

*Place and marketing in a
dynamic world. 1st Consumer
Research Summit*
Bangor Business School (London Centre)

The aim of this one-day conference was to “explore the linkages between place, identity, marketing and consumption”. In articulating this aim, the conference addressed issues relating to what Cresswell (2004) terms the social constructionist and phenomenological approaches to the study of place. According to Cresswell, the social constructionist approach seeks to understand places in terms of how they manifest more general underlying social processes. In contrast, the phenomenological approach “seeks to define the essence of human existence as one that is necessarily and importantly ‘in place’” and, as a consequence, “is less concerned with ‘places’ and more interested in ‘Place’” (p. 51).

The theming of the conference, with its emphasis on consumer research, highlights how places can, according to Soja (1996), be doubly constructed, in that they not only have a material form (i.e. they are built, and also incorporate features of the natural environment) but also are social constructions in that they are perceived, felt, understood and imagined by those who use them. Such issues were explored in the context of tourism destinations in the first presentation by Terry Stevens, which focused on destination *management* in terms of identifying a series of critical success factors distilled from the author’s extensive experience as a consultant to a broad array of different types of tourist destinations. His paper highlighted both the material (in highlighting the importance of having a well-managed, “great” product in physical terms), and the more overtly “social”, in the sense of having a destination management organisation which worked effectively. Combining these physical and social aspects, Stevens argued that the preconditions should be created for innovation and creativity that are crucial to destination success in a competitive environment where (again, emphasising on the social constructionist approach to place) consumers of a destination are proactive in the co-creation of their experience.

This notion of places as social constructions was also investigated in the presentation by Ramazon Yavuz and Aysegul Toker, with specific emphasis on the fact that consumers develop interactive and co-creative relationships with places. Building on notions of place attachment from the environmental psychology literature, and customer engagement from the marketing literature, Yavuz and Toker developed a conceptualisation of place engagement, which could have behavioural manifestations in terms of future patronage intention, “location disclosure” and performing an “ambassadorial” function on behalf of the place in question.

Place attachment was also highlighted in the presentation by Dinnie and Warren, which took the ICON model of place branding – the ICON acronym standing for

integrated (i.e. involving high levels of stakeholder collaboration), *contextualised* (i.e. responding to a specific situation of the place), *organic* (i.e. the place brand evolves as a consequence of a range of both planned and unplanned activities and occurrences) and *new* (i.e. highlighting the importance of innovation) (Dinnie, 2016). Dinnie and Warren considered the application of this model in the context of the city of Toronto, Canada. In particular, the presentation focused on rap star Drake's description of his home city as "the 6" in his recent album (referring possibly to the six municipalities that make up metropolitan Toronto or, alternatively, the two telephone area codes for the city, both of which include the number six) and its appropriation by numerous place management/marketing stakeholders. This also included an associated hand gesture, joining the thumb and index finger to form a circle, with the other fingers upright so as to form a figure "6". This seems to have become an unofficial symbol of this city, used by various city stakeholders across a variety of social media. The existence of such "alternative" place brand symbols and narratives is an interesting area for future research, adding to the existing literature on place branding symbols (Warnaby and Medway, 2010). Cases such as Toronto emphasise on the dynamic nature of place brands and how they can potentially be created.

Linked to this, the changes in how places are perceived by the target audiences for place marketing/branding activity was explored on a national scale by Raymond R Liu, Yubin Zhou and Xiuqin Zeng in a longitudinal study of how China has been perceived between 2008 and 2015, particularly in terms of the relationship between perceived country image and the image of the products produced in that country. This link between place and the products associated with it (harking back to the established research area relating to associated notions of "country-of-origin") was explored in a very different regional-scale context by Gillian Rodriguez, who considered the contribution of meat products derived from Herdwick lamb to the place brand of the English Lake District. In the area, the Herdwick breed of sheep is highly visible and forms part of the local "landscape". The presentation highlighted the fact that residents of the area held a range of perceptions, experiences and associations with the landscape which influenced their judgement of the quality of the meat, and that purchase of the meat was perceived as a means of contributing to the local economy and the community interaction and integration. This more phenomenological perspective on the relationships between places and the products which emanate from them is an area where there is scope for much more research.

The papers presented at this event analysed aspects of place marketing/branding at a range of spatial scales, from city to nation. However, narrowing the spatial scale to arguably its narrowest level, the paper presented by Sara Parry and Louise Hassan considered *personal* places, taking a more overtly phenomenological approach to analyse the relationship between smoking and the spaces in which individuals practise this habit. The aim was to understand if restrictions on smoking in public places have influenced behaviour in terms of self-regulation and negotiation of smoking areas within private shared spaces. Drawing on theories of place attachment, this exploratory research did indicate that smokers did form bonds with the places in which they smoked – perhaps an untapped place marketing strategy for tobacco companies, but one with obvious ethical implications relating to societal well-being.

In conclusion, the presentations at this event could be regarded as a microcosm of many of the issues relating to the management and marketing/branding of places.

Defining a place in the first case is often difficult, given the fact that as well as physical and material entities, places are phenomenological and social constructions. Indeed, the latter helps to explain why places can engender powerful connections and associations for those involved with them. Moreover, places are dynamic entities which change over time, and their organic and evolving nature (to which those responsible for their management and marketing have to adapt) was highlighted in a number of this conference's presentations.

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References

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