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Place branding ‘in colours bold’

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When I think of place branding, I think of bold colours. *Place Branding and Public Diplomacy* (the journal) can be characterized as colourful and its colours as bold. Vivid colours that represent the fact that it has paved new avenues for thinking, writing and discussing around place branding (the field), which itself can be characterized (at least in my view) as colourful and bold. A single or pale colour is not enough to capture the object of place branding, which is the colourful and intense character of our cities and all places that stimulate our senses and our souls in so many different ways. A single or pale colour is not enough to represent a major objective of place branding, which is to bring together many voices, many people, many approaches and many perspectives. A single or pale colour is not what designers prefer when attempting to design logos and slogans, they need vivid, eye-catching colours. Therefore, this brief commentary is entitled ‘Place branding in colours bold’, although there is another reason that will be revealed later.

Place Branding and Public Diplomacy’s 20th birthday is a chance to reflect on the whole field, not only the journal. Human terms do not apply on scientific fields, so comparisons are necessarily inaccurate, but I think that, indeed, the field has gone through its infancy and childhood and is probably reaching the end of its formative years. Has place branding become a fully grown field in terms of conceptual development, research methods, tools of practical application and other elements that characterize a scientific field? Have we acquired the knowledge, skills and experience to make a significant contribution to our societies? There is evidence to suggest that, to an extent, place branding is reaching maturity, but there is always more to do...

Conceptual milestones

In terms of conceptual evolution (for a thorough review see Ma et al 2019), we can trace various stages of how we understand and approach the activity of place branding. In the very beginning, place branding was discussed as simply another form of product branding, as if places are simply different forms of products, just a little peculiar. This is a view that, thankfully, has been surpassed and we now know better. At the start of the journal’s life another prominent idea was that branding was little more than promotion with an emphasis on symbolic and emotional aspects. Thankfully, this has also been largely surpassed. In this direction, we have developed various ideas around the significance of stakeholder engagement (e.g. Reynolds et al 2023), around participation and inclusivity (e.g. Kavatzis et al 2018), around the complexity of place branding and its relation to destination branding (e.g. Zenker et al 2017), around place branding as policy and not only as an additional promotional layer to policy (e.g. Mabillard et al 2024) and we have also been able to raise critical aspects (e.g. Vanolo 2017). One aspect that has blurred the field for a long time is the distinction between marketing, promotion and branding and, in this sense, I have personally found significant clarity in the contribution by Boisen et al (2018). As Eshuis and Ripoll-Gonzalez (2024) identify, the main approaches to place brands that are evident now are three: symbolic (place brands as symbolic constructs that differentiate places), cognitive (place brands as associations in the minds of target groups) and experiential (place brands as embodied experiences). The discussion of these developments, in my view, shows that the field is now mature enough to talk about branding “places as places, not as products, and through processes that really deal with identity, not through simple visual tactics” (Kavatzis 2020, p. 25). In Lucarelli’s (2017) words, we can think of place branding as “a processual hybrid policy in which the public and the private, economics and politics, the market and the

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polis are blurred and co-emerge as a process in a relational and interactive manner”.

Other milestones

It is important to acknowledge other elements that have contributed to substantiating the field of place branding beyond conceptual contributions. Without a doubt, the first such element is *Place Branding and Public Diplomacy*, the journal we are celebrating in this issue. It has been a signifier for a practice and scholarly activity that was in great need for such a signifier to acquire identity. There are, of course, other journals that have also made a significant contribution, the best example being the *Journal of Place Management and Development*. These journals provide vehicles for the development of the field and their contribution cannot be overestimated. Then, another important milestone is the establishment of the *International Place Branding Association* in 2015. Its annual conference, its IPBA Academy and other initiatives have no doubt been instrumental in creating an international scholarly community and that is a very significant contribution. Other regular or one-off workshops and colloquia also make a significant contribution. Special Issues in journals as well as Special Interest Groups or Conference Tracks on place branding are also important vehicles. It would be unfair to leave unmentioned the contribution of digital platforms that help consolidate the field and bring it to new audiences, the best example being the *Place Brand Observer* (www.placebrandobserver.com).

Future challenges

A pressing challenge for the field is to understand better the ways in which technological advancements are changing our lives, our places, our brands, our scholarly activities, our teaching and dissemination of knowledge, all our practices. The availability of so-called *Big Data*, the concept of the *Smart City*, the *Internet of Things* alter the ways in which we all relate to our places, from our living room to our country. Of course, *Generative AI* opens unprecedented possibilities in research, teaching, strategy development and communication. It is intriguing to ask Generative AI about the challenges for the field (after all, that is precisely what all my students would do...).

Mihalis: Please write 300 words on the future challenges for the field of place branding.

ChatGPT: The field of place branding, which focuses on marketing cities, regions, and countries to attract

tourists, residents, and investment, is poised for significant challenges in the future. These challenges stem from evolving global dynamics, technological advancements, and shifting societal expectations.

One of the most pressing challenges is the growing need for sustainability in place branding. As environmental concerns become more urgent, places will need to ensure that their branding efforts align with sustainable practices. This includes managing overtourism, reducing carbon footprints, and promoting eco-friendly initiatives. Places that fail to integrate sustainability may face backlash from environmentally conscious consumers and lose their competitive edge.

Another challenge lies in balancing authenticity with modernization. As globalization intensifies, places often adopt similar branding strategies, leading to a loss of distinctiveness. Maintaining cultural heritage while embracing modernity will be crucial. Place branding must avoid creating a homogenized image that could alienate both locals and visitors seeking unique, authentic experiences.

Technological advancements present both opportunities and challenges for place branding. The rise of digital and social media platforms offers new ways to engage with audiences, but it also demands constant innovation and adaptation. Places must navigate the complexities of digital marketing, data privacy concerns, and the increasing power of online reviews and user-generated content. Additionally, the use of artificial intelligence and data analytics in crafting personalized branding strategies will require a delicate balance between technological efficiency and human touch.

Finally, the field will need to address the challenge of inclusivity. As societies become more diverse, place branding must reflect and respect this diversity, avoiding stereotypes and ensuring that branding efforts are inclusive. Failing to do so could lead to reputational damage and alienation of key demographics.

Overall, the future of place branding will require a nuanced approach that considers sustainability, authenticity, technological innovation, and inclusivity to succeed in an increasingly complex global landscape. (ChatGPT, 31st August 2024)

Well, the literature agrees that the main challenges revolve around sustainability (e.g. Therkelsen et al 2021), authenticity and identity (e.g. Kavaratzis and Kalandides 2015), technological innovation (e.g. Grebosz-Krawczyk 2021) and inclusivity (e.g. Reynolds et al 2023). I would



like to add three aspects that I find important and relevant as directions.

Future directions (some of the many)

In terms of further conceptual development, in my opinion, we are still missing the understanding that will allow place branding to contribute to the main issues of our times (like climate change, the refugee crisis, the politics of war, democracy, justice to name a few) even if that contribution is small-scale and at a local level. Easier said than done, but that is when a field really contributes to society. In terms of practical application, it is essential to finally develop a system of accountability (including indicators of both quantitative measurement and qualitative appreciation) for the investment that is required for place branding and for how its benefits are distributed in society. As an academic, I have a particular interest in further developments in terms of scholarship, research and communication with practitioners and other stakeholders.

American essayist and journalist Joan Didion (1934–2021) famously wrote in her book *The White Album*:

“A place belongs forever to whoever claims it hardest, remembers it most obsessively, wrenches it from itself, shapes it, renders it, loves it so radically that he remakes it in his own image”.

This is a deep and insightful appreciation of places, one that talks about the essence of the place brand but is rarely seen in place branding studies and practice. Of course, it is not easy to formulate strategies around it, neither to incorporate it in studies and scholarship. It is not easy to capture it through the research methods that we (know how to) employ and through the research presentation means that we (know how to) use. There is a clear need to develop novel methods and, for that, we need to experiment and be bold. Experimenting with new, alternative methods can transform both what we can learn from research participants about place brands and how we communicate with various stakeholders about them. The IPBA Art Gallery is an attempt to think about and develop such alternative and arts-based methods that have a significant potential to help us take the field to new fruitful avenues of research and practice (see Kavaratzis and Warnaby 2021). Arts-based methods are particularly promising as it is possible to capture different ideas that cannot be captured in surveys and interviews using painting, films, creative writing or poetry amongst others. Talking about novel, alternative and arts-based methods of dissemination and communication, let us go back to Generative AI...

Mihalis: ChatGPT, while you're at it, can you please write a poem on place branding? Three verses please...

Chat GPT:

*In colors bold, the skyline tells a tale,
Of streets that hum with stories, old and new,
Where every corner wears a crafted veil,
A city's soul in every shade and hue.
The heart of place, in symbols drawn so fine,
A logo sings of heritage and dreams,
Each curve and line a story we define,
A brand that flows like rivers through our streams.
From mountain peaks to shores where oceans gleam,
A name resounds, a whisper and a cheer,
We craft a place where visions find their theme,
A brand that holds our hopes, our memories dear.
(ChatGPT, 31st August 2024)*

Returning to the colours mentioned in the opening paragraph, I forgot to ask ChatGPT to give a title to the poem, but surely the right title would include the name of the journal and the first three words: 'Place branding in colours bold'.

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