbolic elements to the brand is proven to be limited. This implies that destinations need to prioritise other aspects of the branding effort.

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1. Introduction

Places, regardless of scale (country, city or smaller place) or perspective adopted (solely as a tourism destination or a wider perspective), are extremely complex in nature (e.g. Creswell, 2004). Thus, any discussion of branding application to places is also very complex and needs to go beyond theories of product or corporate branding (e.g. Ooi & Stoeber, 2010). The import of approaches, terminologies and methods from the commercial world to the world of place development is not straightforward (Braun, 2012; Mabey & Freeman, 2012). This explains why place branding has been approached from a variety of perspectives and with different aims and intentions. While it is not the aim of this paper to classify all these approaches, four different perspectives can be distinguished, each of them creating rather autonomous theory and principles.

These perspectives are the *country-of-origin* approach (e.g. Papadopoulos & Heslop, 2002), focusing on the role of the place in product branding; the *destination-branding* approach (e.g. Morgan, Pritchard, & Pride, 2002), primarily focusing on the tourism function and attracting visitors; the *public-diplomacy* approach (e.g. Sevin, 2013), examining the relationships between the place's authorities and external stakeholders in order to enhance the

place's reputation; and the *identity-based* approach (e.g. Kavaratzis & Hatch, 2013), focusing on interactions between internal and external audiences and how individuals attribute meaning to place brands. These trends are, of course, inter-related and have considerable commonalities: something that is again a result of the inherently multifaceted nature of places. While the trends are better examined in conjunction to each other, the most significant conceptual developments occur within the identity-based perspective, which therefore serves as the departure point for this study.

This study aims to contribute to a broader understanding of both the identity-based and the destination branding approaches by focusing on an important aspect of the destination-branding effort: namely the role and significance of symbolic brand elements: brand name, logo and slogan (or tagline). The main issues the paper is attempting to clarify are whether and, if so, to what extent the brand's symbolic elements contribute to the place brand as a whole. This is an issue that remains unexplored in the literature. Indeed Pike (2016) identifies the lack of understanding of the effectiveness of slogans and logos as one of the main research gaps in the destination branding literature. The motivation behind the study and the intended contribution of this article is to provide a better understanding of the significance that visitors attribute to these elements in the formation and evaluation of the destination brand. This issue is examined through a preliminary study undertaken among visitors to Greece, the intention being to validate the findings with an in-depth study across a range of destination brands in the near future.

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2. Literature review

Place branding (e.g. Anholt, 2007; Ashworth & Kavaratzis, 2009; Braun, 2012; Govers & Go, 2009; Hankinson, 2001; Kavaratzis, 2004) deals with the application of branding principles to places and the adjustment of such principles to the specific conditions under which places undertake their branding. The most usual aim of place branding is to trigger positive associations with the place and distinguish it from other places (e.g. Hanna & Rowley, 2011). The field includes several significant but as yet unresolved issues (e.g. Gertner, 2011; Lucarelli & Berg, 2011) because two particular challenges have hindered its refinement. The first relates to the inherent differences between places and commercial products, for which branding was initially developed (see Anholt, 2007; Ashworth & Kavaratzis, 2009). These differences are significant and can be summarized in a few points that refer to the multiplicity of a place's stakeholders, audiences and 'creators': the lack of control over the place by the people responsible to brand it; the complexity of the interactions between the physical place; and its psychological and emotional extensions (see Kavaratzis and Hatch (2013)). A second challenge for place branding can be found in the discrepancies between theory and practice. Authorities and most consultants espouse only one element of place branding – namely promotion – and disregard the wider branding pre-requisites (e.g. Ashworth & Kavaratzis, 2009; Govers & Go, 2009). Most practitioners continue to treat place brands as a simple case of conventional branding. In the dominant approach, place brands are understood in a rather static way: largely ignoring that places are not formed through one-way message transmission and cannot be subjected to manipulation in the same sense as commercial products or corporations.

This paper argues that the core construct behind the dominant approach is a rather unfortunate understanding of place identity, which is thought to be the controllable outcome of a managerial process that leads to an improved identity being accepted by target audiences. This approach highlights the importance of symbolic brand elements as communication vehicles for the destination's identity, and suggests that the logo and slogan are the core of the brand and the main point of the branding effort. There is, however, a second approach, advocated among others by Kalandides (2011), Kavaratzis and Hatch (2013), Mayes (2008), which recognises place brands as dynamic, multifaceted, complex entities calling for a personalized and experiential approach, rather than appealing to mass audiences. For instance, Lichrou, O'Malley, and Patterson (2010) adopt a 'narrative' approach to place brands, highlighting the importance of relating to the residents and letting their voice be heard. This is why it is important to incorporate the notion of 'sense of place' (Knez, 2005) in the conceptualisation of place brands (Campelo, Aitken, Thyne, and Gnoth, 2014) and in the way these are represented and highlighted by relevant brand elements. The reason why it is important to combine the destination branding approach with the identity-based approach is twofold: first, the place functions simultaneously as a place of visit and a place of residence or origin. Thus, the entity and the concept (i.e. destination and identity) cannot be clearly be considered separately. Secondly, the ways in which internal and external audiences make sense of the destination brand are linked inexorably. Moreover, there is considerable interaction between the two audiences (also see Hatch and Schultz, 2002).

The identity-based approach acknowledges the usefulness of symbolic brand elements for the effectiveness of the place brand but attributes to them significantly less importance than the dominant approach. In order to clarify further the role of symbolic elements, it is useful to acknowledge how the definitions of brands and branding have evolved, both in a conventional commercial context and in a place context.

2.1. Defining commercial brands

Significant variation is evident in the different conceptualisations and definitions of brands offered in the literature. The most widely cited definition is that of the American Marketing Association (see Kotler and Keller, 2006, p. 274), where a brand is defined as 'a name, term, sign, symbol or design, or a combination of these, intended to identify the goods or services of one seller or group of sellers and to differentiate them from those of competitors'. Despite its popularity, for many people this is an outdated definition (see for a critique Keller, Apeira, & Georson, 2008; Kornberger, 2010). Arguably, the main drawback is its excessive emphasis on the elements of name, term or sign. In a different mode, Gordon (1999) sees the brand as a product or service to which human beings attach a bundle of tangible (functional) and intangible (emotional and symbolic) meanings that add value'. Keller et al. (2008) also discuss the brand as adding to a product either *rational* and *tangible* dimensions (i.e. related to how the product performs) or *symbolic*, *emotional* and *intangible* dimensions (i.e. related to what the product represents) that differentiate it from other products that fulfill the same need. Clearly these tangible and intangible 'additions' to the product cannot be thought of as stemming only from a simple logo or tagline but from a variety of sources. As Keller et al. (2008) observe, the American Marketing Association (AMA) definition does not account for the broader range of associations attached to a brand. In this sense, it does not account for the range of tasks that branding performs. For instance, for Batey (2008) a brand can be defined as a cluster of associations concerning attributes, benefits and values. This idea is based on another very influential definition of brands offered by Aaker (1996a, p. 68), who defined brands as multi-dimensional constructs, consisting of functional, emotional, relational and strategic elements that collectively generate a unique set of associations in the public mind'. These associations are formed in peoples' minds and they are not necessarily the associations intended by the branding authorities. Furthermore, the associations are created or enhanced by every contact or experience the consumer has with the brand (Batey, 2008) and not only by the logo or other symbolic elements. Reinforcing this point, Riezebos (2003) defines a brand as the totality of what the consumer takes under consideration before making a purchase decision. As Pickton and Broderick (2000), p. 242) put it:

As a marketing tool, branding is not just a case of placing a symbol or name onto products to identify the manufacturer; a brand is a set of attributes that have a meaning, an image and produce associations with the product when a person is considering that brand of product.

The AMA has recently updated its definition to reflect the more refined understanding we now have of what brands are and what branding entails. The updated definition is: 'A brand is a customer experience represented by a collection of images and ideas; often it refers to a symbol such as a name, logo, slogan, and design scheme' (AMA Dictionary, n.d.). The effort to put less emphasis on symbolic elements and incorporate the way in which customers experience the brand is obvious. The new AMA definition further states that 'brand recognition and other reactions are created by the accumulation of experiences with the specific product or service, both directly relating to its use, and through the influence of advertising, design, and media commentary' (AMA Dictionary, n.d.). This updated AMA definition comes closer to the essence of branding but it still represents a very common view of brands as company assets and in this sense it is incomplete.

More recently, and based on different approaches to consumption and marketing influenced by post-modern ideas (e.g.

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