Branding Northamptonshire - Whose job is it anyway?
Exploring the Role of Stakeholders in Region Branding

Shalini Bisani

University of Northampton

shalini.bisani@northampton.ac.uk

Differentiated place branding based on geographical scales such as city, region and nation is regarded as an integral part of theory building in the field. However, 'regions' are the least explored scale in place branding, in comparison with city and nation, even though regions are important in the context of development (Herstein, 2012). In the age of city-centric-development, the mesoscale can enable towns, villages and hinterlands to gain a competitive advantage by pooling resources for the betterment of the whole region (Turok, 2004). The existing literature on region branding suggests that – management of local place brands and stakeholders in the region – are the two key aspects of 'region brand management' (Hanna and Rowley, 2015; Ikuta *et al.*, 2007).

In regards to 'stakeholder management', a new participatory approach to place branding has become widely recognised in the field (Braun *et al.*, 2013; Kavaratzis and Kalandides, 2015). All stakeholders who affect or are affected by the branding of the place should be viewed as co-producers in brand strategy, creation, implementation and governance. However, not all stakeholders are considered to have the same role, influence, level of involvement and mission congruence (Ford *et al.*, 2009; Hankinson, 2004; Henninger, 2016). Based on their roles and relationships, stakeholders in place branding have been viewed as either: (i) *Institutional stakeholders*: those who occupy managerial or executive positions in institutions of place governance and are capable of directly influencing resource allocation and decision-making in line with their institutional goals. (ii) *Community stakeholders*: those who are active in the civic, social or voluntary aspect of community life and have a high sense of pride and belonging to the place.

While this study recognises the participatory approach in place branding, the aim is to gather the views of stakeholders to understand how they see their role and involvement in place branding. In this paper, the focus is on the perceptions of Institutional Stakeholders – about their own role and community engagement in place branding.

The Case of Northamptonshire

The county of Northamptonshire is chosen as a case study to explore 'stakeholder collaboration in region branding'. The county is surrounded by well-known cities and counties, namely, Oxfordshire, Cambridgeshire and Buckinghamshire and the cities of London, Birmingham, Leicester and Coventry. This geographical position means that Northamptonshire is faced with competition from its neighbours for attracting the same pool of visitors, residents, investors, businesses and workforce. However, Northamptonshire does not have a city around which development can be centred. The main settlements in the county are in the towns, surrounded by semi-rural and rural hinterlands. It can be argued that the local place brands in Northamptonshire can benefit from a county-level strategy by pooling their resources to create a common brand and thereby compete more effectively.

Methodology

In this study, some 15 institutional stakeholders from the public, private and voluntary sector of Northamptonshire were engaged via semi-structured interviews. Interviewees were active participants in the research who were co-creating knowledge about their place by interacting with the researcher. This preliminary stage of interviews helped in understanding institutional stakeholders' perceptions about collaboration in region branding. The interview questions were based on the themes of – identity, reputation and development of the county, stakeholders' own role and community engagement in place branding. This exploratory study is a part of ongoing doctoral research.

Preliminary Findings

The following preliminary findings were noted in the context of Northamptonshire that could be applicable elsewhere:

(i)   *Role of institutional stakeholders:* Increasingly, there has been a change in the roles and responsibilities of the public sector in place branding owing to the change in funding streams for place brand activities (Slocum and Everett, 2014). In the case of Northamptonshire, the formation of a voluntary board for tourism governance via 'Northamptonshire Surprise' is largely industry-led. However, industry-led partnerships do not see their role as 'leaders' but also that of 'facilitators' for the sectors they are servicing. While public sector agencies are involved, they view their own role to be 'enablers' in the process, defying the mainstream perception that local authorities

have the sole responsibility of place branding. This self-description of institutional stakeholders' role as 'enablers' rather than 'leaders' poses a serious question about 'brand leadership'. The lack of leadership was attributed to the absence of a 'visionary' long-term plan and the lack of 'expertise' in place branding. Indeed, some of the challenges of collaboration among institutional stakeholders emerged due to the 'amorphous characteristic' of regions in general (Dinnie, 2018) and the current local government restructuring in Northamptonshire (Butler, 2018).

(ii)   *Need for an intermediary:* Participants indicated that they themselves did not have 'expertise' in 'place branding' and this work should be carried out by an independent entity who could play an advisory role in matters of governance and grassroots level public engagement. The expertise is seen to be held by 'anchor institutions' since they are place-based organisations rooted in their local community, such as universities. They are vital partners and a central actor in facilitating communication with other stakeholders (Cavicchi et al., 2013). This has implications for the perceived role of practitioner-consultants and academic-consultants in place branding.

(iii)   *Identity and community engagement:* Participants from various institutions, local government, public sector and rural development agencies, business improvement district and university, self-identified as wearing 'multiple hats', and representing the institution, their own selves and their community at the same time. This finding suggests that owing to the multiple identities of institutional stakeholders in place branding, there is an overlap between the two categories: institutional and community stakeholder. This provides a novel lens through which to view institutional stakeholders' role in place branding as not only actors of institutional will but also as members of their community. However, some participants used this aspect of their identity to justify their inaction towards community engagement asserting that the community is being represented through the opinions of the institutional stakeholders who are also residents. This link between the identity of institutional stakeholders and their perception about community engagement will be explored further in this ongoing study.

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