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THE FLÂNEUR IN THE WAGON HOME ON THE HILL: AN EXPLORATION OF PRECEDENT AND PLACE BRAND IDENTITY AS SOCIAL CONSTRUCT

ABSTRACT

The case study plays out in a tiny coastal enclave when a landowner invites an acquaintance with a wagon home to temporarily locate the structure to their empty plot. Residents and landowners raise questions about the appropriateness and legal validity of such living arrangements and ultimately, for the authors, raises the question of community identity. The article explores the phenomenon of the flâneur as a persona, freedom camping, and of marginalisation in space and place through the lens of place brand identity. Considering the notion of place brand, the article explores the situation in the context of habitus and the historical sense of villagers about their enclosed or secluded environment, home, and sense of social belonging. The qualitative thematic analysis revealed three dominant themes namely the disturbance, or threat to habitus, place brand identity as delineated in the interactions of a messaging community group, and inclusion or exclusion of the precedent from the community. The theoretic argument that culminates in the positioning of the ideal social construct suggests that habitus positions the place brand beyond commonalities or variances in its physical features and social demography. The authors conclude that the unique blend of place brand identity and habitus can evolve and confirm itself continuously, with the potential to either facilitate the intersectionality, diversity, and inclusiveness of the place brand identity as the sum of its habitus, or risk is demise. Place brand identity is inextricably defined by its habitus, and direct challenges to social exclusion and the control of common narratives by actively promoting inclusive practices might then also point to a healthy place brand habitus.

Keywords: place branding, habitus, place brand identity, inclusivity, social exclusion, healthy place brand, flaneur

INTRODUCTION

A tiny coastal enclave with an avowed focus on environmental issues and the interests of the immediate community provides the scenario within which the authors describe a particular event in the context of place branding. A landowner and full-time resident invites an acquaintance with a wagon home to locate the structure – self-made of recycled wood on a disused truck with wheels but no engine – on their adjacent property. The arrangement is supposed to be temporary until the guest finds a more permanent solution.

Upon noticing this structure for alternative and unusual living arrangement, parked and levelled under trees on the otherwise vacant property, a small number of residents and landowners become active on the local community social media group and raise questions about the appropriateness and legal validity of such living arrangements. They voice their opinions and concerns regarding aesthetics, lifestyle choices, safety issues, municipal and other bylaws. Critically, they also raise the question of community identity. The authors account for this scenario through the relatively new phenomenon of the flâneur as a persona, freedom camping, and finally, of marginalisation in space and place through the lens of place brand identity.

The issue is clearly complex and multifaceted. About the dynamics of a place, the comments of social scientist and geographer Doreen Massey (1991: 8) come to mind, "Clearly places do not have single, unique 'identities'; they are full of internal conflicts."

A FLÂNEUR WANDERS ONTO THE SCENE

The philosopher and cultural critic Walter Benjamin's seminal work "Der Flâneur", published in 1967 in the intellectual journal *Neue Rundschau* claimed the original concept of a flâneur as that of an author exploring physical spaces or philosophical theories. While subsequent literature also widened the concept to include artists such as visual artists, other subcategories also emerged over time. Theorists have since attached labels such as the eco-flâneur (Hawkins 2009) and, even more recently, the cyborg-flâneur (Bayes 2018).

For the art historian and writer Tom McDonough (2002: 101), the flâneur as "solitary urban stroller" disturbs the social status quo, "which registers so effectively the tenuous nature of urban order; the way that our daily routines are always subtended by other possibilities — the outlawed, the prohibited, the unauthorized uses of the public realm." In this scenario under discussion, a new inhabitant enters the village with a home built from recycled material — visually offensive to some; an eco-flâneur with the professional calling of an eco-artist. Even twenty years later, that "moment" pinpointed by McDonough is still a valid amplification of the conjunction between critical theory in sociology, aesthetic practice, architecture, and brand identity of the place. This current "urban stranger" under discussion instantly becomes "the object of anxiety" (*ibid*.). In the context of Massey's (1991) description of time-space compression, the new inhabitant may be defined as a modern-day street-smart flâneur who simply decided to live in their own locally produced tiny home erected from reused material in the

process of producing landscape art with a global contemporary appeal. It indeed presents, as Massey (1991: 4) claims, a "highly complex social differentiation".

Høyer Leivestad (2020: 3) also reminds us that "[w]e often tend to forget that the types of houses in which we live are critical to the reproduction of class relationships and inequality" and that many people do not consider mobile homes legitimate dwellings. Such a disregard piles another layer of social differentiation onto an owner of a home on (although static) wheels. What does "home" mean, if even a flâneur has a place as such?

FREEDOM CAMPING, THE NOTION OF A HOME, AND ALLEMANNSRETTEN

Duval (2004: 87) refers to the concept of "home" as "a socially-constructed marker or signpost that is more or less designed to help align and ultimately represent an individual's allegiances and cultural comfort with a specific, although some might argue static, space". Philosophically, he claims, "[h]ome is therefore cognitive, but relationally spatial and temporal within that cognition" (Duval 2004: 88). Therefore, home is where you believe and experience it.

The lifestyle and home of the flâneur as related here is a reference to freedom camping, a form of "nomadic urbanism" (Caldicott *et al*. 2018) that is still common practice in some areas of Europe, Canada and New Zealand (Espiner 1994; Aston 2019; Høyer Leivestad 2020; Lonergan 2020; Seeler & Lueck 2021). Consider also their European roots, wherein Allemannsretten, the right of every man to roam is an incontrovertible right (Buckley *et al*. 2008; Øian & Skogen 2016; Seeler & Lueck 2021). Although the principle is applied with slight differences in the various European regions, the main point of departure is that every person has an inarguable right to travel and set up camp next to roads, or on uninhabited land, and where owners of plots have granted permission to do so. Local council permission is never sought or required, and contravening bylaws are seldom invoked. In South Africa, though, rules and regulations are inconsistent and sometimes, covert. "Wild camping in South Africa may sound exotic but is almost always illegal. It's risky and potentially dangerous to figure out if you're trespassing on private land or a public area under the control of a legal municipality" (Stephan & Eric 2020).

The temporary home in question was stationed on a privately owned plot, but the by-laws of the city still apply. The flâneur and family might be mobile at heart, with every intention to keep moving as free spirits, but many members of the community were not convinced. Although the structure is built on wheels, it is inherently immobile, and needs some assistance from a larger truck to move it to another location. It can be safely said that this structure, since it was built on a non-automotive truck which is in itself not mobile, can be deemed a "temporary building" as indicated by the National Building Regulations of South Africa (Swift 2013). According to Swift (2013), "if you want to erect a temporary building, first of all you need permission to do so, and secondly, you will have to demolish or dismantle it within the time frame that is deemed to be 'temporary' for that particular structure." Although by-laws vary slightly

among various municipalities, the general rule persists: if an owner wants to erect a structure, even if it is temporary, prior permission must be granted by the municipality in question (Swift 2013). It is exactly this nature of the temporary home that grated some community members the most.

PLACE BRAND, HABITUS, MARGINALISATION, AND PARTICIPATION: WHAT BINDS, AND WHAT DIVIDES US?

Theorists note that the place brand, like other brand formations such as the product, service, corporate, and the person brand, exists as a social construct with a particular identity that involves a constellation of associations over and above its physical attributes (Berrada 2018; Ahmad & Tuan Zaki 2021; Pereira *et al*. 2021). Therefore, place brand thus signifies a sense of place as exhibited by its everyday "truth" — a particular essence that emerges from the ideas and sentiments associated with being or experiencing part of that space (Swanson *et al*. 2017; Nogué & de San Eugenio Vela 2018; Baker 2019). It is the full experience of the place brand that confirms its unique and compelling identity and thus its authentic nature (Spence & Rushing, in Hsu 2017). By association and reputation, it then contains a distinctive promise and a normative and moral core, as posited by Bhargava and Bedi (2021). As the standard saying goes, a brand is a promise kept, rather than a promise made.

Compared to other brand formations, it can be argued that the somewhat tenuous nature of the existing social order extends in particular to the place brand. The everyday lived realities, allegiances, and cultural comforts of the individual scale up in complexity, for the place brand represents a multidimensional ecosystem of constituents, possible linkages, perceptions, and networks of association (Duval 2004; Schucksmith 2012; Kapferer 2013; Bellini & Pasquinelli 2016). The Airbnb brand-business model evidences the social influences of its place brand hosts to seamlessly support the company brand purpose: "we believe people belong, anywhere". The brand-business model enjoys a wide compass as it empowers hosts to accommodate travellers in their exploration of place on the one hand yet leaves room in certain territories to assist displaced refugees and frontline workers during times of crisis. The Airbnb premise and promise is to share and sustain that unique sense of belonging that can and should be experienced in a particular place, or as Aitken and Campelo (2011) define it, the heart of the place brand as created and shared by its people and its culture.

The initial and seemingly basic public responses to the flâneur in the wagon home on the hill – specifically and repeatedly expressed as "a precedent", a disturbance, if not actually a threat to habitus, caught the attention of the authors. Such descriptions become important when one gauges the heart of the place brand and its communal sense of belonging (Aitken & Campelo 2011). The seminal work of the French sociologist and philosopher Pierre Bourdieu, "Outline of the theory of practice, structure and the habitus", introduces us to the concept of habitus and describes it as "the universalizing mediation which causes an individual agent's practices, without either explicit reason or signifying intent, to be none the less 'sensible' and 'reasonable'" (Bourdieu 1977: 79).

The set of meanings of each construct is based on a communal understanding of how-being-in-the-world (Heidegger [1924] 1992). The how leads to particular ways of doing things in that place, which is linked to the reasons they are done in that particular way, and moreover, why they have cultural significance. To understand what the constructs are, how they work, and why they are experienced and performed in that way is to understand the habitus of the place (Bourdieu 1986; Campelo *et al*. 2014: 161).

It seems that habitus or the physical embodiment of social awareness and relatedness, situate a place brand above and beyond commonalities or variances in physical characteristics and social demography to preserve its unique essence in lived experience, its embodiment of connectedness. Thus considered, the place brand and its community's unique perceptions and attitudes shape a perceived relatedness or social connectedness in experiencing or being part of the place brand – a sense of belonging and civic consciousness (Mehta 2014; Probst 2019; Yeoman 2019; Ahmad & Tuan Zaki 2021). It then appears that it is the composition of the unique characteristics of the healthy place brand, the daily lived experience and the genuine embodiment of social connectedness that enables it to remain intact when its well-being is affected by changes in its conditions (Ahmad & Tuan Zaki 2021).

Any guidance or principled approach to place and destination branding would therefore always have to be mindful that, if common core constructs exist—as we suggest in this article, the analysis of these constructs must recognize unique sets of permutations that reveal particular expressions of a place. These expressions are understood, experienced, and represented as habitus (Campelo *et al*. 2014: 156).

Habitus as a personal or collective history turned into a social nature (Nowicka 2015) forms the theoretical foundational explanation why a small community's place brand identity would subconsciously be exclusionist. In other words, the unspoken way it has always been. Considering the notion of place brand (Mehta 2014; Probst 2019; Yeoman 2019; Ahmad & Tuan Zaki 2021), the authors ascribe it to habitus and the historical sense that villagers might have about their enclosed or secluded environment, home, and sense of social belonging. Where choices may be exercised, the place brand contains and attracts a certain social nature, a type of social connectedness or civic consciousness, and by the same token as Bergvall-Kareborn *et al*. (2015) suggest, the place also shapes its deep relatedness. The longer they remain, the more residents internalise and subscribe to the habitus of the place brand. An outsider disrupting an established social nature is thus excluded until a community actively embraces them with established shared knowledge and assistance.

Madanipour *et al*. (2012: 193) define social exclusion as combining "the lack of access to resources, to decision making, and to common narratives". Although the flâneur in this case scenario has been economically included (being part of the lively local trading market, for example), the place brand seems to have marginalised them in a civic sense (by exercising disapproval by way of complaints within the community, to the police, fire prevention services, and social services). The danger, Madanipour *et al*. (2012: 189) say, is that such a divide creates an unbalanced environment in which the social exclusion of groups or individuals from the larger society may not

only be harmful to the individual but also to the wider community, since the talents and/or meaningful contributions of the individual concerned are nullified. Activism to exclude "the other" is thus a waste of valuable resources that could have benefited the community on many levels.

Although the objections and even in some instances the outright condemnation of allowing the wagon home on the vacant plot of land did not reveal serious or widespread malicious intent among the online messaging community group that was studied, the disturbance of place brand habitus, as the event reveals, opened the door to distrust and animosity by the members of the community.

RESEARCH ETHICS

The researchers and authors are members of the place brand and are also exposed to the open online messaging community group. Thus, self- and collaborative-correcting mechanisms of high order were practiced while conducting this research. The motivation to explore perceptions about the place brand and the embodiment of social connectedness or habitus while confronted by a change in its conditions (Ahmad & Tuan Zaki 2021) provided the impetus for the research and remains the central principle of fidelity (Scanlon & Habib, in Bhargava & Bedi 2021). Above all, the unit of analysis was strictly limited to a thematic analysis of responses in the open online community group within the defined period.

The social system under study, in other words the place brand habitus as expressed through its open online messaging community group, exists as a voluntary association of purposeful members who exercise personal choices, express their views, and partake in deliberative discussions (Colom 2021). Nevertheless, and with due care, the place brand, all anecdotes, and verbatim statements were anonymously reported, and serve simply to represent descriptions of the place brand and provide the context for the online messaging community. Such statements support the thematic analysis to enhance interpretation and understanding of the phenomenon and to guide readers and researchers in interpreting and applying findings and insights.

THEMATIC ANALYSIS

The place brand under scrutiny enjoys a long-established and active open online messaging community group for all interested parties. This platform served as the data source for the defined period (30 October to 8 December 2021) and the described social event or trigger. The open online community is in many ways a disparate group — some members are permanent residents and single homeowners, while others reside in various parts of the world, moving back to the community for shorter or longer periods during the year. Frequent weekenders, general visitors, local trade, and outdoor enthusiasts represent all walks of life, cultural and religious denominations. As constituents of this place brand community, they also join in and participate in the messaging group. As a matter of record, and at the time of writing, the place brand, like its global counterparts, is still caught up in the aftermath of a global pandemic, yet analysis of the messaging has borne no evidence of Covid-19 as a variable of

influence. However, the impact of a global pandemic in the form of Covid-19 on place brand has to be noted. Medway *et al*. (2021) argue that place brand focus has turned inward during this period, amplifying the appreciation of place, the embeddedness, and sense of care, safety, and security, or conversely, the lack thereof.

The cycles of repeated reading and subsequent thematic analyses of responses were supported with a text reading and analysis tool (Voyant) to serve as a second gauge or correcting mechanism (Sinclair & Rockwell 2016). The findings of the thematic analysis are furthermore shared only in published format, following professional, academic and place brand practice. Due reflection showed that collaborating as a research team while undertaking a particular research purpose throughout all parts of the project essentially presented the central omnipresent self-correcting mechanism. The researchers implemented a systematic approach to the data analysis: data logging, data coding, and thematic analysis (Akinyode & Khan 2018).

Three dominant themes were constructed through the qualitative thematic analysis. Mainly, the disturbance, if not actual threat to habitus, contributed to an existential state or even a crisis in place brand identity. The community questioned its purpose and ethos from various angles. Secondly, place brand identity was clearly and firmly delineated in the interactions of the open online messaging community group. The language used resulted in unintentional division and labelling. The third theme dealt with the question and consequences of inclusion or exclusion of the "precedent" from the community. While some members tried to suggest solutions, the issues remained invariably, unresolved.

Who are we as a community?

Shock and horror

The dominant theme emerged as an existential state or even a crisis, where the responses on the open online messaging group confronted or interrogated the social trigger as well as the other views of community members in the context of their perceived place brand identity or habitus. It was notable that the social trigger was continuously referred to as a "precedent", often with reference as to how it could evolve into a threat to the future of the place brand community. Various statements to the effect were made that if the issue of the wagon home was not addressed, the "precedent" could indicate future developments to follow — crime is increasing and the community may encounter people who reside in our gardens en masse. The current or future threat of "the precedent" was presented mostly in the context of its possible impact on property values, or in terms of a call for the enforcement of laws and regulations.

If we allow this, we open ourselves to other squatters … and you start setting a precedent; Unfortunately, this will set a precedent and hoards will jump on the proverbial bandwagon; and My heart goes out to …, but to protect all properties against squatters I reported the matter to Law Enforcement.

In contrast, but equally evident of an existential crisis, there were immediate countervailing responses and views from other members on the community platform to those who had initially flagged the social trigger as a "precedent". These posts present a collective appeal to what is regarded as the established and communal place brand identity or habitus, to how the place brand has always been experienced in the past and how it could now be perceived by others.

The generosity shown to X is exactly the kind of generosity that makes Y such a special place; This so-called conscious living and kind-hearted community; We are and always have been a caring village; This is certainly not the friendly village vibe that once attracted people; In the past this kind of thing slipped by and yet somehow we all survived?; I want to carry on being proud of where I live; and Can we sleep at night knowing that, and is that the kind of "community" we want to live in?

Labels: objects, agents, and behaviours

'language feels a little nasty and aggro'

In this case scenario, place brand identity stood out clearly and firmly in the symbolic interaction in the open online messaging community group. Responses are richly detailed with social labelling to either qualify or classify the so-called "other" and to posit a different self and place brand identity. The social object and trigger were variously given labels as "precedent", a "monstrosity", "that thing", a "wreck" and a "spectacle", inviting counter-responses labelling the inhabitants as

… sweet, kind, lovely, a fantastic (parent), a hard worker and a special person.

One participant extended the following qualified view:

… perhaps the first step would be to invite X to join this XX group. I'm sure X has a voice, and we would like to hear it.

Three dominant respondent profiles emerged from the thematic analysis, and in each case offered a qualified self, and then the others by label. Proponents of the social trigger as a "precedent" and potential threat to the place brand predominantly qualified their views by referring to property and bylaws couched in factual terms. Where these views were not so qualified, more emotional responses were proffered, such as

… when some folks here take emotional shortcuts and invent and promote their own 'laws' as they go along.

Those community members who positioned themselves as constructive participants in this social debate mostly resisted to rely on their own perceptions of the place brand image.

… let's approach things in a friendly and constructive manner and get results that way and the balance between bylaws and compassionate community living can be achieved.

The third response group profile may be delineated by the personal mantras of some community members.

Peace out; Calma. Please. This is not healthy. Not necessary. Sit down, take a moment, breathe.

It is noteworthy that this group often labelled or reinforced their own or others' views by using emoticons, symbols of peace, prayer, and love.

That's what community is about. To help each other [emoticon-heart].

It is also noteworthy that this group was equally adept at employing divisive labels, sometimes referring to others as "keyboard warriors" or suggesting socioeconomic or sociocultural differences.

Your precious assets are not in danger over one visitor. Who's next, those of us economically challenged? Those who dress funny? Unvaccinated? and The village will always be divided by those who genuinely care and those who follow rules/laws and their own ideals. Have a lovely day further [emoticon-peace] [emoticon-balance].

Capital swirls, truths, and tipping points

One for all

In the case scenario, the three persona groupings and the collective existential challenge arose in constant engagement around the place brand identity of the community and how the community was supposed to act, react, or refrain from any action. Three tipping points or critical moments of qualitative shifts in assessing self and others occurred in the case scenario within a period of 40 days. All were characterised by conflicting views on "facts" or "truths", emotional language, calls for public apologies, and threats of legal action.

Nobody, absolutely nobody in X is above the law!; Your rant sounds like a lot of exaggerated bullshit to me…; Prove it with real facts please!; There are many people around the world who..; Just for the record…; You are a 100% correct…; Are we not all missing the point..; Surely X means Y, the only difference is…; and A rule for one should apply for all.

Participants made regular references to the interests of the collective place brand as the yardstick for addressing conflicting views, relative "truths" and ultimately, an attempt to uphold habitus.

… after all it is the community that will have your back when you are in need … something to think about.

However, despite the distinct and heated differences of opinion, the group members did not visibly leave the group or attempt to banish other members from the group. A handful of differing views emerged on two additional occasions but were met with little or no response from the wider online group. The place brand and its community had moved on, final responses mostly proposing codes of conduct.

I'm just wondering if there is an official X group that matters like this could be fairly and rationally considered and discussed with inclusive, representative inputs from all stakeholders?

The eco-flâneur freedom camper had also moved on as the new year got underway and the pre-established timeframe with the owners of the property had lapsed.

DISCUSSION AND INSIGHTS

The authors believe that the existential state or crisis in this case scenario, whether through a perceived threat to the future of the place brand community or through the collective appeal on an established and communal place brand identity or habitus, firmly positions the place brand as a social construct. The place brand under scrutiny exists within and beyond its unique physical features as an experience, mindful of its particular identity, its reputation, and by extension, its moral obligation. Allowing a stationary wagon home on a vacant plot of land did indeed also disturb the place brand habitus, the experience of this reality, and raised the social allegiances and complexities of responses in the various networks of association (Duval 2004; Schucksmith 2012; Kapferer 2013; Bellini & Pasquinelli 2016). In evidencing the state of unbalance, responses on the online community platform called on habitus, as perceived social connectedness and civic consciousness. Those responses in which a sense of established history was displayed also demonstrated the deep relatedness of an internalised and ascribed habitus that Bergvall-Kareborn *et al*. (2015) speak of.

The theoretic perspective of this article, admittedly developed as an argument that culminates in the positioning of the ideal social construct (a "healthy" place brand), suggests that habitus or the embodiment of social awareness and relatedness positions the place brand beyond commonalities or variances in its physical features and social demography. In this case the place brand's composition of unique features, daily lived experience and genuine embodiment of social connectedness seemingly enabled it to remain intact when the wellbeing of habitus was confronted by changes in conditions. However, it is noteworthy that the place brand, in its state of disturbance symbolically expressed as its lived experience, habitus, and moral obligation on the open online messaging community group, gave rise to much labelling from all three profile groups. The tipping points or critical moments of qualitative shifts in assessing self and others were also characterised by conflicting views about "facts" or "truths", emotional language, calls for public apologies, and even threats of legal action. The three persona groupings also engaged equally and constantly as to how the community was supposed to act, react, or refrain from any action.

However, given the thematic analysis, the prevailing references and calls to the interests of the collective place brand habitus as the yardstick for addressing conflicting views, relative "truths", and attempts to uphold its sense of social connectedness remained in this case scenario. Consequently, the authors note the discussion of perspectives on current social media research by Dwivedi *et al*. (2021), flagging the inherent human nature to seek informational, intellectual, social, or cultural capital; to exist and function as empowered individuals, with agency, under conditions of change; and to be able to move forward and to create capital. The authors of this article conclude that the unique blend of place brand identity or habitus as normative and moral code can evolve and confirm itself continuously in a community social media group. Critically, the potential is there to either facilitate the intersectionality, diversity, and inclusiveness of the place

brand identity as the sum of its habitus, or risk is demise – in other words, a sense of togetherness and belonging may be able to emerge, or alienation may occur by stark contrast. Direct challenges to social exclusion and the control of common narratives by actively promoting inclusive practices might then also point to a healthy place brand habitus.

As stated, the eco-flâneur freedom camper has moved on. Issues such as a lapsed timeframe for habitation, pressure from officialdom and inhabitants, the social nature of the solitary urban stroller, the experience of the place brand habitus, or all the above are outside of the scope of this research. That the home is where experience and belief locate it, considering the nature of the flâneur and shifts in place brand identity or habitus, merits further exploration.

CONCLUSIONS

For the human geographer Doreen Massey (1991: 7), the specificity of place is "not some long internalised history" but a "particular constellation of social relations, meeting and weaving together at a particular locus" and therefore, not only connected by a physicality but continuously interconnected "as articulated moments in networks of social relations and understandings".

This article posits an aligned perspective with a focus on place brand identity. Although limited to exploratory thematic analysis of the responses of a single place brand online to a particular experience in time, this article concludes that a sense of belonging in the lived world forms the social tissue of place brand identity. It is this place brand's unique features, daily experiences, genuine social connectedness, and civic consciousness that positions it purposefully. Thus, place brand identity is inextricably defined by its habitus. And it is place brand habitus that is alerted when conditions change. When place brand habitus acts on change, it introduces the social triggers and shapes the tipping points. The habitus of the healthy place brand — its unique characteristics, essence in the lived experience and embodiment of connectedness would then also define, by extension, its civic obligation and the practice of social inclusion.

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