# The branding of cities: a critical exploration

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INTRODUCTION

Branding has long been associated with marketing of products. Today, however, branding has grown beyond the image of a product to include branding of cities and other places (Dinnie 2011). This is due in large part to the increase in competition facilitated byglobalization. Nowadays, cities and other places are increasingly competing with each other for investment, attention, shoppers, visitors, talents, events and the like (Gelder & Allan 2006). This has been accelerated and intensified by the process of globalization which has led to a situation where in, competition is no longer focused on the big cities but rather competition had grown global.
In other words, competition is no longer limited to the big cities that compete for large sports events, UN bodies or for headquarters of multinational corporations (Gelder & Allan 2006). Nowadays, the big cities are increasingly being confronted with competitors from the smaller places. Competition is increasingly growing global as cities from different continents compete for

attention, investment, tourists and many others. For example, major towns in Italy have seen their furniture making industry clusters being wiped out by competitor towns in China who produce similar products but at a much a lower cost (Gelder & Allan 2006).

The need for places to differentiate themselves in pursuit of the various economic, political and psycho-social objectives has become necessary (Dinnie 2003). The application of branding techniques to cities and other places is growing in frequency, given the increasingly global competition facing nations and places, in both domestic and the external market. The adoption of conscious branding is thus essential, if places are to compete effectively on the global stage.

Despite the force of this argument, some scholars argue that there is no such thing as place branding. For example, Simon Anholt, in his book Brand New Justice: The Upside of Global Branding argues that place branding is nothing but a myth. He views the notion of place branding as an excessively ambitious, unproven and ultimately irresponsible claim (Anholt, 2008).

It is thus the sole purpose of this analysis to explore critically on this concept of place branding and to provide evidence that place branding do exists. We provide an evidence based argument and make visible particular themes and issues that would otherwise have remained ' veiled to the eye' of critics such as the success factors of place branding. We begin by exploring on the branding concept.

## THE CONCEPT OF BRANDING

The branding concept dates back to about two centuries ago when Josiah Wedgwood realized that naming his dinnerware after English nobility and stamping his name on his pottery made it more desirable (Morgan et al 2002). Fast forward to the 1930s, Neil McElroy, the promotion manager at Procter & Gambles developed a brand management system where in various groups of people could be assigned to handle specific marketing strategies for competing brands (Morgan et al 2002).

By the 1980s, the title of a brand manager was increasingly being acknowledged as a coveted job for a typical graduate from a business school (Morgan et al 2002). By the mid-1990s, branding had grown increasingly popular and was being applied to products and to the retailers that sell these products as well, with names like Victoria's Secret and Bath & Body Works (Morgan et al 2002)..

Today, branding has grown to include the application of branding techniques to cities and places as competition for investment, attention, shoppers, visitors, talents, events and the like continue to go stronger with globalization.

## PLACE BRANDING AND TOURISM

Place branding is of particular relevance to tourism as the experience of a tourist in a particular country contributes immensely to the image of that country. For example, a distinctive brand that captures the spirit of a city may be created to inspire travelers, the industry and the general populace itself (Kotler & Gertner 2002). A simplistic and often unsubstantiated assumption that is frequently made about place branding is that consumers

construct their perception of a nation based on their experience of product purchase in that particular nation (Dinnie 2003). However, as Jaffe & Nabenzahl (2001) suggest, there are many determinants to the image perception of a country than merely a product purchase. For example, a tourist'spersonal experiencecontributes far more strongly to the perception of the image of a country than a mere product purchase.

In this regard, Gnoth (2002) recognizes tourism as an important determinant of a country's image perceptions and attempts to develop a theoretical model of leveraging the brand of a country through a tourism destination brand, where in services that enhance a tourists experience at a destination are used to develop the brand of a country across different industries.

Place branding must have the following to succeed

1) People' s experience of the place

Place branding should be based on people's experience. Despite advances intechnologythat have created advanced ways of reaching people such as advertising, communicationof most information is still done in the old fashioned way by word-of-mouth (Rainisto 2003). If, for example, tourists have a good experience with New York City, they communicate this experience to the others thereby boosting the image of the city

2) Perception

Perception is yet another important element of place branding. Let's take the case of New York as an example; the perception of New York in most people's mind is a city that is rich and cosmopolitan (Rainisto 2003). It is perceived to be a city that offers its inhabitants and visitors almost everything that could be demanded of a city including commerce, finance,

Universities and colleges, industries, historical sites and cultural and

economic opportunities (Rainisto 2003). This perception is important for a

city to achieve a brand success.

3) What the city or place stands for?

For a place brand to be created, it must have a meaning or stand for

something. For example, San Francisco stands for industry, cultureand

technology (Rainisto 2003). Apple, Oracle, Intel, Xpedior, Jamcracker,

Genentech, Blue Matrix, and Sun Microsystems among others are just but a

few of the firms that reside in San Francisco (Rainisto 2003). San Francisco is

also known for its diversity including Chinatown, Alcatraz, the Silicon Valley,

Fisherman's Wharf, Museum of Modern Art, the retailenvironmentand

proximity of Monterey and Carmel (Rainisto 2003).

Similarly, New York City stands for not only its cultural icons, but for its

financial district and wall street, as well. It is home to the large financial

institutions in the world including WorldBank, American Express, CitiGroup,

Royal Bank of Canada, J. P. Morgan/Chase, Wachovia, United Bank of

Switzerland and Deutsche Bank among many others (Rainisto 2003). New

York is also home to investment firms such as Bear Sterns, Goldman Sachs,

Morgan Stanley and Lehman Brothers among many others (Rainisto 2003).

These key factors have contributed to its brand success.

4) Appearance

Appearance is yet another factor that determines the success of a place

brand. The appearance of a place, particularly the physical characteristics

are important in place branding. Places are defined by their appearance,

location, function and cultural attainments. For example, Amsterdam,

Rotterdam, San Francisco and Barcelona are primarily known for their harbors (Hall 2002). Similarly, New York and Zurich are famed as banking centers while places like Boston, Atlanta and Charleston are known for their architecture and history (Rainisto 2003).

Clearly place branding is very much in existence and has contributed to the success of major cities including New York, Paris, San Francisco and many others. Place branding is, however, not without its criticism.

## CRITICISM OF PLACE BRANDING

According to Anholt (2003) nations may be said to have brands in the form of reputations which are important to their progress and prosperity; in a similar way to which brand images are important to corporations. But the idea of creating a brand for a country, place, city or region in a similar way to branding of products is both vain and foolish. Anholt argues that there is no conclusive evidence that shows that marketing communications programmes, slogans or logos can succeed in altering the perceptions of places.

In fact some evidence seems to suggest the opposite. Since the launch of the Anholt Nation Brands Index in 2005, Anholt notes that there has been no correlation between the changes in brand value of a nation and expenditure on nation branding campaigns (Anholt 2010). He, in fact, suggests that several countries that had not done marketing had seen an overall improvement in their images while those that had spent heavily on advertising and public relations campaign had seen their brand value stagnate or even decline (Anholt 2010).

In as much as Anholt insists that places can't be reduced to simplistic images, I concur with the view that place branding do exists as evident with cities such as New York, San Francisco, Paris, Berlin and Rochester which have continued to experience brand success

## CHALLENGES EXPERIENCED WHEN CREATING PLACE BRANDS

Place branding, however, is not as simple as it may look and has various challenges that vary from place to place. For example, city branding needs to be specific on what it wants to sell and to whom, but at the same time it has to appeal to as wide market as possible (Dinnie 2011). Unlike a product or service brand, a place brand is often unclear and difficult to define. What should a place brand coverAnd what should be the geographical scope of this brandThese are some of the questions that are often overlooked when creating a place brand.

Take, for example, the brand Lisboa e Vale do Tejo which incorporates the city of Lisbon and the area of Vale do Tejo (Dinnie 2011). The main problem with this brand is its apparent lack of focus. This brand unites the urban and cosmopolitan city of Lisbon with the area of Vale do Tejo which mainly comprises of natural parks, rural areas, and picturesque cities like Santarem (Dinnie 2011). This combination of places with distinct variables creates a complex and incongruous brand image.

Moreover, a place brand that is created may have a broader meaning to the target consumers than the intended meaning of the brand (Dinnie 2011). In other words, the perception of the consumers about a brand created to represent a particular area may be different than initially planned. Clearly,

place branding is highly complex and achieving a predetermined position is far more difficult than that of a product or service brand.

## CONCLUSION

Despite the challenges and criticism of place branding, we have identified that it is actually possible to brand a city and that the success of major cities such as New York, Paris, San Francisco among many others is due to the adoption of conscious branding which had seen them competing effectively on a global stage.

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