

UNVEILING THE HIDDEN GEMS: TRANSFORMING CITIES INTO TOURIST DESTINATIONS THROUGH STRATEGIC BRANDING

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Abstract

This study examines the possibilities of achieving an improved and sustainable tourism sector through Strategic City Branding in Sri Lanka. It will also explore the impact of branding the city of Colombo in attracting more visitors and supporting the economic revival of the country. The study will examine the stakeholders' perception of how branding ideologies will affect them and Sri Lanka tourism in general, investigate how well the Strategic Place Branding Management Model can assist the branding process of the cities in Sri Lanka, and explore how important branding cities, particularly the city of Colombo, would be in inspiring Sri Lanka tourism. The study follows qualitative approaches with a cross-sectional design and inductive procedures. Primary data collection is based on extracting information from professionals, business leaders, officials, and other stakeholders, chosen through 'snowball' sampling, connected to the industry through in-depth interviews and focus groups. Secondary data is collected from numerous journal articles and other accepted material that have been published in the past. Stakeholders agree with the concept of Sri Lanka establishing its credentials by branding its cities to derive the best from the latest trends of sustainable tourism.

JEL: L83, R58, M31, Q01, O18

Keywords: *Strategic City Branding, Sustainable Tourism, Urban Development, Place Branding Management, Economic Revival*

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INTRODUCTION

The competition among cities for attention, investment, and recognition has never been more intense than what we experience in today's increasingly interconnected geography. Each city with its unique history, culture, and character tries to promote the art and science of its identity to make a long-lasting impression on the visitors. In our ever-changing world, a city's brand is its currency that tells the story of its self-glory, evokes emotions, and ignites aspirations. Brand managers have to find answers to two fundamental questions: What are the unique characteristics of our city? How can we convey that uniqueness to the world? Hence, this study explores deep into the intricate world of City Branding unravelling its theories, practices, and real-world applications through an insightful analysis of existing literature and examples of City Branding. Showcasing what the city is enriched with would be a powerful magnet for visitors, investors, employees, students, and homeowners. Beyond practical strategies and techniques for branding a city, the study will investigate the collective spirit of the people who call it home, the stories that echo through its streets, and the dreams that take flight from its vantage points, all of which can be made to be the intangible essence that makes a city more than just a geographical location.

Sri Lanka is yet a developing country. The service sector is one of the main income sources for the nation. Tourism, being one of the best opportunities for economic development, is not functioning up to satisfactory standards due to poor strategies. Therefore, the expected targets are very unlikely to be achieved for the set time frames. City branding directly causes urban development and draws attention and visitors. Globally tourism is on the rise. Place branding has helped nations and cities to be competitive. An independent city in Sri Lanka has never been branded before. Recognising global tourism activities is a strategy Sri Lanka tourism could have paid attention to.

Sri Lanka has experienced several waves of political and economic crises in various intensities since its independence in 1948. The 'Sinhala Only' policy that was introduced in Sri Lanka in 1956, economic hardships brought in by the socialist-nationalistic policies of the government at the time, and terrorist activities, conducted by the members of the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) in the south and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Elam (LTTE) in the north, which lead to exodus of Sri Lankans to Europe (Jayawardena, 2020). None of these events had any impact on the life of an average person in the country to the extent of what people are experiencing at present due to the latest economic and political crisis in Sri Lanka.

With this background and the present economic and political turmoil of the country, the Sri Lankan government has realised the importance of reversing the outflow of human resources while focusing on increased revenue through inbound tourism and foreign investments. The IMF Staff Report on Sri Lanka released in March of 2022 has stressed

the importance of promoting the country within the international community as a way to increase the revenue, especially to increase the foreign exchange reserves, by devoting a separate annex to discuss the pros and cons of the Colombo Port City Project (IMF Country Report 22/91, 2022). According to the Sri Lanka Tourism Development Authority (SLTDA), a summary of tourist arrival statistics during the last five years is given in Table 1.

Table 1: Summary of Tourist Arrival Statistics During Last Five Years in Sri Lanka

Year	Number of Tourists	Revenue (US\$)	% of GNP
2018	3.000 Mn	5,610 Mn	5.90
2019	2.000 Mn	4,660 Mn	5.20
2020	0.540 Mn	1,080 Mn	1.30
2021	0.194 Mn	615 Mn	0.69
2022	0.720 Mn	1,000 Mn	1.05

Source: Sri Lanka Tourism Development Authority

AIM AND OBJECTIVES

This study aims to examine the possibilities of achieving an improved and sustainable Tourism sector through Strategic City Branding in Sri Lanka. It will also explore the impact of branding the city of Colombo in attracting more visitors and supporting the economic revival of the country with the following objectives.

- To investigate the impact of the Strategic Place Branding Management Model in assisting the branding process of the cities in Sri Lanka.
- To explore the importance of branding cities, particularly the city of Colombo, in inspiring Sri Lanka tourism.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Traditionally, destinations are considered as geographical areas which are well-defined in terms of a city, country, or island. Combinations of tourism products that offer cohesive experiences to travellers can also be identified as destinations. Destinations can theoretically be divided into areas with political or geographical boundaries taking neither the consumer preferences nor the functions of the tourism industry into account (Buhalis, 2001, p. 1). A destination may also be defined as a place where a traveller decides to visit to experience certain attractions and features as a way of satisfying their thirst for knowledge and leisure (Cooper et. al., 1998). A destination primarily offers an amalgamation of products and services that will be consumed by the inhabitants as well

as the visitors. Therefore, a place brand should work as an attractive umbrella covering all such characteristics that can impress as many consumers as possible (Leiper, 1995).

With globalization, every place is compelled to compete with other places to gain or secure its clientele, tourists, capital, businesses, investments, respect, and attention. Destinations in today's world are similar to companies. The places with very strong brand names find it easy to market their products and services and to facilitate investment and people. Some of the best examples of resilient branded cities in the globe are Paris, renowned for romance (City of Love), Tokyo city as modernity (Endless Discovery), New York as energy (I Love New York), Barcelona known for rich culture (Barcelona like never before), Milan known for style (Milano: It changes more than just your look), Washington as power (Experience DC) and Rio de Janeiro as a fun city (Brazil: Visit and be enchanted). These city names are even better known and recognized than some of the other countries in the world. Place branding is known as a strategic procedure to develop a vision of a place. This, indeed, is relevant and convincing to some of the key audiences. Eventually, it directly influences and creates optimistic perceptions of a place (Glaeser, 2006).

Companies use branding as proof of ownership, quality, and integrity of the product as well as a symbol of the responsibility of delivering what is promised (Kapferer, 2008). Furthermore, it increases the effectiveness of marketing communication, enhances performance needs, and generates customer loyalty as described by Keller (2009) and Hoeffler and Keller (2003). Experts in marketing have recognized that strong brands not only support the growth of business organizations popularizing their products and services but also increase awareness about destinations as well (Kotler et. al., 1993; Moilanen & Rainisto, 2009). A place that has been branded strongly shall inspire tourism and its affiliated businesses, invite investment opportunities, create awareness, and provide information to create optimistic perceptions as a collection of the above creates an economic turnover for the nation (Aronczyk, 2008 and Fetscherin, 2010). Place branding is recognized as a tool to develop the economy of a country, city, or place, and has been embraced by corresponding governing bodies of such entities around the world (Heslop & Papadopoulos, 2002).

However, numerous authors have voiced criticism regarding the application of traditional marketing theory and models to city marketing, pointing out the disparity between the contexts of business and cities (Kavaratzis & Kalandides, 2015; Zenker et. al., 2017). In response, some scholars argue that city branding often overlooks crucial economic, social, and cultural dimensions, prompting a revaluation of the very concept of branding and the underlying theories (Lucarelli & Olof Berg, 2011).

Stakeholder Engagement

Branding, marketing, and managing a place brand is extremely difficult because of the complex relationships, dependencies, and involvements among numerous stakeholders in

tourism and all other related industries. Stakeholders could be described as inhabitants of the place, investors and related businesses, hoteliers, tour operators, tourists and intermediaries, and policymakers (Sautter & Leisen, 1999). It is particularly important to identify all the stakeholders connected with the place at the very beginning of the branding process. Brand managers have to consider all different community groups of the city dwellers, the city government, suppliers, investors, employers, shareholders of companies attached to the city, employees, and potential visitors to the city. These categories cover most of the people who are affected by the brand. The stakeholders can be separated into two sectors, primary and secondary, with the survival of the brand mainly depending on the primary stakeholders (Clarkson, 1995; Donaldson and Preston, 1995). It is important to focus on the diversity among the range of stakeholders from the preliminary investigations of the branding process (Ferrel et. al., 2010). Since the economic as well as socio-cultural growth of the place is the main goal of branding it, the brand managers have to match the wants and need not only of the consumer but also of all the stakeholders (Bourne, 2009; Mc Alexander et. al., 2002). If the city management is to change the existing ones or implement new marketing strategies, they have to listen to the concerns, difficulties, expectations, and ideas of the respective stakeholders for the strategy to be an effective one (Greenley et. al., 2005). With the exchange of ideas, expertise, power, financial aid, and resources, a very solid bond has been created among the stakeholders. It is the mutual understanding among the stakeholders, just as modern-day organizations fitting into global alliances for collective benefits in the marketplace by defeating their competitors, that will determine the success of the brand. Such an approach helps the place to offer a diversified array of products and services through its branding and marketing strategies (Polonsky, 1996; Evers et al, 2012). Though the strength of the partnership between the brand managers and all other stakeholders is directly proportional to the rate of success of the brand, the coordination of such a partnership perhaps would be the most difficult aspect of the whole process (Hanna & Rowley, 2011).

Infrastructure (The re-generation)

Aesthetic and historical value and practicality and availability of all the modern advanced technologies within the infrastructure have become a key determinant of attracting external parties to a place (Gunn & Turgut, 2002; Inskeep, 1991). The service infrastructure providing water, electricity, telecommunication, and WIFI facilities as well as airports, aerodromes, harbours, roads & highways providing transport facilities are known to be the most important in terms of brand experience. When planning for place branding for tourism, the development of those creating new and exciting experiences will be key factors of the strategy (Crouch & Ritchie, 1999). Especially when developing nations are competing among themselves to attract tourists from developed nations, the brand managers should have a clear understanding of the expectations of the visitors since people from developed nations are used to higher standards of living than the standards

accepted by most of the developing nations (Cohen, 1979; Mo et. al., 1993; Khadaroo & Seetanah, 2007).

Brand Identity

The brand identity is also an important component since it differentiates a brand from its competitors (Kapferer, 2008). Just as organizations use their distinctive competencies to be unique in the industry and position themselves where competitors are not, brand identity must complement the rich culture, beliefs, and values of the people living within the area itself (Heslop & Papadopoulos, 2002). The brand identity can be made out of a collection of images, words, ideas, and relations. Depending on these elements the perception towards a brand will differ (Upshaw, 1995). Once the brand identity is exposed to the customers, the producers must ensure that the expected brand experience will be met. Therefore, a company's business strategy must be in line with the brand identity. If a place fails to identify its core values and communicates a wrong image of it and the country, it will lead to a dissatisfied customer. Therefore, a key element in the process of brand building has to be brand identity. Brand identity could be enhanced by changes in beliefs, infrastructure, and cultural changes over time, and with stakeholder involvement (Hanna & Rowley, 2011).

Brand Architecture

This component can be reflected in the structure of a company, which controls a portfolio. It describes the dissimilar activities and the relationships among different brands. A place brand is habitually promoted by one chief brand. This may follow a few sub-brand categories owned by supporting brands of the public and private sectors (Hanna & Rowley, 2011). The collective sub-brands will result in assisting to strengthen the central brand while spreading its benefits among the sub-brands. However, a negative outcome of one sub-brand could create a negative influence on all other sub-brands and the central brand as well. Therefore, brand managers must always remember that all these branches are strongly interconnected and interdependent (Aaker & Joachimsthaler, 2000).

Brand Communication

Communications of all forms are the pathways through which a company tries to exchange information with its customers. Since there are too many competitors in the market, communication has become essential for organizations to be recognized as they exist or even to stand out from existing competitors. Marketing experts say "*A company without marketing communication is like a walk in the dark*" (Duncan & Moriarty, 1998). Marketers should make use of marketing communications to notify, influence, and remind consumers of the brands (Keller, 2001). As experts in branding mentioned in 'Brand Identity' brand messages are influenced by the stakeholders too. It is seen as a great opportunity to have a good relationship among stakeholders in creating the brand message (Duncan & Moriarty, 1998). A brand message needs to be consistent. This will

create a positive sign as it helps build trust with external parties. Place branding needs communication to notify the external audiences which impacts the perception and reliability of the place (Hanna & Rowley, 2011).

Word of Mouth (WOM)

WOM simply is what is been discussed in the marketplace by all the stakeholders (Askegaard et. al., 2010). The researchers' findings are also highly considered by customers as a way of confirming what has been advertised by the marketers. WOM is known as a very powerful tool in marketing communication (Lemon et. al., 2004). One of the most important characteristics of the WOM the brand managers and marketers have to understand is that they (or the organizations) have very little control of the WOM. People seek WOM from friends, relatives, colleagues, and other persons that they can trust as a confirmation of what has been heard already (Arndt, 1967).

Negative information spreads faster through WOM than positive information. Digital and social media have made WOM increasingly popular and faster. Looking at the positive side of WOM, companies, organizations, and destinations can use the same facilities to promote and correct misleading perceptions of a brand and remind customers of its products and services. When analysed carefully, it also provides an understanding of the needs and wants of the customers where they share their thoughts and experiences of different brands used (Li & Bernoff, 2011).

Brand Experience

Consumers try to get the maximum benefit and the best experiences they can get by purchasing a product or a service. This is more evident when it comes to tourists as they expect to experience the place they visit. Therefore, branding has gained increased popularity in the subject of marketing recently (Schmitt & Zarantonello, 2010). The brand experience notion is defined as “*feelings, behavioural replies, sensations, and thoughts*” brought by the brand-connected incentives such as communications, design and identity, environments, and packaging (Brakus et. al., 2009).

The customers' viewpoint or perception is based on their experience with the brand. In-place branding is how they feel about all tangible and intangible aspects of the place. The brand experience shall be influenced by *brand communication, articulation, identity, and* straight inspiration on *infrastructure*. As an efficient factory manager coordinating all the components of a manufacturing process to get the best product out, the WOM combines all those factors related to the brand and becomes a dominating factor in creating the brand perception within the mind of the consumer (Hanna & Rowley, 2011).

METHODOLOGY

This study follows qualitative approaches with a systematic review of the literature. Secondary data was collected from numerous journal articles and other accepted material

that have been published in the past to enhance the understanding of the concept of city branding. Case studies are also used to highlight the strategies that have been successful as well as the ones that have not been so successful as an attempt to provide a frame of reference to the discussion.

Theoretical Underpinning

Destination branding goes beyond the collective perceptions of individuals about a particular place, whether formed through personal experience, word of mouth, or preconceived notions, which significantly influence their emotional attitudes toward that destination (Buncle, 2003). A destination's brand cannot be manufactured artificially since it resides in the subjective perception of observers and must embody authenticity and genuineness. Therefore, the branding process consists of strategic cultivation, refinement, and presentation of the destination's core attributes to its primary audiences establishing or reinforcing its reputation. Increasing global competition has driven effective city branding beyond mere communication and marketing efforts to include urban planning, cultural initiatives, trade, and investment. Defining the destination's identity and its fundamental values in a manner that will be embraced universally and could easily be promoted has become a significant challenge in city branding. In this context, traditional product branding strategies may prove less suitable for destinations due to the complexities involved in ownership, stakeholder engagement, and the intricate development of the brand (Kavaratzis, 2009). The two primary concerns within a destination branding process are the abilities of the brand: a. to serve as a vehicle to express urban identity, and to be a tool for enhancing competitive capabilities of the place. The concepts of 'territorial competitiveness' and 'powerful urban identities' are not contradictory; instead, recognizing their potential synergies can create opportunities for sustainable development. Places trying to attract tourists, investment, consumers, skilled labour, students, and various economically viable events not only have to compete with their local neighbours but also with places situated far across the globe due to the process of accelerated globalization. Ironically, technological advancements and the deregulation of markets act as double-edged swords, contributing to the creation of intense competition and, at the same time, being major ingredients in branding and marketing strategies used in winning such competitions.

Brand Identity Theory

Kavaratzis (2004) introduces a three-tiered framework for understanding city branding better. The first consists of tangible and visible attributes through which a city is perceived, while promotional strategies used by the city and communication of individuals and media outlets about the city reflecting public discourse and perceptions come in as the second and the third tiers, respectively. He also introduces six essential aspects to explore in the branding process of a city: 1. What the city indubitably is; 2.

What the city says it is; 3. What the city feels it is; 4. Whom the city seeks to serve; 5. What the city is seen to be; and 6. What is encouraged and expected?

In the process of branding a destination, it is crucial to recognize the historical significance, architectural heritage, economic landscape, product offerings, and cultural vibrancy as well as all the stakeholders including religious, social, political, and entrepreneurial groups, investors, permanent and temporary residents and visitors (Shirvani Dastgerdi & De Luca, 2019).

Brand Identity Theory describes that products or organizations develop distinct identities and personalities that shape their brands. Unique attributes of a place, such as values, history, culture, and experiences created by the place, contribute to its identity. Place branding strategies could highlight such distinct qualities to differentiate the place from others and create a memorable brand image.

Brand Equity Theory

A marketing concept that refers to the value and perceptions associated with a brand and its impact on consumer behaviour and business performance. It includes the tangible and intangible assets of a brand, including brand awareness, brand association, brand loyalty, perceived quality, and brand personality. Brand Equity Theory suggests that brands with strong equity can build greater customer loyalty, higher perceived value, increased pricing power, and competitive advantage in the market (Aaker, 2012; Keller, 2013). The extent to which consumers repeatedly purchase a brand, or visit a place in this case, over time is an indication of the strength of the brand equity (Yoo, et. al., 2013). Brand Equity, measured using brand awareness, brand image, brand loyalty, perceived quality, and brand association, helps stakeholders understand the strength of the brand relative to competitors, identify areas for improvement, and track changes in brand perceptions over time (Keller, 2013).

Stakeholder Theory

Stakeholder Theory in place branding focuses on the importance of engaging various stakeholders in the process. Though the fundamental principles of destination branding originated from the branding strategies employed by product brands the stakeholder landscape of destination branding is much larger than that of product brands (Hankinson, 2007; Konecnik & Go, 2008). One of the biggest challenges in destination branding lies in incorporating all influential stakeholders into both the development and implementation phases of the process. Buhalis (2001) establishes that the six primary stakeholder groups to be included are: tourists and tourism sector, local populace, government and public sector entities having jurisdiction over the area, local business community including small and medium-sized tourism enterprises and tour operators, religious leaders of all religions being practiced in the area, and civil society organizations focusing mainly on the environmental and cultural aspects and sustainability of economic

development in the area. Navigating the diverse wishes of stakeholder groups while minimizing the costs and negative impacts has not been an easy task, especially when the interests of two or more groups diverge. The long-term success of the destination and the sustainable development of the economy can only be achieved through collaboration among all stakeholders.

For example, an individual's place of residence or origin plays a significant role in shaping their sense of self, leading to a distinct differentiation between the "We" (permanent residents of the place – In-Group) and "Them" (tourists and temporary residents – Out-Group). The phenomenon known as the In-Group/Out-Group Effect, along with disparities in knowledge structures formed by varying levels of experience, suggests that the Out-Group is likely to exhibit more uniform and stereotypical associations, whereas the In-Group is expected to exhibit a more diverse and heterogeneous perception of the place brand (Zenker & Braun, 2010). In essence, destination branding necessitates "the coordinated use of marketing tools supported by a shared customer-oriented philosophy, for creating, communicating, delivering, and exchanging urban offerings that have value for the city's customers and the city's community at large" (Braun, 2008).

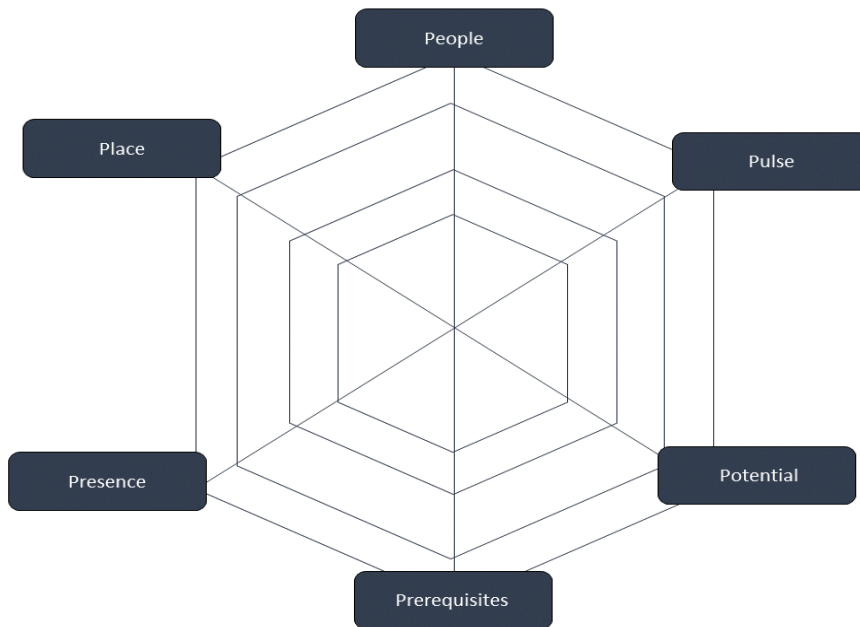
Strategic Place Brand Management Model (SPBM)

As a framework guiding the strategic management of place brands such as cities, regions, or destinations, SPBM provides a structured approach for place managers and stakeholders to create, implement, and evaluate effective place branding strategies. SPBM emphasizes the importance of aligning place branding initiatives with the overall goals and aspirations of the place as well as engaging stakeholders throughout the process. It begins with a thorough analysis of the place's context, including its history, culture, geography, economic drivers, competitive landscape, and stakeholder dynamics (Kavaratzis & Ashworth, 2005). The next step is to define a clear vision and positioning for the brand by identifying the place's unique selling proposition and value proposition as well as its desired image and positioning in the minds of target audiences (Anholt, 2007). Brand managers are now ready to engage the stakeholders, including residents, businesses, government agencies, and community organizations to ensure the collaboration and support of all stakeholders (Govers & Go, 2009). Then the SPBM model will guide the brand managers to develop a comprehensive brand strategy for the place based on the vision and stakeholder input. The model emphasizes effective implementation of the strategy across various touchpoints such as marketing campaigns, events, infrastructure projects, and policies. It also advocates for ongoing evaluation and adaptation of the strategy based on performance metrics, stakeholder feedback, market trends, and changes in the place's context, facilitating continuous improvement and optimization of the brand over time (Zenker et. al., 2017).

Hexagon of Place Branding (HPB)

Representing six key components of place branding, the HPB is a conceptual framework that provides a structured approach to understanding and managing the various dimensions of place branding. Anholt (2006) examines six distinct elements when studying the brand equity of a city or a nation. These are residents, governmental policies, products, cultural aspects, business environment, and tourist attractions in the area. Though it is easier to have clear demarcations of these categories within a country, certain elements, such as products or business environment, may not be prominent enough in the context of a city. Therefore, it is suggested that the six elements can be considered in general as: presence, place, potential, pulse, people, and prerequisites (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Anholt's City Brand Hexagon Model



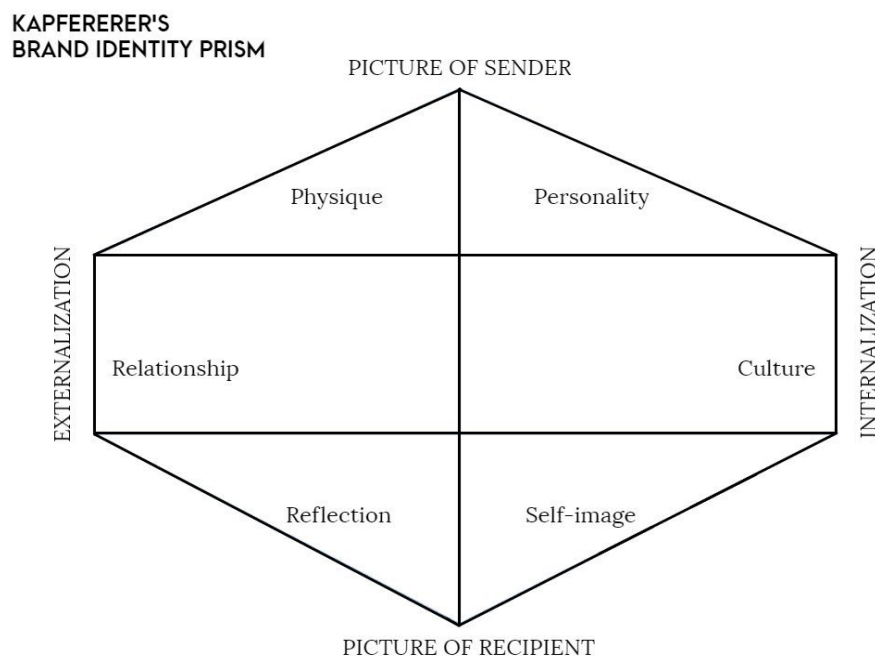
Source: Benedek (2017)

The six characteristics represented by the six sides of the Hexagon can also be interpreted as Identity, Image, Reputation, Brand, Communications, and Experience (Zenker, 2017). The identity of a place evolves through the nurturing of its unique tangible attributes, such as architecture, landmarks, and natural landscapes, as well as intangible aspects, such as history and culture. The image of a place is created by perceptions, impressions, and associations that people hold about the place. Therefore, the image can be influenced by various factors such as media representations, marketing campaigns, word-of-mouth, and personal experiences. Shaping and managing the image is essential for enhancing the attractiveness and competitiveness of the place (Anholt, 2006). An effective place brand resonates with stakeholders and differentiates the place from its competitors.

Brand Identity Prism (BIP)

Kapferer (1992) introduced the ‘Brand Identity Prism’ a conceptual framework that can be used in brand management to analyse and understand the various aspects of a brand identity, distinguishing between the sender and recipient aspects, as well as externalization and internalization facets. The six facets of identity describe both tangible and intangible attributes of the brand (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Brand Identity Prism and three-tier pyramid



Source: Florek & Janiszewska (2013)

The six facets are interconnected and help shape the overall perception and personality of the brand. The ‘Physique’ of a brand refers to its tangible aspects such as logo, design, packaging, and visual elements. It represents the outward appearance and is often the first impression the consumers have of the brand. It also serves as the foundation of branding, forming the essence of the brand. The ‘Personality’ of a brand refers to the human characteristics and traits associated with it that reflect the brand’s values, attitudes, and behaviour. The personality of the brand helps consumers form an emotional connection with it through its communication style, tone of voice, and brand messaging. This internal, intangible dimension shapes the brand’s character and personality traits, which are significant for brand differentiation. The ‘Culture’ of the brand reflects its heritage, history, and traditions as well as its relationship with its stakeholders. The ‘Relationship’ of a brand refers to its interaction and connections with its customers and other stakeholders, whereas the ‘Reflection’ of the brand represents how it reflects the values

and aspirations of its target audience. The 'Self-Image' aspect of the brand helps stakeholders fulfil their psychological and social needs through their relationship with the brand (Kapferer, 1992).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The significance of a city's image has become increasingly important in today's competitive global market. An image can be defined as a comprehensive structure encompassing knowledge, perceptions, and emotions associated with a particular entity. A positive image a city has managed to build can be the strength of its brand. City branding represents a vital component of city marketing and local industrial policies, thereby necessitating the profiling of cities (Anttiroiko, 2014). Given that many cities share similar characteristics, a strategic approach to city branding involves the creation of distinctive values to set one city apart from another. Examination of the city's physical attributes, promotional strategies as well as perceptions of the city held by its inhabitants and the media (Zhang & Zhao, 2009). City branding has the potential to serve as a foundation for sustainable economic policies and for a sense of belonging among the residents of the city (Kavaratzis, 2004). Braun (2012) has highlighted the importance of public consensus, integration with the political process with clear political accountability, stakeholder engagement, authenticity, and credibility of the efforts, and achieving a balance between uniqueness and widespread acceptance of the brand.

From the perspective of developing countries, tourism is of higher importance for economic development (Sinclair, 1998). Therefore, as per Anholt (2003), place branding is most important for developing countries since a major portion of the economic growth of such countries depends on tourism and related industries. The World Trade Organization (WTO) finds the travel and tourism industry as one of the globe's prime economic sectors since it adds trillions of dollars to the world economy every year. For over 30 years, the World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC) has been qualifying the economic impact of Travel & Tourism, highlighting the importance of the sector globally. WTTC has been producing reports on the economic and employment impact for approximately 185 countries/economies and 26 geographic or economic regions in the world. These reports, in conjunction with Oxford Economics, are a vital tool in helping to equip public and private sector bodies with hard evidence of the huge value Travel & Tourism carries to the economy so that policymaking and investment decisions will support the sector. Capitalising on travel and tourism opportunities will, without a doubt, help a destination to grow economically. To fulfil an objective as such, special attention is needed from regional authorities, especially in emerging markets. Expanding opportunities for a promising business environment for investment, suitable infrastructure also knowledgeable and skilled human resources are important factors to have a sustainable and fruitful tourism industry. Authorities may ease their immigration policies by allowing on-arrival visa processes to support tourism. Also, adjusting the existing

taxation policies and replacing them with intelligent tourist and business-friendly policies will be highly effective (Turner, 2014). It is vital to have a glimpse of data produced by this sector to understand the potential.

- Travel & Tourism (T&T) was one of the world's largest sectors, accounting for 1 in 4 of all new jobs created in the world.
- 10.3% of all jobs (333 Million).
- International visitor spending amounted to USD 1.8 Trillion in 2019.
- International visitor spending amounted to USD 0.54 Trillion in 2021.
- International visitor spending amounted to USD 0.56 Trillion in 2022.
- The year 2019 - 10.3% of global GDP (USD 9.6 Trillion).
- The year 2020 – 5.3% of global GDP (USD 4.7 Trillion).
- The year 2021 – 6.1% of global GDP (USD 5.8 Trillion).
- The year 2022 – 7.6% of global GDP (USD 7.0 Trillion).
- Before the COVID-19 pandemic, the growth rate of the global Travel & Tourism sector outpaced the growth of the global economy for nine consecutive years.
- The year 2019 T&T Employment – 1 in 10 of all jobs (333 Million)
- The year 2020 T&T Employment – 62Mn jobs lost (271 Million)
- The year 2021 T&T Employment – 1 in 11 of all jobs (289 Million)
- Asia-Pacific is forecasted to be the first region to revert to the 2019 scenario (in 2023), while all the other regions are estimated to recover completely in 2024.
- Forecast: between 2022 and 2032, Travel & Tourism's contribution to the global economy is expected to grow at an average annual rate of 5.8%.

(World Travel & Tourism Council, 2022).

The literature explains the multiple benefits a country, region, or city could receive by branding a place. The main outcomes expected by a governing body of a branded city are economic development and an expanding tourism industry. Colombo, the commercial capital of Sri Lanka and the main entry point to the Island, has the biggest potential to attract business and leisure travellers as a steady combination if proper city branding takes place. As the modern business traveller visits an urban city for business and pleasure, also known as 'bleisure' in today's context, this in turn could make more local suppliers get involved and contribute to a growing economy.

As explained by Chon (1991) and Brinberg & Baloglu (1997), a tourist recognises a destination as a particular brand involving services and suppliers. Before choosing a place to visit, a tourist visualises an image of the chosen destination using the knowledge he has gathered through various sources dominated by the information available through the branding process of the place. Such a decision could also be influenced by their past experiences, advertising, word of mouth, press reports, articles, web-based information, and common beliefs. People can take virtual tours through specific attractions, cities, or even countries using the technology available today. Therefore, appropriate and adequate

measures must be taken by the brand managers to convey the expected image in the minds of the tourists. A branding process will not only rectify a wrong image a tourist may have in mind but also it will increase customer satisfaction as tourists will be assured of an experience similar to what they imagined about the place.

Well-branded cities are usually associated with sobriquets, aliases, and slogans. The chambers of commerce, tourism boards, municipal councils, local people, or outsiders officially or unofficially make this a reality. As well branded cities draw visitors and the attention of other interested parties, this phenomenon is further expressed in a way that each experiences a good feeling about the place. The origin of the ‘Nicknames’ of a place usually can be traced back to attempts to express those feelings in their own words. City nicknames have an impact on forming civic identity, making the community distinguished, attracting visitors, improving unity, and stimulating civic pride. Some nicknames followed by their slogans have created solid communities successfully. It is believed that these philosophies and myths have economic value which is challenging to measure.

Looking at some of the city names along with their nicknames will help us to realize how recognized these cities are globally and how well they are attached to people’s emotions (Table 2).

Table 2: Cities and their nicknames

Name of the City	Nickname	Name of the City	Nickname
Paris	<i>‘City of Love’</i>	Las Vegas	<i>‘Sin City’</i>
Prague	<i>‘The Mother of Cities’</i>	Chicago	<i>‘The Windy City’</i>
New York	<i>‘The Big Apple’</i>	Los Angeles	<i>‘The City of Angels’</i>
Amsterdam	<i>‘I Amsterdam’</i>	Venice	<i>‘Bride of the Sea’</i>
London	<i>‘The Square Mile’</i>	Pittsburgh	<i>‘Iron City’</i>
Rome	<i>‘The Eternal City’</i>	Seattle	<i>‘The Emerald City’</i>
Barcelona	<i>‘The City of Counts’</i>	Toronto	<i>‘Queen City’</i>
Jerusalem	<i>‘The Holy City’</i>	Boston	<i>‘The Hub’</i>
Geneva	<i>‘The Peace Capital’</i>	Rio De Janeiro	<i>‘Marvelous City’</i>
Mumbai	<i>‘The City of Dreams’</i>	Singapore	<i>‘The Lion City’</i>
Naples	<i>‘City of the Sun’</i>	Milano	<i>‘Fashion Capital of the World’</i>
Cairo	<i>‘Paris of the Nile’</i>	Melbourne	<i>‘Bleak City’</i>
Sydney	<i>‘The Harbor City’</i>	Berlin	<i>‘The Grey City’</i>
Beijing	<i>‘The Forbidden City’</i>	Kuala Lumpur	<i>‘Golden Triangle’</i>

Source: www.travelaway.me

If a city wants to develop a brand strategy and be successful as Milwaukee and some of the other cities did, some basic yet important questions, as stated below, will have to be answered justly and wholly (Malcom, 2004).

Where does the place stand currently among other cities – considering the strengths and weaknesses of the place?

- Where do we want to position the place in the future? And how to articulate it?
- What would make the place unique, attractive, and valued to attract investors, businesses, employees, tourists, and other interested parties?
- What strategies can we use for positioning to make it a reality?
- What is the role of indigenous people and key stakeholders to incarnate the brand?
- What brand strategy can we take for measurement?

Because of the complexity and the involvement of various stakeholders, it is more rational for a place to be considered as a collection of services, products, and associations. As place branding involves many products and services by numerous stakeholders the broader picture of branding a city would be a whole business entity itself. Place branding is not just promoting the available local products and services to external audiences but is about evaluating and analysing the values and resources of a place and using those to promote the place itself. This is similar to multinational corporations using their corporate brand name to promote their sub-brands. Likewise, city branding is gathering several qualities together to the benefit of all sub-products and services through which as many stakeholders as possible can benefit from that single branding process (Rainisto, 2003).

The strength of a brand, in place branding, is optimised when a destination has created a distinguished difference for its brand among the competitors for residents, visitors, businesses, and investments. Building a strong brand consists of three steps (Kavaratzis & Ashworth, 2005).

- Provide awareness of the existence of a place.
- Make the customers aware of the differences and qualities that differentiate the place from its competitors.
- Have control of the consumption of the city's products and services.

What is an urban destination?

The surroundings of a city are usually known as an urban area. Inhabitants of these areas are involved in non-agricultural jobs and are developed relative to other areas of a country (suburban and rural areas). The human population in these areas is higher and growing, the same as residential areas, infrastructure, ports, bridges, and commercial buildings. They are also known as metropolitan areas (www.education.nationalgeographic.com).

The literature explains that from the initial years of civilisation, there has been proof that such areas have been engaging in tourism activities. People travel from city to city to meet people for business and political purposes. Tourism occurred in main cities in the form of sports activities such as the beginning of the Olympics in ancient Greece. People visit cities on pilgrimage as most of the cathedrals, temples, and mosques are frequently situated in major cities. With globalisation, modern business activities are taking place in cities as the traveller is provided with modern facilities for business purposes. The travel industry uses the abbreviation '*MICE*' to refer to the four main purposes a business traveller would associate his/her visit to a city with: Meetings, Incentives, Conferences, and Events (Exhibitions). Urban destinations must be well equipped with high-tech exhibition and conference halls, standard and luxury accommodations, transportation facilities, and infrastructure to host the MICE population. From a city's perspective, business travel is of high priority because the spending patterns of stakeholders are much higher, and hence, it boosts the economic growth of the city faster than the visitors of other categories. The metropolitan cities also attract the leisure traveller, who is recognised widely as a tourist. Leisure travellers mostly visit urban cities during the off-peak season of business activities. It is only a general norm taken by the leisure tourist's travel patterns and there is no hard and fast rule to say that leisure travellers do not travel during the peak season to urban cities. Some suppliers try to reduce the seasonality to the leisure traveller because the earnings received from the leisure traveller are much less than what's received from the business traveller.

However, in contrast to the limitations due to work-related activities and the time constraints a business traveller has, the leisure traveller can experience the unique facilities provided by a destination where they can relish short breaks or even amend and extend their travel plans. This, in return, will create word of mouth when the leisure traveller goes back to their place of living and spreads their views of the destination. New York, London, Singapore, Paris, Hong Kong, and Tokyo are some fascinating attraction points with a vast choice of entertainment including musical concerts, movies and dramas, restaurants, boutique villas, sporting events, bars, and casinos. Urban areas also bring in tourists, such as health and education tourists, as most modern cities are equipped with good healthcare and educational facilities. Berg, Borg, & Meer (1995), Law (1993 and 1996), Page (1994), and Mazanec (1997) all agree with similar thoughts about urban areas.

When a city is branded to inspire tourism, it is best if the brand managers try to understand the geographical location of the city. While using other aspects in marketing the destination, the city administrators simply could diversify the possibilities of attracting more tourists to the city highlighting the unique aspects of its geography. As an example: if the city is in a coastal area, then it can attract business travellers for MICE activities and leisure travellers for *sea, sand, sun, sex, and sports*. Cities in developing countries can use cultural uniqueness, exotic food and art forms, exclusivity of their flora and fauna,

and historic and archaeological sites to satisfy the traveller's curiosity. However, distinguishing between the business and leisure traveller is increasingly becoming difficult as the modern traveller selects their destinations for both purposes. The practice of unifying business travel with leisure time is known as 'bleisure'. It entails extending the stay past contractual obligations to explore the area, fully immerse in the culture, and engage in leisure activities. The business traveller combines business and pleasure to save cost and time. Leisure travel has become inclusive of characteristics of business activities and vice versa. Prolonged conference stays, incentive travelling, business meetings while on holiday, short stays in the city while on transit, and excursions to close radius places make it difficult to box in the modern traveller to only one segment.

The leisure tourist, when selecting a destination to travel, undergoes a complex set of conditions. The leisure traveller is very price elastic; thus, the price is the prime concern in selecting a destination as explained by Gilbert (1991 and 1993), Swarbrooke & Horner (1999), Goodall (1988 and 1991), and Mayo & Jarvis (1981). On the other hand, the cost is not the top priority for the upmarket tourist and the business traveller, and therefore, they tend to choose eco-friendly, greener cities with luxury accommodations more than the leisure traveller. Even if the leisure traveller values the environment as much as the business traveller, the difference in the cost may make them choose destinations that are not at the top of the green list. The business traveller usually considers it as an investment showing their willingness to pay premium prices for their visit and accommodation due to their environment-friendly company policies (Pigram, 1996; Archer, 1996; Thomas, 1992; Garrod & Willis, 1992; Laarman & Gregersen, 1996).

Gilbert (1990) argues that a destination should fathom its pricing strategy depending on where the destination would be placed within the spectrum between the classifications of '*commodity areas*' and '*status areas*'. Depending on the uniqueness of its product and service characteristics, a destination may have a high demand in the tourism market. This uniqueness could be a real factor or even maybe an imaginative factor depending on the knowledge a tourist has gathered. Such status areas are in high demand and regarded as irreplaceable destinations. They are more susceptible to consumer loyalty, and tourists are vehement to pay higher prices; therefore, they can be marketed at higher prices. On the other hand, commodity areas have a very low recognition of the destination's unique benefits or characteristics. Hence these destinations are highly substitutable. Travelers who may visit commodity areas are very price-sensitive and, therefore, are not high spenders.

Case Study Summaries

Milwaukee, USA

Midwest Airlines in the USA took an initiative in the year 1998, to attract business and talent to the city of Milwaukee and to fill the capacity of its fleet. The focus branding needed, for the city, was wisely captured by the 'Spirit of Milwaukee' campaign. The

brand manager said, *“Our biggest barrier was our low self-image and getting Milwaukee to believe in itself. People did not know what we have here in Milwaukee.”* The city of Milwaukee has managed to attract many people due to place branding for business and leisure purposes and considered the achievement as a result of an effort of the whole region (Malcom, 2004).

Hamburg, Germany.

Before 2004, Hamburg, Germany, was also doing what most other cities around the world were doing to attract investors, businesses, and tourists. The city was using different methods to market itself to different groups. City management, with close collaboration with urban planning and policy-making, integrated the main selling points into one marketing campaign that resulted in almost a 100% increase in overnight guests and the presence of international corporations (Zenker & Beckmann, 2012).

Edmonton, Canada.

City management of Edmonton, Canada interviewed thousands of people from all walks of life to find out what made them happy, proud, or ashamed to be Edmontonians. After sifting through all the answers, they summarized the key points as Edmontonians being people with ideas, and risk-takers capable of creating their solutions to problems they faced. They also found out that Edmontonians are proud of what they create, and therefore, the city managers asked them to ‘Make Something Edmonton.’ The expectation was to have perhaps a couple of hundred projects within the two years from 2012 to 2014. However, they ended up having more than 1500 creative projects that can tell the world what Edmonton is all about. The city was awarded the ‘Best Expression of Place Brand Identity’ at the 2016 City Nation Place Forum held in London (Huang et. al., 2016).

Izmir, Turkey.

Izmir is a city with a proud history of being one of the largest port cities in the Mediterranean for over 8,000 years. The port was a transit point on the Silk Road for centuries facilitating trade between Europe and North African countries. The city became a place where Eastern and Western cultures mingle and live in harmony. City managers used its geographical location, history, and demography to empower socio-cultural and economic interactions with other cities around the world. Today, Izmir is marketed as a major logistic hub and a pioneering city connecting Turkey to the global value chain. The city branding process has targeted the talent pool of over 150,000 students in the universities within the city itself. The two UNESCO World Heritage sites located within the city are being treated as valuable assets that can attract history enthusiasts from around the world. According to the Mayor of Izmir and the team of experts supporting him, the secret of their success is prioritising cultural exchanges and people-to-people contacts. Learning from the history of the city itself, the branding team was committed to prioritising international relations since what made Izmir a prosperous city in the past was its openness to the world. Adjusting to the 21st century, the city managers focused on

making Izmir a smart green city that can compete against any city in the world (Sonuc, 2020).

CONCLUSIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

Sri Lanka tourism has never independently branded a city to inspire tourism before. As Colombo is the commercial capital of the Island and the metropolitan area with the main gateways to the Island, the city is more likely to inspire tourism and economic development of the whole country. Therefore, a holistic approach towards branding with a self-evaluation of the city's past and present, as well as an understanding of target audiences and branding strategies, is essential. The destination Sri Lanka went through a sequence of taglines such as '*A land like no other*', '*Small Miracle*', '*Sri Lanka – Wonder of Asia*' to the most recent slogan '*So Sri Lanka*', which is being used by the Sri Lanka Tourism Promotion Bureau (SLTPB) since 2018. Even though the island territory has an area of 65,610 km² in total, the diversity within the island is amazingly and perfectly sculptured for tourism.

Many stakeholders who kept an eye on the growth opportunities in tourism made a step forward in investing in many assets such as hotels ranging from five-star to even seven-stars, restaurants, private villas, new budget hotels, casinos, night clubs, airlines, ground transportation, hotel renovations, increasing hotel inventory, hotel school management programs, employment, operations of destination management companies (DMC's) and inbound tour operators. In unison, all have made and are still making plans to welcome a high number of visitors to the country.

Sustainability—environmental, social, and economic—is increasingly important to people all around the world. To begin, places, including Sri Lanka, must establish their credentials by deeds rather than words. Second, there is an increasing expectation for genuine action on equality, diversity, and inclusion - places must set examples. Hence, Sri Lanka must consider branding its cities around the country to derive the best from the latest trends in global tourism. Sustainable tourism initiatives, such as eco-friendly transportation options, conservation efforts, and support for local artisans and businesses, can be integrated into the city's brand identity. This not only enhances the visitor experience but also ensures the long-term viability of the destination. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) aim to transform our world. They are a call to action to end poverty and inequality, protect the planet, and ensure that all people enjoy health, justice, and prosperity. In aligning its tourism strategies with the SDGs, Sri Lanka can play a pivotal role in achieving sustainable development objectives. By promoting eco-conscious practices and blue carbon initiatives, the cities can demonstrate their commitment to environmental preservation and biodiversity conservation. As travellers go on board their journeys through Sri Lankan cities, they become active participants in the efforts to combat climate change and preserve marine habitats. Through collaboration with local communities, businesses, and stakeholders, Colombo can create a collective

momentum toward positive change. By integrating the SDGs into its tourism framework, the city becomes a beacon of hope for responsible travel, fostering a connection between travellers and the communities they visit. Each trip to Colombo then becomes an opportunity to make a tangible impact, contributing to poverty alleviation, environmental sustainability, and social inclusivity.

By embracing the SDGs, Sri Lanka not only enhances its appeal to conscious travellers but also leads by example, inspiring other destinations worldwide to follow suit. As the country embraces its role in transforming the world for the better, it weaves a narrative of hope, resilience, and a shared responsibility to safeguard our planet for generations to come. Together, we can embark on a transformative journey, where tourism becomes a driving force toward a more sustainable and equitable future. No place in the country cannot be utilised for tourism, a feat many countries in the world cannot boast about. A well-crafted city brand also plays a crucial role in shaping perceptions and expectations. It influences how a destination is perceived by both domestic and international tourists. Through branding, most Sri Lankan cities can emphasise their key strengths, whether it's rich history and cultural heritage, vibrant arts, entertainment, culinary offerings, or natural beauty. By curating a positive and compelling image with catchy messages, cities can shape the narrative surrounding their destination and influence travellers' decision-making processes.

Tourism plays an excessively important role in the currently troubled Sri Lankan economy. It has proven to be a resilient and one of the most dynamic industries in the world. Tourism in Sri Lanka can continue to grow and evolve at a rapid pace, given consistent and continuous stakeholder assistance. More significantly, the warring political factions must set aside petty rivalry and join hands with the tourism industry, which seems a certain breakout for the crisis.

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