

Conceptualising place branding in three approaches: towards a new definition of place brands as embodied experiences

Conceptualising
place branding

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper aims to provide conceptual clarity on the different approaches of place branding in the literature. It discusses three main approaches and provides a new definition of place brands that acknowledges the full multi-sensory experience of place brands. This paper also elaborates brand management within the three approaches.

Design/methodology/approach – Conceptual paper

Findings – This study identifies three co-existing approaches of place branding and provides a definition of place brands for each of them. The first approach conceptualises place brands as symbolic constructs that identify and differentiate places from others. Brand symbols such as logos and slogans are central, assuming that brand meaning resides in them. The second approach views place brands as images and associations in the minds of target groups, whereby brands reside in individuals' minds (the cognitive). This paper aligns with a third approach that views place brands as experiential, multi-sensory constructs. Brands invite not only mental representations in people's minds but especially also multi-sensory embodied experiences. The authors thus define place brands as marketing systems that consist of dynamic performative assemblages of symbolic, discursive, institutional and material elements that selectively invite certain multi-sensory and embodied experiences of place by stakeholders and target groups.

Originality/value – This paper contributes to conceptual clarity by providing an analytical framework identifying three main approaches to place branding. The authors further reflect on the implications of each approach for brand management. This paper also builds on recent literatures to provide a new and contemporary definition of place brands as multi-sensory experiences that encompasses embodiment.

Keywords Place brand, Definition, Place marketing, City branding, Multi-sensory brand experience, Brand identity, Brand management

Paper type Conceptual paper

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1. Introduction

Over the past 30 years, place branding has become a widely used strategy in place management. In parallel, the place branding literature has grown significantly (Vuignier, 2017; see also Swain *et al.*, 2024). With the expansion and maturing of practice and theory, insights changed and new approaches to branding places were introduced next to existing ones. Emphasis shifted from place promotion, to place marketing and then to various place branding strategies including a recent focus on branding place experiences (Kavaratzis, 2005; see also Boisen *et al.* 2018; Florek and Insch, 2020; Rodrigues *et al.*, 2020). Scholars have widely written on new place branding practices and theoretical concepts, but rarely overviewed the existing approaches and conceptualisations of place brands. Notable exceptions are valuable literature reviews conducted in the last decade by Lucarelli and Berg (2011) and Lucarelli and Brorström (2013), which now miss contemporary developments of experiential place brand approaches. Recent reviews do not provide an overview of the place brand concept or place branding approaches. They focus on reporting on bibliographical aspects, research methodologies, themes observed in the literature or potential antecedents and consequences of place branding (see Acharaya and Raman, 2016; Swain *et al.*, 2024; Vuignier, 2017) [1].

This paper aims to address this gap in the literature by providing a contemporary conceptual overview of the main approaches to place branding, as well as explicating the (implicit) perspective within each approach. Drawing from recent developments in the literature, we identify and compare three main approaches to understanding place brands: as symbolic constructs made of logos and slogans; as associations in the minds of target groups; as multi-sensory embodied place experiences. We thus unearth the (implicit) assumptions underlying the different approaches and provide a clear overview of conceptualisations. This enables reflection on the concept and practice of place branding from different perspectives.

A second aim is to elaborate on and define a relatively new approach of place branding as multi-sensory embodied experiences. Providing a new conceptualisation is important because although there is a growing body of literature on place brands as experiential phenomena, there is less attention to brand embodiment. We provide the following integrative new definition of place brands as multi-sensory embodied experiences. *Place brands are marketing systems that consist of dynamic performative assemblages of symbolic, discursive, institutional and material elements that selectively invite certain multi-sensory and embodied experiences of place by stakeholders and target groups.* Furthermore, the paper discusses the role of place brand managers in the three approaches. Although existing literature provides several useful models for place brand management (e.g. Hannah and Rowley, 2015; Kavaratzis and Hatch, 2021), it lacks studies that compare and overview brand management in different approaches. The comparison can assist place brand managers to make well-informed choices for a specific approach and role.

To realise the above aims, the paper addresses the following questions: What approaches to place branding can be distinguished in the literature? How can the concept of place brands be defined within those approaches? How can brands be managed within these place branding approaches?

The structure of the paper is as follows: Section two elaborates the three approaches and discusses the scholarly criticism on each approach. Section three discusses brand management within the three approaches. Section four reflexively compares and discusses the three approaches. We conclude with ideas for future research and implications for practitioners.

2. Place branding: three main approaches

The three main approaches of place brands differ in what is central to a brand, what is the starting point of the branding process and where do brands reside. Below follows an overview of the approaches and scholarly criticisms to these approaches.

2.1 *Place brands as symbols that hold specific meaning*

The first approach is the *classical marketing approach* in which place brands are defined as “a symbolic construct that consists of a name, term, sign, symbol or design, or a combination of these, intended to identify the place and differentiate it from others by adding meaning to the place” (Eshuis and Klijn, 2017, p. 19). The manifest symbol of the place brand is put central, whereby the idea is that the symbol itself holds the meaning or identity of the brand, which it then evokes to the target group (receivers of brand meaning). In other words: place brand symbols identify the place and evoke associations that give places cultural meaning (Eshuis and Edwards, 2013). Thus, place branding is a strategy to create a strong place identity based on a set of symbolic elements that exert appeal to target groups. In this approach, branding processes start with the development of brand symbols such as a name, logo and other brand visuals. The idea is to create a singular and coherent visual identity (that reflects the aspired brand essence), so that the target group can easily understand and recall the brand.

Theoretically, brand symbols can be developed top-down by the brand-owner(s) or emerge from a bottom-up process whereby the target group or audience has an important say in the brand symbols. The literature based on the classical approach of place brands describes empirical examples of both (see e.g. Eshuis and Edwards, 2013). The theoretical basis of the classical marketing view builds on the semiotics paradigm in branding (Oswald and Oswald, 2012). Building on Levy’s (1959) seminal work on brands as symbols, this view emphasises the semiotic value of the symbols that consumers associate with brands and products. The symbolic meaning of place brands is thus translated into particular meanings by brand consumers as they relate with place brands (Anholt, 2010). In place branding the semiotic approach is often ocular centric (Medway, 2015) assuming ontological and epistemological primacy for the ocular and visual.

2.1.1 Criticism. The classical marketing approach of place brands has received significant criticism. Firstly, place brands cannot be reduced to signs such logos or slogans (Boisen *et al.*, 2018). Critics argue that logos and slogans are not even that important in marketing places, and that other aspects are more important in influencing perceptions and behaviours of target groups (Govers, 2013). For example, word-of-mouth (Braun *et al.*, 2014), or what the physical, social and economic environment of a place also communicates (Kavaratzis, 2005). A second criticism is that the classical approach of place brands tends to see places as static, neglecting the dynamic character of place (Kavaratzis and Hatch, 2013). Critics argue that place identities are socially constructed in the interactions between actors (Aitken and Campelo, 2011), and therefore inherently dynamic. Thus, place identities cannot be reduced to a set of symbolic and static elements.

The idea that a place brand should express a singular and coherent identity has also been questioned. Critics argue that place identity should not be viewed in an essentialist way which assumes that a place has one fixed identity. Places are complex phenomena with multiple identities because they are “social constructions made up of a selection of spatial elements by humans” (Boisen *et al.*, 2011, p. 137). Places may thus have multiple identities. For example, as places of residence or as places of investment opportunities (Boisen *et al.*, 2011; Kavaratzis, 2005).

A third linked criticism is that top-down strategies oftentimes used in this approach (whereby brand-owners create the symbols and determine the brand identity) exclude the voices of many place stakeholders (Kavaratzis and Kalandides, 2015; Florek and Insch, 2020). This can not only lead to a lack of representation and affect legitimacy and support for the brand, but also to misalignments between the intended projected/official identity and its interpretation by stakeholders. Not acknowledging the different views of the place by diverse stakeholders neglects the plural (and rich) character of places. It also leads to an overly simplistic, reductionist and often commodified representation of places (Warnaby and Medway, 2013) that may result in resistance towards the brand project (Maiello and Pasquinelli, 2015); reduced effectiveness of branding and negative effects on the brands' democratic legitimacy (Eshuis and Edwards, 2013).

Despite several critical remarks, scholars note that also stakeholder involvement is possible in the classical marketing view. Kotler and colleagues (1993) already stressed the importance of consulting and including the needs and wants and clients when developing brands. Others have suggested that brand symbols such as the logo, can also be created collaboratively with place stakeholders (Casais and Monteiro, 2019; Eshuis and Edwards, 2013). We discuss this further in Section 3.

The second approach described hereafter, builds on the above criticism that brand meaning does not reside solely in symbols but is perceived and socially constructed in peoples' minds.

2.2 Place brands as images and associations in the mind

The second approach places priority with the image that target groups have of the brand (place). Here, place brands are mostly defined as networks of associations existing in the minds of place stakeholders and target groups (Zenker *et al.*, 2017). Thus, place brands do not reside in the brand symbol, but in individuals' minds. The set of mental associations and images in the brain of target groups takes prominence against the brand symbol. The place brand refers to the web of multiple perceptions of place by different stakeholders. Fitting within this view, Kavaratzis (2005) states that the communication of the brand begins with "the realisation that all encounters with the city take place through perceptions and image". This view is linked to the concept of "place image" applied in destination marketing literature. Crompton, for instance, defines destination image as "the sum of beliefs, ideas and impressions that a person has of a destination" (Crompton, 1979:18).

The second approach relates to the work by Keller (1993) who conceptualises brands as cognitive constructions in the mind of consumers, and assumes that brands can have strong, unique and favourable associations in consumers' minds. In this view, the focus changes from the sender to the diverse receivers of the brand such as residents, visitors, or businesses (Hanna and Rowley, 2015).

Marketing literatures within this approach originally applied a mechanistic view of brand communication wherein the receiver (target group) is passive, and just receives and stores the message as sent out by the sender (marketeer). Here, the sending brand manager is almost able to "program" the consumer into certain perceptions and intended actions. However, in place branding literature this linear view of brand communication is commonly replaced by the idea that the receiver is not a passive, but a complex human who interprets messages, gives meaning to them and constructs his/her/their own network of associations in the brain (Fernández-Cavia *et al.*, 2018; Keller, 1993; Zenker *et al.*, 2017). As such, place brand associations are in constant flux and change over time (Kavaratzis and Kalandides, 2015).

Place branding in this approach revolves around interventions that are aimed at changing perceptions and inducing positive associations. Some scholars thereby emphasise that place brand managers should focus on different elements according to different target groups (Zenker and Beckmann, 2013). The role of brand communication is often seen as invoking place images in the minds of the target group through visuals. These visuals can be developed and communicated top-down by the brand-owner (Papadopoulos, 2004) or bottom-up by other actors (Colomb and Kalandides, 2010).

2.2.1 Criticism. As stated above, older marketing literature within this approach applied a mechanistic view of brand communication, which has been criticised for neglecting that place brand communication is not a linear one-way process from brand (owner) to receiver (Kavaratzis and Hatch, 2013). This critique emphasises the active and meaning-generating role of message-receivers. There is current consensus in place branding literatures that people are not passive place consumers, but active place shapers or *citizens* having a “stake” in place (Florek and Insch, 2020; Muñoz-Martínez, 2023). In this regard, Ripoll González and Lester (2018) argued that place brands are the result of mediated messages in the public sphere where diverse actors interact with place brand symbols as well as with other symbols and narratives that are then (re)imagined in actors’ interactions with others. Such multi-way many-to-many exchange of information is particularly evident in digital and social media environments (Sevin, 2013).

Critics further argue that this approach easily ignores social and cultural environments of brands. It oftentimes focuses on individuals and their brand perceptions, ignoring how social relationships and the community shape the associations that brands trigger. Furthermore, this ignores how local culture and existing associations and discourses about the place affect perceptions of place (Edensor and Millington, 2008). It also neglects the creation of brand meaning through storytelling in interactions between local communities and visiting audiences (Aitken and Campelo, 2011; Stoica *et al.*, 2022). In sum, interpersonal influences are key elements that mediate how brands are received by different place audiences (Sevin, 2013).

A final critical reflection is that this approach focuses too strongly on the cognitive, and on associations in the brains of target audiences. Brands, critics argued, do not only exist as mental representations in people’s minds. Wallpach and Kreuzer (2013, p. 1326) explain the limitations of the assumption that people “store brand knowledge as abstract and stable brand associations in semantic memory”. They emphasise that this classical cognitivist stance ignores how people embody brand information. Furthermore, the focus on cognitive associations is often coupled to the visual, ignoring senses such as hearing and tasting (Medway, 2015; Rodrigues *et al.*, 2020). A more integrated approach to place brands as multi-sensory embodied experiences helps to better understand how people experience brands (Medway, 2015; Wallpach and Kreuzer, 2013; Rodrigues *et al.*, 2020). Including all senses is also “likely to deliver a more enriching experience for the recipients of place branding efforts” (Medway, 2015, p. 191) as they contribute to feelings, perceptions and understandings of places (Medway and Warnaby, 2017; Steadman *et al.*, 2021). Next, we elaborate this view.

2.3 Place brands as multi-sensory embodied experiences

A third and more recent approach builds on the idea that brands do not merely work through symbols or mental associations, but through the entire human, i.e. through the corporeal. Brands are not only perceived as mental representations in people’s minds, but rather as multi-layered, multi-sensory embodied experiences (Zha *et al.*, 2022), based on what people have “consciously and unconsciously sensed, touched, felt, smelled, tasted,

moved, viewed, talked and heard” (Wallpach and Kreuzer, 2013: 1326). Lu *et al.* (2020) argued that experience is shaped through interactions between the body, physical and social environments and that “embodiment makes people aware of the importance of the experience” (p. 857). Put differently, bodily experiences make the brand experience more salient and memorable to people and make people feel more fully involved. Thus, theorising brands as embodied entities can help to better understand phenomena such as brand recall and brand attachment (see also Zha *et al.*, 2022).

This third embodied approach views brands as experiential constructs, moving beyond symbolic meanings or perceptions. Brand experiences can be seen as the “sensations, feelings, cognitions and behavioural responses evoked by brand-related stimuli” (Brakus *et al.* 2009, p. 54). Whereas the first view of place brands highlights the importance of symbols such as logos and wordmarks, and the second view highlights attractive place imagery in branding campaigns, this third view posits that non-visual senses can also play an important role in the way places are marketed and branded (Medway, 2015; Rodrigues *et al.* 2020; Steadman *et al.*, 2021). For instance, branding literatures discuss how smell can influence perceptions and especially emotions and memories (e.g. Henshaw *et al.*, 2016), and how sounds can influence perceptions and behaviour (see Medway, 2015, p.192). Similarly, Chakravarty (2017) posits that memories will be stronger if the five senses are engaged by “sensory branding”. In sum, the brand experience is corporeal and multidimensional (Nysveen and Pedersen, 2014) or as Brakus *et al.* (2009, p. 54.) put it: “The feel experience includes moods and emotions. The think experience includes convergent/analytical and divergent/imaginative thinking. The act experience refers to motor actions and behavioural experiences. Finally, the relate experience refers to social experiences”.

The multi-sensory aspect implies that the entire place environment, the place-scape (Evans, 2015), informs the brand experience. Medway (2015) discussed the importance of *smellscapes*, *soundscapes*, *tastescapes* and *touchscapes* for place branding. But also the *policyscape* (Mettler, 2016) and *lawscape* can inform place experience (Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos, 2013). Institutions such as policies and laws may not be directly experienced through the senses but they can cause bodily experiences and sensations (e.g. stress and body tension for an entrepreneur faced with restrictive laws). Under this view, the *placescape*, includes images, narratives, objects, technologies and performances (Ren and Blichfeldt, 2011), as well as institutions, the people or local community in a place.

Placescapes are never entirely static because people may move through the placescape, and because elements of placescapes such as light, temperature and fellow people (to name a few) change continuously. Therefore, the place brand experience is dynamic. At one time the visual may dominate the experience, and the next moment smell or sound may dominate. Thus, brands are constantly in flux and understood not only as assemblages of brand *meaning* by consumers (Lash and Lury, 2007, pp. 4–5), but as dynamic assemblages of brand *experiences* by people. This aligns with human geography non-representational theory (Thrift, 2007) focus on *how* “embodied experiences” are produced in ongoing processes, rather than on *what* is produced – emphasising the experience and process of meaning creation above the outcome. In addition, the experience of a placescape is influenced by the place’s atmosphere or “quality of feeling” (Steadman *et al.*, 2021, p. 136). Place atmospheres are understood here as flows of emotions and sensations between bodies. They result from how people experience the material and immaterial qualities of the place. For example, a place’s atmosphere is the feeling that the built environment and behaviours of other people in a place give them (Eronen, 2024; Steadman *et al.*, 2021).

In addition, Florek and Insch (2020) argued that the place brand experience is based not only on intense and extraordinary experiences, but also the everyday experiences in daily

interactions and happenings. Put differently, place brand experience is co-created during actors' extraordinary and daily activities. Co-creation here refers to the active involvement of stakeholders in various stages of the branding process, and more specifically to actors' contributions to the place brand through their individual behaviours and mutual interactions (e.g. [Stoica et al., 2022](#)). The idea is that place actors' activities create/produce valuable place brand experiences ([Florek and Insch, 2020](#)). Place brands then become dynamic, co-created assemblages of individual as well as collective brand experiences (see also [Aitken and Campelo, 2011](#)). Fitting in this approach, [Rodrigues et al. \(2020\)](#) highlighted how different actors in the place co-create sensorial experiences (beyond the ocular). Our conceptualisation draws also from this framework but expands to observe how such sensorial experiences are embodied by actors in their interactions during the co-creation of place brands.

Theorising brands as embodied phenomena helps to better understand the full experience of a place brand, especially the emotional dimension which is so important in place branding. Psychology literature tells that emotions are "whole body phenomena" ([Gross, 2014](#)). Emotions hence consist of a subjective experience, a physiological bodily response and a behavioural response (which also involves the body) ([Gross, 2014](#); [Mauss et al., 2005](#)). This is nicely exemplified by [Steadman et al. \(2021, p. 146\)](#) in their marketing study of the Manchester football club Manchester City: "As soon as Author 4 and I approach the top of the stairs in our stand, a roaring cheer goes up all around the stadium. A City goal has already been scored. He beams and punches the air in excitement [. . .] I feel the euphoric atmosphere fire into my body like an electric charge, increasing my heart rate, causing my skin to tingle, and the hairs on my arms to stand on end". Similarly, [Muñiz-Martinez \(2023\)](#) provides another empirical study that further clarifies how embodied experience plays a role in place branding; the author describes how the place brand of Cali (Colombia) is centred around salsa dancing, and invites people to participate in salsa dancing. The intense experience of the brand is very much a corporeal one. The bodily involvement that comes with dancing salsa allows the "experience of sensations (moving to the rhythm, achieving a sense of emotional well-being, having fun and experiencing pleasure and joy)" and "sensory self-indulgence" ([Muñiz-Martinez, 2023, p.641](#)). The rich and positive salsa experiences trigger positive valuations of the place.

The third approach is further exemplified by [Rabbiosi \(2016\)](#), who shows how place branding is performed and "enacted on the ground" (p. 155) through food tourism experiences delivered in food shops in Verucchio, Italy. The place brand experience is shaped by material, discursive and bodily performances, as part of an open-ended and hybrid exchange between tourists and placescapes ([Rabbiosi, 2016](#)). A mediated version of places is then presented as a place brand, as the sum of "material culture, discourses, and embodied performances" ([Rabbiosi, 2016, p. 155](#)). Also [Nogué and de San-Eugenio-Vela \(2018: p. 32\)](#) stressed performance and embodiment, describing branding as "a performative proposal that invites an embodiment of people with places". This performative proposal addresses the cognitive relation with places and the affective bond, with the emotions and sensations implied in the sensory exploration of a place ([Nogué and de San-Eugenio-Vela, 2018; Rodrigues et al., 2020](#)). The place brand does not only invite a certain hermeneutical understanding and meaning of the place, but especially also certain bodily performances and corporeal experiences ([Nogué and de San-Eugenio-Vela, 2018](#)). The place brand is characterised by specific experiential and performative affordances; it selectively invites experiences and performances that fit with the brand identity.

Under the third view as described above, place brands can be considered marketing systems in which brand experiences are (re)created.

This perspective leads up to the following *new definition of place brands*:

Place brands are marketing systems that consist of dynamic performative assemblages of symbolic, discursive, institutional, and material elements that selectively invite certain multisensory and embodied experiences of place by stakeholders and target groups.

Given the above, the third perspective implies that a place brand may not even need a fixed logo or slogan because the brand identity does not reside in the brand symbol but in the *placescape*, and the brand symbol forms only a minor part of the brand experience. The place brand is thus more nebulous and multidimensional, and not so easily managed. Moreover, place branding is then more about influencing how target groups experience the place, and less about how they see the place. However, the corporeal experiences are affected by people's interactions with a multitude of place elements which makes it difficult for brand managers, as they cannot fully control the brand experience (Florek and Insch, 2020; Kavartzis and Kalandides, 2015). Furthermore, the brand identity is constantly (re)shaped in interactions, between place actors in complex networks beyond the control of brand managers. (see e.g. Muñiz-Martínez, 2023).

Having said that, the multi-sensory approach to place brands also offers new handles for place brand managers to influence – and thus exert some level of control – how people experience the brand. For example, managers can create pleasant soundscapes or facilitating meaningful engagement with the local community in ways that positively influence the brand experience (see Rodrigues *et al.*, 2020; Muñiz-Martínez, 2023).

2.4 Overview of the three approaches to place brands

The account outlined above brings out important differences between the three views on place brands (see also Table 1 below). A major and fundamental difference between the approaches is ontological. The first approach assumes that the brand symbols are the brand, and that the brand exists as those symbols. In the second approach, the set of associations in people's minds is the brand, and thus the brand exists in people's minds. The third approach assumes that brands are embodied, and that they exist as corporeal human experiences.

Another difference is that in the first two approaches, place brands are meant to shape primarily mental associations and ascribe meanings to places at the cognitive level (e.g. Kavartzis and Kalandides, 2015; Zenker *et al.*, 2017), while in the third approach brands forge feelings and bodily sensations, and connect not only meanings but also experiences to places at the embodied level (e.g. Rodrigues *et al.*, 2020).

The outlined exploration of the first, second and third approaches also shows growing attention to the complexities of place branding and the importance of stakeholder engagement in the development of place brands. This challenges the classic image of top-down brand development by a brand initiator "in control" of the branding process and requires ways of managing branding processes that fit the networked and co-creative character of place branding (see also Kavartzis and Kalandides, 2015). This is particularly important given the open and interactive character of communicative exchanges among actors on social media platforms (Ketter and Avraham, 2012; Zavattaro and Eshuis, 2021). This also calls for deepening our understanding of place brands in the absence of an institutionalised and all-embracing place branding platform by officially entitled actors (Giovanardi *et al.*, 2013).

Furthermore, the importance of managing the place brand and the place branding process is recognised by scholars across all three approaches. However, different views on what place brands are, require different approaches to managing them as elaborated in the next section.

	Symbol	Cognitive associations	Embodied experience
Definition	A symbolic construct that consists of a name, term, sign, symbol or design, or a combination of these, intended to identify the place and differentiate it from others by adding meaning to the place" (Eshuis and Klijn, 2017:19)	network of associations in peoples' minds, existing in the minds of place stakeholders and target groups (Zenker <i>et al.</i> , 2017).	Marketing systems that consist of multi-sensory and embodied experiences of a place by stakeholders and target groups, reflected in both planned and emerging meanings, place users' behaviours and in how places are valued by users (this paper)
Keywords	Slogan, logo, advertisement	Cognition, association	Experience, emotion
Brand identity resides in:	Marketing symbols	Individuals' minds	<i>Material and non-material elements in the placescape</i>
Brand creators are:	Brand manager	Brand managers, stakeholders and target groups	Brand consumers and brand producers including local community, visitors and other stakeholders
Example references	Eshuis and Klijn, 2017; Eshuis and Edwards, 2013	Zenker <i>et al.</i> , 2017; Aitken and Campelo, 2011	Medway, 2015; <i>Zha et al.</i> , 2022; Steadman <i>et al.</i> , 2021.

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Table 1.
Overview of the three
approaches to place
brands

3. Brand management in the three approaches

Within the three approaches, brand management focuses on, respectively, managing the symbol and message; managing the image and associations in peoples' minds; and managing people's experience(s) and feelings. In all three approaches brand management can theoretically be more top-down or more bottom-up or combine both. In practice, top-down forms of brand management tend to be more present within the first approach (Papadopoulos, 2004), and bottom-up forms of brand management are often found in the third approach. In the second approach, brand management is often practiced through various top-down and bottom-up strategies (Colomb and Kalandides, 2010). Table 2 below shows how the aim and focus of brand management differ for the three approaches:

The first approach aims to create symbols such as logos and slogans that represent the place to exert a positive image, either in a top-down way or in interaction with stakeholders and target groups. In the second approach, efforts rather focus on altering associations in the minds of brand audiences via positive place brand images (visuals and messages). The third approach is multifaceted and more encompassing because it aims beyond the cognitive to also affect bodily experiences, emotions and feelings about place.

When shifting from the first to the third approach, the object to be managed becomes broader and more encompassing. In the first approach it is merely about the brand symbols. These can be created top-down by the brand manager, or more bottom-up in interaction with stakeholders and target groups. In the second approach, the objects include a variety of images, visual display points and discursive messages and brand managers can send out top-down brand messages, or interactively develop and communicate brand images with place actors and target groups. In the third approach the entire placescape, including human behaviours and experiences within, become the object of brand management. Elements to be managed may include human interactions, physical settings with various sensory components, artefacts, programs and rules that guide physical and human interactions but also relationships that people bring to the experience, and animations (Rossman and Schlatter, 2015). In top-down forms of this approach, place brand managers and their organisations can develop products, services and experiences that enable target groups to have specific experiences of the place, or may decide to curate a strategically chosen set of goods, services and experiences and commission others to develop them. Thus, the brand manager tries to control the offerings and experiences through an intentionally designed and carefully curated set of structured experiences (see Duerden *et al.*, 2015). In bottom-up forms of this approach, brand managers facilitate actors' development of goods and services that in turn provide opportunities for target groups to experience the place in various ways. Here the brand manager does not control exactly what is offered by place actors and leaves more room for the target groups to craft their own experience of the place based on their own navigation of the place's offerings, more in line with Florek and Insch' (2020) idea of stakeholders co-creating the city brand through daily experiences and interactions *in* place. Such approach to brand management is bottom-up since stakeholders rather than the brand manager create the valuable brand-related experiences.

It should be noted that bottom-up brand management in the third approach differs from bottom-up brand management in the first and second approaches. While the third approach focuses on bottom-up processes of co-creating valuable brand-related experiences in both daily routines and extraordinary events, the first and second approaches focus on ("classic") participatory processes of involving citizens in *decision-making* about the place brand (during formal brand development trajectories (see e.g. Eshuis and Edwards, 2013). Notwithstanding the second approach shows signs of acknowledgement of the role of target groups and residents in crafting and delivering the brand experience (Braun *et al.*, 2014).

Aim	Brand management				Embodied experience	
	Top down	Symbol Bottom up	Top down	Cognitive associations Bottom up		Top down
	Create attractive symbols and control their meaning	Interactively create attractive symbols and influence meaning making	Create strong and favourable associations with the brand by sending out attractive brand images to target groups	Create strong and favourable associations with the brand by interactively creating and communicating attractive brand images with target groups	Create a material, human and symbolic environment that causes favourable experiences among stakeholders and emotions among stakeholders and target groups	Co-create a material, human and symbolic environment that enables/invites favourable experiences and emotions among stakeholders and target groups
Focus of brand management	Brand symbols	Brand symbols	Associations in people's minds	Associations in people's mind	People's multi-sensory experience	People's multi-sensory experience
Marketing materials and brand elements	Logo, slogan, brand visuals, main brand values	Logo, slogan, brand visuals, main brand values	Images and visual touchpoints (e.g. iconic buildings such as the Eiffel Tower); discursive messages	Images and visual touchpoints (e.g. iconic buildings); discursive messages	Placescape including all touch points, experiential objects and situations in full richness. E.g. narratives, symbols, stories, feelings, emotions, physical objects (buildings), smells, sounds)	Placescape including all touch points, experiential objects and situations in full richness. E.g. narratives, stories, feelings, emotions, physical objects (buildings), smells, sounds)

Source: Created by authors

Table 2.
Main features of
brand management
in the three
approaches

Following the three brand management approaches outlined above, we identify a series of roles for brand managers in this continuum from relatively narrow to more encompassing and complex ones (see [Table 3](#)). The three views on place brands hold different ideas on how brands are communicated or enacted in the communicative interactions among place stakeholders in the placescape. We encapsulate this under the headings of “communication standpoint” and “communication direction”. This aspect is important as is tied to an evolving role of place brand managers from creators of place brands who focus on managing the brand content or symbols, to curators who provide designed experiences and even facilitators (or as we label above, co-creators) who enable the co-creation of embodied experiences by multiple actors in the place. The last view requires brand managers to work with networks of actors in which they organise and facilitate the development of meanings and experiences, and present them in a conscious and ordered way. Effectively, this implies that brand managers cannot do it all on their own.

Current literature commonly criticises top-down ways of managing place brands, suggesting that it is more effective and legitimate to manage the brand in close collaboration with other place stakeholders. This literature argues that collaboration with stakeholders in the development of place brands will bring about in greater acceptance of the resulting brand identity (e.g. increased brand legitimacy, see [Eshuis and Edwards, 2013](#)) and greater support for the brand, particularly in the implementation of brand communication activities ([Ripoll González et al., 2024](#)), leading to greater effectiveness of practice ([Braun et al., 2014](#)). Monitoring customer expectations and satisfaction with key elements of the place experience and the close collaboration with stakeholders is viewed as critical for successful experience management ([Hanna and Rowley, 2015](#)). One reason for this is that the delivery of place experiences (and management of parts thereof) depends on many actors such as public transport organisations, police (i.e. safety), cafes and hotels. This interdependence means that brand managers need to co-operate with other actors to be effective. Recent literatures provide more concrete ideas regarding this co-operative effort. [Rodrigues et al. \(2020\)](#) proposed a sensorial place brand identity framework highlighting the role of place stakeholders and “key influencers” (official and unofficial sources with communicative power, p.285) and co-creators in the delivery of place brand messages. [Florek and Insch \(2020\)](#) call for co-operating with a wide range of actors (including residents, service providers, business owners and visitors) who in daily activities create their own experience and at the same time build experiences for others. They stress that brand experience is formed in intense and stylised extraordinary experiences as well as in numerous ordinary daily experiences ([Florek and Insch, 2020](#)). In sum, place brand managers, under a bottom-up embodied place brand approach, thus manage stakeholder networks, facilitating relationships and interactions to provide meaningful, authentic and memorable place experiences.

4. Discussion and conclusion

This paper has contributed a much needed analytical distinction and clarification of current approaches and definitions of place brands. Based on the literature the paper presented two well-established and a third emerging approach with a linked new definition of place brands as multi-sensory embodied experiences.

Next, we elaborate on the utility and limitations of our analytical distinction. We then critically reflect on theoretical assumptions and shortcomings within the third approach to place branding to further contribute to the study of brands as experiential phenomena.

By clarifying and comparing existing place branding approaches, this paper hopefully facilitates conscious and fitting conceptualisations of place brands to assist the further

Role	Brand manager's role			Embodied experience	
	Top down	Symbol Bottom up	Cognitive associations Bottom up		Top down
Communication standpoint	Leader/creator	Leader/initiator	Sending communicator	Moderator (interactive communicator)	Co-creator
Tasks	TALK Developing (brand) symbol	LISTEN → TALK Collecting information about the place and preferences of target groups, and accordingly develop (brand) symbols	LISTEN → ALIGN AND TALK Creating positive associations about the place	LISTEN ↔ ALIGN Building on existing positive associations about place	LISTEN and FEEL → CO-CREATE Facilitating the creation of embodied brand experiences
Communication direction	One-way (one-to-many)	Two-way	One-way, multi-channel	Two-way, many-to-many (word of mouth)	Many-to-many Interactive, co-created and networked

Source: Created by authors

Table 3.
Brand manager's
roles in the three
approaches

development of the field and place brand management in practice. That is why our categorisation into three approaches is primarily analytical. We emphasise that academic literature and place branding practice do not always neatly fit into one of the above-mentioned approaches. Elements of different approaches are regularly combined, and hybrid forms exist. For example, [Eshuis and Klijn \(2017\)](#) hold that place brands are symbols (first approach), but they stress that symbols are cognitively interpreted and given meaning by people (second approach).

Notwithstanding, the analytical contrast of the three place brand approaches found in the literature also clarifies conceptual differences and implies that branding (cognitive) associations is different from branding (embodied) experiences. The third approach is arguably the most theoretically encompassing, because it involves the full human sensory gamut and experience. This approach is theoretically the most complete in its coverage of human perceptual being in the world. It has potentially strong explanatory power because it includes the full experience that drives people's behaviour. However, brand experience is hard to measure, albeit not impossible (see e.g. [Steadman et al., 2021](#); [Taecharunroj and Stoica, 2024](#)). This presents a research challenge and calls for future empirical research. Scholars will face methodological difficulties in operationalising and measuring experiences and may need to reduce the number of cases or indicators of experience in their studies. This inherently implies a simplification and reduction of the full experience that research subjects may have (had).

Also, in practice the third approach is potentially (!) the most powerful, because it includes many handles to reach and influence people – thus increasing effectiveness of branding efforts. However, in practice, the most complete and rich approach is not always the most effective one for brand managers, because it may be difficult and impractical to apply. In fact, brand management in the third approach is about managing a whole placescape, including aspects which are hard to influence and generally not under the direct control of brand managers. This may include everyday behaviours of residents and visitors but also elements of the placescape, for example, the cities' *smellscape*. Practitioners, who have limited resources and work with short timespans, might perceive as a simple but highly feasible approach that focuses for example on visual images and cognitive associations as the most effective.

This paper's analytical framework can serve as a reflective tool to inform brand managers. It can help decision making by providing insight in the trade-offs between different approaches, and help deciding what aspects of the brand to focus on. Also, the addition of the third approach to the more well known first and second approaches, provides managers with more options in the design of branding approaches, because it expands the range of strategies they can use to foster brand attachment and a stronger emotional connection to place brands beyond cognitive and rational responses and stimuli.

Having stated that, conceptualising place brands as multi-sensory brand experiences opens up new concerns and research questions. The literature emphasised how important interactions between people are for the place brand experience (e.g. [Florek and Insch, 2020](#); [Muñiz-Martínez, 2023](#); [Steadman et al., 2021](#)). Although this has provided valuable insights, many social aspects of brand experiences remain undertheorised because brand experience is often conceptualised as an individual sensory experience. The individual experience is nevertheless partly shaped by the individual's interaction with others, as well as by their experience of how others in the place interact. The characteristics of such interactions and the interactive mechanisms that influence the place brand experience should be further theorised and empirically researched. Related, how community-level features influence brand experience(s) remains understudied. For example, little is currently known about how the closedness, or cohesion of a community influences the place brand experience. Does being part of a cohesive or a closed community affect the brand experience? Is there a

difference in brand experience when the subject has a feeling of being part of a loose or an open community? How does this work for outsiders of a given community such as expats and tourists? And how do the different place brand approaches play out in digital brand experiences characterised by the features of the digital medium (decentralised, “distant” and non-physical interactions, influence of algorithms, lack of control over the message/experience)?

Proponents of the third approach have described how place consumers actively shape their brand experience by selecting events, locations and other brand touchpoints (see e.g. [Florek and Insch, 2020](#)). However, there is still an inclination to assume that the place brand experience happens to people once they are in the selected place, and peoples’ active regulation of the emotional experience when being in a place has remained undertheorised. Since the embodied experience goes beyond the cognitive to include feelings and emotions, it could be useful to turn to the literature in psychology that has elaborated on how people continuously apply a range of emotion regulation strategies to manage their emotional experience(s) (e.g. [Gross, 2014](#)). Important strategies might be emotion suppression, cognitive reflection on one’s feelings and sharing feelings with others ([Gross, 2014](#)). Further theoretical integration of the active regulation of emotional experience(s) by place consumers would add to the understanding of place brand experience. Understanding how brand experiences are emotionally regulated could help brand managers devise strategies that take into account such emotional aspects of brand experiences. For instance, making sure branding efforts do not elicit memories or emotions around collective traumatic community events (e.g. bushfires or wars), or acting to reinforce individuals’ affective bond with place.

In addition, brand experiences are voluntarily and involuntarily co-created by place actors. Hence, we suggest that, building on this paper which discusses *what* is co-created (brand experiences), further research is needed to increase our understanding of *how* embodied brand experiences are co-created (i.e. on the roles of various actors involved or the norms and rules regulating interactions). This would in turn inform future place brand experience management models.

Finally, from a practical perspective, approaching place brands as symbols, associations or embodied experiences makes a significant difference for the role and responsibility of brand managers. This papers’ distinction of the three approaches may assist brand managers in making a conscious choice how they approach place brands and their role in place branding. Seeing place brands as embodied experiences, implies that rather than focusing on the development of brand symbols or brand meanings, practitioners focus on shaping a conducive environment for memorable and positive experience (e.g. [Ripoll González and Gale, 2020](#)). Thus, brand managers act as facilitators and “curators” of authentic experiences ([Edensor and Millington, 2008](#)), who manage symbolic, discursive, institutional and material place elements, rather than as communicators of brand identities who send out symbols and meanings.

Note

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