Tourism Management 48 (2015) 100–112

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Tourism Management

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/tourman

Towards a model of the Place Brand Web

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HIGHLIGHTS

- Identifies examples of approaches to place brand architecture.
- Offers insights into the management of place brand architectures.
- Establishes that more than one place brand is often associated with a place entity.
- Proposes the Place Brand Web Model.

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Received 31 January 2014
Accepted 14 October 2014
Available online 25 November 2014

Keywords:
Place branding
Brand architecture
Brand leadership
Stakeholders
Place Brand Web

ABSTRACT

This article contributes to theory concerning the relationships between the brands associated with a place, through a two-stage mixed method study involving interviews with place brand practitioners and web content analysis. The article, first reports on the challenges associated with managing place brand relationships and, then, discusses various aspects of the brand webs associated with places. On this basis, the article proposes, exemplifies and discusses the Place Brand Web Model. This model, which responds to the complex nature of the relationships between the brands associated with a place, is presented in two instantiations, the DMO perspective, and the more generalised perspective that views brands with associations with a place as contributing to the co-creation of the perceptual entity, THE Place Brand. The model is exemplified and discussed and with reference to a major UK city.

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1. Introduction

It is widely recognised that, like a corporate brand, a place brand can act as an umbrella brand to support the promotion and branding of various products, services and places associated with a given place (Anholt, 2004; Iversen & Hem, 2008). Leadership in place branding has, typically been viewed as resting with Destination Marketing Organisations (DMO's). In this study, in order to accommodate the dynamic nature of place branding, we adopt a generic notion of a DMO as the organisation that is perceived as leading the place branding initiatives associated with a given place. The term DMO is applied to those organisations that take a generic role in place branding, with a view to engaging and attracting tourists, businesses, cultural and sporting events and locales, and public and private sector investment. This is consistent with the adoption of an integrated theoretical approach to place branding (Gnoth, 2002; McCarthy, 2007; Peel & Lloyd, 2008), and is supported by the widespread acknowledgement of the importance of buy-in from other organisations with important brands associated with the place (Briggs, 2009; Iversen & Hem, 2008).

Understanding and being able to identify the brand architecture associated with a place is a pivotal aspect of articulating the tourism offering and managing the tourism experience associated with place. However, limited attention has been directed towards place brand architecture or the wider management of the web of brands associated with a place. Important exceptions are the contributions from Anholt (2004), Braun and Zenker (2010), Iversen and Hem (2008) on brand architecture in place branding, in general, and Datzira-Masip and Poluzzi (2014), Dooley and Bowie (2005) and Hankinson (2005, 2009) on destination brand architecture. Both Anholt (2004) and Hankinson (2005) argue that places should have an identified brand architecture that embraces a portfolio of brands, and Mihailovich (2006) asserts that a coherent place brand architecture is fundamental as a structure for forging alliances. In

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http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.tourman.2014.10.012
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addition, in the context of destination brand architecture, Datzira-Masip and Poluzzi (2014, p. 48) emphasise that since the sector is ‘composed of a multitude of private and public players, each of them promoting their own product brand’ there is a significant lack of attention being paid to brand architecture. In addition, the overlap and interrelationships between place brands at the local, regional and national level serve to further strengthen the case for further work in this area.

This research then, seeks to contribute to the development of the notion of place brand architecture, and advance understanding of the web-of-brands associated with a place or destination, through a two-stage study that gathers empirical data on place brand relationships, with the overall aim of proposing, exemplifying and discussing an all-embracing model of the Place Brand Web. Further, whilst acknowledging the importance of the relationships between the stakeholders associated with a place in facilitating meaningful place brand architecture, this article does not elaborate on these relationships or their associated processes, but rather centres its considerations on the relationships between the brands associated with a place. As such, this research should be of interest to all stakeholders, individual and organisational, who have a role in promoting and contributing to a coherent place identity; this includes traditional DMOs, regeneration agencies, local authorities, community groups and commercial and voluntary sector organisations.

Stage 1 of this study adopts the conventional notion of place brand architecture, and is based on interviews with place brand practitioners in DMO's in various locations, exploring their perceptions of the challenges associated with managing place brand architecture. At this stage, the focus is on ‘brand architecture’, the process of designing and managing a portfolio(s) of the places' sub-brands owned by the communities associated with the place (Hanna & Rowley, 2011). The aim of this stage is to:

1. Offer insights into the approaches to and the challenges associated with managing relationships between the brands associated with a place, with a specific focus on the role of leadership, stakeholder engagement, place infrastructures (physical and experiential), and the adoption of visual identities.

Stage 2 of this study is based on an exploratory two-stage web-page content analysis that investigates the nature of the web of place brands associated with a place, not all of which lie within the remit of the DMO. The aims of this stage are to:

2. Explore the web of brands associated with a place, and
3. Propose, exemplify and discuss the Place Brand Web.

At this stage, the focus of the study is on the wider Place Brand Web, which defines the brand space within which any DMO or other branding organisations associated with a place are to operate. The notion of the Place Brand Web is based on parallel concepts in the corporate branding literature, the brand-web, proposed by Leitch and Richardson (2003) and developed by Uggla (2006) in the ‘corporate brand association base’ model. These models centre on the concept of co-branding, which involves the public linkage of partner brands in order to enhance the value of both brands (Motion, Leitch, & Brodie, 2003).

Stage 1 of the study acts as platform for Stage 2. Stage 1 investigates the current situation and challenges to managing the web of brands associated with a place, and generally establishes the need for further research in this area. Stage 2 responds to this need, by further elaborating on the types of brand relationships associated with place brands, as a precursor to the proposal of a theoretical model as the basis for analysis and dialogue.

2. Literature review

2.1. Approaches to brand architecture

Brand architecture, a theory belonging to conventional branding, is described as the organising structure of the brand portfolio that specifies brand roles and the nature of the relationships between brands (Sanchez, 2004). Brand architectures are often seen as hierarchical with some brands being viewed as subordinate to, or sub-brands of, other brands. The conventional strategies of brand architecture include house-of-brands and branded-house. House-of-brands is where an organisation has a number of independent brands each with their own values and characteristics; this accommodates differentiated positioning and limits negative brand reputation transfer. Datzira-Masip and Poluzzi (2014) suggest that the Balearic Islands use the house-of-brands model since the individual islands such as Majorca are more visible than the brand of the Archipelago. Alternatively, a branded-house strategy seeks to transfer organisational values to all of its brands. The Maldives use the branded-house approach since the names and characteristics of the single islands are unrecognised but the generic characteristics of the Maldives are well known (Datzira-Masip & Poluzzi, 2014). Between house-of-brands and branded-house, there are various hybrid options including the sub-brand and endorsed brand strategies (Aaker & Joachimsthaler, 2000). The difference between sub-brand and endorsed brand strategies is subtle. In sub-brand strategies, there is greater affiliation between the sub-brands and their master brand. For example, the sub-brands of Perth and Gascoyne use, with some visual adaptation allowing for some individuality, the template of their master brand, Western Australia. Conversely, in an endorsed strategy the master brand plays a far less prominent role, with the link between the sub-brands and the master brand being perceptual. For example, in promoting the skiing destinations, Iceland, Denmark, Sweden, Norway and Finland are presented a single entity, under the banner of ‘Scandinavia’ (Dooley & Bowie, 2005).

As a point of departure for conceptualising place brand architectures, prior studies have taken brand architectures in corporate branding and compared corporate branding and city brands (Kavaratzis, 2004; Olins, 2003; Trueman, Klemm, & Giroud, 2004) and examined similarities to corporate umbrella branding (Gnoth, 2002; Iversen & Hem, 2008; Papadopoulos and Helsop, 2007; Therkelsen & Halkier, 2008). However, scholars have begun to identify specific challenges associated with the development of such a strategic approach. An important consideration is the link between the brand architecture and the ‘organisation's’ intended strategy (Aaker & Joachimsthaler, 2000). Achieving this link presents a particular challenge since place brand architecture is an interactive and evolutionary process affected not only by intended strategy but also by past and present place factors (Douglas & Craig, 2002; Hanna & Rowley, 2011).

Places evolve according to stakeholder needs and changing desires, traditions, technologies and economies (Van Assche & Lo, 2011). In addition, the evolution of place strategy is a political process having associations with governance (Eshuis, Braun, & Klijn, 2013), and involves engaging with the interests and aspirations of multiple stakeholders (Therkelsen & Halkier, 2008), such that “*branding is seldom under the control of a central authority*” (Iversen & Hem, 2008, p. 604). A further challenge arises from the geographic context associated with a place brand. Whilst, corporate brands are applied to products and services within a corporate organisational framework, place brands are applied to products and services within a political and geographic framework (Allen, 2007; Hankinson, 2009). The geographical context of place brands presents the issue of boundaries and their impact on the notion of place brand architecture. For instance, research conducted by Hankinson (2009) found that in regional branding (UK) conflicts could emerge

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