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The Dilemma of Place Branding: Transitory mega-events vs. sustainable image-building | Evinç Doğan [±]

Abstract

The aim of this study is exploring the challenges in place branding through raising a debate on the transitory nature of mega-events vis-à-vis sustainable strategies for image-building. Food and cuisine, as part and parcel of cultural values, play a significant role in marketing places. In this context, The National Tourism Organization of Serbia (TOS) strives for building a positive and memorable image of the country based on "Soul Food" campaign. On the other hand, EXPO Milano 2015 is the case of a transitory event for analyzing the ways in which Serbia's brand image is positioned and promoted through values, narratives, and manifestations. Unlike the examples of scholarly research focusing on countries hosting mega-events, this study investigates Serbia as a participating country in EXPO Milano 2015. The success of place branding is often attributed to long-term vision rather than short-term oriented promotion activities. Similarly, legacy is an important aspect for the success of mega-events, which should be linked to branding strategies. In this respect, mega-events can be recognized as useful place branding tools, not only in terms of attracting interest but also positioning the image of the place in the minds of people based on axiological, narrative and discursive levels of meaning.

Keywords: Serbia, EXPO, mega-event, urban ephemera, brand image, gastronomy.

Introduction

Mega-events are common marketing tools for enhancing images of places. Hosting a mega-event generates multiple opportunities not only to the host city but also to the entire country such as global exposure, prestige, and legitimacy. Therefore, a country hosting a mega-event is often perceived as the winner of the game. Although hosting country looks like the star, there are benefits for the countries that participate in the mega-events like World Fairs. The benefits of mega-events show similarities between the hosting and the participating countries to a certain extent. More often than not, the impact of hosting a mega-event is amplified in terms of marketing opportunities and tourism. Some of the opportunities might be listed for the hosting country as economic benefits, development of urban infrastructure, (culture-led) urban transformation, publicity,

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recognition/popularity, image enhancement, and tourism. The impact on the participating countries on the other hand, has attracted lesser attention from scholars, although a participating country holds similar interests such as publicity, propaganda, direct marketing communications, exposure, image enhancement, revitalizing tourism, generating inward investments as well as the effort to gain share in the market and being part of the league. Hollengreen & Rouse (2014: 1) note that a greater interest is shown to World Fairs by the developing countries in pursuit of "enhancing the knowledge of their own citizens while also promoting their rapid change to visitors from other countries".

Unlike the examples of scholarly research about different aspects of hosting mega-events, this paper opts to investigate the case of a participating country to EXPO. In this regard, the study focuses on Serbia and its representation at the EXPO Milano 2015 by examining the role of the gastronomic offer and the ways in which food is marketed as a component of cultural identity.

Accordingly, the study sets the conceptual framework by drawing on the place branding and symbolic meaning-making. This is followed by a discussion of culture and ephemera scrutinizing the transitory nature of the mega-events. The sustainability is open to question from the perspective of place branding on the basis of the temporality of mega-events and strategies aimed at building a sustainable and powerful country image represented in the national pavilions at EXPO. Branding a place requires a long-term vision which should be considered more than promotional activities. Mega-events as marketing tools, on the other hand, often act as a kick-start for "attracting new inward investments, improving the infrastructure and strengthening the public and private sector services" (Maheshwari et al., 2011: 199). The debate between the transitory mega-events and sustainable image-building is reflected in the case of Serbia's brand positioning. In this part, a closer look is taken at Serbia's gastronomic offer as a part of a shared culture and symbolic meaning. Finally, the analysis and findings of the study are presented through the ways in which food is marketed as a tourist attraction.

Place Branding in the contextual framework of the study

Place branding is employed as the key concept for drawing a generalizable framework in order to eliminate misconceptions regarding geographical and disciplinary approaches existing in the literature. This is done because the branding strategy adopted by Serbia in EXPO Milano 2015 cannot be solely defined as nation branding (although national pavilions might be signifiers of national pride and the connotations referring to nation-ness). Serbia's overall



branding strategy partly focuses on cities alone or speaks for regions or the country as a whole.

Korać & Šegota (2017) adopt a geographical approach for classifying terms, putting place branding in the first rank as the broadest and most extensive umbrella term (as in Table 1). When a disciplinary approach is taken, such classification could have been done by drawing lines cross-cutting public diplomacy, urban studies, and tourism. Since the image is the main concern here, place branding is tackled by symbolic meaning projected on the international stage.

Table 1. Terminology for place branding (Korać & Šegota, 2017)

Concepts:	Effects:
Place brand	Umbrella brand covering nations, regions, cities, towns, municipalities, and destinations. Improving place image.
Nation/country brand	Attracting foreign investments; increasing number of tourists; boosting exports and international collaboration; attracting young and talented people; becoming more visible; improving a nation's image
City brand	Development of infrastructure; meaningful urban planning (more open space, expanded green belt, rejuvenated riverside); improved housing; better quality of life; nurturing culture; economic development; public policies; attracting tourists; city's recognition
Destination brand	New tourist infrastructure, services, product; improvement of existing tourist facilities; protection and preservation of natural treasures; new jobs in tourism; boosting per capita income; improving destination's image.

The role of communication and public diplomacy in place branding cannot be ignored. The key concepts of this study are framed by concentrating on the communication strategies from the perspective of place branding. Ward & Gold (1994: 2) highlight the importance place promotion, which is defined as “the conscious use of publicity and marketing to communicate selective images of specific geographic localities or areas to a target audience”. According to Kotler & Keller (2006: 536) marketing communications is aimed at

"informing, persuading and reminding customers about products and brands they are selling". Dahlen et al. (2010: 93) address marketing communications objectives directed towards "maintaining brand narrative and sustaining competitive advantage" by considering "how best to build ongoing dialogues with audiences". Accordingly, Egan (2007) sets three broad categories for marketing communications objectives – knowledge-based, feeling based and action based. The first one aims to attract attention through raising attention and interest. The feelings play a key role in creating positive associations and values with respect to brand identity. The last one concentrates on the results directed towards building and maintaining stronger and lasting consumer relationships.

Ephemera, mega-events, and place branding (Urban ephemera and signs)

The transitory nature of mega-events is linked to place branding through the concept of "urban ephemera" defining "momentary, repeated urban public presentations" including spectacles and mega-events that occur "on a regular basis but in a different place each time" (Schuster, 2001). While mega-events are recognized with their transitory nature for the hosting countries, the regularity of their occurrence may lead to better visibility for the participating countries. Therefore, the temporality of mega-events comes into focus mostly when it is considered from the perspective of host countries. Prestige is the key motivation for a country to host EXPO, however, there are high costs associated with it. Schuster (2001) takes an approach from the urban planning point of view and describes this phenomenon "designed and managed ephemera", which occurs "with some identifiable and understood regularity. In this respect, considering the transitory nature of World Fairs, it would be natural to expect from them to create temporary signs that would disappear. Nevertheless, the iconic architecture proved itself in some cases by creating a symbol for the city that has outlasted the event itself. Beanland (2015) lists a few examples such as La Tour Eiffel built for the 1889 Exposition Universelle, which is probably "the best known of the World's Fair icons". The list includes also the Atomium for EXPO 58 in Brussels, and the Space Needle for EXPO 62, which is "an instantly-recognizable symbol of Seattle" (Beanland, 2015).

The spread of World Expositions, from London to Paris, has been triggered by "European imperial powers" as a part of commodification discourse encompassed by the material culture of industrial (Rydell, 2014). London holds the title of the first city hosting the International Exhibition (1851) at the Crystal Palace, which was according to Auerbach (1999:121) "indeed a shopping mall and a department



store". It was an era of development and human achievement. In that sense, Briggs (1955: 41) describes Crystal Palace as "a temple of peace, where all nations would meet by appointment under the same roof". I would call Crystal Palace the "temple of ephemera" instead. The whole cast-iron and plate-glass structure was erected to be dismantled and planned to be rebuilt in Sydenham Hill as permanently. It survived only until 1936 when it went up in flames and was destroyed (Beaver, 1970). Paris, on the other hand, grabbed the title of being 'the capital of the 19th century'¹ (Benjamin, 1999) and hosted five World Fairs in 1855, 1867, 1878, 1889 and 1900. The one in 1889 was perhaps the most remarkable one among all, as it left a landmark to the city - the Eiffel Tower, a supposedly temporary structure and an eyesore at the time it was built became a truly global and cultural icon.

Figure 1. The Eiffel Tower – Exposition Universelle de 1900, Paris



(Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Expo_universelle_paris_1900.JPG)

Greenhalgh (1988: 1) describes World Fairs as "ephemeral vistas" connoting their "spectacular gestures, which briefly held the attention of the world before disappearing into an abrupt oblivion", thus being the "victims of their own planned temporality". The question of designing infrastructure and venues sustaining their function after the event leads to the debate about the legacy of ephemera. Hall (2012:122) sets a number of parameters in relation to the sustainability of mega-events, which are temporality, spatiality, limits, cumulative, irreversibility, complexity and connectivity, uncertainty, ethical issues, and responsiveness of political systems. The temporality dimension refers to the timescales exceeding the cycles of political agenda, while spatiality is problematic for the impact assessment and management in terms of "determination of boundaries" as mega-events are cross-boundary in nature (Hall, 2012: 122). The irreversibility aspect is directly linked to timescales as there are opportunity costs of

¹"Paris, Hauptstadt des XIX. Jahrhunderts" is published in *Illuminationen* by Suhrkamp Verlag, Frankfurt am Main.

development projects, which cannot be taken back once spent away, while complexity and the uncertainty make it "difficult to judge the efficacy" considering the size of mega-events as well as the time-span spent for the infrastructure and use (Hall, 2012: 122). Although iconic architecture is designed purposively for getting attention from the public and increase visibility, such projects might result in the misuse of public resources if they remain idle after their use. Warrack (1993) sees such mega-structures as white elephants. Those are the showcase projects of the local governments in pursuit of visibility instead of utility, where the investment is not viable over time. This explains why mega-events do not always yield the desired outcomes for the host countries (especially that are developing). On the other hand, participating in EXPO is good for developing international relationships, attracting interest and create a more sustainable form of public exposure that crosses beyond raising awareness. In this framework, Schuster (2001) underlines the role of arts and culture in urban economic development, while specifically focusing on the urban revitalization and the idea of enhancing the city's image. Lukas (2014: 400) explains this phenomenon by "the effective use of material culture to create the right associations" underlining the role of the visitor as the key human element along with the material form.

Benjamin (1999) defines World Exhibitions as "places of pilgrimage" to the "commodity fetish" borrowing the term from Marx, whilst rating the exchange value over the use value of the commodity. Baudrillard (1981) extends this theory by introducing "sign value" connoting symbolic exchange, which is oriented towards meaning rather than materiality. Sign value is based on "contextual references to other signs", while the fetish is described as "the human infatuation with consuming sign-vehicles that are devoid of all meaning and reality" (Baudrillard, 1981: 144). Sign value cannot be downgraded to economic costs and benefits, which can be easily quantified and measured. Signs are a collective of memories, imaginaries, impressions, and meaning, thus having a qualitative character in connection to mental structures (Schuster, 2001).

Interpretation is an interactive process between the actors and the media. The mental associations lead to powerful images and sustainable brands. According to Applbaum (2004: 52), who favours sign value in branding as compared to "commodity fetishism", branding is "one of the most significant symbolization strategies". A brand communicates the values to the people through storytelling (Fog et al., 2005). According to Wang (2014), a persuasive story about nation's image engaging with the audiences' emotions and a clear



structure rather than a dispersed approach could produce the desired outcome in an event like EXPO with mass appeal.

Wang (2014) argues about eight dimensions that influence the effectiveness of communication. First comes the *storytelling* as sharing a compelling story, which is the first step to attract attention. The audience's motivations and imaginations play a key role in *co-creating a nation brand*. Stereotypes have a crucial impact on the mental associations through national symbols and familiar representations. Although familiarity is much appreciated on the basis of expectations in a communicative context when the story is mundanely familiar it fails to raise interest. *Surprises* are useful in creating unexpected but joyful experiences while stimulating the mental processes. Speaking of experiences, multi-sensory experiences and quality of visual representations provide a competitive advantage through the use of high-tech and *high-quality production*. However, such productions require big budgets creating a disadvantage for smaller players. In such cases, a low-tech approach for personalized human interaction may work well in delivering a huge impact. The *transnational* dimension of EXPO's should not be forgotten, where pavilions are headed by national governments but represented through public-private and transnational partnerships. The last but not the least is achieving *sustained attention*, which is perhaps the most challenging part because of the temporality of the events. The national representation reflected on "the row of the facades featuring national aesthetics and styles" constitutes the basis for participating to EXPO despite the "ever-broadening array of players from transnational organizations to businesses and NGOs" (Wang, 2013).

Consequently, in the aftermath of the collapse of empires nation states also turned their faces to the expositions "as a medium of choice for influencing the cultural contours of the planet" (Rydell, 2014). Thomas (2014:431) introduced the idea of "fun" for fairgoers and having the sense of "freedom to play", to construct their own meanings. The entertainment was obsolete in the ambiance of the World Fairs like theme parks reflected on the architecture and space, cultural displays, consumption patterns and rides and attractions (Tamilia, 2007). Environmental problems such as climate change and urbanization became intrinsic to the idea of EXPO starting with the case of Montreal in 1967 and followed by the rest (Rydell, 2014).

Pavilion of Serbia at the EXPO Milano 2015

Food and nutrition were adopted as the main theme of EXPO Milano (1 May – 31 October 2015), through the slogan of "Feeding the planet, energy for life". The area of EXPO Milano 2015 is designed around 9

clusters. Bio-Mediterraneum (hereafter Bio-Med) cluster is among those, telling the story of Mediterranean places and food visually through pictures, literature and cinematographic history. Within its exhibition space in Bio-Med cluster, Serbia seeks to promote its brand image and identity through the country's history and the evolution of its cuisine by taking three thematic paths- (1) Wheat and Water – Food of Neolithic to Modern Man, (2) Organic Serbia – Food that is Organic and Healthy, as Energy for the Future, and (3) Fusion Cuisine from Serbia – Food as a Tourist Attraction. Serbia has generated the slogan “Taste Food; Feel Life” for EXPO Milano 2015 (see Fig. 3). Food appeals to five senses and EXPO 2015 creates a setting in which visitors are attracted to experience food.

Figure 2. Raspberry for branding Serbia



Photo credit: Courtesy of Serbia Expo Milano 2015 (<https://www.facebook.com/serbiaexpomilano2015/photos/a.1884800284992602/1884800318325932/?type=3&theater>)

The organization of universal expositions (EXPOs) brings national pavilions together under a common theme. Wang (2013) highlights the similarities between the national pavilions carrying out the communication task for enhancing the image of the country. Since the exterior of Serbian pavilion lacks communicating these features, exhibit displays inside the pavilion should perform communication, preferably by enabling interactive mode of communication. Live performances and manifestations scheduled for certain days or times increase the chances of getting more visitors. Each pavilion in the Bio-med cluster is designed like a standard white cube (see Fig. 4). This is a rare situation in EXPO, as all the pavilions compete to stand forward and attract visitors, which is often emphasized through iconic architecture. However, in Biomed cluster, the pavilions are only



differentiated from each other by colours on their facades. The pavilion of Serbia is differentiated by its red colour symbolized as the colour of raspberry. Serbia is one of the major producers and exporters of raspberry in the World, which makes it "red gold" for the country. Inside the pavilion, the mill symbolizes bread-making tradition in Serbia with regard to the first theme - Wheat and Water – Food of Neolithic to Modern Man. Sample local products, such as jam, *ajvar*, and *rakija* are presented, while demonstrations and promotions are held in accordance with the thematic calendar of events. Conferences and talks are organized about food and culture aimed at connecting Serbian cuisine to Mediterranean cuisine.

Figure 3. Serbia Pavilion at the entrance of Bio-Med Cluster



Photo credit: Evinc Dogan

The exhibition at the Pavilion of Serbia has been evaluated in terms of attracting visitors and improving the image of the country by taking the following aspects into consideration:

Location: Serbia Pavilion was not located on the main parade of Decumano, where the large pavilions were. The bio-med cluster was located close to the lake area, which might be a drawback for its visibility and attracting potential visitors (see Fig. 5).

Architecture: One of the peculiarities of mega-events is creating examples of spectacular architecture. In events like EXPO, the pavilions symbolize national pride and represent monumental features. The Pavilion of Serbia in EXPO Shanghai 2010 can be given as a good example with its façade representing "*Pirotski Cilim*" (Pirog rug – as in Fig. 6). Such representations raise interest and

(catalogues, brochures, posters, flyers, maps, booklets) were provided by TOS and offered to visitors in the pavilion. Ethnic food products such as jam, oil, ajvar, and etc. were available for sale.

Figure 5. Facade of Serbia Pavilion at EXPO Shanghai 2010



Photo credit: Bošković, 2014:46

Figure 6. Facade of Serbia Pavilion, EXPO Milano 2015



Photo credit: Evinc Dogan

Figure 7. Interior of the Serbia Pavilion



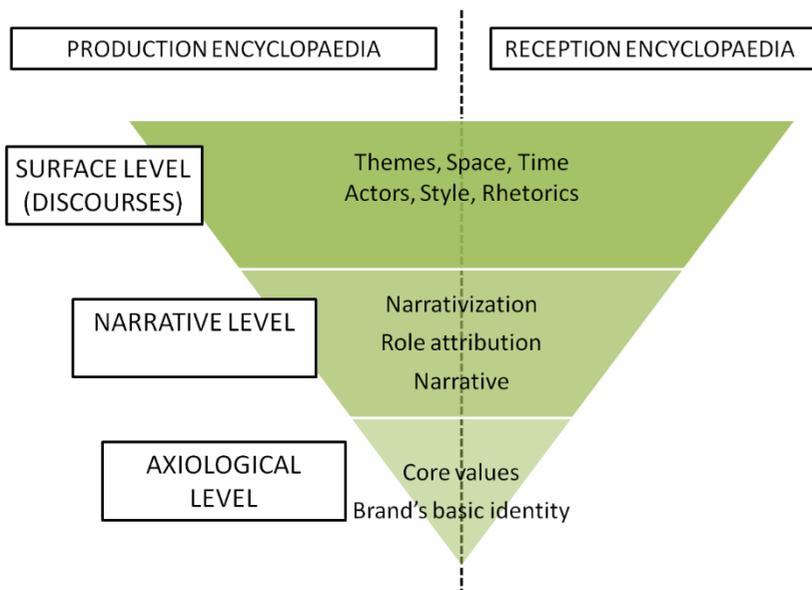
Photo credit: Evinc Dogan

Applying Semiotics to Place Branding

The marketing semiotics research process involves deriving meaning from the broad cultural codes (Oswald, 2015). It is possible to think of a brand in the form of an iceberg, where the meaning occurs beyond

the visible components (i.e. logo and name), and the invisible components (i.e. values, intellect, and culture). The “label” concerning the food products or “etiquette of eating” is crucial in understanding how this signification process works through gastronomic values (Goody, 1982: 151). National cuisine is closely related to “culture and everyday life” reflecting on the official marketing discourse (Bradatan, 2003: 43). Nonetheless, this is the visible part of the iceberg. The deeper meanings rest on cultural associations. The “emotional territories” defined by the lifestyles and values play a significant role in shaping “brand heritage and identity” as the essence of brand communication (Oswald, 2015).

Figure 8. Brand identity system (adapted from Semprini 1992:55)



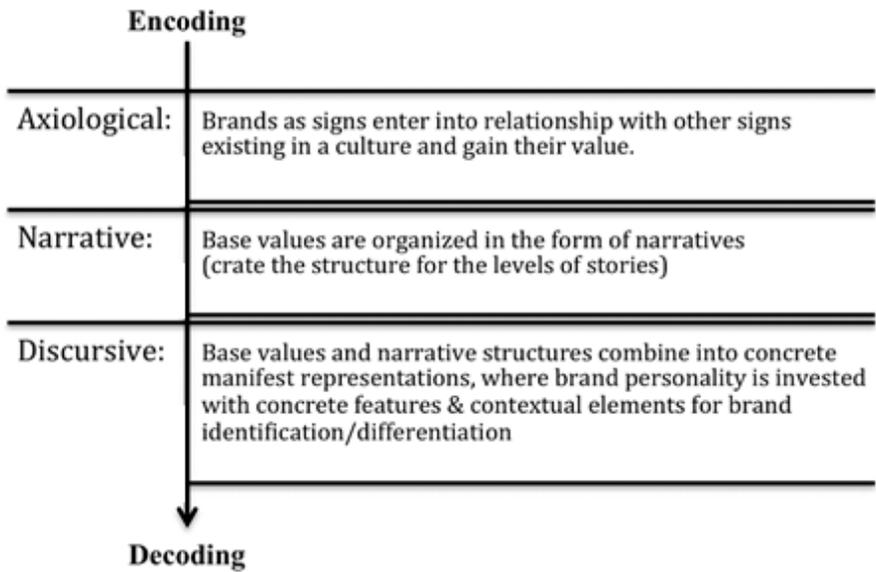
In that vein, the first level of analysis in this study strives for describing shared values and meanings towards food in connection with the identity of a place. Accordingly, the axiological level concentrates on value as a sign by taking into account the symbolic meanings and codes shared by the members of society. Therefore, this stage of analysis is related to the brand equity with the aim of describing an emotional, a practical and a logical dimension in identifying the brand value, in which semiotics is utilized for decoding intended meanings. The core values organized in the form of narratives lay the groundwork to jump on the next level (see Fig. 9 & Fig. 10).

The second level of analysis aims interpreting stories, myths, and narratives about national cuisine derived from contextual meanings. Storytelling gained importance in branding for “the instrumental use of



the story", which is about building the brand image, attributing values and creating an emotional bond with the consumer (Salmon, 2008: 38 cited in Ruiz Collantes and Oliva, 2015: 91). The axiological level is also connected to narratives as values that play a significant role in creating emotional ties and meaning. At this is the step, the meanings at the deep level start becoming visible and transmittable by storytelling. Semio-narrative level acts as the mid-level and connects "semantic values of the deep level with the discursive configurations of the surface level" (Ruiz Collantes and Oliva, 2015: 101). Consequently, brands transmit functional attributes and emotions through stories (Fog et al., 2005).

Figure 9. Analytical Framework based on a model for brand identity



Source: Adapted from Semprini, 1992

At the third level, values and abstract narrative structures become manifest through "characters (actors), times, spaces, as well as rhetorical and aesthetical resources" (Ruiz Collantes and Oliva, 2015: 103). Accordingly, "narrative sequences are thematised" at the surface level, starting from the "fundamental and abstract oppositions" in the axiological level, crossing semio-narrative level, and manifesting themselves in the discursive level by following a more or less gradual development of meaning production (Scolari, 2008:172).

Analysis and findings

There are mainly two sets of data for the analysis: (1) Data produced by TOS for the national promotion of Serbia; (2) Data prepared for and exhibited at the Serbia Pavilion during EXPO Milano 2015 based on observations and personal communication.

The first group of data is comprised of posters and catalogues. 25 posters are acquired in original format (hard copy) from TOS. The catalogues of "Soul Food" and "Organic Food", and "Serbian Wine Routes" are downloaded from the official website of TOS. The visual data is coded and analysed in order to explore key themes in place branding.

The second group of data was collected through personal communication with the Project Management Team of Serbia for EXPO. Meetings were held at the Ministry of Trade, Tourism, and Telecommunications. Calendar of events, strategic marketing programme, and the planned activities were noted during the meetings. Theme Statement of Serbia was provided by Head of Project Management Team (Zatezalo, 2015) through an email conversation.

The Serbia Pavilion was the showcase of the products and events, which were exhibited by emphasizing the cultural codes and shared signifiers. The stone mill signifies the tradition of bread making, which was the only iconic structure among various local products for sale. Tastings were only provided for special occasions, which were influential to attract a larger number of people to the pavilion.

Axiological level

The findings at the axiological level of the analysis indicate binary oppositions such as traditional : modern, diversity : purity, heterogeneity : homogeneity, nationalism : internationalism (/multiculturalism). It is possible to read the nationalism : internationalism pair in two different ways. The international values and cultural diversity empower tolerance and restore a positive image of Serbia against the negative connotations of nationalism. On the other hand, pavilions are the solid signifiers of nationalistic values that are also reflected in branding national products. This is closely linked to the Country of Origin (COO) labeling, which is also known as "made in" image. Nevertheless, Serbia is part of the Balkans which implies a wider region at the crossroads of different cultures. Serbian cuisine is a blend of different cultural influences from Ottoman to Austro-Hungarian; from East to West, which appears as the leitmotiv. This can be understood as the richness, whereas it is difficult to define what "real" Serbian is. All other Balkan nations claim a certain product



as "theirs". In that vein, the cuisine is often perceived as "national pride" for countries represented on the axiological level. Whereas, food is the product of a shared culture, which could not be completely nationalized at the level of deeper meanings attached. If this is interpreted as a positive aspect, then a regional marketing strategy would add value to the brand identity through the shared meanings and collective memory.

Serbia is positioned as a bridge between East and West, which is also reflected on a discursive level at the official marketing strategy. Simultaneously, TOS highlights the multiculturalism, plurality, and diversity through the "melting pot" metaphor. In this regard, imaging Serbia on the basis of authentic types of food and cuisine classified by different regions in the country creates a collage of images.

Narrative level

The historical and cultural assets attract interest in tourism. Yet, the attractiveness of a place does not only rely on its historical richness and cultural diversity but also it is shaped by experiences relying on the perceptions and imaginations. "Good food and hedonistic experience (indulging oneself with pleasures of eating)" appear as the leitmotiv in "Soul Food" tourism campaign by TOS aimed at improving the touristic image of Serbia" (Dogan & Petkovic, 2016: 96). The diversity of food in Serbia is emphasized through the image of a country at the crossroads. In this picture, each region partakes in the repertoire of the gastronomic offer by putting symbolically forward their specialties (such as ajvar, cheese, wine, ham, typical dishes etc.). Yet, "vocalizing" (communication) is the essence of storytelling on the narrative level rather than the "repertoire" (Dogan & Petkovic, 2016: 96).

According to Anholt (2007), "creating a holistic narrative with streamlined territorial symbols and ideas" could be useful for place branding. A number of parameters such as reliability and uniqueness are valuable for brand narratives (Ren & Gyimóthy, 2013). The gastronomic offerings of a destination must be conveyed through a credible and authentic narrative based on the environmental, historical, cultural, traditional and social values. Gastronomy plays a vital role in turning a destination into a culinary landscape, which paves the way for brand identification/differentiation as the prerequisite of the third step - discursive level.

Discursive level

Base values and narrative structures come to surface through the posters and manifestations at the discursive level. Both tangible and intangible cultural assets are communicated through the posters of

TOS. While cultural properties such as monasteries, mosques, castles, Roman ruins along with natural resources are examples of tangible assets; clothing, rug weaving, traditional music, agriculture, and food production are the examples of intangible cultural heritage. The posters attempt to project authentic Serbian way of living in the countryside. Farmers and villagers appear as the heroes of the tale, who are visualized by cultivating local products, doing harvest, making bread and wine.

Moreover, events like EXPO can be also given as examples to manifestations at the discursive level. The term "food and drink manifestations" means some special events such as fairs, festivals, exhibition, cultural and consumers and industrial happenings being held either regularly or just once. There was a significant increase in the number of gastronomic manifestations, which contributed to the promotion of the development of the destination itself (Wargenau & Che, 2006). Participating in the EXPO provides an opportunity for representation of Serbia and improving the image of the country. A more concrete type of representation is reflected on the pavilions as a solid structure. However, the pavilions in the Bio-Med cluster are only differentiated from each other on the conceptual level, in other words through their thematic exhibition areas. Serbia puts a huge structure in the white box (the pavilion), which is "The Mill" in an attempt to symbolize bread making tradition. Such symbolic structures are iconic representations referring to the connotations drawing on the visual signs deriving meaning. Photographs and posters can be also regarded as iconic in that sense. Whereas, degustation and tasting events, concerts, educational and social gatherings are based on experiences in the form of experiential marketing. Such manifestations are instrumental for imaging places through tasting, experiencing and purchasing.

Conclusion

Place branding attracted the attention of the governments of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) countries during the late 1990s (Szondi, 2007: 9) as a strategic tool for image enhancement. Studies indicate a substantial increase the number of international tourists in post-communist CEE, however, countries could not succeed to benefit from tourism market to the fullest extent "due to lingering images of regional instability, poor service, infrastructure, and facility quality" (Hall, 2004: 117). National Tourism Organizations stepped in CEE countries to develop communication strategies and improve image at home and abroad as a result of institutionalization directed towards holistic and coordinated approach.



TOS tries to show the cultural richness of the country by mingling different geographical regions into the same picture collages. When the posters are analysed individually, they represent the places either through cultural and religious monuments or through tradition and values associated with the local culture. On the other hand, when the posters stand together they are a unique whole composed of different parts like a patchwork image. The towns are the nodes in the semantic network, while signification represents the relations, which are the links in the whole branding communication of the country. Food appears as the core concept linking all nodes through "Soul Food" theme.

Moreover, mega-events spread the word about the place and commodify images on the cultural market through expressing, disseminating and staging the meaning. In this respect, EXPO is a showcase to promote the image of places. EXPO provides a perfect setting to have a face to face dialogue with the visitors and interested parties, directed towards shaping their perceptions – often by creating an interactive platform through degustation and other forms of events. Yet, place branding cannot be degraded to single events, which should be consistent and sustainable.

Food is a part and parcel of gastronomic experience and narratives, which is influential in shaping the overall country image. Accordingly, "food as a tourist attraction" theme is linked to myths, narratives, and cultural discourses in order to communicate the brand image of Serbia. The design of any place branding strategy will not be viable if it does not take into account the values, narratives, and manifestations altogether. Although the transitory nature of mega-events can be perceived as a short-term strategy, the sign value reiterated by experiential marketing could be influential for creating a memorable and sustainable place image.

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