

Abstract

Place branding has garnered increasing attention on the international stage over the past 10-15 years. In the competitive landscape of geographical places, it has become evident in recent years that the most significant differentiation tools are rooted in the application of branding tactics and strategies that have proven successful for commercial brands. Place branding is a broad term encompassing any branding activity related to a geographical area, be it a country, region, city, or even a smaller settlement. This book primarily focuses on cities and places a special emphasis on examining the brand communication of cities in the online sphere.

The book can be divided into two major sections. The first section provides an in-depth exploration of place branding as a scientific research field. It begins with defining the terms “brand” and “branding,” followed by a synthesis of various interpretations of place brand and place branding concepts. The subsequent chapter offers an overview of the development of this relatively new research field, elucidating its strong connections with fields such as tourism, marketing, and public administration. In another part of the literature review, we explore how commonly used branding terminology, such as brand identity, brand image, brand positioning, and brand value, can be adapted to the context of place branding, while highlighting the specific challenges that hinder their application. The concluding chapter of the first section delineates the territorial levels at which the place branding process can occur, explaining concepts like country branding, nation branding, regional branding, city branding, and destination branding, with case studies illustrating their application in a local context.

The second part of the book commences by explaining the relationship between place branding and online branding. The first chapter highlights the unique aspects of online city branding, followed by a classification of the most relevant online communication channels based on the PESO model (Paid, Earned, Shared, Owned

media channels). The subsequent section concentrates on the official websites of cities managed by local administrations, considering these as central communication channels for transmitting a place's brand identity in the digital realm. The book presents a comprehensive summary of prior research related to the analysis of city websites, combining results from three distinct research fields: tourism, public administration, and place branding. Based on this earlier research, the book introduces a new framework for city website analysis from a branding perspective, the proposed OCBE (Online City Brand Evaluation) model. This model comprises 100 variables grouped into four major dimensions: brand appearance, brand interaction, brand content, and brand quality. The final section of this second part concludes with the practical application of the model, conducted on the official websites of county seats in Romania.

In summary, it can be asserted that the websites of Romania's county seats only partially meet the expectations set by the current research framework. This suggests numerous opportunities for development in the context of online city branding. The research results offer valuable insights not only to researchers in the field but also to stakeholders involved in city branding processes. For city administrations, the model can serve as a starting point for identifying key criteria for developing their websites. While the content and, in some instances, the appearance of official city websites are subject to legal regulations, it is essential to acknowledge that other factors also contribute to the overall experience, impacting the brand image of these cities. In terms of theoretical application, the proposed model underscores that when evaluating the performance of a city brand conveyed through an official website, researchers should consider not only the brand's appearance but also other critical factors related to website content, interactive capabilities, and overall quality.