

# A Proposed Online Platform for Ranking Place Brands Identity Characteristics of Official Tourism Websites



Victor-Alexandru Briciu, Robert Demeter, Florin Nechita, Androniki Kavoura, and Arabela Briciu

**Abstract** This study aims to clarify the ways in which the authorities involved in place brand management choose to use new technologies to communicate their online identity. A descriptive-explanatory research was employed focusing on a methodology repository, applying an instrument for analysis and addressing the online identity of place brands issue. As a quantitative-qualitative alternative, content analysis was chosen for the communication content, while the work technique consisted of frequency analysis applied to a coding grid for the analysis of the data collected. The ICT component involved in this research, a proposed online platform generates an automatic score calculation algorithm for place brands obtained by applying the analysis grid to web sites. This score involved building composite indexes of the analyzed dimensions and placing the brands in a ranking of all the analyzed sites. As more sites are being added, the user can interpret the charts generated by the application. By analyzing ten official websites based on specific criteria which promote brands, we were able to capture various ways in which the authorities involved in the websites' management understand the use of the Internet in communicating the online identity of brands.

**Keywords** Place brands · Identity characteristics · Tourism websites

## 1 Background of Research and Literature Review

Brand is a complex phenomenon; as a result there is a wide range of definitions explaining it [1–3]. A brand is a product or service that adds dimensions in order to differentiate it from other products or services that are created to satisfy the same

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V.-A. Briciu (✉) · R. Demeter · F. Nechita · A. Briciu  
Transilvania University of Brasov, Brasov, Romania  
e-mail: [victor.briciu@unitbv.ro](mailto:victor.briciu@unitbv.ro)

A. Kavoura  
University of West Attica, Athens, Greece

need. These differences can be either related to the product performance of brand: functional, rational or tangible, or related to what the brand represents: symbolic, emotional and intangible [3, p. 274]. On the other hand, the process of “branding can be applied virtually anywhere a consumer has a choice. It is possible to brand a physical good, a service, a store, a person, an organization, or an idea” [3, p. 276]. Branding matters more and more nowadays on the Internet because all the activities that represent the brand promise are more transparent and much faster online. The website should be easy and quick to navigate; it should not take much time for registration and definitely not ask for unnecessary information; assure the customer that the financial transaction it is safe and private and that the goods bought will be delivered on time. In case of any problems encountered the sales service should be exemplary [4, p. 397].

Therefore, from this perspective, a website can have the following functions: communicate about the company only, communicate about the brand only, sales only, communicate about the company and brand, communicate about the company and sales or communicate about the company, brand and sales [5, p. 15]. The best websites are characterized by consistency, interesting content and easy technical features. “A website should be dynamic, up to date and continuously enriched with new content. It should embody an organization’s personality and display consistency in term of both visual cues and content. It should orient visitors and provide easy-to-use navigation to help people from one area to another” [6, p. 12].

As the globalization process led up to a cultural homogenization, nowadays places compete with each other in order to obtain differentiation so that they can acquire competitive advantages. The competition between them is extremely hard, so original and creative ideas in place branding are crucial [7, p. 315; 8–10]. Relatively new to the field, the concept of place branding has gained prominence only since 1998. Despite occurring only in the recent years, it has soon become a “powerful tool to gain competitive advantage, as it improves the development of a region or country not only in terms of leisure and tourism, but also in term of attracting investment, new residents, jobs and skilled migrants” [7, p. 311]. The concept of place branding refers to “branding and building brand equity in relation to national, regional and/or local (or city) identity”.

Nowadays the foremost important influence in decision making in the most markets for customers is represented by the information found online. Because the Internet is an interactive medium, it enables “social communication such as forums, blogs, social networks and so on” [7, p. 316]. As a result, the visibility of place brands has increased noticeably. “Websites are fundamental tools for communication for place brands. They persuade, convince, help in decision making and finally allow making reservations and purchases” [7, p. 315].

This research aims to clarify the ways in which the authorities involved in place brand management choose to use new technologies to communicate their online identity.

## **2 Methodology**

### **2.1 Research Objectives**

The aim of this research is to identify how the authorities (i.e., governmental entities, central or local administration institutions or stakeholders) involved in place branding management use the internet's potential in order to communicate their online identity. Its purpose is to identify and analyze the characteristics of place brand online identity. In order to explore how the authorities involved in place brand management use the internet's potential as means to communicate their identity, a descriptive-explanatory research was conducted. The research's purpose was to answer the following questions: (1) Are there all the characteristics of a place brand's identity communicated through official websites by authorities? (2) Which are the most common characteristics of a place brand's identity used by authorities online? (3) Are the official websites of places passive channels of communication (informative) or active channels of communication (interactive)?

### **2.2 Method**

For this research the method of content analysis was chosen. Content analysis is an observational research method which aims to systematically evaluate the symbolic content of all communications forms [11]. Gibson and Ward [12, p. 303] claim that "although content analysis in general, and of media sources in particular, has a long and established pedigree, analysis of Web sites is a recent area of study".

### **2.3 Defining the Universe of Study**

The universe of study is finite, as the websites of places are subjected to the research. The websites are considered communication sources because "each activity on the website contributes to place branding which results as a certain imagine of a place" [13, p. 281]. The sampling technique chosen for this study is the non-probability sampling, following the model offered by Jose Fernandez-Cavia et al. [14]. The sampling of ten national and international destination websites is the result of a combination of several criteria: "firstly, taking into account national and international destinations; secondly, incorporating different kinds of destinations (cities, regions, countries and nations); and lastly, seeking variability in terms of geographical location, and the tourist-based potential, the maturity of the destination and the resources at hand to promote it" [14, p. 11]. According to the World Tourism Organization [15] the top ten countries visited in the world were: France, USA, Spain, China, Italy, United Kingdom, Germany, Mexico, Thailand and Turkey

**Table 1** The ten official websites based on research's criteria and the names of the authorities involved in place branding management

No.	Name	URL
1.	Atout France—France	<a href="http://in.france.fr/">http://in.france.fr/</a>
2.	The Paris Convention and Visitors Bureau—Paris	<a href="https://en.parisinfo.com/">https://en.parisinfo.com/</a>
3.	Normandy Tourist Board—Normandy	<a href="http://en.normandie-tourisme.fr/">http://en.normandie-tourisme.fr/</a>
4.	Brand USA—USA	<a href="https://www.visittheusa.com/">https://www.visittheusa.com/</a>
5.	Visit California—California	<a href="http://www.visitcalifornia.com/">http://www.visitcalifornia.com/</a>
6.	A Tourism & Convention Board—Los Angeles	<a href="https://www.discoverlosangeles.com/">https://www.discoverlosangeles.com/</a>
7.	NYC & Company, Inc.—New York City	<a href="https://www.nycgo.com/">https://www.nycgo.com/</a>
8.	Japan National Tourism Organization—Japan	<a href="https://www.jnto.go.jp/">https://www.jnto.go.jp/</a>
9.	Tourism Authority of Thailand—Thailand	<a href="https://www.tourismthailand.org/">https://www.tourismthailand.org/</a>
10.	Asia Web Direct Co., Ltd.—Bangkok	<a href="http://www.bangkok.com/">http://www.bangkok.com/</a>

[15]. For this study the top two countries reported above (France and USA) and several regions/ cities corresponding to those countries (Paris, Normandy, California, Los Angeles, New York City) were selected in order to answer the research questions. Alongside, three brands from Asia and the Pacific region which show major potential for tourism growth: Japan, Thailand and Bangkok [16] were selected for analysis.

The following table (Table 1) presents generic information about the selection of cases, the ten public authorities that own and manage the place brands and their website's names.

## 2.4 The Coding Scheme

In order to create viable categories and coding scheme on place brand's identity online characteristics it is necessary to compare concepts and methodologies from other scientific fields because a calibrated, well-rounded methodology from one scientific field regarding place brand's identity online characteristics does not exist. The closest available conceptual structure is the one provided by Florek et al. [13]. From the political communication field, the methodologies provided [12, 17, 18] were employed that discussed about the operationalization of the brand communication and information dimension with different categories: downward, upward, lateral (inward and outward) and interactive flows and about the interactive model of communication that can be either asynchronous (sequential) or synchronous (in real time). From the corporate marketing field, the structure provided by Okazaki and Skapa [19] was also taken into consideration for assigning the values on the coding scheme, coding an item 1 means the item is present, coding an item 0 means the item is absent [19, p. 206]. Lastly, from the place branding field the approached used by Florek et al. [13] was adopted. According to Rachel Gibson and Stephen Ward "the key utility of the scheme lies in the fact that it offers a

standardized tool for entering information about Web sites” therefore any innovation and new features developed on the Web can easily be slotted on this scheme [12].

## ***2.5 The Use of the Online Platform for Ranking Place Brands Identity Characteristics***

For the websites’ content analysis, a software platform has been developed using modern programming languages. Thus, for the creation of the database, the MySQL relational database management system was used together with the phpMyAdmin tool, with xampp included; to design the application, the PHP language was used and CSS, jQuery and JavaScript were used for stylization. The database has a visual interface. Each table in the database has an auto increment ID. The data of the application was divided into three subdivisions as follows: Admin, User and Site.

This application was not designed for general use or to be publicly available, as it was constructed to perform content analysis of user-rated sites and has solely research purposes. The application is divided into two parts: the front-end (user-side) and the back-end (administrator side). On the back-end side, the sites added by the predefined users are managed and also the users are managed. The administrator has access to all site information, user data, etc. It is able to use all the functions: Create, Read, Update, Delete. For each table in the database, there is a set of CRUD (create-read-update-delete) functions that are activated through forms with the POST method (in the case of update-delete-add it uses forms and for data retrieval, it uses the functions call). Regarding the front-end side, buttons and text fields were created for entering data, the user having to fill in the data according to the analysis grid. This grid has been implemented using aesthetic and intuitive design. The entire interface was made using the Bootstrap module, making it adaptable to any type of smart device. Generic information about the added website can be added by filling in the following fields: Name, URL, Country, Continent, Slogan. Next, one must enter the identity variables for each dimension. The user can easily enter the variables using this form, since it was created with a user-friendly interface. For example, if a brand has the “Slogan” variable in its composition, the user can determine the value by clicking the button next to the “Slogan” variable. The button initially has the value “0”, meaning “No”. Once accessed, the button switches to “1”, i.e. “Yes”.

Connecting to the PHP database was resolved using PDO (PHP Data Objects). PDO provides an abstraction level for accessing data, which means that independently of the configured database, the same functions will be used to send queries and receive data. To insert the data into a table with PDO, the query is first determined using the prepare() function. Then, this query is executed with the execute() function. This practice prevents SQL injection attacks. Once added, a site receives a score that is calculated based on its features. This score is calculated for all four dimensions that need to be analyzed and saved in the database. Depending on the score obtained, the site of the place brand is added to the diagram

of each dimension, to the position obtained. This information can be viewed on Column Bar Chart graphs in the current user Dashboard. As more sites are being added, the user can interpret the charts generated by the application, by obtaining a Top 10 hierarchy.

### 3 Results

The most common characteristics used by authorities online for the brand design are: the logo, the picture gallery and the maps. The following figure (Fig. 1) shows how many of these characteristics were found on the websites of the place brands analyzed.

The most common characteristics used by authorities online for the brand behavior are: the events calendar and the name of the authority under which the place

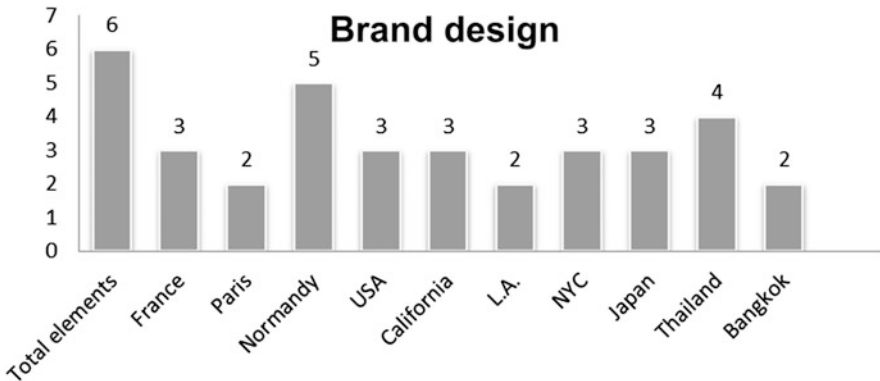


Fig. 1 Brand design characteristics used by the websites analyzed

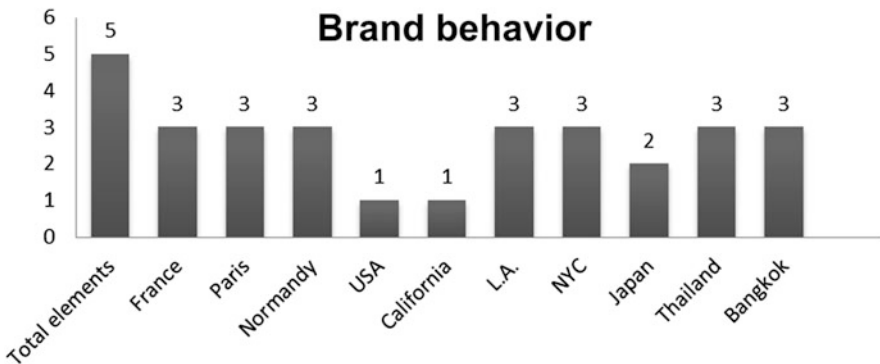


Fig. 2 Brand behavior characteristics used by the websites analyzed

brand exists. The following figure (Fig. 2) shows how many of these characteristics were found on the websites of the place brands analyzed.

The most common characteristics used by authorities online for the brand information and communication are: the general information, the customized information for target audiences such as brochures, the travel tips and FAQ, the offers, the bookmarks and share, the cookies, the useful links, the internal links, the option to download pictures/pdf, the site search, the newsletters and the social media connections.

The most common characteristics used by authorities online for the site delivery are: the presence of mobile icons/images/animate texts, the presence of video materials, the translation of the page, the home page button for each page, the main menu bar for each page and the site index.

## 4 Discussion

This study aimed to clarify the ways in which the authorities involved in place brand management choose to use new technologies to communicate their online identity.

Authorities involved in place branding management use the internet's potential to communicate their online identity by showcasing the brand design; the brand behavior; the brand information and communication; and the site delivery. The results show that these official websites use an average of 22 characteristics of a place brand's identity which represent 48% of the total. Moreover, these official website of place brands are used rather as passive (informative) channels of communication than active (interactive) channels of communication. This has been the case as literature has illustrated [20, 21].

The most common characteristics used by authorities are mainly limited to the logo, the picture gallery and the maps while the internet may offer more possibilities and opportunities.

## 5 Conclusions

In conclusion, branding is a complex phenomenon that can be applied anywhere: to a physical product, a service, a store, an organization, an idea or a place. Major changes occurred in the branding process because of the Internet. Because nowadays the foremost important influence in decision making in the most markets for customers is represented by the information found online, place brands should use the Internet in order to gain visibility which has not been fully implemented. Those involved in the websites' management may employ them more effectively.

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