

Place branding research in times of pandemic

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We were planning a nice and fruitful conference to take place in Barcelona in December 2020, the fifth annual conference of the International Place Branding Association. After the meetings in London, Swansea, Macao and Volos, this new gathering of scholars and practitioners was meant to be a success. But, in February 2020, the world unexpectedly changed. News from Wuhan arrived that a novel kind of coronavirus was spreading.

In a month, Europe was under a serious threat. In another month, America and the rest of the world were in danger too. Globalization at its worst. Global indifference at the beginning, global panic then, and eventually global competition for vaccines and economic recovery. The “domination system” –borrowing the term from Riane Eisler’s work- seems to be still prevalent –although with new players, new rules, and new roles- and the “partnership system” revealed its fragility at an international scale -although some attempts of a new “vaccine diplomacy” are quite remarkable.

Conferences can be defined as events where exchange of ideas and social interaction are the two main goals. And, all of a sudden, we were forced to lockdowns and social distance. The IPBA board, together with the organizing university, Universitat Pompeu Fabra, decided to postpone the conference one year -like the European Football Championship or the Olympic Games-, until December 2021.

So no IPBA Conference in 2020. But, in the meantime, what could we do with the full papers submitted? We decided to stick to our plans, in order not to hinder the task of the researchers, and publish this Special Issue of Place Branding and Public Diplomacy containing a selection of the best scientific contributions.

This Special Issue contains five articles that were submitted and accepted as full papers for the 2020 IPBA Conference. As explained, the event didn’t finally take place, but instead a webinar was organized for the same date, December 10th, and consisted of a keynote about Costa Rica’s branding strategies and a panel discussion between members of the IPBA board.

During the discussion, some interesting questions raised related to how the coronavirus epidemic would affect the professional and academic field of place branding. Three of the most interesting ones were:

- What successful –and unsuccessful- strategies have cities, regions and countries deployed to face the challenges posed by Covid-19?
- Which –if any- long-term effects will the pandemic have in the professional practice of place branding?

- Will the global health crisis accelerate the trends in the discipline -community engagement, environmental and social sustainability, digitization, and focus on communication rather than on promotion, for example?

However, not a single paper in this Special Issue deals directly with the effects of the Covid-19 in place branding, as these academic contributions were designed and developed before the outbreak of the disease. Instead, they address well-known topics such as regional and rural branding, sustainable tourism or inclusive and cultural place branding. They present, though, some of the potential solutions place branding can provide to respond to the health and trust crisis and to recuperate social and economic welfare.

In the first article, *Rural place branding from a multi-level perspective: a Danish example*, Barbora Gulisova, Chris Horbel, and Egon Noe analyze the interactions and administrative overlap in the case of three Danish rural municipalities and a number of small villages. Place brands of different dimensions and scope interact with each other, sometimes under logic of collaboration, sometimes under logic of competition, or both at the same time. Place brand architecture can be strategically planned in order to achieve maximum benefit and visibility.

The authors propose six dimensions or determinants that may have an impact on the interactions between the higher-level and the lower-level place brands. Then, through an exploratory qualitative research, they observe that in none of the cases of the Danish municipalities studied a strategic place branding approach was applied, although different levels of commitment both from the municipal level to the smaller places' brands and vice versa were observed.

They conclude by putting forward a framework of interactions between higher-level and lower-level place brands consisting in four types of interactions: *positioning* –where lower-level places use the higher-level in their branding-, *targeting* –where lower-level places target the higher-level to gain awareness-, *anchorage* –when the higher-level brand uses the lower-level brand to represent the place-, and *resource provision* –when the higher-level brand provides financial, administrative or knowledge support to the lower-level brand.

Similarly, Juha Halme, in *The role of social capital in the institutionalization of regional place marketing activity*, explores –using semi-structured interviews- some regional place marketing projects in Finland to reveal how the social capital generated during the projects contributes significantly to the expansion and reinforcement of stakeholder networks. Social capital – understood as trust, networks, mutual goals, and shared norms and values- helps place branding projects to tackle long-term goals and favors the institutionalization of place marketing activities in regions. Besides, the creation of social capital fosters collaborative practices although arises the need for clear distribution of responsibilities.

The next two articles both examine city case studies to reflect on which specific techniques can be arranged to build brand identity. Sofia Koumara-Tsitsou and Nicholas Karachalis focus their research on the role traditional products and craftsmanship can play in influencing travel behavior, sustainability and brand image. Their article, *Traditional products and crafts as main elements in the effort to establish a city brand linked to sustainable tourism*, explains how two

Greek small cities, Soufli and Ioannina, have put in place a plan to use silk production and silversmithing as brand drivers and attractors.

Combining a visitor survey with stakeholder interviews, the authors highlight how participatory activities and community-based solutions based on traditional crafts can be part of a successful city brand strategy. Local products can be at the center of the promotion of local distinctiveness and, at the same time, preserve historical legacies and provide quality employment. To achieve this, though, a more organized and strategic planning effort should be attained.

In a similar vein, Arja Lemmetyinen, Lenita Nieminen and Johanna Aalto consider how a cultural route –specifically, one based on the famous Finnish architect Alvar Aalto - can be employed in the branding of a network of cities. In their article, “A gentler structure to life –co-creation in branding a cultural route”, and using a critical case approach, they explore how a cultural route expresses the identity of the partner sites. The conclusions support the importance of the interaction and dialogue between stakeholders in cultural place branding, as well as the appropriateness of the co-creation paradigm.

Finally, Lisa Källström and Per Siljeklint, in “‘My green heart’ –an inclusive place branding process facilitated by Design Thinking”, build on the concepts of design thinking and participatory action research to propose a shift in the way place branding processes are conceived and organized. Using a real-life example of a small Swedish countryside municipality, they describe how a place can be rebranded in order to improve the engagement with residents and meaningfulness of its identity.

Their study, though, also revealed how conflicting images about the place, power relations and resistance to giving participants real power can interfere with the methodology. On the other hand, a clear positive outcome is the way in which -by letting the stakeholders take an active role- they immediately develop a strong sense of belonging and ownership about the place brand.

All in all, these five articles contribute to keep alive the flame of research in the place branding field, waiting for the fifth conference of the International Place Branding Association to effectively take place in Barcelona in December, 2021, and waiting also for the results of the studies that will surely analyze how the pandemic has affected the professional and academic sides of the discipline.