Chapter xx

Marketing a sense of place to tourists: A critical perspective

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Introduction

An enduring image of the island of Santorini, one of Greece's popular tourism destinations, is that of 'large clusters of whitewashed buildings nesting at dizzying heights, spilling down cliff sides and offering gasp-inducing views from land or sea' (Bain, 2019). It is precisely this perpetual image of the island that a photographic exhibition entitled *SantoREni: work in progress* (Anonymous, 2012) disrupted. Photos in the exhibition depicted traffic, chaotic buildings, unfinished construction sites, supermarket outlets and parked motorbikes lined up in a street. One might wonder what best captures Santorini's sense of place. Is it the former, the eternal awe inspiring view from the Caldera? Or the hustle and bustle of the main square in Fira, the capital town? Is it the vernacular architecture or the concrete imitations sprawling on the surface of the island? The contrast between the postcard imagery, emanating a sense of timelessness, and Santorini's daily life prompted us to reflect on the experience of place, the interconnections between material aspects and symbolic meanings, and marketing's role in (co)creating a sense of place for tourists.

Places are not simply geographic locations with objective physical attributes, but are generally understood in terms of three core elements: location, locale and sense of place (Cresswell, 2009). Location refers to the geographical position of a place, its coordinates on a map, while locale refers to its physical characteristics, such as the visible and tangible aspects of its landscape (Cresswell, 2009). Sense of place is a more elusive and ambiguous concept which broadly refers to how people relate to places through lived experience (Agnew, 2011). Sense of place has been examined by researchers from diverse disciplines, including anthropologists, geographers, environmental psychologists, architects and sociologists. Exploring various definitions of sense of place, including Yi-Fu Tuan's *topophilia* (the affective bond between

people and place) and Setha Low's *place attachment* (attachment of culturally shared emotional meanings to a particular space), Cross (2001) draws attention to how people relate to places in emotional, experiential and symbolic ways. Sense of place, then, refers to subjective perceptions of place and the affective bonds that people develop with a place or setting, which are culturally significant.

Sense of place is sometimes discussed in tandem with the concept of 'genius loci', or spirit of place, which, while originally associated with deities and spirits thought to reside in places, has come to refer to a place's special 'feel' (Steele, 1981) or distinctive character (Relph, 1997). According to Malpas (2008: 199-200), ' "[s]ense of place" refers us, on the face of it, both to a sense of the character or identity that belongs to certain places or locales, as well as to a sense of our own identity as shaped in relation to those places - to a sense of "belonging to" those places'. Thus, sense of place is our ability to connect with and be aware of places (Relph, 1997), and genius loci is the distinctive identity we associate with a particular place (Relph, 2007). Sense of place offers marketing thought and practice an important yet challenging concept in order to understand how people emotionally connect with and interpret places. Importantly, while sense of place involves emotional reactions to a place and interpretations of that place, a sense of place is also bounded by physical form and location (Stedman, 2003). Sense of place can therefore also involve the interaction between physical elements and socially constructed meanings (Campelo, Aitken, Thyne & Gnoth, 2014; Young, 1999).

In this chapter we explore the growing interest in sense of place among place marketing and branding scholars. We trace a trajectory of place marketing thought from a functional approach which treats places as products, towards representational perspectives which focus on perceptions, identity and image and, more recently, participatory perspectives which seek to engage with people's sense of place. In doing so, we explore the significance of symbolic meanings and narratives of place. Finally, we offer a critical discussion of sense of place with emphasis on the interconnections between material and symbolic, and existential and political dimensions of place.

Place product
The extension of conventional marketing thinking and practice on geographical entities (e.g. Kotler & Gertner, 2004) necessitated the conception of places as products. Drawing on notions

of place as object and location (Ashworth & Voodg, 1990a; 1990b), the place-product is conceived both as a set of products and experiences provided locally and as a product in its own right. For example, the urban product is separated into *contributory* elements, such as the specific services or even a particular isolated characteristic of the city, and the *nuclear product*, which is the city as a whole (Sleipen, 1988; cited in Ashworth & Voogd, 1990b). Similarly, a tourist destination is both 'the point of consumption of the complex of activities that comprises the tourism experience and [...] ultimately what is sold by place promotion agencies on the tourism market' (Ashworth & Voogd, 1990a: 7). Accordingly, place marketing has the task of designing a desirable 'place mix' (Kotler, Haider & Rein 1993), referring to the selection, development and promotion of place attributes and positioning the place product in the market through segmentation (Boisen, Terlouw & van Gorp, 2011), and the promotion of attractive images of place (Ashworth & Voogd 1994). Attributes such as physiography, culture and history have long been considered sources of a place's competitive advantage (Crouch & Ritchie, 1999). Places are essentially conceived as packages of attributes, including natural and cultural attractions, services and available infrastructure (see, for example, Buhalis, 2000; Murphy, Pritchard & Smith,2000). Arguably, this perspective focuses on physical and functional aspects of place in an effort to sell and promote places.

Marketers may have found some comfort in the place product construct in the form of an integrated and standardized framework amenable to the application of marketing tools. Yet, the complexity and fluidity of places is challenging conventional marketing practice and the very notion of a unified place product (see, for example, Warnaby & Medway, 2013). Places are living entities, constantly evolving through time. They are multifaceted and multipurpose, involving multiple individuals and communities with diverse interests and claims to place (Goodwin, 1993). Residents, visitors, investors and commuters all have different stakes. This calls for a collaborative marketing effort that acknowledges and brings together the wishes of different actors.

Marketers, tourists and local communities 'co-create' place products. Importantly, local communities and their different ways of attachment to a place are an important factor of the place product (Warnaby & Medway, 2013) and should not be excluded from the marketer's frame of reference (Hall, 2000). This questions the appropriateness of marketing orientation for places, because adapting a place's resources solely for the satisfaction of the tourists' needs may

neglect the needs of the locals (Haywood, 1990). Places may indeed become objectified, evident historically in the experience of negative tourism impacts internationally (Crick, 1996), such as in the case of Mediterranean tourism destinations (e.g. Lichrou, O'Malley & Patterson., 2017; Panayiotopoulos & Pisano, 2019). More recently, negative impacts and local resistance to tourism phenomenon are examined under the term overtourism (Milano, Cheer & Novelli, 2019; Milano, Novelli & Cheer, 2019).

      The complexity of places and, consequently, the complexity of management processes involved (e.g. Skinner, 2008; Boisen, Terlouw, Groote & Couwenberg 2018), have prompted a rethinking of the role of marketing in the context of place (Warnaby & Medway, 2013; Warnaby, Medway & Bennison, 2010), recognizing that place values form a living and constantly evolving relational system (Gnoth, 2007). Specifically, terminology evolved from 'place marketing' to 'place branding', marking a shift of attention from functional to representational understandings of place (see Giovanardi, Lucarelli & Pasquinelli, 2013), and from places as physical entities to subjective perceptions or images and interpretations. To paraphrase Kavaratzis (2004), encounters with places happen through perceptions and images; thus, the object of place marketing is not the place itself, but its image. What is more, images are not created solely by marketers, nor are marketers in control of the images perceived by tourists. Accordingly, place meanings are co-constructed, and while marketers are not in control, they capitalize on particular images and meanings.

Place meanings

The production of tourist space is 'as much a symbolic order of meaning as a form of material production' (Meethan, 2001: 168). Socio-cultural accounts of tourism and place (Morgan & Pritchard, 1998; Framke, 2002) emphasize the role of symbolic meanings as constitutive of places (Voase, 1999). Rather than static, objective or a priori phenomena (McCabe & Stokoe, 2004), places represent specific historical and cultural phases in society (Saarinen, 1998). Thus, places are not simply physical spaces, but fluid, dynamic contexts of social interaction and collective memory (Stokowski, 2002). From this perspective, culture is not simply a resource or attribute of the 'place-product', but a dynamic process implicated in the construction and interpretation of places. Furthermore, the experience of place entails interpretation of material

aspects, such as the landscape, which represent something, and in that sense the experience of place can be conceived as a story (Suvantola, 2002).

We develop a sense of place for different places in the world without even having been there (Relph, 1997). Meanings about places are formed through exposure and interactions with media, popular culture, fiction and the stories of others (Iwashita, 2003; Santos, 2004). For instance, an advertisement for Greek-style yogurt in the UK can also be implicated in the construction of particular perceptions of Greece through the reproduction of particular (stereotypical) images of Greek people and culture. It is within the tourist's own cultural framework that knowledge, expectations and fantasies, as well as perceptions of the identities of tourism destinations, are created (Iwashita, 2003). Thus, tourist places are culturally significant; they engender representational cultures, which increase the accessibility of sites in everyday life (Rojek, 1997). What is more, signs, images and symbols make the site familiar to tourists in their ordinary culture through the process of indexing (Rojek, 1997), which involves the creation of visual, textual and symbolic representations of places through the media and the semiotic conventions associated with signifying a site (Hughes, 1998). Examples of such media include travellers' tales, printed texts such as travel brochures, as well as novels and poems, dramatic and cinematic traditions and television. Through our screens, books, music and social interactions (physical or online through various social media) we become part of the circuit of cultural representations of places.

People seek to experience 'in reality' the pleasurable dramas they have already experienced in their imagination (Campbell, 1987, cited in Urry, 1990: 13). The tourist imagination constructs ideas, images, myths and fantasies about different places (Selwyn, 1996). The consumption of places involves symbolic interaction processes involved through which tourists create their personal dramas (Voase, 1999). Metaphorical, allegorical and false information is a resource for tourists as an object of reverie, dreaming and speculation (Rojek, 1997). It seems, then, that the 'mythical' is unavoidable in discussions of travel and tourism and, to some degree, the social construction of places always involves the mobilization of myth (Rojek, 1997). Traditional as well as contemporary mythologies are sources of the imagery that surrounds places. For example, the imagery of Ireland as a tourism destination still relies to a great extent on 'pre-modern' associations with friendly inhabitants and empty spaces. This imagery continues in spite of the dramatic changes to both the people and the landscape evinced

by the 'Celtic Tiger' (Foley & Fahy, 2004) and, more recently, the financial crisis. There are numerous examples of the role of mythical discourses in the construction of popular tourism places. Urry (1995) discusses the influence of Romantic poetry on perceptions of the English countryside and its aesthetic appreciation. Costa (1997) examines the paradisal discourses involved in the marketing and consumption of Hawaii.

Appreciating the role of language in the way people construct places, Stokowski (2002) argues that sense of place is rooted in narration. Through stories, we experience and remember places (Trapp-Fallon, 20013). Individuals make sense of their experiences in the world mainly in the form of narrative and consequently their experiences are also structured in narrative form (Bruner, 1991; 2004). For example, places receive visitors 'through the narrative morsels' they plant themselves or that are put in circulation by others (Bendix, 2002: 476). Through her analysis of travel articles, Santos (2004) shows how such stories frame the way readers make sense of various places. Seen as texts and sets of spatial narratives (Voase, 1999; Meethan, 1996), places involve 'not only written media such as documents, books, and brochures, but also spoken, visual and non-verbal media' (Stokowski, 2002: 372). Tourist narratives are, thus, place-making tools (Rickly-Boyd, 2009), including stories that people share online (Munar, 2011). In this sense, marketing and branding communication efforts can be thought of as part of the cultural media for the creation and circulation of place narratives.

It is important to note that narratives are not only structures of meaning, but also structures of power (Santos, 2004). The 'ability to assign meaning to a place is an act of power which has real effects on the people living in it' (Human, 1999: 83). Symbolic values and meanings are not given, but contested and actively involving processes and the construction of place entails the interests or positions of dominant groups (Meethan, 1996). This has political and ethical implications, because representations of people and places have the potential not only to construct the way societies see different places but also to powerfully shape the way the people living in these places see themselves (Borgerson & Schroeder, 2002). For example, a semiotic analysis of six postcards from the colonial era, portraying Arab men and women in an 'orientalist' fashion, reveals how the postcards encompass multiple meanings implicated in the construction of notions of 'us' and 'them' and how they 'capture the essence of the culture of colonial travels, power and discourse' (Burns, 2004: 273). Tourism places are often promoted through mystification, fantasy, associations with Disney world and indulgence in unreality

(Britton, 1979). This is reflected in western tourists' perceptions of destinations in the third world often being shaped by myths that construct particular places as unchanged, unrestrained, and uncivilized (Echtner & Prasad, 2003). Therefore, an understanding of place requires the exploration of the social relations that underlie the production of text (Gotham, 2002), as image and symbolic meaning are not neutral but political.

Place brand

The shift of discourse from function/object towards representation/meaning has resulted in discussions of the place brand as representation of a place's identity. The place brand, as a complex construct, incorporates both internal and external audiences. In the context of cities, Graham (2002) makes a distinction between the 'external city', that which is marketed to tourists and investors, and the 'internal city' which is that in which people ground their everyday lives. Place brand is thus 'a representation of identity, building a favourable internal (those who deliver the experience) and external (with visitors) image (leading to brand satisfaction and loyalty; name awareness; perceived quality; and other favourable brand associations)' (Govers & Go, 2016: 17).

Capitalizing upon imagery that distinguishes a place from ordinary/everyday places, place branding strives to evoke a distinct sense of place. For example, tourism destinations are demarcated from everyday/ordinary places by signifiers in the landscape and the marketing industry (Shaw & Williams, 2004) and by virtue of their natural, historical or cultural extraordinariness (Rojek, 1997). Yet, in their struggle for differentiation, those responsible for the branding of places are often driven to similar policy formulas (Turok, 2009). Preoccupied with engendering development and growth, such practices often consist of quick yield but highly speculative and ephemeral projects (Harvey, 1989), such as serial reproduction of cultural attractions (Richards & Wilson, 2006), themed environments (Amin & Thrift, 2002), flagship projects and catchy slogans (Colomb & Kalandides, 2010).

In essence, places are re-imagined from spaces of production to spaces of consumption (Lash & Urry, 1994) and this re-imaging rests largely on image and aestheticization (Miles, 2010) as places try to become attractive to tourists and visitors for shopping, entertainment and tourism activities. Critics point out to the fact that, paradoxically, in pursuing difference, place marketing produces sameness (Griffiths, 1998) and homogeneity across places. Places may

become commodified, due to the decontextualization of culture in order to mobilize sensations, dreams and play for profit (Amin & Thrift, 2002). This process of commodification can be detrimental for those living in places as it promotes an uncritical relationship with a place's culture and the past (Kearns & Philo, 1993). Besides, '[i]t would be a caricature to imagine place and space being occupied only by passive consumers in the role of tourists and a congenial, compliant local population' (Burns, 2006: 391). In this regard, place marketing practices may contribute to an apparent loss of a sense of place (Malpas, 2008).

In taking these issues into consideration, Kavaratzis and Hatch (2013) argue that effective place branding should simultaneously involve the following processes: *expressing*, which concerns the place's cultural understandings with increased attention to the meanings that local populations attach to a place; *reflecting*, which brings new meanings into culture thus altering place identity; *impressing*, which seeks to leave impressions on others and inform their perceptions, and; *mirroring*, which concerns the mirroring of changes in external images in the brand (Kavaratzis & Hatch, 2013: 80-1). A participatory turn in place branding is reflected in the growing body of work advocating bottom-up, participative approaches as a path to enhanced brand authenticity, stakeholder identification and commitment and brand sustainability (Aitken & Campelo, 2011; Insch & Stuart, 2015; Jernsand & Kraff 2015; Kavaratzis, 2012; Kavaratzis, Giovanardi & Lichrou, 2017; Lindstedt, 2011; Zenker & Erfgen, 2014).

These challenges, together with heightened concerns regarding those living in a place and how they are affected by or implicated in the place branding process, have resulted in discussions about the role of sense of place in place branding (Campelo *et al.*, 2014). In this sense, the process of branding as a reflexive, dynamic and collaborative process is far more important than its output as it is a process that can facilitate community engagement with a place (e.g. Lichrou, Patterson, O'Malley & O'Leary, 2017). Furthermore, branding efforts increasingly attempt to incorporate and convey a sense of place as this is experienced by the diverse people living, working and visiting a place. This can be seen in the cases of Belfast and Berlin, discussed by Northover (2011) and Colomb and Kalandides (2010) respectively, where residents' personal stories and experiences (in)formed the two cities' branding campaigns.

A critical marketing perspective on sense of place

The production and consumption of places involves the entanglement of material, discursive and embodied performances (Rabbiosi, 2016). Exploring place brand essence, Skinner (2011) discusses the role of the physical elements of place as well as symbolic meanings and sensory experiences. Marketing, then, seeks to appreciate the aforementioned elements, in order to capitalize on and promote particular senses of place. Returning to Santorini, it is not surprising that the most widely circulated sense of place centres on the experience of the Caldera, which has fascinated artists, scientists and visitors alike and is often the pride of local residents (Lichrou, O'Malley & Patterson, 2014). In the words of a Greek photographer:

> It is not easy to describe Santorini with words, as is the case with everything unique. Once you stand on the Caldera you feel awe before the almightiness of nature. Nowhere else one encounters so closely life and death, white and black, tame and wild, light and darkness. […] Which artist isn't inspired by this theme? Which photographer will remain unmoved by Santorini? (Talianes, 1998: front inside cover, author's translation)

Undeniably, the experience described above is the most distinct aspect of Santorini for visitors. To borrow Casey's (2001) concept, the *impressionism* of Santorini is rooted in the experience of the Caldera, an experience characterized by a certain intensity. By 'impressionism of place', Casey refers to the mark a place can leave on us, because 'the presence of a place remains lodged in our body long after we have left it, ready to be revived when the appropriate impression or sensation arises' (Casey, 2001: 688). Sense of place is an embodied experience involving corporeal, cognitive and affective processes (Rakić & Chambers, 2011). For Tuan (1977: 6-7) it is important to give attention to the ways "people feel about space and place, to take into account the different modes of experience (sensorimotor, tactile, visual, conceptual), and to interpret space and place as images of complex—often ambivalent—feelings'.

However, a sense of Santorini is not confined to the awe inspiring view of the Caldera but involves a multiplicity of experiences, from extraordinary to mundane, from pleasant to unpleasant. These include the traffic of the main road of the island, the music and other noises coming out of nightclubs, the bustle of shops, the smells of the traditional produce at the local food market, walking on the cobbled alleys, drinking cocktails at the bars in the evening, sunbathing on a black sand beach and so on. It is precisely this multiplicity of experiences that

the exhibition (*SantoREni: work in progress*), cited in the introduction of this chapter, addressed, challenging the fixation to the postcard imagery of the Caldera. This shifts attention to other less celebrated senses of place. Opening the exhibition, visual artist Assimis (2012) talked about how 'Santorini is ten different Santorinies', and described how the different senses of place change as one experiences different geographical locations of the island at different times of the year. The artist, explained the purpose of the work as follows:

> The photographs, as well as the video, attempt to depict and explore this new landscape, which is always in motion. The aim is to firstly understand it, and then to move away from this postcard-like perpetual image of Santorini -not because it doesn't exist- but because it doesn't exist outside the social reality of today. (cited in Anonymous, 2012: online)

The aforementioned event thus prompts a rethinking of the sense of place of Santorini in this case, but also a sense of place in general. It sheds light into the diversity of experiences as well as the temporality and social embeddedness of sense of place. In this regard, sense of place is existential and political. Relph (1997) describes how a sense of place is in part an 'innate facility' that we all possess to some extent. It is our awareness of and ability to connect with one's surroundings. However, he also understands sense of place as a learned skill, offering the example of geography as a discipline that engenders 'critical environmental awareness' (Relph, 1997). Recognizing sense of place as both an innate ability and a learned skill, we can argue that sense of place is influenced by the social reality in which one is embedded. To give one example, talking about his experiences growing up in Santorini, a young entrepreneur (in his 30s) recalls:

> I have experienced tourism since I was 6 years old. I remember that I opened my eyes and I was selling coca colas and orangeades. This is how I remember it, this is how it started. […] I grew up within this, talking to the American, interacting with the tourists, with customers who were passing by, with […] people from the first cruise ships that had started arriving […]. (cited in Lichrou et al., 2017: 112)

As such, a sense of place as a form of relation to and belonging to place (Cross, 2001) develops within particular social, political and economic circumstances. For instance, Lichrou et al. (2014), focusing on local narratives of Santorini, discussed three distinct and competing senses of place and associated forms of belongingness. The first two were clearly associated with tourism; 'harsh beauty' expressed primarily a tourist sense of place focusing on the intense aesthetic experience of the island's landscape, and 'service business' expressed an entrepreneurial sense, focusing on commercial success and facilitation of customer satisfaction for tourists (Lichrou et al., 2014). Third, a sense of Santorini as 'home' was demarcated both spatially and temporally from tourism (Lichrou et al., 2014).

The different senses exposed not only a diversity of experiences and perspectives among different participants, some of whom identified more as entrepreneurs and others as residents, but also different moments in a single participant's narrative as the same participant often embodied different roles. Thus, we see how their relationship with and experience of place did not take place in a vacuum, but was embedded, shaped by and, in turn, shaped the social, political and economic life of the island. Elsewhere, Lichrou *et al.* (2017) discuss the discontent expressed by participants due to the rapid changes caused by touristification and local efforts (reflected in the exhibition discussed earlier) to move beyond a single image in order to confront and make sense of the changes taking place and to imagine alternatives for the island's future. Researching sense of place, should therefore be open to the multiplicity of place experiences and to 'challenge notions of past authenticities' and the 'possibility of change in the future (Massey, 1999: 288, cited in Agnew, 2011: 325).

Conclusion

Following the recognition that places are open, dynamic and contested, and appreciating the role of sense of place in the place branding process, a critical marketing approach considers the dialectical process through which the physical space is imbued with symbolic meaning (Meethan, 1996; 2001), the entanglement of material, discursive and embodied performances in the production and consumption of places (Rabbiosi, 2016) as well as the corporeal, cognitive and affective processes involved (Rakić & Chambers, 2011). Reflecting on these issues, this chapter has explored sense of place from a critical marketing perspective. In doing so we have presented different understandings of place, combining tourism and marketing literatures. We

have traced a trajectory from functional to representational and participatory understandings of place. Finally, we have discussed sense of place drawing attention to the dialectical relationship between material and symbolic, as well as existential and political dimensions.

From a critical marketing perspective, sense of place should not be seen in isolation from other elements of place such as a place's materiality, the practices and structures of social interactions, the institutions that regulate them, and the systems of representations involved in the production of place meanings (Kavaratzis & Kalandides, 2015). Such an approach offers possibilities both for scholars of place marketing/branding as well as practitioners. An open, dynamic, and relational understanding of sense of place helps towards moving away from romanticized, static understandings of place. In this regard, marketing a sense of place is not a one-dimensional process focusing merely on tourist imagery and needs. The experiences and meanings of those living and working in a place are a critical dimension. Through a critical participatory approach, we can challenge notions of the past and open up possibilities for progressive change in the future.

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