DEFINING PLACE BRANDING THROUGH LOCAL AND NATIONAL IDENTITY AND NATIONAL STEREOTYPES

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Abstract: *From a communication perspective, it can be considered that the identity of a brand is defined by the one who transmits the message, while the image of it is the actual image developed in the mind of the receiver. Brand identity is how the brand owner wants it to be perceived, but on the other hand, brand image is how the brand is perceived. The present study highlights some of the structures associated with brands and places, clarifying, from a theoretical point of view, the two important characteristics related to the universe of brands, namely identity and image. These are analysed from the perspective of the conditioning of places, through identity (e.g., local, national) and national stereotypes (with various connotations on the image of the respective place).*

Keywords: *identity, image, place branding, stereotypes, place identity.*

1. Introduction

A distinction is made regarding the management of a destination, which can be substantiated such as product or consumer brands, compared to place branding that can be managed in a manner similar to corporate branding, being associated to a social organization, in the sense that corporations, like places, often have more heterogeneous branches, products and cultures (Kerr, 2006). This view is also comparable to Anholt's (2007) and Olins' (2004) points of view, who have a more moderate opinion, accepting that there are more differences than similarities between countries and companies, and if we consider the metaphor for the world as a marketplace (Widler, 2007), then we can make the analogy between nations and companies. The identity approach of brand management can be viable in expressing the characteristics of a place brand (Briciu et al., 2019), since the corporate brand is characterized (like places) by identity, image, and reputation.

However, the limitation appears by focusing the model on the broadcaster, on the organization, an aspect that cannot be replicated in the online environment. It is important to remember that a place's branding is not the same as promoting tourism (Kerr, 2006). Other synonymous concepts are also found in the academic discourse at the level of this

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discussion about place branding (Briciu et al., 2020): thematic branding, regional branding, geographical branding or geo-brands, and other terms are considered structures that are associated with brands and places: identity, image, stereotypes.

2. Local and National Identity

Local identity is a concept launched and used by destination marketing, by which we understand that the identity of a place captures the historical/heritage conditions that characterize a region or a researched space. The identity of a place is viewed in two distinct ways: as a purely objective matter, with no other determinations (Barke and Harrop, 1994 cited in Deffner and Metaxas, 2007, p. 370) or through culture and tourism representation: "the representations used in destination marketing are not value-free expressions of a place's identity; instead they are the culmination of historical, social, economic and political processes" (Pritchard and Morgan, 2002 cited in Deffner and Metaxas, 2007, p. 370). Instead, national identity can have multiple determinations, the first of which represents: the "collective understanding by a nation's people of the features presumed to be central and relatively permanent, and that distinguish the nation from other nations" (Fan, 2008, p. 3).

Analyzing nation branding as a discourse, seen as a body of common knowledge, shared on a certain issue in society, Widler (2007, p. 145) makes the observation that "the discourse of nation branding takes for granted that nations exist". The author takes the opinion of sociologist Billing (1995) who states that the idea of a nation is a "misleadingly natural (or naturalised) concept" (cited in Widler, 2007, p. 145). In this vision, the concept of nation is "a social construct as are gender, race or class. This does not mean that these concepts are not real, and they definitely have an impact on people. But they are not natural. They seem to be, because they are blended in the taken-for-granted common sense of society. They are reproduced on a daily basis in the media, in institutions and practices. One argument for nations being a social construct is that they come in all shapes and sizes. Speaking the same language is not a categorical condition for a group of people to build a nation, neither is religion. Social constructs need to be constantly re-constructed in order to survive. Nation branding is a practice that targets the nation and therefore contributes to its re-construction" (Widler, 2007, p. 145).

The founder of ethnosymbolism, as a multidisciplinary approach that synthesizes the traditional and modern manifestations of nationalism, Smith (1991, pp. 10-11) begins the analysis of the genesis of the national identity concept by comparing it with another central factor – that of cultural identity.

In order to preserve legal equality between the members of a politically defined and spatially demarcated community, it was necessary to introduce among the population a measure regarding common values and traditions. In other words, the author wants to explain the need of a nation to have a measure of a common culture and a civic ideology, a common set of knowledge and aspirations, feelings, and ideas. The task of ensuring such a mass culture, common to public, was entrusted to socialization bodies, mass ones, especially the public education system and mass media. In the Western national identity model, countries were seen as cultural communities, whose members were united, if not homogeneous, by memories of a common history, myths, symbols, and traditions. Moving

from the previously supported hypotheses, Smith (1991, p. 14) proposes the fundamental characteristics of national identity: "(1) an historic territory, or homeland; (2) common myths and historical memories; (3) a common, mass public culture; (4) common legal rights and duties for all members; (5) a common economy with territorial mobility for members." National identity is fundamentally multidimensional; it can never be reduced to a single element, nor can it be induced in the population by artificial methods (Smith, 1991, p. 14).

The previously expressed multidimensionality and the dynamic character of identity also have justifiable valences for Skinner and Kubacki (2007), who reason: "National identity is therefore not a fixed construct. It exists in a dynamic environment, depending critically on the claims which people make in different contexts and at different times. Although it may be slow to change, a nation's identity can and does change over time. However, much as this identity may change and be perceived as changed by those within the nation, it is at least equally slow to be perceived as changed by those outside of the nation." (p. 310).

By using the general concept of the *Significant Other*, in the sociological sense of the term, Triandafyllidou (2001, pp. 32-34) proposes a conceptualization of national identity as a relationship with two meanings, which involves defining the term from both an internal and an external perspective. From the inside, the national connection can refer to a belief in a common ancestor and/or common culture, mainly being a system of traditions, ideas, symbols, and models of behavior and communication - all these elements being shared by community members. Also, at the level of the internal definition of the national identity, it is also seen through the prism of a clearly delimited territory, which represents the homeland and the natural framework in which the power of sovereignty can be exercised. In order for these elements to take shape, they must be in contrast with other communities, from the outside, from which the nation wants and seeks to differentiate itself. It seems that the history of each nation was marked by the presence of *Significant Others*, defined by Triandafyllidou as "other groups that have influenced the development of a nation's identity through their 'inspiring' or 'threatening' presence" (Triandafyllidou, 2001, p. 32).

Thus, the notion of *Significant Others* refers, in the present case, to another nation or ethnic group that is usually close to (or even inside) the respective community and is characterized as being exactly what the *in-group* cannot be. Not all *out-groups* are important to the reference *in-group*. Social psychology studies (Tajfel and Turner, 1979) have shown that a given group will not engage in comparison with any group, taken at random, but with those that it considers most relevant, depending on a series of "factors such as similarity, proximity and situational importance" (cited in Triandafyllidou, 2001, p. 33); just like "those that share a set of common features with the ingroup pose a threat to its distinctiveness and uniqueness" (Johnston and Hewstone, 1990 cited in Triandafyllidou, 2001, p. 33).

Therefore, identity implies both uniqueness and recognition of those similarities between the members of a group that give collective meaning to this uniqueness. Through the theoretical foundations provided by national identity, "nation-brands possess far richer and deeper cultural resources than any other type of brand, be it product, service, corporate or any other brandable entity" (Dinnie, 2008, p. 14). The same perspective is expressed by Skinner and Kubacki, who observe the materialization of brands in the case of places: "We believe that the place's brand identity appears to be closely linked to the national identity of the place, which we argue is also inextricably linked to the nation's cultural identity" (2007,

p. 306), and suggest more than "undertaking 'branding' exercises" (Briciu and Briciu, 2013, p. 272).

3. National Stereotypes

When countries have an international presence, stereotypes are often mentioned, as they have connotations about the image of a nation. A place, just like a product, "is evaluated not only by its functional aspects but also by its symbolic features, which implies a place embedded with symbolic meaning" (Caldwell and Freire, 2004 cited in Freire, 2005, p. 348). In a sociological sense, the word *stereotype* suggests a "biased (usually prejudicial) view of a group or class of people - a view that is resistant to change or correction from countervailing evidence" (O'Shaughnessy and O'Shaughnessy, 2000, p. 57).

From the perspective of nation branding, stereotypes refer to "something that people hold about other nations because they do not know enough about them" (Widler, 2007, p. 148), they have "an image about a place and its inhabitants, even if those images are built on stereotypes" (Boorstin, 1992 cited in Freire, 2005, p. 348). Consumer perspectives on a nation viewed as a brand will be defined by "a composite of beliefs based on experience (where it occurs) and/ or emanate from the imagery of its people and the social, political, and economic conditions prevailing at the time" (O'Shaughnessy and O'Shaughnessy, 2000, p. 57).

However, stereotypes are considered to be erroneous or naive simplifications, generalizations based on opinions instead of facts or evidence, "a narrow understanding and limited experience of relevant facts" (Freire, 2005, p. 348). Sometimes, they are unfair and wrong, unable to be changed. However, national stereotypes can be both positive and negative, or simply neutral (O'Shaughnessy and O'Shaughnessy, 2000) or as Widler (2007) puts it, they "seem to be the enemy and the best friend of nation branders at the same time, because in practice, prevailing stereotypes are often the starting point from which a national brand is developed." (p. 148), and "this method of perceiving reality will be always present in society because it is a simple strategy used by individuals to deal with the growing information flow. This being the case, it is reasonable to draw a parallel between stereotyping a place and its inhabitants, and brands." (Freire, 2005, p. 348).

4. Conclusions

A synthesis of the concepts of identity - image - stereotypes appears in the conceptual framework proposed by Fan (2008), according to the model of analyzing the image of an organization (Brown, 2001 cited in Stock, 2009, p. 122); it provides a theoretical explanation and unification of many modern approaches to the image and identity of a place. These distinctions lead to six key perspectives, which were presented by Fan (2008, p. 12):

National identity (self-perception): refers to the psychological, irrational bond that unites the inhabitants of a country. It is based on key elements such as: historical territory, common language, laws, myths, and history. Weak national identities lead to weak nation images because a clear image is needed to be able to communicate and promote this self-perception, externally.

Reference point (the perception of Significant Others): creates the contextual framework for the process of image formation. For example, Israel wants to be perceived differently by neighboring countries compared to the United States or European countries. In addition, national identity gains meaning only through contrast and comparison with other countries.

Construed image: refers to how the inhabitants of a country think their nation is perceived by others. This differentiation is not only an essential innovation of this conceptual framework but it is the basis for the examination of subsequent research. The construed image reflects on national identity and on how people see themselves and, at the same time, efforts to change images are based on how people think they are perceived.

Actual image (reputation, stereotypes): refers to the concrete image that a country has about another country. Depending on the reference point, this image changes, and the inhabitants of another country have different images depending on the context. However, the actual image comprises a set of associations that outsiders consider essential, distinctive, and long-lasting for a nation.

Currently projected image: includes countries' efforts to form and communicate their own image to an external audience, which is based on national image management. The projected image represents the image created by a country to be communicated to the outside world, which may or may not represent the apparent reality.

Desired future image (positioning): develops according to the reference point. In essence, the desired future image is the "visionary perception" that a country wants to have from another country's point of view, somewhere in the future. The desired future image is determined not only by the reference point but also by all other aspects that concern national image management.

Important to this framework are the basic elements of: identity, reference point, image, projected image, and desired image. An important contribution of Fan (2008, p. 8) is the distinction he makes between the construed image and the actual image of a nation. That is, the author differentiates between the way a nation thinks it is perceived by another nation and the way it is actually perceived.

Although Fan (2008) is the first to make this differentiation in a conceptual framework (p. 11), other authors have analyzed some of these perspectives. Avraham and Ketter, for example, state: "When discussing a place's image, it is important to distinguish between the place's image among a specific target audience and the place's image in the mass media. Local and international decision makers, marketers and PR professionals believe that these two types are closely linked, so they spend resources, time and effort in creating a positive media image." (Avraham and Ketter, 2008, pp. 19-20). The media image of a country is not synonymous with the construed image, although it may be responsible for the way it is formed. Within both concepts, there is an actual image along with other constructed or construed ones.

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