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Exploring Place Branding in Social Enterprise Places

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Introduction

Economic, cultural and social changes are resulting in fierce competition among places (Kavaratzis, 2005). Moreover, places are striving to balance business provision by attracting new investments and retaining existing ones (Kotler et al., 1999; Kavaratzis, 2005). Several theories have been identified for place branding, especially within a retailing context. However, few studies exist which explore how places can be branded and marketed via partnerships with social enterprises, a gap that this research ultimately aims to fulfil.

Place Branding and Social Enterprises

Literature from human geography, branding, and marketing provide different arguments on the concept of 'place'. For example, Cresswell (2004) argues that places are created and that residents create place through the various activities they engage in. Cresswell and Hoskins (2008: 394) further argue that place is a '*lived concept*' and therefore viewed as '*fundamental components of human activity*' (Florek, 2011: 347). More recently, Warnaby and Medway (2013: 357) expand upon the socio-cultural dimension aspects of place and describe it as a '*socially constructed product developed and endlessly redefined and interpreted via spoken and written words*'. This implies human actions possess creative abilities for their own place. The activity-based created place has been contested and criticised in human geography to have no defined boundaries (Agnew, 1987), thus proving to be a '*complex*' and '*slippery*' concept (Kavaratzis, 2005; Warnaby and Medway, 2013). Consequently, several dynamics have resulted from evaluating and improving certain geographical settings (see Agnew, 1987) and/or the collection of creative human activities (see Cresswell, 2004). Alongside these theoretical developments, there is potential for the creative entrepreneurship of social enterprises to be explored within places. Hotspots of social enterprise activities can be branded and marketed to build a positive image about their communal growth and development. Warnaby et al., (2004) propose partnerships between place administrators and retail associations in developing initiative-specific place branding initiatives. Trueman et al., (2001) also call for greater application of the corporate identity literature to place branding. Both of which have been successfully applied in various UK town centres, for example the 'I love MCR campaign' or 'Glasgow's Miles Better'. Perhaps we can have a similar successful application when it comes to social enterprise places?

Methodology

The study is dyadic in nature (i.e. social enterprises and local council administrators). Therefore, a two stage approach will be adopted. Firstly, a case study approach is adopted to explore the characteristics, enterprise activities and place-centered strategies of leading social enterprise places in the UK. It is the results of this case study that will form the main presentation of this paper. Stage two involves in-depth interviews with social enterprise owners and social enterprise place administrators from across the UK. This will be accompanied by a detailed ethnographic observation of operational activities.

Concluding Comments

Social enterprise places can be branded and marketed as place values are assessed by the worth of the place brand (Kavaratzis, 2004). Social enterprises appear to develop promotional activities in partnership with place administrators/stakeholders to communicate narratives around the enterprising nature of such places. Places are '*city of words*' and '*city of stones*' (Warnaby and Medway, 2013). Therefore, architecture plays a vital role in place branding and identity, however 'selling' narratives around images of social enterprise activities have to be constantly rewritten for marketing and branding purposes to develop place attachment (Cresswell, 2004; Jones, 2011). To fulfil such potential, social enterprises have to ensure their 'organising capacity' is developed to facilitate necessary mechanisms to support marketing planning and implementation (Van den Berg and Braun, 1999).

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