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Is it sound policy or fast policy? Practitioners' perspectives on the role of place branding in local economic development

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ABSTRACT

In response to neoliberal policies and globalization pressures over the past three decades, urban governments in advanced economies have, with near-unanimity, adopted place branding as an approach to foster local economic growth. Framed as an outcome of multilevel neoliberal policymaking and local entrepreneurial governance, place branding has been adopted by urban places at all scales and geographic contexts with little regard for its efficacy. It is unclear, however, whether place branding represents a substantive approach, or is merely an emerging example of a neoliberal scripting. In many regards, the debate surrounding place branding is similar to the discourse on the Creative Class a decade ago. Consequently, uncertainty exists regarding whether place branding reflects practical and responsible urban governance or a superficial, fast policy with limited potential to foster local development. To date, little is known about how practitioners perceive place branding as a policy tool in the context of economic development. This study examines the perceptions of economic development practitioners regarding how place branding is being developed and implemented as a policy tool. The analysis is based on in-depth interviews with economic development practitioners (n = 25) from a wide range of municipalities in Ontario. Findings of this study indicate that while opportunity exists for place branding to represent in-depth and extensive local development policy, it is more generally an urban development script for creating a sense of place and fostering local economic development. Additionally, the majority of place branding policy represents superficial policy, emphasizing hegemonic approaches. Place branding can therefore be explained as an example of fast policy.

Introduction

Within the debate over the myriad historical and contemporary economic development approaches employed by municipalities, consensus is lacking amongst local governments over what policy programmes and initiatives should be used to promote local growth. To date, place branding appears to be an exception, as it has received near-universal attention and usage amongst municipal governments. Since the late twentieth

century, place branding has received considerable attention from both scholars and urban policy practitioners for its role as an urban governance strategy for managing the perceptions about places and driving the attraction of resources important in local economic development. From a practical perspective, place branding has become extremely popular in municipal urban governance as a primary strategic policy to shape the perception of a locale. It's place in economic development can be characterized as a policy "Swiss army knife" as it has perceived utility in attracting investment in a number of sectors, including human capital, tourism, and exports (see Klijn et al, 2012; Jacobsen, 2012; Niedomysl, 2004; Shafranskaya & Potapov, 2014). In a human geography context, the implication of this is that manipulating the urban landscape to create a strong and positive sense of place fosters the attraction and retention of investment from a target audience. And it is place branding that drives the (re)configuration of urban space to develop this sense of place.

As an emerging approach to local economic development, several pertinent questions surround place branding as a policy solution: 1) *how do place and sense-of-place fit in contemporary local economic development policymaking?* 2) *Does this place-making that occurs through the place branding process represent a new or emerging form of economic development policy? Or is it simply a "re-dressing" of soft-policy approaches to development?* And 3) *does place branding represent a substantive policy approach that can influence the development trajectory of an urban area? Or is it fast, superficial, and reductive policy?*

We assert here that place branding is not adequately explained as a single process. Instead, the confluence of historical and modern policy approaches and contemporary political-economic pressures have enabled place branding to emerge as a (relatively) new set of techniques to promote local economic development. Because the urban political-economic landscape has been littered by corpses of "silver bullet" fixes to economic development (Peck, 2011; Reese & Sands, 2014), it is currently unclear whether place branding represents another policy programme that will be shot down when it is perceived to have outlived its perceived usefulness.

Indeed, the discourse around place branding can be framed within the larger political-economic debate surrounding fast policy solutions to local economic development failings (e.g. see Lees, 2012; Peck, 2002, 2014; Prince, 2012). Broadly, the issues surrounding place branding are similar to the Creative Class debate from the past decade or so. First, it is unclear whether place branding itself is more closely related to traditional economic development policies (see Gertler, 1990) or embedded within the emerging discourse on "soft factors" (Lawton, Murphy, & Redmond, 2013; Nye, 2004). Furthermore, this debate on the Creative Class focused on whether it represented an ingenious, substantive approach to fostering economic development (see Florida, 2002; Florida, Mellander, & Stolarick, 2011; Lawton et al., 2013; Mellander, Florida, & Stolarick, 2011; Zenker, 2009) or snake-oil, where flashy packaging obscures prescriptive, cookie-cutter, and ultimately superficial policy (see Kratke, 2010; Peck, 2005, 2007, 2011; Pratt, 2008; Wilson & Kiel, 2008). Similarly, it is unclear where place branding falls in this spectrum.

This examination of the nature of place branding is two-fold: first, place branding is contextualized within a theoretical framework that explores and extends the important debate surrounding the Creative Class and fast policy approaches to development.

Within this section, a critique of place branding is provided to better identify its value in a larger economic development context. Second, empirical research is presented on the local-level political-economic and institutional contexts in which place branding initiatives emerge, the forms that these initiatives and policies take, and the perceived role of place branding in economic development.

At present the debate led by Peck and Florida is more rhetorical and normative. This paper attempts to address this by providing an empirical grounding of the perspective side of the debate. The content of research is drawn from the responses of a series of in-depth interviews with economic development practitioners from a range of municipalities in the Province of Ontario, Canada (n = 25). Ontario and its municipalities represent a strong case study for place branding for several reasons: first, Ontario appears to be a hotbed of place branding activity, with an adoption rate at the local level (88%) that outpaces that of neighbouring regions, such as in the State of Michigan, USA (48%) (Sadler, Cleave, Arku, & Gilliland, 2016). Second, recent research indicates that place branding is being adopted by municipalities of all sizes, types, and geographic contexts (Cleave & Arku, 2014). Finally, despite this high usage, concerns have been expressed over whether place branding policy in Ontario is being employed in substantive and impactful ways (Cleave, Arku, Sadler, & Gilliland, 2016). Additionally, Ontario faces many of the same political and economic challenges and opportunities found in other advanced economies (Arku, 2013), and as a result, findings from Ontario can be generalized, applied, and contrasted to policy findings in other locales.

The descriptive style of analysis employed in this study represents a conscious effort to bridge the gap between the theoretical and practical components of place branding theory. By integrating theory with empirical results, this research shows: 1) while there is potential for place branding policy to foster in-depth change, it is most often superficial in its nature; 2) that place branding at the local level is integrated into a circuit of fast policy, with policy migration and abstraction facilitated by private consultancies; 3) although the responses of the practitioners demonstrate that place branding is most often firmly entrenched within traditional forms of economic development, there are specific instances where place branding is utilized in ways that extend into contemporary development strategy; and 4) that place branding initiatives are often miscast in an attempt to maintain an economic status quo, rather than a new approach to generating sustainable growth. Consequently, the findings of this study indicate that while there is opportunity for place branding to represent in-depth and extensive local development policy, it is more generally an urban development script for commodifying space and place, as well as creating a sense of place to fostering local economic development.

Theoretical context of place branding

From a theoretical standpoint, place branding has been associated with the broad political-economic forces of globalization (Cheshire, 1999; Paddison, 1993; Ward, 1998), neoliberalism (Cleave & Arku, 2015; Giovinardi, 2012; Hannigan, 2003), and the emergence of entrepreneurial governments at the local level (Hall & Hubbard, 1996; Harvey, 1989; Kirby & Kent, 2010). The perceived need for place branding by local officials is explained as a response to the fundamental nature of urban economy being dramatically altered by global-scale political-economic change. Resource-based sectors,

once traditional cornerstones of economic growth, are now buffeted by variable global commodity prices. Furthermore, the emergence of new economic territories, new nodes of production, and increased interconnection and mobility between markets have created stiff global competition for manufacturing industries and spatially redefined the global political economy (Doel & Hubbard, 2002). Concurrently, cities and other contemporary urban centres have experienced social and spatial restructuring as the sites of capital accumulation (Brenner & Theodore, 2002; Swyngedouw, 1997; Peck, 2002), with responsibility for generating local economic growth increasingly being assigned to local municipal governments (Arku, 2014). This change has fundamentally altered how urban areas perceive themselves in the global political economy, and as a result, place branding can be described as a tool to facilitate the reorientation of restructured local space and place.

From the neo-Marxist perspective, the management of space is used to facilitate capitalist consumption (Goss, 1993, 2006). This colonization occurs through carefully measured spatial practices of commodification (Goss, 1993, 2006), government controls (McCann, 2002, 2007), and representations of the space discourses of planning and surveillance (for instance, in the revanchist city) designed to rationally order space (Merrifield, 1993). Indeed, Goss (1993, 2006) describes how place and space have been co-opted, managed, and sanitized with the goal of driving consumption. Beginning in the configuration of shopping centres and extending to the contemporary urban land-scape, the tight control of every aspect of space allows an image of place to be created, designed to create a specific emotional connection with the consumer that drives consumption (Goss, 1993).

Local governments have realized that this commodification of urban spaces can be used as a key driver of local economic development, as:

> All of people's decisions, whether they are as trivial as buying an everyday product or as important as relocating a company, are partly rational and partly emotional. No human activity is exempt from this rule, and the brand images of cities and countries underpin the emotional part of every decision and strongly affect the rational part too. (Anholt, 2006, p. 18)

As a result, the commodification of urban space has taken on many forms. Previous efforts at marketing and promotion have emphasized advertisements (Gertler, 1990; Burgess & Wood, 1988; Leigh & Blakely, 2013), regeneration of urban landscapes through gentrification and urban design (Biddulph, 2011; Hubbard, 1996; Kim, 2010; Paddison, 1993), highlighting unique or iconic buildings (Kirby & Kent, 2010; Warnaby & Medway, 2008) through the construction of flagship projects (Roberts & Schein, 1993), and through the hosting of large-scale events such as the Olympics (Hall & Hubbard, 1996; Zhang & Zhao, 2009). In each instance, there is a commodification of the urban space, and a packaging (or repackaging) designed to extol its virtues as a place to live or do business over its competitors.

Previous place advertising, marketing, and promotion efforts were generally unco-ordinated or disconnected and often—particularly in the case of marketing and adver-tising—not meant to provide a lasting direction for the city and its image creation (Burgess & Wood, 1988). Place branding differs, as it acts as the connection between place marketing and the image rehabilitation efforts through connecting place promo-tion activities to redevelopment and urban design. Indeed, place branding can be

contingent, where a brand acts as a banner under which all local development initiatives fall, essentially providing the guidepost for local initiatives. As Govers (2011, p. 231) argues, "place branding should inform place marketing and function as a strategic compass." To be marketed effectively, a city must have an underlying product created through the (re)development of the physical, social, and political urban landscapes (Kavaratzis, 2005). At a city level these (re)development efforts must be coordinated to ensure coherence in the image of the city being created. Essentially, a "product" needs to underpin any marketing effort, and the brand works to mediate this relationship to attempt to ensure continuity. If there is no place brand, a city's image will continue to develop, but it may become fragmented, confusing, and take a form that is unconducive to local social and economic development goals.

As a result, place branding can be characterized as the manipulation of urban space and imagery to create a sense of place that is leveraged to facilitate the flow of capital (Eshuis & Edwards, 2013; Johannson, 2012; Stock, 2009). Place branding and the resulting place image are defined through symbology that conveys an encoded message of the municipality (Gotham, 2007; Johansson, 2012; Kim, 2010). Like other products, a municipality's place brand is a representational form that invokes the values associated with the community. The brand creates an image of a place associated with particular values and ideas, creating and connecting psychological and social connotative meanings (Stern & Hall, 2010; Tuan, 1971, 1976; Young & Lever, 1997). The place image, therefore, is composed of the impressions and beliefs—a sense of place—that an audience has about a municipality. The goal is to create a proposition that compels the customer to buy into the ideas being presented.

Framing place branding in local economic development

Marketing of municipalities is firmly entrenched in the historical economic development approach. Gertler (1990), Kitchen (1985), and Paddison (1993) all point out that in the realm of local economic development, municipal governments are driven by self-interest, and have a strong incentive to promote information that depicts the locality in the way that is most favourable for generating inward investment. Gertler (1990) links this promotion with conservative economic development solutions that rely on the market to create opportunities for local prosperity and growth. Promotion and advertising is frequently paired with policies of tax-breaks, free or low-priced lands, or the passage of right-to-work legislation.

So where does place branding fit in? The primary difference between the advertisement and promotion described by Gertler (1990) and his contemporaries and modern place branding lies in its strategic nature. Traditional advertising and promotion of cities can be classified in the "shoot anything that flies, claim anything that falls" approach to economic development (Rubin, 1988, p. 237). By flooding the market with information about a place, the goal was to reach the maximum number of potential investors. Alternatively, place branding is more strategic, as it is meant to specifically target particular audiences. A more cogent strategy for economic development is thus required to underpin the brand and help create the parameters in which the brand will have meaning. As Gibson (2005, p. 260) argues, "the logic goes something like this: if city leaders can find a way to project 'world-class' images of 'urban

vitality' into the international marketplace, then perhaps they can improve their chances of convincing tourists and multinational corporations to invest in *their* city and not the city next door or across the ocean."

Kavaratzis (2005, 2009) and Reese and Sands (2014) have argued that since the turn of the twenty-first century, economic development has privileged the accumulation of human capital through a range of quality-of-life strategies, away from more traditional "smoke-stack chasing" strategies designed to recruit and attract large manufacturing facilities through tax-abatements and bonuses. This change has been punctuated by the rise of the Creative Class as a target of many cities' efforts to increase their economic productivity and competitiveness (Florida, 2002). The coalescing and interplay of talent within the urban environment provide a launching ground for ideas, new technologies, and new forms of growth. Economic development also takes on a more holistic view, as vain attempts to lure firms in the hope of economic growth have been replaced by sustainable approaches that consider economic development to include social capital and flexibility. Here again, place branding emerges as a potential tool for municipal governments. Hospers (2003) suggests that place branding is vital in the development of a municipality. If the municipality desires investment of traditional or new economy industries to attract talent or become known as a centre for innovation, entrepreneurship, or creativity, it needs place branding to promote itself and enter the consciousness of the target audience. A municipality could have the necessary infrastructure and economic ingredients to be a leader in an economic sector, but without effective self-promotion as such it will never achieve that external reputation.

Framing place branding as an extension of the creative class debate

Place branding has been explained as part of a shift towards the accumulation of human capital, which privileges "soft factors" for attraction of economic resources (Florida, 2002; Lawton et al., 2013; Lewis & Donald, 2010; Nye, 2004; Sands & Reese, 2008). As Nye (2004, p. 11) notes, "soft power arises from the attractiveness...[of a place's] culture, political ideals, and policies". This relatively "new" approach privileges concepts of *brand, perception, visibility*, and *image* over more traditional economic development approaches such as tax abatements and other improvements to the local business climate. This process is deeply embedded in the theoretical model of the "entrepreneurial city", which posits that the image of an urban area is important in its ability to market and promote itself—particularly in the age of an omnipresent media (Boudreau, Hammel, Jouve, & Keil, 2006; Harvey-Jordan & Long, 2002, Rantisi & Leslie, 2006).

Perhaps the most prominent example of urban spaces using "soft power" to foster local economic development is found in Florida's (2002) larger thesis on the Creative Class, which posited that the economic success of cities was directly related to the ability to attract and retain "creative people" through a unique and positive local milieu. As Florida (2002), Lawton et al. (2013), and Zenker (2009) argue, this economic growth associated with the Creative Class can be perceived as relatively unconnected with "hard" (or "classical") political conditions, such as job availability, costs, and incentives. In the Creative Class context, "soft" conditions referred to openness and tolerance and amenity preferences.

The Creative Class message, however, is heavily criticized on several fronts. Peck (2007, p. 1) observes that Florida's doctrine has proliferated as "a seductive urban development script-cum-vision, complete with prescriptively defined policy practices and positions". It has become "a 'message of hope' to guide poor and declining localities to a future path of successful development. Florida's approach can be criticized for its highly affirmative concept of class and the current mode of capitalist development" (Kratke, 2010, p. 853).

For some, the Creative Class ideas are a form of fast policy used by urban governments in lieu of more long-term, sustainable initiatives where compressed timeframes of policy developments have generally been replacing slower, more judicious, and more measured policy processes (Lees, 2012; Peck, 2002; Peck & Theodore, 2010). A second outcome of circuits of fast policy perpetuated by consultancies and other private institutions is the development of a standard set of neoliberal policy solutions to urban and economic crises. As the same set of policy ideas migrate across markets, they become a neoliberal script, where the same "toolbox" of ideas or "cookie-cutter" solutions are presented as the solution to particular urban ailments. Neoliberal scripts have been identified for welfare-to-workfare policy transition (Peck, 2002), gentrification and urban redevelopment (Lees, 2012; Smith, 2002), and Creative Class attraction (Peck, 2005, 2007).

The Creative Class script presents the commodification of art and culture through a fashionable urban development script (Boschma & Fritsch, 2009; Kratke, 2010; Peck, 2005, 2007), which creates a guidebook for developing superficial streetscapes, complete with signage, banners, street lighting, and facades (Rantisi & Leslie, 2006). Inherent in this script are a limited number of superficial policy options unlikely to foster substantive change that distract from investments in larger areas of need, such as education and basic infrastructure services.

Implications: a critique of place branding

The debate surrounding place branding is similar to those of the past decade about the Creative Class and associated entrepreneurial approaches to urban development. Instead of something tangible being created, most place branding has been critiqued as nothing more than a script that guides urban redressing designed to cover the negative aspects of a place. For most municipalities, place branding appears to be vindicated simply because so many towns, cities, regions, and nations have adopted it (Anholt, 2008; Zenker, Petersen, & Aholt, 2013): the market is practically flooded with brands. As Peck (2014, p. 1) notes, there is hollowness to these entrepreneurial approaches to development:

> In the North American context, and somewhat beyond, this is often reduced to a Pepsi-or-Coke choice between the almost-do-nothing deregulatory economism of Edward Glaeser and elite-oriented cultural makeovers à la Richard Florida, a "choice" that says more about the menu than it does about the tastes or nutritional needs of local "decision makers". The resulting reliance on a battery of weak policy tools and clichéd interventions, of which little seems to be expected and even less delivered, bears the hallmarks of a "syndrome".

As with other neoliberal policy scripts, place branding has become increasingly abstract and homogenized as it continues to circulate as through its circuit of fast policy. Place branding is increasingly being adopted through policy migration arising from "solution-starved" practitioners under pressure to create positive change (McCann & Ward, 2012; Rubin, 1988; Ward, 2011). Often, this entails investigations by practitioners into policy models that have been anointed the best course of action or are heavily used by other municipalities, which once identified are adopted into the local urban governance strategy (McCann & Ward, 2012; Peck & Theodore, 2010; Ward, 2011). To implement these "best practice" policies, a relationship is struck between the municipality and the people or places with which the policies are associated. In the case of place branding, policy migration can be problematic for several reasons. First, the reliance on consultants and external experts—an issue acknowledged by the practitioners—means that the development of place brands is influenced by a small number of consultants associated with multiple municipalities. This creates the potential for a homogenization of local policies within a region, since the same basic script with a limited number of policy avenues is presented to multiple municipalities. For the local practitioner, this provides a safe and simple way to "develop" and implement local policy, but it may lead to the recycling of place brands and convergence in basic form and message. The result could be a homogenous series of place brands, where unique and differentiating efforts are lost in the shuffle.

Similar to other critiques of the Creative Class, there is limited evidence that place branding is effective in altering the development trajectory of a community. Despite the myriad economic development programmes, and the aggressive efforts of municipalities to cope with the challenges and opportunities of globalization, the evidence base for the efficacy of such strategies has not been established (Leigh & Blakely, 2013; McCann & Ward, 2012; Peters & Fisher, 2004). Yet municipal governments have been continually willing to adopt place branding strategies to attract business and investment as a way of appeasing constituents' demands that something be done, even when these strategies have little positive effect on local economic development (Ashworth, 2010).

The use of place branding by municipalities has therefore been heavily criticized for being inefficient, misguided, and a potential waste of local resources (e.g. taxpayers' money, staffing, time, and goodwill with the community). Some scholars have criticised municipal governments for deploying place branding as a desperate policy. In their criticisms, Anholt (2005) and Kavaratzis & Ashworth (2005) also note that funds are being invested in place branding strategies with misguided goals, emphasizing the development of logos and marketing slogans over substantive policy. Some scholars also suggest that place branding initiatives are being used as a decoy to prevent the public from knowing what their governments are doing (Eshuis & Edwards, 2013; Greenberg, 2008). Others raise concern about a clear understanding of the effectiveness of place branding initiatives. This misunderstanding of place branding and its role in local development has the potential to do a considerable disservice to local taxpayers through poorly managed investments of public funds.

In light of these criticisms, the questions remain: *How do place and sense-of-place fit in contemporary local economic development policymaking? Does place branding represent a new or existing form of economic development policy? And is it a substantive policy approach or merely fast, superficial, and reductive policy?*

Methods: interviews with practitioners in Ontario, Canada

Despite assertions that economic development approaches are likely to vary based on the size and type of the municipality employing them (Reese, 1992), place branding appears to be nearly universal in its usage. For example, recent research in Ontario and Michigan showed that place branding is being used by municipalities of all population sizes (Cleave & Arku, 2014; Sadler et al., 2016). While much of the literature on place branding and economic development has focused on primary or larger cities, this paper takes a broader approach by focusing on municipalities of all sizes, since all appear to be employing place branding as part of their economic development strategies. By including smaller and more peripheral municipalities within the research, this paper can provide both a more robust analysis of place branding's role in local economic development and a broader picture of its use compared to single-municipality case studies (Reese, 1992). Additionally, smaller and more peripheral municipalities are facing the greatest likelihood of economic decline, as the trend has been towards agglomeration of activities in the largest cities in a region, leaving smaller urban spaces to fight for the remaining scraps of mobile economic resources. Consequently, it is important to understand the decisions that municipalities of all sizes—not just the largest and most prominent—are making in their economic development efforts (Lewis & Donald, 2010; Reese, 1992; Sands & Reese, 2008). Focusing attention on a diversity of municipalities, large and small, within a single province helps control for variation in macro-level institutional restrictions and the general economic development climate.

In this study, the Province of Ontario, Canada, was selected because its political-economic environment is reflective of most other advanced economies. Since the 1980s, Ontario has been forced to cope with the challenges of significant economic restructuring caused by globalization and neoliberal policymaking. Ontario's historical strengths in traditional manufacturing sectors—including automotive and steel—have faced challenges in restructuring, and along with emerging advanced industry sectors, these traditional sectors have experienced increased competition to maintain their global niches (Bradford & Wolfe, 2013). Municipalities that previously prospered from the presence of large manufacturing complexes were forced to cope with the aftermath of industrial restructuring and shifting of capital to more productive areas of the economy and different methods of industrial organization (Wolfe & Gertler, 2001). Ontario has additionally been affected by the ongoing global economic crisis starting in 2008, as manifested in a range of economic problems such as closures of traditional industries, fiscal stress, and rising unemployment (Arku, 2014; Bradford, 2010). Overall, the challenges of the changing economy have affected the fortunes of most municipalities in Ontario and their approaches to local economic development (Vinodrai, 2010). By necessity, Ontario municipalities have become very proactive in the field of economic development.

Data to assess the rationale and role of place branding within the context of local economic development were collected using semi-structured, in-depth interviews with 25 local economic development practitioners representing a subset of a larger initial list. The downloading of economic development responsibilities to the municipal level has made these practitioners key figures in determining the economic viability of their

localities, and they therefore have important insights into municipal challenges and policy responses.

The use of interviews as an approach to researching both place branding and economic development is not new (see Kvale, 1996; Reese, 1992; Rubin, 1988), but has become a more widely used technique over the past decade (Andersson & Niedomysl, 2010; Arku, 2013, 2014; Bramwell & Wolfe, 2008; Gordon, 2007, 2009; Hankinson, 2009; Lewis & Donald, 2010; Taabazuing, Arku, & Mkandawire, 2015). The use of interviews, therefore, has two potential strengths: first, it allows the current study to remain consistent with contemporary research practices in the field of place branding and economic development; and second, the limited research on and the state of knowledge and understanding of the topic present an opportunity to obtain a deeper understanding. In-depth interviews, therefore, help align the data collection and interpretation with the overall research goals of the study.

The use of semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions was considered appropriate for the study for three main reasons. First, open-ended questions allow respondents to identify significant issues and ideas themselves and explain their importance (Miller, Yanoshik, Crabtree, & Reymond, 1994). Open-ended questions are based on the topic area, but also provide opportunities for additional themes to be identified and examined (Dunn, 2005). While main themes are generally identified prior to the interview, the open-ended framework allows themes that develop throughout the discussions to be explored (Harvey-Jordan & Long, 2002). Questioning can thus be flexible and responsive to what respondents have to say, maximizing the opportunities to obtain unique information, experiences, and ideas (Dunn, 2005; Hay, 2005). In this study, the relative lack of knowledge about place branding in Ontario emphasized the need to have flexibility in the research methodology to identify and explore new themes as they emerged through interaction with the participants.

Secondly, a flexible structure was necessary to deal successfully with the participants, who were part of different organizations acting within different political, economic, and operational environments and with varying place branding uses, goals, and understandings. This flexibility within the interview process allows for the identification, evaluation, and appropriate treatment of such differences among the interviewees. This, therefore, ensures that the interview questions being asked are contextually appropriate, and remain aligned with the research objectives.

Finally, the topic of place branding and its surrounding issues are complex and include several interrelations between the various partial issues. The varying experiences of each respondent are therefore valuable in developing a more complete understanding of the research domain. In-depth interviews in general are appropriate to deal with such complex matters and allow room for clarifications and adequate descriptions of interrelations.

Practitioners came from a range of geographic, political, and economic contexts to create a cross-section of responses. To this end, practitioner selection was based on a municipality's population, location in relation to the economic core of the province, and economic history. A vital characteristic in the selection of practitioners was their experience with place branding issues. The final list of participating localities is diverse geographically, economically, and demographically (see Table 1). While experienced officials were targeted because of the perception of greater knowledge and

Table 1. Municipalities participating in this study.

Municipality	Tier	Type	Population	Place Branding Occurring?
Barrie	Single	City	135,711	Yes
Brampton	Lower	City	523,911	Yes
Brantford	Single	City	93,650	Yes
Brighton	Lower	Municipality	10,928	Yes
Brockville	Single	City	21,870	Yes
Burlington	Lower	City	175,779	Yes
Cambridge	Lower	City	126,748	Yes
Hamilton	Lower	City	519,949	Yes
Kingston	Single	City	123,363	Yes
Kitchener	Lower	City	219,153	Yes
London	Single	City	366,151	Yes
Markham	Lower	City	301,709	No
Mississauga	Lower	City	713,443	Yes
Oakville	Lower	Town	182,520	Yes
Orangeville	Lower	Town	27,975	Yes
Orillia	Single	City	30,586	Yes
Ottawa	Single	City	883,391	Yes
Peterborough	Single	City	78,698	Yes
Pickering	Lower	City	88,721	Yes
Sarnia	Lower	City	72,366	No
Simcoe	Upper	County	446,063	Yes
Springwater	Lower	Township	18,223	Yes
St. Thomas	Single	City	37,905	Yes
Toronto	Single	City	2615,060	Yes
Woodstock	Lower	City	37,754	Yes

understanding, several more recently hired practitioners were included. Thus the experience of the interviewees ranged from two years to over 30, with a mean of 15 years.

The interviews averaged approximately one hour in length. Overarching themes were identified along several general contexts: conditions (the social, political, and physical contexts and the circumstances in which the participant works); interaction amongst actors (for instance, the relationship between economic development practitioners and other key stakeholders in brand development); strategies and tactics (the intents, perceptions, and actions of the research subject and how they relate to place branding); and consequences, which contextualize the outcomes of interaction with a stimulus or phenomenon (for instance, the interaction with a place brand and the sense of place it creates in the consumer). The meanings that practitioners attached to place branding were also examined to further understand the relationship between place branding and policy development (Hay, 2005). Assimilating the responses with general themes on local economic development and place branding, the usage of place branding by municipalities in Ontario is utilized to explore the underlying reasons for and effectiveness of its use. These themes are presented over the Results sections.

Results and analysis

The following section presents key themes that emerged from the in-depth interviews with local economic development practitioners. Interviewee responses are presented within three broad frameworks: 1) place, sense of place, and the relationship to place branding; 2) place branding as substantive economic development policy; and 3) place

branding as fast policy. Direct quotations from the interview transcripts illustrate the themes and provide the context for the practitioner's responses. To ensure confidentially, participants are identified by pseudonyms (e.g. PR1, PR2…PR25 for practitioners).

Place branding and sense of place

The responses of the practitioners revealed that the core strategic purpose of place branding was its role in developing a sense of place. Several practitioners described the role of place branding as: "about creating a sense of place" (PR2), "a different sense of feel about what that community has to offer" (PR15), "creating that visual and feeling… a sense of difference" (PR22), and "trying to invoke a feeling, or memories, or interest" (PR7). These roles were all framed with the goal of shaping "how we want to be perceived by the audience" (PR16). A common understanding among the practitioners was that the perception of the "sense of place" (PR2, PR3, PR9, and PR15) by the target audience is developed through the cultivation of a local identity and image.

The practitioners also noted that the development of a sense of place was not passive, but instead was an outcome of how the political, economic, social, and physical landscape of the municipality was developed and shaped. As one practitioner noted, "if we didn't change the identity, the way the city worked, if we did not create something fundamentally new, there was no way we could get people to talk or think differently about us" (PR8). Similarly, one practitioner explained that:

> We had to do something to re-brand and get the community wrapped around that we are an industrial community when every other community seems to be going after that creative economy and white collar workforce. So we know what audience we want. So now we have to make sure that we have the policies, the business climate, the infrastructure, and the workforce in position to be seen as a place where manufacturing will thrive. But this requires a concerted effort on our part [the local government], we have to be proactive (PR23).

These sentiments were expanded upon by several other practitioners who elaborated that "we want to change how people think about the community, but we have to be proactive in what we do to present ourselves as appealing" (PR7), and "it is up to us [the local government] to figure out where we want to be, and then develop a roadmap for us [as a city] to get there" (PR10). The implication of these quotes is that municipal governments are willing to reshape their urban landscapes in attempts to be viewed more positively by potential audiences.

Elaborating further on the need for developing the sense of place for a municipality through the brand, practitioners identified two primary functions of place branding in local economic development: "to draw attention to the community" (PR15) and "to differentiate from their competitors" (PR14). A common sentiment amongst the practitioners was that place branding helped get towns and cities "on the radar screens" (PR3, PR4, PR7, PR12). As another practitioner noted, place branding provides a "foot in the door" (PR1) with a target audience as it "gets attention…it gives us a chance to explain why we think we're a good location for them" (PR23). Place branding "gets to the point of differentiation…because of the fact that we have so many commonalities" (PR3).

One practitioner noted that "many communities can offer similar amenities. What makes our community unique? What is different?" (PR15), with another noting "many of the communities offer similar levels of quality of life" (PR23).

Interestingly, this emphasis on differentiation suggests a gap between the academic literature and the perspectives of the practitioners. While the practitioners suggest that branding can separate one place from another, the conclusions of the research domain (for instance, see Anholt, 2005, 2008; Pasquinelli, 2010; Peck, 2014; Zenker et al., 2013) suggest that branding is reductive and municipalities are not well differentiated by its use.

The perceived need for place branding amongst the practitioners can be primarily attributed to the idea of differentiation. Place branding, therefore, can be seen as a response to what Turok (2009) describes as the global trend of homogenization of urban spaces in terms of both attributes and offerings. In greater detail, practitioners noted that:

> Communities are always trying to differentiate themselves from everybody else because you tend to have the same sort of assets, you know most places have roads, most places have infrastructure, most places have natural amenities...so it's finding what makes you unique and running with it (PR2).

And

> In such a competitive market, we're trying to distinguish ourselves...what is unique? What are our strengths? It's the nature of it...it's so competitive...you can't be saying the same things (PR13).

The responses of the practitioners reflect the broader concept that the world is becoming increasingly integrated and homogenous. This trend of "McDonaldization" can be observed in the urban landscape, as cities have come to resemble one another more and more (Hospers, 2003; Ritzer, 1993). Municipalities, therefore, are being forced to identify and lean more heavily on their specific local characteristics to stand out in an increasingly crowded global marketplace (Acs, 2002; Florida, 2002; Hall, 1998; Hospers, 2003; Sassen, 2000; Storper, 2000; Turok, 2009). Indeed, the identification and promotion of unique location-based qualities can help determine where a city excels and how it can distinguish itself from its competition (Hospers, 2003).

The use of sense of place to achieve this distinction is important, because it suggests that municipalities are actively trying to define themselves in the ever-changing global environment. The brand is seen to deliver an emotional resonance, thus connecting with potential consumers. Thus to the practitioners, the "localization" described by Cooke (2002) outweighs the "death of distance" (Cairncross, 1997), and illuminates an increasing importance of creating a strong place image at the local level.

Place branding as substantive economic development policy

Communities are actively utilizing place branding to shape local place image because of its perceived role in local economic development. The practitioners interviewed for this research unanimously agreed that they felt under pressure to turn around the economic fortunes of their municipality in light of the persistent global and national political-economic challenges. One method they considered to address this challenge is the

adoption of place branding, because it is seen as a strategic tool to promote growth and foster competitiveness. As one practitioner noted, "we need to be able to deal with the issues our community will face now and in the future" (PR4). Place branding thus has to be embedded within a municipality's broader urban development strategies. In particular, the practitioners indicated that place branding could draw investments into the municipality—attracting residents and business—to increase the potential tax base and ultimately grow the local economy. Interestingly, the majority of practitioners (21/25) suggested that their place branding exercises were focused primarily on external audiences and not local ones.

Practitioners described the perceived role of place branding as: "a way to grow the [local revenue] pie. You're all competitive with each other but there is a way to grow the pie" (PR24). Another noted: "we need to get businesses, and we need to get people... they are where the revenue comes from" (PR16). The implicit assumption underpinning all the practitioner responses was that—in economic and urban development— more is better. One practitioner further described:

> What you're seeing is the result of communities whether large or small recognizing the importance of expanding their assessment base. The bottom line for economic development is that if you can expand your assessment base it will drive revenues for the community (PR2).

Another said:

> If you can leverage assets...if you can sell your strengths you may begin to change how people think about you...You may begin to stand out as the best place to live or do business. It can only help (PR22).

Within this context of local economic development, the practitioners posited that when used correctly, place branding provided a potential response to many of the challenges facing Ontario's municipalities. In general, the role of place branding in economic development was described similarly to its perceived basic purpose: "It's all part of business attraction essentially—from an economic development standpoint—as a city as a whole to attract residents to live here, investments, or tourists" (PR1). The identity created through the brand has had positive influences on the global perception—the sense-of-place—which external audiences held of the municipality:

> These companies we have attracted through our unique brand are fundamentally changing how California thinks about us, the way New York thinks about us, the way Google thinks about us as a corporation, the way Blackberry thinks about us. Our identity...you know I am in dialogue with lots of companies in Toronto that are saying "what the heck is going on over there?" There's too much action, you can't ignore it anymore... (PR10).

In terms of economic development, the image of the place included how municipal stakeholders interact with businesses looking to relocate, and the ease with which potential investors are able to formalize their relationship with a community. Ultimately, the experience of the place would play a key role in how the community was perceived. One practitioner described their local efforts to create an image of a community that was easy to do business with:

> We've put in the tools to get business through the system faster. We've put in a one stop shop on the main floor of city hall if you have any questions. We have two business

facilitators that shepherd you through the process and refer you to the correct people in the corporation (PR8).

The implication is that the actions of the local bureaucracy play a significant role in shaping the perception of the municipality as one that is "open for business" (PR8). Again, the value is that the place branding designed to create the sense of a strong and profitable business environment is connected with tangible changes and improvements within the locality.

Similarly, underpinning local place image are the local assets that a municipality can use to promote their locale as a strong place to invest. Interestingly, location—a geographically embedded characteristic—was the most commonly presented asset. Twelve practitioners mentioned location as a key element in their brand messaging. A primary reason for this high rate is likely due to the proximity of the communities queried to the Greater Toronto Area and the network of major 400-series highways interspersed across southern Ontario. This provides a good example of shaping a message to connect with local assets.

A second response suggested by the practitioners was that place branding was a viable strategy as part of a larger initiative to respond to the changing economic base of the province as traditional manufacturing activities are replaced with creative and knowledge-based activities underpinned by skilled labour and advanced industries. Consequently, the need to recruit and retain talents and skilled workforce in general has increased. A practitioner explained the structural changes in their municipality in the following way:

> When I first took this job it was probably 90% manufacturing oriented. And we know where manufacturing has gone in North America with the external pressures. So our most recent strategy in 2010 looked at other aspects of how we diversify our strategy. Some broad initiatives include immigration, as we have a demographic imbalance…Through our branding efforts the goal is to bring young families and address labour adjustment issues. Some of the young families coming are quite skilled…We have software companies where half their employees are immigrants—all young, all with families, and all with skills in software (PR4).

An emerging theme was that place branding had a strong role in economic development with regard to recruitment of talent:

> I find the talent—the labour market, the people aspect—is easier to attract from our branding efforts. And maybe that has to do with it being very much an experiential brand. It's about quality of life, about being here (PR9).

For others, the role of the place brand was seen as a necessity to attract talent:

> It's because our city is not yet big enough, or not yet dynamic enough for mobile talent. So our job is to make sure our city is compelling, that we've got enough cultural vitality, that we have enough creative energy…to be able to capture the attention of a 23-year old (PR10).

Because of the competition for talent, place branding will likely continue to be an integral part of local economic development efforts in Ontario and other provinces in Canada as they seek to restructure their economies. The attraction of talent is currently an integral part of local economic development efforts. As elsewhere, the Province of

Ontario has strongly emphasized attracting the Creative Class in the hopes of ensuring economic growth and prosperity (see Lewis & Donald, 2010). Practitioners perceive a strong place brand as a tool to attract the individuals from which new technology and entrepreneurial ideas will emerge.

The implication of the responses of the practitioners is that place branding straddles the line between traditional approaches to local economic development (see Gertler, 1990; Leigh & Blakely, 2013; Reese and & Sands, 2014) and emerging perspectives on "soft factors" associated with the Creative Class (Florida, 2002; Florida et al., 2011; Lawton et al., 2013; Lewis & Donald, 2010; Mellander et al., 2011; Sands & Reese, 2008). While there is strong evidence that place branding is used to leverage local images about quality of life and quality of place, it is clear that it is also used to guide the development of more traditional "hard factors". For example, the focus on promoting transportation infrastructure and the ability to facilitate quicker relocations are much more closely associated with traditional economic development strategies. This divide appears to be due to the fact that place branding is used as a policy "Swiss army knife" to address multiple economic development issues concurrently (such as business and talent attraction). The responses of the practitioners suggest that place branding policy has been used strategically to guide action that shapes the local place image. As such, place branding can be viewed as having potential for guiding substantive urban and economic development.

Place branding as fast policy

While there do appear to be examples of place branding being a substantive approach to local economic development, the responses of the practitioners indicated that it often takes a simplistic form that can be implemented and completed with relative ease. This results in the majority of place branding policy being both fast and superficial. One practitioner noted that "we have to be able to show the public we are doing something" (PR21). Similarly, a second practitioner explained that place branding was popular because "it provides something tangible…something that we can point to as something that we have done" (PR4). Although place branding points to something tangible, however, it appears to be largely superficial:

> There is that old saying…you can have something done well, done fast, or done cheap… but you can only pick two of the three. From what I see, most place branding focuses on being done quick and cheap (PR24).

Many of the practitioners contextualized place branding in superficial terms, focusing on projects that could be done within a limited timeframe and for limited expense. Examples given by the practitioners include "new street signs" (PR2, PR22), "putting exercise equipment in parks and along trails" (PR7, PR10), "re-dressing the downtown" including new facades and paintjobs (PR2, PR12), creating "video testimonials" from unmanned video booths (PR13), and redeveloping or constructing new buildings to change the character of a downtown area (PR1, PR5, PR7, PR10, PR11, PR24). While changing the downtown character through redevelopment is more costly than the other examples provided by the practitioners, they all fall into a similar characterization: projects that produce tangible results in a pre-determined time and budget.

The practitioners' perspectives are consistent with traditional research on public officials, which suggests that they seek projects to undertake based on pre-defined costs and development periods (see McCann & Ward, 2012; Rubin, 1988). These more prescriptive policies stand apart from the more substantive examples of place branding policy, which could be characterized as more nebulous in their timeframes and costs at project outset. Additionally, the examples of projects provided by the practitioners tended to focus on marginal upgrades or superficial changes to the landscape that occurred in isolation as "one-off projects" (PR1). This suggests that these projects do not emphasize broader and long-term changes to a place, and do not exist within some form of larger strategic policy direction.

Logos and slogans: superficial and fast

The most prominent example of fast and superficial policy provided by the practitioners was the overuse of logos and slogans to help create a sense of place. The majority of practitioners interviewed (13/25) considered the visual identity as the primary outcome of the place brand. As one practitioner described, "I think place branding means the use of a logo or slogan to invoke feelings, or memories, or interest to find out more" (PR7), while another suggested that "the challenge for any community is to come up with a name and label that quickly sums up what they are about in one or two words" (PR6). Another practitioner justified the use of a logo through the colloquialism "a picture's worth 1000 words" (PR7). This concern about the effectiveness of logos and slogans permeates the place branding literature. The advantages of a strong visual identity described by Cleave and Arku (2014), Gotham (2007), and Johansson (2012) are that it provides a strong method of distilling the place brand into a few key concepts, which can become the "signpost" to draw focus to the community. Anholt (2008) suggests that the use of logos and slogans is a waste of taxpayer money and should not be pursued. Instead, the relationships fostered between municipal stakeholders and the audience they interact with become the most important way of communicating the brand (Anholt, 2006; Kavaratzis & Ashworth, 2005). Similarly, an approach primarily focused on a visual identity appears less strategic in its utility. Instead of developing urban governance tools that specifically connect with a target audience—such as expedited permitting processes to make business relocation quicker and less expensive—the logo and slogan appear far more abstract. While they do provide information about the municipality, and act as a device to crystalize the place brand, they are meaningless without the underpinning of support. The municipalities thus appear to be creating a brand with no real product to promote, and as a result, it is difficult to connect with the consumer and have them develop a sense of place.

Circuits of policy migration, consultants, and place branding

The overemphasis on logos and slogans has led to a homogenization of place brands in Ontario and abroad. A key reason for this homogenization is that place branding exists within a circuit of policy migration that privileges superficial policy development. Indeed, place branding is viewed by practitioners as "the cost of doing business" (PR5, PR13, PR19). Place branding is viewed as necessary because "everyone is doing it, so we have to make sure that we stand out as well" (PR19). From this context, place branding appears to be adopted because other places have used it, and has come to be

seen as a best—or necessary—practice. A potential issue is that with each iteration of policy transfer, the understanding of place branding becomes increasingly narrow and superficial.

A key reason for this simplification of place branding to logos and slogans is due to the near-universal employment of consultants. Over half of the practitioners (19/25) described their community as engaging with external consultants in their policy development. The use of consultants was justified by the perception that they are "experts in their field [who] will be able to offer good suggestions" (PR4). More importantly, the value of consultants was explained to be in their ability to complete tasks within a specified timeframe and budget:

> I am a big fan of consultants. Doing branding exercises using external resources is the way to go. Number one, they tend to bring the depth of experience that you cannot find internal to your organization. Number two, they are going to be paid to get the job done, so they will be on time, on schedule, and be focused as opposed to multitasking unnecessarily (PR7).

As a result, the practitioners acknowledged ceding power in the place branding process to these private consultants. This transfer of power has led to instances where "cookie-cutter" policy solutions were employed, which limited the scope and the effectiveness of place branding. Most prominently, several municipalities noted that the visual identity produced was similar to others already in use: "[The municipal logo] looked like it had been lifted from somebody else's logo" (PR22). Another practitioner raised a similar issue: "the logo that this community ended up with was very, very similar to the logo that they had given out beforehand" (PR21). In both cases, blame was attributed to consultants who were producing similar logos, or simply refurbishing or recycling logos used previously.

Discussion and conclusion

The three overriding goals of this research were to *identify how place and sense-of-place fit into local economic development policymaking; determine whether place branding represents emerging policy approaches to place-making, or a repackaging of previous soft-policy approaches; and examine whether it could be characterized as fast or slow policy.*

A key theme emerging from the empirical results is how the concepts of place and sense-of-place are embedded into the fundamental nature of local economic development through place branding. Unlike traditional marketing associated with economic development (see Gertler, 1990), the goal of place branding is to accrue an equity and loyalty within the consumer base. Branding is the expression of the perceived truth or value of a community. It is a communication of characteristics, values, and attributes that clarify what a particular brand is or is not. Its intrinsic nature closely aligns branding with a sense of place. Additionally, place branding differs from marketing. Marketing may contribute to a brand, but the brand is bigger than any particular marketing effort. The brand is what remains after the marketing campaign is over, whether it is direct advertisement (see Gertler, 1990; Leigh & Blakely, 2013) or a one-off development project (see Kirby & Kent, 2010; Paddison, 1993). Many cities consider the

positive image provoked by undertaking a regeneration project. Because the brand will remain once the project has been completed, strategic consideration will have to be given as to what the legacy—the sense of place that is created—will be.

Place branding is heavily involved with the restructuring and commodification of place. Place branding acts as a guide to creating the sense of place for a community, which will influence how it is perceived and invested in. Based on the responses of the practitioners, place branding is also clearly heavily integrated into a circuit of policy migration. An implication of the entrepreneurial approach to government is the perceived need for austerity and the outsourcing of policy prescription to consultancies who facilitate the rapid transfer of policy between places, helping explain the swift adoption of place branding in urban centres. Coupled with the direct copying of specific strategies perceived to be working in competing cities, place branding can be characterized as a neoliberal script for constructing a local image and sense of place, with the ultimate goal of facilitating consumption within a target audience. Due to its "Swiss army knife" characteristics, this script is much broader than that associated with the Creative Class, as it has been applied in a much wider array of situations.

Though place branding incorporates many of the same elements of soft and fast policy solutions—such as the Creative Class—it is far more expansive, as it is intended to engage a range of economic situations, including attraction of traditional manufacturing, business, and investments. Because of this more expansive dimension, place branding is more closely related to traditional economic development policy. Such traditional economic development policies include: pursuing existing firms already located elsewhere; a distinct preference for attracting manufacturing firms rather than service activities; the provision of developable, serviced industrial land; and the publication and dissemination of glossy pamphlets, brochures, advertisements, and other information as part of an overall promotional effort (Gertler, 1990, p. 44). Based on the perspectives of the practitioners, cities have only made superficial changes to their economic development approaches. New economy sectors such as high-tech and high producer services have replaced traditional manufacturing in many cities (Bourne, Britton, & Leslie, 2010; Hutton, 2010; Vinodrai, 2010), while others have shifted focus towards more creative-based industries (Lewis & Donald, 2010). The implication, however, remains the same: the goal of most contemporary economic development efforts is to draw business away from competing urban centres, reflecting the fundamentally neoliberal capitalist perspective of municipal governance. Additionally, hard factors, such as cost, infrastructure, and ease of relocation, play a prominent role in place branding. As noted by the practitioners, the main goals of place branding are to ultimately generate wealth and increase the assessment base, all of which are ultimately not dissimilar from traditional economic development strategies.

Within the larger historical context of global capitalism, economic development has often been characterized as essentially a zero-sum game, being embedded in a framework of inter-urban competition for resources, jobs, and capital (Harvey, 1989; Leigh & Blakely, 2013). As such, economic development activity becomes an exercise in uneven development, as the market simply reorganizes capital, labour, and production over space (Harvey, 2007; Jessop, 2002; Kipfer & Keil, 2002). In this regard, place branding does not help grow the economy; it simply encourages and

facilitates the movement of resources between competing markets, often through a policy script that provides a limited range of options for dealing with urban and economic development issues.

Ultimately, the script for place branding is also one of fast policy—focusing on a superficial redressing or development of a limited visual identity, rather than being part of the larger, more substantive policy. The constant use of a limited set of tools in the place branding script designed to produce immediate, tangible results is both insincere and counterproductive. The increasing pressures of globalization and interconnectivity of places yield the potential for place branding to allow a municipality to make its presence felt within a market and raise awareness about its unique set of political, economic, social, and geographic advantages. Municipalities using place branding, however, create the potential for homogenization or reduced exceptionality in place brands. Place branding, at its core, is about differentiation. The effectiveness of place branding is unclear when every place is using it, as it would no longer be effective as a strategy for standing out. Indeed, as place branding becomes used more frequently, only the places with truly exceptional brands and high living standards are likely to accrue any benefit as the rest could be lost in a market of similar messaging.

A final critique of place branding is that it is consistently being used by municipalities to connect with external audiences, rather than internal ones. This can be problematic for a number of reasons, including that the taxpayers underwriting the place branding initiative are being ignored in favour of potential new clients. This can create an inequality where new investors perceive a more favourable climate for business or migration than those who are already present in the municipality, creating a level of elitism between the groups that the local government is privileging with the place branding effort and those being excluded. In addition, an overemphasis on business attraction can create an impression of desperation on the part of municipalities, which can lead to a situation where businesses play municipalities off each other to identify who will provide the best incentives for relocation. Instead of becoming a solution to the pressures of globalization and neoliberalism, place branding just becomes another cog in the wheel of global competition for investment. Finally, the cog-i-ness of place branding shows why we need research to continue to be critical of its adoption.

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