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A SHORT REFLECTION ON CITY BRANDING AND ITS CONTROVERSIES

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ABSTRACT

Thanks to its conceptual character the paper ‘City Branding: An Effective Assertion of Identity or a Transitory Marketing Trick?’ by Kavaratzis and Ashworth (2005) is a classic piece in the area of place branding. The paper has been much cited in the literature, but did it really steer the further development of the field? Nearly fifteen years later, there is still a lot of debate in place branding circles. Taking the paper as a starting point I briefly discuss four controversies in city branding: (1) branding versus marketing; (2) places versus products; (3) policy versus politics; and (4) theory versus practice. I conclude that the complexities surrounding places and their stakeholders asks for more realism, modesty and dialogue in the place branding community.

Key words: City branding; place branding; place marketing; place fuzziness; dialogue

INTRODUCTION

It is no surprise that the *TESG* paper ‘City Branding: An Effective Assertion of Identity or a Transitory Marketing Trick?’ by Kavaratzis and Ashworth (2005) has been cited so much in place branding, geography and urban studies. With its catchy title and fundamental considerations the article is a real ‘classic’. However, the fate of classics is that they often referred to, but seldom read. Therefore I found it a pleasure to re-read the paper and reflect on it after so many years.

The strength of the paper lies in the clever way in which the authors discuss the particular nature of city branding. They do so by focusing ‘specifically upon the self-conscious application of branding to places as an instrument of urban planning and management’ (Kavaratzis & Ashworth 2005, p. 507). To begin with, Kavaratzis and Ashworth describe the transition from city marketing to city branding, a development they attribute to the popularity of product and corporate branding at the start of the twenty-first century. Then, they dwell on the concept

of branding – defined as ‘the forging of associations’ (p. 508) – and its three components (identity, positioning and image). After that, the authors deal with the question to what extent places can be seen as products. This is the most interesting part of the paper, since a number of issues are raised here that are still debated in the place branding community. Kavaratzis and Ashworth do not give definitive answers, but conclude in any case that place branding needs to treat places as distinctive products. Or as they state in the final sentence: ‘If these distinctions can be recognised and incorporated into the process, then it [city branding] becomes a valid and effective form of management: if not, it is an irrelevant distraction’ (Kavaratzis & Ashworth 2005, p. 513).

Re-reading the piece by Kavaratzis and Ashworth (2005) was not only a pleasure, it made me also realise how timeless certain issues are. Against this background I will reflect on the paper and point to some recurring debates in the field of place branding. The remainder of this article is structured along four of those controversies, namely (1) branding

versus marketing, (2) places versus products, (3) policy versus politics and (4) theory versus practice. I discuss these issues with the help of some theoretical arguments, empirical findings and case examples. Where possible and relevant, a link is made to Kavaratzis and Ashworth (2005). The paper ends with a brief conclusion.

BRANDING VERSUS MARKETING

Kavaratzis and Ashworth (2005) rightly observe that cities increasingly use branding concepts and techniques in an attempt to emphasise their distinct qualities. As they see it, branding goes beyond 'boosterism', promotion and marketing – it should be considered an additional tool. Although they discuss the concept of branding and its elements at some length, the authors remain somewhat vague on the relationship between 'branding' and 'marketing'. Is branding part of marketing, do the two go hand in hand or is branding really something else than marketing? As a matter of fact, this lack of conceptual clarity can be seen throughout the place branding literature and has often been discussed (Hanna & Rowley 2008; Skinner 2008; Boisen *et al.* 2018). Skinner (2008), for example, provides a thematic literature review in which she provides some light in the dark. In her view, place marketing relates to the place's overall management driven by a market orientation (outside-in approach). In turn, place branding covers the promotional activities of a place that are based on its identity (inside-out approach). Seen from this perspective, branding might be seen as a part of marketing, as Skinner (2008) suggests. Ten years later, however, there is still a lack of common understanding on the differences between place promotion, marketing and branding. Boisen *et al.* (2018) do a new and more successful attempt to clarify the concepts: they stress the need for an integral place approach in which place branding should give direction to place marketing (finetuning the place to manage supply and demand) and place promotion (communicating about what the place has to offer). Here, place branding is seen as a key concept in the governance of a place, requiring a lot of strategic insight and organising capacity of the stakeholders.

To be sure, Kavaratzis himself is well aware of the conceptual problems in the place branding field. In his introduction to a special issue in *Cities*, entitled 'Place Branding: Are We Any Wiser?', he acknowledges the confusion of the terms 'marketing', 'branding' and 'promotion'. In this respect, he states: 'The problem has been for many years that the concepts have been used as synonymous although they are not' (Kavaratzis 2018, p. 61). And where Kavaratzis and Ashworth (2005) at least define the concept of branding and its components in a clear way, many colleagues after them do not. Obviously, such a sloppy use of terms is a widespread phenomenon in academic circles. However, as Skinner (2008) makes clear, it might be even more commonplace in the place branding literature because its contributions come from disciplines as diverse as marketing, geography and urban studies. Even more, also well-considered publication strategies by authors play a role: depending on the academic field in which they are active or the journal to which manuscripts are submitted, they choose a term that has the best fit. In fact, in publishing the authors follow a marketing rather than a branding strategy. An intriguing paradox can be observed: academics preach the need for unambiguous concepts, but undermine their call by practising segmentation themselves.

PLACES VERSUS PRODUCTS

One of the strong points of the article by Kavaratzis and Ashworth (2005) is their claim that places are distinctive products and that these distinctive elements should be taken seriously in place branding. As such, they contribute to a long-lasting controversy in the literature on the differences between products and places. Can regions, cities and towns just be branded like cars, t-shirts and pizzas? Kavaratzis and Ashworth (2005) criticise marketing scientists (e.g. Kotler *et al.* 1993) who see no problems in doing so and provide arguments why places are different from regular products. The reader would expect that the authors describe the unique features of places in some detail. This, however, is not the case. It is true that different types of place branding (such as geographical nomenclature and

product-place co-branding) are discussed in the paper, but the question what makes places so special is only implicitly answered. Instead, at the end of the paper the authors refer to an earlier publication (Ashworth & Voogd 1990, p. 513) for an outline of 'the distinct attributes that accrue to places, such as spatial scale, spatial hierarchies, resulting scale shadowing, the inherent multiplicity and vagueness of goals, product-user combinations and consumer utilities'. It is a pity that no more attention is paid to these issues of 'place fuzziness' (Warnaby 2009), because it would have made the claim that places differ from products even stronger.

Interestingly, Kavaratzis and Ashworth (2005) use the terms 'places' and 'cities' interchangeably, while they briefly mention examples from a country (Switzerland), regions (Champagne, Parma) and cities (Brussels, Barcelona, Paris). At the same time, their paper is about 'city branding'. Can we say that what is true for cities also applies for places in general? To some degree this is the case, but at the same time cities are a spatial category *sui generis*, as Tuan (1975), Boisen *et al.* (2011), Dormans (2008) and Lewicka (2011) suggest. After all, cities are 'centers of meaning' par excellence, because they are historically grown and constitute an important context of people's daily life – residents and visitors navigate through them for work, education, school and leisure. On maps cities are instantly recognisable, which is not always the case for regions. For example, there are a lot of regions that are branded as 'functional' areas without a historically formed identity (e.g. the metropolitan region Rotterdam The Hague (MRDH) in the Randstad). Unsurprisingly, cities evoke a diversity of feelings among its stakeholders (e.g. residents, policy-makers and visitors), thus making city branding even more difficult than national and regional branding. The complexity of the 'city product' is one of the reasons why Zenker and Braun (2017) question a 'one size fits all'-city brand – cities are simply too complex in terms of target groups, offerings and associations they evoke that sub-brands might be useful when branding them. In short, researchers should not only 'move beyond conceptual confusion' – to use the words of Boisen *et al.* (2018, p. 4) – when talking about place promotion, marketing and branding. Also with regard to the types of places studied, be it

countries, regions or cities, there is still a need for conceptual clarity. To be sure, this critique is not exclusive for place branding research. For example, it also applies for tourism studies, where the term 'destination' is often used without paying attention to the particular scalar level involved (Oliveira 2016).

POLICY VERSUS POLITICS

Perhaps the greatest value of the paper by Kavaratzis and Ashworth (2005) is that place branding is dealt with as one of the instruments of city planning and management. Branding is seen as a kind of umbrella and a compass guiding urban policy choices, where 'the "stories" [about the city] need to be built into the place, not least by planning and design interventions, infrastructure development and the organisational structure' (Kavaratzis & Ashworth 2005, p. 512). Indeed, in the ideal situation, city branding is part of urban policy, thus making a positive contribution to the goals the city governors want to achieve. However, being part of urban policy also means that branding is subject to all the complex, dynamic and uncontrollable aspects surrounding public policy. For one thing, the need for a long-term strategy, stability and continuity – branding is a marathon rather than a sprint – can be threatened. For another thing, place branding might become a political instrument that is strategically used by stakeholders in the city (Lucarelli 2018). Kavaratzis and Ashworth (2005) do not really pay attention to the political context of place branding within urban policy, although the first author deals with it in later publications (e.g. Kavaratzis 2012). This is remarkable, because the inherent policy and political aspects in city governance are an additional argument to see places as distinctive products and place branding as a special case of product branding.

Acknowledging that place branding is part of urban policy is more important than it seems. It can explain, for example, why cities and their administrators often hesitate to follow place branding principles. After all, branding requires positioning, that is, making choices to strengthen the brand (Ries & Trout 2001). Also place branding has such a selective nature: it implies a selection process in which

some features and target groups of the city are highlighted more than other relevant aspects and stakeholders of the city (Boisen *et al.* 2011). For instance, for an international audience the Dutch City of The Hague has branded itself as the International City of Peace and Justice for many years. Obviously, there are other aspects of The Hague that make it distinct as well, such as its location near the sea, its multicultural character or the fact that the city is home to the Dutch royal family. These aspects, however, have been highlighted among other target groups, especially on a national scale. Many cities do not venture to make such choices, set priorities and integrate them in a long term place branding strategy (Govers 2018). This is understandable, as policy-makers are usually not inclined to choose: they have the task to strive for the common interest, accountability and transparency, while branding asks for selection, a competitive attitude and entrepreneurship. Consequently, some public virtues are seen as private sins and vice versa. Thus, public policy and branding are part of different 'value systems' (Jacobs 1992). If these moralities are mixed, value conflicts may arise. Against this background, the way place branding is organised is a key issue. Should city branding be implemented in-house (i.e. in the city hall) or should it be outsourced to an independent entity at arm's length of urban politics? How to guarantee that a city branding strategy 'survives' the political changes to which local elections might lead? Such questions should be part of what Anttiroiki (2014) aptly has called 'the political economy of city branding'.

THEORY VERSUS PRACTICE

The paper by Kavaratzis and Ashworth (2005) emerged from their observation that in the real world cities increasingly make use of product branding concepts and techniques. The authors reflect on this trend and advise city branding professionals to do justice to the unique features of the place product. Otherwise, they fear that branding will not be an effective tool for urban planning and management. As Green *et al.* (2016) show in an interesting article, city branding research and practice have developed in waves. Initially, research was lagging behind practice, but then

city branding practice showed stagnation while theory progressed and developed a critical view on practice. At the moment, we can see attempts where practice and research try to inspire and reinforce another ('co-creation'). Still, however, there is a wide gap between place branding theory and practice that is usually criticised by academics. They seem to be disappointed that the daily reality of place branding is complex. For example, based on in-depth interviews with professionals in the United Kingdom and Ireland, De Noronha *et al.* (2017a, p. 91) conclude that 'the results suggest that the strategic potential of place branding is negatively affected by a focus on operational thinking'.

In a report based on their article the same authors even write: 'Place branding is misunderstood by many town and city management practitioners in England, Wales and Ireland. This is a situation that needs to be remedied' (De Noronha *et al.* 2017b, p. 13). Among researchers this lamentation is often heard; they are disappointed that practice does not follow theory. But are the professionals really responsible for this? After all, there is still a lot of confusion in the place branding community, as I argued before. At the same time, place branding professionals have to act in a political environment with many stakeholders. Therefore, it should not come as a surprise that in reality the potential of place branding is not fully exploited. In the case of cities in the province of Ontario, Cleave *et al.* (2016) show that place branding may be useful in business attraction, but is not used efficiently yet. This is not so much because the views of practitioners and academics diverge. Instead, there is a divergence of perceptions by practitioners and site selectors, who employ their own criteria, like the availability of land, infrastructure and quality of life. To be sure, a favorable image of a place induced by branding plays a role, but it is only one of the various factors site selectors take into account in their selection process. When place branding works, it works in mysterious ways.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Kavaratzis and Ashworth (2005) gave their classic *TESG* paper the challenging title: 'City

Branding: An Effective Assertion of Identity or a Transitory Marketing Trick?' Now, nearly fifteen years later, it is perhaps the right moment to look back. Based on the frequent complaints in the place branding literature on the gap between research and practice, one might conclude that in reality city branding often has been 'a transitory marketing trick'. However, it is too early to draw this conclusion, simply because research on the development of the field among practitioners is lacking. When future studies on branding practice over the last fifteen years indeed would conclude that city branding has been 'a transitory marketing trick', then the professionals are certainly not the only ones to blame for this. As scholars we also should take a good look at ourselves before we point the finger to the practitioners. As a matter of fact, with our international academic papers we do not always contribute to the clarity needed for developing straightforward place branding strategies. A survey among place branding practitioners in 2016 speaks volumes: according to two-thirds of the respondents place branding research only 'somewhat meets their needs', while many of them criticise the lack of consensus in using key concepts (Govers *et al.* 2017).

Academics can better face that in the real world politics is playing a role in all branding issues, either explicitly or implicitly. Perhaps the time has come to develop a more realistic and modest attitude on the promises of place branding research for the practice of urban planning and management. Yes, in theory, place branding can be a useful and effective policy instrument with a lot of potential for cities. But in the complex reality of urban development there are so many uncontrollable factors that the high hopes of branding are often frustrated. Let place branding academics therefore engage more with the work of professionals. It is telling that Kavaratzis (2015) himself published an inspiring article on this topic and pleas for more contact between the two worlds. As I see it, there are several ways to organise a dialogue between theory and practice. First, more research could be done on all those activities going on in town halls, marketing offices and promotion agencies where the 'real' city branding is made. When studying this branding 'on the ground',

researchers automatically hear about relevant issues in the workplace that deserve further attention and where academic place branding research could be meaningful (Govers *et al.* 2017). Second, place branding scholars could engage themselves more in the practice of city branding as a volunteer, adviser, commentator or supervisor. For example, I am part of the supervisory board of the promotion agency of my hometown and thus get a useful glimpse into the often hectic daily work of place branders. Third, there is a need for communication 'at eyelevel' between researchers and practitioners, taking each other seriously and talking in a similar language. One cannot expect from professionals that they read academic journal papers – therefore we should make sure to valorise our research findings by publishing columns in newspapers and magazines, writing blogs and giving talks, obviously in the national language. All in all, the city branding community needs more 'boundary spanners', namely, individuals who cross the boundaries between theory and practice (cf. Benneworth 2013). In my view, such boundary spanning makes place branding research not only more relevant, but also much more interesting.

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