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Ogunoye, Fredrick, McEachern, Morven G. and Kane, Kevin

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Exploring Place Branding in Social Enterprise Places: The City of Salford Experience

By

Fredrick Ogunoye, Morven McEachern and Kevin Kane

Introduction

Several conceptual and theoretical models are advanced for place branding, especially within marketing, tourism and destination literature (e.g. formation of destination image model by (Beerli & Martin, 2004); the relational network brand by (Hankinson, 2004); city image communication by (Kavaratzis, 2005); and strategic place brand management (Hanna & Rowley, 2011)). However, Hanna and Rowley (2011) call for greater critical exploration of the relative significance of place brand components (i.e. image and identity). Simultaneously, Mitchell *et al.* (2016) point out that social enterprises are under intense pressure to establish place brands to boost marketability amidst competitive and cooperative pressures. As a result, certification of hotspots where social enterprise activities are thriving have been tagged as social enterprise places (SEPs) to help foster recognition and marketability (SEUK, 2016a). In the face of limited attention to such forms of certification, this study critically explores the significance of place brand components and evaluates the branding and marketing activities within the City of Salford – a certified SEP.

Place Branding in the Context of Social Enterprise Places

Place and place branding has gained much academic attention over the last decade (Ashworth *et al.*, 2015; Bell, 2016). Place is often defined as a ‘lived concept’ (Cresswell & Hoskins, 2008, p. 394) and therefore viewed as ‘fundamental components of human activity’ (Florek, 2011, p. 347). Warnaby and Medway (2013, p. 357) expand on these definitions by defining place as a ‘socially constructed product, developed and endlessly redefined and interpreted as a ‘city of words’ and a ‘city of stones’. While this observation implies that people’s lived experiences and their virtual experiences help create this symbolic space, the concept of place has been contested and criticised in human geography to have no defined boundaries (van Ham, 2008; Bell, 2016), thus proving to be a ‘complex’, ‘slippery’ and ‘multifaceted’ concept (Kavaratzis, 2005; Warnaby & Medway, 2013; Castillo-Villar, 2016). Thus, Hanna and Rowley (2011) propose the adaptation of stakeholders’ relationships in asserting a continued process of place identity refinement. Here, place identity is described as the way people see themselves and place image is the way a place is perceived (Dinnie, 2008). However, convoluted governance arrangements could pose constraints that could result in a gap between place brand identity and place brand image (Bell, 2016). Furthermore, an identity-image gap tends to be a negative factor (see Dinnie, 2008), with many places struggling with the frustration of not being perceived by the rest of the world for what they truly are. As a result, place brand identity-image gap management and communication requires specific expertise and this is where stakeholder partnerships play a prominent role. Place branding effectiveness however, is further complicated by exhaustive strategy duplication, lack of theories/empirical theoretical frameworks, a common language and an immeasurable stance (Kavaratzis, 2009; Ashworth *et al.*, 2015; Medway *et al.*, 2015).

Alongside these conceptual developments, there is potential for the creative entrepreneurship of social enterprises to be explored within places. These are business ventures created for a social purpose – mitigating/reducing a social problem or a market failure (Alter, 2007) as well as run

cooperatively (Spreckley, 2008). As a result, these hotspots can be branded and marketed to build a positive image surrounding their communal growth and development. As Trueman *et al.* (2007) recommend a greater application of corporate identity literature to place branding, the complexity of place and difficulty in measuring brand effectiveness make place branding a daunting task (Zenker & Martin, 2011; Bell, 2016), especially within the context of SEPs.

Methodology

This paper is part of a larger study, of which is multifaceted in nature, engaging both social enterprises and local council administrators. Firstly, participant-led, ethnographic observations of nine Salford social enterprise network meetings and three events were carried out. In addition, a snowball technique was used to secure additional participants. Next, in-depth interviews took place with eight social enterprise owners and a place administrator. The overarching themes of inquiry for the interview included social enterprise activities, place identity; place image; place branding; level of support and partnership. Data analysis was carried out through thematic analysis.

Findings & Concluding Comments

Despite being ranked among one of the most deprived areas in England, Salford is an area with a network of passionate social entrepreneurs and social enterprises who are contributing to Salford's economy to improve the wellbeing of residents. For example, one social enterprise expressed their place goals for the City of Salford:

“My little vision is to get a plaque to say ‘Welcome to Salford’...also creating a social enterprise history trail so of all the things that we’ve done in Salford...the border of Manchester and Salford are very close, so Salford would have something that stands out, more people are going to take notice of it, and it’s something to shout about”.

In comparison, the City Council wants a city where all forms of businesses can thrive:

“The entrepreneurial spirit of Salford is about improving more lives and is more important than having the city branded as a Salford Enterprise Place”.

However, some social enterprises wanted Salford to reflect its original co-operative and entrepreneurial ambiance. One SME owner qualified this by saying: *“almost in a sense not going back in history but a sort of equivalent to what was going on a hundred years ago with cooperatives running a large part of the city”.* Consequently, this image differs from the perception of the City Council, resulting in a place brand identity-image gap within the city. Thus, it will require significant stakeholder partnerships to build an acceptable place brand for the city. In accordance with place interpreted as a ‘city of words’ or ‘city of stones’ (Warnaby & Medway, 2013), attracting varied business types within the area as well as architecture will also play a vital role in place branding, for example:

“Very high profile companies like the B.B.C. moving here and suddenly every day on the B.B.C. Salford is mentioned, that makes a big difference. The fact that they say Salford not Manchester is really important to Salford. I think things like social enterprise places mean that we get seen differently comparable to Greater Manchester”.

Despite the different Salford SEP stakeholders' place brand goals, Salford SEP can still be branded via the engagement of place branding experts. This will mediate these differences and strategically involve all stakeholders in the place brand process to build a stronger SEP brand. Stakeholders' partnership is pivotal for the success of SEP brand (Pryor & Grossbart, 2007; Hanna & Rowley, 2011). However, as place branding is a complex project and requires all stakeholders' engagement to

optimise the socio-cultural dimensions within Salford SEP in establishing place brand narratives (Zenker & Martin, 2011; Warnaby & Medway, 2013; Bell, 2016), it appears that Salford SEP members have not been able to establish an agreeable SEP identity due to the place brand goal differences amidst the stakeholders (Hanna & Rowley, 2011)(Hanna & Rowley, 2011)(Hanna & Rowley, 2011). Due to a lack of expertise around place branding, the mixed messages provided by social enterprises and city council members implies that Salford SEP image could potentially confuse potential business investors to the area. In light of this place identity-image gap within Salford SEP (Dinnie, 2008), place brand expert engagement is paramount for Salford SEP to build a place brand which will invariably proffer social enterprises within Salford a boost in their marketability.

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