Place Branding Within Business Clusters: Development and Future Research

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Abstract

The present article aims to provide an overview of the development of place branding and to discuss business clusters as place brands. Business clusters are agglomerations of different actors of a related and complementary nature within geographical proximity. Whilst shaping a strong brand for a business cluster can help the overall development of such entities, the heterogeneous nature of clusters can make such processes challenging. In the last few decades, both place branding and clusters have played an increasingly important role within policies and strategies to foster economic development at the local, regional, and national level. Existing place branding literature has often over-emphasized the roles of collaboration and stakeholder participation within the place branding process. However, few have examined why and how stakeholders engage in such processes. Moreover, place brand research beyond the field of tourism is scarce and little is known about the dynamics of place branding within clusters. The development of place branding research has shifted to more qualitative research methods, but scholars suggest that this discipline still lacks conceptual clarity due to inconsistent definitions and a weak theoretical foundation. Here, I argue that interdisciplinary cluster studies can provide a fruitful avenue for future research.

Keywords: *Place branding, clusters, stakeholder management, co-creation, regional development*

Introduction

Drawing upon practices and theoretical conceptualisations of branding for products and services, place branding deals with the “associations in the consumers’ mind based on the visual, verbal, and behavioural expression of a place” (Zenker & Braun, 2010, p.1). Initially adopted for more protectionist scopes, for example, in “buy domestic” campaigns, more recent developments of place branding practices have aimed to attract tourists, foreign investors, and new residents a national, regional and city level (Papadopoulos et al., 2016). Similarly, the concept of clusters has become increasingly important for regional development since Porter’s seminal work on the Competitive Advantage of Nations (1998). Porter’s work (1998) sparked the idea that to compete in the global marketplace, nations

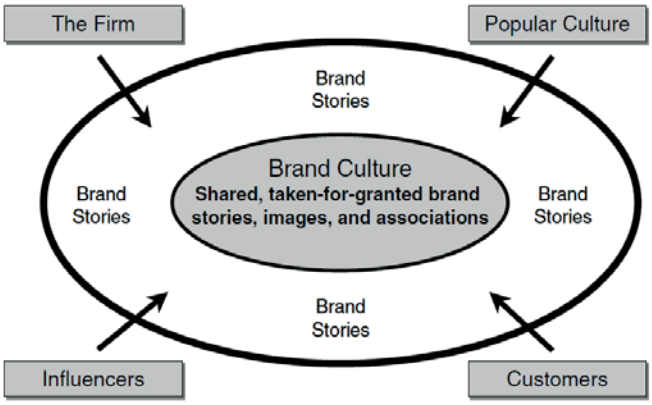
would need to leverage their competitive advantage through a combination of a place's geographical conditions and industrial strategies. The Porterian approach to cluster is still relevant to current industrial policy strategies. For instance, the European Commission (2020) has recently launched a number of initiatives (e.g., ClusterXchange and EUROCLUSTERS) to encourage collaboration among firms, build resilience and boost innovation. To date, there are more than 3000 clusters within the European industrial landscape. As argued by Kasabov and Sundaram (2013) clusters are "specific examples of place brands" (p.538). The emergence of the service-dominant (S-D) logic in marketing has led to a proliferation of studies that emphasize the collaborative nature of the branding process. This approach in turn has been transferred to the domain of place branding (Kavaratzis and Hatch, 2013). According to this new logic, brands are the outcome of interactions between multiple stakeholders. Whilst the development of clusters is often deemed organic and attributed to a place's geographical conditions (Kasabov, 2010), studies have found that place branding and image can play a pivotal role in supporting existing clusters and the creations of new ones (Hafeez et al., 2016). Aiming to better understand the dynamics of place branding within the context of clusters, the present article provides an overview of the development of brand management and cluster branding and what common challenges and opportunities the two fields share, as well as possible directions for future research.

Brand Management and Meaning Co-Creation

If, on the one hand, traditional brand theory views brands as tools controlled by the organizations behind them (Aaker, 1996), more recent approaches (e.g., Hatch and Schultz, 2009; von Wallpach et al., 2017) argue that brands are the result of interactions between various actors such as companies, customers, the media, and the public at large (Holt, 2003). This co-creative understanding of branding is often attributed to the emergence of the so-called service-dominant (S-D) logic of marketing (Merz et al., 2009; Vallaster & von Wallpach, 2013). According to this logic, value is determined in use and by the beneficiary (Vargo & Lusch, 2016). For instance, if once companies tried to instil value by adding meaning to a product through promotion, the S-D logic implies that the value of a certain product or service is determined by what purposes they serve and by how the receiver evaluates those purposes (Merz et al., 2009). According to Holt (2003), brand building is a complex process that is put into action by the firm and accomplished by three more "brand authors" (see Figure 1).

Figure 1

The Four Brand Authors; Source: Holt (2003)



As shown in Figure 1, each brand author produces their brand-related stories. Once those meanings are widely accepted in society, they become a brand culture (Holt, 2003). However, over the course of the time, the role of branding has not remained stagnant. For instance, in their review of the development of brand management between 1985 to 2006, Heding et al. (2016) identified seven different brand approaches. As shown in Table 1 below, according to the authors, a brand's role can be seen as a communication tool for companies to spread their messages (to passive consumers) in the first period; in the second period, brand approaches were focusing on the receiver, and lastly, they focused on the role of brand understood as platforms that enable societal discourses.

Table 1

The Seven Brand Approaches; Adopted from Heding et al. (2016).

Brand Approaches	Period	Author(s)	Focus
Economic approach	Before 1985	McCarthy (1960)	Company/Sender Focus
The identity approach	Mid-1990s	Hatch and Schultz (1997)	
The customer-based approach	1993	Keller (1993)	Human/Receiver Focus
The personality approach	1997	Aaker (1997)	
The relational approach	1998	Fournier (1998)	
The community approach	2001	Muñiz and O'Guinn (2001)	Cultural/Context Focus
The cultural approach	2002	Holt (2002)	

The observations made by Heding et al. (2016) are also in line with the streams of research concerning corporate branding (e.g., Balmar and Gray, 2003, Hatch and Schultz, 2008), Customer Based Brand Equity (Keller, 1993), co-creation and co-construction (Hatch and Schultz, 2010). This development of brand management has implied a change in the understanding of brands from static tools controlled by organizations that add value to their offerings to dynamic entities that create a sense of belonging among those who shape them. Ultimately, the evolving role of brands from the economic to the cultural approach has also implied a shift from quantitative to more qualitative research methods (Heding et al.2016).

Figure 2

Economic and Cultural approach to brand; Adopted from Heding et al. (2016)



As shown in Figure 2, as opposed to the one-way dialogue (from marketer to consumer) typical of the economic brand approach, the cultural approach to branding becomes a process that shapes culture as a product of the interactions between consumers and marketers. As argued by Holt (2003), brands represent the meanings and stories attached to a specific product or service. However, over the last two decades, the definition of branding has extended beyond the commercial domain, including, for example, NGOs, people, and places (Neumeier, 2015).

Increased by the internet and social media platforms, customers' brand-related interactions potentially contribute to shaping brand meanings either in a positive or a more negative way (Vallaster & von Wallpach, 2013). With the internet, the amount of opportunities for allowing interactions among like-minded individuals have increased and intensified (Vallaster & van Wallpach, 2013). Moreover, these interactions are no longer constrained within geographical boundaries (Schau et al., 2009). The boundaryless aspect of this and the resulting easiness of community building recently has allowed brand communities to quickly gather together critical masses of like-minded brand admirers or detractors (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001). This capability to attract a wider range of actors, allows brand communities to accomplish a broader range of brand-related activities such as improving product and service quality, stimulating innovation and identity building (Hatch and

Schultz, 2010; Wallpach et al., 2017). Accordingly, companies increasingly recognise the importance of such interactions. For instance, in their review of LEGO's brand community, Hatch and Schultz (2010), observed that LEGO provides brand fans with resources and opportunities to engage in product innovation. By doing so, companies share control over their brands. Therefore, by providing "(un-)filtered forums" for brand-related discussion, firms do not just gather data about customers but from them (Vallaster & von Wallpach, 2013; p. 1505). Whilst the academic debate on co-creation of product and service branding is well developed, there has been a paucity of scholarly literature on the place branding mechanisms (Pedeliento & Kavaratzis, 2019). Thus, the discussions of why and how place brands are co-created has been neglected (Giannopoulos et al., 2020). Therefore, to elaborate on the role of place branding in the context of business clusters, we now turn our attention to place branding and its development as an academic discipline.

Place Branding

Place branding as a research area originates from the more established body of knowledge of country of origin (COO) in the field of product marketing (Papadopoulos, 2004). By conducting a systematic review of the extant literature on place branding and place marketing from 1976 to 2016, Vuignier (2017) found that this discipline lacks conceptual clarity due to inconsistent definitions and a weak theoretical foundation. Whilst initially adopted for more protectionist scopes, for example, in "buy domestic" campaigns, more recent developments of place branding practices have aimed to attract tourists, foreign investors, and new residents at a national, regional and city level (Papadopoulos et al., 2016). Though widely applied in different contexts such as FDI, resident, students and workforce attraction, studies on place brands are mainly focused on exports and tourism (Sun et al., 2016; Almeyda-Ibáñez and George, 2017).

One of the most prominent authors and arguably the founder of place branding as an academic discipline, Simon Anholt has often criticised a lack of control on how taxpayers' money is spent on place branding initiatives (2014). In one of his articles, titled "Place branding: Is it marketing, or isn't it?" Anholt (2008) suggests that one should critically distinguish between the place as the object of a strategy and the product that such campaigns want to sell. In short, it is a place branding campaign aiming to build a long-term brand for the place or it aims to achieve short-term profits by selling products and services such as hotel reservations, FDI opportunities and so on. Various definitions and terms concerning place branding are often used interchangeably. Table 2 below provides an overview of the main concepts related to the topic.

Table 2

Place branding concepts and definitions

Concept	Author(s)	Definition
Place branding	Zenker and Braun (2010)	A network of associations in the consumers' mind based on the visual, verbal, and behavioural expression of a place, which is embodied through the aims, communication, values, and the general culture of the place's stakeholders and the overall place design.
Nation branding	Papadopoulos et al. (2016)	Nation branding concerns the image and reputation that a nation enjoys in the world, which in turn can directly influence its attractiveness as a destination and/or producer.
Place brand image	Papadopoulos (2004)	The image that is developed among target customer(s) of a particular place, given the place's unique identity.
Place brand equity	Bose et al. (2020)	Place brand equity is a set of all assets and liabilities that a place brand can be attached to.
Place identity	Kavaratzis and Hatch (2013)	Place identity is the construction of an identity through a constant dialogue between the internal and the external elements of a place.
Destination brand	Almeyda-Ibáñez and George (2017)	Conveys the promise of a memorable travel experience that is uniquely associated with the destination; it also serves to consolidate and reinforce the recollection of pleasurable memories of the destination experience.

Similarly, to more traditional brands, place brands can be understood as social objects and the result of negotiations between stakeholders. As residents are more aware of the issues a place is facing, e.g., housing and transportation, they often disagree with the

simplified meanings embedded within a place brand for commercial scopes (Zenker et al., 2017). Stakeholders involved in place branding may not have the same access to discursive resources. According to Vallaster and von Wallpach (2013), resources can range from economic such as money to social/cultural resources like power, social influence, and evidence. This unbalance of discursive resources can hinder the participation of key actors in brand-related discourses, thus hampering their quality (Vallaster & von Wallpach, 2013). Therefore, the place branding process may not benefit all the stakeholders equally (Lucarelli, 2018). Examples of critical issues discussed in place branding literature include the interdependencies of partner brands under a common place brand umbrella (Iversen & Hem, 2007), the issues related to the politicization of place brands (Lucarelli, 2018) and the role of visitors and residents in shaping the place brand (Zenker et al., 2013). Whilst those discussions have contributed to overcome the understanding of place branding as a top-down process and shed light on issues of power and consensus in place branding, there is a lack of studies that extend beyond the field of tourism (Kasabov & Sundaram, 2013). Critical questions, such as whether it is possible to sell a place like a product, have arisen since place branding emerged as an academic discipline (Parkerson & Saunders, 2004). At the same time, other issues such as place brand ownership and how a brand can include all the meanings associated with a heterogeneous entity like a place have remained critical topics in the place branding debate ever since (Florek & Insch, 2020). A research area that shares common objectives and faces similar issues of power and consensus is the study of clusters in the field of regional studies (Kasabov & Sundaram, 2013).

Cluster Branding

As mentioned in the previous paragraph, scholars (e.g., Kasabov & Sundaram, 2013; Hafeez et al., 2016) have drawn parallels between place branding and business clusters. Through the agglomeration of businesses, suppliers, and institutions of related and/or complementary nature established within spatial proximity, so-called clusters can gain a reputation for being specialised in one particular industry (Porter, 1998). Moreover, such agglomerations are also deemed to accelerate economic growth at a local and regional level (Porter, 2000). In extant literature, clusters have been conceptualised in numerous ways including as market organizations (Maskell & Lorentzen, 2004), collective social entities (Teigland & Lindqvist, 2007) and a pool of skills (Kasabov & Sundaram, 2016). For instance, from a firm perspective, clusters provide organizations with highly skilled human resources, access to key infrastructure and facilitate knowledge exchange, hence boosting firm growth and innovation processes (Porter & Kramer, 2011). As argued by Kasabov and Sundaram (2013) clusters are “specific examples of place brands” (p.538). Implementing place branding processes can support existing clusters and aid the formation of new ones (Hafeez

et al., 2016). However, Kasabov and Sundaram (2013) also explain that the complexity of brand-building processes can hamper the formation of a collective identity for the cluster through place branding processes. The complexity of cluster branding can be attributed to the too often incompatible or even contrasting interests and agendas held by the cluster members (Kasabov & Sundaram, 2013; Perkins et al., 2021). In their study on regional small tourism firms, Perkins and Khoo-Lattimore (2020), found that collaboration among regional businesses is not easy to achieve. Their findings show that among others, issues such as the lack of formal collaborative arrangements and unbalanced efforts between businesses pose a threat to successful collaboration. As highlighted by Lucarelli (2018) in the public domain, place branding is a fragmented process in which multiple brands, by interacting with each other, co-create the place brand. Holding a high degree of social proximity (belonging) and institutional proximity (similarity) is key to ensure the cluster's success (Kasabov, 2010). A cluster brand forged by genuine collaboration can reduce power asymmetries that may arise among actors (Mauroner & Zorn, 2017). However, cluster members have different access to resources and legitimacy based on the duration of tenure and hierarchical position in the cluster (Kasabov & Sundaram, 2013). Shaping a cluster brand, therefore, becomes a matter of balancing the expectations of the stakeholders who engage with it (Admam et al., 2020).

Whilst there has been advancement in place branding literature regarding place brand dynamics, little is known about the stakeholder's participation in cluster branding and how place brand managers release control over the place branding process. Therefore, questions still arise as to *how* and *why* stakeholders engage in cluster branding. Based on extant literature, Table 3 below introduces the roles of stakeholders involved in the branding of clusters, their scope and implications. As outlined in Table 3, there are internal and external stakeholders to be considered in the context of cluster branding. Examples of internal stakeholders are the companies, research institutions and universities that may form the cluster. External stakeholders could be potential employees, potential investors and policy makers who may have an interest in the cluster. Whilst a strong cluster brand can provide benefits to internal and external stakeholders, challenges can arise for both groups. For internal stakeholders, contrasting agendas and interests can hamper the branding process. Assessing the stakeholders' expectations and future of the cluster can be a challenge for external stakeholders.

Table 3

Cluster Branding Stakeholders, Scopes, Implications, and Limitations

	Stakeholders	Scope(s)	Implication(s)	Limitations
Internal Stakeholders	Companies Universities Research Institutions	Visibility and attention Exchange and cooperation Idea and promise	Mediating function for diverging interests	Contrasting agendas and interests
External Stakeholders	Potential Employees Potential Investors Policy Makers	Risk reduction Promoting regional competitive advantage	Awareness on the part of political decision makers	Difficulties in assessing stakeholders expectations and future direction oft he cluster

Discussion and Future Research

Seeking to contribute to the growing literature on place branding and clusters, this article set out to discuss business clusters as place brands and to identify similarities and research gaps between the two areas of research. From a managerial perspective, understanding the dynamics of place branding within clusters would allow companies to coordinate their branding effort better (Pedeliento & Kavaratzis, 2019). More specifically, the place branding perspective on business clusters highlighted in this article is relevant for companies' (re)-location decisions, marketing agencies with a focus on place, policy makers, and for business development and investment attraction agencies.

The overview presented in this article, serves as a starting point for future debate about the evolution of the field of place branding, and in particular for the branding of business clusters. The development of brand management in the last few decades has shifted from an economic approach to a cultural approach. In the early 2000s, the marketing scholars' view of brands as social objects has been borrowed by practitioners and scholars in the field of place branding. Place branding originates from not-for-profit and more social aspects of marketing for the public sector. However, scholars have highlighted the complexity of multi-stakeholder engagement in the place branding process and have suggested comparing it to corporate branding (e.g., Kavaratzis & Hatch, 2010). One of the

most critical issues of corporate and place brands is the issue of finding a point of cohesion for what the brand stands for. The discussion presented in this article can also be enhanced by setting it in the context of Hatch and Schutz (2009) Vision Culture Image (VCI) model of corporate brands. According to the VCI model, a strong brand needs to find a balance between the three elements.

Existing literature has shed light on the co-creation process of place branding, hence defining place branding as an open and fluid dialogue between internal and external stakeholders. However, as discussed in this article, there is a paucity of studies that extend beyond the field of tourism, and little is known about how and why stakeholders engage in place branding within clusters. Therefore, further research into the place branding process could pay greater attention to stakeholder management to understand how brand value is created within clusters. Focusing on the issues of power and consensus in place branding would be necessary to understand the different access to economic, discursive, and social cultural resources to engage in the brand-related debate that eventually shapes what a cluster stands for.

A limitation of this article is its reliance on existing literature to deliver arguments and conceptualise cluster branding. Therefore, future studies could conduct more empirical research using existing business clusters as case studies. On the grounds of the cluster members' ever-changing access to resources to engage in brand-related discourses (Vallaster & von Wallpach, 2013), a promising line of research would consist in conducting research of the cluster branding process at different stages of a cluster's cycle and from the perspective of cluster members who hold different hierarchical positions within the cluster. For the same reason, it would be worth to empirically evaluate the role of legitimacy and isomorphism in influencing cluster members' behaviours during the cluster branding process, as cluster members may tend to become homogeneous due to long-term socialising with oneanother (DiMaggio & Powell, 1991).

There have been a few studies that have analysed the development of cluster brands (e.g., Hafeez et al., 2016; Mauroner & Zorn, 2017). These studies, however, have focused on clusters that have a similar origin and are located in the same regional or national context. Future studies could utilize a comparative methodology to focus on different types of cluster development and assess the role of institutions such as the legal frameworks of different countries in influencing the cluster branding process.

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