

The selective nature of place branding

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to strengthen the conceptual understanding of place brands and place branding by exploring to which extent place branding implies a level of selectivity.

Design/methodology/approach – A conceptual approach has been taken in this paper to provide an analytical conceptualisation of place branding to guide future empirical studies. The research, and the resulting paper has been structured around a progressive discussion of place as concept, of place brands as limited forms of geographical representations and of place branding as a highly selective process.

Findings – Places are highly complex and cannot simply be understood as spatial entities within a closed hierarchical, territorial-administrative system. Places only exist when they have an audience, and the resulting spatial identities often overlap, contradict or complement each other across existing territorial-administrative levels. The rise of new forms of spatial identities results in new ‘places’, and all places can be seen as having or being brands. Such place brands are limited forms of geographical representations that consist of positive, neutral or negative associations that influence perception and eventually behaviour. The notion of place branding implies market segmentation and a certain level of power to exercise control by selecting target-groups and formulating policy, strategy and undertaking action. Through this selectivity some target-groups will be preferred above others in a process of inclusion and exclusion. This selectivity potentially creates inequalities between not only different groups but also different places.

Research limitations/implications – In future empirical and conceptual research concerned with place branding the inherent selectivity of place branding should be given more attention. The ends to which place branding is used as a means should be paid more attention in both policy (practice) and theory (practice).

Originality/value – The paper fills a gap in the conceptual thinking about place brands and place branding. Most literature has been concerned with translating the traditional methods from marketing and branding towards places and exploring to what extent that is possible. It provides us with a better understanding of the way in which places and branding can be conceptually addressed without the lock-in of the traditional ideas on ‘place’ or ‘branding’. By directing the attention of fellow researchers, policy makers and professionals towards the selective nature of place branding the paper also bring forth valuable insights for scholarly and professional debate.

Keywords – Place, Place Brand, Place branding, Place marketing, Layering of spatial identities

Paper type – Conceptual paper

1 Introduction

“If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences” – William I. Thomas (Thomas and Thomas, 1928)

The marketing and branding of cities, regions and countries is positioned firmly on contemporary policy agendas. In North-western Europe, pressure on the traditional welfare states has led to the adoption of more neo-liberal approaches. In what Neil Brenner termed ‘the re-scaling of statehood’, responsibility and administrative elbowroom has been transferred upwards toward (supra-) international institutions on the one hand, and downwards towards regional and local authorities on the other (Brenner, 2001; Brenner, 2004). Besides these changes in the hierarchical vertical dimension especially local administrations increasingly cooperate horizontally with non-state actors. The diminishing support from central government for social and economic depressed cities and regions, forced local administrations to look for alternative ways to stimulate their economy. Mobilisation of local stakeholders and attracting outside investors were key elements in this shift from managerialism to entrepreneurialism (Harvey, 1989). Together with a discourse on

economic globalisation resulting in a perceived state of international, inter-regional and inter-urban competition, these processes have boosted the focus on the competitiveness of places. This fuelled the interest for marketing-driven spatial strategies that aim to strengthen the competitiveness of the places. The notion of competitiveness is no longer bound to policies of national competitiveness; it now affects almost all aspects of places. Countries, regions and cities all embark on such marketing-driven strategies. The fundamental issues concerned with the translation of concepts and methods from the disciplines of marketing and branding are however often not addressed. Scholars from various disciplines have disputed the extent to which places are actually competing against each other. Some point out that urban competition is hardly global, but mostly limited to nearby cities (Gordon, 1999). Furthermore, especially economic geographers stress that not cities or regions, but firms compete (Boschma, 2004; MacLeod and Goodwin, 1999; MacLeod, 2001a; MacLeod, 2001b; Kitson et al., 2004). Despite these concerns policymakers continue to formulate policies promoting their competitiveness. This results in a variant on the Thomas theorem as quoted above: If policymakers perceive their places as being in competition, they will embark on policies to improve the competitive position of their places (Boisen, 2007a). As more places employ marketing-driven strategies, the perceived competition increases and even more places are likely to follow suit.

Branding has become a central concept for promoting local competitiveness. Whereas place marketing is concerned with the whole issue of a demand-driven approach to places and thus can be seen as a broad term (Kotler, 1993) – place branding is a more specific marketing-instrument that implies a more hedonistic approach to places. The goal of branding is to add value to a specific product, service or organisation. When translated to places, the goal of place branding would be to add value to the place in question in a broad sense. By influencing the perceived qualities of the place in question place branding can indirectly result in the attraction of more tourists, more inhabitants, more firms and more investments – yet the essence of place branding should be to add value to the existing users of the place in question. The translation of branding techniques towards places is one that has resulted in some interesting academic publications in the recent years (Kavaratzis, 2004; Anholt, 2007; Dinnie, 2008; Moilanen and Rainisto, 2008; Govers and Go, 2009; Dinnie, 2010), all of which embraces the complexity of the issue from different academic vantage points. Government officials, policymakers and various commercial and non-commercial stakeholders are becoming confident that a coherent, strong and attractive place brand will help promote the economic development of their city, region and/or country. Consultancy firms specialize in advice on how to apply traditional methods and techniques developed for the branding of products, services and organizations to places. In consultation with governments, firms, citizens and other stakeholders, such firms aim to develop branding strategies that present, promotes and strengthens the ‘brand’ of the place in question. The identity of a place is sought identified, extracted and orchestrated to further load the place brand with positive associations. Ultimately, the goal of such practices is to improve the image of the place as attractive and competitive amongst desired target-groups in the hope that a positive image will influence individual and institutional decisions that will benefit the place in question. In our view, such conscious orchestrations with focus on desired target-groups imply a selectiveness that deserves more attention in both policies (practice) and research (theory).

In this paper we focus on this selective nature of place branding. This is not only linked to presumed competition between places and state re-scaling discussed above. This article addresses some fundamental questions. First we take a closer look at the character of places and question the conceptualisation of places as distinct entities. The conceptualisation of places as having a distinct identity becomes even more problematic in the current increasingly complex political situation where new places and regions are constantly created and branded. Next, we discuss the extent to which places can be seen as being or having brands. We show how place brands are limited geographical representations and how the place brands are fluent in terms of content and in terms of the scalar level on which these representations are manifested. Building on the outcome from the discussion on ‘places’ and ‘place brands’ we then discuss the selective process of ‘place branding’ itself.

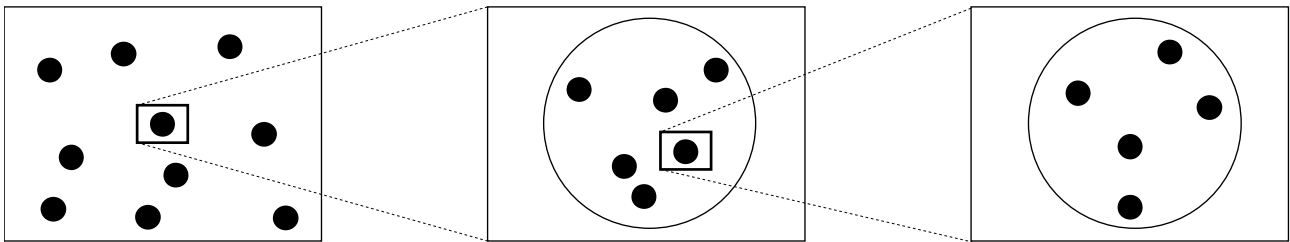
2 Places and the layering of spatial identities

“A place for everything, everything in its place.” – Isabella M. Beeton (Beeton, 1861)

Places are mostly uncritically conceptualised as separate objects. But places are social constructions made up of a selection of spatial elements by humans. Reducing the diverse and multidimensional space into separate homogeneous objects like places, wrongfully reifies the diverse and multidimensional space into spatial fetishes with magic powers

over humans (Brenner, 2004, 70; Massey, 2005). A first step to avoid this territorial trap of methodological territorialism is to conceptualise a place as part of a geographical hierarchy of places. For example: the European Union, the state of the Netherlands, the province of North Holland, the city of Amsterdam and the neighbourhoods of Amsterdam are geographical entities defined by a hierarchical organization of territory through geographical scales. In relation to place branding, policy-makers bound to such administrative levels are often the ones deciding to employ place branding as a means to strengthen specific, spatial policies. However, we need a more abstract understanding of place and how places exist through different geographical levels to understand the conceptual implications for place brands and place branding in general.

Figure 1: Place – zooming in: a demarcated space with other places and spaces inside



By the authors

The simplest symbol of a place is a 'dot'. If we imagine zooming in on this dot, the level of detail increases and the dot becomes a spatial container – a complex amalgamation of different elements. This spatial container embodies a space wherein other places can be distinguished. Figure 1 shows an over-simplified conceptual rendition of this scalar approach. A city might be defined as a 'place' within a region, yet the region itself might be defined as a place in its own right if the spatial context is focused on a higher territorial level such as, for instance, the state. Likewise, a city is made up of different spaces and places. Neighbourhoods, parks, squares, buildings, landmarks, infrastructure and other components make up the fabric of the city as a whole. The city as a place is thus an aggregate of other places and spaces within its boundaries. However, these places are selectively used in determining the image of the city.

For a typical European city with a medieval city centre, chance is that this centre plays a pivotal role in the identification with the city. Its built environment with landmarks and distinctive features represents the history of the city as a whole. If one were to choose only one picture to represent the Dutch city of Utrecht, it would almost surely be a picture of the Dom tower. The Dom tower is a famous landmark that represents the history of the city from the times of the Roman Empire (it was built upon the foundations of a Roman castle) - to the foundation of Utrecht University (founded by the Church). The tower has become a landmark which today is seen as the logic point of identification for inhabitants and visitors alike. It is a historical building, and therefore a building with a story. Its story is not limited to the building itself, but represents a part of the history of the whole city and therefore becomes a signifier of the whole city. Due to their historical importance and/or the role they play in everyday life, some places are more significant than other places. Often, such places are the ones that inhabitants and visitors are familiar with. They are often historical and have had the time to develop an identity that subsequently has evolved slowly, reflecting the development of the society in general. Such places are the ones used to identify the city as a whole and distinguish it from other cities.

Places are thus not distinct entities but are part of a scalar hierarchy, through which identities at different scales are selectively layered. Spatial identities sometimes often correspond to the territorial-administrative levels, but they often overlap, contradict or complement each other, both in terms of the space these 'places' occupy, and the context in which they are deemed relevant by their audiences. These problems in the conceptualisation of places in general become all the more pressing when we try to grasp the identity of places and regions, which have no historically formed, established identity. The recent re-scaling of statehood has created an increasing number of non-standard regions. 'Non-standard', because the new forms of spatial identity are less bound by territorial-administrative hierarchies than their traditional counterparts. New institutions of inter-municipal or inter-regional cooperation are increasingly created to serve specific purposes. Often these purposes are highly functional and initiated to deal with issues that cannot be addressed within the geographical hierarchy of existing territorial-administrative entities. The purposes are often centred on economic growth or related issues such as infrastructure or landscape strategies.

Figure 2 – The layering of spatial identities, from thick to thin

ASPECT	Ranging from <i>thick</i> :	to <i>thin</i> :
Spatial form	Closed	Open
	Territorial	Network
Organisation	Institutionalised	Project
Participants	General population	Administrators and specific stakeholders
Purpose	Broad and many	Single
	Culture	Economy
Time	Defensive	Offensive
	Historical oriented	Future oriented
	Stable	Change
	Old	New
Scale focus	Local and National	Global

From Terlouw (2009)

Terlouw (2009) presents a framework that is helpful in analysing the layering of identities in such non-standard regions. The range between ‘thick’ and ‘thin’ (figure 2) is important because of the aspects on which these new entities are constructed. One could look at such layering as the artificial creation of new ‘places’ for the purpose of promoting functional (and often economic) purposes. In the layering process, these new entities often build their spatial identity using existing identities of older places. They can copy the identity of neighbouring places or download or upload identity from a higher or lower level. The justification of such new ‘places’ is related to their functional role and to the identity they project through processes of uploading, downloading, copying or even moving associations between existing spatial entities on different scalar levels. The Dutch ‘Food Valley’ is an example of such a non-standard region centred around the University of Wageningen, with a well-established research centre focussing on food science. The rest of the region consists of cities and more rural areas where many firms and individuals are active in the food industry. Although the Food Valley region is a recent construct, the concept is gradually filled with related associations from the places within the new region. The spatial identity is thus becoming gradually ‘thicker’, as a result of both conscious communicative efforts by stakeholder institutions and the adoption and perception of the concept in general. A farmer living and working within this region might now find himself and his farming businesses represented in the ‘Food Valley’-concept, and in time embrace the concept if it represents added value. Equally, existing and potential firms within the food industry might consider locating or expanding their activities within the region due to a strong thematic and sectoral focus. The region might have been created to the specific purpose of projecting an attractive image of the region as a whole, yet individuals and businesses outside of the food sector are not likely to identify as strongly with this new region. For the ones that do identify with the Food Valley, they have gained another ‘place’ to identify with on a different scalar level. The farmer might identify with the village of Barneveld in terms of everyday life, yet in the role as farmer he might slowly start identifying with the Food Valley. This illustrates that the identification with places is highly contextual – especially when dealing with new, less traditional, ‘thin’ spatial identities. In essence, this layering of spatial identities results in new ‘places’, without the layering process only existing ‘places’ would exist, since the notion of ‘place’ requires an audience that identify with the place and recognize the place as a place.

3 Place brands as limited forms of geographical representations

“The image of a brand is a subjective thing. No two people, however similar, hold precisely the same view of the same brand.” – Jeremy Bullmore (WPP, 2001)

Although places inherently differ from products or services, they do share some characteristics with more traditional brands. Places can be seen as brands to the extent that most places have names that carry specific associations and

connotations amongst people that know about them. The name of a place provokes a set of perceptions in the mind. Associations of a place exist in the mind, in the same way that specific associations are attributed to specific commercial brands. The place name can thus be seen as a brand; containing different geographical representations that make up the brand image of the place it signifies. However, places are inherently more complex than commercial brands and the notion of places as having or being brands should therefore be seen as metaphorical (Boisen, 2008). Well-known places often come with a set of strong associations that are hard to change. Simon Anholt – often referred to as the instigator of the scientific discussion on place brands and place branding – characterises the outcomes of such associations as the ‘reputation’ of a place (Anholt, 2010). In essence a brand is a set of positive, neutral or negative associations. The number and strength of such associations is likely to reflect the extent to which a specific place is known. The reputation or image of a place holds positive and negative aspects, and whether they are positive or negative is highly context specific. German cars are often instinctively perceived as technically superior because of the widespread idea that Germans and thus German firms are especially thorough. Paris carries an air of romance and delicate candlelight dinners, whereas London often is associated with hardcore business such as investment banking. Even though it is perfectly possible to enjoy a romantic candlelight dinner in an extraordinary restaurant in London and likewise to become an investment banker in Paris, the strength of the associations that cling to these well-known places influences how people perceive them.

The perception influences which qualities are attributed to these places and ultimately how people experience them. This implies a process wherein perception directly influences behaviour because people decide how to behave on the basis of the perceptions they have – an implication that forms the basis of many studies in behavioural geography (Gold 1980). Different people might have different associations with the same place, yet specific associations can be so widely accepted and shared that they become stereotypical for specific places. We can then speak of partly ‘collective’ or ‘shared’ perceptions. Due to a combination of ‘direct’ and ‘mediated’ experience such perceptions have been continuously re-constructed and thus enforced over time (Adams 2009). Because people have limited knowledge of and limited experiences with all places, they have to create many of their perceptions on mediated experiences. These geographical representations are sets of associations attributed to a geographical entity – a place or a space. A vast number of different actors contribute to the creation and recreation of the geographical representations of places and thus influence the place brands. Unlike a product, service or organisation, nobody owns a country, region or a city. Different people have different interests in a place. Public authorities selectively cooperate with specific stakeholders favouring some interests above others. Place branding reflects this selectivity. But outside this official place brand, there will still be representations of the place by those not involved in the process, through for instance local or (inter)national news media. Although such projected images might be intentional from the perspective of their authors, they might result in unintentional images seen from the perspective of the ones involved in the process of orchestrating ‘official’ representations (Kozma and Ashworth, 1993). Kavaratzis (2004), suggest that everything that happens in a city can be seen as a form of communication in relation to its brand. The process of communicating a specific place brand for a city is thus impossible to exercise complete control over. This conceptual notion holds true for other types of places as well.

The processes through which such geographical representations are produced and reproduced are highly complex. Some associations are very difficult to change and tend to prevail over time, whereas other associations are more fragile and shorter lived. When such stereotypical associations are positive, they are often embraced with pride by policymakers and individuals alike. They become the cornerstones of a projected, specific and inclusive spatial identity: the identity of the place. A place, however, does not exist in an isolated space as discussed in the previous section, but in a spatial context, and all different geographical levels within this spatial context come with different associations. For example, the mental construct of a candlelight dinner in Paris does not only carry the connotation of Paris as a romantic city. For people that acknowledge the historical merits of French cuisine, the fact that Paris lies in France contributes to the attractiveness of the mental construct as well. A candlelight dinner is romantic everywhere, yet one in Paris, France, is so close to the epitome of the concept that it almost becomes a cliché. However, although the romance of Paris might not automatically be transferred to lesser-known cities in France, the French kitchen is French by definition and the positive associations therefore inherently available to all places within France. In this specific example, the positive associations are even instrumental for French restaurants anywhere in the world, provided that their customers know, acknowledge and appreciate French cuisine. Associations belonging to a country or region might be connected to individual cities within this area, especially if the city in question lacks a strong set of associations itself. Likewise, associations of a specific city might be connected to a region or country as a whole. Attributes of specific places can

over time be transferred to other places and spaces on other geographical scales. These transfers of associations happen habitually when some of the places involved are lesser known than the case of Paris and France as discussed above.

Such transfer of associations with places through different scalar levels is unfortunately not limited to positive associations. There are many examples of post-industrialized cities that have experienced difficulties in pursuing new growth strategies due to the inertia of the negative image from the de-industrialisation process. But such processes are not limited to cities, and not even to countries: Every city on the continent of Africa, from well known to unknown have to face the consequences of the stereotypical associations that a majority of the world's inhabitants attribute to Africa. Due to serious problems with poverty, civil war, corruption and ethnic tension in many African countries, the rest of the world often perceive only the negative aspects of the continent, and due to a lack of specific knowledge transfer these associations towards all other places and spaces that happen to lie within the spatial container that is Africa. According to Transparency International (2010), Botswana is the least corrupt country of Africa rating it number 33rd in the world, less corrupt than for example member states of the European Union such as Poland, Czech Republic, Romania, Hungary, Bulgaria and Greece – yet Botswana also has to face the negative associations of the continent of Africa as a whole. Although some countries, regions and even cities in Africa are able to show quantitative statistics on (relatively) low corruption, low crime and stable government – their potential for attracting European investors will still be somewhat hampered by the negative connotations that has become inherently attached to Africa. This 'dark continent' has dominantly received negative attention throughout its more recent history from the exploration and subsequent colonization by western powers (Jarosz, 1992). Interestingly, Simon Anholt has promoted that efforts to change such stereotypical images for developing countries should play a central role in development aid (Anholt, 2006).

To discuss place brands is to discuss limited geographical representations. All places can be seen as brands. A place name comes with associations and specific connotations by people familiar with the place. By people not familiar with the place there might be very vague or even no associations at all – then the place name represents a mental container that potentially could be filled with associations transferred from other scalar levels or consciously orchestrated through promotional activities. Places are thus quite complex. On the one hand places are overflowing with different actors and representations. On the other hand places are frequently quite empty of meaning for external audiences. The more or less empty identities of these unknown places tend to be filled by associating them with the areas to which they belong and with which external audiences have some familiarity.

4 The selective nature of place branding

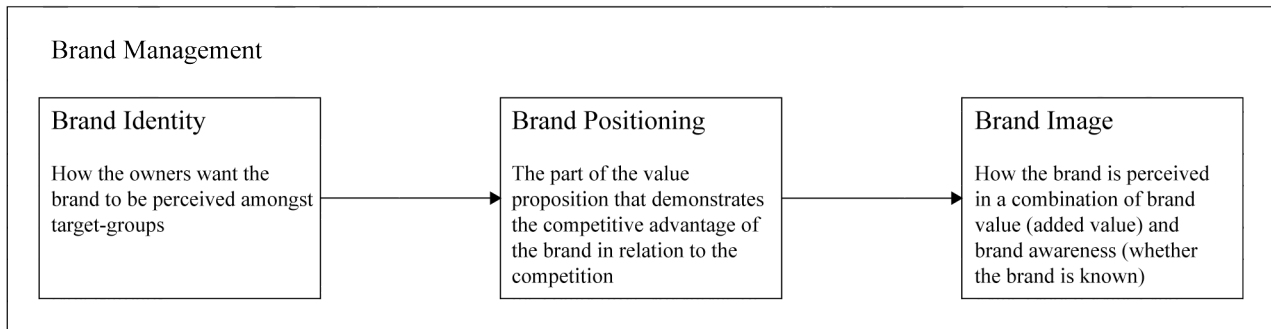
“A brand becomes stronger when you narrow the focus” – Al Ries and Laura Ries (Ries and Ries, 1999)

The process of place branding is to provide added value and specific meanings to a place by consciously orchestrating and managing this brand. According to Ashworth (2008), the process of product branding contains three elements that can be applied to places: *brand identity*, *brand positioning* and *brand image*. In figure 3, these three concepts are placed in relation to four other concepts that Ashworth (2008) distinguished in a literature review on product branding: *brand management*, *brand equity* (as composed of *brand value* and *brand awareness*). The management of a place brand implies both the continuous formulation of the brand identity, the brand positioning and measurement and monitoring of the brand image; and – if necessary – actions to change this image for the better. It is not a static process where the different elements of the place branding process can be devised and then left alone to do its work. Accordingly, the management of a place brand requires a stable organisation that is responsible of the maintenance and further development of the brand over time. Logically, a brand management requires a certain level of ownership and control over the brand in question.

Figure 3 shows that a certain level of control is needed in this process. One can question if any institutions have the inherent right to exercise such control over a place in its entirety. Likewise, it is questionable whether any institution – governmental or not – actually hold enough power to exercise sufficient control over a place brand. However disputed, this control is inherent to all branding processes and is necessary if the branding is part of a marketing-driven long-term strategy of adding value to the place in question. As stated above, it is impossible to exercise the same level of control over a place brand as over a product brand, and even a product brand is not as easily controlled by the owner as is often suggested. However, this does not mean that no control can be exercised over a place brand: When spatial policies are followed by a strategic vision and tactical actions to promote specific goals, the institutions formulating and pursuing these policies can exercise significant power in guiding the future development of

the place in question. The institutions of government are capable of exercising power to stimulate specific developments, and due to the developments discussed earlier in this paper (see section 2), they have been given more responsibility for pursuing and securing their own growth agendas – and thus, one could argue, more power over the brand. Therefore, when dealing with place branding as theoretically exercised by different types of government institutions one should pay special attention to the goals of these institutions, especially when investigating the place branding of the new, non-standard forms of semi-governmental authorities.

Figure 3 – Brand management and the process of branding



Based on Ashworth (2008)

In figure 3, the brand identity is not formulated as the identity of the place, but as the identity of the place the ‘owners’ of the place brand want specific target-groups to perceive. This notion of specific target-groups is an important one. It implies a conscious selectivity amongst ‘the owners’ of the brand in determining which individuals, firms and institutions are deemed strategically important and thus central to policy action. These target-groups are then given special attention, both in terms of communication, involvement in the branding process and ‘real’ changes. The branding process includes much more than merely communication, although communication is central to the notion of brands and branding in general. To change perceptions, sometimes ‘reality’ should be adjusted as well. If we see a place brand as a promise, this promise should be fulfilled and followed by concrete and tangible proof of this promise. Otherwise, the brand is not very likely to be sustainable over time. This adjustment of ‘reality’ would be termed ‘product-development’ in traditional marketing terminology. However, when dealing with places it refers to all possible aspects of the metaphorical place product (Boisen, 2008).

The key to most marketing and branding concepts is to make use of market segmentation. Such market segmentation is meant to distinguish target-groups from each other and ultimately formulate strategies and design corresponding actions to address the target-groups that are deemed as most profitable to cater to. If no market segmentation is maintained, the resulting brands will be all-inclusive and on many scalar levels it will be difficult to position these brands in relation to other – competing – brands. It is not as much a question of what a specific place is, but more of what ‘the owners’ would like it to become. Sooner or later, the place brand should help realize this ambition. Likewise, the brand positioning is termed as a part of a value proposition as communicated to target-groups. The competitive advantage that should be demonstrated by the brand positioning is thus directed towards a value proposition of specific interest to defined target-groups that are selected as segments of a larger market. The brand image can be approached in much the same way: The perception of the place amongst the included members of a target-group becomes more important than the perception of the place amongst people excluded by the definition of the target-groups. The brand management is most likely to focus on the added value of the brand towards the target-groups as well as whether the target-groups are aware of what the brand represents, thereby potentially overlooking other implications. The selectivity that is inherent to the process of branding can thus be seen as a process of conscious orchestration of the brand through the strategic inclusion of specific target-groups (and thus exclusion of others). For governmental institutions this should represent a problematic issue due to their democratic responsibilities and accountability (Boisen, 2007b). One obvious consequence is that the target-groups will be defined to include as many different actors and stakeholders as possible. But even then when confronted with a specific spatial strategy some target-groups will be more important than other ones. Efforts to include all target-groups but provide some target-groups with extra attention are also likely to have the same inclusive-exclusive bias. If the brand management undertakes policy actions where the brand identity provides the guiding principles, these target-groups are likely to get extra attention in spatial policies. The

aspects of the place that is deemed attractive and important for these target-groups are also likely to get more attention in the communication of the brand positioning and eventually in the formation of the brand image.

There is nothing inherently wrong with giving specific target-groups more attention than others, and this does not represent a new development in spatial policies in its own right. However, the idea of a place brand is that it represents the entirety place in question and that it becomes dominant in the formation of the perception of this place. Furthermore, a consistently carried out place brand strategy should also result in spatial policies that are aimed to further strengthen the brand. This metaphorical ‘product-development’ is likely to be aligned with the brand strategy, preferring to serve the needs of specific target-groups above the needs of others. The process of place branding demands selectivity in the formulation of the brand strategy and the target-groups of the place the brand is to represent. Without this selectivity one cannot speak of place branding, although metaphorically the place might still be seen as a brand (see section 2). The selective nature of place branding means that the resulting selection not only includes specific aspects related to the dominant stakeholders, in addition it is a selection of specific places and spaces within the spatial container that is the branded place. Specific places could be seen as being included (and others excluded) by such branding efforts. Prosperous neighbourhoods, the city centre, business districts and research campuses fit the dominating discourse on inter-urban competitiveness and are more likely to be represented and strengthened by place branding than other parts of a city. Likewise, specific cities and regions might be deemed more important in the international competition with other countries and thus be given more attention in the branding of a country. Place branding is contemporary happening on different, overlapping scalar levels and is directed towards different target-groups due to the specific strategic choices made by the involved institutions at every single level. Add to this complexity the concept that perception of places often happens in a combination of different scalar levels that add associations to each other and the result is a frustratingly potent confusion of overlapping, contradicting, spatially inconsistent and incongruent place brands.

Although public institutions concerned with spatial bound policies are often responsible for the welfare and well-being of all individuals, firms, institutions and organisations that carry out activities within the spatial bound area in question – they will have to make specific choices if they employ place branding. If the choices are specific enough to add any value to the brand, they will most likely not be evenly popular amongst all the different actors that visit, live in or operate in the area the brand has to represent. For instance, the Dutch city of Eindhoven brands itself as a competitive place in terms of innovation and technology, but obviously the city holds much more firms and individuals that are not employed or engaged in activities in relation to such competitive innovativeness. This demonstrates that the selective nature of place branding means that the brand management cannot evenly represent the places and spaces within the place that is being branded. A consequence of the selective nature of place branding is thus a spatial inequality between places within the place that fit the core elements of the brand identity and are seen as assets in the brand positioning, and places within the place that are not.

5 Conclusion

In the above, we have established that selectivity is inherent to branding and thus also to place branding. We have shown that the processes involved are highly complex and that many elements of these processes can be and are being disputed. In future research concerned with place branding, more attention should be given to this selective nature. The criteria by which the decisions are made and the reasons behind the selections that are carried out as a result of such decisions should be critically examined in empirical studies. The contemporary neo-liberal discourse on international, inter-regional and inter-urban competition combined with the re-scaling of underlines the importance of sound empirical research into such selectivity. The competitiveness imperative could lead to conformism through such selectivity by justifying the choices that are made by economic arguments embedded within the dominant discourse. Through this discourse and policy action based upon it, specific individuals, firms and institutions become preferred above others and indirectly the places where these preferred market segments are concentrated become preferred above other places. When cities set out to attract the creative class, highly skilled knowledge-workers and business tourists by employing place branding to consciously orchestrate the meaning of the place in general, other parties might be excluded and slowly become estranged from the policies and politics of the place in question. More importantly, if the place branding strategies are highly successful, members of excluded groups might even slowly lose the ability to identify with some places, because the meaning of these places increasingly are being directed towards other segments of the market.

Place branding itself seems to become increasingly selective and incongruent. In the fixed hierarchical world of the welfare state, different spatial levels were concerned with different tasks. Countries provided welfare for all its citizens and controlled external affairs like attracting tourists and foreign investors. State re-scaling has fundamentally undermined these national monopolies. Regions and cities now try to compete with each other for external resources by managing their brands. Regions and cities increasingly find themselves in competition with other regions and cities abroad; they increasingly launch their own initiatives, which transform the traditional relations between geographical scales. It has become unfeasible to see the national brand as an umbrella brand for the regions and the regions as umbrella brands for their cities. The hierarchy is not straightforward, and in acquisition not always even instrumental. When we take into account that many non-standard 'thin' spatial identities are likely to employ marketing and branding techniques in the future, the resulting picture could be a mishmash of place brands that overlaps in terms of both the geographical space they occupy and in terms of the scale of the market they try to reach. Such 'thin' entities have fewer dimensions than the traditional territorial-administrative entities. They are often created for specific – often economically defined – purposes that make it easier for them to select target-groups for both actions and communications. The coherence of the place brands is likely to suffer from such a situation due to the divergence between functional goals of institutions on different scalar levels. The brand identity and the brand positioning will differ in relation to specific target-groups and most likely the resulting brand images from overlapping 'places' will not always be in alignment to each other. Ideally, the different overlapping place brands should strengthen each other by addressing different target-groups and promoting different aspects in a way that the different place brands add value to each other through the geographical levels. Then the place brands could truly mean added value for the places they represent. Unfortunately, incongruence in the intentionally orchestrated and communicated brand images seems a much more likely outcome.

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Autobiographical note (first author)

Martin Boisen MSc. is Danish and grew up in Copenhagen where he studied Geography & Geoinformatics at the University of Copenhagen. Subsequently, he moved to the Netherlands where he completed a Research Master in Human Geography & Planning (*cum laude*) at Utrecht University, where he has been working as Assistant Professor in Human Geography & Planning since his graduation in 2007. His research focuses on the strategic marketing and branding of cities and regions in Europe. He is a frequent speaker on the topic, and has been involved as an external policy advisor in a number of cities and regions in the Netherlands and Denmark.

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