

# The influence of Public Relations in nation branding: the case of Bucharest

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**Abstract.** *This study aims to explore why public relations play an important role when discussing about place branding. The economic crisis that hit the market in 2008 has left as a consequence negative aspects upon many countries and places in the European Union. Intense competition between places together with fast movement of globalization, require the action of branding places. Public Relations represent the main activity that could still get audience's interest about the certain topic. The current paper starts by an analysis of the academic literature on the importance and elements of place branding, place marketing and city branding, and briefly also on suggestions made by practitioners towards the proposed topic. Furthermore, after the literature findings, research objectives have been established. Some of the objectives that are going to be discussed are related to: the theory of place branding, place marketing and city branding, key elements influencing or contributing towards place branding, the current image of Bucharest in communication with place branding professionals, as well as to explore the importance of PR in sustaining place branding in Bucharest. After establishing the objectives mentioned before, the research methodology process has been discussed. Regarding the methodology that is going to be implemented, a qualitative approach is going to be used in order to have valid data. The data are going to be collected in the geographical area of Bucharest, Romania. After doing an in-depth analysis of articles published regarding the proposed topic, academics and practitioners suggest that 15 to 20 interviews can provide us with accurate results. The interviews are going to be audio-recorded and transcribed in English. The limitation that this type of methodology has is that after interpreting the data findings, the results cannot be generalised.*

**Keywords:** *public relations; nation branding; Bucharest.*

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## **Introduction**

The economic crisis that hit the market in 2008 has left as a consequence negative aspects upon many countries and places in the European Union. Intense competition between places together with fast movement of globalization, require the action of branding places.

In the recent years, understanding and managing the marketing of places as brands (product) has shown an increase demand in the research area. Similar to companies, places have started to brand themselves in order to increase tourism expenditures, attract investors, number of visitors, international media, driving up exports, as well as to create a reputation.

Globalisation has pushed developing places into a competitive arena where the main players are the older established places (Hanna and Rowley, 2008). Places are branded for so many years and some of them even commercialise their brand name and logos such as New York, Paris or even London. In the Balkan region, place branding is a topic which slowly starts to have a meaning.

When discussing about place branding in the literature, practitioners and researchers use terms such as place marketing, urban marketing or even city branding. Some of the players that help constructing a place's image and reputation are governments, public relations agencies, publicity agencies, as well as local communities.

This study aims to explore why public relations play an important role when discussing about place branding. Moreover, branding a place usually means increase a place's image, as well as a place's reputation. Thus, Public Relations represent the main activity that could still get audience's interest about a certain topic, given the fast movement of technology that we live in which people are beginning not to trust advertisement anymore.

The further research will likely contribute to the academic and practitioner knowledge regarding the process of place branding during a crisis periods and the importance that public relations have in branding a city.

## **Literature review**

### ***Branding***

Branding is a term usually known for products and services, but in the last two decades practitioners and researchers have shown that it can also be used when talking about cities, countries or even regions (Anholt, 2010; Upadhyaya, 2012; Cozmiuc, 2011; Crombie, 2011; Lindstedt, 2011).

Usually a brand is perceived as an image which has a network of people working for it and who has built a community in the scope of achieving “entrepreneurial activity, innovation and economic development” (Crombie, 2011, p. 16). An interesting statement has been emphasized by Mayes (2008) that questions concerning “not only what a brand does and for whom, but also to whom and by whom” ( p. 134) should be addressed before starting a branding strategy.

Anholt (2003) stated that branding places is different from branding products. On the other hand, Stachow and Hart (2010) mentioned that places can be branded in a similar way as products do.

### ***Place branding***

Because globalisation has pushed places in the competitive arena, limitations in the differentiations between places do exist. First, in order to be different, a place has to point out to its target audience what another place does not have. Secondly, place branding should meet and satisfy the needs of the potential target audience (Mayes, 2008). Branding is considered one of the most powerful tools in order to increase profit in the commercial sector (Cozmiuc, 2011).

Kavaratzis (2004) mentioned that in order to develop a city’s brand, a city marketing strategy should be stated which actually leads to the understanding of a city’s image and perceptions. As Martinez (2012) stated, practitioners refer to the field of promotion, with references being made sometimes to marketing, sometimes to branding. This fact lead to interpret what Karavatzis (2004) mentioned that ‘stories’ need to be developed for places by the development of infrastructure and afterwards these stories should be communicated and promoted.

According to Upadhyaya (2012) places exist as “holistic entities or as collections of contributory elements or individual services or facilities” (p. 41), fact that emphasizes that place branding differs from region to region. The aims of place branding are to achieve economic, social and cultural benefits (Mayes, 2008). Skinner (2008) emphasizes that unlike products, places do not begin with a development phase. Often, the marketers’ implications towards branding places are limited due to the fact that local communities develop the cultural environment, invest in heritage and infrastructure.

When discussing about topics such as place branding and place marketing, terms such as ‘branding’, ‘brand’, ‘brand image’, ‘brand identity’, ‘brand personality’, ‘place image’ (Gertner, 2011) and ‘location’, ‘destination’ (Hanna & Rowley, 2008) are frequently used.

As stated by Pryor and Grossbort (2007), academics and practitioners use the term place branding in accordance to place marketing, place promotion or concepts related to tourism marketing. When discussing about products and services, branding has become an important element which led companies emphasize their competitive advantage. When talking about cities, regions or countries, place branding is developed with the help of companies from local industry, as well as tourist offices, playing the role of the “marketplace actors co-producing marketplace meanings” (Pryor & Grossbort, 2007, p. 302).

Place branding is the concept of marketing, promoting, branding and regeneration of a city, country or region (Lucarelli & Brorström, 2013; Herstein et al., 2014). Anholt (2010) stated that it is the main tool to attract customers, visitors, traders or even investors. Furthermore, strategic place marketing (a concept developed by Kotler et al., 1993) explains that places have to promote themselves in the same way as businesses do. The end-user is the main decision-maker for the positive or negative image that a place has (Anholt, 2010).

Usually, when discussing about place branding, a place image is the main element coming into people’s mind. The image of a place is shaped up by

the local communities' perceptions towards the place, as well as external target audience. The difference between a place's internal and external image is that the first one is perceived as part of the 'place's identity' (Lindstedt, 2011). People's perceptions about the image of a place is highly dynamic, the images are actually based on a stereotype. In order to create a powerful place image, a lot of time and effort should be invested (Avraham, 2009; Martinez, 2012).

Mayes (2008) emphasizes the fact that place identity is built from the internal features and history of a given place. Before starting any branding campaign, the identity of the city or place should be investigated focusing on the people's beliefs, cultural history and values (Martinez, 2012). Gotsi et al. (2011) argues that companies can be one major factor influencing the increasing image of a place.



**Figure 1. The concept of place brand perception (Zenker & Martin, 2011)**

Zenker and Martin (2011) argue that a place brand represents the perceptions and expressions that the target audience has in their minds and leads to two brand effects that can be measured such as: willingness to stay at the place and the satisfaction of the residents.

The term 'branding' is considered to be quite new when it is related with place marketing policies (Metaxas, 2010).

### *Place marketing*

As it is mentioned by Zenker and Martin (2011, p. 33), place marketing's aim is to share a customer-oriented approach by "creating, communicating, delivering and exchanging" the city's historical value with its end-consumers : visitors and local community.

Place marketing enhances people's perception about places. The elements that compose the image of a city or country are the 'location, leadership, type of regime, economic situation, government stability and more' (p. 197). Advertising, public relations, direct mailing/marketing and sales promotions are the main major techniques influencing the way a place is perceived by media, international organizations or publics. The main goals of place marketing are to create a distinct identity of a place (Avraham & Ketter, 2008) and to increase social and economic benefits (Zenker & Marting, 2011).

As positioning a company's product or service is important to the target customers and affects choice decisions, the same element is applicable to the process of place marketing. Thus, a clear positioning strategy can ensure that all the marketing elements are consistent and supportive (Walker, 2011).

### *City branding*

Cozmiuc (2011) introduces the concept of city branding when talking about place branding. City branding is affected by several fields such as: marketing, public policy, public relations, tourism, economic development and international relations.

Nowadays, municipalities, media and local government invest a lot of money in branding a city. The main reason for investing amounts of money is because they want to differentiate from their neighbours, meaning to emphasize their competitive advantage. City branding has two main objectives: increase investment and tourism expenditure and achieve community development (Herstein et al., 2014).

As mentioned by Kotler (1993), visitors, residents and workers, business and industry and export markets are considered to be the main target groups when developing a branding strategy for a city (cited in Herstein et al., 2014; Crombie, 2011).

On the other hand, Rizzi and Dioli (2010) discuss about place marketing and city branding as two different terms. Place marketing is the

“indispensable instrument in terms of operative implications associated with a specific place” (p. 303), while city branding is a strategy in which a place brands itself having as a result a positive or negative image associated with that specific place.

### *Suggestions*

Metaxas (2010) explained that place marketing is a strategic process and it has to be developed in the same way as products and services. After emphasizing the competitive advantage (characteristics, values etc.) that a place has, the ‘final provided good’ has to benefit of a good and well-structured marketing mix. Objectives, strategies and techniques have to be established.

Skinner (2011) suggested that a broader understanding of the terms place marketing and place branding should be researched, as well as the practices associated with the two terms. Moreover, Gertner (2011) stresses out the fact that practitioners should develop more in-depth the terms of place marketing and place branding towards a more structural framework in order to emphasize the competitive areas, as well as efforts done by specialists, residents, visitors and other entities participating in this process to be analyzed more. When discussing about branding and place, important elements should be closely examined such as: Public relations strategies, foreign direct investment, advertising and promotion (Anholt, 2010).

According to Szondi (2010), one of the main issues when talking about place branding is that the Public Relations field is usually ignored, being the main concept of relationship building or engagement with stakeholders. Facing an economic crisis, communication during and after crisis is realised with the help of Public Relations. In order to gain attention, press agency / publicity help the creation of favourably or negative image through pseudo-events related to a certain place. PR is considered to be the main actor in the relationship between institutions and its audience, by creating an ‘internal brand culture’ which can afterwards be shared with the publics. Involving citizens to create the brand of a place is another task realised by PR practitioners.

### **Research aim**

The purpose of this research is to explore the evolution of place branding during the recent years, as well the influence of Public Relations nowadays when communicating information about a place to potential target audience.

From the research aim and literature review mentioned before, the research objectives are stated:

- Identify the theory of place branding, place marketing and city branding
- Identify the key elements influencing or contributing towards place branding
- Determine the current image of Bucharest in the opinion of place branding professionals
- Explore the importance of PR in sustaining place branding in Bucharest.

### **Methodology**

Methodology refers to the specific principles implemented in the research activity such as rules, principles and formal conditions that can guide scientific research into a logical framework that emphasize ways to solve the problem questioned (Gelo et al., 2008). After doing an in-depth analysis of articles published regarding place branding and place marketing topics, Gertner (2011) sustains that a predominant number of them are of qualitative nature in the form of essays or editorials, and that a "small set out of the large number of qualitative articles made an attempt to adopt a specific method, such as ethnography, textual analysis, focus groups, in-depth interviews, literature review, historical approach or hermeneutics" (p. 96).

The objectives mentioned before are going to be achieved through the collection of both primary and secondary data. Secondary data will be gathered by examining closely the literature review about place branding, place marketing and city branding theories, elements and implications. In order to have a strong view about literature findings, the results will be compared and contrasted.



Quantitative approaches	Qualitative approaches
Sampling	Sampling
Probabilistic	
Simple random sampling	
Systematic random sampling	
Stratified random sampling	
Cluster sampling	
Purposive	Purposive
Convenience sampling	Convenience sampling
	Homogeneous cases sampling
	Extreme/deviant and Typical case sampling
Data collection	Data collection
Primary data	Primary data
Tests or standardized questionnaires	Open-ended interviews
Structured interviews	Focus group
Closed-ended observational protocols	Naturalistic observation protocols
Secondary data	Secondary data
Official documents	Official documents
	Personal documents
Data analysis	Data analysis
Descriptive statistics	Description
Inferential statistics	Identification of categories/themes
	Looking for interconnectedness between categories/themes
Data interpretation	Data interpretation
Generalization	Contextualization
Prediction based (theory-driven)	Interpretation based (data-driven)
Interpretation of theory	Personal interpretation

**Figure 2. Difference between quantitative and qualitative approaches**

*Source: Gelo et al., 2008*

Discussions about qualitative and quantitative research have been debated in the academic literature, mainly because of the implications and outcomes they can provide (Gelo et al., 2008; Barnham, 2012). As it is stated in Figure 2, besides the difference between the two approaches regarding the sample size, sample criteria and questioning route, a major difference exists in the validity, explanation and comprehension of the data findings.

Moving on, regarding the primary data collection for the proposed paper, a qualitative research approach is going to be used. The qualitative research approach will be applied in the form of interviews containing unstructured questions. According to Barnham (2012), qualitative research help interviewers to go in- depth with the research questions in order to have a better understanding about the interviewees' perceptions and associations with the topic.

Interviews are considered the best research technique when gathering information because they can provide more details and explanations about participants' perceptions, associations, beliefs, strategies towards a certain topic (Stathakopoulos, 2005).

### **Sample**

The information that will help the author analyze further the research objectives mentioned has to be detailed and reliable. Thus, participants who are going to be involved in the research process have to have knowledge about topics such as: place marketing, place branding, city branding, Public Relations. They have to be professionals working with this kind of terms in their daily lives. The most suitable persons for providing the information needed are PR and place branding professionals. Because the proposed approach is a qualitative one, the sample will be non-random and in order to contact them, the snowball effect is going to be used. Area sampling is going to be Bucharest, Romania.

### ***Sample size***

In comparison with the quantitative research methods, the existing literature does not provide a certain sample size for qualitative research (Marshall et al., 2013). According to Marshall et al. (2013), it is suggested that in order to have conclusive data around to 30 interviews should be done, while for a single case study, like the one presented in the current paper, around 15 to 30 interviews are considered enough. As stated by Francis (2010) in interviews "sample size is often justified on the basis of interviewing participants until 'data saturation' is reached" (p. 1229). Glaser and Strauss (1967) explain that data saturation emphasizes the fact that no additional data can be found for conceptual category (cited in Francis, 2010).

Thus, for the proposed topic, 15 professionals working in the PR and place branding field are going to be interviewed in order to acquire valid data.

### ***Data collection***

The method applied in order to get the information needed is going to be through face-to-face interviews. Gelo et al. (2008) stated that in qualitative research, data collection allows an “in-depth understanding of the participants’ perspective” (p. 275) towards a certain phenomena. In order to ensure the quality of the data collection, interviews are going to be audio- recorded and transcribed. Due to the fact, that the topic area is going to focus on Romanian professionals, interview questions are going to be provided in English and in Romanian for professional not speaking English.

According to the objectives previously mentioned, the research questions have been elaborated and can be seen in the Appendix 1.

### ***Data analysis and interpretation***

After gathering findings of the research, a content analysis is going to be provided. The author is going to group the data by means of ‘coding system’. As stated by Gelo et al. (2008), coding system reflects the process of grouping different sections in the interview answers in order to acquire broader perspectives. Qualitative research findings are based on ‘inductive interference’ (Gelo et al., 2008).

### ***Pilot testing***

In order to observe if the interview questions decided are understandable by the participants and help at providing the information needed, a pilot testing will be done. The pilot test will be realised upon 3 participants in order to observe their reactions towards the questions. Pilot testing is a useful way to assist the limitations, flaws or other weaknesses that the research design might have (Turner, 2010).

### **Limitations**

Curtin and Fossey (2007) state that qualitative approach cannot provide a generalization of the findings, which lead us to the limitations, that this type of approach provides. Furthermore, the results of the study may be influenced by the certain characteristics of the country.

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