

Re-branding the High Street: the place branding process and reflections from three UK towns

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Received 2 August 2016
Revised 11 May 2017
Accepted 21 June 2017

Abstract

Purpose – The main aim of this paper is to develop a holistic understanding of place branding and reflect on its practical value and implications, by drawing evidence from the rebranding process of three UK towns (Alsager, Altrincham and Holmfirth) that participated in the HSUK2020 project.

Design/methodology/approach – A comprehensive place branding process that includes the interrelated stages of research, deliberation, consultation, action and communication is presented. The practical value of this theoretical proposition is linked to the experiences of three UK towns that participated in the HSUK2020 project.

Findings – The importance of research, the challenges of participation and the role of communications in place branding processes were identified as primary issues in all towns. The results of the project demonstrate the significance of the initial research stage of the place branding process and show that the process as a whole is valuable in helping places deal effectively with identity issues.

Research limitations/implications – Participatory place branding processes can flourish when place stakeholders are engaged in the right context and are encouraged to work together. In addition, place brands are important cues and empower stakeholders' participation in all stages of place brand processes.

Practical implications – Knowledge exchange projects that have the potential to engage a plethora of place stakeholders should be considered by practitioners for future place branding strategies.

Originality/value – The paper offers a refreshing practical grounding on participatory place branding concepts and theories. The value of knowledge exchange strategies for examining the field of place branding is also highlighted and can become a useful research approach for future research.

Keywords High Street, Rebranding, Place branding process, Place brands

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

One of the tasks that has captured the imagination of local authorities around the world is that of developing and maintaining a successful brand of the town or city (Lucarelli and



Berg, 2011). Often it is considered that the city's branding process centres around "a cacophony of logos, slogans, events and other types of interventions all aimed at promoting, selling and marketing places" (Giovanardi *et al.*, 2013; p. 366). What this treatment of place branding implies is that the crucial elements in the formation of place brands are advertisements and visual identity tactics that can be designed and created by consultants or city officials behind closed doors. However, as repeatedly discussed in the literature (Govers, 2013; Oliveira, 2015), such a misunderstanding significantly limits the application and effectiveness of place branding. The brand of a place is not created in the design of a logo but rather in people's encounters with the place and all its diverse aspects. In this sense, place brands have numerous co-creators who engage in a process of co-constructing them as they form and exchange ideas, experiences, feelings and opinions about the place (Kavaratzis and Hatch, 2013). The role of designers, consultants and local authorities is a role of participation in these processes and of facilitation of a dialogue that constantly re-creates the place brand. While the need for advertising and other promotional activities should not be disregarded, they are only a small part of the wider place branding process (Ashworth and Kavaratzis, 2009). All places are complex entities that have multiple identities (Boisen *et al.*, 2011), which do not allow an easy depiction in a single identity claim or a single logo, as beautiful and appealing as this might be.

In this article, we argue for a broader understanding of the place branding process. We highlight the importance of research as a foundation of the process, the crucial role of stakeholder participation in grounding the place brand in the place's identity and the need for integration of actions to fully capitalize on the potential of the place brand to assist in place development. We link this theoretical discussion to illuminating examples from three towns in the UK. We start by describing the pillars of place branding and the interrelated steps of the place branding process. This is a process that makes the place brand more effective and links it to the local needs and specificities, thus making it also more sustainable. This provides a theoretical basis and conceptual grounding for the description of the re-branding process, as this was understood and implemented in three small UK towns that participated in the High Street UK 2020 project.

The place branding process

For place branding to contribute to the development of towns and cities, several preconditions need to be met. The foundations of the place branding process can be accurately described by the three areas of analysis, strategy and participation (Kavaratzis and Kalandides, 2015). *Analysis* is an essential part of any place branding project. Internal and external market research is vital in achieving the necessary understanding of the place, its audiences, its potential and its aims – all of which become the cornerstones of place brand development (Kotler *et al.*, 1993). A solid grasp of the constituents of the place's image (how it is perceived by people) and what the place means for people is crucial for the development of a sustainable place brand (Govers and Go, 2009), as is the evaluation of the place's potential for the future in relation to the external environment. The understanding developed by the analytical stages of place branding leads to the development of a vision for the place and the *Strategy* that will be followed. Place branding actions implemented in isolation and not adhering to a wider place reputation strategic framework (Bell, 2016) are not likely to achieve long term effects for the place. Even the most appealing and creative promotional campaign or a well-organised event can only bring temporary results if they are not aligned with a strategic vision of what the place's stakeholders aim for the future.

Consequently, this highlights the significance of stakeholder *participation* for effective place brand development. Several groups of place stakeholders (Stubbs and Warnaby, 2015)

are important participants in the branding process. The need to involve them in this process stems from the nature of places and place brands themselves which are complex, multifaceted, dynamic and participatory (Kavaratzis and Kalandides, 2015). It is often the case that place brands are developed without the participation of stakeholders (Bennett and Savani, 2003; Merrilees *et al.*, 2009). As Zenker *et al.* (2017, p. 17) critically note, “because branding is often understood as a process of reduction and concentration on core associations [...] practitioners and researchers alike tend to react negatively to complexity”, and they avoid involving many stakeholders in the process. This, however, is unlikely to lead to sustainable place brands because it minimizes the sense of ownership over the brand that is necessary for the brand to be endorsed and advocated by people (Aitken and Campelo, 2011). Current implementation of place branding seems to emphasise the development of a place brand that is chosen by the local authorities or consultants, which is unfortunate, as it ignores the meanings of the brand for the people who live in the place and have invested interests in its development. In contemporary political environments, it is this aspect of participation that is most fragile, as it goes against the desire for fast and easy solutions, thus hampering the potential of place branding to represent in-depth local development policies (Bennett and Savani, 2003; Braun *et al.*, 2013; Cleave *et al.*, 2017).

To put it simply, what this means in practice is that effective place branding implementation consists of the five interrelated and overlapping stages of the participatory place branding process (Figure 1). The first stage is *research* where the analytical aspects of place branding projects discussed above come to the fore. This involves a detailed account of the resources available in the place and an investigation of the external and internal environmental factors that affect it. Perception studies of the current and potential image are included as also several other studies and methods that help evaluate the current situation of the place and its potential for future development. The second stage is *deliberation*. In this stage, the core group of stakeholders discuss and propose a strategic vision for the place. These stakeholders might include local authorities, tourism offices, the local chamber of commerce and/or industry, directly involved sectors (e.g. retailers, leisure, transportation)

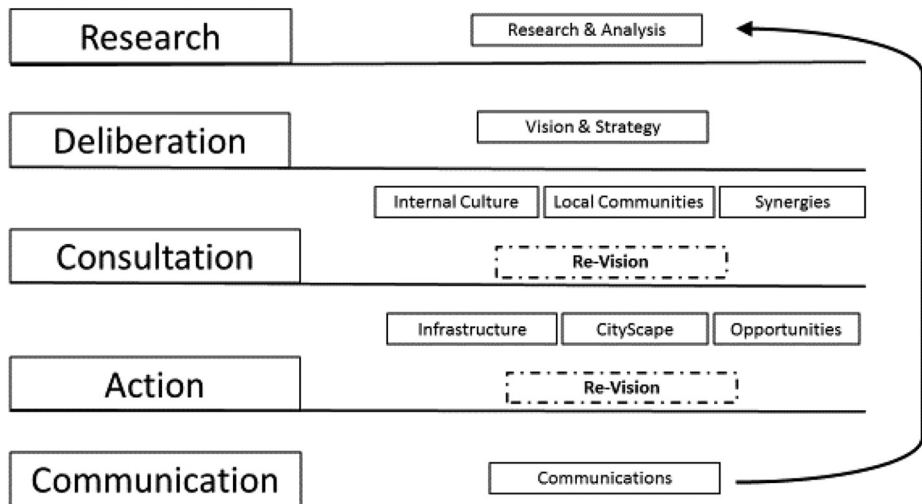


Figure 1.
The participatory
branding process

and any external consultants or experts. The aim of this stage of the process is not necessarily to create a final vision of the future but rather to formulate and articulate a meaningful proposition of such a vision. This proposition will be used in the next stage of *consultation* to initiate a dialogue around the proposed vision and about the future. Extensive discussions and consultations with local communities are required to refine the vision and strategy. Furthermore, this stage of consultation includes the seeking of synergies with organisations, institutions and other places that might be mutually beneficial. The fourth stage is the stage of *action*, in which measures are taken and tactics are implemented. These actions will inevitably include infrastructure development and improvement, regeneration initiatives and initiatives aiming at enriching the “opportunities” offered to the several place audiences (opportunities for residence, work, leisure, education, investment and general quality of life). In this sense, this stage of the branding process relies on “place making”. It is important to note that the previous stages are also action-based in the sense that the activities undertaken brand the place equally actively by sending powerful messages about the place and its brand. The next stage is the stage of *communication*. There is a clear need, particularly in our information overloaded times, to actively engage in communication of the place’s benefits and improvement efforts. This stage wraps up all the above efforts and aims at making all interventions known to the wider public. In this sense, the previous stages of the process provide this last stage with the content of communication.

It is very important to note that the stages of the above described process are not independent of each other but they are overlapping and happen simultaneously. For analytical and planning reasons, it is useful to consider the different aims of the stages and the different activities they include. However, in the actual implementation of place branding projects and strategies, the stages are interdependent and overlapping to a great extent in both content and timeframe. This notion helps clarify two important implications. First, all above-mentioned activities and measures are indeed branding measures. All activities described above in essence send messages about the place’s brand, which is what the process is about and are not meant to happen in parallel or after the branding process. Rather, they constitute the branding process. For instance, research does not happen “before” branding starts, but it is part of the branding process. The stage of consultation aims neither at clarifying the meaning of the brand before this is captured in other actions nor at getting people “on board” the established brand. It is in and of itself an integral part of the branding effort in that it sends important messages about the nature and content of the place’s brand. Place making is also a part of the branding process and not a separate activity. The second implication of the overlapping and simultaneous stages of the process is that the vision for the future of the place and the strategy to achieve this vision are not finalised at the second stage, but they are only propositions that need to be revisited at regular intervals. This is necessary to accommodate changes in the wider environment in which place branding takes place and also to account for the changes brought about by the branding process itself.

High Street 2020 priorities and the re-branding factors

The High Street UK 2020 project involved retail experts, academics, town centre managers and key High Street stakeholders (retailers, town centre partnerships, local authorities, property owners/developers and residents) from ten partner locations (Alsager, Altrincham, Ballymena, Barnsley, Bristol, Congleton, Holmfirth, Market Rasen, Morley and Wrexham) in a knowledge exchange process for building a framework for High Street intervention. The framework entails four main components (“repositioning”, “reinventing”, “rebranding” and

“restructuring”) that were identified from the management and marketing literature. One of the main objectives of the project was the development of a series of sustainable centre plans on each one of these locations. After a series of workshops, discussions and consultations with the project team, retail experts and academics, each partner location had to develop a plan by focusing on one of the four components above.

Partner towns were encouraged to focus on improving these factors that can exert the most influence on the High Street and can also be mostly influenced by the High Street itself. A systematic literature review revealed more than 150 factors that can influence town performance. After that, via the utilisation of the Delphi technique, a panel of academics and experts participated in a two-round exercise to identify the most important factors. The above outlined process led to the identification within the HSUK2020 project of the top 25 priorities and factors for the future of the High Street, which are considered as the most important areas of action (Table I).

Several, if not all, of the factors presented in Table I are closely related to place branding as understood here and described above. The priorities of High Streets and town centres regarding their future can be considered in branding terms, and a place branding logic might help in achieving an integrated reaction to the challenging factors, as will be shown below with the brief discussion of the three cases. In general terms, branding is very clearly related to the “appearance” group of factors (cleanliness and design) and, of course,

Priority	Factors
Activity hours	Opening hours; shopping hours; evening economy
Appearance	Visual appearance; cleanliness
Retailers	Retailer offer; retailer representation
Vision and strategy	Leadership; collaboration; area development strategies
Experience	Service quality; visitor satisfaction; centre image; familiarity
Management	Centre management; shopping centre management; TCM; place management
Merchandise	Range/quality of goods; assortments
Necessities	Car-parking; amenities; general facilities
Anchor stores	Presence of anchor stores, which signify importance
Networks and partnerships	Networking; partnerships with council; community leadership
Diversity	Attractions; range/quality of shops; non-retail offer; tenant mix; retail diversity; availability of alternative formats
Walking	Walkability; pedestrianisation/flow; cross-shopping; linked trips
Entertainment and leisure	Entertainment; leisure offer
Attractiveness	Place attractiveness; attractiveness
Place assurance	Atmosphere; BIDs; retail/tenant trust; store characteristics
Accessibility	Convenience; accessibility; public transport
Place marketing	Centre marketing; marketing; tenant/manager relations; orientation/flow; merchandising; special offers
Comparison/convenience	The amount of comparison shopping opportunities compared to convenience (usually in percentage terms)
Recreational space	Recreational areas; public space; open space
Barriers to entry	Obstacles that make it difficult for retailers to enter the High Street’s market
Chain vs independent	Number of multiples stores and independent stores in the retail mix
Safety/crime	A centre KPI measuring perceptions or actual crime including shoplifting
Liveability	Multi/mono-functional; connectivity; liveability
Adaptability	Retail flexibility; retail fragmentation; flexibility; mixed-use; engagement; functionality; store/centre design; retail unit size
Store development	The process of building, upgrading, remodelling or renovating retail stores

Table I.
Top 25 priorities for
change and factors

promotional needs, by assisting in disseminating information and persuading about the High Street's features and benefits. Arguably, though, the "attractiveness" factor is to a great extent part of a holistic branding strategy, the "experience" factor is influenced by the place brand and all factors related to the facilities (e.g. "necessities" or "anchor stores") and infrastructure (e.g. "walking") and diversity of the offering also. The factors related to "networking" and stakeholder relationships are at the heart of a participatory branding focus as the brand can provide the common ground for these relationships to develop. Certainly, the "vision and strategy" factors can benefit greatly from the brand as, in a holistic understanding, the brand becomes itself the vision for a town's future and the strategic guidance necessary for all other actions. Even factors that seem clearly unrelated to the brand such as the "accessibility" can be positively influenced by an effective place branding process as this might minimise the psychological distance from someone's residence or might motivate people more to sustain access difficulties. This is just an example of the brand's contribution to the reputation of the place, which in turn has an effect on many other development factors.

This briefly describes the way in which the place branding process covers a wide range of factors affecting the High Street, and it shows the potential of place branding to assist in city centre revitalisation and in securing a prosperous future for High Streets. It also makes clear why re-branding has been chosen as a main focus of the HSUK2020 project. This has been beneficial for the project as a whole, particularly for participating towns that chose to focus their efforts on re-branding, as the next section describes.

Reflections from the High Street

This section covers three case studies from HSUK2020 towns focusing on rebranding. The section does not report on a purposefully designed research process with set objectives and strict methodological guidelines. Rather, it is a description of how the three towns reacted to the need of re-branding and a reflection of how the re-branding theory has helped local stakeholders realise change in their towns. We draw evidence from the collaboration with our partners during the life of this project, as well as from workshops and meetings with town stakeholders. Each case includes a reflection on how the rebranding process relates to the theory and some commentary on what could have been done differently in each town. This serves the dual goal of placing specific practices and actions in a wider conceptual framework and of linking the place branding process to the specific context with its particular conditions.

Alsager: reminiscing the "village" place brand

Alsager is a classic "sleepy" town with a population of 12,500. Originating as a farming Hamlet, it expanded during the Victorian Period when the Railway made it a popular and attractive place for the wealthy to live away from the potteries. Alsager has been undergoing major changes recently, with the impending closure of Manchester Metropolitan University's Alsager campus, the loss of manufacturing businesses, improvements in and around the town centre (including the opening of a new anchor store) and plans for future housing developments. It became evident during the lifetime of the project that these changes might have led to confusion between local stakeholders about what type of town Alsager is and what town they want it to be in the future. This was reflected during workshops and meetings, in which it became evident that the town is in need of proper market research that will eventually inform the place branding process and will assist stakeholders in decision-making regarding the future of the town centre. For example, people in Alsager tend to agree that the centre lacks definition and has no real identity,

which coupled with its linear structure poses a serious challenge for the centre's resilience. It can be argued that these agreements mainly stem from town heuristics ("rules of thumb" regarding town perceptions based on minimum knowledge) and place schemata (Kotler and Gertner, 2004) that determine what town heuristics will be integrated (Brewer and Treyens, 1981) in the place branding process. Even though these heuristics are not entirely intuitive and probably correct, they are usually based on very little information about a problem, in an attempt to reduce efforts and speed up decision-making processes (Shah and Oppenheimer, 2008). However, a complex process such as place branding cannot be implemented without also weighting relevant information that might be unknown to place stakeholders and can corroborate public opinion. In Alsager, stakeholders agreed that future research and analysis regarding footfall, the catchment area, centre users' behaviour and shopping preferences and residents' perceptions of the town centre can reinforce the place branding process by elucidating town centre challenges and what type(s) of action is needed. This is something that highlights the necessity of research as the starting point of any branding initiative. Even if there is consensus between decision-makers as in the case of Alsager, extensive research can engage more stakeholders during the process (businesses, landlords, investors) and will mitigate against further conflicts between groups/individuals who have different associations about the place (Zenker and Beckmann, 2013).

Even in the absence of thorough research, people in Alsager seem to come to an agreement when it comes to place perceptions and what the town means to them. In their view, Alsager is a big village rather than a small town, with great community spirit, village feel and dynamic people who are proud of their town, and they agreed that a strategic vision for the town centre needs to put community spirit and friendliness in the forefront. These place associations can act as a guide towards dialogues and discussions between local stakeholders, an element of the place branding process that was identified as problematic in Alsager at the start of the project and was exemplified by a "tell us what to do" attitude that is directly opposed with the participatory view of place branding and co-creation (Aitken and Campelo, 2011; Kavartzis and Hatch, 2013; Kavartzis and Kalandides, 2015). This links directly to the participatory aspect of place branding projects as suggested earlier, and it was comforting to see that during the last months of the project people in Alsager were highly engaged with the rebranding process, as they felt that the place brand was embedded in their own personal values and that was something that they could communicate easier. Consequently, this process reminisced the Alsager brand in the minds of stakeholders, a brand that needs to be communicated effectively and to remind residents of the town's assets and values. Almost half of the negative associations that people linked with the town centre were related to communication, place promotion and marketing of events. It was deemed important by the participating stakeholders that more effort should be made in encouraging more stakeholders to take an active role in promoting a positive image for the town. "It's All about Alsager", an on-going initiative to promote Alsager, its community, events and news, was praised for its social media presence and its role in engaging with stakeholders. However, it was felt that communicating the present place brand can only have a short-term impact on vitality and viability of the town centre, which links back to the absence of proper research in the town centre.

Altrincham: from "Ghost town UK" to "modern market town"

Back in 2010, Altrincham was labelled as the UK's bleakest ghost town by the media with 37 per cent of its shops lying empty. The town's close proximity to both a major city centre (Manchester) and a retail park (Trafford Centre), coupled with the economic downturn, contributed to the decline of Altrincham's town centre, an image that did not reflect the

town's history as one of the first market towns in the country and its affluent status. In 2011, the Altrincham Forward initiative brought together the town's key stakeholders in a single partnership to drive forward change and help to turn around the fortunes of the town centre by implementing a collaborative approach towards the redevelopment of Altrincham. Good things are already happening in Altrincham, with the recent revamping of the Altrincham Market and the Historic Market Quarter, new developments such as a new transport interchange and a hospital and plans for improving the public realm and linkages in town. The biggest challenge though for the partnership is to reverse the negative perceptions that are still evident in the town. During workshops and meetings, local stakeholders not only acknowledged the positive energy and momentum from town developments but also admitted that more needs to be done in communicating positive messages for the town.

The current Altrincham brand is based on the concept of "Modern Market Town", a vision that is shared amongst local stakeholders, emphasises the history and character of the town and places the market back at the heart of the brand. Markets, as key elements of the market town "brand", can act as catalysts for change in towns (Hallsworth *et al.*, 2015), as they can transform a place to a unique, multifunctional social centre that is relevant to the needs and interests of local people and visitors (Action for Market Towns, 2011). These aspirations need to be nested in all stakeholder groups and that can be achieved through co-ordinated leadership, an element of place branding that Altrincham Forward is constantly exercising, most recently by working and engaging with local businesses and developing a proposal for Altrincham Business Improvement District.

The central role of the market, in the case of Altrincham, is a good example of how certain place branding tools (in this case the market) cut across the different stages of the place branding process described above. The market is obviously linked to all parts of the "Action" stage of the process as "infrastructure" for necessary town functions, as a distinctive feature of the "cityscape" and as an "opportunity" for locals and visitors alike. However, it can be also used for parts such as "local communities" (with its clear community gathering function) or synergies (with its several links to suppliers and potential clients from outside the town). Furthermore, as the basis for the place brand, it has provided the core of the vision and strategy ("Deliberation" stage), and it also becomes a vehicle of communication of the brand ("Communication" stage). Co-ordination of all planning activities in town is of crucial importance to people in Altrincham, who try to make sure that all plans regarding the place brand, including the Business Neighbourhood Plan, the BID and the work of Altrincham Forward, are aligned to the vision. In addition, the majority of workshop participants saw collaborative leadership as a way to move things forward and tackle high vacancy rates by developing new actions for the town centre, such as transforming retail units to artistic and residential, as well as nurturing start-ups and supporting new businesses.

However, the transition from "Ghost Town UK" to "Modern Market Town" is not smooth sailing, as was pinpointed during the HSUK2020 project. Despite town regeneration and the revamping of the town centre and market, local people are not engaged and are not aware that Altrincham is changing. This is particularly interesting from a place branding theory perspective, as it is evident that the role of residents in the place brand as ambassadors and as citizens (Braun *et al.*, 2013) is somewhat dysfunctional. Local support is low and the place brand is downplayed in tertiary communications, such as word-of-mouth between local people, retailers and potential investors in the case of Altrincham. Poor perceptions coupled with vacancy rates are still deterring anchor stores and young entrepreneurs from investing in the town centre. Therefore, the rebranding process in Altrincham needs to emphasize communications and promote town events and festivals in the town centre to bring local

communities closer and to support the town. This was identified by Altrincham Forward members who believe that communication is key and are working on social media activity and other approaches for engaging residents. Communications about successful stories can also attract new businesses and investors in the town centre, which have to be coupled with new data and evidence from the street to strengthen the appeal of the place brand.

Holmfirth: reshaping the town's identity

For most people, Holmfirth, a small town in Holme Valley, is known as the setting of *Last of The Summer Wine*, a long-running TV sitcom that showcased the beautiful rural setting that surrounds the area. The show's popularity drew in thousands of tourists every year, but since its cancellation in 2010, these numbers continue to shrink, emphasising the need not only for a diversified economic base but also for ample creativity in choosing the focus of the place brand. The show's decline as the main attraction, coupled with poor retail diversity and lack of confidence from local people in their town, are major challenges for the place brand. Therefore, town stakeholders such as Keep Holmfirth Special, a partnership with a mission to contribute to the wellbeing of the town, are firm believers of reshaping the town's identity. It became evident during conversations with local people in Holmfirth that it will take more than just marketing and communications to bring forward a new identity that is not heavily influenced by the distinctiveness of *Last of The Summer Wine*. On top of that though, the biggest challenge for Holmfirth is how to bring more people in and engage different stakeholder groups.

Research in Holmfirth prior to HSUK2020 revealed that people understand what is going on in the town, which needs to become more appealing to future businesses and young people by reinventing the town centre, as well as investing in events, sports and leisure facilities, and links to the national park. Despite these agreements and residents' sense of belonging with the place, workshop participants were quite pessimistic on the chances of implementing a participatory place branding approach in Holmfirth. This links back to the fragility of participation in the construction of the place brand, as frequently the majority of a place's residents remain silent and uninterested in a place branding process that they feel they do not own. Several residents in Holmfirth also recognised that they were not aware about the existence of a town partnership until they were invited to HSUK2020 workshops, further supporting communication and participation barriers in the town and lack of resources to raise awareness and interest for participation in the place branding process. This is something that reinforces the significance of the third stage of the place branding process as outlined above, where a culture of consultation and "listening" to stakeholders is suggested. While there is no clear vision for the Holmfirth brand due to many scattered groups and individuals in town, there is a great need for the partnership to identify people's trust points, be open and try to engage with local retailers, the council, residents and young people to refine the vision and the strategy for the brand. Workshop participants recognised that the need to inform, educate and map different stakeholder groups is essential for the development of networks that can reinforce the place branding process (Hankinson, 2004; Hanna and Rowley, 2011).

For all towns, the hands-on approach to knowledge exchange that HSUK2020 adopted helped participants to understand the complexities of places and, in the case of rebranding towns, how place brands can be influenced. In Holmfirth, the project team encouraged participants during the last workshop to work together in groups and answer what makes Holmfirth special. Once again, the level of agreement regarding the town's assets was particularly high and the exercise worked as a preliminary place brand formation process, something that highlights the integrative effect achieved when the place branding process is

understood as a series of overlapping steps that collectively produce their common outcome. What was striking though was the high level of involvement and the connection between participants when thinking about their place and how it can become better. This example illustrates the important role of engaging stakeholders in the right context (the workshop event in this case) and being able to do it on a regular basis to engrain place brand values that stem from local people's constructions during these communications.

Concluding remarks

The experience of the towns participating in the HSUK2020 project serves as evidence for the usefulness of the foundations of place branding (i.e. analysis, strategy and participation) and the place branding process as presented in this article. The results and experience of the project clearly demonstrate the link between place branding and town development. Approaching place branding in the way proposed here has proven helpful to the town authorities in their effort to deal with several of their imminent problems. Thinking about the place branding process in the above outlined manner has particularly helped tackle place identity issues that can be detrimental to any development effort. A general strategic guidance is also evidently provided by the place branding effort. The results of this project also show that the holistic view of place branding is helpful, much more so than a promotional view. Limiting place branding to the development of a new slogan for the towns or to the design of a new visual identity system for the town's communications would not have been able to assist any of the towns examined here, as it would not offer a viable solution to the roots of their problems. However, this wider and more comprehensive view of what actually contributes to branding a place was able to offer a range of solutions and a wider set of tools that towns could use. Additionally, the reflections on the three towns demonstrate that the holistic place branding process provided an appropriate context and a useful opportunity to engage local stakeholders in the rebranding efforts. The HSUK2020 experience has also made clear the value of academics and practitioners working together. Both parties have agreed that there was a useful and rather surprisingly seamless transfer of knowledge and experiences that was beneficial for everyone involved, and this is something that we hope will be a major legacy of the project.

Clearly, there are several challenges, but with cooperation between stakeholders and their participation in the development of the place brand, it can be a valuable tool to understand the place's identity and to guide strategic vision. As witnessed in the HSUK2020 project, place brands can "talk" to local people's emotions and thus inspire them to engage in public discussions and consultations regarding the future of their town. This is a very encouraging first step towards the establishment of participatory place branding processes in towns as a vital part of town strategies.

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Further reading

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