

Special Issue Place Branding

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Guest Editors

Paola de Salvo

Università degli studi di Perugia

Marco Pizzi

Università degli studi di Perugia

Pablo Gómez Iniesta

Universidad de Castilla-La Mancha

Juan Luis Manfredi-Sánchez

Universidad de Castilla-La Mancha



Direttore Fabio Corbisiero
Caporedattore Carmine Urciuoli

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Territorial Governance and Place Branding. Interview with Olga Kolotouchkina

In the age of globalisation, the risk of a homogenisation of production processes as well as of structuring of world business and markets, of the determination of the same lifestyles, of the construction of critical thoughts uniform to the dominant mentality is actually present. In such new historical conditions, not devoid of criticality and profound differences and singularities with respect to the past, it becomes particularly important to preserve the originality and specificity of specific territories, their history, culture, the typicality of the resident population, and local life experiences. Achieving these objectives proves particularly complex and difficult in some circumstances, due to the loss of identity of places and to the standardisation of the lifestyle of their inhabitants. It is in this context that the practices of Place branding assert themselves, i.e. the activation of a complex communication process capable of addressing a broad target audience, in an attempt to create (together) a competitive identity of places, states, regions, cities, capable of highlighting the authentic characteristics of a place, its history, its culture, the areas of excellence, or potential excellence, the mentality of the people who inhabit it, their lifestyle, the organised forms of widespread sociality.

The aim is to create a new territorial "vision", or to strengthen the existing one, in order to enhance the individual places of reference, so as to activate a process of systemic reflexivity and a consequent shared planning of the future development of a territory, so that it will be planned, designed and implemented in governance, with public, private and third sector actors present and active in the territory itself. In this sense, the involvement of citizens, considered strategic stakeholders from which to operate successfully, becomes fundamental. Citizens, in this sense, are understood as bearers of historical memory, repositories of government experience and practices, holders of strategic information, actors interested in structuring forms (old and new) of political participation, as well as primary consumers and users of the place where they live. If asked, no Italian, Spanish or Japanese citizen would reduce their country to pizza and mandolin, sun, sea and fun, or technological industrial district as some stereotypes might clumsily represent Italy, Spain, or Japan. Identities are always complex, plural, sometimes even contradicting each other. The challenge to which the actors of governance are called is to compose a unitary project that can represent the different local specificities, thereby restoring a coherent vision of a given territory.

The main aim of Place branding is actually to build "competitive identities", capable of bringing together material elements - space, natural resources, industrial facilities, transport routes - and intangible, cultural, emotional and artistic identity elements, to build a shared image of the territory. Everything is played out around a sort of triangulation between the "reflected" image of places, the "perceived" local identity and the activation of "strategic" public policies aimed at enhancing, promoting and developing these places. Many cities, regions or states hold many resources, sometimes known and sometimes not perceived, which must be discovered and narrated in a coherent, non-chaotic and non-random manner. Knowing so many singularities and drawing a single prevailing identity is a very complex task, which cannot be reduced only to good food, good sea, good sun, pleasant music, governmental effectiveness or technological modernity. Places are complex and must be told and described with the same complexity. This is what Place branding must deal with.

Place branding policies must be conceived in a "sustainable" form, avoiding representing the territory as a mere market product. They aim to express a relevant degree of government effectiveness and therefore must be able to respond to these critics directed at such experiences, understood by some as neo-liberal practices of producing tourist and commercial goods

¹ Marco Damiani, University of Perugia, marco.damiani@unipg.it, orcid.org/0000-0002-2787-2242

and services on the showcase of international markets. The sustainable branding of a territory has an interest in restoring the idea of participatory government, whose objective is to provide identity (or new identity) to any territory inhabited by a community of active citizens and non-citizens, interested in the place that (even transitory) they decide to live in and “use” to draw benefit and material and immaterial sustenance for themselves and their families. In implementing the principles of Place branding, making a place attractive to those who inhabit it, to those who work in it, to all the people who visit or pass through it, becomes a mission that the governance of any city, of any territory, of any region will have an interest in pursuing and realising.

Given the centrality of these issues, we want to explore them in depth with Olga Kolotouchkina, a scholar and expert on the subject in question and a profound connoisseur of Place branding practices. A short curriculum of Olga Kolotouchkina and a short interview with her will follow.

Olga Kolotouchkina holds a PhD in Communication Sciences. She is a lecturer and researcher in Communication and Branding at the Faculty of Information Sciences at the Complutense University of Madrid. Kolotouchkina is a member of the American Academy of Advertising, the European Communication Research and Education Association (ECREA) and the International Place branding Association. Her research interests include place branding, social inclusion, forms of political participation and active citizenship, and public diplomacy. She has been a visiting researcher at The Institute of Culture, Communication, and Information Technologies of the University of Toronto and at Waseda University of Tokyo. Kolotouchkina has many years of well-established professional experience in multinational advertising and branding companies such as J. Walter Thompson (WPP Group) and Saffron Brand Consultants, in addition to her experience in her own branding company, STUFF design consultants.

1. Place branding has recently become a topic of interest in Italy and it is often stigmatized by observers and policy makers juxtaposing it with all the activities of “selling,” commodification and commercialization of a territory. Territory thereby becomes a consumer good like many others, at the free disposal of economically profitable activities. Actually, international literature suggests that Place branding is something else, with other goals and functions. What are in your opinion the benefits that can be obtained when it is properly applied?

First of all, I would argue that there are important differences between places and consumer goods. A place cannot be priced, packaged, sold, or discontinued as a soft drink or a car. Places are complex social and economic constructs, shared and owned by many stakeholders, citizens being the most important. While a formal organization of different places may be similar in terms of their key operating systems, governance and infrastructures, each place is unique in its history, culture, local experience and in the lifestyle of its people. In the context of the widespread economic, technological, and financial globalization, many places preserve their singularity and authenticity. While some places might not need to reaffirm their uniqueness, as they are already well-known icons and powerful magnets for tourists, new residents, companies, and organizations, other territories may face specific challenges in terms of their reputation and perceptions. In this regard, Place branding is a consistent strategic tool enabling visibility, fostering positive reputation and the engagement of relevant targets in the place experience.

2. When referring to Place branding, one cannot but refer to the process of building territorial identities (or new territorial identities). As if to say that through the tools of Place branding one can come to provide an identity, or a new identity, to a specific place. In this regard, what is the relationship between “past” and “present” and between “reality” and public “representation” of an individual territory? How far can Place branding go and how much are its effects related to the assumed, perceived, experienced or recognized reality of a given territory?

With the exception of brand-new smart cities that emerge around the world to become futuristic labs of the most advanced technologies (e.g. Masdar City, UAE; Woven City, Japan; Konza City, Kenya), all territories have their historical and cultural roots that shape their place experience and reputation. This place legacy cannot be erased and rebuilt from scratch overnight. The formation of place's reputation is a medium-long term cumulative process of a series of direct and virtual experiences with the place by all relevant stakeholders, from occasional visitors to exchange students, local residents, tourists, international companies, investors and media. Place branding tools are useful and valuable when a territory needs to adjust its external and internal reputation to a new place vision, to enhance the relevance of the place within specific targets, or to strengthen specific place values. But this process should be strategically articulated from a standpoint of the place's critical needs and challenges, prevailing legacies and relevant opportunities, considering always a medium-long time-frame for the expected outcomes.

3. What relationship can be defined between Place branding and local governance? With reference to the identification of shared development models, can the involvement of actors, stakeholders, users within co-design actions aimed at a more inclusive and participatory line of development also be facilitated by the tools made available by Place branding? Or, are the two not compatible?

The leading role within the Place branding strategy is usually assumed by the local government as the main promotor, coordinator and implementor of the strategy. However, the government cannot work isolated from its citizens. Places are owned, shared, and enjoyed by their residents; therefore, their role in defining places' priorities is essential. Furthermore, the role of citizens as places' formal and informal ambassadors should not be underestimated. Proud citizens enjoy sharing positive news and comments about their places, becoming a trusted source of meaningful insights about the place. Check "The Swedish Number" campaign for a great example of the successful engagement of residents in the international promotion of their country. In democratic societies, a wide range of consultative and engagement actions exist to effectively involve citizens in the decision-making process and the co-design of specific actions (e.g. Participatory budgeting, Citizens councils, Citizens labs, Public consultations, Online communities). The increasing presence of digital media channels for interaction of local governments with citizens makes citizens engagement a common and relevant practice of Place branding Strategies.

4. Starting from the reflections on how to promote an area, Place branding could also have spillover effects on national politics. For example, Italy can use Made in Italy to develop new soft power strategies, at the economic level with the intention of placing its products on a global scale, at the political level to increase the country's credibility in diplomatic and international relations, and at the cultural level to enhance the characteristics of Italian excellence. From this point of view, could Place branding tools also push toward the enhancement of new forms of political sovereignty?

Place branding strategies can be applied to all kinds of places, from urban districts, villages, and towns to cities, regions and countries. However, depending on the type of territory, its structural complexity and its specific challenges on the local, regional or global arena, the degree of the complexity of the Place branding Strategy may vary significantly.

5. Place branding has very often been used to plan the governmental action of cities and urban spaces, so much so that the expression "city branding" has even been coined. However, those same tools could also be effectively used to review rural development processes, the enhancement of peripheral areas, or bearers of different structural fragilities. One possible example is what can be grasped in contemporary Spain. The urbanization process of the past decades has left large "empty" spaces (Spain's "vacía," which in Italy corresponds to territories similarly defined as "inland areas," less developed than urban centers). From this point of view, will Place branding also be able to target the suburbs and marginal areas, or do you think it will continue to be a tool mainly used for urban governance policies?

All kinds of places can successfully develop their Place branding Strategies to address specific needs of their reputation management or transformation goals. However, to achieve the expected results, the strategy should be effectively implemented and constantly monitored over a significant period of time. In addition to a consistent articulation of the strategy, the allocation of human, technical and financial resources should not be neglected. In this regards, local governments need to have a clear vision of what they expect from a Place branding strategy and how they are going to implement it effectively, to avoid talking the talk, but to walk the walk of the place transformation.