

Conference report, 2nd consumer research summit – place and identity: advancing theory and practice

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“Place” is acknowledged as a dynamic concept and an evolving product; however, it is also being progressively regarded as an entity in need of strategic direction and management. Place marketing and branding can provide the necessary strategic direction if there is a recognition that place marketing is a highly political process because of the various interests and aspirations of different stakeholder groups. In this, personal identities and their mutual influence on place identity become major considerations. This was the central idea of the “2nd Consumer Research Summit: Place and Identity” that took place in Chester, UK in June 2017. The aim of the Summit was to explore the multidisciplinary nature of place marketing and, especially, the role of personal and place identity in advancing the theory and practice of place marketing and place branding. As Sonya Hanna, one of the organisers of the Summit, put it:

the theming of the summit focused on the interplay between the role of place in influencing and/or cultivating its stakeholders’ own identity and, in turn, the influence of the place stakeholders on the identity of the place itself.

The complex nature of this relationship is something clearly worth studying as it can help us further our understanding of place and place management. Indeed, one can notice the recent recognition that studying identity helps us clarify the opportunities and, importantly, the limitations of place branding. Given that various publications and government and destination marketing organisations alike have evidenced this recognition, the motivation for the Summit was to foster a debate between urban planners, tourism representatives and related academics and practitioners around these topics.

As expected, the presentations covered a variety of topics, approaches and methods. The keynote address was given by Professor Cathy Parker. Her speech emphasised the interdisciplinarity of dealing with understanding place – she also used an interactive exercise to make the participants think about (and re-think) their own stand – and she discussed the fascinating mixture of past and present, materiality and activity, product and myth that makes places what they are. Her speech was an invitation to think beyond concepts and definitions and towards processes and practices that make places better. Professor Parker made us all confront our own responsibilities: to cross disciplinary borders and to reach out to practice.

It would be impossible to capture in this report the depth of all presentations and the quality of the arguments raised. It is still worth it, though, to briefly mention for the interested reader the topics handled. The presentation by Carol Zhang and Nigel Morgan discussed national myths and all sorts of symbols and discourses around them that crisscross the borders between heritage and nationalism. Charlie Mansfield discussed the



“way-tales” method of capturing what the local inhabitant is doing with the place. Simon Curtis focused on public art and the very interesting case of “The Link” in East London while Aled Singleton used De Certau’s idea of thick and thin space to discuss how people imagine place. In a voice-over presentation from Canada, Nicolas Papadopoulos examined in detail the place of “place” in product marketing and related areas. He expressed his frustration that the concept of place “lies in the periphery of many disciplines but is central to none” and went on to justify why this should not be the case giving several reasons why “place” is central for consumers, sellers and researchers alike. Mihalis Kavaratzis and Giuseppe Pedeliento discussed the structuration theory by Antony Giddens and demonstrated how it provides a useful tool to understand the dynamics of encounters with marketing material and the power relations that govern those. Justyna Andres-Morawska and Marta Herezniak examined the nature of place attachment and used their “Participation-Identity Loop” to show how participation leads to higher place attachment and stronger place identity. In his presentation, Efe Sevin provided a very interesting and critical appreciation of the role of social media in place branding and linked this discussion to the theory of place brand communication. While emphasising the current significance of social media engagement for place branding, he assessed that social media is not as novel as we seem to think and he argued against the doctrine “engage in social media or die as a brand”. Yassine El Bouchikhi also talked about social media in a place-related exploration of Russel Belk’s extended self and our attachment to possessions. Ai Ling Lai and Ming Lim presented their research on the polyrhythmic places we live in. They used Lefebvre’s Rhythmanalysis to explore the rhythms of dining establishments specifically looking at solo dinners and revealing how solo dining becomes an awkward – if not shameful – endeavour. Finally, Konstantinos Theodoridis, using the Greek crisis as his particular context, explored social media activity and consumption as identity construction in our “society of the spectacle”.

The usefulness of events like this is not to pin down ideas and offer general, collective conclusions. Rather, their real value lies precisely in the variety of approaches and points of view that participants are exposed to and in allowing individuals to learn and grow their own thinking in a multitude of ways. There is certainly a need for a forum for the exchange of ideas around the role of personal and place identity in the theory and practice of place marketing and for platforms for debates around place branding in general. One of the aims of the Chester Summit was to provide such a forum and this was certainly achieved. In a very pleasant atmosphere that allowed for ideas to be suggested, debated and challenged, the participants of the Summit had the chance to influence each other’s thinking around place, identity and branding. The beautiful city centre of Chester provided an ideal background for the discussions. The organisers (Sonya Hanna, Edward Shiu and Louise Hassan) deserve praise for the conception and organisation of this event. As the other participants confirmed, we will all be looking forward to the 3rd Summit.

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