PLACE BRANDING: A CONCEPTUAL AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Jordi de San Eugenio Vela
Departamento de Comunicación. Universidad de Vic
jordi.saneugenio@uvic.cat

I. INTRODUCTION

Within the context of rising competition between territories, identity has become the most important element of recognition, differentiation and commodification in the communicative process within which cities, regions and countries position themselves. Geographical spaces thus compete in terms of this identity, which is then subjected to fierce comparison and competition (Nogué, 1999; Anholt, 2007a). The territorial brand thus entails the reinvention of places through a process of brand construction (branding) based on the promotion of the individual and collective identities of geographical spaces; these identities, in turn, are imbued with the intangible factors associated with their respective territorial identities.

II. THE ORIGIN AND EVOLUTION OF BRANDS ASSOCIATED WITH GEOGRAPHICAL SPACES

It is difficult to put a date on the origins of the place brand, as there are two principal reference points on the timeline of the development of this concept. One the one hand, we should consider the hidden branding that nations and countries have implicitly carried out throughout history. Anholt (2008a) contends that the link between brands and territories dates back as far as the times of Alexander the Great (356 B.C. to 323 B.C.), who was one of the first people to consider that the success or failure of places depended largely on the image they projected beyond their borders.

Within the literature, the first examples of explicit documented references to the brand-territory dyad –in which the significance of the concept of the brand is real rather than token, as occurs within the ambit of promotion– are found at the end of the 1980s and beginning of the 1990s. In this period, Bartels and Timmer published their work *City Marketing: instruments and effects* (1987), Ashworth and Voogd published *Selling the City* (1990), and 1993 witnessed the appearance of one of the fundamental reference works within the academic literature linking brands, marketing and places: *Marketing places: attracting*

investment, industry, and tourism to cities, states, and nations, by Philip Kotler, Donald H. Haider and Irving Rein.

The concept of the communication of places has undergone a transition from the initial base of *promotion* (communication for its own sake, without a specific long-term strategy and with the sole purpose of selling), to develop towards the *selling of places* (strongly linked to advertising and the marketing of cities in terms of culture), to then progress on to *marketing strategies* (which involve the large-scale incorporation of business dynamics into the management and communication of spaces), to finally culminate at the current state of affairs. The current situation is defined by the branding of places, with the emphasis placed on the brand and its capacity to differentiate and position certain spaces with the principal aim of projecting an image towards an external audience, the aim being to move beyond the attraction of tourists in order to also draw in talent, investment capital, infrastructure etc.

III. FROM THE COMMERCIAL BRAND TO THE PLACE BRAND

Corporate branding has become established as the point of reference for the branding of places. The dichotomy that this creates –corporations versus places– within the context of branding allows for the development of a comparative analysis from which it is possible to specify the basic differences encountered in the application of a process of brand construction in both cases. Although there is a convergence between the end goals of corporations and places – that is, the creation of a positive image and reputation – the path followed in the achievement of these goals differs substantially. Divergences appear, however, due to the inherent public-domain nature of places, this meaning that the two spheres have working environments with social implications which are radically different. The sphere of place involves management which crosses into politics, domain and public goods, whereas the sphere of corporations involves business management and private ownership.

IV. TYPES AND FUNCTIONS OF PLACE BRANDS

Within the ambit of branding places, Anholt (2010) contends that the direct objective of the brand is not defined by economic gains, rather the brand aims to achieve a positive reputation for the place, which in turn will report economic benefits. According to Anholt, the virtue of this advanced vision of a brand applied to a geographical space lies in its flexibility, which derives from its ability to unite market forces and human capital. López-Lita and Benlloch (2006: 51) argue along similar lines, positing, «A brand must serve as the basis for marking out places, thereby promoting differentiation and thus enabling places to highlight anthropological and cultural differences, thus transcending their initial purely economic dimension». Similarly, Fernández-Cavia (2011) posits that branding strategies are fully integrated into a global process of place development, in line with a prior marketing strategy. As such, the objective of a branding strategy of a place is not limited to projecting and communicating a certain image and reputation beyond its boundaries, rather its differentiating feature lies in the specific task carried out with the internal public (local population) in order to promote pride in residing in the area and to create a sense of

belonging. The following section sets out a scheme for the organisation of, and attribution of meanings and functions for, each of the currently existing types of place brand.

4.1. The place brand within geographical space

Govers and Go (2009) maintain that it is necessary to deconstruct the old model of place branding, as this is strongly linked to the traditional theory of place image, which is inappropriate due to its failure to link the image of place to aspects of identity and communication of place within a global context of space and time. Unlike the promotion of places, spatial branding is not an activity that can be guided by intuition or chance, rather it involves a highly integrated and strategic sphere of action. Spatial branding is directly linked to a new urban lifestyle in which visual images and the myths associated with them adopt a special relevance, and within this context image promotion takes on a central role for planners and politicians. Hence, the emergence of spatial marketing and branding becomes a natural consequence of a new form of territorial governance that is geared towards satisfying the needs and desires of a potential public (Kavaratzis, 2005 and 2011). Therefore, the division of the terms *place promotion*, *place selling* and *place branding* is a result of the multitude of publics to which these concepts are directed as well as of the attributes and values which each concept offers.

4.2. The brand within the context of the nation and state (country/nation brand)

Nation branding becomes a requirement for places that wish to compete in a globalised world, as well as helping them to shake off certain stereotypes. This view is shared by Dinnie (2008 and 2011), who posits that in addition to attracting tourists, stimulating inward investment and boosting exports, nation branding also focuses its actions on increasing exchange-rate stability, re-establishing international credibility and investor confidence, increasing political influence, strengthening international alliances and, in general, improving the nation's image in the global arena. This might be considered as the essential difference between the branding of nations and/or countries and the branding of lower-level territorial units, such as destinations, cities or regions. In the former case, the primary consideration is to take into account global interests, a more diffuse image and transversal representation, whilst in the latter case interests are more sectoral and narrower in scope, meaning that the management of these is carried out from a more limited perspective than in the case of the all-encompassing interests that we observe in nation branding or country branding.

4.3. The brand within the context of urban and/or metropolitan space (city brand)

The competitiveness of a place currently depends on its integration into global systems of information and communication. It is precisely this competition between cities which underlies the need to promote changes in the public organisation and management of the metropolis, especially in terms of achieving a certain positional goal (Dinnie, 2011). To a large extent, the city thus leaves behind its function of a cluster of economic relations in order to become a system of competing symbols, especially in the aesthetic ambit (Lash

and Urry, 1998; Urry, 2004), in order to attract talent, investment and infrastructure, amongst other factors. The evolution of a city of infrastructures towards a city of values, in which abstract and intangible aspects take on an unprecedented leading role, calls for new management systems in which the evolution from the primary sector to the service sector and the information society can be clearly seen.

Indeed, we see a new type of consumption for the contemporary city together with new identities within the highly-charged emotional context required for differentiation. The city is thus transformed into a space of use and consumption par excellence, that is, the urban and/ or metropolitan space is transformed into a cultural consumption product. The contemporary city is thereby one of the clearest manifestations of an identity space for late capitalism. The transformation of the city is due, in large part, to the reconceptualisation of a cultural and knowledge-based vocation for urban space, with the city functioning as the territorial vanguard for everything linked to innovation and creativity.

4.4. The brand in the context of tourist space (destination brand)

Anholt (2005b) argues that tourism is often the most visible promotional aspect in the process of nation branding. This is due to the fact that tourism accumulates baggage of aspects related to the marketing of spaces, and this results in the presence of a wide-ranging literature related to the promotion, marketing and branding of tourism spaces. Rodríguez-Amat and Campalans (2010) proceed in the same vein when they indicate that tourism has become a mechanism which catalyses and concentrates the cultural and the symbolic, acting as a presentation interface connecting the interior outwards to the exterior. In addition to this, professional experience which links marketing to tourism also has a long history, which can be seen, for example, in the long-standing existence of destination marketing organisations (DMOs). Tourism is thus positioned as a central axis of the processes which link together image, brand and territory. Furthermore, tourist activity and its associated image has historically acted as a lens through which to view the values of a geographical space –be that a country, nation, region or city– both in their positive and negative manifestations.

Indeed, tourist space has become consolidated as an important means to present a place, and the image associated to this derives, in all probability, from a first-hand tourist experience or from the establishment of a certain image through a past tourist promotion campaign. Anholt (2005a) further ploughs this furrow in arguing that in some cases the practice of destination branding distorts the perceptions of a country through its projection of a diffuse and global image which goes beyond the scope of what are purely tourist interests; this occurs as a secondary effect of the desire to sell a tourist destination at all costs. For their part, MacCannell (2003), Urry (2004) and Donaire (2012) refer to the importance of tourism from a sociological point of view, examining the importance of the arrival of the image industry; the *tourist gaze*, as coined by Urry; and experience which generates new paradigms of aesthetic reflection, a theme which Lash and Urry (1998) had previously advanced. Contemporary consumption, when played out in the ambit of spaces, impetuously seeks out aesthetic, symbolic and semiotic pleasure, and in this aspect, tourism is yet again the paradigmatic activity (Urry, 2004).

V. CONCLUSION

Place brands are defined above all by the influence they exercise over the perceptions of individuals. The application of a unique identity expressed through a brand offers recognition and differentiation for geographical spaces, thereby allowing for an advantageous position which, in turn, becomes decisive in the preferences of users. Furthermore, a place brand involves the simultaneous exercise of both management and communication. This management is not limited to brand management, rather it involves intervening within a space in accordance with brand criteria and, ultimately, marketing. Therefore, whereas the communication of a place brand is linked to branding, management issues are firmly rooted in marketing.

A place brand must therefore respond to three principal objectives, which are, in order of importance: a) positioning; b) a sense of ownership of the brand and identification with it on the part of local communities and, finally; c) the brand must act as a mechanism through which to generate positive perceptions of the space it represents. In addition to this, it should be noted that the creation of an identity is the element which best enables a place to set itself apart and stand out. Culture, human and intellectual capital, heritage and history are some of the most important attributes of spatial identity through which a place brand can be positioned in order to gain maximum added value. In terms of the future, the brand as a representation of place will become a vital asset in the enticement of investment capital, talent, infrastructure, companies and events, amongst other benefits which places wish to capitalise on. However, it should be stressed that a place brand does not necessarily require any type of creative manufacturing. In many cases the brand already exists –albeit in a tacit, latent and implicit form– and in this event the only tasks required are those which give visibility and projection to a pre-existing concept and image.

The identity of places is an important issue, coming close to being a matter of survival, though not in purely economic terms but rather due to a manifest need to promote identity in times of globalisation. This identitary need can be partly channelled through a sophisticated use of the traditional concept of the brand. Therefore, brand construction never involves the theming of space, rather it refers to the discovery and subsequent promotion of its identitary roots.

During the research carried out for this article it has been evident that the implementation and management of place brands merits a deeper reflection in terms of their *value in use* and *value in exchange*, which goes beyond a simple promotion campaign and becomes a de facto framework for the development of places which, by extension, improves the life of citizens. However, projects which aim for a transversal management of space often come up against a worrying disciplinary monopoly, which goes against the heterogeneous nature of geographical space. It is thus vital that this process be opened up to contributions from other disciplines, especially those which are most directly related to the study of the geographical environment.