


Please cite the Published Version

Kavaratzis, M  and Florek, M (2021) Special Section: The future of place branding. Place Branding and Public Diplomacy, 17. pp. 63-64. ISSN 1744-0696

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41254-020-00197-w>

Publisher: Henry Stewart Publications

Version: Accepted Version

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THIS IS THE PRE-PUBLICATION VERSION OF THE ARTICLE PUBLISHED AS:

Kavaratzis, M. and Florek, M. (2021) Special Section: The future of place branding. *Place Branding and Public Diplomacy*, <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41254-020-00197-w>

Special Section: The Future of place Branding

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Speculations about the future of place branding

When we first had the idea for this special section, the world was a different place. It was in 2019, which marked 15 years since the launch of *Place Branding and Public Diplomacy* by its Founding Editor Simon Anholt. This journal has undoubtedly played a pivotal role in the development of place branding as a field of academic inquiry and, as we had explicitly written in the Call of Papers, we wanted to mark this important anniversary in the best way possible: by taking a look at the future of the domain. Of course, since then, the Covid-19 pandemic has turned the world upside down and has dramatically affected places and communities. It has effectively brought the tourism industry to a halt and it had a particularly severe effect on retailing in High Streets across the world.

The major themes that we had proposed to deal with in the Special Section included i) more refined appreciations of the nature of place branding (particularly as opposed to tourism branding), ii) the relationship between place branding and sustainability (including social sustainability), iii) place branding through digital means, iv) the concept of the 'Smart City' and how that affects city branding, v) stakeholder (dis)engagement, vi) the problem of over-tourism and vii) place branding in times of crisis. Although the world seems different, the

same issues are still relevant, perhaps even more relevant than ever before. Little did we know two years ago that the pandemic would accentuate all those themes. On the one hand, the crisis has made many turn to instinctive responses focusing on quick, mass promotion in the hope that this might restore some of the lost vitality by miraculously bringing back tourists and shoppers. On the other hand, the idea that branding can help create a feeling of community and belonging has come to the forefront in many accounts of what the future looks like, something closely related to social sustainability. The use of digital techniques and practices has been accelerated in an unprecedented manner. The role of branding in times of crisis is understandably one of the hottest topics of discussion as, at the moment, all place branding happens within a crisis and no one can really predict when the crisis will be over. And that includes over-tourism, which might have been spectacularly 'solved' overnight, but it will come back, and places need to be more prepared that they have been in the past.

So, the pandemic has actually emphasised all these themes and has made the need to understand them even more dire. The articles included in the Special Section do not deal directly with the future of place branding in the Post-Covid world. However, they do emphasise several issues, ideas and practices that will no-doubt be the focus of much place branding practice as places struggle to recover after the crisis and attempt to use place branding to pave their way to a better future.

In consideration of the future role of place branding and how it could contribute to common good, particularly relevant is the article by Hereźniak and Anders-Morawska who propose a paradigm shift in the place branding discourse, by adopting the public value (PV) approach. They call for replacement of the competition-oriented and demand-driven perspectives on place brand building with activities centred around creating value for the residents. The authors posit that place branding can become an enabler of public value creation in a threefold manner: as a means of PV expression, as an enhancer of social relationships, and as a moderator of social behaviour. In particular, taking a public value orientation implies that place branding strategies should be critically reviewed in terms of their potential positive and negative consequences for public value. The authors argue that if moderated with caution and sensitivity, place branding has the potential to become public value-driven and to bring communities back to their foundations by stimulating a sense of unity.

In line with the community approach, Barkun, Glinska and Dębkowska consider the strategies of place branding as an important tool for managing the flow of human capital. They focus on talented employees as the target group crucial for the future of many places that make significant efforts to develop and implement strategies for talent attraction and retention. The authors have chosen Poland for analysing the differences in the attractiveness of the country's regions for 'talent'. The attractiveness is estimated at the meso-level, providing an additional perspective to the micro (corporate) and macro (national) levels that have been explored in more detail. The evaluation was possible through creation of a ranking based on the structure of the Global Talent Competitiveness Index and the use of the TOPSIS method.

When discussing the future of place branding one cannot omit the smart city concept which attracts a lot of attention and interest from practitioners and academics alike. In her paper, Grębosz-Krawczyk discusses the smart city approach stressing that although initially, the concept focused on the technology perspective, recently it has become more associated with

the idea of sustainability and linked with communities' needs and engagement. The Smart City's Brand Management model, presented in the paper, highlights the human aspects and underlines the links with emotional, functional and smart values. The results of research carried out by the author confirm that smart city brand management should rely on building and developing a competitive local identity of a city brand founded on strong and distinct features through the implementation of long-term initiatives by involving the residents and other stakeholders.

Similar conclusions were reached in the last article. In a search for common ground between place branding and yet another close concept – public diplomacy - Niedja de Andrade e Silva Forte dos Santos investigates how the UNESCO Creative Cities title can potentially contribute to the future of branding where city diplomacy meets city branding. By using an analytical framework named 'the CBCD crossroads matrix' where components of city diplomacy and city branding criss-cross, the author categorizes the important crossroads between the two: alignment between theory and practice, focus on the stakeholders, and the pivotal role of citizen diplomacy. The author also calls for an integrated approach in city management where the perspective of city branding and diplomacy will make an effective contribution to the future of cities.

We would like to thank all contributing authors for their work and effective collaboration during the preparation of this Special Section. We would also like to thank those who submitted their work but, for various reasons, it could not be included. Although no one can know what the future will bring, this is a great opportunity for place branding scholars to join forces and help realise a better future for our discipline. This can only happen if we focus on the ways in which place branding can help realise a better future for our places, which, in turn, means for our communities.