

COMMUNICATION & LANGUAGE at work

Mimicry and artistry: Place branders' construction of "good" branding

Jon Bertilsson

Senior Lecturer, Lund University, Sweden
jon.bertilsson@fek.lu.se

Jens Rennstam

Associate Professor, Lund University, Sweden
jens.rennstam@fek.lu.se

Katie Sullivan¹

Assistant Professor, University of Colorado, Colorado Springs, USA
Ksulliv8@uccs.edu

Abstract

Many public organizations think of themselves as brands and engage in branding to increase their attractiveness. Often this is seen as a good practice, but this paper takes a more skeptical view and interrogates the value of place branding expertise for public organizations. Through observation of a place branding conference, drawing on some principles from ethnomethodology, this paper provides clues to what the place branding profession constructs as "good" and legitimate expertise and the norms that guide their work. We identified two levels of legitimate place branding expertise: Mimicry and Artistry. Mimicry signifies imitation of already institutionalized ideas and practices, and proficiency in supplying beautiful yet detached and superficial representations of cities. Artistry refers to place branding that stands out as brilliant and inventive, encompassing unexpected play with symbols and creative combination of branding models. We argue that both these levels of expertise may be at odds with civic values of city government such as inclusion and representativeness. Our study concludes that the ways in which the branders construct expertise risks deflecting attention from the core problems of a place or a city and separating place branding from city management practice.

¹ All authors contributed equally to this work.

Keywords

Place Branding, Mimicry, Artistry, Professionals, Expertise

1 Introduction

This study explores how professional place branders construct norms for good branding. We are interested in how branders' speech and interactions in a professional setting – a place branding conference – construct an everyday or common-sense view of what constitutes place branding expertise. Such a focus allows us to theorize how place branders' speech enables or constrains public organizations' ability to contend with the tension between civic and market priorities that might emerge when a brand orientation is adopted by places, such as cities and nations (Bertilsson & Rennstam, 2018). In particular, this paper is interested in understanding the potentially “dark sides” of place branding, which may be hidden beyond public view (Mumby, 2016), by studying how the language used by experts constructs “ideal” professional practices.

Branding has entered public organizations in particular through city or nation “place branding” efforts, which we understand broadly as communication to create, develop, and protect the image of places where people gather to live in interaction with various stakeholders (Kavaratzis, 2004). The dominant literature on the topic tends to promote the advantages of place branding, such as increased tourism, economic development and attracting a highly skilled labor-force (Asbury et al., 2008; Braun, Kavaratzis and Zenker 2013; Evans et al., 2008). In some influential mainstream texts, branding is even presented as an altruistic activity that can simultaneously solve a city's economic *and* social problems. For instance, leading scholar Kavaratzis (2004, p. 60) asserts, “City branding is understood as the means both for achieving competitive advantage [...] and activating all social forces to avoid social exclusion and unrest.” In other words, in large part, place branding literature supports a market-orientation in the management of and communication about places.

This paper takes a step back from this panacean view of place branding. We side with other critical scholars of work and organization who have expressed skepticism of the value or practice of branding in society (Bertilsson & Rennstam, 2018; Mumby, 2016) and especially in public organizations (e.g. Fredriksson & Pallas, 2016; Wæraas, 2008). These scholars question what it might mean when cities or nations, which are grounded in democratic or civic principles, follow a brand orientation, which is grounded in market principles. But although critical scholars argue that it is important to understand place branding due to its influence on city government, and brand consultants are often seen as “leading actors who influence local and national governments” (Goulart-Sztejnberg & Giovanardi, 2017, p. 425), few studies explore how place branders talk about their work. Thus, there is a gap in scholars' knowledge of how communication is influential to this work (Lueg & Kastberg, 2018), including how experts in the field understand, construct, and socialize others to do place branding.

We add to this knowledge by exploring place branding practitioners' professional presentations to ask, *how do place branders communicatively construct norms for what constitutes place branding expertise?* It is largely in professional settings where individuals learn how community members talk, what is expected of them, and what is celebrated as an achievement (Hardy & McGuire, 2010). We explore our research question and seek insights into how experts construct good practices by conducting observations of “The Nordic Place Branding Conference,” a full-day conference where place branders from various parts of the world (mainly Europe) meet annually to share knowledge and present their work. The conference can be understood as an “institutional event,” that is, a recurring event where common practices and norms of an institution (place branding) are established (Hardy & Maguire, 2010). Drawing on the epistemological assumption that attention to a community's talk and interaction provides clues to its culture (Baker, 2002; Lueg & Kastberg, 2018; Silverman, 1993), we analyzed the presentations and exchanges between the branders at the conference with our research question in mind. We found that the branders expressed two types of norms for good place branding, which we conceptualize as “mimicry” and “artistry.” We discuss and compare mimicry and artistry, and argue that while the expertise they represent may contribute with attractive imagery of places, it may deflect attention from core issues in cities and separate place branding from city management.

2 Literature review

The overarching influence of branding in organizations has been recognized by scholars interested in the intersections of brands and organizing (Hatch & Schultz, 2008; Kornberger, 2010). For instance, Kornberger (2010) argues that “brands fundamentally transform how we manage an organization's identity, how we think of its culture, and how we organize innovation” (p. xi). Studies on varied topics such as the dynamics of image and identity in corporate branding

(Hatch and Schultz, 2008); branding and its impacts on inclusion or exclusion (McDonald & Kuhn, 2016); and the working lives of branding professionals (Kärreman & Rylander, 2008) shed light on the ubiquitous and multifaceted role of branding in organizations.

Yet, branding has also been critiqued by organizational scholars as playing a vital, yet hidden and potentially dark role in the constitution of organizational life (Bertilsson & Rennstam, 2018; Mumby, 2016). The concern here is that a brand's reach extends far beyond a set of internal marketing practices, and is instead a central cultural and economic phenomenon that constitutes organizational meaning and practices, often in line with neoliberalism. In other words, brands are both the medium and the outcome of contemporary economic, political, and cultural movements that seek value from communication and social relations (Mumby, 2016). Empirical projects exploring the darker-sides of branding involve how employees are regulated by brands (Brannan et al, 2015; Müller, 2016), including how employees might be sacrificed to protect an occupational brand (Rennstam, 2013), how organizational brands might exploit atrocities (Muhr & Rehn, 2014) and how brands might seek, yet miss the mark in increasing diversity (McDonald & Kuhn, 2016) or managing change (Frandsen, 2017).

Of interest in this paper is how brands – influenced by how place branding professionals construct and manage meanings – have stepped into the role of governing important societal practices, such as citizenship, city management and planning, or inclusion of marginalized groups.

2.1 Place branding

Although brands and branding have traditionally been a part of the private sector, and marketing practices in particular, researchers acknowledge the rise of a brand orientation in public institutions (Maor & Wæraas, 2015). Public institutions are typically understood as organizations that are publicly owned or financed, and whose existence is, at least in part, centered around service to the public (Leijerholt et al., 2019), such as cities, municipalities, police, universities, and public hospitals. When these institutions follow a brand orientation, this implies that their processes of organization and governance “revolve around the creation, development, and protection of brand identity in an ongoing interaction with target customers” (Urde, 1999, p. 117). Differently put, “brands come first and everyday organizing and work processes follow” (Mumby, 2016, p. 886).

Place branding is multidisciplinary and flourishing in fields such as Urban Studies, Marketing, Management, Political Science, and Geography, to name a few. A straightforward definition of place branding is that it is the application of product branding to places, and as such, can be treated as a form of place management – heavily relying upon changing the way places are perceived by specified user groups (Kavaratzis and Ashworth, 2005, p. 508). This definition fits with what Vuignier (2017) labels a classical marketing perspective, or that Lucarelli and Berg (2011) classify as “branding as production,” which focuses “on how to produce, create and manage a brand as well as how to organize and govern a branding process” (p. 18). Descriptive and prescriptive articles are the most robust in the place branding literature, followed by studies that explore the use and consumption of place brands, and then, subsequently, critical studies, which account for a small percentage of articles to take a more skeptical view of the social, economic, and cultural effects of city brands and branding (Vuignier, 2017).

Although often nodding to the fact that places and products are different, typically, the marketing perspective seeks to apply corporate branding to places to achieve a unified and consistent message (Kavaratzis, 2009). Various models offer some version of Marketing's 4 P's, such as a focus on advertising, promotion and design; space, infrastructure, and redevelopment; organization, basic services, and public-private partnerships; and attractions, mega-events, or cultural regeneration (Kavaratzis, 2004). For instance, Kavaratzis develops a model of “city image communication” that draws from a corporate marketing mix to provide guidelines for managing a city's brand. He articulates for branders that “the beginning lies in the realization that all encounters with the city take place through perceptions and images” (2004, p. 66) and therefore, the image of the city needs to be carefully planned and considered vis a vis what a city consists of and all of its interventions or actions (i.e., policies). In other words, it appears that Kavaratzis' model of branding advocates that branders should be sensitive to both functional and the symbolic elements of a city when performing place branding.

This emphasis on images and management of perceptions has been picked up by critical studies, who note that place branding is impossible to separate from political and institutional contexts (Lucarelli & Berg, 2011). Rather than viewing place branding as an extension of marketing, critical scholars see it as a broad governance strategy that goes beyond managing image and perceptions (Eshuis & Klijin, 2012), and they express concern that branding changes the norms of democratic legitimacy and citizen participation (Eshuis & Edwards, 2013). Recent empirical studies from a critical perspective explore the place brands as simulacra, or self-referential entities (Kaneva, 2018); as costly and isomorphic representations where places paradoxically differentiate themselves by following other places (Riza, 2015); and as neoliberal political activities whose purpose is gentrification that further marginalizes vulnerable citizens (Eisenschitz, 2010). These studies highlight the risk of using branding terms and tools from the private sector. For instance, Aronczyk (2008) poses the question,

“If a public good is by definition an object of democracy, encouraging collective participation from its citizens and procuring just and equitable rewards for the benefit of all, what happens when this public good falls under the authority of private branding and advertising agents?” (p. 43).

What these critically-oriented articles share in common is a belief that places are complex and multidimensional, and that ‘selling’ them via practices aimed at producing an appealing image is a matter of power and politics, even though it is often given over to brand- rather than city experts.

2.2 Place branders as experts

As noted, although place branding has been studied extensively, few studies specifically explore those responsible for the city branding (de Noronha, et al., 2017), namely brand managers and consultants (Anholt, 2008; Cleave et al., 2019; de Noronha et al., 2017). This gap in the literature is consequential because little is known about how branding professionals understand, interpret, or talk about place branding practices (for an exception see Aronczyk, 2008 on nation branding professionals). Despite this dearth of scholarly insight, the use of branding consultants is wide-spread and popular (Carroll & Nelson, 2017). As McCann and Ward note, this is due in part to public employees feeling as though they are “solution-starved actors, often under pressure to ‘deliver’ successfully, quickly, and at a low cost” (45) and therefore desire the help of consultants who offer “easily consumable, sellable, and moveable packages” to brand a city (p. 45).

Many scholars embrace the role of brand experts in city branding, noting that some seek to understand communities (Goulart-Sztejnberg & Giovanardi, 2017) and encourage inclusive, participatory, bottom-up approaches to branding (Kavaratzis, 2012). But some studies question the efficacy of relying on brand experts, rather than public managers, to adequately and appropriately engage in branding and policy-making (Anholt, 2008; Aronczyk, 2008; Cleave, et al., 2017). A general concern is that branders, due to a lack of in-depth knowledge of governance, tend to focus on the image or identity of a place, amounting to ‘redressing’ rather than a guide for comprehensive development. The strategic potential of place branding is feared to be negatively impacted due to a focus on operational, short-term thinking (de Noronha et al., 2017). Another concern is that place branding spearheaded by brand experts is likely to be divorced from a city’s holistic strategy, physical attributes, and knowledge and concern for multiple stakeholders’ needs and wants that would enable comprehensive and ethical and purposeful decision-making (Anholt, 2008; Cleave et al., 2019). Instead, it is criticized as “superficial” (Carroll & Nelson, 2017), “simple” (Cleave et al., 2019), overly “prescriptive” (Vuignier, 2017), and best limited to aspects of logo design or city slogans, rather than a strategic or holistic tool. Finally, Aronczyk (2008), demonstrates a concern for governance itself by noting, “while nation branding pays lip service to public participation and diversity of opinions, its reliance on a ‘core idea’ to represent a national population comes at the cost of recognizing internal differentiation, resistance, or conflict” (p. 55). She argues that this is actually the point of branding, which ultimately serves to erase that which compromises the legitimacy or positive image of a place.

Researchers have also expressed worry about place brand consultants wielding significant and often unfettered influence on cities. For instance, there is a concern that conceding brand control over a place leads to quick solutions and policy-homogenization (McCann & Ward, 2012). Anholt (2008, p. 1), argues strongly against branding that does not stem from in-depth knowledge of a place and its concerns by noting, “there appears to be no evidence to support that using marketing communications to influence international public perceptions of an entire city, region or country is anything other than a vain and foolish waste of taxpayers’ money.” He furthers that if consultants are used for place branding, they must become policy experts rather than marketing communications experts to do the work, “just as a farmer will have to become a software expert to advise on software” (p. 1). Similarly, Cleave, Arku, and Chatwin (2019, p. 180) explore the roles and utility of place branding experts and suggest:

“Place branding, as with all place-based policymaking, requires an extensive knowledge of the municipality’s attributes. As a result, relying on consultants can compromise the policy development process, as there may be a lack of the in-depth local knowledge needed to develop substantive policy that truly reflect the area’s identity.”

Thus, branding professionals are criticized, but they are nevertheless influential and frequently used in city management. Far from simply being arbiters of logos or slogans, branding professionals are some of the most prominent trendsetters in the place branding field and are “often understood as the leading actors that influence local and national governments in (re)allocating resources and deploying specific image-related policies” (Goulart-Sztejnberg & Giovanardi, 2017, p. 425). In other words, brand experts and their norms for what constitutes good work are the authoritative characters of place branding, and therefore should not be ignored, but rather better understood (McCann & Ward, 2012).

3 Methodology

We pursue the method of studying professionals in their natural habitat – focusing on how they talk and interact – to gain an understanding of the culture that guides their actions. At a general level of methodology, this plays a central role in research traditions such as ethnomethodology and symbolic interactionism. As key proponents of these traditions have noted, “By analyzing how people talk to one another, one is directly gaining access to a cultural universe and its content of moral assumptions” (Silverman, 1993, p. 108; see also Baker, 2002). But this method has also been suggested as particularly relevant for studying the work of those who influence policy and work in public organizations, such as branders. McCann and Ward (2012), urban policy scholars, advise researchers to attend the places where branders learn and share information, stating “it is incumbent on researchers to be there [...] to gain a detailed appreciation of the practices through which policy actors draw on circuits of knowledge as they cobble together their policies and cities” (p. 49).

We thus attended one of those places where branders share information, the Nordic place branding conference. Observing the conference, we were inspired by another methodological principle, namely to pay attention to how the participants construct their practice, including the norms and values that underpin it (e.g. Rosen, 1988). In our specific case, this regards how the place branders 1) construct place branding expertise and 2) how they consequently construct place branding.

3.1 Data collection

Data collection took place at The Nordic Place Branding Conference in a European capital, at a conference center in a trendy neighborhood. The event featured 23 speakers with expertise in place branding from across Europe and over 200 attendees. The first two authors attended the day-long event. The conference, which started in 2017, is designed for place branders or other “private and public professionals working with investment promotion, economic development, talent attraction, and tourism” (NPBC, 2020, <https://nordicplacebranding.com>). The agenda, or purpose of the event, is to provide “actionable lessons from best practices examples of cities, regions, and countries that have done an outstanding and recognized work in making their place more attractive to their target groups and citizens” (NPBC, 2020, <https://nordicplacebranding.com>). The slogan for the annual event is, “creating better places for people and business” (NPBC, 2020), further stating that the conference is about making changes that will have a real impact. Although the question posed on the first page of the website, “Who takes responsibility for making better places?” (NPBC, 2020) appears to be open-ended, it is clear that place branders are at the helm of creating “real” changes to places, often insinuating that the work branders do is “placemaking.”

The full-day event consisted of a morning session with short, 20-minute presentations by city branding experts on topics such as how cities attract female employees, how companies can benefit from city branding, or using digital tools in place branding efforts. The afternoon session consisted of parallel sessions focusing on investment promotion and how cities can attract major investments; placemaking for attractive places, and building an international house for talent. A final session focused on 20-minute presentations on cities that have gained success from their branding efforts. Issues discussed included how to turn a small town into a world-famous destination, how to gain success via social media, and how to employ “stunts” such as Polar Bear Pitching or Branding Happiness.

The empirical material collected comprises about 60 pages of transcribed field notes from the conference observation, documents in the form of PowerPoint slideshows (including both texts, pictures, and movie clips) from all 23 presentations, and four word-file pages of tweets collected from #NPBC19. The two authors attending the conference separately took field notes (about 30 pages each), which were then compared and checked for accuracy and details. Also, documents about the conference as well as three articles from the place brander community’s magazine – *The Place Brand Observer: Place brand insights, strategies, stories and examples* – were collected to gain general insights into the nature of the event.

3.2 Data analysis

Our main basis for analysis was the field notes and PowerPoint slideshows from the observation of the conference. We started with an open reading of the notes, searching for overarching themes, in line with ideals of research traditions such as grounded theory (Charmaz, 2014) and ethnography (Prasad, 2018). Although, of course, many categorizations were possible, we found that the presentations could be divided very broadly into two groups based on the reaction of the audience: presentations perceived as “standard” in the sense that the audience displayed a relatively neutral reception (applauding politely, looking fairly but not overly interested, etc.), and presentations perceived as “outstanding” in the sense that the audience displayed clear enthusiasm (more passionate applause, smiling, nodding, etc.). The latter, “outstanding,” category was chosen for further analysis as a representation of what the place branding community perceives to be particularly skilled and competent practice while the “standard” category was chosen as a representation of what the community perceives to be normal and competent, but not outstanding.

According to our observation, only a few (3-4) presentations qualified for the “outstanding” category. Selecting one example for presentation in this paper was therefore fairly simple. We selected the presentation from “The Island” – an island in the northern hemisphere – because we perceived it to be the most appreciated one, and because it was rich in terms of detail. Practically all other presentations qualified for the “standard” category. Differently put, no presentations stood out as being perceived as bad in the sense that they were openly questioned. One presentation that had very little to do with branding – focusing on the development of connections between the city and its university – received mild applause and no questions were asked, but it was not disputed or criticized. As a result, the selection of a representative example from this category – i.e. the “illustrative reduction” of data (Rennstam and Wästerfors, 2018) – was somewhat more delicate. Since illustrative reduction aims to describe an identified phenomenon as clearly as possible (Rennstam and Wästerfors, 2018, p. 116), we picked the presentation from the “The Metropolis,” a major European city. This presentation was clearly received as competent but not outstanding – thus a sample of what can be understood as an accepted standard – while it also provided clarity by containing plenty of details about how the presenters had reasoned and acted when they branded The Metropolis. Also, The Metropolis presentation contained many of the elements that were also found in the other presentations, such as producing and showing movies and beautiful images.

After selecting these examples, we re-read them with a particular focus on identifying how the talk and interactions expressed norms and values about what constitutes “standard” and “outstanding” place branding expertise, respectively. When it comes to the former, we found – for reasons that will be communicated below – that the constitution of standard expertise is fruitfully understood through the concept of “mimicry,” while the constitution of outstanding expertise can be understood through the concept of “artistry.”

4 Findings

As indicated above, we identified that the branders expressed two types of norms for good place branding, which we conceptualize as “mimicry” and “artistry.” Broadly, mimicry implies competent but fairly standard use of branding practices that resembles many other branding initiatives. Artistry, in contrast, implies more creative displays of uniqueness and unexpected play with symbols and branding models. In the following, we will outline, discuss, and compare these two categories, which should be understood as two levels of expertise, where artistry is valued higher than mimicry by the branders. We present two illustrative sample presentations: one from what we call The Metropolis, representing mimicry, and another from The Island, representing artistry. As noted in the method section, the data from the examples are drawn from our notes from the actual presentations, as well as from the PPT-slides used by the presenters.

4.1 Mimicry: Skillful use of isomorphic language

Our first example illustrates how engaging in mimicry is a way of indicating place branding expertise. Mimicry implies a certain level of literacy in the sense of competent use of practices, terminology, and images that are accepted as legitimate in the community, while it also implies that this use is of a standardized character that resembles many other uses. There is thus an element of isomorphism in mimicry – it expresses communication through the same forms, using the same language, as almost everybody else. A consequence of this is that the content of the branding initiative is difficult to distinguish from other initiatives, and, therefore, the connection to the place it sets out to brand becomes vague. Considering that the context is branding, which is grounded in the ideal of constructing uniqueness, mimic place branding tends to produce platitudes rather than uniqueness. Thus, its function is to “conventionalize” and “establish what is normal” (Czarniawska and Joerges’ 1988, s. 174).

Our illustration of mimicry is a presentation of the branding of The Metropolis. The account below shows how two organizations – The Nation and The Metropolis – worked together to brand The Metropolis:

Two men in fashionable suits, Tom and Michael, enter the stage. One of them has previously worked with branding The Nation (i.e. the nation where The Metropolis is) and the other with branding The Metropolis, but now they have formed a joint organization. They begin by talking about the relationship between The Metropolis and The Nation. “The image of The Nation is founded in The Metropolis,” they say, and present The Metropolis is an “icon” that is important to The Nation, however stressing that the dependence is mutual. Although their talk mainly focuses on The Metropolis, they posit that The Metropolis and The Nation have the characteristics “openness and caring” in common.

When the two organizations became partners, one of the men says, they were “free to set the image of The Metropolis the way we want.” He says that they wanted to produce a branding strategy for The Metropolis and The Nation, which he explains like this:

“We set a common goal, what we want to change together, and we looked at the core values of The Nation and The Metropolis and focused on the openness of the two brands and the caring part of the two brands. So these became our two values.”

Let us stop the presentation here for an analytical comment. In the situation above, the two men enter the stage as expert members of the place branding community, invited to share their knowledge and experience of branding The Metropolis. Other members, the audience, are expected to listen and learn from their example. Relatedly, the title of the talk, “How The Metropolis and The Nation together hit the refresh button and created a new strategy to effectively manage place branding,” indicates that this is a success story to learn from. Their presentation is thus to be seen as an account of what competent place branders might do.

What we want to bring out from this first part of the talk is that a competent place brander can reduce complexity – a key activity in branding (e.g. Keller and Lehmann, 2006; Rennstam, 2013). In this case, the complexity reduction is done by unifying two different entities: The Metropolis and The Nation. In several ways, the branders indicate that The Metropolis is the essence of The Nation (“The image of The Nation is founded in The Metropolis”; The Metropolis is an “icon”). In addition, after the two branding organizations merged, any potential differences disappeared and they were “free to set the image of The Metropolis the way we want.” Place branding, in this account, is thus at the helm of “placemaking” by “setting” images of cities. And they set the image to be “openness and caring.” In other words, what is implicitly communicated is that a place brander can and should reduce complexity by taking two different entities (The Metropolis and The Nation), see the one in the other (although more The Metropolis in The Nation than the other way around) and identify a common denominator (openness and caring). Competent branders identify characteristics in a place and claim that they are the “essence” or “DNA” or “identity,” and communicate this to an external audience.

Tom and Michael continue by explaining how they, in addition to setting the image as “openness and caring,” found an additional etiquette for The Metropolis, namely The Metropolis as “the alternative.”

“One of the most important things,” they state, “was how to position ourselves with the target group so that they are attracted to us. Many countries want to attract the target group and this is what we call ‘the alternative’.” After making this statement Tom and Michael present a PowerPoint with a text intended to illustrate what they mean by “the alternative.” The text is framed by four images whose connection to the text is fairly loose: 1) a young-ish man with make-up (the artist Motoboy), sitting by the water looking at something unknown, 2) an abstract image that looks like lava and metal, 3) the rooftop of a house surrounded by trees, and 4) a cell phone taking a picture of a bonfire. One of the men reads the text out loud:

“The Metropolis and The Nation is the idea of something else. A continuous quest for the new which challenges the existing. Can design be made more democratic, what is food for new generations, can fashion become more sustainable or music more accessible? The Metropolis and The Nation is a creative culture that is based on an inclusive society, where nature has its given place and curiosity is driven by impressions from the outside world. This is the place to meet new perspectives and different ideas. The Nation and The Metropolis is the alternative.”

Tom and Michael present this as their “manifesto,” and point out that it took them 7-8 months “to really settle this.” After this settlement, they explain, “the work had to start” and they describe how the manifesto was used in practice. They do this by briefly describing that there is a “mastergroup” with people from both The Nation and The Metropolis and a marketing group whose main task is to be a “bridge” to the teams around the world: “we need to inspire them to do this,” Tom says.

Two things are worth pointing out regarding place branding mimicry here. First, Tom and Michael illustrate what might be called processual mimicry when presenting how they systematically worked to communicate an additional label (“the alternative”) for The Metropolis. They formulated the label and integrated it in a narrative of positively charged labels, intent on catching readers’ attention. Then they sent it to and inspired the “master group,” which was tasked to communicate the narrative to the teams around the world. This process is quite typical for branding as understood by strategic marketing (e.g. De Pelsmacker, et al, 2007), which indicates isomorphism in the process. The competent place brander can find a seemingly catchy, if not entirely clear, label (“the alternative”) and disseminate it.

Second, Tom and Michael illustrate mimicry when presenting the narrative. They indicate that competency implies attaching a positively charged terminology to the place to be branded. Notably, the vocabulary is positive but also *general*, in the sense that it is not related to anything specific in the place. “Openness,” “caring,” “challenging the existing,” “democratic,” “creative culture,” “inclusive society,” “curiosity” – the labels lack referents and therefore, arguably, lack meaning. It is clear that these labels signify something “good” – who can be against openness and caring? – but they could be applied to many cities and therefore “the alternative” is mimicking all other statements that

salute grand and positive ideologies. Nevertheless, composing a narrative such as this is presented as the activity of a competent place brander.

The high level of generality is further illustrated as the talk moves on. It never becomes clear what “the alternative” is or what it is an alternative to. Instead, Tom and Michael further describe how they produced communication around the term “openness” and the slogan “The Metropolis, the open city.” For instance, the term “value” is used without referent, but instead as a signifier of something good. They stress the importance of “values” and say that “We really feel that our USP is based on the value, so we created ‘The Metropolis the open city – an open invitation to lovers, haters and hesitators’.” “The Metropolis the open city” is a branding film, with images of various people in different situations in The Metropolis, where the message is that everybody is welcome, irrespective of who they are. A soft female voice speaks to viewers through the film:

“I don’t know who you are. Where you came from. Who you voted for. What your family name implies. If you’re a rebel. Or a conservative. I don’t know who you love. What you just can’t stand. If you’re rich, poor, or somewhat in between. If you’re a man, a woman, or somewhat in between [shows an image of a man, woman, and baby]. I don’t even know how you feel about me. If you love me, hate me, or haven’t made up your mind. You’re welcome anyhow. Just – as – you are [articulating]. With your dreams, beliefs, doubts, and preconceptions. Come visit me. I’m The Metropolis. The open city.”

The film is shown without much further comment. It is clear, of course, that the value communicated is “openness.” But its relation to The Metropolis is not addressed. It appears as the main message with showing the film is to display that they made a nice film (which they did, it is very beautiful). Again, the *generally* upbeat message – positively charged words (“welcome,” “come visit me,” “the open city”), and overall message (everybody’s welcome, “just – as – you are”) – is the main achievement.

As the speakers move on, they reflect on the generality of the notion of “openness” in an exchange that perhaps most explicitly underlines how mimicry is constructed as a basis for place branding expertise.

After the film, Tom moves on to describe one of their other activities, “social listening,” which means investigating what people are writing about The Metropolis. Tom brings up one example from a commentator (on social media) that they “listened” to. The commentator had noted that Copenhagen also brands themselves as “open.” Tom shows a PowerPoint slide with a clip from a social media page where he responded to the commentator: “Open is not our brand. It’s an initiative by us and The Nation aiming to highlight the openness of The Metropolis as a travel destination, and in this spirit inviting people from around the world to come visit. There can’t be too many open-minded cities, right?” The commentator had replied in a positive tone, writing that both Copenhagen and The Metropolis are really open cities, adding “same as my hometown Amsterdam.” Tom summarizes this interaction with the comment: “So we realized we did the right thing.”

The men then wrap up the talk by rhetorically asking themselves what they learned from this: “I think it’s communication, as always,” says Tom. “Making sure that no questions are left unanswered.” The moderator thanks the speakers and moves on to the next activity, a panel discussion.

This last passage again expresses how competent place branding does not need to entail communication of something specific about a place. Instead, the point is that the labels used are perceived as “good.” Tom succeeds in his enterprise of creating such a perception. The commentator indicates that Amsterdam and Copenhagen base their branding on the same value (openness) as The Metropolis, which Tom translates into a good thing in terms of branding (“there can’t be too many open-minded cities, right?”) and an indication that they are indeed competent (“So we realized we did the right thing”). It remains unclear how the same as many other cities (open) can be the alternative, and the relationship between the term and the place is further downplayed. Instead, selecting and communicating a generally positive term that mimics two other cities is constructed as a sign of expertise.

Our point, of course, is not that the terminology used is “bad” or that The Metropolis is not open to tourists. The point is to show how place branding expertise is associated with the ability to use a vocabulary that is positively charged but lacks reference to anything unique about the place and therefore could be used to describe many cities. It is a vocabulary that largely consists of platitudes, in the sense of terms that help the community and its audience recognize what is normal and conventional (Czarniawska and Joerges, 1988). Thus, the audience recognizes itself: the other branders applaud the presentation and the commentator on social media is satisfied with the message that open is a good thing, generally. But as a descriptor of the place, the terminology borders to what is sometimes, somewhat pejoratively, referred to even in academic discourse as “bullshit.” Bullshit, according to Frankfurt (quoted in Spicer, 2018, p. 6), implies “‘a lack of connection or concern for the truth’ and a remarkable ‘indifference to how things really are’.” Our point is not to state that the branders *are* bullshitters, however. (We know little about their thoughts and intentions, having only observed their performances in this case.) The point is to show that the norm of mimicry – which includes

indifference to how things really are but attention to mimicking things that sound good – is reproduced in the presentation as part of what place branding expertise is about. The indifference, thus, resides in the norms surrounding the practice of place branding, not in the individuals. The norm of mimicry tends to lure branders away from the nature of the object of their activity and make them more or less indifferent to how things are there (in The Metropolis in this case). Instead, they become engaged in a practice where basically any positively loaded fragment of a place can be singled out and woven into attractive narratives that can be used to label virtually any city. As a result, the place branding practice, ironically, becomes detached from the practice in the place it is meant to signify.

4.2 Artistry: The creative play with words and place-branding methods

A second way in which we found place branding professionals constructed expertise was through their display or manifestation of what we call artistry. This goes beyond place mimicry and the simple use of positive appeals. Artistry entails creative displays of uniqueness and unexpected play with symbols that are constructed as particularly outstanding by the place branding community. At the Nordic Place Branding conference, this manifested itself in the audience's active and positive response to the presenters, containing laughter, "ooooo expressions," and energetic applause. These presenters became the conversation piece of the conference.

We present one example from The Island (an island in the northern hemisphere) which was literally about being put on the map. This is how the initiative was presented at the conference:

The moderator welcomes Astrid to the stage with the words, "What do you do when a small place such as The Island is not even on Google maps? How to turn that into an advantage, through viral marketing success?" After this introduction, Astrid starts quite abruptly by showing a short film about a place (The Island) where Google street view had not been, and the branders created "Google Sheep View" in response.

The film begins with the question, "How do you create awareness of one of the smallest, most isolated, and beautiful places in the world? A place where Google street view hasn't even been?" It then tells – in a kind of joking manner, for instance including well-placed sheep mäh-ing – about how a small branding team at The Island managed to create such awareness. They started a campaign called "Google sheep view." They mounted a 360-degree camera on the back of a sheep, let the sheep walk around on the island, uploaded the images and films to Google's web, documented the process, and sent out a press release together with Google cardboard VR-glasses. "Within an hour, it was all over the news. And, it went viral from there," says a deep male voice, while the film shows a rapidly increasing counter of the number of shares. The speaker moves on: "We engaged our followers and maintained the buzz with new videos and activities. Each time we asked our followers to help, and hashtag #wewantgooglestreetview." Many people did this, Google liked the project and decided to come to The Island and provided the branders with cameras. "We were proud to announce: Mission accomplished. And then we went viral again!" [as a result of the fact that Google actually came to The Island] The film shows a flow of news clips from all over the world, reporting on the sheep-view initiative, and the speaker says, "we reached more than 40,000 as many as live on the islands [showing a counter, counting up to +2 billion]. Everyone was mentioning sheep view." Then the speaker informs that most hotels sold out after the campaign, and "In the end, we didn't just get Google street view to The Island. We got the whole world's attention." The film ends with sheep running over beautiful meadows, and a "mäh."

The audience, which has previously shown only a mild interest in the presentations, is very excited about this. The film receives big applause and people are smiling, laughing. Astrid then talks about how The Island has a "unique DNA" by being in the middle of the ocean, and she shows a new film with beautiful scenery from the islands (fisherman, mobile phone, a man running among foggy hills, hiking and drinking creek water, dramatic cliffs, man abseiling from a cliff, sailing boats, drinking schnapps out of fresh mussel shells, swimming in a lake, seafood, champagne, beautiful people, accompanied by a pretty woman with a guitar singing, ending with the message: "The Island: Unspoiled, Unexplored, Unbelievable"). Astrid explains that they needed to set themselves apart from all other destinations and came up with "Unspoiled, Unexplored, Unbelievable."

Last, Astrid moves on to the title of the talk, "What comes after viral success?" and replies, "Hopefully more viral success. Because we have created a method. We *do* rather than tell. Storydoing rather than storytelling. The media will pick up our stories anyway. And because we now have a stronger relationship with international media and influencers, we come out with new stuff." She ends by stating that the lesson learned by this would be that if they – a very small organization of only 5 people – could do this, "then anyone can do it. It's a question of ideas and creativity. ... If there is one thing I wish to communicate, then it is to start from your DNA, stick to it, and do rather than tell. Thank you."

There is a new round of applause from the audience, and the moderator moves on.

In contrast to The Metropolis example, this place branding initiative is considered not only competent but both creative and unique by the audience – no one had put a street view camera on a sheep before. Artistic competence is accomplished by unexpectedly combining subjects (sheep), with objects, (cameras and digital platforms) to record, project, and spread The Island’s authentic uniqueness to the rest of the world. Also, as the sheep themselves are a natural feature of The Island’s milieu, their “sheep view” may provide further authenticity in terms of how The Island is perceived by others. Through their place branding initiative, The Island managed to accomplish impressive results in terms of recognition and number of visitors.

Artistry is also accomplished by demonstrating to the audience how to creatively use and combine different branding metaphors and branding models. First, the presenter displays a distillation process (c.f. Bertilsson and Rennstam, 2018), in which the rich traits of The Island are boiled down to a limited set of unique core brand characteristics of the place: “Unspoiled, Unexplored, Unbelievable.” Astrid uses the metaphor of DNA to describe how The Island can be reduced to its core – three common denominators representing the entirety of the place. The concept of DNA is part and parcel of the so-called “Mindshare branding paradigm,” which seeks to create brand value by placing and owning brand associations in customers’ and consumers’ minds (Holt, 2004).

Second – by mobilizing followers to snap and upload their pictures and movies of The Island, thereby attempting to fill the place brand with additional and unique content – the presenter combined a distillation process with what Bertilsson and Rennstam (2018) refer to as “branding as platforming.” Here branding is understood to involve the design of interactive platforms in a manner that mobilizes and organizes consumers into becoming active co-creators of the content and meaning of brands to produce a higher brand value.

Third, The Island’s place branding campaign contained features of a third branding paradigm, Viral branding (Holt, 2004). The initiative was designed and implemented through social media in a way that allowed it to spread like a virus, creating a buzz in the media landscape and thereby generating extensive public attention. Artistic place branding expertise (as constructed at the conference), thus seems to involve the inventive and creative play with features from three different branding paradigms – distillation, platforming, and viral branding – mixed into one integrated place branding initiative.

In the later part of the presentation, Astrid continues to demonstrate artistry. This time by introducing and labeling a new place branding method: “storydoing.” This, of course, is a play with the established method of storytelling. Although her presentation is a bit unclear about how storydoing is actually different from storytelling, she attempts to construct their performed activities as inventive, less expected, and less standardized to the audience.

In light of the displays of artistry in her presentation, the way Astrid ends the presentation appears somewhat surprising. When she is to sum up the talk and present “lessons learned” she does not mention anything about creativity but retreats to “mimicry.” Now she turns to platitudes: if only five of us could do this “then anyone can do it,” it is only about “ideas and creativity,” “start from your DNA,” “do rather than tell.” She wraps up in a similar way as The Metropolis-presenters, indicating that she also masters the conventional vocabulary of the profession.

In short, the excerpt from Astrid’s presentation shows how what we call artistry is constructed as legitimate place branding expertise. Artistry is displayed by unexpected combinations of subjects and objects (sheep and cameras), a combination of branding models, and tweaking of conventional branding methods (storytelling – storydoing), and it is accomplished by the enthusiastic responses from the audience. The platitudes used to wrap up the talk depart from this, indicating that the same initiative may contain elements of both artistry and mimicry.

5 Discussion

We have shown how place branding professionals, through their talk and interactions, provide clues to what they consider to be good branding. Specifically, we conceptualized this process as the construction of place branding expertise. We found two levels of expertise – mimicry and artistry – whose meaning and relation to place branding scholarship we discuss further below.

5.1 Mimicry and artistry as legitimate place branding expertise

Although there is a hierarchy between the two levels – artistry is constructed as better than mimicry – both levels are thought to signify practices that qualify as legitimate expertise. Thus, mimicry and artistry are not to be understood as ends of a continuum, but rather as legitimate levels on a scale on which place branding expertise, as constructed by the place branders themselves, can be put.

Mimicry refers to place branding expertise of a fairly standardized type, which mimics already institutionalized ideas, models, procedures and practices of the place branding profession. It thus celebrates the use of platitudes – i.e. conventionalized and normalized terminology – which is most clearly expressed in our data when being similar to other places is taken as a sign of “being right,” a phenomenon also observed by Riza (2015). Mimicry thereby reproduces and

reinforces the mainstream dimension of the place branding profession. In contrast, the other level of expertise, artistry, is constructed as that which stands out as particularly unique and brilliant. Through the unexpected play with symbols and creative combination of branding models (viral branding and mindshare branding) and methods (mounting a camera on an animal to display the authentic nature of place), almost magical (positive) effects may be achieved. In short, mimicry signifies competent place branding while artistry signifies outstanding place branding.

These two levels of expertise – in the sense that they are invited, applauded, and generally treated as competent or outstanding – express and reproduce norms about what constitutes good and legitimate place branding practice by the place branding community. Mimicry expertise reproduces the norm that a place brander should be proficient in supplying general and positively charged images of places, but that the connection to the specificities of the place are of lesser importance. This breathes superficiality rather than substance but resonates with Kavaratzis (2004) and Kavaratzis and Ashworth's (2005) view of place branding as a practice dealing foremost with the image-making of places, and less with developing the unique characteristics of a place. Under the norm of mimicry, it appears most important that representations are appealing and attractive, and that they conform to the cherished values and buzzwords of the place branding community, such as openness, caring, democratic and inclusive (cf. Florida, 2002). In contrast to mimicry, artistry defines what the place branding profession considers to stand out as brilliant and inventive. Artistry suggests that brilliant place branding, in addition to mastery of the mimicking aspects, entails the creative capability to combine branding methods and symbols in unique ways based on a selection of a unique feature of the place. This level of place branding expertise generates awe and respect from other professionals within the community.

5.2 The dark side of mimicry and artistry

Both mimicry and artistry contain a “bright” side in the sense that they may attract people to the places they brand. Mimicry may do this mainly by presenting detached but appealing images and narratives, while artistry may do it by adding a creative and/or witty touch and a connection to something unique about the place. But they also have a “dark” side, which is particularly related to what they obscure and deflect attention from.

Processes that *surround* the production of goods and services may obscure the conditions of value production. This is known from critical management studies. For instance, employees' ways of manipulating management to fill production quotas (Burawoy, 1979) or organizations' emphasis on having fun or “just being yourself” (Fleming & Sturdy, 2011) may deflect attention from the conditions under which value is produced on the shop floor. Lately, attention has been directed toward branding as one of those processes that obscure the conditions of value production. That is, branded messages such as “Facebook is about mutuality and reciprocity” hide the condition of value production that individuals' private lives and interests need to be exploited for Facebook to make money (Mumby, 2016).

Our analysis draws on these insights although we do not focus on external branded messages but on how branding professionals construct “good branding.” These constructions are important because they make up the soil in which the branded messages grow. Mimicry and artistry provide insight into what the place branders are interested in, expressing norms that value repetition of aesthetic images and appealing narratives, and witty play with symbols. Arguably, these practices may produce market value if they attract tourists and profitable citizens (often referred to as “the talent” by the presenters at the conference), but obscure the conditions of “civic” value production – value measured by the extent that it contributes to the common good (Boltanski & Thévenot, 2006) – in the cities. Differently put, the conditions of producing civic value – such as management of unemployment, criminality, planning, pollution, and inclusion – are obscured by the positivity that characterizes the norms for good place branding. Positivity can be hard to argue against (open city, funny furry animals, etc.), which may make artistry even more problematic than mimicry. Although artistry maintains some connection to the place, it encourages the development of witty and inventive communication that can effectively draw attention away from the core issues of the city.

A key risk with both mimicry and artistry – having in common that they deflect attention from the complexities of the places – is that they support the *separation* of branding practices from the core value-creating practices in the city, which is something that previous authors such as Anholt (2008) and Cleave et al (2019) warn against. This is indicated in our data most explicitly by The Metropolis's branders stating that “[we were] free to set the image of The Metropolis the way we want.” Our study thus underscores how place branding practices may become self-referential systems (cf. Kaneva, 2018) that start to “live their own lives” with their own value criteria, developed in the place branding community rather than in the broader community of city management.

The construction of mimicry and artistry as good place branding also indicates that the place branding profession does not seem to worry too much about changing branding models from the corporate context (e.g. Kavaratzis, 2004) when applying branding to a civic place branding context. This increases the risk of separation. There is little in the presentations or in mimicry and artistry indicating that the specificities of public organizations are taken into consideration. Somewhat bluntly put, branding cities seems to build on similar ideals as branding toothpaste. This is despite previous literature indicating the problems of modeling branding in public organizations on corporate branding, particularly emphasizing the problems associated with projection of singular and simple images of democratic public organizations (such as cities), which are ripe with complexity (e.g. Eshuis & Edwards, 2013). Thus, the place branding expertise we identified in this study provides further support for the concerns expressed by some researchers that place

branding professionals tend to lack or disregard in-depth knowledge about the complexities of the cities they are branding.

To conclude, the ways in which the branders are constructing expertise risks to draw their attention away from what is considered to be the core problems of a place or a city. Our paper provides clues to how this happens by offering insight into the backstage of this knowledge production, that is, to place branding strategists' tacit expertise (Hackley, 1999). This may be useful input in the work of combining the knowledge of place branding and general city management, aiming to move communication closer to the problems related to cities. One suggestion, or outcome, echoing Anholt (2008) is that branding experts who want to sell communication to cities need to have in-depth knowledge of cities and their problems. We should not deny that place branders have some core competencies when it comes to precision in communication with citizens and other stakeholders, and sometimes it may not even hurt to be a little bit funny and creative, which, arguably, communicators are more trained to be. However, in an ideal world, "placemakers" would be citizens and city managers with important civic insights.

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