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**PLACE BRANDING AND CITIZEN INVOLVEMENT:  
PARTICIPATORY APPROACH TO BUILDING  
AND MANAGING CITY BRANDS**

**ABSTRACT:** This article examines the role of citizens in the process of building and managing city brands. A multidisciplinary approach is applied to explain the multifaceted nature of territorial brands and citizen involvement. To this end, theoretical concepts from marketing and corporate branding, public management, and human geography are applied. By conceptualising place branding as a public policy and a governance process, and drawing from the concept of participatory place branding, the author discusses a variety of methods and instruments used to involve citizens. Special attention is given to the importance of modern technologies for effective citizen involvement.

**KEYWORDS:** City branding, city brand, participatory place branding, citizen involvement.

**Preface**

Recent theoretical developments and empirical observations in branding and managing territorial entities have made it possible to conclude that the importance of citizens in these processes is growing. Place branding is increasingly viewed as a public management activity and governance process, and, as such, it requires support from the public. Moreover, technological developments (web 2.0, user-generated content, mobile technologies) and their democratic potential enabled a more open and bottom-up

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creation and management of place brands. Nonetheless, in reality citizens are an undervalued and underrepresented group in place branding strategies and practices, often viewed as a “necessary evil” (Kavaratzis, 2012). Furthermore, the major focus in place branding activities seems to be outward, with attempts to attract foreign tourists and investors and to present a coherent place image in the media.

The objective of this paper is thus to examine the role of citizens in creating and managing place brands with special reference to cities. The paper discusses the concept of participatory place branding, interdisciplinary nature of citizen involvement, it also examines methods and instruments of citizen activation, and the role of modern technologies in citizens empowerment.

### **Place brands – towards participatory approach**

The notion of place brands and place branding has been present in the academic literature for over two decades and more recently it became one of the central issues on place management agenda. Still, however, there seems to be no universally acknowledged definition of the term as such which can be attributed to its multidimensionality and interdisciplinary background. Among many attempts to define this concept, one that embraces the multifaceted nature of place brands is provided by Zenker and Braun (2010, 5), who define place brand as “a network of associations in the consumers’ mind based on the visual, verbal, and behavioural expression of a place, which is embodied through the aims, communication, values, and the general culture of the place’s stakeholders and the overall place design.”

Over the years, the notion of place branding was subject to substantial theoretical and empirical evolution. The initial attempts to articulate its essence were predominantly related to tourism industry and made place branding seem equivalent to place promotion with the main focus on the development of visual identity and on the advertising of a place in the media (Govers, 2013). Such an approach caused important misinterpretations of the role that place branding had to perform within the place management system. Consequently, there appeared a number of problematic issues for the discipline, three of them being especially relevant for this paper.

Firstly, the outlined approach deprives the process of building place brands its depth, presenting it as advertising of the idealised and somewhat manipulated place image, often detached from the reality of the place in question. Secondly, such an interpretation of place branding presents it as an outward-oriented process, thus making it irrelevant for citizens of the place. This, in turn, results in their negative attitudes and their reluctance to see the public resources being allocated to this activity (Hereźniak and Florek, 2016). Thirdly, communication-oriented view of place brands assumes that there is a single and static identity of the place (Kalandides, 2011) that has to be coherently communicated to various audiences to raise brand awareness and create positive associations with a place. Yet, place brands differ significantly from commercial brands (Hereźniak 2011). Namely, they lack specified ownership; the place product is utterly complex (Papadopulos, 2004; Hanna and Rowley, 2008) and more experiential than commercial products and services. Consequently, there usually exist multiple place identities and images (Kavaratzis and Hatch, 2013), which makes the process of place brand management far less controllable than that of commercial brands.

The aforementioned issues present a range of challenges for the theory and practice of place branding and management. Hence, recent theoretical developments in place branding evolve towards the concepts of stakeholder participation, co-creation and co-production (Kavaratzis, 2012; Aitken, 2011), moving this notion further away from a promotional perspective. This new paradigm requires addressing the interdisciplinary character of place branding by applying theoretical concepts from diverse areas, specifically from corporate branding, public management and cultural geography (Kavaratzis and Hatch, 2013; Hereźniak and Florek, 2016). It is beyond the scope of this paper to assess and analyse all the theoretical influences critical for the evolution of place branding. Nonetheless, several concepts from the abovementioned disciplines need to be quoted to understand the nature of place brands and the role of citizen involvement in the place branding process.

Within corporate branding and marketing from which place branding originates, the concept of participatory marketing and branding (Ind and Bjerke, 2007), brand communities (Schau et al., 2009) and service-dominant logic (Warnaby, 2009) influence to a great extent how places are branded and managed. As Eshuis et al. observes (2014, 156) in participatory branding “marketers neither

own nor control the brand. This opens up the possibility for different stakeholders to try to influence the meaning of a brand, and thus participate in the process of developing a meaningful brand.” In corporate branding consumers form brand communities through which they influence and co-create brands of their interest. O’Guinn and Muniz (2001, 412) define brand community as “a specialised, non-geographically bound community, based on a structured set of social relationships among admirers of a brand.” This concept appears to be of value for understanding the dynamics of place brands in the context of citizen involvement in this process.

Another important finding in the discipline of marketing is the concept of service-dominant logic, proposed by Warnaby (2009), who observes that with technological advancements and widespread access to interactive media, corporate brands should resemble brands from the service industry that puts the concept of co-creation at the heart of branding. Thus, it is through participation, experience and the exchange of information that brand stakeholders dynamise brand identity and influence the brand strategy (Hereźniak, 2016). This observation applies to place brands, which, according to the participatory approach, are seen as networks of multiple stakeholders (e.g., Hankinson, 2004). Therefore, the process of place branding happens through the series of interactions among them. In participatory branding, internal stakeholders (employees of a company or citizens of a place) are given a primary role in brand co-creation.

With regards to the public management perspective, there is a growing body of literature that calls for seeing place branding as one of the public policies (Eshuis et al., 2014; Eshuis and Edwards, 2013; Hereźniak and Anders-Morawska, 2015). Within this realm, place branding is seen as a governance strategy in which the public administration engages in relationships with residents to foster citizenship, community participation, and social capital (Anders-Morawska and Rudolf, 2015: 36). This is in agreement with Smith’s and Huntsman’s (1997) value model of relationships between citizens and public administration characterised by high involvement, decentralised, democratic, participative and communal form of wealth creation that involves co-partnership, co-investment, common interest, cooperation and sharing among citizens (Smith and Huntsman, 1997: 132). In analogy with participatory branding, internal stakeholders (citizens) are the main focus for public administration activity.

Cultural geography is yet another discipline that offers theoretical contributions to place branding. It can be of value in understanding how communities are formed and what strengthens place attachment (Florek and Insch, 2008) – one of the critical factors in creating strong, citizen-inclusive place brands. Brands (of places and products alike) are widely considered in literature as carriers of meaning (Wooliscroft, 2014), which makes them larger and more sustainable than products with ever shortening lifecycles. It is thus critical to study how place meaning is created and exchanged within the community, which can be explained through the notion of the sense of place. Campello observes that a “community-centred approach for branding a place requires an understanding of the constructs that people attach to their place. These constructs are perceived and expressed through a communal sense of place [...] which should be seen as ‘a set of shared experiences based on social relationships that exist in a place which are influenced by history, culture, spatial location, landscape, economic factors and which are constructed through the use of our senses [...]’” (Campello in Kavaratzis et al., 2015: 52).

To fully understand the nature of citizen involvement in place branding strategies and practices, the aforementioned and other theoretical concepts need to be taken into consideration, which should result in both conceptual and managerial developments that will lead to a more satisfactory relationship between the city, its residents and authorities.

### **Citizen involvement – place branding perspective**

For the past years citizens started being considered as a stakeholder group of growing importance. Braun et al. (2013) distinguishes three types of roles that can be attributed to this group of local stakeholders in the development and management of a place brand: (i) residents as an integrated part of place brand, (ii) residents as ambassadors for their place brand, and (iii) residents as citizens. Citizenship-driven behaviours include residents’ participation in activities and contribution to the decision-making process. Thus, the challenge of place brand managers is how and to what extent place citizens could and should be engaged in place branding activities (Hereźniak and Florek, 2016).

Zenker and Efrgen (2014, 228–29) propose a model that encourages a strategic approach to citizen involvement. The three-stage process begins with the definition of the key components of the place and the articulation of its shared vision. This is the basis for creating a consensus among the key stakeholder groups and a common denominator for place brand-related activities. Throughout the second stage, the framework for citizen involvement should be developed, including the scope and the depth of participation, principal guidelines and key non-governmental organisations that facilitate involvement and dynamise the process. The third stage focuses predominantly on the implementation of citizen-generated projects through providing professional assistance in diverse areas (e.g., finance, marketing, logistics, networking). Also, within this last stage the monitoring system for the implemented projects should be developed. The aforementioned model should be treated as a general outline of steps that need to be undertaken to treat citizen involvement as an integral part of the place branding process. Particular elements of such a framework need to be further developed with special focus on the selection criteria for the projects to be implemented and the appropriate success measures.

Within this realm, it must be noted that not all citizens can be involved in place branding to the same extent and in the same manner. Bass et al. (1995) identifies several sub-segments of participants based on their predicted level of engagement in diverse public policies:

- I. Participants listening only: they receive information from governmental PR campaigns or a publicly available database;
- II. Participants listening and giving information: to this end they use public inquiries, media activities, “hotlines”;
- III. Participants being consulted: usually through working groups and meetings held to discuss policy;
- IV. Participation in analysis and agenda-setting: through multi-stakeholder groups, round tables and commissions;
- V. Participants in reaching consensus on the main strategy elements: through round tables, committees and conflict mediation;
- VI. Participants directly involved in final decision-making on the policy, strategy or its components.

Although this categorisation does not directly refer to place branding strategy, it is certainly adaptable and useful for those city authorities who are ready to treat place branding as public policy and not as a communication exercise.

Another issue that needs to be addressed are the preconditions for effective involvement of stakeholders (also citizens) in public policies. Dalal-Clayton and Bass (2002, 193) articulate the necessary requirements that need to be met to ensure effective stakeholder involvement:

- Shared principles for participation must be developed with a special focus on diversity, representation, transparency, time to consult and inclusiveness. In order to produce such principles, early discussion on the previous and current strategies should take place;

- Stakeholders must be properly identified: the problem with different public policies is that too often a substantial group of stakeholders is left out, because of the traditional criteria used to assume the level of importance of a stakeholder group – their influence and their interest in a specific project (Kavaratzis, 2012: 13). Such an approach puts numerous groups in an underprivileged position and limits involvement and participation to the power struggle of the strongest;

- Presence of the catalysts for participation: an organisation that stimulates a participatory approach is needed to initiate the process and to coordinate and integrate different stakeholder groups, and to “translate” more central decisions into the local context;

- A set of specific activities and events must be outlined around which participation will be focused;

- Evolutionary approach must be taken: the snowball effect should be generated, whereby the participation system is built on the existing patterns and then gradually gains depth and breadth;

- Appropriate participatory methods: a variety of ways to involve the community in public policies should be developed including dialogue, consultations, partnerships and networks, conflict management etc.;

- Slow start, early investments: financial resources and long-term approach are necessary to foster the appropriate involvement system that will bring results in the long run;

- Stimulation of learning environments, namely the “policies, laws and institutions that encourage, support, manage and reward participation in the planning/development process – including specially formulated groups where appropriate institutions do not exist – and which allow participants and professionals to test approaches” (Dalal-Clayton and Bass, 2002: 193);



- **Demonstrable results and benefits:** the impact of community involvement needs to be seen by the community itself from early stages on to reassure the involved that their efforts are well-made.

The set of prerequisites proposed by Dala-Clayton and Bass treats community involvement as a systemic policy and an indispensable component of public management, which is consistent with a broader and more profound understanding of place branding. Adopting this kind of logic requires mentioning the concept of place making, rooted in geography, urban planning and urban design. According to Al-Kodmany, “place making is the art of creating urban landscape that fosters pride and ownership of the physical and social environment” (2013, 153), it leverages the assets and potential of the local community to create public spaces that promote citizens’ well-being. Place making is therefore about the transformation of a place in such a direction that it becomes more liveable and grounded in the needs and aspirations of its citizens. One of the important features of place branding both as a process and as a philosophy is its transformational potential for places. The transformational potential in this context means that diverse groups of stakeholders (citizens) implement numerous initiatives, whose common denominator is place brand identity. Stimulated and supported by the local government, these initiatives lead in the long run to the transformation of the place’s reality and social relationships within it. Thus, place branding and place making are strongly interlinked with the former, adding a more tangible, not only symbolic, dimension to the latter.

### **Citizen involvement and new technologies: a perfect match?**

An issue that needs to be discussed when examining the phenomenon of citizen involvement in place branding practices is the role of technological development in this process. As noted by Castels (2011), new media are the tools with a substantial democratic potential due to their accessibility, global circulation of content and interactivity. If used to the fullest, they can foster citizen participation in different public policies in an unprecedented manner. This in turn should make place branding much more inclusive and creative than it is today (Paganoni, 2015: 7), thus making it more legitimate in stakeholders’ eyes (residents included).

Over the past decade or so, technological developments such as the rise of web 2.0, user-generated content (UGC) and mobile



technologies allowed the voices of citizens to be heard louder than ever. The democratic potential of the Internet gradually enabled a more open and bottom-up creation and management of place brands. The participatory and inclusive character of places is thus fuelled with a widespread access to interactive and mobile tools which raise the profile of citizens and make them true co-producers of the city's reality.

Digital technologies enabled citizens to participate in place branding policies on multiple levels.

Brand analysis and conceptualisation: participation in surveys and other forms of research concerning the brand concept, social consultations, voting etc. through websites, discussion forums and mobile applications (crowdsourcing). An interesting example here is the B-Berlin project whose aim is to identify values, impressions and associations that Berlin citizens have with/about the city. The questions the community members were asked are the following: (i) What are the three fundamental traits of Berlin?; (ii) How do you recognise that you are in Berlin?; (iii) When do you feel like a Berliner? The campaign is supported by social media and online surveys which guarantee a widespread participation. What is more, it also takes place in public spaces, where citizens can write their ideas down on B-shaped boards placed around the city.

Brand expression/experience: promoting a place brand online through social media, the blogosphere, content sharing, creating and moderating place brand communities and online place brand experience, social activation of other community members etc. One of the most praised projects of this kind is "Curators of Sweden," in which the official Swedish Twitter account was handed over by the government to be managed by citizens (curators) of Sweden. Each week a Swedish citizen gets nominated to represent the country on Twitter, sharing content about their life, work, passions. The project – run since 2011 – helped Sweden gain numbers of followers on Twitter, generated substantial media coverage without advertising spending, and inspired other places to follow the same pattern.

"Play Melbourne" is another citizen involving initiative that uses modern technologies to raise the international profile of the city brand. The campaign uses a "Play Melbourne Live" ball-shaped device containing a phone that enables the usage of Periscope. This ball is carried around the city of Melbourne by its citizens who perform an interactive live tour around the city acting as guides.

The audience can ask questions and choose directions the guide will follow.

Brand delivery and evaluation: online participation in an evaluation process, writing reviews online, submitting suggestions and amendments to the existing strategy. An interesting example is provided by the small Spanish city – Jun – where every citizen has their own Twitter account through which they communicate with the mayor of the city and other public officers. The themes of communication vary from daily matters such as street lighting that does not work properly or personal messages posted online to more strategic issues regarding the city. This mode of operation (although not without criticism) fosters community integration and the non-standard place management techniques raised the international profile of this small city of just 200 000 citizens which currently has 400 000 followers on Twitter. It also suggests that activities undertaken inwardly can have an outward effect with no real spending on traditional promotion of a place.

With reference to the transformational potential of place branding there are examples of projects based on citizen involvement. One such project that needs to be mentioned is “Neighborland” – an interactive platform developed in the United States that facilitates communication between city organisations and local people. So far it has fostered relations between around 200 such entities and over 750 000 citizens. The initiative is built around a website where citizens can submit their own projects that will help reshape the neighbourhoods: infrastructurally, scientifically, socially. The projects are subsequently evaluated by the citizens who decide whether the project is worth pursuing.

Another example of brand delivery through citizen involvement is that of participatory budgets. In the Polish city of Łódź, a special website allows citizens to learn about bottom-up projects from diverse neighbourhoods to be funded from the city budget and vote for them.

## **Conclusions**

The issue of citizen involvement in place branding is a fairly new but a very dynamic development. A growing number of academic papers and conference announcements are devoted to stakeholder participation in building and managing brands of territorial

entities. This tendency marks an important turn in the domain in both theoretical and practical sense. There was, and still is, the danger for place branding to be perceived as logo and marketing communication. Such an approach does not make the process legitimate in the eyes of its stakeholders, especially citizens, whose primary aspiration is to stay in sustainable and liveable cities, and who oppose spending substantial public resources on further promotional campaigns. Marketing communication, regardless of its quality, will not create sustainability and liveability of a place. It is only through understanding place branding as a dynamic process in which multiple stakeholders interact to create value that place brands will be inextricably linked to place identity and a sense of place.

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