



Towards a contemporary research agenda for island branding: developments, challenges, and dynamics

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Abstract

This opinion paper aims at suggesting a research agenda for contemporary place branding by presenting developments, challenges and dynamics of the field based on meta-analysis of relevant literature. It is high time place branding is identified as a significant tool for exercising contemporary public administration. In order to achieve this scope, it is mandatory to advance the theoretical understanding of the field by building on existing knowledge and models like Hankinson's and by incorporating cross-disciplinary knowledge from other relevant fields. Therefore, in this conceptual paper the authors attempt a critical review of the existing bibliography and professional reports in order to contribute to the creation of a regime of knowledge production, to group some key findings about selected gaps of the field and assess whether such analysis can reveal the need to identify new potential research paths. Building on existing cross-discipline theoretical foundations, adopting a conceptual approach, the authors aim at (a) urging readers—especially practitioners and scholars—to move beyond towards investigating more challenging and intriguing research gaps like the need to examine more alternative research units than cities like island and insular areas and (b) proposing to elaborate more on the relationships between concepts like tourism, sustainable development, place branding and islandness.

Keywords Place branding dynamics · Tourism · Sustainable development · Islandness

Introduction

Globalization has changed the way locality is viewed, hence leading to a new era for places, products and even experiences. In addition, the past decades several changes have occurred and abrupt crises like the Covid19 pandemic have emerged that impose us to rethink how places and destinations are managed internationally, regionally, and locally and to generally reflect on mass tourism model that has been prevailing around the world for decades. Given this necessity, and while the pandemic is still spreading globally, the real question is how prepared nations and smaller regions like islands are to tackle pressures towards local society and environment and therefore to set an effective framework for managing all different types of places. So, despite the growing body of literature around city branding, nation branding and similar, there is still a significant gap for island branding.

In fact, as (Hildreth 2010, p. 8) had underlined few years back [...] “all of the ‘continents’ of place branding appear to have been discovered, despite many territories retaining the tantalizing label: *unexplored*”. So, why not exploring more in depth certain place branding territories like island branding?

Given the close connection between tourism and place marketing and branding process, as it is usually used from local and national authorities and governments as a positioning, development and regeneration tool (Hall 1997), this opinion paper aims to contribute to place branding literature by aiding academics, practitioners and local authorities to reflect on progress in the place branding field that past years and to eventually become better equipped to face all contemporary challenges which face regarding places' management and marketing. Place branding provides a wider perspective than destination branding, that would include various interactions with stakeholders and relationship flows that create certain patterns. For example, literature on mass tourism and destination management identifies Greek insular regions to be following a rather uncontrolled tourism development pattern over the past decades (Andriotis 2004), fact

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that reinforces the need to reexamine how tourism development is designed and implemented. Tsartas (2003, p. 129) concludes that it is high time tourism policy makers now searched for softer and locally integrated models of tourism development. Today, one of the most discussed topics is how to tackle tourism monoculture and reinvent mass tourism. In this paper, the perspective the authors adopt, argues that this double aim could be achieved through place branding because as a procedure takes into account both negative and powerful features of a place along with its relevant stakeholders and therefore truly respects each region.

The dynamic of the field of place marketing and place branding has been quite notable the past 20 years without, however, having given answers to fundamental issues of its nature, major relevant concepts, and theories. It is high time participants in the public dialogue discussed about place branding that goes beyond being a marketing tool. As Hanna and Rowley (2015) put it, place branding is a necessity because of the increasing power of international media, the falling cost of international travel, consumer spending power, the threat of place parity, the role of international investors, competition for skilled and professional immigrant's and differentiated tourist behavior. Whether at the national, regional, city or town level, branding is as much a way of planning developmental policies as branding in the private sector is about business strategy (Hanna and Rowley 2015, p. 63). One could argue that branding strategy is nowadays as fundamental for places as business strategy is for companies. Branding strategy at its core is a logical procedure with specific steps. Rehan et al. (2019, pp. 159–160) for example present their view of five main steps in a place branding procedure. These steps are:

1. Determining obvious missions and objectives and formulating development goals (vision, mission, objectives)
2. Identifying current brand image (perceived identity and images as well as projected image)
3. Setting the aspiration brand identity and designing place brand essence using the brand identity and the concept
4. Developing the positioning and implementing the new place brand by performing the brand strategy.
5. Measuring success by monitoring the place brand.

According to this comprehensive scheme, it is highlighted the well-known argument that place image lies in the heart of place branding and it has been widely examined in this context for more than a decade. Place image and place branding can have a significant impact on tourist behavior and tourist intention of visiting a specific place (Acharya and Rahman 2016). Today, places and especially cities are thought to become economic assets and fundamental pillars in the economic development of regions. Place marketing could be

considered as a natural component of the economic development of a place (Deffner et al. 2013, p. 243) especially for those places that are becoming worldwide tourist destinations. This is one reason why places need more sophisticated and more advanced tools to support their own nature. Every place needs to be managed according to a unique vision and customized solutions. Branding a place, however, is a much more sophisticated and multilevel process that goes beyond a logo and promotion and takes into consideration the interests of all relevant stakeholders at all steps of place branding procedure. More and more recent publications (e.g., Casais and Monteiro 2019) underline the bottom-up place brand approach (Aitken and Campelo 2011) and the distinction of place marketing beyond the communication perspective (Boisen et al. 2018). Indeed, the cross-disciplinary view of place branding evolution will permit the production of more advance knowledge through the creation of new models, new paradigms, new tools in existing frameworks and bridging the gap between theoretical and practical standpoints.

Given the need for more advance knowledge about place branding, the field more than ever needs both the scientific point of view of academics and practitioners' insights that derive from practical implementation of place branding strategies, fact that makes the gap among academics and practitioners one of the most challenging ones. The combined knowledge from these two critical stakeholders can be very beneficial for local authorities to design and implement strategic place branding policies that could lead to places becoming contemporary tourism destinations. Indeed, place branding is an activity usually connected to public sector local authorities (Casais and Monteiro 2019, p. 229) but the past few years stakeholders' involvement has been a quite popular research topic which has brought residents' significance at the spotlight. Anholt (2007, p. 37) underlined that "building a place brand strategy around the skills, aspirations and culture of its population is far more likely to result in credible, sustainable and effective results than something cooked up by a team of ministers or PR consultants in closed meeting rooms". The residents of a destination form a fundamental (Braun et al. 2013) but usually overlooked stakeholder (Zouganeli et al. 2012, p. 740); if residents don't perceive the destination in the same way it is being promoted, no sustainable tourism model can be developed (Henkel et al. 2006). Internal branding, namely ensuring buy-in to the brand from a place's residents, draws from the approaches of sustainable development and organizational culture and expresses the bottom-up philosophy of the place (destination or nation) branding process (Zouganeli et al. 2012, p. 743). Today's place branding needs a synthesis of opinions and theories in order to interpret the multifaceted nature of places; Places are simultaneously places of residence, work, visit, leisure, entrepreneurship, financial investment, social interaction, social activism, emotional



attachment and many more (Kavaratzis 2017, p. 98). The place (as a brand) comes closer to residents because it is not seen as imposed from above (the authorities) or from the outside (some highly paid consultant) but based on the reality of the place as this is lived by the place's residents and experienced by its visitors. Making locals and visitors own the place brand through their active participation in the place branding process on the basis of a shared vision of what constitutes a place's potential for development is a rather critical issue (Kavaratzis 2017).

The past few years, European Union through various research projects and analyses has resulted in supporting the development of integrated and place-specific policies in order to tackle a wide diversity within European regions characterized by geographic specificities. Policies should rather be developed on the basis of functional approach dealing with common features, such as insularity, remoteness, demography and coastal situations (ESPO 2017). Place branding is a procedure that brings together a variety of theoretic fields and special scientific knowledge, like brand management, corporate branding, general management, marketing, but also developmental policy, so as to create a new discipline which balances communication, visionary models and concepts but also has a practical implementation (Maheshwari et al. 2011). So, we argue that place branding has good possibilities to be one tool to create proper policies that respect territorial challenges and opportunities, the environment, and the inhabitants of a region. After all, place branding still needs to prove that goes beyond logos and slogans.

Main approach

Given the aforementioned assumptions, the authors attempt to investigate selected literature reviews that have been published mainly over the past 20 years. Vuignier (2016) has based his analysis from articles published from 1976 until 2016 in 98 different journals. Among his findings were the field's lack of conceptual clarity, evidence, and explanatory articles. Moreover, the review underlines the literature's lack of interest in the political and institutional frameworks that places need to also be examined, although this information is crucial in terms of public management.

Dinnie (2004) presented an overview of—what was then—an emerging literature that depicted the interest in place branding. He had then pinpointed that the field was indeed practitioner-led (Dinnie 2004) and that Place Branding Journal was a very useful theoretical contribution. One of the simplest and yet descriptive models, is Hankinson's (2010). Given what earlier Dinnie (2004) had argued, there should be no surprise that Hankinson's model relies also on practitioners' point of view, identifying through his core

research proposition that the gap between academics and practitioners of the field should be once more addressed.

Briefly, Hankinson (2010) chose to illustrate the development of the field of place branding through three subsequent phases of concept and theory evolution. Even though, it is beyond the scope of this paper to extensively analyze Hankinson's work, it is of great importance to understand the rationale behind the three suggested phases of place branding evolution. The three phases of Hankinson's model about the development of the mainstream and place branding domains include (Hankinson 2010, p. 302):

- Domain origins (product branding, urban policy, marketing)
- Domain deepening (brands as assets, place promotion, destination branding)
- Domain widening (corporate branding, services branding, non-profit branding, internal branding and place branding)

Hankinson (2010) brings emphasis on the need to focus more on studying the contribution of more traditional concepts and models or various marketing sub-fields like corporate, product, non-profit, internal and services into the shaping of place branding. Already from the 1970s research focused on the relationship between image and tourism development (Hunt 1975). According to Oguztimur and Akturan (2015, p. 357) branding theories within the context of tourism management gained visibility more than 20 years after Hunt's work, in 1998 as the focal topic of the Annual Travel and Tourism and Research Association's Conference. Despite the fact that in the area of tourism and place branding, a number of researches has been conducted that mainly focus on the destination image and image congruity (Sirgy 1982; Sirgy and Su 2000), however, Hankinson (2010, p. 313) himself recognized that the research agenda he proposed in his three-phase scheme reflects his own background in the mainstream branding domain, and therefore may be less complete with regard to the tourism and urban policy domains. So, should scholars "go back" in order to move forward, i.e., reflect on traditional models and concepts in order to inspire and conduct research that will be beneficial for the evolution of place branding and turn into an even more contemporary field? Almost a decade after his work, has the field evolved more so as to speak for a fourth phase or is there a need to add more concepts and theories in the existing third phase?

Oguztimur and Akturan (2015) also attempt a quite extensive literature review by focusing on a synthesis of city branding literature between 1988 and 2014. They identify two different approaches on city branding concept: marketing oriented and planning oriented. And there lies one big confrontation between marketers on one hand who talk about



selling points of a place and urban planners, sociologists and human geographers on the other hand who oppose to that logic. Lucarelli and Berg (2011) highlight that place branding is an umbrella term encompassing nation branding, region branding and city branding. Therefore, the quite often interchangeable use of these concepts and the superficial usage of place marketing concept (Berglund and Olsson 2010) make it even more difficult to comprehend the literature. Additionally, most gaps pinpointed by Hankinson (2010) relate to conceptual weaknesses and model implementation problems. Researchers so as to build more a more solid place branding field need to seek concepts, theories and models outside the typical boundaries of the marketing science.

Additionally, Acharya and Rahman (2016, p. 289) attempt to record and review major research gaps based on 147 papers from three different databases from January to April 2014. Their research resulted in two main findings. Firstly, most articles were based on qualitative methods and secondly, place brand identity was present at all studies. Their research is one of the most completed in terms of successfully having attempted to summarize, synthesize, and analyze previous work in the field. Kaplan et al. (2010) also attempted a quite extensive literature review to underline that the strategic power of brands has drifted evolution also in the more specific sub-fields like place management and place branding. However, Acharya and Rahman (2016, p. 310) also stressed that most articles published in the field lacked proper theoretical background and they only focused on theories of product, service, corporate marketing and branding, and social sciences. Given this rather alarming conclusion, in the present paper the authors aim to link place branding with island studies in an attempt to enrich the transdisciplinary research of the two fields and to urge the academia to identify quickly the need to bring islands in the place branding spotlight as soon as possible.

It is interesting that place branding can be practiced at different spatial scales from the neighborhood, through the city to the region, national state or continental scales (Ashworth and Kavaratzis 2018, p. 425). So, various stakeholders are equally significant at all spatial levels. Extra carefulness is needed in order not to exclude citizens from branding strategies because it takes place within governance networks of interdependent actors (Ashworth and Kavaratzis 2018, p. 431). Place branding needs to be viewed as a more participatory process (Kavaratzis and Kalandides 2015) and it is very significant to understand in practice how public managers include citizens' participation in place branding strategy (Casais and Monteiro 2019, p. 229).

One of the most profound research gaps seems to be the differences in views between academics and practitioners as described by Kavaratzis (2015). In his paper entitled "Place branding scholars and practitioners: 'strangers in the

night'?" he used the phrase "parallel complaints" to describe the paradox of both sides (academics and practitioners) facing similar issues. On one hand, theoreticians had argued that practitioners are not very fond of using theories when they implement place branding strategies and at the same time practitioners were of the opinion that mere focus and pressure towards the implementation of theories that often have little to do with practice, was more than frustrating, given that in practice there are also challenges of budgets and deadlines. This type of gap adds to the fact that there is no consensus about concepts, terms, models and theories of place branding and make it even more difficult for the field to evolve. From 2010 and onwards, according to Kavaratzis (2015) certain researchers (e.g., Stubbs and Warnaby 2015) call for action to reinforce the constructive dialogue between academics and practitioners.

In the section that follows, the authors attempt to briefly present the major research gaps that derive from investigating the relationship between tourism and place branding. Contemporary place branding needs to build on existing knowledge by moving forward. In a sense, the reader might reflect again on fundamental theories, terminologies, and models, i.e., "go back to the roots" in order to push the field to move forwards.

Key arguments/findings

The authors provide the reader with indicative major findings based on the relevant literature review that are believed to potentially lead to a more fruitful path of the fields' islandness, island tourism and place branding theoretical and practical evolution. Through a balanced but focused discussion, the authors' aim is to urge researchers to rethink tourism and place branding together, to move towards more participatory paths and examine place branding theories not only in an urban context like cities but others like islands due to their unique characteristics. Islands before being considered and been treated like destinations, need to be viewed as places.

New era for destination management, tourism growth, and places

Tourism is indeed one of the most important and rapidly developing economic activities the past decades especially for Greece's numerous small and medium-sized inhabited islands. For the majority, tourism has influenced their economic conditions but also had numerous social, demographic and environmental impacts (Spilanis and Vayanni 2004) and is extremely important for local endogenous development that builds on competitiveness from local resources and local participation (Karampela et al. 2016).



But local resources and local participation differ from place to place, thus creating destinations with distinct features and competitiveness ending up in totally different tourism growth at least at a local level.

Overtourism is a new term to describe a complex but quite old phenomenon (Capocchi et al. 2019), which however has nowadays profound impact on places (Dodds and Butler 2019). It is closely related to place management and it can be defined as “the impact of tourism on a destination, of parts thereof, that excessively influences perceived quality of life of citizens and/or quality of visitors in a negative way” (UNWTO 2018, p. 4). Overtourism brings to the top of the discussion the significance of local residents and the preservation of local culture and lifestyle because it actually poses a threat both for places and their residents in cases like Barcelona and Santorini. Freire (2005, p. 358) argues that tourism, if supported by branding, can actually be a helpful tool for people to be able to preserve local cultures but also to make use of all the positive amenities the modern world can provide, like healthcare, education, security and stability. Moreover, implementation of branding philosophy in places can lead to increased communities’ self-esteem by creating the relevant awareness that their local environment is unique, precious and should be preserved.

Increasing research demonstrates that the rise of sharing economy and especially of platforms like Airbnb do pose great challenges for places especially when linked to phenomena like overtourism. According to Kavartzis (2017) in cases certain places are considered also as destinations, such tendencies challenge established understandings of how destination brands form and might be influenced. A recent paper of Balampanidis et al. (2019, p. 2) argue that Airbnb constitutes a major transformative force, with an important impact on social and spatial relations in Athens. The informal practices related to Airbnb have social, spatial and economic consequences and lead to ambiguous processes of urban regeneration and place making. Given these indicative examples, consequently today no development strategy should be produced without incorporating sustainability. Sustainability is a concept that more or less, describes any attempt to balance and achieve environmental, social and economic objectives, but quite often during any relevant procedure this proves to be quite challenging or even not feasible because of the very diverging nature of its three pillars (Sarantakou and Terkenli 2019). Given that sustainable development still remains under discussion both as a concept and as a framework, researchers can underline three moral imperatives: satisfying human needs, ensuring social equality and respecting environmental limits (Holden et al. 2017).

Maheshwari et al. (2011) had identified that there was a significant gap regarding any exploration of a possible relation between place branding and sustainable development, apart from Ashworth’s and Voogd’s (1988) and Walker’s (2000)

specific research projects. Baldacchino (2010, p. 380) sets the questions straight forward by using islands as an example: “What does one do, however, if a particular island wants to be successful on both these fronts? Can one be both economically and ecologically successful, and be globally known for both?” A number of issues regarding sustainable development need to be addressed and place branding can aid towards that direction, such as the suitable geographical scale for action and the design and implementation of effective tools that will help achieve sustainability (Karampela et al. 2017). What if researchers attempt to generalize this question not only for islands but for other types of places?

Today, many islands as destinations heavily relying on tourism depend heavily on notion of sun, sea and sand (Del Chiappa et al. 2018), turning tourism into monoculture and thus allowing several negative aspects of this phenomenon to be present even today. According to Karatzoglou and Spilanis (2008, p. 27) tourism has sharply changed the land use patterns on the islands, damaged fragile coastal ecosystems and disturbed the littoral habitats. So, the political decisions about the development of local tourism can have a significant impact on the distribution of local resources. This increases the significance of the role and participation of local citizens when it comes to planning and financing tourism. Certain local institutions can have the power to influence decisions outside the community that can affect not only local development but their everyday lives. And this power is especially relevant, as Kotler et al. (2002) argue for sustainable place development.

If there is a need to rethink tourism, then subsequently there is also the need to rethink place branding because it puts pressure on destinations globally and locally. Sustainability has become more than a buzz word and sustainable development is not a wild goose chase any longer; it has become a necessity which needs to be included as a pillar to every strategic procedure. According to Freire (2005, p. 350) tourism has indeed undergone deep transformations due to the new movements in society and this has also affected both tourism behavior and the way people view places they visit. Based on the argument that post-modern tourism engages with the concept of a semiotic society, Freire (2005, p. 355) concludes that tourism destinations help people to better express who they are. Therefore, tourism destinations have a more advanced significance for the core of contemporary tourism models that urges us to think that they have more similarities with typical consumer products and that is why they need to be managed as brands.

Islands’ Branding (or Branding Islandness): Destination Branding Balancing Symbolic and Geographic Features

“What is an island, other than a body of land surrounded by water?” questions Mountz (2015, p. 636). She continues



by arguing that islands evoke infinite imaginaries, from dreams of development, escape, and exoticism to exploitation and imprisonment. Islands are unique locations, which may fuel the tendency toward geographical imaginaries that orientalize an other (Mountz 2015, p. 636). Spilanis et al. (2011, pp. 35–36) also stress that islands can be thought of as objects ‘of the mind’ but underline that they also need to be examined at a more pragmatic level, i.e., as ‘physical’ objects. Over the past few years, the emphasis being on the inherent negative impact of those characteristics have on islands, the term ‘insularity’ seems to be the most commonly used (e.g., Evans 1977; Cherry 1981). As a term, insularity has been used intensively to describe “the connecting link, the common characteristic of all islands regardless of their size, population and development level. Insularity expresses ‘objective’ and measurable characteristics, including small areal size, small population (small market), isolation and remoteness, as well as unique natural and cultural environments. However, it also involves a distinctive ‘experiential identity’, which is a non-measurable quality expressing the various symbols that islands are connected to (Spilanis et al. 2011, p. 9)”. This combination of physical and geographical characteristics along with those that are more experiential make place marketing and branding more demanding for island territories especially when they are also tourism destinations. After all, according to Kavartzis (2004, p. 63) the important part for the management and marketing of the destination is this point for interaction, the interaction between the real and the perceived, as experienced by those who live the destination—the brand—in everyday basis. However, the past few years, the term insularity is gradually being preferred in an attempt to do justice because islands should not only be related to negative aspects and features. Conkling (2007, p. 200) argues that “islandness is often considered as a metaphysical sensation deriving from the heightened experiences that accompany the physical isolation of island life.” He thinks of islandness as “an important metacultural phenomenon that helps maintain island communities in spite of daunting economic pressures to abandon them” (Conkling 2007, p. 200).

So, what “sort of places are these” (i.e., islands) (Mountz 2015, p. 643)? According to Spilanis et al. (2011, pp. 35–36), there are four main characteristics that seen in combination define insularity and describe of what islands are, which are quite relevant to those presented by McCall (1994) years later. These are:

A. **Small Size:** More often than not, islands are small both in terms of areal size and population compared to “mainland”. Their small population results in a limited internal market and constrained local demand for commodities and services, as well as limited workforce. This, in its turn, limits scale and concentration economies.

Concurrently, small size means that islands tend to have precious few—if any—land resources for extensive agriculture, whilst they also regularly lack key natural resources, including adequate water supplies, fossil fuels but also non-fuel minerals. In cases where raw materials may have been available in the past, these have now often been exhausted. The islands’ small size has meant their environmental balance is regularly seriously endangered and this trait, in turn, makes environmental management a necessity.

- B. **Remoteness and isolation:** that result in high installation and operating costs for companies, households and the state.
- C. **Special experiential identity:** The particularities of insular space affect perceptions, behaviors and actions. As has already been mentioned, islands are ‘objects of the mind’ in addition to being physical objects and they are viewed in different ways by visitors—tourists and mainlanders—compared to long-term local inhabitants. While for the visitor, islands can be places to ‘escape’ from everyday life and live ‘utopias’, local inhabitants may have highly different views.
- D. **Particular, rich and vulnerable natural and cultural environment:** Because of their small size and their isolation many islands have witnessed the evolution of unique endemic species and, as a result, have valuable terrestrial and marine ecosystems. Additionally, numerous islands have a rich historic past due to their strategic position on the maritime routes, which is presently highlighted through monuments, settlements and landscapes; many of these have been classified as national, European, or even world cultural heritage sites. This unique natural and cultural capital has been used till now mostly for the development of tourism—and in the case of the majority of Mediterranean islands mass tourism.

Maroudas and Kyriakaki (2001, p. 62) argue that this kind of islands’ characteristics—small size, small population, inadequate transport and communications networks, lack of infrastructures, high proportion of emigrants and low degree of diversification of the local production structure—constitute restraining factors for the islands’ development, resulting in their gradual isolation and marginalization. According to Hong and Pungetti (2012, p. 1), islands and seas carry a particular duality between communication and isolation as an island is seen by travelers as the destination of a journey, and the sea the means to reach it. Are islands a kind of destination that need differentiated approach? Can place branding could play in rethinking islands as places in general and as destinations in a less negative way and towards more balanced approach?

Why is it so important to deal with island tourism today? Both tourism and subsequently place branding is particularly



important for islands. Tourism can positively influence the life standards of residents, increasing their income, creating new job opportunities, improving local infrastructure, increasing the availability of entertainment facilities, promoting the local identity and so on (Del Chiappa et al. 2018, p. 42). Moreover, the aim of an island's being branded is to find the right balance and try to reverse the negativity that quite often is conceptualized through islandness. When islandness is effectively managed then an island as a place can turn into a branded destination. To achieve this, it is high time island tourism was redefined. Nissology, the field that studies islands on their own terms (McCall 1994, p. 106). Offers very useful theories and research. Moreover, Environmental and tourism pressures, demographic and social changes have direct consequences for island communities which need to be taken into consideration (Ratter 2018). Finally, given that islands are not static but complex and dynamic systems with specific natural and spatial boundaries (Petridis 2011; Stratford 2008) the search for more in-depth transdisciplinary research should always be a fundamental research goal.

Concluding remarks, limitations and future research paths

The image of a place is still important at many levels, but it is high time researchers started examining it in relation to other concepts which have image in their core narrative, like attractiveness and competitiveness (Kozak and Rimmington 1999) and attempt to discover and highlight "hidden links" and connections. According to Trinchini et al. (2019, p. 529) creativity and innovation have been widely recognized as essential to cities attractiveness and competitiveness. Cities are increasingly relying on their capability to attract visitors and investors as well as talented and creative people, while fostering innovation for the benefit of all stakeholders involved. To gain competitive advantage, such value of creativity and innovation for cities is usually translated into promotional marketing strategies by exploiting the so-called the human and social capital resources. Nowadays, there is growing body of research about smart cities, smart destinations, and smart places. Buhalis and Amaranggana (2014) suggest that contemporary smart tourism system incorporate both human and social dimensions. Boes et al. (2015) suggest that there are two dimensions: hard smartness which relates to infrastructure and soft smartness which relates to human capital, innovation, and leadership. Their effective combination is a driving factor for increasing competitiveness. So, we argue that place branding in the context of contemporary smart tourism is becoming more that "logos and slogans". The authors of the present papers urge the readers to rethink place branding and all place audiences to go

beyond "I am Amsterdam" place branding campaigns. What once seemed to be a success, does not mean that it remains the proper path to be followed. For example, smartness has been, according to Trinchini et al. (2019, p. 530), increasingly regarded as the solution to the major issues presented, among others, by urbanization and overtourism. So, different ways of approaching attractiveness and competitiveness and contexts like smartness should be more carefully and extensively be examined along with a different implementation of relevant theories and models away from city context.

Indeed, the focus should not only limit on cities and urban environment. Despite the fact that islands as research units might raise issues that might be harder to discern in other different locations, more research needs to be conducted about islands and other areas that face territorial challenges and development trends and have common features such as insularity, remoteness, demography and a coastal situation (ESPON 2017, pp. 2–3). Researchers need to explore more the link between *Nissology*, i.e., the study of islands on their own terms (McCall 1994), and place branding. Global tourism growth and islands being on the spotlight as destinations, highlights the need to set the public discussion on a different basis more oriented to sustainable development. In fact, "islands and archipelagos pose unique challenges for tourism policy. While tourism development in islands is well studied, little attention has been given to archipelagos and their special challenges" (Bardolet and Sheldon 2008, p. 900). All in all, islands and archipelagos are powerful, recurring, and vexing to the spatial imaginary: highly unique, idiosyncratic, disparate and yet revealing, offering spatial form, pattern, and logics that are everywhere reproduced (Mountz 2015, p. 638), forming a certain type of geographies with distinct features and circumstances. Tourism planners need to have a better understanding of their particularities before deciding on which strategy mix, they will follow (Zhang 2010), which should be different than the one that is being selected in other cases like cities and customized in order to incorporate the dimension of islandness. Place branding as a (public) management tool has no horizontal solutions for all places. Moreover, it must not be only examined in relation to tourism theories and models but also to regional development in order to evolve into a useful field not mainly focus on city branding. For example, islands need differentiated place branding procedures and strategies than mainland regions and cities and it is even harder to use best practices from one place to another. It is not yet universally accepted that islands need to be studied on their own terms and that this awareness will have an impact on place branding too. Given that islands do not behave as their continental proximate regions (Pons and Rullan 2014) a major challenge emerges regarding the integration of isolated island economies into more internationalized economic models (Baldacchino 2004, pp. 272–273).



Moreover, we argue that place branding community needs to build on Hankinson's model and create space for new theories and models from other fields. Designing a better future for place branding involves two interconnected needs: (a) better understanding of branding as a strategic procedure and (b) identifying the number and types of stakeholders that participate in the branding process (Ashworth and Kavaratzis 2018). This can be achieved by listening to the public and use place branding as a public administration tool more effectively. However, it is not easy because relevant research shows that still local governments have not a solid view of what constitutes a place brand (Cleave et al. 2016).

A new place branding era means that the citizen lies in the heart of relevant strategies and takes active part in various phases of place branding procedure (Rehan et al. 2019). As mentioned above, one of the most common misconceptions about place branding is being treated merely as a promotion mechanism which uses logos and slogans that represent some extraordinary places. Contemporary place branding needs to challenge this misconception by proposing an alternative view that will capture the ways in which different place brands operate. Researchers need to go beyond external meanings of the place brand and align these with internal meanings of the locality along with each place's human and social capital resources, especially as experienced and lived by the place's residents and other stakeholders. Research evidence needs to be collected internationally about place branding debates, theories, models and concepts involved and especially who it is implemented by professionals in various typologies of places and regions which range from the management of retail and business districts to smart city pilot zones, historic town centers, tourism destinations and so on (de Noronha et al. 2017).

Indeed, the present paper selects purposely to give a special emphasis on islands because of their unique set of characteristics and boundaries that impose a necessity to think differently both on positive and negative potentials of tourism of the strategies pursued for place branding. Even though, these key issues may be harder to discern in more diverse locations, we support the view that islands are 'living labs', central to understanding what happens subsequently on mainland territory (Mountz 2015, p. 639). Islands are systems that are closed and bounded in many respects and thus present a manageable unit of study for scientists (Deschenes and Chertow 2004, p. 202). The idea that islands can be viewed as a field of experimentation to test theories, models, and tools, i.e., as "laboratories", is not new. This argument in various forms manifests in the work of several researchers from various disciplines even for the time of Darwin in the nineteenth century (e.g., Steinberg 2005; Depraetere 2008; Pungetti 2012; Mountz 2015). Despite the rational limitations islands have as a study unit, they also

pose a unique and very interesting field that is in need for new transdisciplinary research.

It is not only possible to implement theories of traditional branding to places, but it should be desirable (Freire 2005) as society moves towards more challenging eras. One must not forget that one classical argument is that from a consumer's perspective, a place will always have a meaning (however not the same for all), even if it is not managed with a strategy based on the concept of place branding ideas (Freire 2005). Recent agenda includes reflections of how phenomena like the pandemic of Covid19, climate change, overtourism along with other types of pressure impact places and shape place branding policies and tourism development model which imposes destinations to be managed basically like enterprises and/or products. It is rather alarming that according to Dr. Jack Spengler, Yakira Yamagucki Professor of Environmental Health and Human Habitation at the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health "Tourism management seems to be entirely focused on promoting businesses. It is so tied to commercial and tax interest that the focus is less on how to manage the destination and more on how to develop destinations for commercial interests. Government ministries lack the full set of professional tools they need to make use of measures that can equalize the playing field and protect vital resources and human health and well-being" (Epler Wood et al. 2019, p. 8), which is actually in the "heart" of sustainable design goals. So, is it possible to use theories and tools of place branding to change this negative ascertainment?

Even though this analysis goes beyond the scope of this present paper, one can argue that phenomena like the ones mentioned earlier, all seem to play a significant role in place management and therefore they cannot be ignored as frameworks that need to be taken into consideration when discussing contemporary place branding theory and practice. Managing places has become even more complex because they face contemporary economic, social, and environmental issues that require stakeholders to rethink their current practices and look for innovative solutions (UNWTO 2018). In fact this kind of phenomena that have or can cause local and global crises, could be a space where practitioners, scholars and other stakeholders can 'bridge the gap' (Kavaratzis 2015) and cooperate to produce innovative, sustainable and effective policies for places and local societies. Therefore, a fruitful research agenda ideally includes more research—especially for islands as destinations—on how and with which tools is it possible to develop a branding system combining human capital, market forces, network capital, social capital (Trinchini et al. 2019) and islands' features in order to co-create a brand through the participation of stakeholders, like tourists and locals.

All in all, future search in this area could range from reflecting on certain very traditional paths like the adoption



of cross-sectoral approaches to more contemporary of how place branding can operate in various other frameworks like islandness, sustainable development, and smart destination branding. Moreover, this present opinion papers urges readers—especially practitioners and scholars—to move beyond towards investigating more challenging and intriguing research gaps like the need to examine more alternative research units than cities like island and insular areas.

Compliance with ethical standards

Conflict of interest On behalf of all authors, the corresponding author states that there is no conflict of interest.

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