

Confused branding? An exploratory study of place branding practices among place management professionals

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Abstract

Although the knowledge about place branding and place management is growing, there is a substantial gap in the understanding of place branding among professionals responsible for the management of town and city centres, including private-public partnership formats such as business improvement districts (BIDs). This exploratory study addresses this knowledge gap through in-depth interviews with key professionals in England, Wales, Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. The results suggest that the strategic potential of place branding is negatively affected by a focus on operational thinking, which hinders innovation towards more holistic approaches to place management. Further quantitative research is needed to elaborate on these findings across the UK, Ireland and other countries to enhance the understanding of the uses and interpretations of place branding among town and city managers.

Keywords: [P](#)lace branding; [P](#)lace management; [S](#)trategic planning; [T](#)own centre management; [B](#)usiness improvement districts; [R](#)etail

1.1 Introduction

1.1.1.1 Background

Branding is a construct increasingly being applied to geo-political entities at different levels, including retail districts, shopping centres, town centres, regions and nations. Research and practice in the branding of places has emerged from a plethora of associated disciplines. Scholars have drawn meaningful parallels between the branding of places and the branding of products and services ([Parkerson & Saunders, 2005](#)), destinations ([Pike, 2005](#)), corporate branding ([Hankinson, 2007](#)), tourism management ([Avraham & Ketter, 2008](#); [Dinnie, 2011](#)), urban regeneration ([Kokosalakis, Bagnall, Selby, & Burns, 2006](#); [Tallon, 2013](#)), public policy and governance ([Anholt, 2008](#); [Lucarelli & Berg, 2011](#)), urban planning ([Costaglioli & Van Assche, 2012](#)) and place marketing ([Dinnie, Melewar, Seidenfuss, & Musa, 2010](#); [Gertner, 2011](#); [Kavaratzis, 2004](#)).

Place branding as an emerging discipline has evolved considerably over the last two decades, particularly with regards to the way it communicates messages to different audiences ([Braun, Eshuis, & Klijn, 2014](#); [Zenker, Braun, & Petersen, 2017](#)). The increased marketing by governments and other bodies related to tourism, planning and city management has resulted in more sophisticated applications of branding and marketing, including social media ([Zhou & Wang, 2014](#)). Place marketing has evolved from a promotion-based approach to a more strategic and holistic view of the marketing of places ([Ashworth & Voogd, 1994](#); [Avraham, 2004](#); [Gnoth, 2002](#)), including the concept of place reputation ([Bell, 2016](#)), even if there is evidence that the fallout of the 2008 global financial crisis may have started a period of ‘soul searching’ in the place branding community (see [Eisenschitz, 2010](#)) in terms of the actual purpose of this strategic activity with further calls later to reassess its focus (see [Ashworth, 2011](#); [Ashworth, Kavaratzis, & Warnaby, 2015](#)), including doubts with regards to the effectiveness of place branding ([Medway, Swanson, Delpy Neirotti, Pasquinelli, & Zenker, 2015](#)).

As the concept of 'entrepreneurialism' emerged from the backdrop of a business-like approach to the management of places (Hubbard & Hall, 1998), the ensuing initial rise of city marketing and branding stemmed initially from corporate branding as people's experience of places began to be interpreted through the prism of perceptions and images (Kavaratzis, 2004) irrespective of whether their boundaries comprised those of a whole city or smaller business improvement zones (BIZ) or retail districts (Steel & Symes, 2005). More recently, scholars in place branding have posited that there are evolutionary parallels between place branding and place management (Boisen, Terlouw, & van Gorp, 2011; Kavaratzis & Ashworth, 2008; Kavaratzis, Warnaby, & Ashworth, 2015) worthy of further investigation, particularly if the management processes involved (e.g. brand management versus place management) are considered, even if it has become apparent that a considerable gap exists between academic discourse and practitioner engagement with place branding. These arguments build on earlier work by Stubbs, Warnaby, and Medway (2002) and Warnaby, Bennison, and Davies (2005), who proposed that place management requires marketing and branding strategies wherein the multi-dimensional interests of varied stakeholders can be fulfilled. Other scholars have developed this argument further by highlighting the need for more integrated area-based public-private sector partnerships that provide a more balanced approach to the management of places (Riviezzo, de Nisco, & Napolitano, 2009; Zhao, 2015).

This research uses these scholarly foundations and recent research on tourist destination managers by Zavattaro and Adams (2016) as well as Oliveira's (2016) exploration of links between place branding and spatial regional planning to explore the construct of place branding with a special focus on how professionals involved in the management of retail-led place management partnerships - including town centre management (TCM) schemes and business improvement districts (BIDs) - interpret its use in practice. The focus of this study on professionals involved with BIDs and TCM partnerships renders it a first of its kind in place branding.

1.2.1.2 Conceptual framework for research

The conceptual framework for this research (Figure 1) builds on stakeholder theory and place branding, including Tasci and Gartner's (2009) framework for the creation of strategic destination brands, Balakrishnan's (2009) framework for branding strategy for destinations, Hannah and Rowley's (2011) strategic place brand management model and Qu, Kim, and Im's (2011) destination branding and image model. It also connects these to recent work by Foroudi et al. (2016) linking place branding, place image and place reputation, as well as Oliveira's (2016) linking of place branding to strategic spatial planning.

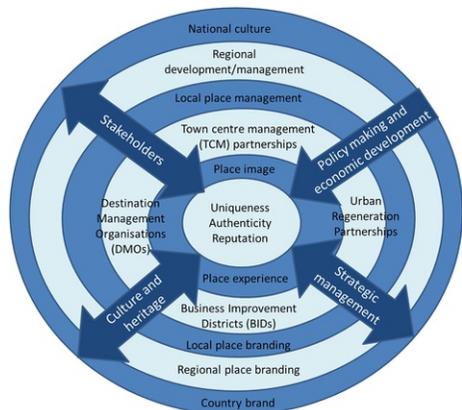


Figure 1. Fig. 1 Conceptual framework for research

alt-text: Fig. 1.

1.3.1.3 Research aim and objectives

The aim of this study was to determine perceptions of place branding as a concept among TCM and BID practitioners in England, Wales, Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. The specific research objectives were:

- a) To identify the role of place branding in the management of TCM schemes and BIDs.
- b) To examine the mechanisms used by place management professionals to implement place branding on the ground, including working with local stakeholders.
- c) To evaluate potential avenues for the future of place branding in TCM and BIDs.

2.2 Literature review

2.1.2.1 Place branding

Place branding has been defined from a wide array of perspectives along a spectrum that ranges conceptually from product identity to the very applicability of product branding techniques to places (Kavaratzis & Ashworth, 2006), including spatial interpretations of places, which include countries, regions and cities, among others (Ashworth et al., 2015; Chan & Marafa, 2013).

A meta-analysis of the place branding and place marketing literature over a 20-year period (Gertner, 2011) found that early work was dominated by dissent among academics on the applicability of branding to the hypernym 'place'. A similar lack of consensus existed with regards to (potential) parallels between the branding of places and products (Kotler & Gertner, 2002), especially whether marketing concepts used in services and products could be successfully applied at all to places (see Caldwell & Freire, 2004). However, a growing school of thought emerged in the 1990s for a steady state consensus (Hankinson, 2010) whereby services and product branding techniques should be investigated with regards to their applicability to places (Skinner, 2008). This historical evolution of thought was summarised by Hankinson (2010), as shown in Figure 2.

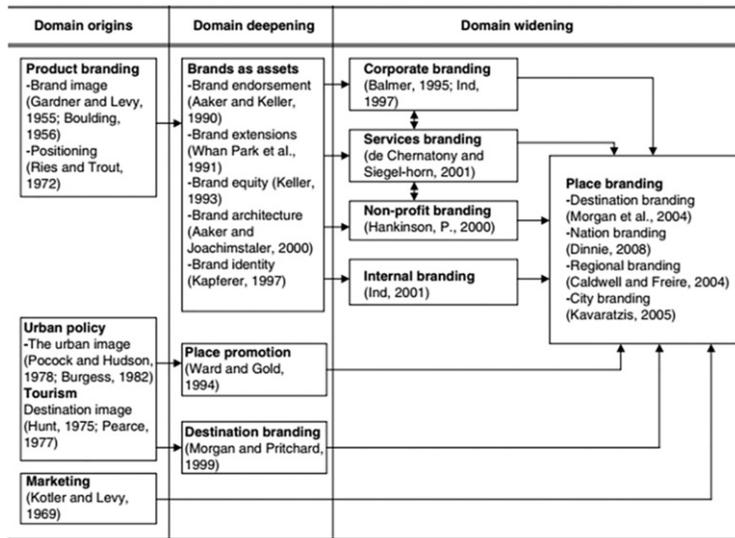


Figure 2: Fig. 2 Historical timeline of the evolution of place branding as a research discipline (Hankinson, 2010)

alt-text: Fig. 2.

One of the more holistic interpretations is that of Lucarelli and Berg (2011), who suggested interpreting place branding as a (relatively organic) process for the development and management of target audiences' perceptions of specific places with the sole objective of influencing their spatial behaviours and ultimately contributing to the development and sustainability of the place's distinct identity (Llinares, Page, & Llinares, 2013). Other scholars (Kavaratzis & Ashworth, 2008; Warnaby, 2009; Warnaby et al., 2005) argued that for marketing and branding strategies to be successful, places need to be managed actively to satisfy the multi-dimensional interests of varied stakeholder groups (Avraham & Ketter, 2008; Jackson, 2008). This issue of place management and its connection to place branding is explored next.

2.2.2.2 Place management

The ubiquitous growth of place branding and marketing activity suggests that geographic locations can and should be managed as actively as goods are (Gertner, 2011), regardless of whether places are interpreted as 'marketable commodities' (Kavaratzis & Ashworth, 2008) or as highly differentiable entities able to attract market segments with specific expectations (Hankinson, 2005) even if some scholars have argued that places are not generally 'produced' with explicit intentions in mind (Pryor & Grossbart, 2007). Moreover, consumption patterns for cities as destinations - often reliant on events and specific promotions (Rota & Salone, 2014) - can differ considerably to those of countries, which tend to have more stable and enduring destination images (Caldwell & Freire, 2004). Cities have inherent advantages over countries as destinations as a result of specific attributes that reflect local historical and cultural intricacies (Landry, 2008; Rabbiosi, 2015; Warnaby, 2009).

The management of places has been defined as "a coordinated, area-based, multi-stakeholder approach to improve locations, harnessing the skills, experiences and resources of those in the private, public and voluntary

sectors” Scaramanga (2012, p. 74). This concept is far from new and has evolved considerably over the last four decades from an initial focus on town centres as shopping destinations (Davies & Bennison, 1978) to a much more holistic view of the role of town and city centres (Whyatt, 2004).

The proliferation and evolution of place management schemes in the UK and elsewhere (Coca-Stefaniak, Parker, Quin, Rinaldi, & Byrom, 2009) over time has resulted in a number of different typologies including the BID – a rather contested (Lippert, 2012; Schaller & Modan, 2005; Steel & Symes, 2005) though rapidly growing format (Hoyt & Gopal-Agge, 2007; Ruffin, 2008) that relies on businesses in a selected area agreeing to pay an additional levy directed towards the amelioration of places (Peyroux, Pütz, & Glasze, 2012).

A growing number of practitioners and scholars (Kotler, Hamlin, Rein, & Haider, 2002; Murphy, Pritchard, & Smith, 2000; Trueman, Cook, & Cornelius, 2008) acknowledge that the branding aspect of place marketing is key to leveraging the tangible and intangible characteristics of places in order to attract investment, tourism and potential new residents (Page & Hardyman, 1996). Keller (1998) suggests that branding is the “natural starting point” for the marketing of places. Similarly, the importance of clear strategic marketing plans in effective city marketing-led place practice in place management is emphasized by De Elizagarate (2008), who argued that TCM as a concept in Spain has evolved from a mere promotional tool towards more complex strategic urban revitalisation for inward investment through effective city marketing and branding, exemplified by Bilbao’s ‘Guggenheim effect’ (Sevin, 2014).

Authors (see Muñoz Martinez, 2012; Olins, 2008) have posited the need to integrate place branding techniques in the formulation of policy related to places and their management by pointing out that place management professionals in Germany put greater emphasis on place branding strategies than their British counterparts, who have often had a tendency to focus instead on aspects of the retail competitiveness of town centres. There also appears to be growing consensus that stakeholders and particularly local residents (Braun, Kavaratzis, & Zenker, 2013) should be actively engaged in place making (Zenker & Rütter, 2014) and place management interventions (Gaggiotti, Cheng, & Yunak, 2008; Merrilees, Miller, & Herington, 2009; Vanolo, 2008), even if the attainment of stakeholder satisfaction and their degree of involvement remain contested issues (Anholt, 2008; De Elizagarate, 2008; Morgan, Pritchard, & Pride, 2003).

Overall, as Gaggiotti et al. (2008, p. 122) aptly argue, “a city brand strategy cannot be implemented by the city government acting alone”. Therefore, TCM schemes and BIDs hold a key role as facilitators of a more integrated approach to urban planning and management (Säynäjoki, Inkeri, Heinonen, & Junnila, 2014; Warnaby et al., 2005) that produces successful place brands. In view of this, they merit further discussion here.

2.3.2.3 Town centre management

TCM and associated concepts such as BIDs have attracted more attention from scholars over the last two decades (Forsberg, Medway, & Warnaby, 1999; Hoyt, 2005; Riviezzo et al., 2009; Ruffin, 2008; Warnaby, 2009; Wells, 1991). The Association of Town and City Management (ATCM) in the UK represents the interests of the sector as the largest association of its type in Europe and one of the largest in the world with a membership base in excess of 550. ATCM defines TCM as “a co-ordinated pro-active initiative designed to ensure that our town and city centres are desirable and attractive places. In nearly all instances the initiative is a partnership between the public and private sectors and brings together a wide-range of key interests” (ATCM, n.d.). TCM and its delivery have evolved considerably over the last three decades. The emergence of a professional body for the sector in the form of the Institute of Place Management has been a key catalyst in this process and became instrumental in bridging the gap between place branding and place management (Kavaratzis & Ashworth, 2008; Parker, 2008), even if further work remains to be done in terms of incorporating innovative international practice in place management into the professionalization of the sector (Ruffin, 2008).

Despite the parallels between place management and place branding and the importance of strategic place management to the sustainability and resilience of place branding initiatives, there appears to be a substantial gap in the understanding of the use and interpretation of place branding concepts by professionals responsible for the management of town centres in the UK and Ireland. This includes whether place branding is seen by these professionals as a merely operational tool or instead as a strategic approach capable of shaping the longer-term competitiveness of town and city centres. This research addresses the knowledge gap through field research involving in-depth interviews with key professionals including town centre managers, BID managers and consultants in England, Wales, Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland.

3.3 Methodology

3.1.3.1 Sampling and interviewee profile

A total of 15 interviews were carried out with professionals in TCM and BIDs. A profile of the interviewees is provided in Table 1.

Table 1: Table 1 Profile of interviewees.

alt-text: Table 1.

Interviewee no.	Level of responsibility	Current employer	Industry experience (years)	Area served

I-1	CEO	Place branding and event management consultancy	31	UK and overseas
I-2	CEO	Place branding and urban management consultancy	38	UK and overseas
I-3	Senior manager	Trade association	18	UK
I-4	CEO	Business Improvement District	18	West Midlands (England)
I-5	CEO	Business Improvement District	11	Southeast England
I-6	Senior manager	Local authority	10	London
I-7	Marketing and communication manager (CEO's spokesperson)	Business Improvement District	7	London
I-8	Executive director/director	Business Improvement District/DMO	28	West Midlands (England)
I-9	Executive director/director	Business Improvement District	5	East Anglia (England)
I-10	Director, marketing and communications	Destination Management Organisation (DMO)	19	Northern Ireland and UK
I-11	Managing director	Place branding consultancy	18	UK
I-12	Operations manager	Business Improvement District	7	Eastern Ireland
I-13	Director, corporate development	Business Improvement District	3	Eastern Ireland
I-14	CEO	Business Improvement District	10	Eastern Ireland
I-15	CEO	Town centre investments and retail planning	18	Wales and Southeast England

3.2.3.2 Interviewing procedures and questions

The focus of the research was on exploring interpretations and use of place branding by place management professionals in the UK and Ireland involved in TCM and BIDs. This was accomplished using in-depth, semi-structured interviews so as to encourage “the interviewee to respond freely within their own frame of reference” (Hankinson, 2009, p. 104), and allow the researchers to respond and clarify as needed. The interviewees were selected adopting snowball sampling, a type of non-probability procedure providing a comprehensive (though not generalizable) characterization of the process of place branding. The geographical coverage of this research deliberately left out Scotland on the basis of differences related to the legislation pertaining to BIDs in that part of the UK.

Interviewees were approached initially via an email, which outlined briefly the aims of the study and invited them to participate. Respondents agreeable to participating were then emailed a second time and sent an informed consent form, which outlined the objectives of the research and offered respondents anonymity in exchange for their participation.

3.3.3.3 Response coding process

While the semi-structured interviews were not based on a set of rigid pre-determined questions, the open-ended, discursive nature of the interviews allowed an iterative process of refinement, whereby lines of thought identified by earlier interviewees were taken up and presented to later interviewees. Table 2 provides the initial interview themes for the three research questions and Table 3 shows the final set of interview questions.

Table 2: Table 2 Research objectives and themes.

alt-text: Table 2.

Research objectives	Themes
a) To determine the role of place branding in the place development and management schemes.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Views of place branding. ■ Whether strategic or operational. ■ Method of application in TCMs/BIDs.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Independent implementation or with outside help.
<p>b) To examine to what extent the application of place branding is effective in developing and managing places.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Extent of TCMs/BIDs effectiveness ■ Extent of the effectiveness of place branding in TCMs/BIDs. ■ Methods of enhancing effectiveness. ■ Impact of political discontinuities on ongoing place branding activities.
<p>c) To evaluate potential avenues for the future of place branding in place making.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Difference place branding makes to TCMs/BIDs. ■ Future role of place branding. ■ How well embedded in policies of urban governance. ■ Responsibility in carrying out place branding.

Table 3. Interview questions.

alt-text: Table 3.

Place branding role (research objective 1)

- What do you think place branding is in your opinion?
- Do you consider place branding strategic to place development and place management?
- How is place branding carried out in your BID/TCM? (Strategically or operationally?)
- Do you think the place branding activities have to be carried out by consultants rather than using the internal expertise? If yes, why?

Effectiveness (research objective 2)

- To what extent do you think your BID/TCM has been effective so far?
- How effective do you think the application of Place Branding has been in your BID?

- How do you think the TCM/BID schemes can more effectively apply place branding?

- Is it needed?

- What are the effects of political discontinuities on ongoing place branding activities and how do TCM/BID managers mitigate such effects?

Evaluating the future (research objective 3)

- What difference do you think place branding makes to a place management and place development project (in terms of benefits to the place/people?)

- What role do you think place branding will play in managing and developing places in the future?

- How well is this scheme embedded in the local borough's policy of urban governance?

- Who will be carrying these developments and applying to place branding (whether strategically/operationally)?

- How do you see this working out operationally or strategically for your place?

The interview data set contained more than 70,000 transcribed words and these data were analysed as follows:

1. Combinations of both inductive and deductive approaches were followed, with the researchers generating meaning from the data collected. Using a bottom-up approach, all the interviews were sieved through with appropriate quotes and relevant points using open coding.
2. Axial coding was employed to classify similar themes together.
3. Themes were then grouped into three major themes/sets and sub-themes (Table 4) were also created for deeper analysis and understanding of the meanings.

Table 4. Example of sub-theme creation.

alt-text: Table 4.

Sub-theme	Description	Example quotes
Defining place branding	Developing a place identity or place DNA	"For me place branding is about creating a (...) concise brand message and story for an area" (I-3)
		"... place branding would be developing an identity for a location" (I-5)
Extending the definition of place branding	Business mix (combining business, history and culture to enhance place branding)	"... place branding would be developing an identity for a location (...) could be anything from the business mix to the public realm to the (...) the sort of heritage and history (...) of the place and that is then used to promote it, to position it viz. -a-viz. the locations". (I-9)

	Product branding (applying the conventional yardstick of branding/product branding)	“... place branding is no different, I suppose, from normal branding. You are just applying regulation, marketing and branding techniques to an area. I suppose you are treating the area like any product that you are trying to sell and you are looking to make the most of its positive attributes.” (I-6)
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- A review was conducted to tighten up the codes and to re-categorise the quotes if necessary, to provide a more coherent and complete framework. Descriptions were also developed for the codes, in order to ensure consistency.
- Main themes were compared and linked across the three themes to render a complete picture with final common themes for further analysis (see [Figure 3](#) for an example).



Figure 3. Example of theme creation.

alt-text: Fig. 3.

4.4 Results

4.1.4.1 Practitioner perceptions of place branding

Participants in the study revealed a rather heterogeneous set of interpretations of place branding as a concept as well as its role in place management. For instance, managers of some of London's largest BIDs tended to adopt a strategic approach to place branding and even formed sub-regional partnerships; while an operational perspective on place branding appeared to prevail elsewhere. In spite of these differences and potential north-south divide, respondents were unanimous in their support for the role of TCM and BID partnerships in unifying local stakeholders as part of the place branding process.

When asked to describe place branding using their own interpretation of the concept, respondents referred to issues of place identity ($n = 8$), competitiveness ($n = 6$), differentiation ($n = 6$), attractiveness ($n = 4$) and even, perhaps somewhat simplistically, as "... treating the area like any product that you are trying to sell" (I6) by applying product branding principles to it.

4.2.4.2 Place branding and culture and heritage

A majority of the participants ($n = 8$) concurred that culture and heritage should play a key and central role in the branding of places, even if their interpretation of the potential of place branding processes was often limited to competing with neighbouring places, as well as attracting investment and tourism to their area, which rather overlooks the potential of local heritage-based place branding processes to create community pride, contribute to social cohesion and enhance place attachment among residents (Zenker & Rütter, 2014). This rather unambitious approach to place branding processes was particularly evident for one participant, who pointed out that place branding processes are "often mistaken for (...) a nice logo and a slogan for the area" (I2). Moreover, some interviewees posited that place managers in the UK may be lagging behind colleagues overseas in their use (and perhaps also understanding) of place branding:

The whole place branding scene (...) is understood in the USA, it is understood in Australia, it is understood in Germany and most of mainland Europe (but) England or the UK is one of the few places that still struggle with it'. (I 1)

4.3.4.3 Place branding and BIDs/TCMs

The role of active management of places in the form of BIDs and/or TCM schemes was deemed by most interviewees ($n = 8$) to have a positive influence on the local economy. In this context, catalyst elements such as "galvanising local business support" ($n = 8$) or "being a voice for local businesses" ($n = 8$) in front of policy makers were quite prevalent among interviewees, though support mechanisms offered to local businesses in addressing challenges such as "keeping pace with the digital economy" ($n = 6$) and "place marketing and branding" ($n = 14$) were also mentioned.

4.4.4.4 Place branding and stakeholder relationships

The importance of stakeholder management was highlighted unanimously by participants ($n = 15$) as key in the place branding process:

"For me, place branding is about creating a concise brand message and story for an area with all the relevant stakeholders involved". (I 3)

However, the process of engaging stakeholders in the branding of places proved to be a contentious issue as a variety of approaches emerged among TCMs and BID managers ranging from an almost unilateral management approach (I9) to one where branding responsibilities were split among stakeholders by geographical area and target audience (I5), as illustrated by the quotes below:

"We engage with our stakeholders in an informal way but they don't sign things off or give us permission to do things. So we very much run the branding in the way we want to." (I9)

"The BID has actually taken a strategic decision to promote [the] city to those people living half an hour or one hour from the city itself. So we have split the place branding role for the city. We don't promote the Cathedral, the Castle or indeed the city itself to the wider tourist visitor. We are trying to engage with the people who live within an hour from the city." (I5)

There were also those who argued that highly focused approaches such as the ones outlined above may actually result in missed strategic opportunities for a more holistic branding of town and city centres:

"I think they need to work in far greater levels of partnership. (some) Business Improvement Districts (some) focus far too much on their members' interests over the wider interests of the areas in which they sit, which (some) ultimately means that they are missing on opportunities for joint marketing of the city." (I6)

5.5 Discussion and Conclusions

Building resilient place brands is a long term commitment (Kavaratzis & Ashworth, 2008) that needs to accommodate over time to the evolution of places as living entities (Trueman et al., 2008) and leverage the tangible and intangible traits of place (Kotler et al., 2002).

Ashworth, and Kavaratzis (2010, p. 7) argue that "There are several fundamental questions that remain unanswered" when it comes to place branding's strategic planning perspective and question whether the paradigm has "a strategic orientation or a tactical practice". In addition, the main argument of confused branding related to industry practitioners in regions outlined earlier, seem to find congruity with Ashworth and Kavaratzis who convincingly corroborate that "the non-geographical thinking of many commentators and practitioners who work in the field has led to confusion in terms of the social and spatial implications of place branding" (ibid).

Despite the confounded perception of place branding by industry practitioners, there was a unanimous agreement with regards to the strategic role of place branding and the need for TCM and BID practitioners to be more strategic in their outlook. There were concerns raised by some interviewees ($n = 5$) who argued that rather than using it as a strategic planning tool, place branding was being envisaged as a "housekeeping implement", resulting in BIDs and TCMs coming under growing pressures to deliver at operational and janitorial levels (e.g. street cleaning). Furthermore, the new fiscal regime affecting local authorities and dwindling resources, which may only result in a further widening of the gap between some of the very successful (and strategic) London-based BIDs and their counterparts elsewhere, may increasingly focus on specific place marketing and promotion activities instead without a wider place branding strategy in place to address regional and national dimensions of the place's brand as well as its implications for the area's uniqueness, authenticity and reputation, as outlined in the conceptual framework for this study (Figure 1).

The results of this study show that place branding remains a rather heterogeneous concept among town and city management practitioners in the UK, with a large variety of interpretations of this concept emerging from the responses of participants in this study. The parallels mentioned by some interview respondents between place branding and corporate branding, subject to a somewhat contested analogy of product and place (Warnaby & Medway, 2013), would appear to echo Anholt's (2008, p. 2) view that "places have images just as products and corporations have images", and that "places depend to a similar extent on the power and appeal of those images for their progress and prosperity."

Drawing from the above premise, it was not surprising to find that the majority of interviewees appeared to have a dependency on consultants with regards to support for the place branding process. This also appears to echo similar findings by Blain, Levy, and Ritchie (2005) in the spheres of destination management organisations (DMOs) and convention visitor bureaus (CVBs), where branding was often limited to aspects of logo design. In spite of this, there was unanimous agreement among the town and city management professionals interviewed that place branding should be fundamentally about creating places where people want to be, which mirrors the study's conceptual framework (Figure 1) in as much as place experiences are intimately linked with place images as well as a sense of uniqueness and authenticity.

A number of the study's participants expressed concerns about the challenges of the digital age, including concepts such as smart cities and smart destinations (Belanche, Casaló, & Orús, 2016; Boes, Buhalis, & Inversini,

2016; Neirotti, De Marco, Cagliano, Mangano, & Scorrano, 2014; Vanolo, 2014), which very few town and city centres to date have considered from a place branding perspective in spite of their growing impacts on the authenticity and uniqueness of destinations around the world (Zhou & Wang, 2014).

On a parallel front, it could be argued that a new paradigm for the competitive advantage of town and city centres could be delivered by the co-creation of brands, something rather established in the corporate sector and increasingly evident in the marketing and branding of places (Kavaratzis & Kalandides, 2015), with some of the latest thinking among scholars advocating 'co-opetition' (Govers, 2015) and collaborative planning with a common strategic vision (Healey, 2003). All this, of course, entails a more proactive approach to stakeholder engagement in the branding process (Kavaratzis, Braun, & Zenker, 2010) as well as a more multi-dimensional view of places, as shown in this study's conceptual framework (Figure 1).

Furthermore, the operational aspects of place branding alluded to by participants in this study and particularly their more janitorial elements, including place safety and cleanliness would appear to be reflections of a reactive approach to the management of places. This approach may have been inadvertently encouraged in part by the more holistic thought elements of place branding, which see brands as sophisticated mechanisms to represent complexity (Olins, 2008), an art rather than a science (Landry, 2008) or even places themselves as "too complex to include in branding discussions since they have too many stakeholders and too little management control" (Morgan et al., 2003).

Various academics and practitioners have repeatedly admitted that place branding is not being fully applied in strategic planning. Conversely, according to Oliveira (2016), spatial planning strategies can act as a catalyst in place branding interventions. This underpins our premise of place branding having a knitted affiliation with strategic planning with the involvement of local actors, citizens, policymakers and organisations.

6.6 Research limitations and future research needs

The exploratory qualitative nature of this study and its modest sample size inevitably render its findings difficult to generalise. In spite of this, the findings of the study offer insights into the use and perception of place branding by professionals involved in the management of town centre partnerships and business improvement districts across the UK and Ireland, with the exception of Scotland. Further (possibly quantitative) research should address the potential generalisability of these results across the UK. Furthermore, this study raises the need to improve our understanding of how place branding is understood and implemented by place management professionals in different parts of the world. This type of international comparative research is still in its infancy in place branding. Moreover, given rising levels of scrutiny and critique by scholars with regards to the role of place branding and as BIDs begin to enter the visitor economy arena (Chaperon, Coca-Stefaniak, & Kennell, 2016), it would be desirable for these debates to be informed not only by conceptual thinking but also by research evidence gathered internationally on how place branding is understood and used by professionals in differing typologies of place management ranging from the management of business/retail districts to smart city pilot zones, downtowns, town centres and tourism destinations, to mention but a few. This would not only contribute to our current understanding of place branding but, crucially, could serve as an invaluable facilitator for knowledge exchange among practitioners and policy makers, particularly if the analysis were to result in a comprehensive international framework aimed at supporting key decision makers to identify innovation (local as well as international) in place branding, which could encapsulate different practice-based models and case studies in a similar way to how earlier research has achieved this for place management practice across Europe (e.g. Coca-Stefaniak et al., 2009) or, more recently, in the UK (e.g. Coca-Stefaniak, 2013).

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Highlights

- This exploratory study is the first to address a substantial gap in the understanding of place branding among professionals responsible for the management of town and city centres in England, Wales, Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland
- Field research was done with professionals in place management, including town centre management partnerships and business improvement districts (BIDs).
- The results of the study suggest that the strategic potential of place branding is negatively affected by a focus on operational thinking, which hinders innovation towards more holistic approaches to place management.

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The research suggests that the strategic potential of place branding is hindered by a generalised focus on operational thinking

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