

Economic Development in the Contemporary Global Environment: The Role of Place Branding as a Tool of Local Economic Development

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Abstract

Over the past three decades, place branding has emerged as a strategy for local economic development for municipalities in Canada and globally, as communities seek to (re)assert themselves in a dynamic global economic market. Due to the infancy of the research domain – as it has only been in the last 15 years that place branding has received critical academic attention – there are several major lacunae within the existing scholarship: (i) current research is primarily focused on Europe; (ii) research has mainly focused on nation branding and the largest urban centres, so place branding within ‘typical’ municipalities is not well understood; (iii) there are few testable models or hypotheses that have been developed; (iv) most is conducted through one-off case studies, and therefore it is difficult to make generalizations or conclusions; and (v) most place branding privileges tourism attraction as the context of study.

To expand existing research, a mixed-method approach was adopted drawing on statistical, spatial, and qualitative methods to explore the breadth and depth of the place branding issue in Ontario. Statistical analysis was used to examine the usage and message of place branding in Ontario’s municipalities ($n = 414$). Spatial analysis examined the underlying spatial pattern of the place brands, and attempted to find potential locations for municipal collaborations. Finally, in-depth interviews were conducted with key stakeholders connected with place branding process to gain insight into the background, rationale, process, and utility of place branding. The results of the three phases of research show that place branding is occurring in a majority of Ontario’s municipalities (in well over 90% municipalities). The distribution of place brands show that they are not random, and that municipalities with similar brands tend to cluster together, providing an opportunity for inter-regional collaborations. Finally, the results show that municipalities are using similar approaches to ensure economic advancement and that place branding is seen as critical component of local development. The findings call for the inclusion of place branding as a local strategy for economic growth; however, it requires readjustment in the brand positioning to allow greater effectiveness in attraction of target audiences.

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- [7]

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