Special Issue Place Branding

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Focusing on Place branding an issue of a Journal centred on places, tourism and technology could lead to unpredictable outcomes, and such editing process could even be not so easy to manage. This is especially true in the case of a special issue, since this is usually expected to deal with themes that are not typically debated by its journal. The difficulty of this task, this time, is given by various factors. The topics touched in this Journal, indeed, are typically numerous and diverse, but also open to multidisciplinary approaches and capable to activate a lot of researchers from different fields, since they meet our surrounding reality being declined in infinite research objects. The Place branding subject, moreover, is various and animated by a lot of academics and practitioners with deeply diverse backgrounds. Furthermore, Place branding is experiencing a pinnacle in the effort to realize its theoretical statute and it established, at this point, its own specific terminology, despite its novelty. In conclusion, foreseeing the authors theoretical backgrounds and approaches and spinning the *fil rouge* connecting their works to compose this issue could be a real challenge, as mentioned before, in the context of a multifaceted topic like Place branding developed in a polyhedric journal like Fuori Luogo.

Anyway, the last complexity factor we listed, to a closer look, is simultaneously one of the obstacles in this editing process and a strength of it and an opportunity for a Journal with opened developing horizons as this. In this peculiar moment of Place branding as a discipline, indeed, it has both a wide grounding literature and a discrete permeability towards fresh and innovative approaches, which can contribute to shape it. In such a frame, this call for papers could not take for granted the coherence between the essays, the methodological approaches, and the research objects, considering, overall, that the addressee academics are not those typically involved in such debate or concerned in establishing the matter boundaries during these last years. Many of them, indeed, are simply far from a certain lexicon – e.g. "brand" – even being involved in the role of communication in place development for long time.

Place branding as subject matter already overcame the marketing boundaries, demonstrating its impact on places and its interest for different disciplines. The heated answer to this call for papers is an additional example to the reflections carried out by many highly cited scholars who already stated this and a further attempt to exceed the prejudices that still prevents many academics to consider the relevance of this topic, its lexicon, its theoretical framework, and the causes for reflection that it gives in favour of the debate about local development.

Under this light, we can affirm that the occasion produced by this call is even more important. Journals with such a multidisciplinary and multi-thematic attitude like this are privileged spaces, far from the accomplished journals dedicated to this branch of studies and represent an interesting gateway to the stimulating debate about the role of communication in local development.

The need for debate occasions like this, however, is given also by the daily presence in public policies of Place branding discourses and practices, that are keeping on calling academics to reflect.

The role of territories, cities, and regions as agents of globalization are a fundamental part in current research in different fields, indeed. Planetary urbanization is growing field of research through different perspectives and disciplines.

Territories have not only experienced demographic changes (urban agglomeration and migrations), but also changes in their financial potential (Singapur, London as financial hubs are quasi global actors), their infrastructures (railways, airports), as well as in their capacity to influence decisions affecting human welfare (green cities, sanctuary cities).

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In this complex scenario, characterized by the tension between globalization and de-globalization, cities and regions compete to be different and develop a unique voice. The competition evolves as a race for attracting talent (international students, higher education institutions, digital nomads, entrepreneurs), economic resources (industries and business, foreign investment), cultural institutions and initiatives (art exhibitions, music festivals, museums), social capital (NGOs, lifestyle, universities), as well as tourists from all over the world. This is the qualitative leap in Place branding studies: all cities – large and small and even towns like Urueña, Monsaraz or Asilah – are participants in the phenomena and aspire to design a territorial attractiveness strategy that is in line with their own political objectives. For this reason, the objective of territories has been transformed and is now focused on investing to create public value. It is a matter of using the resources at their disposal to highlight those characteristics that make them unique, attractive and, above all, different from other locations. This is the essence of Place branding: to generate, create, manage, and promote a brand, an emotional connection to the space. The strategy uses political and symbolic communication tools to transform the collective imagination and generate opportunities at different levels. Cultural initiatives such as "Hay Festival", "Aspen Ideas Festival" or "Perugia International Journalism Festival" are initiatives that renew the cultural offer and allow the city in question to be located for a few weeks at the epicentre of global cultural life. In the educational field, Dubai is promoting a campaign to attract students and educational services to become an educational hub of reference. Entrepreneurs dream with Silicon Valley, while young Europeans wish a stagiaire in Brussels.

The Place branding process is particularly complex because it transcends the usual channels that make up marketing strategies and business plans. Place branding involves a process of governance that has to do with local development and territorial management, and in which various public and private actors participate. Moreover, this new management model involves the joint work of actors from different fields: economic, tourism, cultural, political, social or sports. Thus, the main challenge of Place branding will lie in finding the right synergies between the actors involved, so that their interests are satisfied. This phenomenon has led to a new way of understanding international relations and has provided a new space for different social agents, organizations, companies, and institutions to exchange ideas and launch proposals to be applied at the local level with the aim of generating an impact and transfer to the international sphere. When Place branding is integrated into municipal policy, it acquires the status of public policy and becomes professionalized. Without professional direction, decisions are left to the whim of political councils which are too concerned with fashions, the latest trend or short-term results. This "fast food policy" is counterproductive and disconnect citizens from global projects.

Globalization, decentralization, and urbanization have given way to a new understanding of state structures that benefits and empowers territories. Whereas states have more bureaucratic, rigid and hierarchical structures, territories and their governments offer practical solutions to specific problems. In this way, they demand responsibility for creating, planning and implementing public policies that offer solutions to problems that have been generated by the territories themselves or that develop in their spaces: traffic, pollution, inequality, gentrification or privatization of public spaces in cities; lack of investment, talent, technological resources or depopulation in rural areas. The interests of territories are shared among them, but different from those of states. The new political agendas make it possible to face global challenges from a local perspective in order to decentralize powers and generate greater influence from the territory which, until now, has played a secondary role. Therefore, the promotion of the territory will also measure its success in its participation in formulating policies that combine the incorporation of horizontal elements (multilateral cooperation) with vertical elements (local governments).

This multilevel governance approach represents an advantage for global initiatives. For example, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) represent the model for the implementation of global decisions, driven by states in the international community, to be executed at the local level. The recognition of these local capacities (Voluntary Local Review and other similar instruments) facilitates a differentiation that links climate, investments, municipal management.

In this sense, communication has become a fundamental pillar in the process of promoting the territory. Place branding integrates all territorial realities and must be designed for both insiders and outsiders. The new narratives are based on the construction of proposals that show coherence between what one is internally (the identity of the place, its characteristics and that of its inhabitants) and what one wants to be externally (what the territory can offer, what makes the experience of visiting the place, living or investing in the territory unique). The aim of the communication process is to link the projected brand image with the perception of the territory by the resident citizens and the outside population, through coherent and homogeneous messages that enhance its ability to boost the socioeconomic reality of the site. The promotion of the territory goes beyond highlighting the landscapes or monuments that make it up. It has to do with its identity and the design of a brand based on it. For this reason, the active role of the local community is essential to unify all those brands and sub-brands that are related to a site. To achieve this purpose, the bet has to focus on carrying out a collective project, in which all the actors involved, and stakeholders participate and collaborate, leaving aside ideologies, personalistic purposes and stimulating a relationship that is sustainable over time.

The Covid-19 pandemic has given rise to a new communication paradigm in the field of territory. Crisis communication has resulted in a scenario in which cities, regions and other sub-state territories are able to transmit messages with transparency, agility and a flexibility that adapts to the form and channel. Opinion leaders in a territory, mayors or governors have found in communication, based on a strong identification with their community, the best way to generate trust in their own citizens and in others, understood as potential visitors, residents or investors. In this new way of proceeding, the territory participates in the international agenda through a new localism, where leaders and leaders are key players. Their personal style is based on leadership, through charisma, and drives political initiatives that transcend their territorial boundaries. Here, social networks become a fundamental loudspeaker, where a global sense can be given to their appearances through content and digital platforms. A significant example is the COP on Climate Change, where the participation of urban and territorial leaders is gaining more and more weight and repercussion.

In short, Place branding comprises an area of work, research and action of enormous theoretical interest, social impact and knowledge transfer.