

THE PLACE AS A BRAND. THEORY AND PRACTISE OF THE PLACE BRANDING

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Abstract

Research purpose. The purpose of the research project was to evaluate the status of place branding as a scientific discipline and to check whether this concept has been concretised during exploration and articulation. An additional objective was to check the theoretical status of place brands.

Design / Methodology / Approach. The study used an approach based on the analysis of 'place brand' models developed in the literature since models are central to the scientific procedure. These models were then confronted with the empirical observations of the authors using the Flexible Pattern Matching (FPM) method.

Findings. A consulting and practical approach is noticeable, especially in the ever-new 'process models' (how to create and manage 'place brand'); moreover, these models are scientifically insignificant and practically unworkable. Descriptive models (what a 'place/territorial brand' is) do not reveal signs of concretisation. There is undoubtedly a phenomenon of 'forcing' empirical data.

Originality / Value / Practical implications. Based on the analyses done, it can be concluded that none of the examined models meets the requirements of lawlike generalisations. In the practice of place branding, carried out by territorial units, the only common element is the usage of the name and logo of the place. It can also be argued that the basic concept of 'place brand' is poorly defined. The research method used (FTM) has not been applied in the analysis of place brands so far; however, the examination done in this article proves its usefulness.

Keywords: Place branding; Place branding model; Place marketing; Flexible pattern matching

JEL codes: B40; M30; H70; Z18

Introduction

The starting points for the presented considerations were the following comments from recognised experts.

- “Knowledge is 'scientific' if it is impartial, systematic, and more complete and accurate than 'popular' knowledge at the time” (Machlup, 1956, p. 163);
- The scientific method is described as a procedure with clearly separated two phases: discovery and justification (in marketing theory, see, e.g., Hunt, 2015, p. 25). However, as Haack (1997) states, “but the dichotomy is too crude. A better picture would include something like an initial phase in which an inquirer forms a vague idea, and subsequent phases of exploration, articulation, testing, modification, and presentation” (p. 502);
- Hunt (2015) also claims that marketing should have a theoretical basis, perceiving marketing only as a practical discipline focused on advice, applications, and consulting, which is pernicious, leads to the marginalisation of the discipline in academia and results in its stagnation (Hunt, 2015);

Place brand as a concept and place branding as a process which allows building a brand of the place became important due to the competition in the global world going along the marketisation policies practised by local and regional governments (Anholt, 2007). The brand of a place has its market value, which is built and later developed to attract foreign investments, encourage tourists to visit or increase the attractiveness of the place of residence. The place brand and its promotion are tools used in the socioeconomic development of a given local/regional/country government. For this reason, this approach is used in practice and in consulting activities. However, it should be emphasised that the place brand does not mean the market value defined in the price because the market value of a brand consists not only of its tangible and measurable resources. When it comes to the value of the place, the intangible dimension of the place, which is a logo, an image, a reputation, and a timeless and inalienable value, should be noticed. This means that the place brand performs marketing functions, and the representatives of this view refer to many scientific disciplines, finding justification for their considerations. To sum up, the brand of a place is a concept resulting from marketing activities undertaken by city managers; therefore, it must demonstrate the specificity of a place in a material, visual, or a discursive way to attract attention and distinguish it from others (Govers & Go, 2009).

The above assumptions lead to the question: is it possible to indicate a model of a place brand that allows it to be adapted to a specific place (city, region, country)? What could be the sources of such a model, theoretical or practical? Normative or descriptive? Such questions influenced the authors' decision to collect and study the place brand models presented in the literature, to answer further questions arising from the literature reviews:

1. Is 'place branding' a scientific discipline?
2. Has the initial 'vague idea' (Haack, 1997)* of the 'place brand' become more concrete during exploration and articulation?
3. What is the theoretical status of the term 'place brands'?

**Haack describes the 'vague idea' as an initial phase of scientific inquiry (Haack 1997, p. 502). Hunt (2015) writes, "many, if not most, major scientific discoveries are flashes of perceptual insight and are not the result of following some rigorously prescribed procedure" (p. 25). Such discoveries, perceptual insights, and vague ideas are later, in scientific procedure, justified or rejected.*

In the presented study, authors applied an approach based on the examination of place brand models discussed in the literature on the subject because "models are a central necessity of scientific procedure" (Rosenblueth & Wiener, 1945, p. 316). In scientific consideration, a model is a representation of an idea, an object, a process, or a system that is used to describe and explain phenomena that cannot be described directly. It should also be added that theoretical models are crucial for conducting research as well as for communicating the results.

The purpose of the paper is neither clarification of major concepts (e.g., place marketing vs place branding vs place promotion vs public diplomacy) nor the description of the history of the discipline; however, the authors accept three theses to be widely shared in the literature on the subject:

- Place marketing is chronologically the most recent extension of the field of marketing studies (Kotler, 2005);
- The conversion in terminology from 'place marketing' to 'place branding' occurred around 2000 (Lucarelli & Berg, 2011);
- The relationship between these terms is disputed and treated differently in the literature (Skinner, 2021; Vanolo, 2017).

Literature studies of research and consideration of the place brand concept allowed identifying a research gap, which is the lack of practical analysis of the developed models. Place branding is derived from the practice of territorial marketing used by local authorities as part of new public management, taking into account the achievements of business practice in the practice of place management. However, numerous and, at the same time, more and more complex models of the place brand make them exclusively theoretical and move away from the possibility of practical use (Green et al., 2016). Therefore, the authors tried to collect models, analyse them, and formulate conclusions.

In summary, it can be stressed that the very appearance of the term 'place branding' became an impulse to conceptualise this notion and to build theoretical models. The number and variety of models found in the literature on the subject indicate compliance with Haack's thesis, which says that attempts are made to concretise the initial vague idea.

Literature review

Despite the relatively short history of the discipline, the number of studies, articles, and books devoted to place branding is significant. As a result, there are also relatively large numbers of studies devoted to the analysis of the literature on this issue. The most recent and extensive examination is included in the article by Renaud Vuignier (Vuignier, 2017), in which 1,172 papers in this field were analysed, and in the article by Ma et al. (2019) in which 2,665 articles and reviews were analysed. It should be noted that relatively little attention was paid by the authors to the models of 'place / territorial brands' proposed in the studied literature, except for the considerations made by Kavaratzis (2005), Gertner (2011a) and Kumar and Panda (2019). It is important that the authors of the reviews point out that the discussed articles (Gertner, 2011b, p. 101) 'do not advance testable models or hypotheses' or that future studies could develop an integrated model in the context of nation branding (Hao et al., 2021).

The conclusions drawn from the review articles are not entirely consistent. For example, Gertner (Gertner, 2011b) states that out of 212 articles examined, only 13 contain 'testable hypotheses or models' (p. 95). In a more recent review article, Kumar and Panda (2019) mention 188 articles, and they list 20 models but only 5 of them have been empirically tested. The authors also add that the only construct common to these models is 'brand communication'. However, even this statement has been questioned. Mohamed Berrada, before developing his 'Holistic Place Branding Model', analysed 30 models from the literature on the subject and found that only 21 of them contained the 'brand communication (s)' construct (Berrada, 2018). The weaknesses of theoretical models were noted by Lucarelli & Berg (2011). Those authors point out that there is a lack of a coherent theoretical basis since at least three different approaches are used to create place brand(ing) models: "traditional branding, service marketing, and multi-attribute consumers' attitudes and perceptions" (Lucarelli & Berg, 2011, p. 20).

After studying the cited review articles, the following trends emerge, which are important for further analyses:

1. 'Borrowing' models from other fields of science (Kasapi & Cela, 2017; Lucarelli & Brorström, 2013)
2. Proliferation of models (Adeyinka-Ojo & Nair, 2016);
3. Complexity and multidimensionality of the constructs used (Balakrishnan, 2009; Berrada, 2018).

As literature reviews on the subject demonstrate, it can be concluded that at least several dozen models have appeared in 'place branding'. These models have a rather weak empirical basis because the research if referenced, is carried out using different methods, at different places, based on diverse research samples and analysing different data. All of them make the models inconsistent and complicated. This multiplicity and diversity led to the development of a model of models by Shahabadi et al. (2019), which is based on only nine previously created proposals, and a construct proposed by the authors consists of more than 40 variables. In summary, the reviews of the literature on place branding as a scientific discipline reveal an inability to explain the differences and inconsistencies in the presented models, which justifies a more thorough analysis of this topic.

Research Methodology

The 'Flexible Pattern Matching Method' (FPMM) (Bouncken, Qiu, Sinkovics, et al., 2021; Sinkovics, 2018; Trochim, 1989) was used to analyse models existing in the literature guided by the following premises:

- the method can enhance the "internal validity" and "reliability" of the research constructs used;

- it allows readers to follow the research process;
- it provides a theoretical framework for the empirical discoveries made;
- it allows for the effective formulation of analytical categories;
- it is useful in comparative analyses of 'case studies', which is essential in the context of 'place branding' because, as indicated by Vuignier, 36% of the text corpus is single case studies (Vuignier, 2017, p. 465).

This method is, therefore, particularly beneficial when the analyst has a large number of theoretical deliberations on the one hand and a large number of descriptive studies on the other, while the theory is inconsistent and unsubstantiated. The articles cited disclose that researchers studying place branding issues deal with such a situation. As Oguztimur and Akturan (2016) write, “methodologically, most of the studies are based on secondary sources or convenience samples and do not propose testable models or hypotheses” (p. 369).

According to the quoted literature, one may notice that a 'pattern matching' method is a recognised research mode in business, organisational and management studies. However, it has not been used so far in 'place branding' analyses. As Czakon and Glinka conclude, FPM is particularly useful when a given field of knowledge is rich in numerous and inconsistent theoretical approaches and models (Czakon & Glinka, 2021), and the interaction between the observational and theoretical realms remains unclear (Bouncken, Qiu, & Sendra Garcia, 2021).

There are three research approaches in the 'pattern matching' technique: (1) full pattern matching, (2) partial pattern matching, and (3) flexible pattern matching (FPM). FPM, as systematically categorised by Sinkovics (2018), is an iterative process harmonising theoretical constructs, patterns, and assumptions presented in the literature on the subject and observed patterns emerging from observed empirical data. As Trochim writes (Trochim, 1989), “we should assess the link or match between the theoretical and observed patterns” (p. 365). The research procedure is presented in Fig.1.

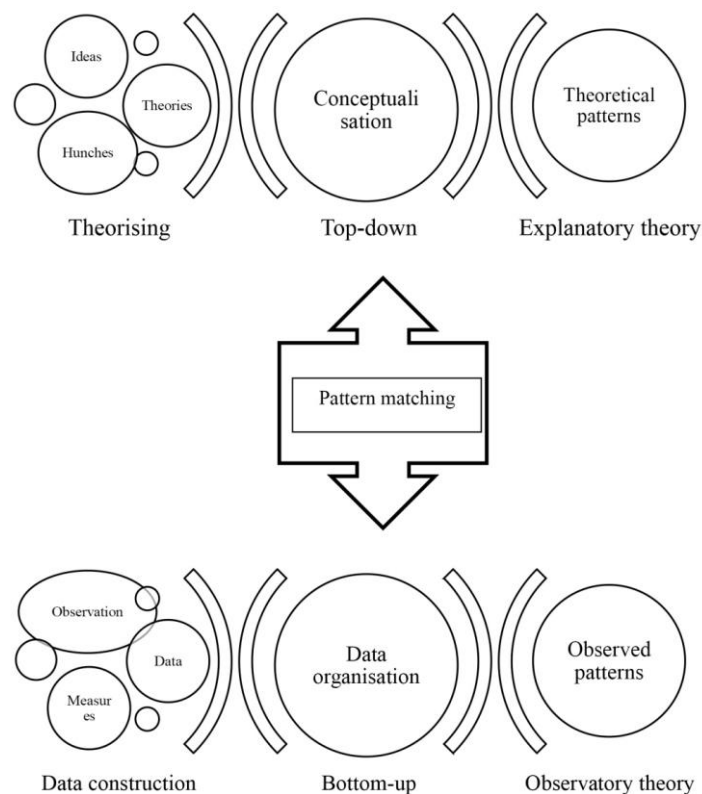


Fig. 1. Flexible Pattern Matching Source: adopted from (Sinkovics, 2018; Trochim, 1989)

According to the Flexible Pattern Matching model, the study was conducted in the following stages:

1. The theoretical perspectives found in the 'place branding' models have been identified. For this purpose, the following databases were used: EBSCO, Google Scholar, and Web of Science. Keywords searched for were as follows: 'place brand/branding' and/or 'territorial brand/branding' plus 'model(s) and/or 'modelling'. The time frame was set for the years 2002-2022. The designated time range resulted from the two variables: (1) the terminology change from 'place marketing' to 'place branding', which took place at the beginning of the 21st century, and (2) the emergence of the first model (Cai, 2002), which is considered universal in the literature, although originally developed for 'rural destinations' (Adeyinka-Ojo & Nair, 2016). Preliminary 193 articles were identified.
2. The models were also identified in sections devoted to the topic as 'literature review' or 'state of the art'. Finally, 44 articles, books, and chapters in multiauthored books that offered models of place brands were recognised. Additionally, three review articles dedicated to place branding models were acknowledged. In these three articles, the authors proposed their own solutions based on a review of previously developed models. These papers will be discussed separately.
3. The third stage of the examination divided the recognised models according to criteria: (see Table 1) (1) model source with publication date; (2) empirical basis - conceptual model, case study, other methods, such as surveys, multiple cases, combination of data gathering methods; (3) model type: process - PB, descriptive - TRBrand, composite; (4) whether the model was subsequently revised/modified/developed by the author, which meets the requirement of clarification (Haack, 1997); (5) whether the model refers to a known school of research, method, or theory coming from others disciplines as marketing and branding, due to the widely documented multidisciplinary nature of place branding (Vuignier, 2017). In Table 1, the acronym HST (Humanities, Social Sciences and Theology) is applied.
4. In the final step, theoretical data were compared with empirical data. For this purpose, reference was made to the authors' own research project, conducted since 2011 and focused on various aspects of the construction, maintenance and modification of territorial brands in Poland. (Adamus-Matuszynska & Dzik, 2017). The authors used various analytical methods to conceptualise the obtained data; however, the main method used was verbal-visual content analysis (Rose, 2016). Furthermore, during the project, the authors contacted more than 300 Local Government Units (LGU) in Poland, verifying the information obtained through telephone, video and personal interviews. A supplementary source of information was the consulting practice of the authors; in total, they participated in about 50 projects in the field of territorial marketing, including international projects. This allowed 'pattern matching' in the FPM model and the assessment of whether there is a link or a match between theoretical models and empirical data.

Table 1. Models analysed (Source: the authors' own research)

	Date and source	Empirical basis			Model Type				
	Proposed model	Conce- ptual	Case study	Other	PB	TRBrand	Comp.	Dev./Rev.	HST ref.
1	(Cai, 2002), modified (Cai, 2009)		X				X	X	
2	(Anholt, 2002)			X		X		X	
3	(Kavaratzis, 2004)	X				X		X	
4	(Hankinson, 2004)	X			X			X	
5	(Laws & Scott, 2004)	X			X				
6	(Azevedo, 2005)	X			X			X	
7	(Kavaratzis & Ashworth, 2005)	X				X			

8	(Trueman & Cornelius, 2006)		X			X			X
9	(Baker, 2007)			X			X	X	
10	(Gnoth, 2007)	X			X				
11	(Dinnie, 2008)			X		X			X
12	(Gaggiotti et al., 2008)		X		X				
13	(Konecnik & Go, 2008)		X			X		X	
14	(Moilanen & Seppo, 2009)			X	X			X	
15	(Balakrishnan, 2009)			X	X				
16	(Govers et al., 2007)			X	X			X	
17	(Kavaratzis, 2009) II	X					X		
18	(Hudson & Ritchie, 2009)		X		X				
19	(Hankinson, 2010) II	X				X			
20	(Qian, 2010)*	X				X			
21	(Zenker & Braun, 2010)	X			X				
22.	(Hanna & Rowley, 2011)	X			X		X		
23	(Aitken & Campelo, 2011)		X		X				
24	(Lang, 2011)	X			X				
25	(Balakrishnan & Kerr, 2013)		X		X				
26	(Kavaratzis & Hatch, 2013) III	X					X	X	X
27	(Cleave, 2014)			X		X			X
28	(Buhmann & Ingenhoff, 2015)	X				X			X
29	(Arabzadeh & Aghaeian, 2015)		X		X				
30	(Bisani & Choi, 2016)			X		X			X
31	(Foroudi et al., 2016)			X	X				
32	(Dinnie, 2016) II			X			X	X	
33	(Hudson et al., 2017)		X		X				
34	(Uonaki et al., 2018)		X			X			
35	(Ageeva & Foroudi, 2019)			X		X			
36	(Pawlak & Hajduk, 2019)		X		X				X
37	(Shahabadi et al., 2020)		X				X		X
38	(Ojo, 2020)			X		X			
39	(Lucarelli & Cassel, 2020)			X	X				X
40	(Sang, 2021)		X			X			X
41	(Kvaratzis & Hatch, 2021)		X		X				

42	(Herezniak & Anders-Morawska, 2021)	X			X				X
43	(Nursanty, 2021)		X		X				
44	(Jain et al., 2022)		X				X		X
	Total	15	16	13	22	14	8	11	12

*Original source is hardly available. Comprehensive review and graphic presentation in (Berrada, 2018; Bicakci & Zeynep, 2017)

Research Results

Research confirms previous findings in literature reviews that models are built mainly on the basis of case studies (Vuignier, 2017), which are unequally selected by researchers (Lu et al., 2022), and there is a lack of coherent and explicit theoretical base (Hao et al., 2021). Some models were empirically tested; No. 1 in (Ruzzier & de Chernatony, 2013), No. 6 in (Petrea et al., 2013); No. 22 in (Ranasinghe et al., 2017); No. 26 in (Walters & Insch, 2018) and No. 32 in (Warren & Dinnie, 2017). However, it is evident that random factors such as physical proximity to the researcher influence the selection of the analysed cases (Lu et al., 2022). Without a doubt, the "data forcing", i.e. fitting empirical data to a previously generated model, is confirmed in the analysis (Kelle, 2005). The conclusions coming from the presented research suggest that the examined models force empirical data, i.e., research procedures are conducted in such a way that the data are adjusted to the previously developed model. This is a methodological error (Konecki, 2009, pp. XV - XVI)

In three articles (Balakrishnan, 2009; Berrada, 2018; Shahabadi et al., 2019), an attempt to create a holistic and comprehensive 'model of models' was completed.

The comparison of models shows that the only shared component found in most of them is 'brand communications' (Shahabadi et al. (2019) model, it is 'expression'). The authors have been examining the activities (practices) of Polish local governments since 2011 and can state beyond all doubt that even this common component in the analysed models can be questioned. In the practice of Polish place branding, carried out by territorial units, the only common element is the usage of the name and logo of the place (Adamus-Matuszynska & Dzik, 2020).

Process models [PB], according to the terminology of De Almeida and Cardoso (2022), are scientifically worthless because they do not add new knowledge, do not reorganise existing knowledge, and do not question existing knowledge. Their practical (advisory) value is also very limited, if not non-existent. The explanation for this phenomenon stems from the facts that firstly (Kong, 2012), "similarities can be observed among the different frameworks" (p. 88); secondly, the branding procedures have been known for decades, but because they were created outside the place branding, mainly in the graphic design theory and practice (Chua & Illicic, 2007; Mollerup, 2013; Spies & Wenger, 2020; Wheeler, 2018), these procedures are neither known nor cited in the literature on place branding. This is an unambiguous example of the "silo mentality" described by Vuignier (2017). In place branding, it is implicitly or explicitly assumed that a territorial brand (TRBrand) is a multielement and multidimensional construct, i.e., the so-called component model - CM (De Almeida & Cardoso, 2022) widely accepted in the literature on the subject. However, in scholarship, this model is challenged because there is: no 'cogent underpinning theory' (Patterson, 1999), no analytical definition of a brand (Manning, 2010), the nomenclature is considered confusing or dysfunctional (Gaski, 2020), and the model is considered 'opaque and unwieldy' (Avis & Henderson, 2022, p. 351). Avis and Henderson posit that branding should return to the basic 'Label and Association Model' (LAM).

In the next step of the research procedure, a comparison of the models analysed with empirical data obtained during field research of the Polish LGU's place branding processes was made. In this article, there is no space to discuss all the phenomena found absent in the recognised models. However, the authors mentioned the most important examples questioning the processes and components present in the mentioned literature. Examples of inconsistency between models and practice have been confirmed in empirical studies of Polish local governments, which are as follows.

1. Funds. In the analysed models, it is assumed that funding for branding activities is provided and stable, while in Poland's case, it is a fundamental challenge. (e.g., Mazowsze region), An important factor is project financing, especially from EU projects. In the Polish literature on the subject, this issue was noticed already in 2012 (Zdon-Korzeniowska, 2012).
2. Organic development. There is no formalised process of creation and implementation of a place brand, and as a result, there are chaotic interactions between the administration, residents, and local businesses (e.g., the city of Tarnowskie Góry).
3. Rejection of the brand by the local community after its implementation (the city of Olkusz).
4. 'Debranding', which means that the place brand can be repealed while the place itself still exists. This phenomenon does not occur in commercial branding (for example, in Gorzów and Nowy Sącz, city brand projects were officially closed by resolutions of the City Councils).

In summary, each component existing in the examined theoretical models was disproved or not used in actual practice. It seems that the brand of the place has become a victim of the race to create more and more new models. One can get the impression that in the discipline, only the one who presents his/her model matters, regardless of whether it makes any sense. The authors of place brand models rarely empirically verified them, as well as references to the recognised theories outside of marketing and branding are rare and inconclusive.

Conclusions

In conclusion, the answers to the three questions in the Introduction to this article are as follows:

1. Is 'place branding' a scientific discipline?

Even if we accept the cited definition of Machlup (1956), it can be said that place branding does not go too far beyond common sense findings and does not have the value of lawlike generalisations. Assume more formal demarcation criteria between science and pseudoscience, such as those formulated by Paul Thagard, who defines pseudoscience using five combined criteria (Thagard, 2011), such as “lacks mechanical explanations, uses dogmatic assertions, or resemblance thinking, which infers the things are casually related merely because they are similar; practitioners are oblivious to alternate theories; uses non-simple theories that require many extra hypotheses for particular explanations; stagnant in doctrine and applications”, it might be concluded that place branding is at best in the early stage of turning from common sense approach into a recognised scientific discipline (p. 27). However, it should be noted that this is not an objection but rather a conclusion resulting from the analysis of numerous theoretical thoughts of researchers for whom understanding the idea of place branding is essential for practical reasons.

2. Has the initial 'vague idea' of the 'place brand' become more concrete during exploration and articulation?

Knowledge of the research field is fragmented and does not fit into a system; it is difficult to confirm that there is a crystallisation of an 'initially vague' idea (Haack, 1997) idea. Andersson stresses that (Andersson, 2014) at least seven research approaches can be identified in the literature on the subject, of which only one is derived from mainstream branding. The first perspective involves place branding as a means to create, change, preserve or regain place identities and place images. In the second perspective, place branding is seen as part of growing urban entrepreneurialism. Papers discussing the theoretical relationship between branding and geography constitute the third research perspective. Research on place branding practices constitutes the fourth identified perspective. The fifth one discusses place branding as an undemocratic and socially excluding process that promotes social elites while systematically marginalising less powerful groups in society. Place branding as an integral part of strategies to make creative places is the sixth perspective identified in the literature. The seventh perspective is well-known in the literature as a country-of-origin effect (Andersson, 2014, pp. 150 - 151). These approaches are not found in the analysed models; it seems that even within the discipline, there is no flow of knowledge and concepts.

3. What is the theoretical status of considering 'place brands'?

In reviews of the referred literature, there are regular remarks that the theoretical foundations of the discipline are weak and that the definitions used are unclear, opaque and ambiguous. The examination of the models confirms this situation; the authors introduce their own nomenclature; the same (or similar) phenomena are called by different terms, despite the commonly declared multidisciplinary nature of the research subject; references to theories outside of marketing and branding are rare and inconclusive. Instead, they relate to methods of collecting and analysing data, not to theoretical foundations. It seems that the authors of the models know about the existence of such disciplines as humanistic geography, sociology of space, urban planning, or cultural anthropology; however, they do not consider it useful or purposeful to use them in the created models of place brands, which will work either in theory or in practice. This is a highly worrying situation for the further development of the discipline and the construction of a widely shared theoretical foundation regarding place branding.

Summing up the list of place brand models and the analysis of their practical dimension by reference to Polish practice, it should be emphasised that the number and complexity of these models are proof and that the place brand concept is still at the stage of searching for both its theory that will allow for development and the methodology that will combine theory with practice. Place brand results from practice, but it should also serve it. Studies of Polish branding activities show that each authority chooses its own way to build a place brand due to the lack of a clear, simple, and practical model.

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