

The role of sports in the face of changes in place branding - some reflections

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Referencia de este artículo

Florek, Magdalena (2024). The role of sports in the face of changes in place branding - some reflections. En: *adComunica. Revista Científica de Estrategias, Tendencias e Innovación en Comunicación*, n° 27. Castellón de la Plana: Departamento de Ciencias de la Comunicación de la Comunicación, 241-246.

The branding of places has been undergoing major changes in recent years, thus in the efforts of cities and countries to build a strong brand, the role of sports is changing, or at least it should be adjusted. On the one hand, these changes are due to events and trends in the external environment. On the other hand, they are attributed to the progressive reflection on the role and responsibility of the brand in the management and development of places.

Place branding seems to be a fairly recognized field in practice, while researchers are still looking for some common understandings, definitions, frameworks, etc. Suffice it to say, the number of publications on place and destination branding has

increased significantly lately (see e.g. Ma et al. 2019). However, like any other field, it needs some reflection and rethinking, so it could better serve the communities.

While an interdisciplinary field, in practice place branding derives mostly from general branding. Consequently, place branding is often treated as a tool to win against competitors; it is believed that a place needs to stand out among competing places, so place managers carefully compare themselves with other places and look for distinguishing features. Next, the focus is on image creation and communication. Lots has been said on how to create a place image, what tools to use to communicate the desired image, and how to talk about a place and its brand (oftentimes the louder the better). Another typical activity is creating attractive products (or offers) that could be of interest of potential target groups. An equally important role is attributed to promotional activities (for years, the greatest emphasis was on the logo and other visual elements as well as advertising campaigns). Luckily, we observe that place officials have learned that place branding should not be an exercise in promotion but rather, a strategic approach to guide a place brand in a long perspective. Finally, what characterizes today's branding, is a tendency to measure (if at all) the effectiveness of place branding solely by numbers, to corroborate a places' performance.

Paradoxically, the pandemic provided an opportunity to stop for a while and reflect if the current place branding does it right. In the midst of a global pandemic, it is important for research and practice to establish clearly two crucial potential contributions that place branding can make to places in the near future, namely: the support of place development in times of crisis, and the achievement of aims related to social and ecological sustainability (Kavaratzis and Florek, 2022). This awareness is growing, and it applies to many aspects of places (including sports).

However, we should not attribute the changes taking place to the pandemic alone; after all, we are living in very chaotic times, in which rapid change is a norm: migration, economic chaos, climate change, terrorism, epidemics, military conflicts, and even wars. These problems affect single places and by extension, especially sports events (e.g., the case of the postponed Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games).

This is well illustrated by the acronym VUCA which presents the qualities that make a situation or condition difficult to analyse, respond to or plan for. It was first used in 1987 in reference to Warren Bennis and Burt Nanus' leadership theory to describe or reflect on the Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity and Ambiguity of general conditions and situations.

To counteract each of the four elements of VUCA with a specific positive response, VUCA Prime behavioural leadership model was introduced in 2007 by Robert Johansen, a distinguished fellow at the Institute for the Future. The responses are as follows: Vision rises above Volatility, Understanding reduces Uncertainty, Clarity counters Complexity, Agility overcomes Ambiguity (di Bartolomeo, 2019).

Based on this concept, one can wonder how place branding can respond to a demanding environment, thereby indicating the direction place branding should take to support places.

It can be proposed (and this is the author's own view), that for Vision - clear vision of a place brand is needed, the «purpose» of a place brand should be clarified together with the brand values a place wants to communicate, live and share. For Understanding - authenticity, experience, contribution, communication, and qualitative measurement are needed. For Clarity - place branding need to be transparent and simplicity of brand management is required. Finally, Agility involves collaboration, co-creation, and new tools of implementation.

Particularly for sports to become a significant tool for supporting a place brand but also for benefiting from the place brand, it is extremely important to answer the following questions: what is the place brand's vision, what are the values a place brand represents, and how sports can fulfill and communicate them? By answering the questions: what do we believe in, what do we stand for, what values do we want to share with the world?, we determine how, for example, sports events can fulfill them. Moreover, it is necessary to know the contribution a city, region or country can make to the external world, what share value it can create.

A relevant illustration comes from New Zealand, as reported by Dubinsky (2023, p. 252): «Part of the message that prime minister Jacinda Ardern tried to send in her speech prior to the drawing of the Australia & New Zealand 2023 FIFA Women's World Cup was that New Zealand did not just want to use the event to show it is a progressive country and one of the best countries in the world, but also as one of the best countries *for the world*».

Another excellent example of this approach is the idea implemented by a small town of Salla, the coldest town in Finland's Lapland, located above the Arctic Circle. Already experiencing global warming, it is suffering the consequences of increasingly unpredictable weather and shorter winters. Salla has attracted the world's attention to the problem in a very original way, namely by proclaiming its bid to host the 2032 Summer Games. The purpose of the announcement wasn't actually a real bid, but rather a call to the world to help with the ongoing climate crisis. Salla followed all the steps and protocol in order to host the Summer Games, including creating a logo, a bid book, uniforms, promotional activities, naming a mascot and organizing a press conference to elaborate on the town's statement (marcommnews, 2021).

Cultivating the authenticity of a place and its brand is another issue worth emphasizing. As humans, travelers, sport fans, we are more and more searching for truth, and we want the promise to be fulfilled. Brand authenticity builds customer trust and, consequently, improves brand reputation (e.g. A Stackla report (2017) revealed that 86% of shoppers view authenticity as a huge factor in purchasing

decisions), which is very true for place brands. That's why branding a place with sports must be based on authentic features and emotions, not just those prepared for a specific event in mind. Machtiger and Prieto (2015) aptly summarized that we are a witness to a shift: from what brands say to what they do, from stating beliefs and values to living them consistently through actions, from what you read above brands to what you experience. This conclusion is extremely important for place brands with experience at their core. After all, visiting a place or attending an event, like a sport event, is all about experience. There is probably no better combination than a destination and sports coming together to produce experiences and sensations as well as to trigger emotions.

We also need to understand that a relevant measurement scheme is necessary to implement to make places not only resilient to future disasters and crises, but also more sustainable. Often the success or failure of place branding efforts and relevant tools (including those related to sports) is judged by numbers. As Skinner (2021) noticed, while it may be tempting for places to seek to meet politically driven growth targets in terms of visitor numbers, such strategic focus can lead to dissatisfaction for many groups, including the visitors themselves. We must therefore shift to metrics that are more human-centric, that take into account the social, cultural and natural environment. Among the drivers that contribute to operating responsibly are ethics and stakeholder cooperation (Skinner, 2021).

For the context of sports, it must be therefore also emphasized that to be agile we can't rely only on official, top-down brand management, we need to encourage all stakeholders to become a part of the process. Since a place brand is built from all moments of contact with a place, it is crucial to involve stakeholders as co-creators. For example, during the 2006 World Cup in Germany, the Federal Government launched a National Service and Friendliness Campaign accompanied by a slogan 'Germany rolls out the red carpet', targeting the service sector and the residents. The aim of the campaign was to highlight the strong commitment to service leading to nicer reception, stay and experience during the World Cup. All the members of the service value chain from airports, train stations, hotels, public transport to taxi services were trained in workshops offering advice on intercultural relations, tolerance, sensibility, hospitality, and foreign languages.

To summarize the points only briefly mentioned above, the challenges of today's world make it imperative that the role of place branding should change so that it has an impact on building a better world which, after all, is a collection of places. From a branding point of view, it's certainly important to match the various aspects of sports (e.g. a sporting event, famous athletes, sports infrastructure, etc.) and the place to which they relate, as this determines in detail how a place (and place brand) can benefit from sports and vice versa.

However, we certainly need to pay more attention to what sport does for the local community, how it contributes to common good, in what way it supports sustainability, and whether through sports one can manifest values that are important to the place community and worth sharing with the world. In this way, sports can actively and consciously contribute to making a place better for everyone, whether it is a place to live, work, study, invest, visit, or enjoy sports.

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