The role of digital tools in increasing stakeholder participation in the city branding

The aim of this paper is to explore the impact of digital technologies on the strategic city brand management process. In particular, it analyzes whether the digital tools are increasing internal stakeholders engagement in city branding practices or just substituting offline branding. The study aims to contribute to the understanding how the strategic city brand management components are affected by stakeholders’ engagement through digital technologies.

The application of branding strategies for places has become increasingly popular. This is illustrated by the progress of application of various rankings related to city brands such as the Anholt-GMI City Brands Index, the Saffron European City Barometer or the Digital City Index. Therewith more and more scholars are interested in this field of study and the advances in scholarly literature on the topic prove that the application of branding practices to cities, regions and countries is an „increasingly appealing topic for academic research” (Ashworth et al., 2015).

A recent trend that develops in place branding theory is the concept of participatory marketing and branding. In the literature of place branding more attention on this issue is focused by the following authors: S. Hanna and J. Rowley, R. Aitken and A. Campelo, M. Kavaratzis, J. Stubbs and G. Warnaby, Rainisto S., J.P. Houghton and A. Stevens, B. Merrilees, M. Kavaratzis and M. Hatch, S. Zenker and E. Braun. In their publications, the authors point out that the involvement of stakeholders has a central importance in the process of place brand building. The most holistic, integrative perspective on place brand management has been suggested by Hanna and Rowley-Strategic Place Brand Management Model (Hanna and Rowley, 2013). The authors have collected every component of place branding models proposed by other academics and compiled into one matrix, which allows looking on the process of brand building with different perspectives. This model significantly highlights relational aspects of branding and affirms the importance of stakeholder engagement in place brand management.

The main reason for engaging stakeholders in place branding emerges from different presumptions. One of the reasons originates from the standpoint of public management, where place branding is considered as a part of the governance strategy (Kavaratzis, 2012, Eshuis et al., 2014). In public management literature, governance refers to the interaction process between mutually dependent actors (citizen, private and public representatives) around the public policy issues (Mandell 2001; Klijn, 2008; Rhodes, 2012). The most important characteristic of governance is that public service delivery, strategies and policies are shaped and implemented in the networks of civil society. In order to enhance the quality of public services, the knowledge of civil actors and their involvement in decision making process is vital (Hartley 2005; Pasquier, et.al 2012). Within this concept, place branding is viewed as a component of public
management activity, where local authorities engage in relationships with citizens and in this way contribute to the participative, democratic form of cooperation (Houghton, & Stevens, 2011).

Considering that places are characterized by having various stakeholders, cities need to consider branding with respect of the management of numerous participants (Hanna and Rowley, 2013). The reason is that different stakeholder groups may have different perspectives and interest whereas the identification of their functional and psychological needs is vital (Merrilees, 2012). For this reason, city branding should be analyzed in the frame of relationship marketing directed at stakeholders.

The development of the Internet and digital technologies has been included in the place branding domain and made an impact on the place branding and management processes. According to some authors, most of the place images are functioning to a greater extent in the virtual world than in reality, because the majority of audience create the associations with places on the basis of word-of-mouth (opinions of other users, websites, social media, etc.; Govers, 2015). Over the last years, the growing role of digital technologies, such as social media, user-generated content, IoT, web 2.0 or web 3.0 enabled the city authorities to find new ways towards more open and inclusive management of place brands. Moreover, the city branding process has become more democratic, where the Internet is giving stakeholders equal opportunity to share and voice their opinion (Bayraktar, et.al 2016). In the marketing literature, significant attention of researchers was directed at the role of digital tools in engaging customers in the branding process (Gensler, et. al 2013; Hollebeek et.al, 2014, 2017). At the same time, the public management literature highlights the importance of online tools in increasing stakeholders’ engagement and participation in public management activities. Moreover, the Internet gave citizens the power to make impact on the process of decision-making (Davis 2010; Zheng 2017, Bolivar et.al 2019). Applying the above in place branding domain, the main purpose of this research is to answer the following research questions:

Q1. How is the Strategic Place Brand Management concept perceived by local authorities in different cities?
Q2. How do the city authorities influence the involvement of stakeholders in the city brand management process?
Q3. How do the digital tools change the relationships between local authorities and city stakeholders?
Q4. At what stages of city brand management is stakeholder participation supported by the digital tools?
The proposed research is based on two country examples—Georgia and Poland. Comparing the practices of a developed economy to the less developed one gives rich insights for developing implications for theory and practice. The research area in place branding experiences the lack of international comparative studies. Therefore, the presented research focuses on analyzing leading cities from two countries with different cultural, socio-political, and economic backgrounds. Despite this difference, both, Georgia and Poland showcase the similarities in transformation of public governance and establishment of strong city brands, with the aim of economic development.

In this paper the qualitative research method has been applied among the city officials. In the place branding research, most of the authors use qualitative methods too (Vuginer, 2017). Qualitative research is a useful way to study subjects and examine participants opinions in their natural environment and to interpret phenomena from the meanings, which people give them (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). The advantage of a qualitative method is that it tries to develop a complex picture of the problem, by identifying multiple perspectives, different factors involved in a situation and finally illustrating the whole picture (Gummesson, 2005). The semi-structured interview technique has been used in this study, in order to allow the interviewees to freely explain their viewpoints or particular interests, while enabling certain issues to be explored in greater depth, and in particular bringing out and resolving the apparent contradictions (Horton et. al, 2004).

For the study the city officials have been selected from 3-3 cities from Poland and Georgia, which are: Warsaw, Poznan, Wroclaw, Tbilisi, Kutaisi and Batumi. The partnerships of these cities have already lasted for years. The contacted participants were: first the individual(s) regarded as having the lead and direct responsibility for place branding (i.e. directors of city marketing or persons holding parallel posts). Secondly, persons from marketing offices/city promotion bureaus/economic cooperation bureaus, have been interviewed with use of the same interview scenario (2 persons in each city will be interviewed to obtain different views on the same topics). In total, 12 participants (6 from Poland, 6 from Georgian cities). For the purpose of analysis of interview transcripts, content analysis with MaxQDa software version PLUS has been applied.

The results of this study indicate the positive effects of using digital tools in increasing the stakeholder engagement and strengthening the longterm relations between city authorities and stakeholders. Moreover it has identified two groups of stakeholders - residents and business sector representatives-as the main groups, willing to establish long term relationships with the city governments. The findings revealed which components of strategic city brand management are affected by stakeholders involvement through
digital technologies. In this respect, Polish cities show more advanced results, where stakeholder participation via digital tools is applied within the brand conceptualization, communication and brand evaluation processes. In Georgia, stakeholders are involved via digital tools in the processes of communication and promotion of the place brands. The research identifies which digital tools are used at each participation stage for both stakeholder groups (residents and business) and how the participation in this channel is conducted.

Finally the study contributes to the place branding research concerning the understanding of the role of digital tools in increasing the effectiveness of strategic city brand management process. The practical implications of the research concern the improvement of the local authorities’ relations with internal stakeholders and enhancing the active involvement of stakeholders in the place branding practices.

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