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All things must pass? Introduction to the special issue on post-Covid place marketing

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5 **All things must pass? Introduction to the special issue on post-Covid place marketing**
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15 **Abstract**
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17 *Purpose:* This introductory paper outlines the theme of - and introduces the papers comprising - this
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19 special issue on Post-Covid Place Marketing.
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23 *Design/Methodology/Approach:* A brief literature review outlines some of the impacts of the Covid-
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25 19 pandemic on places, and also for place-bound and spatially oriented industry sectors (particularly
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27 retailing and tourism & hospitality, which are often the focus of place marketing initiatives), before
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29 describing the papers constituting the special issue.
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33 *Findings:* The impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic for places are identified, relating to both economic
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35 and more phenomenologically oriented impacts, and the implications for place resilience are
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37 considered. The papers comprising the special issue are groups in two main themes relating to: (1)
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39 the impact of the covid-19 pandemic on retailing; and (2) and the impact of the pandemic on place
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41 marketing processes.
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45 *Originality:* Notwithstanding the burgeoning literature on the Covid-19 pandemic and its impacts, the
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47 papers comprising this special issue focus on specific place-oriented marketing (and retailing)
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49 implications, providing potential avenues for future research.
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52 **Keywords:** Covid-19; Place Marketing; Place Resilience; Retailing
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Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic has had a massive disruptive effect across the world, with significant social, economic and psychological impacts, as countries closed their borders to travellers, implemented 'lockdowns' to restrict citizens' movement and also enforced social distancing measures, in an attempt to halt the spread of the virus. The impact on lifestyles, work patterns and travel behaviours has been dramatic: for many employees 'hybrid' patterns of working - and the associated digital transformation of working practices - have become the norm (see Vyas, 2022), with potential implications for employee well-being and engagement (see, for example, Carnevale and Hatak, 2020; Pass and Ridgway, 2022). There have perforce been changes in consumption patterns (Gordon-Wilson, 2022; Hodbod et al, 2021) including an acceleration of pre-existing trends towards online consumption. Moreover, personal horizons have contracted through restrictions on movement at all spatial scales; from the 'macro' level of international travel (see, for example, Martin and Bergmann, 2021) to the 'micro' level of social distancing regulations in localities (see for example, Galeazzi et al, 2021).

Those sectors of the economy that are particularly place-bound and spatially oriented were especially affected. The tourism and hospitality industries in particular have felt the negative impacts of the pandemic, amply justifying Sand et al.'s cautionary statement that places "dependent on travel and tourism will be more vulnerable to economic disruption from potential pandemics" (2016: 2447). In the retail sector, the pandemic has greatly exacerbated many existing industry trends (Deloitte, 2020), with a particular negative impact on traditional retail areas within town and city centres, (evident in significantly reduced footfall - see British Retail Consortium, 2021), and also major changes to business operations of individual firms, as locational networks of multiple retailers have contracted (for example, through the closure of stores that almost overnight were rendered uneconomic). Furthermore, at the individual store level, social distancing has had major implications for how customers are served (see Ntounis et al., 2020).

Throughout the pandemic there was much speculation regarding the nature of the environment that would emerge once its worst ravages were over. Originating from phraseology in *Matthew 24* in the Bible, George Harrison's first album after the Beatles split-up - *All Things Must Pass* - is ultimately an expression of hope for a better future, and this special issue of the *Journal of Place Management and Development* seeks to analyse the implications of the Covid-19 pandemic and identify some of the characteristics of this hopefully brighter future, or to use the commonly used *phrase du jour* at the time of the pandemic - the 'new normal'. Previous versions of the papers included in this special issue were presented at the Academy of Marketing Conference in 2022 (which was the first in-person gathering of the Academy for three years), where the guest editors ran a well-attended

workshop titled *Post-Covid Place Marketing*, after which (somewhat ironically!) two of the guest editors tested positive for Covid on their return home.

In this introduction to the special issue, we first outline briefly some of the economic implications arising from the Covid-19 pandemic for place-bound and spatially oriented industry sectors (particularly tourism and hospitality, and also retailing - which are often the focus of place marketing initiatives), as well as the impact on inward investment/foreign direct investment (as the attraction of such capital motivates much place marketing activity), acknowledging the vast array of academic studies that have sought to investigate the economic fallout of the Covid-19 'phenomenon' (which we cannot hope to do full justice to in this short introduction). However, the implications of the pandemic go beyond the economic to include the social and psychological impacts on those that have lived through it, not least in terms of their relationship to 'place'. We discuss these more phenomenologically oriented factors, before moving to discuss the concept of (spatial) resilience and its potential application in this context. We conclude by briefly outlining the papers comprising this special issue and their relationship to its theme.

Economic impacts

The Covid-19 Pandemic has generated an extensive and continually emerging academic literature, especially relating to industry sectors that are 'spatially oriented'. Thus, tourism researchers have investigated Covid 19's negative impacts on holiday destinations, and have pondered what the post-Covid tourism landscape might look like (see for example, Bianchi, 2021; Dube et al., 2020; Gong et al., 2020; Higgins-Desboilles, 2020; Niewiadomski, 2020; Ntounis et al., 2022; Škare et al., 2021). A similar situation exists in relation to retail research (see for example, Burt and Maglaras, 2022; Pantano et al., 2020; Roggeveen and Sethuraman, 2020; Szász et al., 2022), with an emphasis on the nature of the ongoing relationship between traditional bricks-and-mortar and online retailing, and the impact on town centres (see Carmona, 2022: Ibert et al., 2022). The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on inward investment and foreign direct investment decisions has also been investigated (see for example, Giofré, 2022).

These impacts have had inevitable knock-on effects for place marketers and branders; in part arising from the fact that one of the principal reasons for enacting place marketing and branding is to attract potential income streams to the place in question, whether this be from tourist visitation (and associated spending), retail and leisure expenditure from local catchments, or inward investment and development by organisations, institutions and other entities outwith the place. In 2020, many of

these income streams were, at a stroke, cut off entirely, or at least radically curtailed. Regarding tourism, in a McKinsey report published during the first year of the pandemic, Constantin et al. (2020) suggested that international tourist arrivals could fall by 60-80 per cent worldwide and that tourism spending was not likely to recover to pre-Covid-19 levels until 2024, thereby putting at risk up to 120 million jobs. In the retail industry, Deloitte (2020) posited that some orthodoxies (notably, relating to interacting with customers in person, and managing the supply chain), "have been turned on their heads" and those retailers responding successfully to the associated challenges can potentially "redefine the basic assumptions of the industry - how to build trust with stakeholders, how to operate stores in new ways, and how to structure their entire operations around new consumer expectations" (ibid: 6). Gioffre (2022: 1) argues that as far as foreign direct investment is concerned, there was "a flight to advanced economies at the outset of the COVID pandemic", stating that "countries featuring higher GDPs per capita, and belonging to the groups of advanced, G7, or euro area countries, appear to have been significantly less severely hit by the pandemic than developing countries".

Of course, only time will tell whether some of the more apocalyptic scenarios predicted by academics and industry commentators will come to pass. However, one can envisage a future 'new normal' in which those responsible for the management and marketing/branding of places have to operate, where the negative economic impacts briefly outlined above will result in even more intense spatial competition, with place managers and marketers desperately chasing external income streams from tourists, residents and inward investors as they seek to recoup for their locales some of the inevitable losses that have arisen from the shock of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Phenomenologically oriented impacts

The impact of the pandemic is not only evident in how we *use* places, but also how we *feel* about places - as Bright states, "we have been forced into a closer relationship with the spaces and places we inhabit" (2023: 102). For example, during the first 'lockdown' in March 2020, the UK Government's 'Stay Home' instruction stated that one period of exercise each day was allowed, as long as it was near to a person's home. This led to people exploring their own locales more extensively, and there were numerous reported instances of the media-shaming of those travelling to tourist districts outside of their locality for the purpose of exercise. Furthermore, there was much media commentary on how, during 'lockdowns', people (re)discovered the attraction, beauty and excitement of where they lived as well as (with significant implications for the tourism industry) embracing the benefits of 'staycations' - either remaining at home and travelling to and from other destinations in a day, or latterly, staying within their home country when taking holidays, rather than going abroad.

Consequently, rather than familiarity breeding contempt, there arises the potential for a stronger sense of place attachment - defined in terms of "an affective bond or link between people and specific places" (Hidalgo and Hernandez, 2001: 274) - to where one lives, arising from this increased knowledge and experience of one's local environs. This resonates with Tuan's (1974) concept of topophilia, and - highlighting the growing emphasis in both literature and practice on residents as an important target of place marketing and branding activities (see for example, Braun et al., 2013; Kavaratzis, 2012; Stubbs and Warnaby, 2015; Warnaby and Medway, 2013) - a future role of place marketing and branding activity will be in nurturing feelings of local embeddedness and place attachment, as well as feelings of care and associated safety and security, resonating with Cresswell and Hoskins' description of place as a "lived concept" (2008: 394). Indeed, there is evidence to suggest that place attachment is felt more keenly at a more localised spatial scale (see Lewicka, 2010; Swapan et al., 2022). This has significant implications for the practice of place marketing and branding; manifested in the current emphasis in the literature on *participatory* place branding, defined by Lichrou et al (2018) in terms of an activity that goes beyond economic interest and goals; which focuses on residents as a key audience; which integrates the voices of many stakeholders through participatory methods; and which 'listens' to the non-powerful. Participatory/inclusive place marketing has in recent years has generated a significant academic literature (see for example, Insch, 2021; Kavaratzis et al; 2018, for reviews of this topic).

This more phenomenologically oriented connection with one's locale arising from a greater time spent there as a result of Covid lockdowns has had an economic impact also. This is especially true for smaller towns that would normally see a daily outflow of commuters to larger proximate conurbations. However, the experience of the Covid-19 pandemic has exposed the fact that, with the huge expansion of hybrid working patterns as mentioned above, the necessity of fixed ties to places of employment has lessened. Professional workers have learned to adapt to virtual modes of work, mediated by video conferencing technologies such as Zoom and Microsoft Teams - and whilst more white collar workers are (sometimes very unwillingly) returning to the office, in many cases it is not for a full week - in 2023, research by the Centre for Cities suggests that on average central London workers came into the office 2.3 days per week, constituting only 59 per cent of January 2020 levels (Swinney et al., 2023).

This has had significant implications for some places; not only the major urban centres which constitute the (previously) daily destination for millions of commuters, but also the smaller, satellite towns where many of these people actually *live*. Indeed, an analysis of footfall in six contrasting towns over the period of the Covid-19 pandemic, led Enoch et al (2022: 1091) to state that "the smaller centres modelled have tended to be less impacted by the pandemic, with one possible explanation

being that they are much less dependent on serving longer-distance commuters and on visitors making much more discretionary trips from further afield". Whilst these smaller places are benefitting from a greater proportion of their residents actually being 'in place' for longer, the future arguably bodes less well for some of the larger urban service centres - for example, parts of Central London face big challenges, with empty streets and unused ancillary services such as sandwich and coffee shops, as workers are reluctant to return to their previous travel and consumption patterns.

Post-pandemic place resilience?

Evident from the above discussion is the fact that, post-pandemic, some urban places will be more resilient - recovering faster and more fully - than others. Resilience is acknowledged as a fluid concept (Coaffee, 2013) with "fuzzy" boundaries (Meerow et al., 2016: 39), but existing conceptualisations have been synthesised by Meerow et al. to define resilience in this context as:

> the ability of an urban system - and all its constituent socio-ecological and socio-technical networks across temporal and spatial scales - to maintain or rapidly return to desired functions in the face of a disturbance, to adapt to change, and to quickly transform systems that limit current or future adaptive capacity (ibid: 45).

In proposing this definition, Meerow et al. acknowledge the existence of what they term "conceptual tensions" (ibid: 40), some of which relate to the ability of a place to recover its equilibrium after a 'disturbance' (such as the Covid-19 pandemic), and what this might mean - in other words, the nature of the 'new normal'. Thus, Meerow et al. distinguish between *single-state equilibrium* (i.e. capacity to revert to a previous equilibrium, post-disturbance); *multiple-state equilibrium* (i.e. transformation from one stable domain to another, post-disturbance); and *dynamic non-equilibrium* (i.e. constant change with no singular stable state). Grinberger and Felsenstein (2014) identify similar tensions in terms of 'bouncing back' (to a former stable equilibrium) or 'bouncing forwards' (i.e. towards various potential new trajectories) from urban shocks.

Arising from this insight is the potential for the nature of the post-pandemic 'new normal' to vary from place to place, dependent upon their perceived - and actual - resilience in the face of the adverse conditions created by the pandemic. For example, as has been mentioned above, changes in working patterns could mean that, for many workers, the daily commute is (at least for part of the week) a thing of the past, with a possible return to a more localised focus in individuals' mobility patterns (to the detriment of some of the major urban centres). How the places in question respond

to these changing circumstances will arguably be a function of how they are managed - including the way(s) in which they are marketed and branded. This could result in fundamental changes to a place (in terms perhaps of both its physical attributes and also its governance), as implied by Grinberger and Felsenstein's (2014) notion of 'bouncing forwards'. Alternatively, in other places the pandemic may be ultimately regarded as a mere hiatus with a sense of 'business as usual' quickly emerging, as these places bounce back to their former equilibrium (Grinberger and Felsenstein, 2014).

In seeking to address such issues, the papers comprising the special issue divide into two main groups: first, papers that address the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on a spatially oriented industry sector that is the mainstay of many urban economies, namely retailing; and second, papers that explore the pandemic's impact on place marketing processes - in particular, the issues around maintaining stakeholder involvement and participation in place marketing initiatives to ensure that the places in question are appropriately resilient in order to thrive in the post-pandemic 'new normal'.

The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on retailing

The first paper in this special issue, *The Place of Charity Shops Post Covid-19* by Neil Robinson, Nick Catahan, Crispin Dale and Chris Doran, considers the 'place' of UK charity shops in a post Covid-19 environment. The charity shop sector is in many ways a unique, yet under-researched, retail sector with both economic and social implications which can arguably have a transformative impact on places. From their review of the extant literature in this area, Robinson et al. provide insights and recommendations that could be adopted by the many charities that operate retail outlets to help fund the furtherance of their particular cause, and identify areas for future research regarding the role of the charity shop and place marketing, place identity and transformation.

The second paper, *Towards an Experiential Identity of Place: The Case of Manchester's Craft and Design Centre*, by Alexandros Skandalis, explores the role and potential of lived experiences in informing and shaping the formation of place identity within the sphere of the production and consumption of craft objects, in the specific context of Manchester's Craft and Design Centre. Resonating with some of the phenomenologically oriented implications of the Covid-19 pandemic mentioned above, the paper draws upon a series of in-depth interviews conducted with craft makers and visitors to theorise an experiential identity of place which revolves around the fusion of the cultural heritage and lived insideness of the physical setting, activity spaces and the micro-encounters of craft-making, and conflicting meanings and attachments to the Craft and Design Centre. The paper

provides a novel perspective to the understanding of place identity in the context of craft-making by focusing on the lived experiences of various place stakeholders.

The third paper, *The Double Jeopardy in High Street Footfall* by Charles Graham, Grace O'Rourke and Kamran Khan, seeks to evaluate how knowledge of repeat buying established in the consumer marketing domain might be adapted to benchmark place marketing effectiveness. They apply the Law of Double Jeopardy (Ehrenberg et al, 1990), which postulates that smaller brands (or in this context, places) suffer twice: first, in having many fewer buyers (or in the case of places, visitors) than bigger rivals; and second, who buy (i.e. visit) the smaller brand predictably a little less often. The implications of this for the vitality of individual places (specifically traditional urban retail destinations) in an ever more intense spatially competitive context, as they seek to capitalise upon the changing patterns of consumption and working mentioned above which have arisen as a consequence of the pandemic, have much resonance with themes discussed in this introductory preamble.

The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on place marketing processes

The first paper addressing this key issue is, *COVID-19 and the Participatory Place Branding Impasse: A Study of Actor Agency* by Laura Reynolds, resonating with an important theme in current research into place marketing and branding relating to debates around places attachment (manifested in terms of people's heightened connection to their localities, as mentioned above), investigates the impact of the pandemic on participatory place branding processes, and in particular, multiple actors' ability to build agency. Through semi-structured interviews with 28 public, private, and voluntary sector representatives during the pandemic various transitions in the meaning-making and engagement processes at the nexus of participatory place branding are identified: (1) heightening value of the local environment; (2) building and sharing local knowledge; (3) embedding a sense of community into relational networks; (4) innovating engagement channels; (5) and blurring of roles and responsibilities. The paper finds that during a period of disruption (namely, the pandemic), actors gained legitimacy for their participation by emphasising the value attached to localities, building place (brand) attachment and drawing on blurred place branding boundaries.

The final paper, *Leveraging Social Capital to Catalyse Post-Pandemic Anti-Fragility: The 'Vilnius Model'* by Giannina Warren and Simona Grigaliunaite, draws on the notion of the 'antifragile city', which advocates that cities must not only learn from crises but evolve from them, echoing the notion of urban resilience, as outlined above. The paper combines Social Capital Theory and resilience (outlined in an organisational context by Aldrich, 2012) and Cultural Intermediation Theory Bourdieu,

1984), and draws on multiple sources of evidence including key informant interviews, content analysis, netnography and participant observation to explore how the Lithuanian capital Vilnius was able to emerge relatively unscathed from the Covid-19 pandemic, especially its first wave. This was accomplished by leveraging existing stakeholder relationships and a strong common identification among political actors, promotional intermediaries, residents, and city institutions to not only adapt to the unfolding crisis, but also evolve its marketing, place-making, tourism and community engagement strategies to emerge a more resilient, dynamic and animated city after the pandemic.

Concluding comments

A key theme of all the papers comprising this special issue is the importance of the adaptation and resilience of places in trying (and uncertain) times, as they seek to navigate a way through the Covid 19 pandemic to arrive at a 'new normal' which, in time, will emerge as of course, 'all things must pass'. The massive impact of the Covid-19 pandemic has had - and will continue to have - lasting implications for places, and the industries that are bound to those places (especially retailing and tourism and hospitality). Any research into these implications will arguably be provisional as their full impact will only emerge over time. However, this does not negate the importance of their investigation in order to enable those responsible for the management and marketing of places (and the management of industries linked to those places) to make more informed decisions not only in the post-pandemic 'new normal', but also to help 'future-proof' the place if faced with a future pandemic scenario, (covid-related or otherwise), or indeed, other 'external shocks' which could arise from causes such as climate change, for example. We hope that this special issue helps in that task.

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