

Chapter 20

Place @–Branding and European Capitals: “City Visiting Cards” via Municipal Websites, Virtual Tours of Significant Places Flying with Google Earth, and Conversational Exchanges about City–Places Experienced/ Imagined via Social Networks

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ABSTRACT

This chapter extends the concept of place branding and applies it to the digital world of the Internet (place @-branding). Among the various environments of the complex digital universe of the Internet, the chapter deals in particular with (1) Websites as vehicles of images, representations, evaluations of places, and (2) social networks as spaces for the exchange and sharing of “lived” or “imagined” experiences of places by past-visitors and potential first-visitors. The analysis of place@-branding via Websites and social networks is based on empirical research data that targets various historic European capitals (Rome, Paris, Berlin, Brussels, Helsinki, Lisbon, London, Madrid, Warsaw, Vienna). The social representations of these cities are investigated by comparing: 1) their institutional Websites; 2) virtual tours made by Google Earth; 3) conversations among the members of two social networks (Facebook and Yahoo! Answers) on elements of interest concerning social representations and the “lived” or “imagined” experiences of these cities as first visitors (past-visitors) or potential ones (future first-visitors). The nature of these conversations is induced or spontaneous according to communicative constraints imposed by the two social networks by means of a series of piloted questions (in the case of Yahoo! Answers) and a selective focus on spontaneous communicative exchanges (in the case of Facebook).

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INTRODUCTION

Our research on city-marketing via the Internet, exploring the contribution of new internet-based communication systems to psychosocial research in different forms and through different channels, with the focus on communication applied to the field of tourism, contributes to expanding the agenda for future research by environmental psychologists in the Internet era outlined by Stokols and Montero (2002) and Misra and Stokols (2011).

It is a further development of a broad research programme on *Place-identity and Social Representations of European Capitals in first visitors of six different nationalities* begun by de Rosa in the 1990s (see e.g. de Rosa, 1995; 1997, 2010a, 2010b, 2013c). The first wave research, based on a multi-method modelling approach (de Rosa, 2013b), has been subject to follow-up field study conducted in Rome at a distance of some decades and then extended to further historic European capitals (Paris, Helsinki, Lisbon, London, Madrid, Warsaw, Vienna), starting with a first comparative study between Rome and Paris (de Rosa, 2010a, 2010b, 2013b; de Rosa and d'Ambrosio, 2009, 2010, 2011; de Rosa, Dryjanska & Bocci, 2012).

In this chapter we present a selection of empirical findings based on three further different, but interrelated research lines aimed at detecting:

1. Some aspects of e-branding studied using a multi-method approach, with also comparative analysis of the institutional websites of ten historic capitals (Rome, Paris, Berlin, Brussels, Helsinki, Lisbon, London, Madrid, Warsaw, Vienna), starting from the assumption that the websites constitute official 'visiting cards' presented by the municipalities to residents and tourists (de Rosa, Bocci & Picone 2012). After brief examination of aspects concerning the usability of the websites which yield information about the communicative capacities of the cities and which were recorded using Nielsen's

Usability Test (Nielsen & Loranger, 2006), the article presents the main results of the analysis grid drawn up by de Rosa and Picone relatively to the contents of the websites. These results will be integrated with qualitative information obtained using the Atlas/ti software program and whose applicative interest will be evaluated in light of other recent studies on the usability of municipal websites (Pribeanu, Marinescu, Iordache & Moisii, 2010). Starting from a comparison between the websites of Rome and Paris (analysed lengthwise in time by comparing the versions downloaded in 2003 and 2004) and of Paris (downloaded in April 2004), and subsequently extended to more updated versions and to the other municipal websites of the above-mentioned European capitals, the analysis highlights aspects relative to contents, structure, and various technical elements important from the user's point of view (graphics, interactivity and usability in particular), emphasising strengths and weaknesses. Besides their descriptive value and possible function in guiding web professionals and a city's institutional communication managers, the results have a historical value (given the volatility and dynamicity of websites, like many other Internet environments) with respect to the evolution of web 2.0 scenarios, assuming a particular interest for further comparative analysis with 2010 websites, currently under investigation (de Rosa, Bocci & Picone, 2012);

2. 'Virtual tours' made by means of Google Earth, "flying" over the historic European capitals (London, Madrid, Paris, Vienna) as not yet known tourism destinations for 'potential first-visitors' and as 'experienced cities' for 'past visitors'. The main goal of the cross-analysis between the research carried out in the field and on the Internet is to compare the preferred itineraries and places selected by the 'virtual tourists' (both

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