

Managerial discourse in city branding - A critical perspective on Hamburg city branding.

Context

During a research project in Hamburg conducted between the 7th of June and the 6th of August 2010, data on the city's branding efforts was collected. The data on Hamburg's branding process was published in a research report on metropolitan branding. The data evidenced a coordinated approach towards city marketing in Hamburg, and the study invoked enormous interest from key players involved in the branding process. Consequently, it became clear that 'city branding' is no longer an exotic exception but a strategic pillar of city policy. Furthermore, cities or city brands now compete on a global scale. Brands are ranked and grouped, for example by Anholt's city brand index, Saffron Consultants' ranking, GaWC ranking, or real-estate-based rankings like the ones compiled by Jones Lang LaSalle. In addition, as pointed out by Lucarelli and Berg (2011), place marketing and city branding are gaining attention in the academic field and are described as emerging international research domains, however characterized by multidisciplinary and a fragmented theoretical basis.

But city branding and city marketing are controversial subjects. For instance, it faces criticism by citizens' initiatives, like in the 'Not in our name'-campaign in Hamburg, where citizens linked the city's marketing efforts to gentrification and fostering an increase in housing prices (Gaier, 2011). Other city campaigns, like the 'I AMsterdam' in the Dutch metropolis Amsterdam (I Amsterdam, 2011) or the 'beBerlin' campaign in the German capital (beBerlin, 2011), have also been mocked, criticized and even demonized by citizens and activist groups (e.g. by changing the Amsterdam slogan to 'I AMsterdamed' or by claiming 'Don't be Berlin, be yourself' in the case of Berlin). Furthermore, the young academic field is also critical of city branding, emphasizing the possible negative aspects of city branding from the human geography and urban planning perspectives (Lucarelli & Berg, 2011).

Research question and purpose

By revisiting the Hamburg field study, this paper analyzes the role of the branding discourse in city policy making and the acceptance of this policy by different stakeholder groups. The paper focuses on branding's managerial origin and its emphasis on functionalism, or in Habermas's terms the functional logic of the system under a strategic exchange, rather than a direct communicative orientation of the lifeworld (c.f. Crossley, 2005: 37f). The major questions guiding the analysis are what discourses do key stakeholders draw on to conceptualize Hamburg as a brand and is there a dominant discourse drawn on? Furthermore, this paper considers whether the branding discourse influences the city's conceptualization as a brand. Using the Hamburg case to paint a picture of the ongoing global competition of city brands, the paper will illustrate how the dominance of the global branding discourse has a colonizing effect on the lifeworld of stakeholders. Borrowing Kornberger, Clegg and Carter's (2005) usage of Lyotard's concept of *différend*, this working paper will offer an alternative approach to tackle the irreconcilable ideological conflict between city branding supporters and city branding critics, which lies at the basis of the controversial status of city branding.

Contrary to most critical perspectives, this paper is an attempt to analyze city branding from within the fields of marketing and management, using concepts derived from critical marketing studies (c.f. Alvesson, 1994; Tadajewski, 2010) and from critical management studies that apply managerial terms as a Habermasian 'colonization of the lifeworld' that reduce the complexity of the modern self (c.f. Costea, Crump & Amiridis, 2007). Following Burton's (2005) argument that

'theory' matters in marketing and that a field needs an internal critical perspective to be complete and accepted, the paper aims to enrich the emerging city branding field by offering a critical perspective from within the marketing arena.

Methodology

The approach developed in this paper is derived from a constructivist understanding of reality (c.f. Alvesson & Sköldböck, 2009) and guided by a belief in the fruitfulness of a humanistic inquiry into marketing research (c.f. Hirschman, 1986). This paper's empirical data comes from an extensive exploratory field study of the brand and the branding process in the German city of Hamburg. The research was based on three pillars: ethnographic observations, an extensive netnography, and 25 semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders, like former city officials, city representatives, city marketers, etc., involved with or affected by the branding activities.

This working paper, however, analyzes the material by focusing on the discourse presented by key players, on the words they use to conceptualize Hamburg and to describe the branding process. Similar to critical discourse analysis (c.f. Fairclough 1995), but with a lesser degree of formalization, the focus lies on isolating themes, concepts, persons and words that are used as sense-making devices by the interviewees. One possible problem to this approach is the possible tautological nature of the observations. The interviewees confronted a research project studying the city brand and branding process, and it seems rather logical that their disclosed conceptualizations were influenced by a managerial discourse. The focus of the paper, however, is to evaluate how this dominant discourse influences conceptualizations of the city as a public space beyond the city brand. Therefore, the data was analyzed for clues as to how stakeholders understand their branding or brand-resistant activities, use ideas to motivate and legitimize these activities, describe the city, and visualize the task of city policy.

Theoretical framework

The theoretical foundations of the working paper draw mainly from marketing literature but are supplemented by work in critical management studies. Branding in general is understood as expressive communication with strategic intent (c.f. Schultz, Hatch & Larsen, 2000). City branding, in particular, is regarded as being similar to and derived from (Kavaratzis & Ashworth, 2006: 184) corporate branding (c.f. Balmer & Greyser, 2006). Therefore, brands and city brands alike are seen as purposeful symbolic embodiments of product information from the perspective of the brand producer. In the area of corporate branding, the notion of polyphonic organization and an understanding of management as a discursive practice will be highly relevant for the presented theoretical framework (Kornberger, Clegg & Carter, 2004). Kornberger et al.'s (2004: 11) usage of Lyotard's concept of the *différend* as "an irreconcilable conflict between parties, one that cannot be equitably resolved, because no judgment rule is applicable to all the parties' situation simultaneously" especially will be used to explain the irreconcilable, ideological conflict between some 'city branding'-critics and supporters.

Conceptualizing cities as brands will be regarded as another step towards a dominant managerial discourse intruding on the social sphere of the individual. Cities today, conceptualized as brands, become consumable entities, which the individual self can use as an identity device in the life project. Furthermore, the performative dimension of the recent focus on city branding in city policies leads to a view of cities dominated by a managerial understanding of cities, possibly replacing alternative frames of reference, and can therefore be described as a 'colonization of the lifeworld'.

The analysis's structural framework will be based on Marzano and Scott's (2009) exploration of persuasion and authority as forms of power in destination branding. By combining a discursive

view of management and managerial tasks with the idea of polyphonic organization (c.f. Kornberger et al., 2006), the paper will offer an explanation for the controversial status of city branding, while presenting the dominant discourse in Hamburg. Using a discursive understanding of management and focusing on issues of power and domination in evaluating city branding's effects invite a final interpretation of city branding as an instrument in line with the 'colonization of the lifeworld' concept.

Analysis

After presenting a summary of the branding process in Hamburg and the city brand as portrayed in the descriptive field study, the analysis is developed along three themes: (1) Join the 'brandwagon' – Dominance of the managerial approach; (2) 'Und bist du nicht willig so brauch ich Gewalt'¹ - Ideological gap and power asymmetry; (3) 'There is nothing quite as wonderful as money'² - Managerial approach.

To 1: The dominance of a managerial approach towards city branding is carved out by quoting interviewees and key strategic documents, such as the city's mission statement. Using Marzano and Scott's (2009) analysis of persuasion and authority as strategic tools in destination branding, it will be shown that key stakeholders, like former mayor Klaus von Dohnanyi or former Senator Wolfgang Peiner, argued for a change in attitude towards economic mindsets as a logical response to the challenges to city policy. Furthermore, the city's and its institutions' coordinated city branding approach was justified and legitimized by referencing Richard Florida's creative class concept and by touting other cities', such as Barcelona and ,Copenhagen, as successful examples for the importance of city branding. Both cities' stories were heavily, but rather uncritically, used to persuade political leaders and administrative personnel of the need for a coordinated city branding strategy by appealing to the assumed authority of Florida's concept.

To 2: Despite the 'fashionable' status of city branding, Hamburg experienced resistance and criticism against the branding activities. Using the concept of *différend* (Kornberger et al., 2006), this controversial status is explained as being grounded in an ideological dispute. The analysis cannot deconstruct this ideological gap. But by accepting that Kornberger et al.'s (2006: 24) claim that the status of management today to "translat[e] between different rationalities" is also true for managing city brands, one increases city branding's acceptance. In addition, the strong role of the city government in the city's branding activities pushed through the branding agenda, despite critical voices. This power asymmetry in turn reinforces the managerial discourse and excludes stakeholders that base their arguments on different rationalities.

To 3: In general, the language of active key stakeholders in the city's government and branding agencies indicates a strong emphasize on managerialism. The city is constructed as a manageable entity, which needs to be promoted in order to secure and attract investment. Furthermore, the economic focus of strategic documents, which were essential for the creation of the city brand as we know it today, is pointed out. This managerial zeitgeist is present in the stories presented by most interviewees and their actions are presented as logical answers to a quasi-natural phenomenon.

Together, these three themes help to establish an interpretation of city branding as a 'colonization of the lifeworld' by managerial discourse.

¹ A line of the famous poem, 'Der Erlkönig', by Johan Wolfgang von Goethe. The literal translation would be: And if you're not willing, I shall use force. For a version of the German text and its English translation see: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Der_Erlkönig. 2011-04-06.

² A line from the British comedy group Monty Python's song, 'The Money Song'.

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