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## Research Paper

# Recognition, reputation and response: Some critical thoughts on destinations and brands

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## ABSTRACT

It is argued that the concept of the 'brand' is apt to be misunderstood. This theoretical paper seeks to improve understanding through an examination of its generic nature. An authentic brand is a symbolic construct, reductionist in character, which facilitates recognition, conveys reputation, and generates an instinctive response. The reader's response is learned through previous exposure, and is to be understood in terms of the insights afforded by post-structuralism: the brand is constructed in the reader's mind. The brand has long been used to add a symbolic 'personality' to simple products; but care is needed when it is applied to geographical places which are already possessors of 'personalities'. Moreover, the need of the tourist is to perceive the potential to explore, rather than to respond with superficial immediacy; therefore 'branding' requires caution. The argument is illustrated by the example of Scotland, a country replete with globally-recognised imagery and in that sense, ready-branded. Research undertaken for the paper shows that caution is, and has been, exercised in the deployment of that imagery.

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## 1. Introduction

This article presents a critical view on the use of the concept of the 'brand' in the marketing of destinations. The literature on destination branding is prolific. The intention of this paper is to take a step away from that discourse, link observations about promotional communications with the known needs of exploratory tourists, and consider the response that destination promotion should seek to elicit. This involves a consideration of the concept of the 'brand' as a symbolic construct; the nature of the reader response to symbolic messages; and the extent to which recognition, reputation and response constitute a nexus, the workings of which can be understood through the insights of post-structuralism. Scotland, a destination endowed with globally-recognised imagery, is offered as an example where that imagery is deployed with care and discretion. The paper is in essence theoretical, supported by elements of primary research in the case study of Scotland.

## 2. Destination branding

The terms 'product' and 'brand' are discrete concepts, with discrete meanings. For example, a bar of chocolate is a product,

the essence of which is barely distinguishable from one manufacturer to another. To 'brand' a bar of chocolate involves attaching to the product, through consistent promotional activities, symbolic qualities which consumers are intended to recognise, and to which they are intended to form an affective attachment. The bar of chocolate is a simple product – a blank page – onto which a 'personality' can be drawn. Problems arise when the concept is applied to complex 'products' such as tourist destinations that already engender affective attachment. The literature is huge, and for this reason, the review below makes reference to salient contributions.

An important text has been the edited collection of Morgan, Pritchard, and Pride (2002), *Destination Branding: creating the unique destination proposition*. This collection was revised and re-published (2010), accompanied by the reflection, by the editors, that 'the relationship between branding and places is not always straightforward, and it is certainly not well understood'. This was complemented by the suggestion that places cannot be brands 'in the traditional sense'. Destination branding was rather, it was said, the application of branding techniques in pursuit of 'reputation management' (2010, p. xxiii). The most recent edition of the collection (2011) bears a revised title: *Destination Brands: Managing Place Reputation*. This would seem to indicate an evolution of thinking: that to 'brand' a destination is not so much a transitive matter, but a question of eliciting and interpreting qualities already inherent to the place. The author would concur with this revised view.

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There is already a critical literature, though modest in comparison with the total output on the topic. Destination branding has been said to be a misuse of a term; that it is place promotion under another name (Mundt, 2002, p. 345; Park & Petrick, 2006, p. 263). There is said to be confusion surrounding the identity of the wider topic of place marketing (Skinner, 2008), uncertainty regarding the difference between destination 'brand' and 'image' (Tasci & Kozak, 2006), and that widely-circulated standard definitions of 'brand' fail to explain what branding does and achieves (Meenaghan, 1995, p. 25). Morgan (M) summarised three problems in his review of the original (Morgan et al., 2002) collection: first, places were complex and not subject to managerial control (see also Mundt, 2002); second, tourist experiences were to be privileged over brand identities, a point which will feature later in this paper; third, the concept of 'the nation' in the consumer's mind is the generator of a brand effect, rather than the result of one (Morgan, 2003).

The nation as 'brand' is worthy of mention, as an illustration of how far the brand concept has been stretched by some. The idea that a nation can be branded has been criticised (Girard, 2001). In riposte, a commercial brand consultant argued, inter alia, that Napoleonic France was an example of nation-branding (Olins, 2002, and republished, amended, in Morgan, Pritchard, and Pride (2010). Reference will be made later in the paper to Olins' comments on Scotland. Other salient contributors to the literature on place branding include (Hall, 2003; Hankinson, 2003, 2004, 2007; Morgan, Pritchard, & Piggott, 2003; Fan, 2005, and Gnoth, 2007). There is also a stable of books that bestraddle the academic and practitioner fields. However, absent from much of the writing is an explanation of what a brand actually is: how it prompts recognition; how it connects with reputation; and how the reader responds. The purpose of this paper is to explore these questions.

### 3. What is a brand, and how does it work?

#### 3.1. *The brand and the bland*

Branding arguably reaches its apogee, when that which is branded is little more than a commodity (Kniazeva & Belk, 2007, p. 63). It is useful to think of the simple product – the bar of chocolate, or whatever – as the essence, and the brand as the set of symbolic associations that consumers have been taught to attribute to it. It can be said that the importance of the brand is in inverse relationship with weakness of essence: when the product is more or less nothing, such as a cola drink, image becomes the basis of comparison (Hatch & Rubin, 2005, p. 52; see also Wee & Ming, 2003, p. 212; Wood, 2007, p. 108). The brand is therefore an abstraction that conceals the absence of essence. Baudrillard terms this the hyper-real. He writes of four phases of increasing intensity of the departure from the real: from the reflection of the real, to the perversion of the real, to the masking of the absence of the real, to the pure simulacrum (2001, p. 170). A branded cola drink is arguably an example of the third phase, the masking of the absence of the real. The Coca Cola brand was worth in excess of \$64bn in 2002 (Hatch & Rubin, 2005, p. 52), but the essence was a flavoured drink. Such a brand, as a powerful abstraction unencumbered by relational realities other than its sweet taste, can be seen as an object in itself (Lury, 2004, p. 1). It is as if, *pace* Berman, all that is air melts into solid.

Bland brands (it is tempting to call them 'blands') can therefore be thought of as 'a blank screen onto which to project fantasy' (Hatch & Rubin, 2005, p. 52). This resonates with the central insight of post-structuralism. Derrida (1997) famously suggested that '*il n'y a pas de hors-texte*'; meaning that a visual image is nothing more than representation, and a text is nothing

more than words on a page (1997, p. 158). A brand is a set of meanings, generated in the human mind, projected by the human reader (see Moisander, 2009, pp. 338–339). The somewhat startling implication is that brands, as external objects, do not exist. Shoppers may gaze at a garment with a designer label; they believe they behold a brand. They are, in fact, gazing on a garment. The brand is in their heads. The garment is the screen for their projection. To understand this effect, a discussion is required about how language, and particular symbolic language, is processed in the human mind.

#### 3.2. *The brand and the brain*

The paradigm offered by the science of linguistics is that symbolic meanings are generated in the mind by the confluence of three semiotic elements: the signifier, the signified, and the referent/interpretant. These equate to a word or image, the concept to which the word or image relates, and to the meaning the reader generates on encounter (Mick, 1986). For example, a church may have a distinctive form of architecture, such as a spire. A spire (image) is a signifier, the concept (signified) is a church, the meaning (referent) is that the building bearing this structure must be a church. But the crucial point is that the symbol only works, when the reader has already learned the links between the three elements (Broadbent, 1980, pp. 20–22).

Similarly, 'branding' requires the promotional exposure of a product to a target audience so that the intended symbolic associations will be learned and remembered. It is presented, normally through advertising, with projected fantasies that embody the intended symbolic values that the brand owner wishes to associate with the product. The aim is to ensure that the target audience generate in their minds the intended meanings when exposed to the product, its name or visual image. The process mimics symbolic interaction, whereby humans agree on shared meanings of symbols and objects through a process of learning (Wee & Ming, 2003, p. 209; see also Arvidsson, 2005, p. 189). An example is the giving of a single red rose as a symbolic act indicating love (Barthes, 1972, p. 117). It could be any flower, of any colour. But through centuries of symbolic interaction – one thinks of Robert Burns' *My Love is Like a Red Red Rose* (1794) – it happens to be a rose, and a red one.

The vital point about the workings of a symbol is that it suppresses conscious thought: It short-circuits the generation of meaning in the mind of the consumer, diverting attention from essence to connotation, and the character of that response is instinctive rather than considered. In other words, the workings of the brand, and conscious thought, are in antithesis. This point is endorsed with insights from neuroscience: brand choice is said to 'take place largely outside our consciousness and is rapid, automatic and effortless' (Walvis, 2008, p. 182). Brand names thus require constant repetition, so that the desired connotations remain in the forefront of their intended purchasers' minds on encounter with the branded product or its promotional material (Lury, 1999, p. 513; Blumenthal, 2002, p. 14; Gontijo, Rayman, Zhang & Zaidel, 2002, p. 329; Holt, 2006, p. 302; Walvis, 2008, p. 189).

Three implications arise. First, a brand name has to be short, and the graphic image simple: a logo. This facilitates exposure and repetition, and easy recognition on the part of the intended reader. Organisations have famously, and on occasions infamously, expended large sums on what look like rather simple designs, and the application of them to their property and goods. Branding is therefore by nature reductionist. The aim is to reduce the intended values to a conciseness that secures recognition, and thence purchase, without further contemplation. The dictum of the Nike corporation, 'Just Do It', is refreshingly frank (Lury, 1999, p. 508). Just do it. Do not think about it.

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