



Editorial

The state of academic place branding research according to practitioners

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Despite the state of global affairs, 2016 brought some positive developments for the place branding community. 2016 saw the birth of the International Place Branding Association (IPBA: www.placebranding.org), now counting over a hundred members. At the same time, The Place Brand Observer (<http://placebrandobserver.com>) confirmed itself as the leading online magazine, think blog and knowledge hub for place branding practitioners and academics alike. It now counts more than 1500 newsletter subscribers. The newly established International Place Branding Association also organised its inaugural conference together with local host, Middlesex University, in London in December 2016.

The IPBA conference series builds on the collective success of the earlier International Colloquia on Place Brand Management (London and Aosta), the International Conference on Destination Branding and Marketing series (DBM Macau and Cardiff), the City Branding Symposia (Stockholm and Beijing), the Corfu Symposia on Managing & Marketing Places, and the Poznan Best Place Summit. With 130 delegates, the inaugural conference proved to be successful in bringing together place branding researchers from various backgrounds, which used to meet in smaller networks within their own respective disciplines. It shows that place branding is slowly emerging as a stand-alone, although

critiqued, topic in academia (Warnaby *et al*, 2015), and as a meeting ground for various established and newer academic disciplines (Hankinson, 2015).

Therefore, editors of this journal and The Place Brand Observer thought that the timing was right to ask place branding practitioners what they think of these developments and, in particular, the state of academic research in the area of place branding. Does research conducted so far meet the needs and expectations of those “on the grounds”? Which areas require more investigation? How can place branding research become more meaningful with greater societal impact and better alignment between academic and practice (Kavaratzis, 2015)? Does a practitioner’s view match with the perceptions of leading academics in the field (Gertner, 2011; Lucarelli and Berg, 2011)? Are we all on the same page regarding research priorities (Moilanen, 2015)?

An exploratory survey was made available online from October 12 to November 20, 2016. The survey was promoted via The Place Brand Observer and through social media channels, including relevant LinkedIn groups, explicitly asking practitioners, not academics, to complete the survey. Questions asked in the survey included:

1. To what extent does existing research on place branding meet your needs?

2. Your thoughts on the current state of place branding research?
3. In your view, which areas require more investigation?
4. How can place branding research become more meaningful for your work?
5. How can we achieve better alignment between academia and practice?

A total of 35 respondents answered the survey. Eleven respondents categorised themselves as ‘consultant’, eight as ‘place (brand) marketer’, five as ‘place (brand) developer’ and eight ‘miscellaneous’. This shows the diversity of the group and akin to the multidisciplinary nature of the academic place branding field, it is likely that respondents come from many backgrounds. They most likely also look at the field from different perspectives. Whether they are—or have a background—in general policy making, diplomacy, reputation management, communications, tourism marketing, events, investment promotion, talent attraction or export marketing, will certainly colour their responses. Therefore, the following observations are indicative, exploratory and subjective in nature, but nevertheless, in the minds of the authors, relevant and interesting to the readership of this journal.

Generally speaking, it seems that the respondents believe that place branding research still has a long way to go to gain attention and admiration from professionals outside of academia. Two-thirds of respondents indicated that place branding research only somewhat meets their needs, with only four respondents expressing total satisfaction. One-fifth of respondents do not see their needs met by place branding research as it is today. One respondent finds place branding research repetitive and not moving on. Various respondents consider it still in its infancy. A frequent point mentioned is the lack of consensus on definitions and usage of key terms, such as ‘brands’; the best way to measure branding success; and the diversity of strategic objectives when it comes to place branding. Even though few in the academic community would argue that the place branding domain is a mature field of study, the relevance of these comments by respondents can only be

gauged when weighted according to their access to the academic literature. In that light, it is remarkable that only eight respondents read some ($N = 6$) or most ($N = 2$) of the journal of *Place Branding and Public Diplomacy* and only five respondents read some ($N = 4$) or most ($N = 1$) of the *Journal of Place Management and Development*. Respondents’ ability to objectively assess the state of academic research must therefore be approached with some scepticism. However, if academic place branding research has an image problem, then that would be an issue that requires just as much attention as the actual research itself.

However, respondents also made valuable comments that bring hope. One survey respondent stressed the cross-disciplinary potential of place branding research, whereas another observed that the field is developing very fast. One statement caught our particular attention when one respondent mentioned that “place branding should be an academic subject that is taught at university, with research that can serve as a foundation on which to build”. Unfortunately, to date, no institution offers place branding as a stand-alone academic field of research or study. Nor does there seem to be any university with a dedicated place branding department or research group.

When asked about areas that need more investigation (a question which will be particularly useful for students looking for a thesis topic), two respondents mentioned the link between place branding and sustainability. The question about the actual effectiveness of place branding also still requires further investigation, judging by survey responses. And so does a focus on place branding for rural regions and smaller towns (see Baker, 2012). If you are about to embark on a doctoral degree, why not address the following knowledge gap, pointed out by one survey respondent:

Country or city statistics in tourism, investment and trade aren’t enough to evaluate the success of a long term branding campaign. A new methodology for testing how a place ranks in people’s hearts, minds and indeed wallets is required.

Another potential research strand is to look at place branding holistically, as part of a larger system. For instance, how place branding relates to other elements of successful places, particularly placemaking. The question being asked is whether place branding experts really are the drivers for place competitiveness and appeal—or is it that external factors like changing airline connections, new events or basic benefits like cost of living really make the difference? Lastly, more research is needed on place branding operating at the interface of the digital and the physical, the influence of social media on brands and—directly related—the extent to which destinations, for instance, still have control over their brand.

Some of these research gaps are certainly being addressed in current research, which reinforces the idea that the gap between research and practice is not just about misunderstanding and misalignment, but just as much about networking and access. Getting practitioners to read academic literature is a challenge, because of writing styles; scientific requirements of academic papers making them less attractive to practitioners because they do not have much time to read and because many papers limit themselves to smaller research questions as opposed to addressing the larger issues. Some practitioners are asking for real case studies and best practices, yet others, rightfully so, argue that this only helps to some extent, as the essence of branding is that it deals with specific local circumstances and contextual peculiarities. Ultimately, brands need to create a unique positioning, while dealing with situational complexities. Hence, to copy best practices defeats the purpose. Academics have signalled this repeatedly when observing the practice of place branding.

It seems that some form of mediation between practitioners and academics will always be needed as the job descriptions, personal performance indicators, job requirements and interests are too asymmetrical to warrant easy exchange of ideas, methods and learnings. Both the IPBA and The Place Brand Observer aim to facilitate networking

and conversation between practitioners and researchers through their websites, member network and annual conferences. In 2015, The Place Brand Observer teamed up with the Journal of *Place Branding and Public Diplomacy* to share selected publications from the journal and interview the authors to summarise methods, findings and insights in a way that is accessible to practitioners. Much work remains to be done, but it is a start.

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