FROM CONJUNCTURAL URBAN STORYTELLING TO CITY BRANDING: AN EMPIRICAL MODEL FOR BUCHAREST

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Abstract
Academic literature, both socio-human and economic profile, approached pretty much the subject of the city brand, usually in the broader context of analysis concerning national and local brands. Despite various theoretical paradigms proposed to identify the most appropriate theoretical modeling frameworks, the city branding remains, at least in Romania, a fact unsupported in a structured and continuous way, often with disparate initiatives, conducted by various economic and social actors, but not organized into a coherent strategy with medium and long term projects. However, the success of several projects focused on emotional approach in recent years concentrated on the rediscovery of past and present stories of the Romanian capital, lead us to believe that the city brand built through stories has a real potential. Thus, in this paper, we propose an exploratory analysis of the potential of storytelling technique in building the city brand, by customizing an empirical model for Bucharest.

Keywords*:* storytelling, city branding, urban management, place branding, destination branding.

1. INTRODUCTION

The branding is one of the most important and powerful concepts in today marketing, existing, at both the scientists and practitioners level, a common belief according to which places, destinations, can be branded in similar ways as products and services. (Caldwell , Freire, 2004). Researchers have shown, in general, not only the building potential of the city brand, but also public authorities' gaps in the use of branding and corporate communications models to enhance positive perceptions of the stakeholders. Such gaps are usually highlighted by the lack of continuity of the specific actions taken and the existence of conflicting messages sent by various levels of urban management (Truemann, Klemm, Giroud, 2004; Insch, Florek, 2010).

Discussions about the city brand of Bucharest are also quite extensive, researchers examining this topic from various perspectives. Thus, methods of using prestigious instruments such as *The City Brand Index, The European Barometer of City Brands* or *The Global Cities Index* by the local authorities in order to create a strong city brand of Bucharest have been made popular (Popescu, Corboⅰ, 2010). At the same time we can

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recall the previous emphasis on the lack of differentiation between representations about Romania in general and about Bucharest in particular, as well as the analysis of Bucharest's logo not being distinctive for European tourist and, finally, the academic emphasis on highlighting the very controversial nature of the Romanian capital's icon, the Parliament House (Dumbrăveanu, 2010).

What is clear now is the fact that the city of Bucharest was not provided, after the fall of communism, with any supported view, at least on the medium term, although development and urban growth plans have been and still are very numerous. However, most actions on urban development path, including its brand, were, at least for Bucharest, the offspring of private initiatives (Nae, Turnock, 2011).

Last three years have shown a true ferment of private projects that try to reposition the perception of Bucharest target audiences concerning the potential and history of the Romanian capital. Thus, multiple PR campaigns (events, lectures, exhibitions of the most unusual places) together with urban display campaigns initiated by various dealers without any correlation whatsoever, have sought to present the good side of Bucharest, which makes the city a worthy destination for those passionate about the authentic, about history or culture - be it older or contemporary.

All these campaigns have in common *the story of Bucharest*, based on the storytelling technique as the ground of competitive strategy. To what extent can we believe that storytelling represents a medium and long term solution for the Romanian capital brand building? How appropriate is this approach? In the following, we will try to answer these questions, based on an empirical profiled literature analysis and the running campaigns we refer to.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW: ON CITY BRANDING AND STORYTELLING

Marketing academic literature has developed, in the last decade, the subject of branding, giving it a central theoretical concerns in which useful models for professional practice are grounded (Corbu, 2011). The brand has established itself as the main solution for attracting new customers and market penetration, as well as for customer loyalty, competitive differentiation and securing market shares (Pinzaru, 2009).

Peak brand loyalty is when it is loved, when it becomes a *lovemark* (Roberts, 2006). Intensively promoted by advertisers and appealing to marketers, the concept of lovemark means that a brand is both loved and respected by consumers, therefore, the sales and the repeating act of purchase by them are grounded in this love and respect for the brand. Theoretically, it is a concept that exceeds the reality of the classic brand commitment (Traylor, 1981), meaning not only name and values, but also emotion and introspection from the customer's experience with the brand in question.

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The brand represents a requirement for competitive markets and it exists nowadays in almost all areas of activities, becoming more and more a deliberate and systematically pursued decision. Brand positioning is based on differentiation, considering either the visible advantages or, on the contrary, the intangible ones - good positioning can lead to successful marks, which thus become a source of competitive advantages. Buyers' loyalty can widely vary between certain classes of products, depending on the number of competing brands and product nature. Brand loyalty is a strategic dimension, inasmuch as it means, in short, reduced marketing costs; commercial leverage; attracting new customers (through brand recognition and offering warranty for the new buyers); response time to competition's threats.

Brands are designed to support complex long-term marketing activities, so they must be thought as such. Increasingly more authors consider that, in fact, the *brand story* is the one that can ensure the continuity of promise and values that support a brand: Companies that do not tell a compelling and consistent brand story that speaks to both the rational and the emotional needs of the audiences risk creating a shallow, short-term brand that is easily destroyed by external factors. (Herskowitz, Crystal, 2010). Other authors share the same opinion, pointing to the pseudo-brands unsupported by lasting stories and not powered by heroes, values, stories and visuals which address the target on a long term (Woodside, Sood, Miller, 2008; Fog *et al.,* 2010; Baker, Boyle, 2009).

What makes the power of storytelling and constitutes, at the same time, the main explanation for the fact that the branding and narratives are usually closely related, comes from the very essence of human appraisal of heroes, myths and extraordinary stories, in a sort of relation with the individual's expectations, experiences and feelings. Everyone, deep in his/her soul, wants to be proud of his/her life and to feel that is important - this is the source of power and influence that can be achieved through storytelling (Simmons, 2002). Stories are related to feelings and emotions, representing, in essence, a chain of emotionally interlinked facts (*ibid.,* 56).

Recent studies regarding the way our brain works show that emotions guide us and direct our thoughts and the interpretations of rational facts, which explains the emergence of a true economy of the emotional (Hill, 2010). Therefore, as Hill shows (*ibid.,* 164), if it is properly done, the brand is assimilated and accepted by loyal customers, earned with effort as an extension of their own beliefs and values . Trust and faith strengthen quality brands and defend against damage. Consumers prefer brands that reinforce their self-confidence, namely brands that succeed in making them feel proud of themselves and of their choice. This explains why brands are products with personality, with values that communicate something to others, and that what they say addresses not only the level of reason, but also the emotional one. In short, a good brand is a myth added to the functional attributes that meet the promises made by that specific brand and make the story seem real (*ibid.,* 183).

In order to choose how to build a brand, you must focus, in the end, on a credible story with a possibility for continuation. Stories come from personal experiences, they must be credible and meet the identified consumers' needs. There are six types of stories in which most brand buildings can be assigned and which can frame the communication campaign strategy and, *in extenso*, product development strategy under the umbrella brand (Simmons, 2002, 4):

- Who Am I stories;
- Why am I here stories;
- The Vision stories;
- Teaching stories;
- Value in action stories;
- I know what you are thinking of stories.

Any successful story is based on several metaphors that are perceived on a deeper level or, on the contrary, more superficially by the audience. Therefore, branding is built on the metaphors most relevant to the target, but with a clear differentiation from competitors. Or, as the Zaltman and Zaltman (2008, 186-191) show, all branding strategies should start with honest answers to some fundamental questions:

- What deep metaphors or thematic expressions of these storytelling are owened by the competitors, if they own any? How firmly do those companies hold them? How much will you have to pay to hold them also? Can you co-own them?
- What deep metaphors fit best with consumers' relevant emotions? What deep metaphors are most likely to turn on other deep relevant metaphors?
- Is there a specific deep metaphor with a negative connotation that can show something else? Does this mean that you could show a negative side of a deep metaphor, even if you show a positive side? How likely is this to happen?
- Should your strategy begin with a deep metaphor and, in time, to bring to light other deep metaphors?

The main tools of storytelling are, therefore, metaphor, message, hero, action and framework. Usually, what is primary and defines storytelling strategy and, therefore, brand building is the choice of metaphors. The actions come in serial system to support deep metaphors, being implemented through different communication channels, adapted to historical periods and audience evolution. A strong partner for brand storytellers, especially if we consider the destination brands is, or should be, the media (Fog *et al.,* 2010, 206-208). Media bring to the attention of consumers new stories, recreate old stories, sustain metaphors by the force of image and, generally, protrude topics, according to classical theory *agenda setting*, formulated after the studies conducted during the election campaigns of 1968 and 1972 by Donald Shaw and Maxwell

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McCombs and which confirmed the hypothesis that the public hears through the media not only the issues of the day, but also how they are ranked in terms of importance (McQuail, Windahl, 2001).

For city branding, press plays a decisive role, since the story of the city itself must be understood by all targeted audiences and, specifically, the local public. Messages vary depending on audiences (stakeholders, authorities, investors, tourists, etc..), but, above all, the story must be credible for city residents, the first ones allowing the unfolding of the narrative framework and who will support the deep metaphors which they should identify themselves with and which should generate them a series of positive emotions.

Public opinion is not merely a gathering of individual opinions, but the product of a process of debate (Dobrescu, Bârgăoanu, Corbu, 2007). Public opinion has in its substance something that starts from the individual, but its value is beyond the individual and represent, in no case, the multitude of individual opinions, whereas understanding the mechanisms for formation and modification of public opinion shows, in fact, the necessity for a credible story which should be undertaken by an entire community.

City branding is a clear concept since it raises the fundamental issue of community identity and of credible messages both for local public opinion in general, and for other external audiences. Moreover, there are authors (Kawaratzis, Ashworth, 2006; Stigel, Frimann, 2006) who clearly raised a question mark on sustainability strategies of place branding, this becoming a real trendy topic in urban marketing. As Kawaratzis showed (2004, 70), city branding implies a significant change of perspective on the whole marketing effort. City branding is understood as the means for both achieving competitive advantage in order to increase inward investment and tourism, and also for achieving community development, reinforcing local identity and identification of the citizens with their city and activating all social forces to avoid social exclusion and unrest. Or, such an understanding of city branding implies the need of strategy and vision, understood and shared by internal audiences that, for a city, are identified as being the residents and local authorities.

City branding is built, according to Kawaratzis (2004, 70), on two basic coordinates: city's identity and the value of the products and related services of the city itself. It is, in fact, what we see into the attributes considered for measuring instruments of city brands, as Anholt-GfK report (Anholt-GfK City Brand Index, 2011), where classification parameters are organized around the following items: Presence, Place, Pre-requisites, People, Pulse and Potential. City branding does not mean only campaigns, but strategy, continuity and consistency. Thus, despite the natural disasters in 2011 (earthquake, tsunami), Tokyo remained the global top 10 city brand (*ibid.*), thanks to good and solid built reputation, previously gained.

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3. BUCHAREST: CITY BRANDING THROUGH STORYTELLING? A PROPOSAL OF EMPIRICAL MODEL

Bucharest city does not have, at least until the time of writing this article, a branding strategy and any clear vision in supporting its own identity. Therefore, this reality leaves room for discussion regarding the typology of strategy which should be used for positioning properly Romania's capital before its audiences. In reality, there are two main options for Bucharest's city brand, both based on the country's nation brand (this being the subject of many local controversies as well): whether as an ingredient for the country brand, the capital becoming an element included on the list of values promoted at national level, or as a landmark, for defining and subsequently for improving the country brand (Popescu, 2009, 179).

The main factors that may explain the lack of city brand for Bucharest are, actually, the gaps Romania's capital city has in all the four fundamental dimensions of the product-place (Kotler et al., 1999):

- place viewed as a character: the place's spirit, its fundamental values;
- place viewed as infrastructure (transport, telecommunications, accommodation, housing, etc..);
- place as service provider – especially provider of quality public services;
- place viewed as recreation and entertainment.

Most likely, the only place where Bucharest can now tick 'progress' in building its brand, is in terms of recreation and entertainment – and only if we are referring to Old Town (Corbo, Popescu, 2011), and we do not take into account the area's logistical inconveniences (lack of parking, sloppy and potholed streets), provided that the area is still rehabilitated and developed as well as promoted (ibid.).

However, Romania's capital has experienced, in recent years, a series of communication campaigns which had as common message a genuine appeal to the pride of being a Bucharest inhabitant. All these communication actions, perhaps in a rather surprising way, showed a common theme - the story of Bucharest, from yesterday and today, irrespective of the type of campaign and advertiserr:

- campaigns about the city, initiated and announced by commercial brands which have sponsored rehabilitation of monuments and urban development projects in Bucharest, as part, sometimes, of their tentative to become more competitive through CSR projects (Dobrea, Ciocoiu, 2008). The most important private communication campaign was actually a commercial one, Timisoreana brand's campaign, Rediscover Bucharest as it once was, from 2009. Timisoreana campaign was the most visible in recent years and involved the installation of vintage time clocks in Bucharest's historic areas, various events and outdoor display with contents related to history of traditional places in the nineteenth century and early twentieth-century Romania.

- campaigns about the city, initiated by public cultural institutions and various NGOs, especially photography exhibitions, usually in unconventional urban spaces, such as Bucharest 2011 from Passage University, Urban Aspects – landmarks, 2012, from the subway station Dristor, Years passed by, placed on Sutu Palace's fence downtown Bucharest, with editions in 2010 and 2011.

It should be noted that these were the only communication actions or campaigns addressing a wide audience, which revealed what Bucharest city really is and the background it has. Local authorities in Bucharest have not initiated any campaign in this regard in 2009-2012 (at least until the time of writing this article).

The natural question is whether Bucharest really needs a city brand and if so, how it could be built. In this respect, based on profiled literature and highlighting the fact that the only communication actions built around the theme of Bucharest city focuses on its story and mythical places (many destroyed by communist demolitions), we propose below an empirical model.

Bucharest city does not have its own brand, thus not being recognized either be its citizens nor by other external audiences. Moreover, it has a contradictory identity (Popescu, 2009) explained by a history that involved multiple stages of destruction of its main architectural landmarks. Bucharest is not a tourist destination in a true sense and it has a rather confusing picture which explains the fact that it is not included in the annual monitoring report Anholt-GfK Roper City Brands Index, upon which international hierarchies of city brand are established (as opposed to other cities in Central and Eastern Europe such as Budapest, Prague or Warsaw).

The only communication campaigns which told directly about Bucharest in recent years have been private initiatives and, without any exception, they were focused on things that make us proud to live in Bucharest. In other words, they had as main target just Bucharest's inhabitants, which stresses once again the need for Bucharest to regain its identity. Or, to have identity, is to have personality, values, history, present and future. This means that Bucharest needs to rediscover its stories that can make a clear identity profile. Therefore, we propose storytelling as a strategy to build the city brand of Bucharest, which could be implemented along the following lines, gathered in an empirical model.

Empirical model of city branding through storytelling, proposed for Bucharest departs from two assumptions:

- Bucharest city needs a redefinition of identity both to be assumed by its own inhabitants and to be a source of differentiation from other capitals in Central and Eastern Europe;
- there are several interactive processes and strategic coordinates based on the rediscovery of their identity.

Thus, the empirical model of this paper is based on two other models already theorized and used in practice:

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- the city branding model City Brand Hexagon (Anholt, 2000);
- the interactive storytelling model (Champagnat, Delmas, Augeraud, 2010).

Hence, local authorities who could become the brand manager of Bucharest, should, above all, highlight key strengths and main weaknesses of the Romanian capital in terms of City Brand Hexagon model.

There is a steady growth concerning the standard of living in Bucharest, where there are registered the highest wages in the country and one of the lowest unemployment rates.

TABLE 1 SW ANALYSIS OF BUCHAREST IN TERMS OF CITY BRAND HEXAGON MODEL

Item	Strengths	Weaknesses
Presence	Historic Old Town Arhitecture House of the People, the second largest government building in the world	The monotonous architecture of bedroom districts (neighborhoods built during the communist workers)
Place	Geographical location, in south-eastern Romania, near the Carpathians, the Danube Delta and Black Sea	Away from other capitals, traditional tourist destinations (Budapest, Prague, Istanbul)
Pre-requisites	Improving local public transport (night buses and the extension of the subway) The expansion of the accomodation infrastracture and public alimentation.	Very poor access infrastructure (highways) and quite a questionable one for local public transport.
People	There is a steady growth concerning the standard of living in Bucharest, where there are registered the highest wages in the country and one of the lowest unemployment rates.	There is not a very clear data about how proud are inhabitants about their city or how well they know the city, as present or as history.
Pulse	Bucharest is a dynamic city with an intense cultural life.	There are no studies to trace down how the spirit of Bucharest city defines itself.
Potential	Bucharest has a great potential for tourism (business tourism, cultural tourism).	This potential is continuously comparable with the one of the neighboring capitals.

Source: Author's analysis.

An honest approach of the authorities concerning the six parameters of the City Brand Hexagon model should become a habit, an annual review to allow comparisons and conclusions based on trends over time and against other similar cities.

Once defined the city's strong and in trend elements, the branding could be continued through interactive storytelling with multiple nodes pointing narrative discourse, as we propose in the empirical model graphically presented in Figure 2. Thus, the story of Bucharest would be told daily, participatory, by multiple actors, but in a concerted and coherent strategy that support, through secondary messaging, a central constant message communicated by local authorities, as positioning, irrespective of developments election.

Through an exhaustive analysis of perceptions about Bucharest, you can define a map of its image which can be used as reference in defining the city brand positioning. Subsequently, various local actors (cultural institutions, NGOs, schools, economic actors) could programmatically be encouraged by local authorities to tell and carry on, interactively, the stories of Bucharest that give it personality and would support its position.

Transposing the interactive storytelling model (Champagnat et al., 2010) in the city branding construction, the presentation of Bucharest stories (to be integrated into the daily life of various external and, especially, internal audiences) is based, in the proposal model developed in this paper, on story as a set of partially ordered events that solves a problem. Stories are built sequentially and on different levels with different narrators and different ways of telling the story (different plots). Thus, there can be left loose frameworks for defining situations, heroes, communication channels, audience's involvement without affecting the story itself. Or, such approach allows interactivity with all publics of Bucharest city, regardless of the desirable or the available budgets.
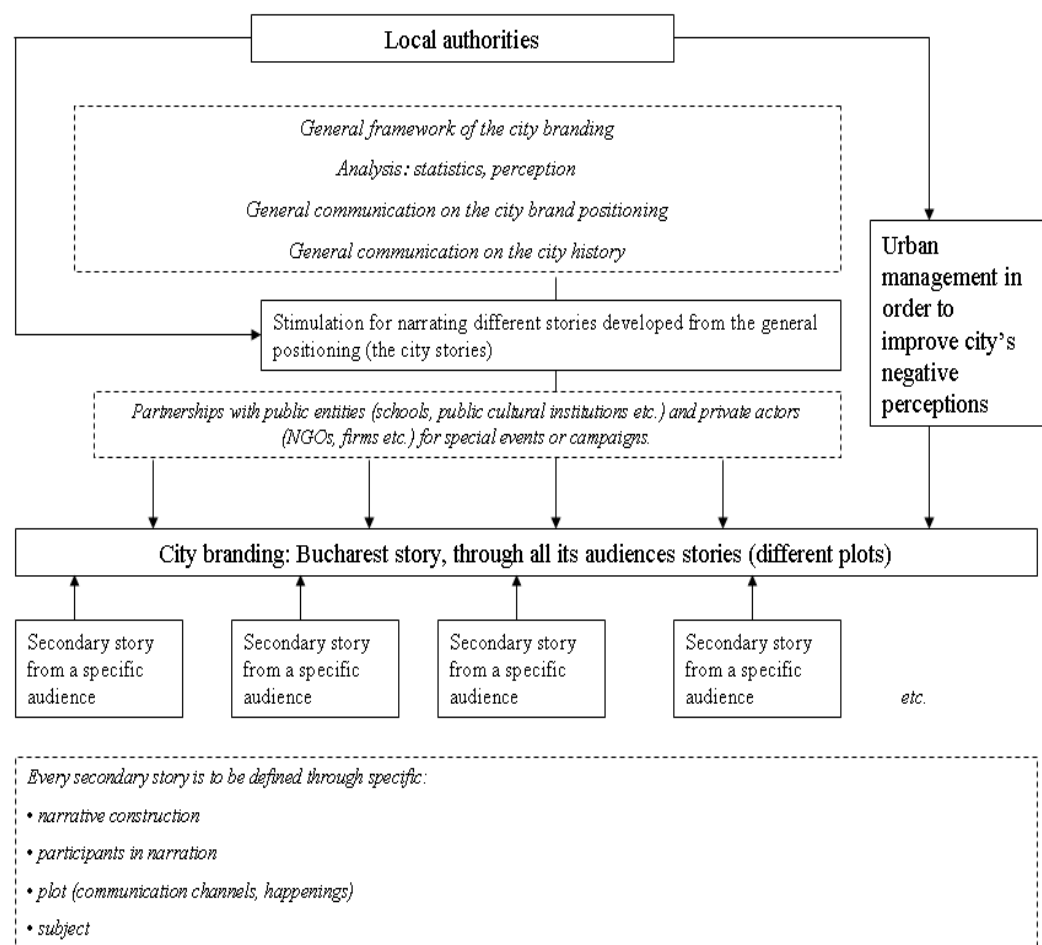

FIGURE 2 - GRAPHIC SCHEMATIZATION OF THE EMPIRICAL MODEL OF CITY BRANDING PROPOSAL USING STORYTELLING TECHNIQUES

In this model, the main role of local authorities can be summarized as follows:

- to analyze the constant perception of Bucharest;
- to find urban management solutions in order to remediate weaknesses that lead to unfavorable perceptions about the city;

- ▪ to constantly stimulate, around a clear and well defined positioning, the narrative of Bucharest's story, on multiple levels, with multiple enunciators and, thus, stimulating the financial participation of existent private actors in the locale.

In short, in our view, according to this model of using storytelling, the narrative technique is no longer a conjuncture tool, but it becomes a structured approach of the city branding strategy, with a stimulating framework for building interactive stories to give vigor to the city's personality. Thus, city branding is subsumed to the idea of vision and continuity, avoiding the trap of sequenced thinking in the short term campaigns and the eventual logo refreshments, without any impact on medium and long term, but still expensive.

4. CONCLUSIONS

Cities are living entities that have their own personality, only not always enough promoted, at least in some capitals as Bucharest. Clearly, places incorporate customs, traditions and unique elements, more than the sum of human and natural characteristics that make them up (Popescu, 2008, 89). The main challenge of any authorities which have the ambition of developing place brands is that of understanding the specificity of that place and of being able to highlight on long term the positive features of that specificity. On the other hand, the main trap that those who build place brands fall into is that of short term thinking, in the specific actions and in communication campaigns which have rather by chance common themes or some aspect of pseudo-continuum.

In this study we tried to sketch a model of using storytelling as a strategy, not just as a technique, of city branding construction, customized for Bucharest, a capital with a diffuse and controversial identity and insufficient financial resources for promotion. Hopefully this will validate, possibly in practice, the applicability of the model in order to create a spirit of participatory and sustainable city brand, wherever applied, regardless of the financial resources available, but applying a medium to long term thinking. To that end, city branding means strategy and continuity.

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