

PLACE BRANDING: A CROSS-ROAD BETWEEN
ACADEMICS OF MANY DISCIPLINES
AND PRACTITIONERS.
CALL FOR “A” ARTICLES WRITTEN
BY MARKETING ACADEMICIANS!

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Two texts can be considered as seminal contributions to the place branding literature, both published in 2002: the book *Destination Branding*, edited by Morgan, Pritchard and Pride, and the special issue “Nation Branding” of the *Journal of Brand Management* (vol. 9, issue 4). The authors of the first book are two academicians and one practitioner (Pride); the editor of the special issue, who is neither properly a practitioner (being qualified as “one of the UK’s best-known international marketing thinkers”, p.1) nor an academician, writes in his Foreword: “To be plunged back in the world of academia after nearly 18 years in the world of ‘practice’ has reminded me sharply of both its attractions and its limitations”. Of the nineteen contributors to the special issue, roughly half are academicians, many are practitioners, a few are politicians (one is a minister); of the academicians, approximately half are professors of marketing, while the others work in history, in arts, in tourism.

Actually, the topic was anticipated almost ten years before 2002, when in 1993 two books were published: *Marketing places: Attracting Investment, Industry, And Tourism To Cities, States and Nations*, written by Kotler *et al.*, and *Product-Country Images: Impact and Role in International Marketing*, edited by Papadoupoulos and Heslop. The fact that Kotler appears as a contributor on the topic is in itself a clear signal that place marketing and branding are significant fields, and had already developed a body of knowledge that could be packaged in a book for larger dissemination¹.

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1. Even if it is obvious that place marketing and place branding are two distinct concepts, as are marketing and branding, it is equally true that they are strongly related. See Kavaratzis (2005).

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Another significant landmark is the article “Nation-brands of the twenty-first century” (Anholt, 1998), which, assigning the status of brands to some countries and not to others, opened a new stream of inquiry with clear political implications. Simon Anholt has indeed developed a toolkit that public policy-makers can use to measure the strength of their place’s brand and to understand its components. In his continuous effort to build and spread the knowledge on place branding, in 2004 he created the journal *Place Branding and Public Diplomacy*, which, together with the *Journal of Place Management and Development* (founded in 2008) and the latest *Journal of Destination Marketing and Management* (founded in 2012), nurture and broaden the debate involving a growing number of contributors. These journals, rather young compared to the classical journals to which we often refer, have gained significant positions in the rankings, and may be worth considering for those of us who want to contribute to the field. As table 1 shows, two of them are B-journals, while the journal created by Anholt is a C-journal².

Table 1 – Ratings of Journals involved in the debate on Place Branding (in parenthesis the year of foundation)

Journals	IF	SJR	H	Tot	A, B, C
Journal of Destination Marketing & M.ment (2012)	0,575	0,967	0,192	1,734	B
Journal of Brand M.ment (1993)	0	0,590	0,615	1,206	B
Journal of Place M.ment and Development (2008)	0	1,000	0,154	1,154	B
Place Branding and Public Diplomacy (2004)	0	0,377	0,346	0,723	C

Source: Journal Rating AIDEA 2015.

In the same years in which the debate grows, we see the appearance of the first destination brands indexes and rankings. While they do not seem to be much used in academic publications, nonetheless they have the merit to raise the attention of the stakeholders involved in managing places, and to put in the spotlight that the brand dimension of a country can be a key factor for its competitiveness. The publication of these rankings has an

2. It is worth noting that:

- The Scimago Index SJR is used also to rank countries, as it is evident in its title “Scimago Journal & Country Rank”, and that
- In the long Journal Rating AIDEA list, thirty-six of the A-journals carry a place in their name, with “European” at the top and “American” second; and the same for thirty B-journals, with “Asia/Asia-Pacific” at the top.

interesting positive effect: the particular position of a country in a rank can be the starting point of a demanding, long and complex process of rethinking the place as a brand to improve its score³, and even to develop new indexes. This process of branding places, which involves a very large number of public and private stakeholders, has been the topic of many case studies, published in academic journals.

The increasing availability of newer and newer experiences to tell is probably one of the reasons why the literature has been focused on descriptive cases (Muniz Martinez, 2012), and has been scarcely involved in developing a theoretical framework (Gertner, 2011, Hanna and Rowley, 2011). The consequence is that “Place branding still lacks a clear and commonly accepted theoretical framework that would structure and guide its practical application and fill the evident gap between existing theory and practice” (Ashworth *et al.*, 2015, p. 2). The field is very much practitioner-led, and sees an absolute predominance of articles of qualitative nature based on the authors’ personal opinions, and paradoxically the scarcity of empirical research (Gertner, 2011). Practice has been abundant, while theory has lagged behind.

Besides country brand indexes, rankings, and case studies, another stream that has been developing through the years is the distinction between branding different geographical units: nations (Dinnie, 2008, Marino e Mainolfi, 2013), regions and cities (Kavaratzis and Ashworth, 2010, Kavaratzis *et al.*, 2015; Dinnie, 2011, Ari-Veikko Anttiroiko, 2014), small cities (Baker, 2012), glocal and virtual identities (Govers and Go, 2009), and other hybrid units (Zenker, 2015). If on one side it is true that identities of different classes require dedicated attention, we believe that the critical issue is not to see these concepts as separate units, but rather to integrate the branding of a nation with that of its regions, cities or even parts of the city. As well as companies have to organize hierarchically their product portfolio to develop an effective brand architecture strategy, the stakeholders involved in branding different geographical and physical identities must investigate their hierarchy, which is not only a matter of physical size.

The difference between applying the brand relationship spectrum (Aaker and Joachimsthaler, 2000; Keller, 2014) to brand a portfolio of

3. Following the low ranking of South Korea, 33 out of 50 in 2008 Anholt-GfK Roper Nation Brands Index, the government of South Korea decided to take action in order to climb up the rankings. In January 2009, President Lee Myung-bak, who made upgrading South Korean nation brand one of the priorities of its mandate, created the Presidential Council on Nation Branding, which consisted of 47 members: 34 civilian members and 13 government officials (including eight ministers). The Chairman of the Council announced in March 2009 that the goal of the Presidential Council on Nation Branding was to raise South Korea’s ranking in the index of 18 spots in 4 years, reaching rank 15 by 2013.

products and a portfolio of geographical units is that place branding appears to be an organic concept springing from the routine behavior of a large variety of stakeholders (residents, tourists, firms, public institutions, investors and others), but most of them are not aware of their effective contribution to the equity of the place (Medway *et al.*, 2015). What's more, while images of places evolve over time, the place's past can continue to exert a strong effect on its current image (Govers and Go, 2009), so that this image appears as a stereotype emerging from the many activities, behavior, political and economic issues in which a place has been involved in its past history. In this perspective, place images may be hard to change in a short time: "Paris is about style, Japan about technology, Switzerland about wealth and precision, Rio de Janeiro about carnival and football, Tuscany about the good life, and most African nations about poverty, corruption, war, famine and disease", noted Anholt in 2007 (p. 1). We do not know if these stereotypes still hold today, but it is certainly true that it is very tough for a country to convince people living in other countries to stop thinking in frames and start seeing the place the way it really is (Kotler and Gertner, 2002). What is even more is that these clichés affect how people treat other close places, as it may be for South Korea and North Korea, or for South Africa compared to the African continent.

We have raised many issues in a short space, but in its relatively short life place branding has evolved in different stages, where each stage was not substituting the old one, but rather coexisted (Kavaratzis and Ashworth, 2010), so that the topic becomes more and more multidimensional and multifaceted, and the delimitation of the field is still rather blurred (Gertner, 2011).

From its very beginning, the field qualifies itself as an agora where academicians, consultants, practitioners, and even politicians exchange ideas and publish their views in articles and books. After fifteen years, the panorama appears still variegated. If this is not bad per se, it is surprising how many people talk and write about marketing and branding when marketing and branding are not their vocational background, while many experts in marketing and branding are almost silent on marketing and branding places. Time is ripe to fill the gap, to build a stronger theoretical background, to try to integrate the various streams of thoughts in order to enhance our understanding of the field. "Rethinking place branding" is the call for action of Kavaratzis *et al.* (2015), and each chapter of the book is dedicated to the rethinking of something related to the place: the concept, the image, the physical communication, the sense of place,... But someone is questioning whether talking and theorizing about place branding is a waste of time (Medway *et al.*, 2015)

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