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Special issue
Place Branding

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Who really creates the place brand? Considering the role of user generated content in creating and communicating a place identity

Abstract

This paper explores online and social media users' contributions to place identity creation, challenging the role and importance of various actors in the place brand identity and place brand image formation process.

Findings arise from a content analysis of 149 separate photographs of a unique event that takes place on the Greek island of Corfu as part of the Orthodox Easter festival. Findings are also informed by autoethnographic reflexivity from the researcher's own participation in and observation of the event, and 84 images from the researcher's own photographic record of the event.

Comparisons are drawn between social media users' images and those communicated by the local Municipality through 7 relevant images reproduced in the official Easter on Corfu brochure.

The images uploaded by social media users were not vastly different in terms of content from those of the local authority, and were also similar to those taken by the researcher. Perhaps it may be time for place branders to not only voluntarily give up their perceptions of control over at least part of the identity formation process and encourage contributions from wider stakeholders, but to no longer perceive them as mere consumers of the brand, but also as its co-creators. However, this will require another shift in academic understanding of place brand identity and place brand image, which may be difficult to achieve considering that there has only recently been reached a certain level of agreement within the extant literature about the various definitions of terms associated with these constructs.

Keywords

Visual imagery, qualitative research, place brand image, Corfu, Easter, content analysis.

1. Introduction

The marketing of destinations is seen as key to remaining competitive in the global market for tourism. Destination Marketing Organisations (DMOs) are being created, funded, and sustained by ‘a large number of nations, states and cities’, and have become the ‘main vehicle’ through which to market the places that have become ‘the biggest brands in the tourism industry’ (Pike & Page, 2014, p. 202). It is generally held that DMOs should inform their marketing policies based on an understanding and knowledge of the destination image that has been formed from contact points with a wide range of information sources. Studies that advance understanding of destination image are therefore not only of theoretical, but also of “high practical relevance” (Stepchenkova & Mills, 2010, p. 598) to DMOs for whom “issues of performance are critical” especially when attempting to create and communicate a coherent integrated brand message to tourists from a “disparate and fragmented group of tourism stakeholders [...] such as service providers, local authorities, business representative bodies” (Murray, Lynch & Foley, 2016, p. 877-878).

According to Lew (2017) “tourism destination planning and marketing are fundamentally place making actions intended to shape the image and imageability of a place... The tools of place making are essentially the same for both organic place-making and planned placemaking, but the intentions and outcomes can vary enormously.” Therefore, for such destinations, planned placemaking efforts are also seen to be closely linked to place marketing, branding, and as Lew refers to it, “purposeful image building.” However, Lew also believes that, “from a tourism social science perspective,” one key area of fruitful future research is to answer the question of how tourists contribute to place making including by “sharing images and stories through social media,” ethnographically understanding places while making places, and consuming places while co-producing them. This study included tourist generated content (TGC) but also included wider content uploaded to various online and social media by a range of users.

While Kisali, Kavaratzis and Saren (2016, p. 72) found that “scholars keep trying to reconceptualize [destination image] in the new millennium” there remains a need for further studies into the way it is affected by technological factors, especially relating to the internet and social media which “emancipate individuals from the dominance of traditional information sources and open new research areas for scholars,” also stressing that “the role of the social media and user-generated content in DI formation is an area that needs to be further investigated” (p. 73) as a matter of urgency.

The aim of this paper is therefore to provide contemporary insights into the creation of a place identity via online and social media other than by those more usually perceived to be responsible for the place brand process, thus challenging widely accepted perspectives in the extant literature concerning the role and importance of various actors in the processes of place brand identity and place brand image formation. This research will therefore inform our understanding of the relationship between place identity, place image, place brand image and the emerging and changing role of various information formation agents, especially via social media, to project a certain image of places.

2. Literature Review

2.1. *Place identity, image and branding*

If places were no different from any other commercial product or service, a place brand would quite simply be seen to be the result of the place branding process in the same way as a product / service brand is the result of the product / service branding process. However, this is where the study of place branding becomes more complex, and the definitional terms somewhat unclear. It is difficult to find agreement in the extant literature about whether a place *is* a brand or *has* a brand (Skinner, 2008), and whether the brand is an object or a

perception, because, while, “obviously the intention of communicating a brand (identity) to an audience is to affect perception (brand image), but the branding literature does not always clearly state the distinction between the brand (identity) and its perception (image)” (Merkelsen & Rasmussen, 2016, p. 103). Indeed Merkelsen and Rasmussen (2016) believe that it is the use of the “brand” construct itself that has both facilitated its broad application outside of consumer products and into areas such as place branding, but also note that it is this very “plasticity” that has attracted criticisms including “terminological confusion” that leads to associated challenges for appropriate theory development “when there is too much confusion about what basic concepts mean” (p. 103).

Such complexities in the understanding of place identity, place branding, and place image have led to calls “to develop a more appropriate approach to both the theoretical development and practices of place marketing and branding” (Skinner, 2011, p. 283) and “enhance our understanding and defend our field more thoroughly in this regards” (Zenker & Govers, 2016, p. 3). Towards some reconciliation, and in finding a way of moving on from potential definitional torpor, it is generally agreed, at least within the more recent extant place marketing and place branding literature, that the following may be an appropriate way to clarify the definitions and relationships between the main constructs raised in this paper:

- *Place Identity* - At its most basic level, the identity of a place is its “DNA,” quite simply, what the place is (Berrozpe, Campo & Yagüe, 2017). However, the concept of place identity “is probably the most elusive and paradoxical of the concepts that make place branding a particularly challenging endeavour” (Kavaratzis & Kalandides, 2015, p. 1372), in no small part because place identity is not one thing, it is heterogeneous, it does not stay constant, it also changes over time. It is outside the scope of this paper to offer as thorough in-depth consideration of this concept than that provided by Kavaratzis and Kalandides (2015) which is highly recommended as further reading by scholars who are interested in this topic.
- *Place Image* - refers to the mental perceptions a person has about a place (Crompton, 1979). As explained by Kavaratzis and Kalandides (2015, p. 1373), place identity and place image can be seen as “two sides of the same coin, neither of which has meaning without the other” offering the proposition that the place brand should be situated “within this process of place identity formation.”
- *Place Brands* - unlike other commercial product and service brands, places “aren’t for sale” and are not “owned,” nor are they able to be managed, in the way other commercial product and service brands can be (Anholt, 2010, p. 6). Because of these differences, Anholt (2010, p. 1) clarifies that when we apply the concept of branding to places it is better perceived in metaphorical than actual terms, thus ‘brand’ is simply a “metaphor for the way places compete with each other in the global marketplace.” The ‘nation brand hexagon’ identifies that when conceptualised and communicated as ‘brands,’ this can enable global competitiveness across “six areas of national competence” to have positive impacts on a nation’s: exports; its people; its culture and heritage; to attract investment and immigration; place governance; and tourism (Anholt, 2005, p. 186).
- *Place Branding* - is therefore the marketing-related practice (Falkheimer, 2016) by which a positive place identity is created and communicated for marketing purposes to various target segments (Zenker, Braun & Petersen, 2017) that differentiates one place competitively from other places (Glińska & Gorbaniuk, 2016; Govers, 2011), and which can alter perceptions about a place (Valaskivi, 2016).
- *Place Brand Identity* - comprises elements from the physical and natural environment, i.e. from within its’ territorial and geographical borders; from the place’s economic system, legal system, political system and culture; and, finally, from various symbolic and sensory elements that contribute to the way it presents itself to the world, either

authentically or through the staging of spectacles (Skinner, 2011). A strong positive place brand identity can build a reputation that can differentiate one place from another in order to achieve some level of competitive advantage in a range of contexts that can be used to communicate the various value propositions of that place to identified target markets (see, for example, Anholt, 2005; Skinner, 2008; Govers, 2011; Friere, 2016). Place brand identity is a marketing-related construct, it is formed from the inside-out (Skinner, 2008, 2017a, 2017b; Williams-Burnett, Skinner & Fallon, 2016), and is communicated in ways that tend to rely heavily on the visual rather than other senses (Medway, 2015).

- *Place Brand Image* - is therefore also a marketing-related construct. Whereas place brand identity is created and communicated from the inside-out, the place brand image is an outside-in construct that applies to the target markets' perceptions of the place (Skinner, 2008, 2017a, 2017b; Williams-Burnett, Skinner & Fallon, 2016).

However, agreement on definitional terms is not universally found across all implementations of the place brand construct, particularly, for example, when related to tourist destinations. Many places aim to attract resident visitors as well as other 'tourists'. While, "conceptually destination branding targets solely tourists [...] destination branding and place branding in general should not be seen as separated entities" (Zenker *et al.*, 2017, p. 16), and thus from this perspective destination brands would not be differentiated from other types of place brands. Govers (2011) believes that "what is now labelled 'destination branding' is nothing more than plain tourism promotion," whereas Friere (2016) takes the view that destination branding is simply place branding in a tourism context. While the terms place and destination will continue to be used throughout this paper where each are appropriate, it must also be acknowledged that where organisations charged with promoting a place exist, these tend to be referred to as Destination Marketing Organisations.

2.2. Image formation and the role of DMOs

There have been a number of different ways of classifying the stages and sources of image formation (see for example, Echtner & Ritchie, 1991; Fakeye & Crompton, 1991; Gartner, 1993) since Gunn (1972) first differentiated between those arising from formal sources such as the DMO and those emanating from unbiased external sources (Williams-Burnett *et al.*, 2016) such as "general print and television media, documentaries, travel guides, and books, as well as word-of-mouth" (Stepchenkova & Mills, 2010, p. 578). Generally, the former are held to be *induced* images, the latter *organic* images, with one key differentiating factor between the two types being the amount of control exercised by the DMO (Gartner, 1993).

In this respect, the role of the DMO tends to be both theorised and practiced as akin to the marketing function of any other commercial product or service brand. However, in questioning the extent to which the DMO can indeed be "responsible for the competitiveness of the destination" (Pike & Page, 2014, p. 202), and in order to make the distinction between a destination brand and other type of commercial brand, Pike and Page have clarified the limitations of a DMO in being able to *manage* rather than *market* the brand. Yet regardless of the distinctions between place brands and other commercial brands, and the recognised limitations of the DMO, both the theoretical and practical approach to understanding the role of DMOs remains that it is the DMO that is the entity "responsible for creating and maintaining a destination image that conveys the types of needs that a destination is capable of satisfying" (Line & Wang, 2017, p. 87). Thus, the DMO creates and communicates the desired place brand identity that hopefully then aligns with the image of the destination that, as a result, is formed by the intended target audience from these induced sources, although recognising that the image formed also takes into account the identity of the destination that emanates from organic sources.

2.3. UGC and the changing role of image formation agents

Through the increase in the organic image formation source of User Generated Content (UGC) available across a wide variety of media, including many digital and social media platforms (Choi, Lehto & Morrison, 2007), it is becoming increasingly evident that place marketers themselves retain little control over destination images (Bing, McLaurin & Crotts, 2007) as image formation becomes a dynamic process “of selecting, reflecting, sharing, and experiencing” (Govers, Go & Kumar, 2007, p. 978). This challenges many existing destination marketing practices (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010), and leads to questions concerning the effect of social media and the role of content-generating tourist contributors in the way destination brand identities are formed (Choi *et al.*, 2007; Greaves & Skinner, 2010).

Tourists are keen to share their experiences with others –from the very earliest travel writings, through to holidaymakers eagerly awaiting the return of their printed photographs to show their friends and family images from their trips. “The visual is central to tourists, and taking pictures of the extraordinary in tourism has long served as an antidote to the mundane daily life at home” (Tribe & Mkonno, 2017, p. 111). The growth in smartphone usage by tourists has simply facilitated easier, quicker, and wider sharing of photographs. This recognises that tourists do indeed play a part, through their social media activities, in co-creating at least to some extent the destination products they will be consuming (Mariani *et al.*, 2016), and that this ‘prosumption’ becomes part of their destination experience (Li *et al.*, 2017, p. 95). Thus it is the way ‘such open access and image sharing opens up a more democratic construction of tourist spaces’ and ‘further enhance opportunities for prosumption’ (Li *et al.*, 2017, p. 95).

Interestingly, cultural geography’s approach to the construct of place making confers both an identity creation and image formation role to tourists who are seen to “construct personal narratives of the places they encounter” (Lew, 2017, p. 5). Moreover, in this respect, place identity creation cannot therefore be considered fixed in the traditional perceptions of place branding, but rather is performed as consumers not only experience the place, but also co-create and co-produce it including through sharing their pictures on social media, and thus there is also a temporal element to place identity (Baka, 2015; Berrozpe *et al.*, 2017; Lew, 2017; Scarles, 2012). It is not only tourists who upload and share UGC representing a place identity that can lead to place image formation. Zenker *et al.* (2017, p. 4) contend that, because any place brand comprises “a large variety of variables, such as a place’s buildings, history, economical and geographical aspects, and demographic characteristics,” residents are not only a target group of place branding efforts, but are also “part of the place [...] place ambassadors, in addition to being voters and citizens who initiate and legitimate place branding activities [and] thus, residents play a central role in the branding process” (p. 17). It is for this reason this research focuses on the wider term UGC than solely on TGC, yet recognising that in this case, many such users will be tourists to the event. UGC is also often available in tandem, and even on the same online and social media sites as the DMO-projected place identity, yet the place identity projected by a DMO is often perceived by target audiences as being less credible than that projected by less formal organic sources (Terzidou, Styliadis & Terzidis, 2017). The potential also remains for the DMO-projected place identity not to match up with the place identity portrayed by organic sources. These issues have led authors such as Choi *et al.* (2007) to call for a “rethinking [...] into the role of information agents in shaping destination images” (Greaves & Skinner, 2010).

2.4. Online Place Brand Co-Creation

To some extent, parallels can be drawn between the notion of consumers as co-creators of commercial product brands, and those who upload UGC becoming co-creators of place brands. Indeed, the notion of the co-creation of the place product by consumers is not new. In 1993, Ashworth contended that because “each consumption is an individual experience [...] in many logical respects the producer of the place-product is the consumer” (p. 645), although

that view is contested in a counter-argument that place is “merely the context of a consumption experience, rather than a consumption experience itself” (Parker, 2008, p. 9).

Within the literature pertaining to products there has been a shift away from a goods-dominant towards a more service-dominant approach “centered on customers’ and/or other stakeholders’ interactive experiences taking place in complex, co-creative environments” (Brodie *et al.*, 2013, p. 106). However, within this body of literature, there remains the issue that it is the product brand-owning company that facilitates customers to become participatory collaborators and co-creators of the brand and its value proposition (Hajli *et al.*, 2016). With respect to place brands, while a DMO may be seen to be engaged with place marketing and branding efforts, they cannot be perceived as owning the place product in the way a commercial organisation owns a product brand. Indeed, one of the early problems associated with branding places was recognised by Olins (2002, p. 241) who identified that attempts at doing so could meet not only with negative reactions, but downright “visceral antagonism” from various stakeholders.

It is also pertinent to stress that “while ‘attitude’ ‘image’ and ‘perception’ may be defined differently by academics, tourists do not tend to make any obvious differentiation between these various constructs” (Skinner, 2017c). They may also perceive some sources of organic information to portray a more real identity of a destination than others, and do not always distinguish between whether the source of this information is formally charged with inducing such an image (e.g. a DMO) or whether that source is another tourist uploading UGC to a social media platform (Williams-Burnett *et al.*, 2016).

2.5. The role of Social Media

While social media platforms allow visitors to an event or place to easily share their experiences with others, where UGC can be perceived as offering electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) insights to others, these platforms are also used by DMO’s, individual tourism related businesses, and a wide range of the other stakeholders who may be contributing to communicating a place brand identity. These platforms are also increasingly accessed via mobile devices, yet while “the role of technology in mediating and creating experiences has been examined in tourism contexts” (Van Winkle, 2016, p. 204), compared with the amount of research into the use of technology in work environments, far less research has been undertaken that explores “mobile technology in free-choice, leisure and tourism contexts” (*ibid.*, p. 202). Even when research has been undertaken into the application of various mobile technologies that facilitate individuals to share UGC via a range of social media platforms in a tourism context (for example, see Liang *et al.*, 2016) authors continue to separate the role and usage of ICT into its tourism service provider and its tourism consumer applications.

There is some literature considering the role of social media in destination marketing that has identified how DMOs themselves use platforms such as Facebook in the promotion of their destinations (Mariani, Di Felice & Mura, 2016). However, these studies show that, for the most part, these DMOs strategically use such platforms ‘with a top-down approach, allowing for little spontaneous user generated content’ (Mariani *et al.*, 2016, p. 321). Moreover, while tourists use a wide range of social media platforms across which to share their vacation experiences in the forms of blogs, reviews, textual posts and photographs, many DMOs continue to rely upon only a few such platforms, and overall continue to use a website as their primary vehicle through which to communicate with their target audiences (Li, Robinson & Oriade, 2017). For example, in Italy, the use of Twitter is sparse with DMOs more heavily using Facebook (Mariani *et al.*, 2016). Greece has only recently announced its ‘digital transition journey’ to incorporate modern communications technology to help tourists access information about Greek destinations (Greek Travel Pages, 2018).

Treksoft’s most recent *Tourism Trend Report* (Fuggle, 2016) found evidence that 39% of Twitter users will access the platform while they travel, and 27% ‘share positive travel

experiences... 97% of millennials say they share pictures while travelling, especially on Facebook, Instagram, Whatsapp, and Snapchat,' and that while "the number of Gen Zs using Facebook is on a steady decline while Instagram adoption continues climbing [...] there remain more than 53 million candid traveler photos on TripAdvisor" with not only 76% of TripAdvisor users agreeing that their booking decisions were influenced by other travellers' photographs, but that "coloured visuals increase people's willingness to read a piece of [social media] content by 80%." Where "image-focused social media" has been studied, this has focused on applications that are specifically designed for image sharing (such as "Flickr and Instagram mainly," Liang *et al.*, 2016). Destination managers also use the same platforms, and often upload visual images of the place brand to these social media sites, where "many of the images on these sites have a real life approach, without any or only a minimum amount of manipulation. This form of content makes a very powerful contribution to destination image formation" (Munar, 2011).

Twitter is useful in a festival and event context, because it allows for two-way communication between a visitor asking for information or sharing feedback with the organisers that is also open to be accessed by others (Garay & Pérez, 2017). However, when DMOs did use platforms such as Twitter, these were mostly to convey one-way information about festivals and events etc., and in no way were DMO's seen to be using Twitter as interactively as they could have done (Sevin, 2013), although Sevin uses the example of Twitter to propose that such platforms can help build online place brand communities where place brand co-creation can take place similar to the way it is seen to occur in the corporate world. Indeed it is in the festival and event literature where the creation of such online communities and the use of social media to engage with consumers is most evident when considering such issues from a place-based perspective. For example, Hudson and Hudson (2013) identify that in such contexts, marketers may face challenges in building brand communities because festival-goers may assume their motives to be solely profit driven, thus while DMOs commonly use social media "to increase awareness and to build engagement with consumers" (p. 208) festival and event marketers "should employ a passive role when facilitating brand communities" (p. 211). Gyimothy and Larson (2015) found evidence of three co-creation strategies employed by festival event organisers: Customer Insourcing -where customers are used as "online ambassadors" to blog and tweet about the event; Co-innovation -invites feedback and improvement suggestions from customers via social media; and Community Consolidation -where the marketer input is definitely not passive, but instead the marketer joins in with the online community in an informal friendly and even playful manner. In Facebook tends to be used in a more interactive manner, motivating "customers to participate with organisations and encourage co-creation of customer value" (Hoksbergen & Insch, 2016, p. 88).

However, similar to co-creation in the realm of product brands and online communities, such online and social media interaction still often remains as that from an individual to an organisation -even via Facebook where the online community will revolve around the brand's Facebook page, which, when translated to a place brand, if an individual engages with the social media presence of a DMO, the communication and image formation remains in the realm of induced image formation agency. While claims have been made in the extant literature that 'the conventional function of DMOs... has been undermined somewhat by the emergence of these new communication tools' (Li *et al.*, 2017, p. 96), and even challenge their authority and undermine the DMOs reputation (Mariani *et al.*, 2016) the literature tends to remain wedded to the opinion that the way DMOs should respond to the changing world of social media is relatively simply expressed as that they 'must expand from using official destination websites as the their focal point of online marketing and proactively interact with tourists through social media to stay visible and relevant in the virtual world' (Li *et al.*, 2017, p. 98) rather than to suggest anything more radical.

3. Method

Rather than consider the way DMOs use social media and visual images (Huertas & Marine-Roig, 2016), data were collected from UGC on a variety of online and social media. This better allowed for an exploration of the role of information agents other than the DMO in creating place identity via online and social media, and thus informing our understanding of the relationship between place identity, place image, place brand image and the emerging and changing role of various information formation agents, especially via social media, to project a certain image of places.

Rakić and Chambers (2012) identify a growing use of visual methods and a focus on the visual, including tourists' photographs (Gillespy & Harris, 2011) in many different academic fields including in tourism research, due to both "the increasing legitimisation of qualitative research, and the willingness of tourism researchers to explore innovative approaches to research" (Rakić & Chambers, 2012, p. 4). Considering this study is focused on UGC contributions to the creation of a place identity, i.e. presenting what a place is (Berrozpe *et al.*, 2017), the use of such visual images would tend to address the methodological paradox of photographs being perceived as evidencing both subjective perspectives of the photographer, and "the reality in front of the camera's lens" (Schwartz, 1989, p. 120). Stepchenkova and Mills (2010) found 47 articles employing a qualitative analysis of either text and/or pictures in their analysis of destination image research published between 2000–2007, although of these, only 7 had sourced their data from the web. Moreover, when visual imagery has been analysed in the context of destination image, there is very little in the context of religious tourism (Terzidou *et al.*, 2017). Terzidou *et al.*'s research (2017), undertaken within a Greek Orthodox context, but using visual media from television news and documentaries, noted that DMOs and religious authorities will often project an outline of specific place-based practices, and providing visual imagery that offer signs and symbols to the tourist that may enable them to "create meaning and shape their experiences."

For this study, data were collected from mostly secondary sources, photographs taken on Holy Saturday April 15th 2017 when a unique event takes place on the Greek island of Corfu as part of the Orthodox Easter festival and uploaded to various publicly accessible digital and social media. Data were collected using the following parameters: an item was included only if a post was publicly accessible online and if that post included a photograph taken on and pertaining to some aspect of Holy Saturday (15th April) in Corfu in 2017. Only still photographs, not videos, and only original photographs not those shared from other posts –although the trail of these photos was followed to source more data, thus there was an element of snowball sampling involved, because certain initial data sources were purposively chosen, i.e. large membership publicly accessible Facebook groups relevant to Corfu, and then posts that had been shared to these groups from other sources were traced back to include the originally posts at their original sources. All data sources were scrutinised for posts made between 15th April (Holy Saturday) and the end of the month 30th April –allowing a two-week period for posts to be made and photographs to be uploaded. With each source of data, the researcher scrolled down through the newsfeeds scrutinising every post made between the search dates rather than entering search terms, to ensure no images were missed out. Using the same search parameters, other sources scrutinised for relevant data were: Instagram –searching using the hashtag #easterincorfu; and Google Images –using the search term "Corfu Easter 2017." When an image was located via Google Images, the researcher traced the photograph back to the original webpage to which it related. This did not generate much additional data, because these links to webpages showed either pictures that had already been collected as part of this dataset (indicating that data saturation had been reached), or because photographs could not be verified as either original, or were not taken during the relevant dates in 2017 – indeed many pages were promoting the entire Easter period as if it were coming up in

advance, and so had loaded onto their webpages pre-existing photos from previous years, including some with earlier dates clearly written on the “μπότηδες” (“botides” clay pots that are ceremoniously smashed as part of the festivities).

The initial data set drawn from these online sources comprised 166 still photographic images, upon initial analysis, 17 duplicate items were removed leaving a total data set for analysis of 149 images. However, when categorising the photographs by data source, it became increasingly obvious that the boundaries were indeed very blurred between what was *tourist* generated content and what was content uploaded by other types of social media user. Boundaries were also blurred when considering the type of online presence that hosted the source data and the user who generated the content. For example, images originally taken by commercial photographers were being shared by other commercial organisations on their websites, or had been shared by individuals onto e.g. Facebook groups. It was therefore decided not to limit the analysis to only those photographs taken by tourists (see Table 1), as this was in some cases impossible to identify, although tracing source images back made it possible to categorise the user generating the content as either a private individual (whether tourist or resident), or a commercial poster, whether that be a sole trader (particularly in the case of commercial photographers) or a larger commercial organisation.

Table 1: Data sources

SOURCE	TYPE OF PRESENCE		POST TYPE		IMAGE n=	CONTENT GENERATOR	
	Groups N=	Pages N=	Original Post	Shared Post		Private individual N=	Sole trader or commercial organisation N=
FACEBOOK	3		3	5	71	4	4
		9	8	1	59	2	7
WEBPAGE		1			4		1
INSTAGRAM		13			15	13	1

Analysis of this data set was compared with 84 photographs taken by the researcher, and the 7 photographs specifically relevant to Holy Saturday reproduced in the Corfu Municipality office brochure Easter on Corfu, that was available in hard copy in various outlets around the island, particularly in Corfu Town, and also available to download in .pdf format. Analysis was undertaken through representational readings of the content of these photographs (Haldrup & Larsen, 2012). The findings have also been informed by autoethnographic reflexivity (Pink, 2003) from the researcher’s own participation in and observation of the event, and comparisons drawn between the UGC images of the event and those communicated by the local authority. The autoethnographic element of this research was undertaken from the level of ‘complete participant’, which while approached covertly did not raise any ethical issues regarding informed consent or deception, but rather provided a high level of involvement in a cultural event in which the researcher was an ordinary participant, and already immersed in the place’s culture, affording the necessary depth of understanding of the symbolic nature of the event itself (Jaimangal-Jones, 2014). Thus even while much of the data was gathered from the online environment, the approach is deemed to be ethnographic, and not netnographic (Tribe & Mkonno, 2017).

4. Findings

At the time of data collection, the 3 Facebook groups where relevant photographs had been posted between them 18,931 members. The 9 Facebook pages in total had 86,404 ‘likes’. While there will be some element of cross-over between people on social media who may join various groups and also like pages about places of interest to them, and therefore it is impossible to identify a number of unique individual, the total potential audience who may have viewed these images amounts to over 105,000. Corfu does not have a DMO to promote tourism on the island, although there is a Vice-Mayor within the Municipality who is responsible for Tourism Development and Planning. Corfu also falls under the remit of the Prefecture of the Ionian Islands who work under the strategic direction set by the Greek National Tourism Organisation (GNTO). The authority responsible for the creation of the strategic plan of the national communication policy, the Greek Secretariat General for Media and Communications, has recently scrutinised the nation’s image by analysing 400,000 reports with direct references to Greece in 1,000 international media of 28 countries during the period 2008–2016 (Liapis, 2017). The impact of social media on this image does not yet seem to have assumed much strategic importance. Moreover, Greece is a country still in financial crisis. The GNTO, as with all other Greek government agencies, has limited funds to spend on promotion, and has to promote the nation as a whole, and the Prefecture is responsible for all 7 Ionian islands, so Corfu, as with many smaller destinations, has limited resources to promote itself via traditional media and attempt to reach the size of audience that UGC is reaching via online and social media channels.

Overall, certain images appeared more frequently across all UGC sources, and appear to be very specifically related to the events taking place on Corfu on Holy Saturday. “Tens of thousands of tourists, from all over Greece, and beyond” (Chaitow, 2008) come to Corfu each year to participate in this “unique experience of Easter time on Corfu [...] this emblematic element of our cultural identity... rooted in the collective conscious of the inhabitants of the island” (Nikolouzos, n.d.). “The island of Corfu overflows with tourists for its special Easter celebrations on a yearly basis. “Crowds gather repeatedly at the historic town center with its large square (the largest in the Balkans)” (Moschoudi, 2014). On Holy Saturday an artificial earthquake takes place at 6am to signify the first resurrection of Christ. Religious processions then take place throughout the town centre during the morning, until the famous and unique Corfu Easter tradition of pot smashing takes place at 11am. In the evening, people gather inside and outside of the churches to join in the services, holding their specially decorated Easter candles that will be lit with the flame taken from the original Holy Fire that is flown to Greece from Jerusalem in the celebration where people greet each other by announcing “Χριστος Ανεστη” (Christos Anesti - Christ is Risen), followed by firework displays.

Common images that appeared in the UGC of Holy Saturday, 2017 (see Table 2) were the “δαμασκός” (“damasks”) the dark plum coloured damask curtain-like drape that is hung from a window or balcony to indicate participation is throwing and smashing of the clay pots (μπότηδες) onto the streets below. The most frequently occurring UGC images (see Table 2) showed the damask-draped balconies with people either making their preparations (n=83) for the pots to be thrown (n=56). The vast crowds the pot throwing event attracts were also featured frequently in these photographs (n=63). Apart from images focusing on the windows and balconies, other frequently occurring images included the architecture of the town (n=57), particularly around the area of the Liston (modelled on the Rue de Rivoli in Paris) and its Esplanade, where the architecture dates back to the time when Corfu was under both Venetian and French rule, and thus also contributing to the unique identity of Corfu, and differentiating the place from other destinations across Greece. This area is situated at one end of Spianada Square, where the main road running parallel to the Liston passes the Old Fortress. At the other end of the square is the location of the Maitland Rotunda, a memorial

dedicated to the first British governor of the Ionian Islands, which is lit up during the evenings at Easter time. Behind the Liston is St Spyridon's church, built in the late sixteenth century at the heart of what is now Corfu old Town's UNESCO world heritage centre. The church, with its red dome, is another famous landmark in Corfu Town, and it houses the relics of the island's patron Saint that are paraded through the streets of Corfu Town on various occasions throughout the year, including during the Orthodox Easter celebrations. Surprisingly, for the main event in the calendar of the Orthodox religion, very few photographs included processions of priests (n=4) or religious icons or symbols (n=5). The marching bands (known as *Philharmonics*) that accompany these processions, and which also parade along the Esplanade after the pot throwing ends, date back to 1840, and are also a product of Corfu's historic links with other empires and cultures and a marker of the island's identity. During its time as a British protectorate, the British administration would not allow their military bands to participate in the Greek Orthodox parades, and so the island's citizens formed their own marching bands to accompany St Spyridon's processions. The UGC included 22 photographs of these marching bands. UGC also included images of the smashed pottery on the ground (n=16). Only 15 photographs showed images of the decorative Easter candles, or of candlelight outside the evening church service, and only 5 photographs included images of the evening firework displays.

Who really creates the place brand? Considering the role of user generated content in creating and communicating a place identity

Table 2: UGC Images of Holy Saturday during Easter on Corfu by online source and content generator type

Source	Damasks on Balconies / windows	Architecture	Crowds	Pot throwing	Smashed pots	Philharmonics	People	Candles	Fireworks	Priests	Religious symbols	Traditional dress	Greek flag	Corfu flag	Cameras	Food	Musicians	Balloon sellers
on FB Group (Individual)	13	6	5	7	0	3	1	4	0	0	0	0	0	0	4	1	0	1
on FB Group (Commercial)	36	10	20	35	8	3	13	1	0	0	0	5	2	1	21	1	0	0
on FB Page (Individual)	16	25	13	3	2	8	7	2	1	0	0	0	8	4	0	0	0	0
on FB Page (Commercial)	10	8	11	7	3	3	4	6	2	2	3	0	0	0	7	0	0	1
Webpage (Commercial)	1	4	4	0	0	0	0	1	1	2	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
on Instagram (Individual)	7	4	10	4	3	4	2	1	1	0	0	1	1	0	6	1	0	0
on Instagram (Commercial)	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Frequency Total n=	83	57	63	56	16	22	27	15	5	4	5	6	11	5	38	3	0	2
Comparison: Researcher's photographs	47	14	22	43	6	2	6	1	0	0	3	1	0	1	24	3	2	3
Municipality brochure images	3	5	5	1	1	3	1	2	1	1	2	0	0	0	1	0	2	0
Frequency Total n=	50	19	27	44	7	5	7	3	1	1	5	1	0	1	24	3	4	3
OVERALL TOTALS n=	133	76	90	100	23	27	34	18	6	5	10	7	11	6	63	6	4	5

Apart from the images of the *Philharmonics*, no UGC contained any images of the street musicians, only 6 included images of dancers in traditional Corfiot costumes, 3 included food, and only 2 included images of the balloon sellers who are in evidence throughout the streets and along the Esplanade –even the Municipality understand that this spectacle has now become a “civil-cum-religious ritual” (Nikolouzos, n.d.). While it was impossible in many of the photographs of the vast crowds to actually pick out images of cameras, many photographs (n=38) clearly showed the participant pot throwers and spectators holding up smartphones or cameras to capture their memories of the day.

5. Conclusions

The aim of this paper was to provide contemporary insights into the creation of a place identity via online and social media other than by those more usually perceived to be responsible for the place brand process, thus challenging widely accepted perspectives in the extant literature concerning the role and importance of various actors in the processes of place brand identity and place brand image formation.

This research has shown there is no real interaction between the Municipality and those uploading UGC. These content generators are themselves creating an identity for the place through what they choose to post in online and social media, and that identity appears to be consistent whether the content is generated on a Facebook Page, Facebook Group, on a Webpage, or via photo sharing platforms such as Instagram. There also appears to be little difference in content generated by individuals (whether tourists or residents) and that generated by those with a commercial interest in sharing their photographs of this event on this island. In this case, where no DMO exists to specifically promote Corfu, and when there is little to no promotion of the island’s individual resort destinations at Municipality level let alone at Prefecture or National level, the identity of these places *is* what the tourists, residents, and local business concerns create. Moreover, the identity that is created is overwhelmingly positive of the place, and without any strategic management, these content generators are all themselves choosing which images become iconic of a destination, with much similarity in evidence of what is promoted.

There are limitations to this research. To allow for a manageable data set, and to undertake this study in a context within which these issues have already received a degree of scholarly attention, this research has been contextualised during the staging of an outdoor mega or hallmark event, one which due to its long history and tourism attractiveness is deemed to hold a role in “image making, place marketing and destination branding” (Getz & Page, 2016, p. 599). It was outside the scope of this study to consider the overall destination image of Corfu. One event was purposively chosen, albeit one that attracts many visitors from the island and from further afield, and which includes elements of spectacle that are not seen anywhere else in a Greek Orthodox Easter festival. Thus, further investigation could be undertaken in other places, in the context of other mega events, or, in this island, at the level of the entire destination, or resort by resort, and at different times of the year, to validate the arguments emanating from these findings. However, given the autoethnographic nature of this study, it may be relevant to indicate that when UGC is shared on these platforms relating to other places across Corfu, many similar images will be found relating to individual resorts: For example, in the North West, UGC photographs of the resort of Arillas will frequently feature photographs of sunsets, framing a backdrop of the various smaller islands that can be seen from the beach; and in the resort of Messonghi in the South East of the island, the most frequently posted photographs are of the little blue fishing boat and the pier.

In conclusion, while some, particularly smaller destinations, could benefit from the activities of a DMO, many do not have any such organisation helping their marketing and branding. This research has focused on not only one commercial social media presence, but, rather, on the visual imagery that exists about a place across a variety of multiple social media

platforms, which is an original contribution to the literature on place brand identity creation and communication, and place image formation. It also fills a gap in the literature identified by Kisali *et al.*, (2016) for an urgent need to investigate the way destination image is created by users of social media, and a gap identified by Lew (2017) into the role tourists play in placemaking –consuming the place while co-producing it via sharing their place-based images on social media.

This research was designed to inform our understanding of the relationship between place identity, place image, place brand image and the emerging and changing role of various information formation agents, especially via social media, to project a certain image of places. Findings from this research suggest that if place branding concerns the way in which a positive place identity is created and communicated to various target segments (Zenker, Braun & Petersen, 2017), and because a place brand is not owned in the same way a commercial brand is owned, then, and especially if there is no DMO actually *doing* branding, we see that the place brand, unlike other commercial product or service brands is actually created by multiple actors. Perhaps therefore it may be time for place branders to not only voluntarily give up their perceptions of control over at least part of the identity formation process and encourage contributions from wider stakeholders, and to no longer perceive them as mere consumers of the brand, but also as its co-creators, and sometimes indeed its' creators. Destinations such as this could capitalise on the events they currently host without the need for spending budgets they can ill afford on promotional material, capturing and leveraging the social media users' own content to create and communicate the identity of the place through the hallmark events it stages, and this process included in the destination's event strategy. However, this new conceptualisation and practical application will require another shift in both practitioner and academic understanding of place brand identity and place brand image, which may be difficult to achieve considering that there has only recently been reached a certain level of agreement within the extant literature about the various definitions of terms associated with these constructs.

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