The Economic Geography of Brand Associations

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**Abstract**

This paper discusses place-product brand associations as processes of symbolic value creation. Focus is on the place-product brand experience and, thus, on the symbolic value that emerges from non-material associations. According to the proposed theoretical and methodological framework, symbolic value is traceable within the ‘underworld of affect’ boosted by the place-product experience. The case of Vespa-Rome brand association enacted through the experiential platform of the movie Roman Holiday, is analysed. From an historical perspective, this paper identifies a process of symbolic capital accumulation occurring within an ecology of associated brands (i.e. place, product, media), thus suggesting an expanding geography of brands and branding that includes both ‘material’ and ‘non-material’ brand associations.

**Keywords**

Place brand, product brand, experience, symbolic value, symbolic capital, non-representational theory
1. Introduction

Brands and branding have been analysed by a growing community of scholars that discussed, tested and contested the use of branding theory for unconventional settings such as cities and regions. A `geographical issue` has emerged in the branding debate and two standpoints have been adopted. Attention has been drawn to the geographical entanglement of product brands in an attempt to cast light on the implications for cities and regions of an emerging economic geography of brand associations (Pike 2011). On the other hand, cities, regions and countries have been studied as `place brands´ in order to analytically deal with place images and place reputation and uncover the social, political and economic mechanisms behind their formation and dynamic evolution (Jensen 2007; Halkier and Therkelsen 2008; Bellini et al. 2010).

The intertwining of place and product brands deserves further attention, however. Cities are filled with brands which populate streets, squares, and basically every corner of the urban space where commercial billboards, flagship stores, sponsorships of events and of urban artefacts contribute to a symbolic production of the lived space. That is, product brands shape the urban context and fill it with values and symbols that we `consume`, consciously or not, in our everyday lives. At the same time, firms encourage the association of their products with geographical contexts, since such an association is tested to enrich the product brand with values and symbols that emanate from the place identity. If origination, i.e. the construction of brand origin, is a source of value for product brands, since signalling traditions, quality and authenticity (Pike 2011), there is still a need to understand how and the extent to which place-product associations contribute to place-brand building and to fostering place competitiveness in global value chains (Papadopoulos et al. 2000; Roth and Diamantopoulos 2009). Generally, there is a need to analyse how place-product brand associations create an ecology of symbolic value that benefit the brands – product, place and personal brands - participating in it and the related economies. This is the ultimate goal of this paper.

Symbolic value creation is progressively overshadowing the role of material value in global markets; in certain cases, it seems that product immaterial and experiential aspects play a greater role than technical and utilitarian aspects (Jansson and Power 2010). Those who sustain the rise of a symbolic economy stress, in fact, that image-making and symbolic consumption become a priority at the expense of the material "world of things" (Klein 2000). This is fairly evident in product markets where consumers seek to appropriate symbolic value (Levy 1959), which helps them to build their distinctive identities (Karrh 1998; Holt 2002) and satisfy their need for “recognition, freedom and agency” (Zwick et al. 2008). There is room to argue, however, that the pursuit of symbolic value is not just (or not only) the umpteenth ‘market trick’ aiming to expand the volume of business; instead it pervades a range of social contexts where non-marketable entities are symbolically consumed. This is the case of the symbolic ‘consumption’ of place and space. Think, for instance, of the symbolic consumption of the ‘creative city’ e.g. Berlin, of the ‘university city’ e.g. Cambridge, or of the ‘fashion capital’ e.g. Milan: beyond the tangible payoffs of being – for example – an artist in Berlin (presence in the art community providing opportunity for collaboration and learning), a student in Cambridge (high quality educational credentials) or a fashion designer.
in Milan (presence in a fashion cluster), we should not overlook the intangible payoffs related to the consumption of the ´city brand´ contributing to the production of professional self-identity and reputation: this act of identity production partly derives from individuals´ appropriation of the symbolic value embodied by the occupied space.

That is, a ´postmodern´ consumption of symbolic value (i.e. symbolic consumption aimed at producing self-identity, Arnaud and Thompson 2005) is inherent not only to product brands but also to place brands. This paper acknowledges and discusses the existence of a two-way relationship between place brands and product brands, so that the effects of their pairing - or association - are interpreted as mutual, in contrast with a tendency to prioritize a product-centric perspective in both economic geography and marketing literature. Furthermore, when focusing on place-product associations, there is a need to analyse an expanding set of spatialities of symbolic value creation, thus going beyond traditional spatial circuits of production. That is, not only spaces and places of production, but also spaces and places of consumption and intermediation can play a salient role in symbolic value creation.

In a discussion on place-product brand associations as processes of symbolic value creation, focus will be on a specific form of consumption, i.e. the place-product experience. The experiential dimension wants to stress the immateriality of associations, as emerging in an absence of physical or material connection between a place and a product. After theoretically entangling the place-product experience as non-material association, the case of the encounter between Vespa scooter brand and the city of Rome in the 1950s movie Roman Holiday is presented to exemplify the experiential dimension of place-product brand associations.

### 2. Place brand and Product brand: Towards a conceptualization of Brand Associations

Two streams of literature are here used to theoretically discuss the place-product brand associations: (a) place-brand literature concerned with place image and reputation as functional to fostering place competitiveness; (b) the literature on geographical brand associations mainly concerned with product/firm competitiveness. Marketing scholars and geographers have contributed to both streams and are increasingly developing similar considerations and arguments, in many cases without being aware of this convergence.

Place-brand literature is engaged with analysing mechanisms that build the “reputational assets” (Anholt 2005) – prestige or credit - of cities and regions, by utilizing the analogy of ‘places as brands’. One of the main elements characterising this stream of literature is a monolithic conceptualization of the ´place brand´ which is interpreted as emerging from a collective action (Pasquinelli 2013). That is, the place brand derives from a collective effort to build place reputation, an effort that often coincides with the “conscious attempt of governments to shape a specifically designed place identity and promote it to identified markets” (Kavaratzis and Ashworth 2010:1). The limits of the ´collective brand´ have been
discussed by those emphasising conflicts and tensions that emerge during the place-brand building (Jensen 2007). Political efforts of mediation often fail in reducing conflicts among territorial stakeholders (Bellini 2004), while processes of negotiation hardly mobilize the support of diverse stakeholders (Ooi 2004). Moreover, the collective brand does not frame analytically the role of individual branding efforts of those organizations, firms and individuals that, being associated with the place, contribute to place-brand building.

That is, the place-brand perspective conceptualizes the place as a brand, but tends to overlook the complex network of associations that, by linking products, places and people in multiple ways, build the place brand. There is, instead, room to interpret the place brand as a network of brands, a set of relations and links spilling out symbolic value. As Jansson and Power (2010) put it, the place brand is built throughout circuits that are activated by third parties in the building of their own brands. According to their analysis of the city of Milan, the “fashion capital” brand is built through the multiple links of the city with products, firms, events, stores and urban spaces that source the Milan brand with crucial symbols and values. For instance, the perceived connections to Missoni and Versace brands, to Milan Fashion Week event, and to Galleria Montenapoleone and other prestigious shopping districts make Milan a “fashion capital”.

The literature on geographical associations of product brands sheds light on the nature of the links – or associations - connecting different brands. There is a long-standing tradition in international marketing analysing geographical associations and the impact of the country-of-origin (CoO) on product success (Bilkey and Nes 1982; Johansson et al. 1985). The proliferation of global firms has further pushed the CoO effect studies since the global geography of TNCs impacts corporate and product brands, which have become a variable to be considered during strategic decision-making regarding international expansions (Brodowsky et al. 2004). The geographical fragmentation of global value chains implies a need to break down the concept of CoO into a set of geographical associations (Insch and McBride 2004): the ‘Made in’, ‘Designed in’, ‘Headquartered in´ and parts manufacturing brands highlight a plethora of geographical associations that have been under scrutiny as adding value to product brands (Papadopoulos 2011).

International marketing literature has proposed a definition of “brand origin” overcoming the narrow geographical focus of the ‘Made in´ associations: the origin is not simply the geographical context where the product is manufactured. Rather, the brand origin is “the place, region or country where a brand is perceived to belong” (Thakor and Kohli 1996:26). The origin is, thus, a matter of perception and, beside the physical or material attachment to ‘the place of production’, other spatialities add value to product brands, such as the “usage context” attaching meaning in relation to specific situation and rituals of consumption (Gerr et al. 1999).

In economic geography the notion of origin has been further developed. The process of construction of geographical associations (Pike 2010) is built upon those spatial circuits of value and meaning that are activated in the production, circulation, consumption and regulation of product brands (Pike 2011). In these spatial circuits, brands emerge from a network of relationships, negotiations of meaning and ownership that involve a variety of economic actors including consumers (Power and Hauge 2008). It seems that not only the
construction of the origin in relation to the place of production, but also the presence of brands in “status markets” creates value (Hauge et al. 2009). Multiple “brand channels”, which are shaped in both local and global circuits, being of a temporary or permanent nature, represent the spaces where products are received, consumed and reviewed with a consequent creation of value (Power and Jansson 2011). In other words, there is increasing awareness of the fact that “the moments of value creation might not happen behind the factory gates but in other places” (Power and Jansson 2011).

Hence, international marketing and economic geography are converging on situating value creation also outside of the circuits of production. In particular, international marketing clearly suggested the existence of a ´perceived origin´ replacing the narrow focus of the material or physical origin. This implies there might be non-material geographical associations deriving from the perception of a ´imagined´ link between a place and a product; this opens to multiple spatialities that, hosting geographically fragmented global value chains, seem to participate in shaping valuable brand associations.

The immateriality of place-product associations has been overlooked in literature, with an exception for recent scholarship. Tokatli (2013) analysed the case of Gucci and ´imaginary´ associations to Los Angeles. The firm appropriated the city images and collected the associated ´monopoly rents´ without being located in Los Angeles or having any physical or material connection with it. Los Angeles - and its image – enters the Gucci brand as “lived experience”, thus becoming a myth ready to be consumed by Gucci buyers. That is, Gucci is imagined as a way to experience Los Angeles and this perceived association creates value (Tokatli 2013). Arguably, this is particularly relevant argument in a time when Gucci´s Italian ´material´ origin seems to loose appeal, as recent survey showed (Anholt 2011:297).

2.1. Brand Associations and Symbolic Capital Accumulation: an historical perspective

The above literature review highlighted three elements entangling place-product brand association: (a) place image and reputation justifying an analogy of ´places as brands´; (b) the relational nature of place and product brands whose reputation or prestige is built within a network of brands whose links do a symbolic work; (c) links or associations defining a perceived and imagined geographical brand origin that opens to spatialities of origination beyond the places of material production or consumption.

Brand associations are the expression of a symbolic value creation which, from a longitudinal perspective, puts in place an accumulation of ´symbolic capital´ within a network of brands. Symbolic capital is understood as property or attribute of the network since being accumulated (or dissipated) within it over time. In fact, place-product brand associations tend to be self-reinforcing because brands are “joined together in a spiral of mutual interdependence built upon the creative reprocessing of old images and the continual addition of new ones to local repertoires of designs and symbologies” (Scott 2010:124). The network of brand associations upgrades the symbolic status of participating brands, which are interpreted as undertaking a path of symbolic development.
Symbolic capital, however, belongs to a perceptual dimension and, accordingly, is interpreted as “dispersed capital” accumulated in people’s minds. It is, indeed, a perceptual and geographically dispersed entity so that tracing and giving evidence of its accumulation is not an easy task. The accumulation of symbolic capital conceptualized by Bourdieu and Nice (1980) is here proposed. They stated about the accumulation of symbolic capital as that “credit”, “prestige” and “authority” that guarantee economic profits in the long run. They underlined three mechanisms of symbolic capital accumulation. First, the accumulation of symbolic capital is a relational process according to which one agent’s symbolic resources add value and prestige to the connected agents; in other words, the accumulation is understood as a process of symbolic exchange. Secondly, symbolic capital is accumulated only if the relational process is perceived as “sincere” i.e. genuine, disinterested and characterised by a lack of commercial interest. Thirdly, the “spatial context” in which the accumulation of symbolic capital occurs ascribes value: by doing a symbolic work, the spatial context shapes the interpretation of the surrounding world through meaning-making process.

Bourdieu and Nice (1980) discussed the accumulation of symbolic capital in relation to cultural goods; arguably its relevance is evident for a variety of product brands whose symbolism and “credit” are prioritized by postmodern consumers in search of opportunities to produce self-image, identity and culture (Arnaud and Thompson 2005). But, does symbolic capital accumulation matter to cities and regions? Cities are repositories of “a collective form of Bourdieu’s notion of symbolic capital” mainly based on their uniqueness, authenticity, and on their “distinctive and non-replicable cultural claim” (Greenberg 2008:29).

Symbolic capital can be understood as a territorial asset. If interpreted as a set of cultural meanings, symbols, ethics and aesthetics, symbolic capital is at the basis of symbolic knowledge that, combined with other forms of knowledge, foster regional innovation (Asheim et al. 2007). Furthermore, if disentangled in aesthetic, cultural and symbolic values, it frames and fills product brands, thus boosting firm competitiveness (Storper 2000; Scott 2002). Accumulated symbolic capital can be appropriated by product brands: this relates to Tokatli’s analysis of the case of Gucci which provided buyers with an opportunity to consume the “lived experience” of the city of Los Angeles through the consumption of the city image (2013). Even though its role in strengthening place competitiveness is overlooked and marginal in the academic debate, symbolic capital seems to play a crucial role in positioning cities and regions in global value chains, by helping them to occupy a spot in it.
3. Place-Product Experience as Non-material Brand Association: theory and methodology

Focus is now on non-material place-product brand associations whose imagined and perceived nature prevails over the physical and material place-product connections. As said, the product is not physically produced within a place nor is it made of materials coming from that specific place: rather, a perceived association coincides with the symbolic work that a place-product experience does.

The place-product brand experience is conceptualized as laying in-between the place-based and the footloose experiences that are suggested by Lorentzen (2009): it is neither place-based as it can take place everywhere (accordingly immateriality is argued in light of an absence of physical or material connection to a place), nor footloose as only a specific place-product experience is the one capable of fostering symbolic value creation and, over time, an accumulation of symbolic capital. The role of the place in the so-called "experience economy" (see Pine and Gilmore 1999) has been discussed in literature, but the proposed notion of place-product brand experience is distant from those arguing that the place is a sort of "stage" where experiences are consumed. The place is more than a “container” (Lorentzen 2009) and is salient part of the product experience as participating in symbolic value creation.

From a theoretical and empirical perspective, dealing with experiences is not an easy task. Experiences are, in fact, the result of an intertwining of two distinct realms, i.e. feelings and emotions, and cognition and analytical thinking (Brakus et al. 2009). The brand experience has a multi-sensorial nature according to which behavioural, emotional and cognitive inputs differentiate and position the brand (Hultén 2011). In experiential consumption research, increasing emphasis is on emotions, symbolic and non-utilitarian aspects of consumption (Arnould and Thompson 2005; Hultén 2011), since empirical evidence showed that “the ‘affect’ influences receptivity directly rather than through ‘beliefs’” (i.e. cognition and analytical thinking, Papadopoulos 2011: 37). Acknowledging the two dimensions of affect and cognition, the next section will introduce elements of non-representational theory in order to shed light on the affect dimension, which, beside the representational perspective of cognition, helps to entangle the place-product brand experience.

3.1. Place-Product Brand Experience: Between Affect and Cognition

Thrift’s work on non-representational theory (2000a; 2000b; 2004; 2006; 2008) helps discuss the “affective excess” (Shaw and Warf 2009) characterising several observable phenomena, among which we position the place-product experience here under scrutiny. When arguing the “ubiquity of affect”, Thrift (2004) stressed the vital role of the affective register to understand and study the city as being the “place of affect”: the city is lived and understood according to the emotions that the urban context is capable of boosting, so that the design of the urban landscape increasingly considers a need for “intensive expressivity”. The engineering of affect also pervades politics, where “regimes of feelings” constitute the new political practice (Thrift 2004: 68). A manipulation of affect for political purposes has
become a routine through a set of practices that redefine the essence of the political sphere (Thrift 2008).

Consumption is the third field in which the power of affect is evident (Thrift 2004); when affectively engaged through a stimulation of their passions and enthusiasm, consumers are keener to purchase products so that firms are very active in the identification of “emotional pressure points”. The use of “registers of senses” steers emotions in connection with product brands and the deriving commitment pushes consumers to buy. Affect and emotions are not only a selling method, but also a method of innovation (Thrift 2006). Innovation may consist in “the configuration of new worlds into which commodities are inserted” and, through the emotional involvement of consumers, an “experience innovation” occurs (Prahalad and Ramaswamy 2004 cited in Thrift 2006). Thrift (2000b) noted the rise of the experience economy in industrialized countries, where capitalism is now appropriating consumer’s emotions and passions to foster growth for which firms aggressively target senses and perceptions in order to uncover and co-create new markets.

The affective register is marginal in human geography (Thrift 2004; 2008), even though emotions are integral part of human life; as a matter of fact, geographers can no longer ignore this (Bondi 2005). Thrift identified the main reasons for neglecting “the underworld of affect” (Lorimer 2005): these are related to a residual cultural Cartesianism according to which only knowledge opens the way to reality, and to methodological concerns. Since affect cannot “be captured in print” (Thrift 2008:175), it is difficult and risky to deal with, so that there is a propensity to pretend it does not exist; this is a safe way for researchers to avoid risks of failure. Nevertheless, an interest has been rising in human geography and the so-called ‘emotional geography’ has been increasingly engaged with a spatialization of emotions (Bondi 2005).

Non-representational theory addresses affective experiences which, coinciding with anger, fear, happiness and joy, manifest themselves in either grand scale events or in everyday life (Thrift 2008). Experience is a dimension of living (Smith 2003) which reflects what Thrift names the “poetics of encounter”; according to this the “unsayable has genuine value and can be felt in our pulses” (Thrift 2000). According to Lorimer (2005), non-representational theory is an umbrella term for diverse attempts to deal with the “more-than-human”, “more-than-textual”, “multisensual world”, contemplating the unconscious and identifying an affective realm of “wild new imaginaries” that emerge from “repertoires of sensations and emotions”. The “underworld of affect” belongs to a precognitive dimension, so that emotions trigger decision and action before the conscious intervenes; affect is a form of thinking that is indirect, non-reflective and based on mechanisms that are not completely subjective, meaning not entirely led by individual identity and sensitivity. In other words, affect is a type of intelligence, and not simply irrational domain (Thrift 2008).

Non-representational approaches look at the practice and “what people do, as opposed to what they say they do” (Lorimer 2005), in order to uncover what lays beyond cognition which, instead, manifests as discursive form of representation (Bondi 2005). The “underworld of affect” is, thus, understood in antithesis to discourse: affect cannot be represented by text or speech as “emotions are largely non-representational (…), evidence of what speech cannot conceal” (Katz 1999 cited in Thrift 2004). Affect is non-verbal and
emerges from human embodied reactions: this makes an empirical analysis of affective experiences particularly challenging, as there is a risk of ending up with analysing how people talk about their emotions, so limiting our insight to a representation of emotions (Bondi 2005; Thrift 2008).

3.2. Towards a methodological framework

Elements of Thrift’s non-representational theory entangle the proposed analysis of place-product brand experience and the related “underworld of affect”. Non-representational theory is the foundation of a research methodology, whose empirical scope will be presented in the next section. There is room to agree with those who sustain that representation and affect are not entirely separate and, instead, they are interrelated forces impacting human perceptions and actions (Shaw and Warf 2009). In line with branding studies, the narrative representation of brands is a starting point for the analysis, as it gives evidence of those symbols and meanings that shape the *spatial context* from which affect emerges. This is the spatial context suggested by Bourdieu and Nice (1980, see Section 2.1). By enabling an interpretation of the surrounding world, the spatial context contributes to symbolic capital accumulation. In fact, “very often the source of emotions seems to come from somewhere outside the body, from the setting itself”, whose identification is based on the analysis of texts, symbols and material objects (Thrift 2008).

As said, representation is here combined with the analysis of the “underworld of affect” (Table 1) according to which human embodied reactions and non-verbal manifestations will be taken into account. According to Shaw and Warf (2009), this approach is close to the recreation of a universe of free-floating signifiers *à la* Baudrillard where images have not any relation with reality. This is the “affective excess” that is investigated in this research: the affective excess is taken, in fact, as evidence of the symbolic value creation triggered by the place-product brand experience. In particular, this will emerge from a juxtaposition of the cognitive dimension of representation and the underworld of affect.
Table 1. Representation and the Underworld of Affect: a combination of methodologies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Representation</th>
<th>Underworld of Affect</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Mechanisms:</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Cognition</td>
<td>Precognitive</td>
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<tr>
<td>Analytical processing</td>
<td>Unconscious</td>
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<tr>
<td>Understanding</td>
<td>Living</td>
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<tr>
<td>Reflective</td>
<td>Non-reflective</td>
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<tr>
<td>Knowledge</td>
<td>Feeling, Empathy, Passion</td>
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<td>Subjective/Non-subjective</td>
<td>Not subject-based</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Manifestation:</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Material reality and image: connection</td>
<td>Free-floating signifiers</td>
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<tr>
<td>Texts, graphic, visual representation</td>
<td>Non-verbal, beyond discourse</td>
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<tr>
<td>Discourse and narrative</td>
<td>Embodied reaction</td>
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Source: the author

It is worth stressing the potential but also the limit of this methodological approach: both consist in the role of the researcher who is not an external and detached observer, since being in need to deal with feelings and affective reactions (see below). One might argue that introducing reflexivity is necessary to strengthen the qualitative research methodology. However, reflecting on what the researcher knows and how he/she knows it in order to understand how and the extent to which the empirical analysis is impacted by subjectivity, risks not solving all methodological problems. When putting the “underworld of affect” under scrutiny, the elements usually influencing researcher’s way of knowing and interpreting, e.g. gender, race, class, sexuality, ethnicity, nationality, are likely to be neutral factors. In fact, affect and emotions pertain to a precognitive and unconscious realm where the understanding, thinking and knowing of the researchers are supposed not to enter. The point is whether or not the researcher’s identity impacts not just his/her way of knowing, but also his/her way of feeling. In this regards, Thrift (2008) stressed the “anti-biographical”, “pre-individual” and “not subject-based” modes of perception on which non-representational theory is built: affect, hence, seems not to depend entirely upon individual identity and sensitivity. This is here taken as postulate, since deepening the insight into the nature of human feelings and emotions is evidently outside of this research scope.

In other words, the analysis of the “underworld of affect” is likely to be one of those cases in which reflexivity is not enough to guarantee the validity of a qualitative study; that is, the use of elements of non-representational theory for the empirical investigation of the place-product brand experience can be one of those “messy examples” that, according to Pillow (2003), are highly needed in the qualitative research arena, in which “comfortable, transcendent end-point” research solutions based on reflexivity are not available, while “the uncomfortable realities of doing engaged qualitative research” evidently emerge (Pillow 2003:193).
4. Place-Product Brand Experience: the case of Rome-Vespa-Roman Holiday brand association

The above theoretical and methodological framework is now utilized for the analysis of the Rome-Vespa brand experience emerging from the experiential platform of Roman Holiday, a movie filmed in 1953. This can be interpreted as a case of brand placement (Kahrr 1998) that goes beyond the inclusion of a product on the movie set (Steortz 1987); it consists in showing the Vespa scooter usage throughout the movie storytelling in order to enhance verisimilitude (Molesworth 2006) and favour an identity representation of film characters (Karrh 1998). Furthermore, the city of Rome as movie set might be considered as a pioneering form of destination placement, which contributed to build the image of the tourism destination (see Morgan and Pritchard 1998; Hudson and Ritchi 2006).

The case of Vespa-Rome in Roman Holiday was selected since enabling an historical perspective on the dynamics of symbolic capital accumulation within the network of three different brands, i.e. media brand (the movie), product brand (Vespa scooter) and the place brand (the city of Rome). Going beyond the international visibility and fame that both the city and the scooter derived from the movie, this paper is in charge to show how the co-placement of the Vespa brand and the city brand of Rome within the Roman Holiday movie did a symbolic work, thus creating symbols and values that, throughout a process of accumulation, have been capitalized not only by the participating brands (Rome and Vespa) but generally by the Italian industrial system.

Celebrated by the CNN survey in 2013 as one of the best 12 designs over the past 100 years, the Vespa scooter is produced by the Piaggio firm. This was established in Pontedera, which is today a town of about 29,000 inhabitants in Tuscany region in central Italy, in 1946 when, after the II World War, the entrepreneur Enrico Piaggio understood a need to shift from producing aircrafts and trains, to manufacturing products for wider distribution, made of available materials during Italian Reconstruction, low cost products targeting problems of everyday mobility (Fanfani, undated). The result was a small scooter, easy to drive, consuming little fuel but also presenting design novelties introduced by engineers that, before inventing the Vespa, were aircraft designers. In 1950 the Times spoke about Vespa as an entirely Italian product that was particularly welcome since being the first after centuries (after the Roman chariot, it was said). In the 1950s Italy was not a prestigious ‘country of origin’ and Vespa, with its history and success, clearly contributed to building the ‘Made in Italy’ brand which, then, was translated into different manufacturing domains, e.g. machinery and equipment industry as well as fashion industries.

The success of Vespa scooter emerged along with the Italian “economic miracle” during the 1950s-1960s: if the commercial success was evident since its launch, Vespa became a status symbol when the association with Italianness and Italian culture started being perceived. The presence of Vespa in several movies, songs, artworks and books played a role in transforming a scooter brand into a cultural product. Movies contributed to creating “the myth” of Vespa and, in turn, exploited the increasing symbolic richness of this brand (Fanfani, undated). This process of mythicization, initially celebrating a new productive model of “Italian Fordism” providing the nation with “a blue collar myth”, “a myth of
redemption” and “a family myth”, ended up delivering “a freedom myth” that gave young Italians symbolic resources to build their identity within a fast changing context of optimism and industriousness in the late 1950s-1960s (Calabrese, undated). A longitudinal analysis of Vespa communication campaigns gives evidence of the different stages of a cultural transformation in Italy and in Western countries, including the emancipation of lower classes during post-war period, the emancipation of youth increasingly playing a role in society and the emancipation of women, becoming increasingly autonomous (Calabrese, undated).

The Vespa brand has become an icon of lifestyle and a ‘living experience’ internationally, thus overcoming geographical cultural differences. Beyond Western countries, the Vespa has entered Asian markets, such as India, China and more recently Vietnam where it was introduced as high-end scooter keeping the original symbolic, experiential and functional features (Wunker 2011). A global Vespa community, organized in a network of Vespa Clubs, shows loyalty to ‘the Vespa experience’ which, in addition to purchase and consumption, is lived through events, conventions (e.g. in 2013 the Vespa World Days in Belgium registered 2,300 participants, Vespa France, Facebook page) and social networks (Calabrese, undated).

Moreover, the Vespa brand gives an opportunity to live “the Italian experience” which is symbolized by an unconventional and fascinating holiday or escape made possible by this ‘special’ mode of transport (Figure 3). In 2011 an English writer and photographer, Ben Birdsall, published the book “Vespa Valdera Tour” telling his journey through Valdera region in Tuscany riding a Vespa. The key message is that visiting Tuscany by riding a Vespa is a
unique experience, since this scooter allows the traveller to observe the landscape with calm and attention. The Tuscany-Vespa experience is said to be totally different from experiencing the region by driving a car, and if trying both "you will have the impression to have followed two completely different paths" (Il Tirreno 2011). The Vespa seems to coincide with a well-defined brand experience (made of freedom, aesthetics, lifestyle, Italianness), as well as with a symbolic means enabling a unique experience of places, of their ‘authentic taste’ and soul.

Figure 2 The Vespa brand experience
Source: Vespa India, Vespa France and Vespa Official facebook pages.
The second brand in the proposed analysis is Rome. According to the Saffron European City Brand Barometer, today Rome is one of the strongest city brands in the world, owing to its international popularity for being the Italian capital city, for its Roman archaeological sites, for cultural and artistic heritage and for hosting the Vatican City State and the Roman Catholic Church. In the frame of this research, however, an historical perspective on the city image is necessary. In the years following the II World War Rome image transformed radically: Gundle (2002) described such transformation linking it to the impact of Hollywood on national and international perception of the city and, generally, of Italy. He made three relevant points: (a) Cinecittá Studios hosting Hollywood productions in Rome, Hollywood stars and movie sets brought to the city and introduced into the country an idea of glamour which, once elaborated as the ‘Italian glamour’ made of “grittiness and authenticity”, of natural talent and spontaneity, would have become fundamental asset for the ‘Made in Italy’ and, especially, for fashion industries; (b) during the Italian Reconstruction Hollywood movies were a vehicle for boosting a mass consumer market, exports and services, by forming and diffusing images of desirability, wealth, style, sex-appeal, as well as a “me too” spirit, necessary to a destroyed country throughout a path of recovery. According to Gundle, the 1950s-1960s American movies impacted the evolution of Italians’ consumer preferences and fostered a connection with international markets; (c) there was a simultaneous rise of the Italian fashion and the development of Rome as ‘film capital’, so that the idea of glamorous lifestyle proposed by American movies and the one of elegance of Italian fashion industry have been heavily intertwined. From being modest and provincial in the 1930s and 1940s, Rome became a fashion capital, a film capital, a destination for celebrities choosing the city for fashion brand shopping and high-society events. Throughout this process of symbolic upgrading in the Italian system, the Vespa brand shifted from being an “amusing curiosity” (Gundle 2002) to being a status symbol in international audiences´ perceptions.

The movie Roman Holiday represents the experiential platform where Rome-Vespa brand association takes shape. The movie provides an indirect experience capable of triggering an “affective excess”. According to Thrift (2008), affect heavily and increasingly emerges from media whose influence cannot be avoided due to a saturation of society. Modern media put emotions at the core, thus resulting in a concentration of affective elements - e.g. people’s bodies, voices and faces - and in a magnification of details that amplify emotions. Films and videos are powerful ways to trigger affect, and technology has further enhanced the affective power of media by allowing interactions. For instance, the virtual world of video games enables an affective experience that “spills out of the screen” (Shaw and Warf 2009), while the internet opens multi-dimensional spaces, such as social media, augmented reality, virtual worlds and 3D internet which enable “immersive experiences” blurring the border between virtual and physical domains (Teigland and Power 2013).

While the “immersive internet” represents a field for further research in relation to brands and brand experiences, the capacity of movies to provide an experiential opportunity has been analysed: watching a movie is considered passive yet highly valued experience (Pine and Gilmore 1999), an opportunity for indirect interaction with brands (Brakus et al. 2009). Baudrillard (1970/1998) suggested that mass media can be interpreted as simulation that recreates a distance from the real and, accordingly, determines a state of “comfort” deriving from a mere allusion to reality. The “mediated experience” is certainly different from a direct
experience, but, if “imagined as real” - also by means of brand placement enhancing realism and verisimilitude –, it can result in a strong attitude formation (Molesworth 2006).


While the theoretical foundation of the methodological framework was presented in Section 3.2, here we explain the research procedure. The analysis of the movie was carried out according to two layers of reading, in relation to (a) representation and (b) the underworld of affect. The movie was watched three times. During the first turn the researcher – who had never watched the movie before - annotated impressions and feelings, without interrupting the flow of the movie for not spoiling the immersive effect. The researcher simply wrote single words on a paper and added details regarding the scenes associated to the emerged feelings after the end of the movie. During the second and third turns the researcher transcribed the movie as a text and, afterwards, described the landscape, artefacts, various type of material symbols and physical icons appearing on the scenes. That is, the first turn was aimed at capturing the “underworld of affect”, while the second and third turns aimed at analysing brands´ representation in the movie.

4.1.1. Representation

Brand 1: Roman Holiday

The plot of the movie is here considered as discursive representation: Princess Ann travels across Europe and experiences a ‘soul journey’ bringing her from the frustration of her daily life, made of rules, routine and formality, to ‘life’, from self-control to freedom, from the proscribed order to tasting ‘true’ everyday life. This is the story of a Princess’ escape from protocol, in the pursuit of her dreams and happiness; for instance, the Princess says “I would like many things… I dreamt…” and, when asked by an Italian man to go dancing, she answers “I wish I could”. Her desire of a simple life is also expressed with “I can cook, clean, but I never had the opportunity to do it”.

From a representational perspective, cognitive mechanisms of interpretation and understanding are, for instance, stimulated by the following text which opens the movie: “This film was photographed and recorded in its entirety in Rome, Italy”, which not only is a geographical information but also builds a link with Cinecittà Studios and related background information on the movie production. The actors´ names showed at the beginning, i.e. Audrey Hepburn and Gregory Peck, provide the audience with interpretative elements that, depending on individual background knowledge e.g. knowledge of Hollywood stars´ lives and their relationship with Rome and Italy in the 1950s, are processed analytically.

Brand 2: Rome

The representation of Rome in the movie shows two faces of the city. On the one hand, there is the Eternal City of monuments and artistic heritage represented in the movie by the
Imperial Fora, Trevi Fountain, the Altar of the Fatherland and the Mouth of Truth. A vibrant city of art is represented through the sculptors’ studio at the ground floor of the building where the male protagonist’s flat is located.

On the other hand, the city of poor, generous and simple people of post-war Italy is represented in most movie scenes: examples are the food and craft market in a popular (chaotic and noisy) neighbourhood visited by Princess Ann, and the scenes with Italian characters being all modest people (the taxi driver, the landlord, the cleaning lady, the man selling flowers, screaming young boys), in contrast with the Princess coming from abroad (her nationality is not mentioned) and the American journalist falling in love with her. Simple and spontaneous lifestyle, but also modesty and provinciality, are narrated in relation to the city of Rome, represented as crowded of young men and women out of bars chatting, laughing and enjoying life.

Brand 3: Vespa

The Vespa scooter is almost constant presence in the movie in two kinds of scenes; the ones representing a city crowded of people and busy streets (a very high number of Vespa scooters go all around throughout the entire movie), the others representing key scenes where the two protagonists interact, also ‘by means of’ the Vespa scooter (see below). Given the spread of the scooters in the city and especially in popular neighbourhoods, Vespa is represented as affordable, mass product, easy to drive, agile, especially used by young people and couples.

If watching the movie nowadays, the audience might be induced to interpret Vespa in light of the ‘Made in Italy’ brand. This would add brand attributes regarding design, quality and generally prestige, all associations that, however, would not have been spontaneous in the minds of the audience in the 1950s: as said above, the Made in Italy was not a consolidated brand yet, and the 1950s and 1960s were crucial to its development.

4.1.2. The Underworld of Affect

The analysis aimed at ‘capturing’ the underworld of affect emerging from the movie experiential platform. Fragments of the underworld of affect are here reported, by focusing on feelings and emotions induced by the coupling of the city brand and the Vespa brand. Such were labelled and presented along with a brief description of the related movie scenes (see Figure 3).

Fragment 1: Sense of re-birth (and permanent change)

Princess Ann looks through the window, sees Rome and suddenly decides to escape. Hidden in a truck, the Princess escapes from the Embassy and, just outside the Embassy gate, she sees young people driving Vespa scooters in the busy traffic of Rome. A young
happy couple on a Vespa says hello to her, thus welcoming her to a new ‘real’ life (Figure 3).

Throughout the movie, the feeling of re-birth becomes a feeling of permanent change due to a perception of the ‘soul journey’ experienced by the Princess; at the end of the movie the Princess receives pictures of her escape in Rome and, even though aware of her royal destiny, she has a new perspective on life and on the value of authentic and simple life. The feeling of permanent change is sealed by the Princess that, answering the question “what city that you visited you enjoyed the most?”, says “Rome, by all means Rome. I will cherish my visit here in memory as long as I live”.

Fragment 2: Freedom

The Princess visits Rome popular neighbourhoods, which are crowded of Vespa scooters running in noisy and chaotic streets. She visits a market where she buys handmade leather shoes and enthusiastically looks at shops and stands. Also she asks a hairdresser for a radical haircut, a radical, stylish and different haircut, yet not appropriate to a Princess. She proclaims: “Now it’s cool!”, in front of a hairdresser worried about the extremely short cut.

Fragment 3: Romance

A sense of freedom mixed with romance comes from the famous scene when the two protagonists riding a Vespa across Rome enjoy a random, free, rule-breaking tour of the city. This scene became the icon of the ‘romantic escape’ reproduced in several contexts and strongly associated with Vespa as well as with the city of Rome.

Fragment 4: Sense of Empowerment

The Princess takes over the Vespa scooter and undertakes a foolish ride; not knowing how to drive a scooter nor traffic rules, she provokes car accidents and chaos until two policemen stop her and drive the two protagonists to the police station. In the context of the movie, seeing a woman - and especially a Princess - to ride a Vespa scooter, gives a sense of empowerment which is further strengthened by the protagonist’s expressions of joy and enthusiasm.

Sense of empowerment is felt, first, in relation to young people playing a crucial role in the movie and taking over city ownership; secondly, a sense of empowerment is felt in relation to women (not only in relation to the protagonist, but also to other women appearing in various scenes).
4.2. Juxtaposing Representation and the Underworld of Affect: the accumulation of symbolic capital

The juxtaposition of two layers of reading, i.e. the discursive and visual representation (cognition) and the fragments of the underworld of affect, makes the “affective excess” emerge. Representation and affect are understood as intertwined forces impacting human perception and experience (Shaw and Warf 2009). This is because the discursive and visual representation of the brands shapes the spatial context that is vital to the emergence of affect, which, as Thrift suggested, derives from external input and stimuli. This spatial context is composed of the movie scenes in which the interplay of the place brand and product brand (the brand association) creates symbolic value: by ascribing meaning and fostering an interpretation of the surrounding world, the spatial context participates in doing symbolic work within the network of brands.

Table 2 summarizes the results of this juxtaposition and shows that, if we look at each brand and brand representation individually, we see that no symbolic value is created. The Rome brand and the Vespa brand are represented according to narratives and visual elements that constitute a consolidated knowledge cognitively processed, e.g. Rome as the Eternal City or the popular neighbourhood of an Italian city in the post-war period, and Vespa as affordable and mass product (as said, an “amusing curiosity”). But, when looking at the underworld of affect, we see that the indirect place-product brand experience triggers emotions and feelings that create symbolic value in the space of the brand association. That is, the
experience of that product (Vespa) in that city (Rome) in the spatial context of that movie (Roman Holiday) does a symbolic work that creates value in the analysed relational brand system. That is, a brand ecology emerges, where the brands are vital components of a complex ‘organism’ which, by evolving as a whole, accumulates symbolic capital over time. Only if focusing on the underworld of affect, these complex mechanisms of symbolic value creation are uncovered. Connections, interactions and exchange across the brands – as network of connected ‘agents’ - create and attach value to them. There is a sort of symbiotic relationship established by the affective experience in which brands undertake a “spiral of mutual interdependence” (Scott 2010:124), continuously processing place-product images.

Table 2. Juxtaposing Representation and the Underworld of Affect

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Representation</th>
<th>Underworld of Affect</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Roman Holiday</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Escape from routine and rules</td>
<td>Sense of re-birth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Simple life</td>
<td>Freedom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hollywood and Cinecittà Studios</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Rome</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beauty</td>
<td>Romance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Art</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>History</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Simple and spontaneous life</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Modesty and provinciality</td>
<td>Empowerment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Vespa</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Simple, easy to drive</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Affordable, mass product</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Urban</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Stylish, “amusing curiosity”</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

An historical perspective on the evolution of the involved brands and, generally, of the Italian system, allows us uncover the dynamics of symbolic capital accumulation within the relational space of brand associations. Freedom, romance, empowerment/emancipation and sense of re-birth have become part of the symbolic capital accumulated in the network of brands, i.e. media, place, product. The accumulated symbolic capital has been a powerful resource for the Vespa brand, whose mystification was linked to the idea of youth empowerment and freedom during the 1960s and beyond, but also for Rome (and Italy) whose reputation as tourism destination, as fashion and film capital and as capital of the “Italian glamour” was built during the 1950s and 1960s. Rome-Vespa-Roman Holiday brand ecology took part of those processes of symbolic value capitalization that has benefited the Italian industrial system. The development and evolution of the Made in Italy can be explained through an accumulation of symbolic capital that has resulted not just and not only from material and physical but also from immaterial, imagined and perceived geographical
associations promoted by experiential encounters between brands and national and international audiences.

Non-material geographical associations were defined as deriving from the perception of origin, an experienced connection between a place and a product. Rome is associated with Vespa not as being “the place where Vespa is made” – although the product was produced in Italy, evidently this is not the essence of the perceived association in the analysed brand ecology -, rather as the place where the product is experienced in a way that is exceptionally meaningful and symbolic. In this case, the experiential (non-material) place-product association prevailed over the manufacturing origin of the product.

Finally, the role of the city brand within the network of brand associations is worthy of attention. The accumulation of symbolic capital was theoretically defined as a relational process working only if sincerity, i.e. genuineness and lack of commercial interest, is perceived. The city of Rome, owning to its history, heritage, modesty, simplicity and spontaneity – embodied by its citizens as represented in the movie - , downplays any commercial interest that may be perceived in relation to the product brand placement in various scenes. While both the movie and product brands are for selling, the city is not and, consequently, play a major role in rendering sincerity. Rome and its “sincere character” make the two products involved – i.e. the movie and the scooter - perceived as “inalienable cultural material” (Miller 1998), thus playing the role of a “third party” that provides the spectator with a disinterested support in the co-creation of the brand experience. Further attention should be drawn to place brands and their role in networks of brand associations in light of their capacity to make individuals escape from a sense of alienation induced by the market context (Moor 2011).

5. Conclusion

This paper discussed place-product brand associations and their capacity of triggering an accumulation of symbolic capital, which is a systemic asset of networks of brands. In particular, the place-product brand experience gives an opportunity to focus on non-material place-product brand associations. This is a novelty in a field where studies on the country-of-origin effect have stressed physical and material place-product association, i.e. the product is made within a place or is made of materials coming from a specific place. Non-material associations expand the economic geography of brands and branding, thus shaping a new geography where cities and regions, often struggling in nurturing or retaining material associations (e.g. because of their low – or reducing - competitiveness as “places of production”) take part of non-material associations since being “places of experience”. This is not a matter of shifting focus from material to non-material brand associations; rather, it is a matter of raising awareness of an ecology of symbolic value spilling out from multiple types of brand associations.
The dynamics of symbolic capital accumulation have policy implications. While local and national governments are increasingly keen to invest on the “place brand” building, the opportunity to foster, nurture and shape place-product brand alliances should be considered. In light of the brand ecology discussed in this paper, nurturing the place brand actually implies building links to and within a network of brands, which is the repository of fundamental mechanisms of symbolic value creation and accumulation.

The power of the place-product brand associations emerged from the analysis of the Rome-Vespa-Roman Holiday experience; the city, the product and the movie were analysed as three brands taking part of a network where symbiotic relationships trigger symbolic value creation, which would not have spilled outside of this relational context. From an historical perspective, the accumulation of symbolic capital has occurred within an ecology including Hollywood productions in Rome, the development of the Vespa brand and of the city brand of Rome, until constructing a powerful asset for the whole Italian industrial system. That is, the accumulation of symbolic capital established the Made in Italy brand. History matters to brands and the dynamics of symbolic capital accumulation showed it. But we should also reflect on the dynamics of symbolic capital dissipation that may occur when, for instance, local and/or global dynamics destroy or, in any case, dramatically change the brands participating in the brand ecology.

This paper suggested a relational interpretation of brands, according to which their symbolic power does not only depend upon the management and development of one single brand, but also upon the evolution and co-evolution of the other brands in the network. As said, there seems to be a symbolic ecology that a variety of brands contribute to; shaped by history, this ecology determines power and success of brands, so that the evolution of one brand depends upon the evolution of the other associated brands.

Furthermore, the theoretical and methodological framework presented in this paper highlighted the role of affect in the creation of symbolic value. Studying and presenting the underworld of affect was, however, not an easy task. The researcher had to deal with the domain of emotions and feelings and give them a name; would another researcher have elicited different emotions? Then, the adopted historical perspective relied on the information collected in literature and from on-line sources, which helped outline a likely trajectory of symbolic capital accumulation. It was not possible, however, to measure the extent to which (or how much) Hollywood and, more specifically, the Roman Holiday movie entangling the Rome-Vespa brand association, contributed to an accumulation of symbolic capital. Difficult is also to measure the extent to which Roman Holiday and Vespa impacted the city image of Rome, and *vice versa*. While direct causal links are not easy to trace and measure, salient mechanisms – symbiotic relationships that characterise a brand ecology – leading to symbolic capital accumulation were theoretically sustained and discussed, also in light of the presented case analysis.

Further research should be undertaken at least in three directions. First, there is a need to deepen an insight into the relationship between geographical associations and brand experiences and, generally, to further a geographical insight into the role of consumption in symbolic value creation and brand building. Secondly, there is an evident need to draw more attention to the ‘affect’ side of symbolic value creation in order to design methodological
tools and research procedures to empirically deal with this challenging domain. Thirdly, different experiential platforms, beyond traditional media, should be considered for empirical research, in order to uncover their contributions to the geography of brand associations.
References


