

Re-thinking place branding from a political perspective: Urban governance, public diplomacy and sustainable policy-making

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Abstract

Place branding is a relatively new transdisciplinary academic discipline. It is an evolution of what some researchers understood as “place or city marketing”, “place selling” and “place promotion”. The three concepts analyze the need that territories have to position themselves in order to compete in the global markets through an eminently economic perspective. However, place branding rejects the corporate world in order to address, as positioning axes, the tangible and intangible values of a specific region and, therefore, its identity. Furthermore, public administrations have had to adopt strategies that link residents when designing place brands that can guarantee long-term narratives and become effective mechanisms for spatial planning, urban governance, local development or economic promotion. Citizens’ engagement, at the grassroots level, has become a key element for the successful conceptualization and implementation of place brands.

The current discipline of place branding is therefore totally linked to the political order. Public administrations become key actors in the development of place branding campaigns, not only in the local context but also at the national and international levels. The aim of this article is to present a theoretical evolution of place branding in order to find the most common links with the political order, as well as to design a conceptual framework to fit this discipline into the context of political science. This theoretical evolution will be conceived taking into account the results of previous empirical research that the authors conducted for different Catalan public administrations. The results of this article show clear synergies between four basic concepts: the place brand, its aim to contribute to sustainable planning, its influence on public governance decisions and, finally, its capacity to be central in the definition of public diplomacy programs outside the usual state-centric domain. Therefore, place branding led by public administrations—this is what we can understand as “public branding”—has a major and inevitable political focus.

Key words: place brand, regional identity, public diplomacy, urban governance, sustainability.

1. Introduction

Regional promotion is no small matter in times of globalization. In fact, countries,

regions and cities compete fiercely in order to attract tourists, investors and talent, as well as to improve competitiveness. A paradigmatic example is the way in which the city of Barcelona has positioned itself since the early 1990s, first with the 1992 Olympic Games and, since 2006, with the organization of the World Mobile Congress. Both events have allowed the city to construct a narrative to contribute to the re-vitalization of the region in the long term, which does not only last during the time these events are taking place.

The construction of a narrative for the territory has, traditionally, been the field of study of “city marketing”, which initially focused the analysis of its object of study from an essentially commercial point of view. However, today we can consider that this concept has been surpassed by *place branding*, which has strongly consolidated as a transdisciplinary notion that, while still relatively young (Anholt, 2004; Govers and Go, 2009), has already reached maturity in just a few years (San Eugenio, 2012).

The aim of this article is to offer a holistic review and a theoretical systematization of the discipline of place branding, also taking into account the new geopolitical and urban challenges of the regions and cities. In this regard, and bearing in mind the geopolitical nature of many of the decisions related to place branding, the article attempts to show some of the new developments in the discipline that connect it to certain basic concepts in the area of political science, such as public diplomacy and regional governance.

2. Methodology

We propose a theoretical approach based on a systematic review of the existing literature regarding the area of place branding published in the main scientific journals that have covered this field of knowledge from specific disciplines. The transdisciplinary nature of *place branding* forces researchers to consider contributions of various kinds to substantiate the main developments of the discipline, all of which are transdisciplinary in nature, be they in areas related to spatial planning, in areas of sustainability or, finally, politics and public management.

However, this article’s theoretical reflection is also possible thanks to the results of the empirical studies that the authors have carried out between 2012 and 2020, all of them structured through contacts with local administrations in Catalonia (San Eugenio, Ginesta and Kavaratzis, 2019; San Eugenio, et. al., 2019; Ginesta, et. al., 2020). The various contracts have enabled the authors to conceptualize, design and implement a number of regional and city brands in Catalonia.

These projects are the result of a methodological triangulation, based on the doctoral thesis “The transformation of territories into brands: The recognition and differentiation of spatial identities in postmodern times. A review of the current status” (San Eugenio, 2011). This triangulation is structured around one quantitative (surveys for residents) and two qualitative methods: focal discussion groups based on sectors and

in-depth interviews with opinion leaders from each community analyzed. The projects are listed below:

Table 1. Projects of knowledge transfer between the University of Vic-Central University of Catalonia and the public administration of Catalonia, in the area of place branding. Source: UVic-UCC (2020) and the Statistical Institute of Catalonia (2019).

Project	Contractor	Total no. of residents involved	Final results
Tourist development project "Forests of witches and bandits"	Association of "Forests of witches and bandits" municipalities	15,023	 BOSCOS DE BRUIXES I BANDOLERS Montseny · Guillerries · Lluçanès
Design and conceptualization of the brand "Vic"	Vic City Council	46,214	 Vic, ciutat a la mesura humana
Design and conceptualization of the brand "Empordà"	Figueres City Council, Alt Empordà County Council and Baix Empordà County Council	275,698	 Empordà TOCAT PELS DÉUS
Design and conceptualization of the brand "Pla de l'Estany"	Pla de l'Estany County Council	32,293	 PLA DE L'ESTANY COMARCA DEL BAIX LLOBREGAT
Design and conceptualization of the brand "El Vendrell"	El Vendrell City Council	37,606	 el Vendrell Sant Salvador Coma-ruga el Francàs <i>l'estima!</i>

3. Place branding. A theoretical review

3.1. The beginnings of place branding

Simon Anholt, in the first issue of the journal *Place Branding* (2004), wrote a small

foreword where he expressed the need to bring order, especially with regards to conceptual and theoretical aspects, to the notion of place branding. Providing terminological and conceptual order is especially important in order to progress with rigor within the new fields of study that academia opens up. In this regard, Anholt (2005a, p. 119) states: “The reason why the convergence of advanced brand theory and statecraft is truly epoch-making is because branding is, potentially, a new paradigm for how places should be run in the future”.

Anholt (2004) insists that, as a point of departure, place branding has little or nothing to do with creating a visual identity for a region (logo, slogan etc.), which is historically linked to the promotion of spaces and was restricted to what some professionals have defined as “city marketing”. For Anholt, this promotional exercise is, today, a complete waste of time and money.

Thus, place branding must be used, from the empirical and strategic point of view, to give value to certain spaces by implementing a process of continuous improvement of their image that, inevitably, is linked to a new form of managing the territory: a kind of governance in which the brands of the countries, regions and cities become great vectors of projection of a national and international image (Lucarelli, 2018). For all this, the brand, as a basic device for the perception and understanding of territories, needs to focus on communicating the reality of spaces and avoid the tendency to create an excessively induced perception, which sometimes fails to provide a faithful picture of reality. Although advertising and communication are an important and integrating part of place branding, they are not a core part of the process.

Anholt (2005b) states that the brand is not something that is added to the journey, but is rather an element that is there from the start. The perception of places arises from what exists, from what is done, from what other people say, or from the location of certain companies. With this starting point, Anholt (2005b) reasons that changing the image of a country means behaving differently, appealing to brand designs in terms of effectiveness, efficiency, impartiality, truthfulness, usefulness and predictability.

In the academic literature, reference to fundamental aspects that differentiate corporate branding from place branding is recurrent. According to Anholt (2009), these differences are rooted in the fact that while in the commercial sphere there is a tendency to spread a clear and simple image of certain products and/or services, with places this tendency does not work; the inherent complexity of places is transferred to the management of their brands, so that the image of richness and complexity are valuable attributes for any region, city or country. Anholt’s position differs, in part, from that held by Gertner and Kotler (2004), who point out that the guidelines that must be followed in the designation of place brands must involve validity, credibility, simplicity and the capacity of attraction and differentiation.

In any region there is a large set of industrial, cultural and political activities, and so the image of spaces has difficulty in presenting itself in a clear and simple manner. It

is complicated to sell a single promise if one takes into account the large number of variables that make up a geographic area. As a result, and as Anholt (2009) argues, the image associated with specific places has to be desired and, necessarily, complex and multifaceted (Paniagua and Huertas, 2018).

Much of the criticism of the practice of place branding comes from developing countries, which see it as one more manifestation of capitalism, which marginalizes the poorest countries. This position is firmly rejected by Anholt (2006), who argues that the application of a process of place branding does not follow capitalist logic, since its purpose is to ensure that the public has a fair and truthful image of a specific place regardless of its economic possibilities. Therefore, the effective practice of place branding is not so much a matter of possessing economic resources as of possessing a negotiable value (competitive advantage) that allows for the creation of a brand value, whether in New York, Bhutan or Bogotá (Kavaratzis and Kalandides, 2015). To all this, it should also be added that brands, according to Anholt (2005a, 2005b), compete primarily for cultural excellence and not for showing off economic muscle.

3.2. Antecedents and meanings

Anholt (2005b) insists on the need to not confuse the term place branding with the promotion of individual assets of a country like tourism, domestic investment, culture and exports. He also defines branding as the process of design, planning and communication of a name and identity, in relation with the creation and/or management of a reputation (Anholt, 2007). This has nothing to do with the isolated development of a certain visual identity; it is an integrative process of management and communication of a place and never involves only a specific promotional action. In this regard, Anholt (2005b) makes an important distinction between different definitions of the practice of branding. A first definition refers to a popular concept that is fairly unclear and often related with 360° communication, marketing and public relations. Here, branding is identified with a passing fad associated with modern sales techniques and, therefore, has accumulated negative connotations.

The second definition of branding according to Anholt is related to a simple conception of the process and usually refers to a specific visual identity (name, logo, slogan). The last definition is linked to an advanced conception of brand and branding that incorporates more simple definitions but, at the same time, emphasizes the interface between the personality of a company, product and/or service—in this case we would speak of places—and their potential consumers. In this type of advanced vision of branding, specific work with intangible aspects, and not functional and/or physical attributes, takes on special importance. In this way, as Anholt (2005b) points out, the brand becomes a key device in the operating of any organization, and becomes consolidated as its most valued asset. This last, and most advanced, approach is the one that occurs in the transfer from corporate branding to place branding.

Anholt (2005b) also points out that the advanced concept of brand loses a good

deal of its mercantilist connotations, because it mainly targets people and markets. Anholt prefers to use the expression “competitive identity” rather than place branding, which he defines as follows: “Competitive Identity (CI) is the term I use to describe the synthesis of brand management with public diplomacy and with trade, investment, tourism and export promotion. CI is a model for enhanced national competitiveness in a global world and, in fact, it is already beginning to pay dividends for a number of countries, cities and regions, both rich and poor” (Anholt, 2007, p. 3).

The most surprising thing about the concept of competitive identity is that Anholt (2007) understands this process not individually or previously planned, but rather organically and/or spontaneously, with the prior conviction that the reputation of a country or nation will depend on many factors (he uses a hexagon to explain his concept of competitive identity, which includes six variables: tourism, brands, peoples, politics, culture and investment). As a result, Anholt (2007) considers competitive identity, necessarily, as an end rather than a beginning of the journey, and argues that good management of a place, in the areas his hexagon indicates, will automatically lead to a good reputation for a country, region, city and so on (Huertas, 2010).

3.3. The objectives, the praxis and the characteristics of place branding

“The brand must serve primarily to ‘brand’ the regions in order to differentiate them, to highlight their anthropological and cultural differences, transcending their initial strictly economic dimension” (López-Lita and Benlloch, 2006, p. 51). Therefore, based on a fundamental model of differentiation and positioning typical of corporate brands, place branding pursues the following objectives (Fernández-Cavia, 2009, p. 95): a) increase their attractiveness as places of business investment; b) improve their competitive position in the tourism market; c) increase their attractiveness in order to capture and retain talent; d) promote the identification of citizens with their place of residence; and, finally, e) facilitate, in general, social and economic development.

Branding, then, is integrated within a global process of regional development, in accordance with a prior marketing strategy. The goal of branding is not limited to the projection and communication of a specific image and reputation outside. The feature that differentiates it is its specific work with the internal (indigenous) population in an attempt to enhance pride of residence and the feeling of belonging to a specific place. Thus, both Olins (1999) and López-Lita and Benlloch (2006) argue that the internal public is key to managing a branding strategy. For his part, Brujó (2010) states that it is the citizens who really change the image of a city or country. In the same vein, Monerris (2008) considers that, in essence, place branding is a practice of inside-out branding and that, as a result, the local communities play a fundamental role in this process. Kavaratzis and Kalandides (2015) defend the same position, proposing necessary processes of participation by stakeholders in the development of the brand in order to seek its legitimacy in its subsequent implementation.

López-Lita and Benlloch (2006) state that the main objective that a place brand

seeks to achieve is the generation of a perception device with the capacity to defend a set of values that differentiates it from other places, in order to enhance or make the identity profitable. As a result, López-Lita and Benlloch (2005, p. 92-93) consider that a place brand must contribute to: a) increase the competitiveness of the place; b) increase the tourist attraction; c) ensure certain levels of foreign investment; d) obtain predisposition to consume products of a specific region; e) support exports; and, finally, f) achieve a certain strategic political and regional positioning.

Anholt (2007) argues that the application of the logic of place branding has the fundamental goal of incorporating countries, cities or nations in a new competitive brand framework, in a global market of places, where the values of a differentiated and positive image are essential in order to stand out in a context of high saturation among places that struggle to obtain economic resources. On the basis of a certain image, society organizes its purchase, investment and change of residence decisions, as well as choosing the tourist destination to travel to (Kotler and Gertner, 2002). Complementing the above, for Papadopoulos (2004) place branding aims to assume four main objectives: improve the country's export capacity; protect companies and businesses already existing in the region against the arrival of possible external competitors; attract or retain development factors and, finally, obtain a position in the internal (national) and external (international) spheres to achieve a comparative advantage in economic, political and social terms.

Likewise, Moilanen and Rainisto (2009) point out that the influence exerted by a place brand must serve to increase the attractiveness of the place with a view to possible locations of companies and investments, to promoting objectives of the tourist industry, promoting public diplomacy, providing support to the interests of the export industry and, finally, to strengthening the identity of citizens and increasing self-esteem.

However, Govers and Go (2009) argue that, first, the old model of place branding, which is closely associated with the traditional theory of the image of places, needs to be deconstructed. This model is inadequate due to the current need to link the image to identity and communication aspects of places in a global context.

Hankinson (2004) tries to establish a conceptual model for place brands and, to do so, starts from four concepts intrinsic to the brand, as well as the place branding concept, based on the brand's relation with its stakeholders, focusing on the components instead of the communications, and on the reality rather than the image. He points to the purpose of the brand as a device to communicate identity and thus differentiation, and its function as an entity of perception related to the meaning, reason and emotions of the consumers. He also refers to the brand as a value enhancer linked to its management and, lastly, alludes to its inherent relational value, in the sense of interpreting the brand and its personality in terms of its relationship with the consumer. For all the above, Hankinson (2004) considers that place branding consists of a process of general coordination more than management, if one bears in mind that governmental authorities are in charge of the place brand and that they work with low budgets and

multiple distorting factors.

Unlike place promotion, place branding is not an activity undertaken in an intuitive and random manner, but rather one that requires a much more comprehensive and strategic focus of action. It is directly linked to a new urban lifestyle, in which the visual images and myths associated with the region take on considerable relevance. In this context, image promotion plays a central role for planners and politicians. Therefore, marketing and branding for the places becomes the natural consequence of a new governance of the region aimed at satisfying the wishes and desires of its potential public (Kavaratzis, 2005).

The definitive split between the terms place promotion, place selling and place branding arises from the realization that a region has a potential audience to target and many attributes and values to offer, such that promotion strategies lose their validity when faced with the regions' new logic of action.

Indeed, when applied to places, branding aims to execute advanced brand techniques, an attitude that in some way involves the loss of the mercantilist and utilitarian approach that is so characteristic of place promotion, in order to move towards a management of the places' reputation with the aim of optimizing its assets. The end goal of this practice is to obtain a favorable positioning in the world market of places through the projection of an image that corresponds to the reality of the region represented, far from stereotypes or clichés that offer a partial vision (Piñeiro-Naval, Serra and Mangana, 2017).

Many authors specialized in the field of branding point out the need for places to differentiate themselves and project a specific image given the increasing competition (Govers and Go, 2009; Ashworth and Kavaratzis, 2010; Dinnie, 2011). In this regard, the place branding aims to create a strategic brand identity based on the main active capital of the region (the identity) and place it in the market through the optimization of its main passive value (the image). The evolution experienced up to the branding stage involves a significant change of concept in relation to what had been done so far. It means, above all, the construction of a positive image of the place to be represented, based on the fact that the appropriate projection of a positive image in the international arena opens up the possibility of access to numerous market opportunities. Opportunities that, without adequate brand and image management, would probably not exist.

In this regard, Fernández-Cavia (2009, p. 91) argues the following: "From my point of view, marketing's most important contribution to place management is to have introduced the conviction that a city, region, community or country has, in the image they project to the world, their best asset, their best source of wealth and well-being. And it is not a just matter of tourism or the economy, it is about something more general that affects all the inhabitants of a place, it is about opportunities and quality of life. In short, it is about the future".

Avraham and Ketter (2008) maintain that the survival of many places involves

developing a unique identity that allows them to compete in the international market of places. As with product branding, place branding arises from a combination of the characteristics (attributes and/or values) of a place and from taking advantage of the added value of its tangible and intangible assets.

However, the complexity and uncertainty inherent in place branding are presciently expressed by Anholt (2007), when he points out that the very nature of the brand, in many cases, can lead directly to superficial treatment of its theory, and limit it to a simple act of buying and selling characteristic of market logic. He states the need to treat the phenomenon of place branding from a holistic point of view, considering some philosophical questions that need to be addressed: the nature of perception and of reality, the relation between objects and their representation, crowd psychology, the mysteries of national and cultural identity and social cohesion, among others.

In the opinion of Govers and Go (2009), the practice of place branding should start from three fundamental working assumptions: the identity of the place, the image of the place and the experience of consumption in the place. In the context of globalization, place branding is the direct result of a certain desire for visual consumption transferred to the sphere of places, and that is therefore, in some way, a consequence of a new economy of image and of the experience of postmodernism.

In addition, the effective practice of place branding incorporates a certain doses of extravagance and eccentricity typical of postmodern societies, which is specified in the definition of new logics of regional intervention, in which the attainment of a certain image can even end up conditioning the logics of spatial planning, to the point where the image is the main factor of production in some places (Muñoz, 2008).

The desire to place the region at the level of image and in a context of ephemeral and volatile consumption is directly related to what Govers and Go (2009) call the “age of access”, the entry into the market of places and their cultural resources, including rituals, the arts, festivals, social movements and spiritual or fraternal activity, among others. The commodification of resources, with a non-exclusively tourist vocation, leads, in some way, to the potential public interested in a region (investors, seasonal workers, etc.) also including the tourists one wants to attract. In fact, tourism becomes an experience of hedonistic consumption, very much in line with what Urry (2002) explains in his book *The Tourist Gaze*, in which the tourist’s gaze becomes an exercise in colonizing the region in its recreational and leisure aspects, which ends up generating a certain view of the world, halfway between reality and virtuality.

4. Conceptualizing the political dimension of place branding

The previous section has served to present the main theoretical definitions of the concept of place branding, from the most important researchers within this field. With an analysis of the discipline’s main concepts, we can see how most of the researchers flee the corporate sphere in order to embrace definitions that are much more in line

with the need, from theory and professional practice, to situate place branding in a field that is much closer to geopolitics.

Anholt (2007, p. 3) links the competitive identity of regions to “a new model for enhanced national competitiveness in a global world”; López-Lita and Benlloch (2005) assume that place branding, in the end, must enable an improvement of the political and strategic positioning of the region; Kotler and Gertner (2002) link the place brand with the capacity to attract investments—that is a global world are completely subject to political decisions—; and Hankinson (2004) makes the necessary coordination by the public administration of all the actors involved in the creation and implementation of a place brand central to the practice of place branding.

Nevertheless, it is Govers and Go (2009) who argue that we are entering a phase where the old model of place branding—with its strictly commercial vision from marketing—must be deconstructed in favor of a renewed definition that includes the contextualization of this discipline within the framework of the challenges arising from globalization. From this perspective, globalization has not only modified the international economic flows, it has also shaped the geopolitical conception of the world we live in and our way of understanding relations of power between and within communities. Therefore, understanding the implications of place branding in a global context forces us to consider a conceptual map that involves visualizing the necessary relations between place branding, public diplomacy, governance, spatial planning and the promotion of sustainability.

In fact, in his eagerness to approach place branding from its political dimension, Lucarelli (2018) explains that this can never be approached in a reductionist fashion. Quite the opposite: it needs to be understood in an integrative manner with respect to the whole public administration and oriented towards the diversity of agents that intervene. He concludes that place branding is “a processual hybrid policy in which the public and the private, economics and politics, the market and the polis, are blurred and co-emerge as a process in a relational and interactive manner” (Lucarelli, 2018, p. 12).

Below, and from the accumulated experience of the authors conceptualizing and implementing place brands (see Table 1) under contract with various public administrations (San Eugenio, et. al., 2019; San Eugenio, Ginesta y Kavaratzis, 2019; Ginesta, et. al., 2020), a proposal for a theoretical review of the concept of place branding is presented, assuming its inherently political nature.

4.1. The symbiosis between place branding and public diplomacy

In what is today known as “global regionalization” (Murciano, 1992), at a time when nation states are losing weight when compared to other political institutions that have demonstrated to be more efficient in managing public affairs (Pina, 2019), contextualizing the geopolitical interests of those that act on the international scene becomes more complex. If place branding can be understood as an exercise of places to seek their “competitive identity” (Anholt, 2008 and 2007)—and also assuming that these

places might be cities, metropolitan areas or regions—then it is logical to think that diplomacy is no longer the patrimony of those nation states created after the Peace of Westphalia (1648). It is an essential element for the implementation of a place brand at the municipal, regional and supra-regional level.

We could therefore ask ourselves whether public diplomacy is a constitutive element of a global place branding strategy, or vice versa (Moilanen and Rainisto, 2009). However, it seems much more correct to think that both the discipline of place branding and public diplomacy are spheres of knowledge in constant intersection. The creation of place brands is sometimes the result (or a connected action) of a much longer term para-diplomatic strategy carried out by a specific public administration; and sometimes it requires actions of public diplomacy for the consolidation and strategic deployment of a campaign of place branding that allows the positioning of a place (city, region, country etc.) on an international level to attract tourists, investments and talent. Following Anholt (2006), Ginesta and San Eugenio (2013, p. 231) state: “Therefore, public diplomacy should no longer be limited to communicating and/or promoting the government’s policies but should, in the spirit of nation branding, work to improve the nation’s international reputation, which is conditioned by the image that it presents abroad”.

The Autonomous Community of Catalonia, in the northeast of Spain, is a clear example of how public diplomacy strategies and the will of the administrations to create place brands are placed on an equal footing, according to the political need of each actor (local or regional government). On the one hand, since the 1992 Olympic Games, the city of Barcelona has played a leading role in the international positioning of the region, with the Barcelona brand being an integrating concept of all the potential that this region has (Michael and Sedghi, 2014). Barcelona’s international positioning strategy, its appeal to attract investors, tourists and talent, has been structured assuming the innate potential of its brand: in technology, with Mobile World Capital Barcelona and the Barcelona Tech City hub; in business, with the Barcelona Global lobby; and in sport, with FC Barcelona, which is a true entertainment multinational (San Eugenio, Ginesta and Xifra, 2017a; Ginesta, Sellas and Canals, 2019).

On the other hand, the strength of the Barcelona brand has diluted the potential of a supposed Catalonia brand. In fact, from 2012 to 2017—during the period in which Catalonia held a non-binding consultation on its political future (9 November 2014) and an unconstitutional referendum on independence (1 October 2017)—the government of Catalonia needed to explain its project for an independent Catalonia on an international level. It was in this context, with the Catalonia brand completely eclipsed by the appeal of its capital, that the regional government led a series of actions of public diplomacy—corporate, cultural and in relations with the media on an international level (Cull, 2008)—through two organizations: the Public Diplomacy Council of Catalonia (Diplocat) and the Eugeni Xammar International Program of Communication and Public Relations. As a result, in a scenario of weakness of the regional brand, the para-

diplomatic actions led the construction of a narrative to project on an international level (San Eugenio, Ginesta and Xifra, 2017b; Torras-Vila and Fernández-Cavia, 2018).

4.2. Place branding as a device of regional governance: Spatial planning and sustainability

The design, conceptualization and implementation of place brands has become a perfect instrument for regional governance. The various case studies mentioned in the methodology section of this article (see Table 1) enable us to verify the capacity of the processes of conceptualizing place brands to draw a strategic framework where the public administration can make decisions related to the deployment of its policies much more effectively (San Eugenio, Ginesta and Kavaratzis, 2019; San Eugenio, et. al., 2019).

The success of a place brand is based on the conviction that, in reality, a process has developed that ends up providing a *de facto* regional strategic plan; that is, a wealth of very valuable information from the public regarding a future proposal for a regional model. In this way, the discipline of place branding is intrinsically linked to urban planning and the region's sustainable development (Muñoz, 2008; Oliveira, 2015; San Eugenio, et. al., 2019).

On the one hand, Oliveira and Ashworth (2017, p. 35) have approached the relationship between place branding and strategic spatial planning from the point of view of improving regional governance, understanding place branding "as a strategic process contributing to urban/regional development and urban/regional competitiveness. To this end, place branding can operate effectively through strategic spatial planning". Furthermore, Van Assche and Chien Lo (2011, p. 123) argue that the relationship between spatial planning and place branding can be understood because both initiatives "can contribute to the discovery and the creation of a place identity that produces economic value".

The case study of the brand "Empordà, tocat pels déus" ("Empordà, touched by the gods") (San Eugenio, Ginesta and Kavaratzis, 2019) can illustrate the previous theoretical approach from a supra-municipal level, in the northeast of Catalonia. While the geographical division of Catalonia into counties has, in some cases, divided areas that have a natural continuity (for example, the area of Empordà), the creation of a place brand that encompasses the two administrative counties of Alt and Baix Empordà (Upper and Lower Empordà) has allowed the supra-municipal administration (in Catalonia the county councils) to establish a road map for the holistic management of the region, from different areas of public management: economic and tourist promotion, cultural management, citizen participation, environmental management and so forth.

On the other hand, today "public policy planning centered on environmental sustainability and sustainable development has become a central idea for good governance" (San Eugenio, et. al., 2019, p. 2). In fact, nowadays, the concept of sustainable development goes far beyond that laid out in the Rio Declaration on

Environment and Development, Agenda 21, in 1992—which was focused basically on a “strategy for planning professionals, architects or development officials to address the effects of human developments on the environmental crisis” (Elsakka, 2016, p. 1)—and moves towards a global agenda to promote prosperity while protecting the planet: this is what the United Nations advocates with its interconnected 17 Sustainable Development Goals to be achieved by 2030.

For example, the case study of the brand “El Pla de l’Estany, comarca que batega” (“El Pla de l’Estany, the region that pulsates”) (San Eugenio, et al., 2019), led by the Pla de l’Estany county council, “shows how place branding, as a central component of a public administration governance strategy, needs to be associated not only with tourist promotion but also with sustainable governance for long-term positioning. In fact, and according to the physical characteristics of the Pla de l’Estany [a region with one of the most famous lakes in Catalonia, the lake of Banyoles] it is mandatory to include sustainability aspects as key arguments for the place branding process” (San Eugenio, et al., p. 13).

When place branding becomes a tool for regional strategic planning, rigor is crucial for success. Avoiding visionary postulates and opting for the application of social research processes is a good place to begin to obtain a good understanding of the region to be conceptualized. Grasping a region involves understanding the complexity of its identity, which, in addition, in a global and digitalized world, can only be understood in a liquid manner (Bauman, 2006). Place branding involves analyzing and managing a region’s identities, both tangible and intangible, which is why it works with research techniques that enable us to monitor the region at the grassroots level.

Citizen involvement in the conceptualization of the new place brands is essential for their success, as well as ensuring that the brand guarantees the deployment of sustainable policies in the region. In fact, “the concept of sustainability is based on the premise that the inhabitants of a destination should be involved in the way that destination is managed and promoted” (Zouganeli, et al., 2012, p. 739). Therefore, the deployment of a place brand does not have to be done with the aim of ‘selling’ something, but rather of applying a bottom-up strategy to transform the (already existing) place identity into a competitive place identity (Anholt, 2007).

4.3. Place branding as a legitimizer of political action

It is therefore very important to maintain channels of communication with the public permanently open. Only through the complicity of residents, who are also voters, in a region, can we legitimize the narrative of a place brand. This complicity requires communication that is set up on three levels: a) communication for education: this involves explaining, in great detail, the nature of the project; b) communication for expectations: a classic element for maintaining a positive tension with the process of conceptualizing the place brand that is being deployed; and c) communication for participation: the constant invitation to the public to participate in the branding project

is essential for democratizing the place brand strategy.

Consequently, place branding acts as a driver to foment more inclusive spaces for political decision-making. Partly because the conceptualization of place brands requires a broad political consensus among political agents and elected officials, who are generally the people that lead such projects. This means that place branding needs to avoid the political tactics that are usually imposed in public management and that, in the case of Spain, has marked the way public policies have been planned. And also those related to place promotion, which have often ended up being reduced to a logo and a slogan with no real connection to place management (San Eugenio, Ginesta and Kavartzis, 2019).

Two of the case studies in Table 1 are very illustrative since they are opposites. On the one hand, the brand “Vic, ciutat a la mesura humana” (“Vic, a city with a human dimension”) —Vic is the capital of the Osona region in Catalonia—was developed with a very broad political and social consensus, and its public implementation (through signage, institutional advertising, online profiles etc.) was a success quite apart from the restructuring that the municipal plenary underwent after the municipal elections of 2015 and 2019 (Ginesta, et. al, 2020).

On the other hand, the initial diagnosis made in order to conceptualize the brand “El Vendrell”, failed to become tangible in a brand supported by the city council, due to the low level of cohesion of the municipal coalition government of the city of El Vendrell (capital of the Baix Penedès region, in Catalonia) that emerged after the 2015 local elections and that broke up definitively in 2019. In fact, it was not until the Covid-19 crisis, which paralyzed the Spanish economy during the first half of 2020, that the new municipal government of El Vendrell was forced to implement a tourist campaign taking advantage of one of the preliminary projects that had been developed and that had been ruled out by the research team.

As has been pointed out throughout this article, place branding directly appeals to voters. By its very nature it appeals at the grassroots level, providing residents and voters with new spaces of direct democracy that legitimate political institutions (Simelio, et. al., 2019). The different projects presented in Table 1 have enabled us to show that the greater the degree of interaction between residents and the political agents that lead the creation of the brand, the greater capacity the public administration has to legitimize a narrative and a future process of multi-level implementation.

5. Conclusions

Place brands are extremely complex in their conceptualization and subsequent development due, among other reasons, to the variety of stakeholders that circle around their sphere of influence. This implies the need to have work teams that are highly specialized in the area of place branding (San Eugenio, et al., 2019; Ginesta, et. al., 2020), as well as to approach the discipline in a necessarily integrative fashion with other fields

of knowledge, politics among them.

Although some authors have already approached place branding from a political dimension (Govers and Go, 2009; Lucarelli, 2018), the necessary deconstruction of the concept in times of globalization and liquid identities (Bauman, 2006) forces us to rethink the more classical theoretical approach of place branding, associating it with other areas of knowledge that are markedly political in nature, attending to the central role that public administration and political agents play in it.

Therefore, this article has considered the necessary convergence between place branding and public diplomacy in a stage of global regionalization and the traditional Westphalian nation state's loss of geopolitical weight. A convergence that should never be considered from a parasitic point of view, from one discipline towards another, but rather from a symbiosis between the two in both practice and in theory.

Additionally, place brands, understood as management devices for complex identities, contribute to the elaboration of a strategic plan to define the future of a community at an integrative level among all the areas of the administration. Consequently, the multi-level implementation of specific policies that are assumed to integrate the whole society will be much easier; for example, those outlined in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), adopted by the United Nations.

Finally, place branding is by nature a driver for direct democracy. The necessary contribution of the resident, citizen and voter in the conceptualization of place brands indicate its legitimizing character of a political practice that is much more ethical and co-responsible with public management.

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