JOURNAL OF GASTRONOMY HOSPITALITY AND TRAVEL

Research Article

IS IT POSSIBLE TO THEORETICALLY DISTINGUISH BETWEEN PLACE BRANDING, DESTINATION BRANDING, AND NATION BRANDING IN TERMS OF TOURISM?

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Abstract

The etymological origins of most concepts are insufficient to account for their terminological origins. This situation creates limitations, particularly in explaining terminologies based on a specific theory. This study aims to reveal the semantic and terminological differences between nation branding, place branding, and destination branding, which may be seen as conceptually similar structures. The study examines articles in journals indexed in Web of Science. Therefore, the study was conducted using a qualitative research design. The research was conducted in September 2025. The keywords "nation branding" and "tourism," "place branding" and "tourism," and "destination branding" and "tourism" were searched in the Web of Science database. A total of 1,224 publications were found, and all publications were included in the study. Bibliometric analysis was used to analyze the research data. In this context, the R Studio Bibliometrix package was used for bibliometric analysis. The research found that nation branding is classified on the outer periphery, place branding on the middle periphery, and destination branding on the innermost periphery of the space marketing ecosystem. Furthermore, it is believed that all three types of branding in the space marketing ecosystem contribute theoretically to tourism.

Keywords: National Branding, Place Branding, Destination Branding, Space Branding

Introduction

Branding plays a crucial role in enabling businesses and other organizations engaged in commercial activities to compete in today's market (Aaker and Moorman, 2023; Savchenko et al., 2020). In this context, Diamond and colleagues (2009, p. 118) describe branding as "powerful and emotionally resonant," arguing that it is a product of an organization's own dynamic structure. Therefore, a brand is not merely a physical element such as a shape or symbol. Additionally, it encompasses all tangible and intangible elements that consumers consider when choosing a brand's products (Llorente-Barroso et al., 2022). Branding is one of the fundamental topics in the discipline of marketing due to the benefits it provides to all types of organizations. In recent years, leading academic journals have published hundreds of studies on branding. Although these studies differ in terms of discipline, methodology, and approach, they all emphasize the importance of branding (Keller, 2025). Branding is seen as a cornerstone for creating and sustaining a loyal customer profile in a highly competitive environment (Ismail, 2023). For this reason, in addition to businesses producing industrial products (goods and services), city, regional, and country managers are also focusing on the importance of branding.

Branding, which is also an important element in the tourism sector, increases the likelihood of both businesses and regions being preferred. Destination branding, place branding, and nation branding concepts generally encompass promotional objectives aimed at branding a geographical area. Although these branding forms are carried out for different purposes, they are also important in the context of tourism because the main element is a geographical area (Sarı and Meydan Uygur, 2023). This research examines the branding of a geographical area or place through three concepts: place branding, nation branding, and destination branding.

Place branding, which focuses on branding a place and space, has become an important topic for place management, especially over the last thirty years. Although conceptual development has progressed in this context (Vuignier, 2017; Swain et al., 2024), its conceptualization is still limited and not fully understood (Aguilera-Cora et al., 2025; Eshuis and Ripoll González, 2025; Vuignier, 2017; Ma et al., 2019). In addition, place branding studies play a decisive role in the tourism sector, whose capital is nature. In the tourism sector,

space-based branding is seen as differentiating the experienced region from others and providing a competitive advantage in attracting tourists (Shiva Ezzatian et al., 2025; Ramadania et al., 2025).

The second concept, which involves the branding of states established within a geographical area, is nation branding. Although nation branding is part of the discipline of international relations, it is important for tourism development and tourists' vacation preferences (Sarı, 2024; Sarı and Meydan Uygur, 2023; Sarı and Meydan Uygur, 2024). Dinnie (2007, p. 200) describes this situation as follows: "A nation brand is considered an umbrella brand that endorses many sector brands, for example, in tourism or exports." Tourism is an important variable in Anholt's (2012, pp. 1059–1068) nation branding model. Furthermore, tourism studies similarly view a country's positive image as a motivating factor for visits to that country (Chaulagain et al., 2019).

The third concept, which encompasses the branding of a geographical area or location, is destination branding. A destination is a geographically focused city, region, island, or country (Davidson and Maitland, 1997); it is the combination of products designed to meet tourism needs from a marketing perspective (Cooper et al., 2005). The marketing of destinations encompasses the forms of communication carried out to attract potential tourists (Uysal et al., 2011). Recently, concerns about destination competition have been increasing due to the similarity of destinations. In this context, destinations are placing greater emphasis on branding efforts to create a unique identity (Mandagi and Centeno, 2025).

The concepts of "place branding, destination branding, and country branding," which involve branding a geographical area and space, play a decisive role in tourists' purchasing preferences, but the terminological framework has not yet been fully clarified. This research first aims to reveal the normative relationship between the three types of branding and tourism. Second, it was conducted to determine the terminological basis of the types of branding.

Conceptual Framework

In general, destination branding focuses on tourism studies, while place and nation branding studies focus on international relations research from a soft power perspective. However, both nation branding and place branding are also examined in tourism studies (Sarı and Meydan Uygur, 2024). The concept of destination in tourism is seen as a concept that leads to a distinction in many disciplines such as culture, anthropology, and geography, described as a "place" or "location" (Nilsson, 2024). For this reason, the concepts of destination branding and place branding are used interchangeably. Additionally, in most tourism countries—which are mostly island nations—destination branding is used alongside nation branding. Below, the terminological structures of these concepts and their requirements for tourism are discussed in detail.

Place branding is examined from different perspectives in the relevant literature. Place branding is defined by Theodoropoulou (2020, p. 314) as "establishing a stable connection between a place and specific positive and controversial experiences," and within this framework, successful place branding can "transform that place into a destination.". Zenker and colleagues (2017, p. 17) define it as "... a network of relationships based on visual, verbal, and behavioral expressions that materialize in the minds of place consumers through a place's goals, communication, values, and the general culture and spatial design of the place's stakeholders." Ashworth and colleagues (2015, pp. 31–34), however, define it as "a useful tool used by places competing with each other for limited, hyper-mobile financial, human, or cultural resources." This provides answers to questions such as how to attract investment for a place's development and growth issues or how to fully utilize tourist resources. As in destination branding, stakeholder participation plays a crucial role in achieving goals in place branding (Ashworth et al., 2015). When considered in most respects, place branding has a structure very similar to destination branding (Theodoropoulou and Tovar, 2020). However, place branding has also been used in recent research conducted in the field of international relations (Sarı and Meydan Uygur, 2024). Place branding is also associated with nation (country) branding, particularly because it is a subject of soft power.

Nation branding, on the other hand, can be defined as the sum of a country's image and reputation in the minds of citizens of other countries around the world (Fan, 2010). Nation branding adopts developmental approaches to migration and cultural heritage, in addition to increasing tourism, foreign investment, and the preference for products sold abroad in a country (Sarı, 2024). Nation branding benefits from the discipline of marketing. Therefore, nation branding enables national economies to build competitive strength by positively influencing the attitudes of stakeholders. It also allows a nation to promote its identity and image (Pamment et al., 2017). If national brand managers pursue a traditional approach, limiting their efforts to high-level stakeholders and government bodies, this may result in limited grassroots engagement and lead to criticism (Volcic and Andrejevic, 2011).

Fan (2010) states that a country's brands, destination branding, public diplomacy-political branding, and national identity-cultural branding play a decisive role in the formation of a nation brand. Furthermore, Fan (2010) states that nation branding consists of A (Visual symbol, Slogan and ribbon), B (Brand commonent, Co-brand, Umbrella brand), C (Country Image, Country Reputation, Country Positioning), D (Competitive Advantage, Competition Identity), E (Soft Power), and F (Country ID), and new variables depending on changing conditions. Nation branding progresses from A to F, from easy to difficult.

Figure 1. Origins and Interpretations Of Nation Branding
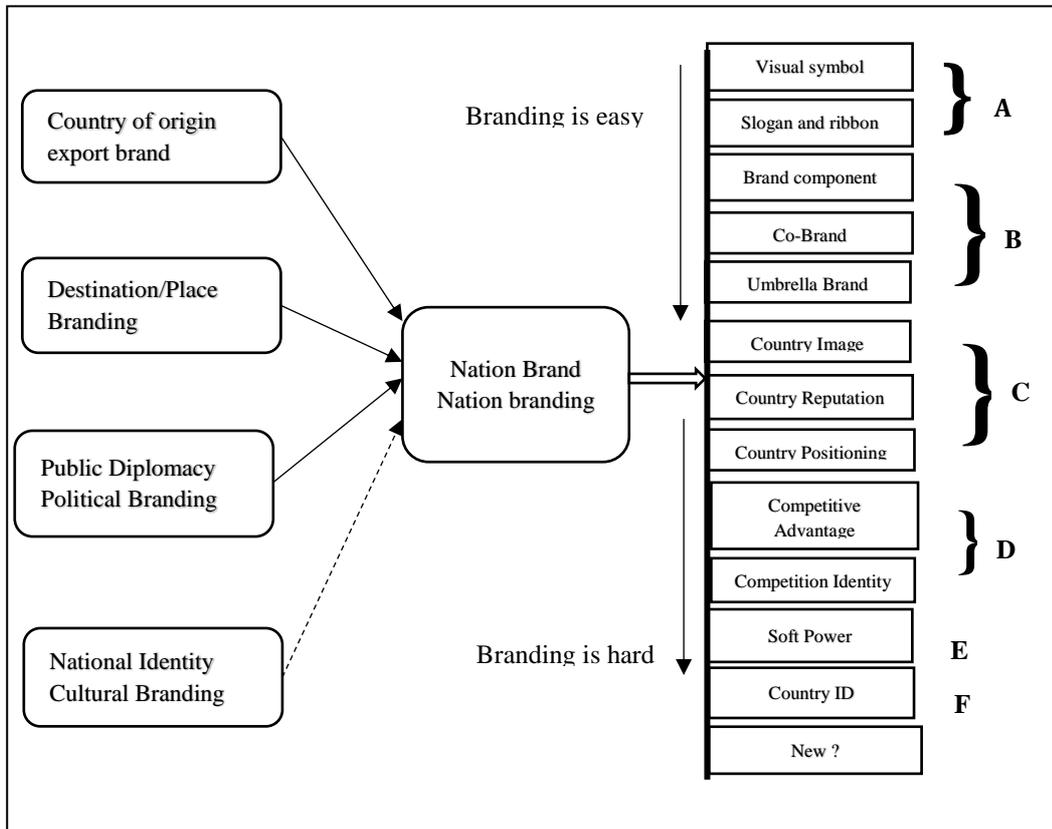
Source: Fan, 2010

Destination branding plays a significant role in destination marketing efforts (Pike, 2009; Zenker et al., 2017). Destination branding, as proposed in previous studies, encompasses the branding of places that offer products needed by tourists (Kerr, 2006). Therefore, destination branding involves the participation of all stakeholders because it has a more complex structure than branding a business (Simpson and Bretherton, 2009). The stakeholder approach in destination branding also shows that, unlike businesses, local stakeholders are tourism supply providers (Schultz and Block, 2015). In tourism, destination branding is an important way to reveal the unique identity of a tourist destination (Zheng, 2022). Therefore, there are two key variables in the branding of tourist destinations. The first is definition. Definition explains the existing characteristics of a destination in general terms, while differentiation enriches the destination with distinctive features to make it stand out from other destinations (Florek, 2005). Therefore, destination branding involves equipping destinations with unique features that will leave a positive image in the minds of tourists and managing this process correctly (Qu et al., 2011).

In a highly competitive environment, destinations, like businesses, are engaged in intense efforts to gain a competitive advantage. In particular, the competition among destinations to attract tourists is the most important indicator of this situation (Blain et al., 2005; Wagner and Peters, 2009). In this context, destinations' SWOT analyses (Strengths-Weaknesses-Opportunities-Threats) are heavily used in differentiation strategies (Baloglu and Love, 2005). Most researchers (Li et al., 2025; Hosany et al., 2006; Pike, 2009) state that the destination should be considered as a whole and branded with a tourist-centric approach. Some academics (Datzira-Masip and Poluzzi, 2014; Zenker and Braun, 2017) state that it is important for destination branding to be carried out by DMOs (Destination Management Organizations). However, some researchers (Li and Zhang, 2024; Li et al., 2025) emphasize the importance of inter-destination alliances, pointing to the role of stakeholder collaboration in branding.

Destinations are quite different from other consumer goods (Hankinson, 2007), and their branding can also become quite complex (Hankinson, 2009; Taşçı and Kozak, 2006). This situation highlights the characteristics of destinations as products, services, institutions, and co-production ecosystems. These characteristics enable the formation of the concepts of destination as a product, destination as a service, destination as an institution, and destination as a co-production ecosystem. Consequently, the structures of destinations become relatively differentiated, and these structures can complicate the branding of destinations (Li et al., 2025).

Methodology

The research focuses on the concepts of place branding, nation branding, and destination branding and their relationship with tourism. Within this scope, the research adopts the bibliometric analysis approach from qualitative research methods. The research is limited to studies in the Web of Science (WOS) database. WOS is considered the oldest academic database and has extensive publication data (Caputo and Kargina, 2022). The research was conducted in September 2025. The keywords "nation branding" and "tourism" (229), "place branding" and 'tourism' (445), and "destination branding" and "tourism" (570) were searched in the Web of Science database. A total of 1,224 publications were found, and all publications were included in the study. Systematic literature reviews or bibliometric analyses are used in research to examine the state of a subject (Paul and Criado 2020). In this context, researchers mostly prefer well-established bibliographic databases such as Web of Science and Scopus (Caputo and Kargina, 2022). The R Studio Bibliometrix package was used for bibliometric analysis. Within this framework, investigations were first conducted on the themes of annual scientific production, trend topics, thematic maps, word clouds, and most relevant words. *The relevant study is based on a review of open-access articles available in the WOS database. In this context, the study does not require ethics committee approval.*

Findings

The highest number of publications related to place branding were produced in 2022 (40) and 2024 (40). No publications were found for 2002. In 2025, there are (13) publications. The highest number of publications related to national branding to date was in 2024 (21); the lowest was in 2004 and 2007, when no publications were found, and in 2025, there were 12 publications. The highest number of publications related to destination branding to date was in 2020 (47); the lowest was in 2007 (7), and in 2025, there were 34 publications.

When examining the trend topic graph related to place branding, the most prominent term in 2019 was "tourism (183)". Between 2010 and 2019, the terms "image, nation, local, brand, globalization, branding, marketing, policies, food, destination image, and culture" stood out. After 2019, there was a shift towards "identity, city, local people, experience, co-creation, satisfaction, loyalty, and country image." When examining the trend topic graph related to nation branding, the most prominent term in 2018 was "tourism" (150).

Between 2009 and 2018, the terms "cultural tourism, brand, marketing, authenticity, consumption, globalization, destination branding, national identity, destination marketing, heritage, and brand identity" were prominent. After 2018, there was a shift towards "place branding, country image, culture, public diplomacy, loyalty, experience, soft power, communication, and country marketing."

Regarding destination branding, when examining the trend topic graph, the most prominent term in 2018 (150) was "image." Between 2010 and 2018, the terms "brand, brand image, brand identity, and positioning" were prominent. After 2018, the focus shifted towards "tourism, management, satisfaction, place identity, social media, co-creation, interaction, behavior, and experience."

Figure 2. Annual scientific production of destination branding, nation branding and place branding.
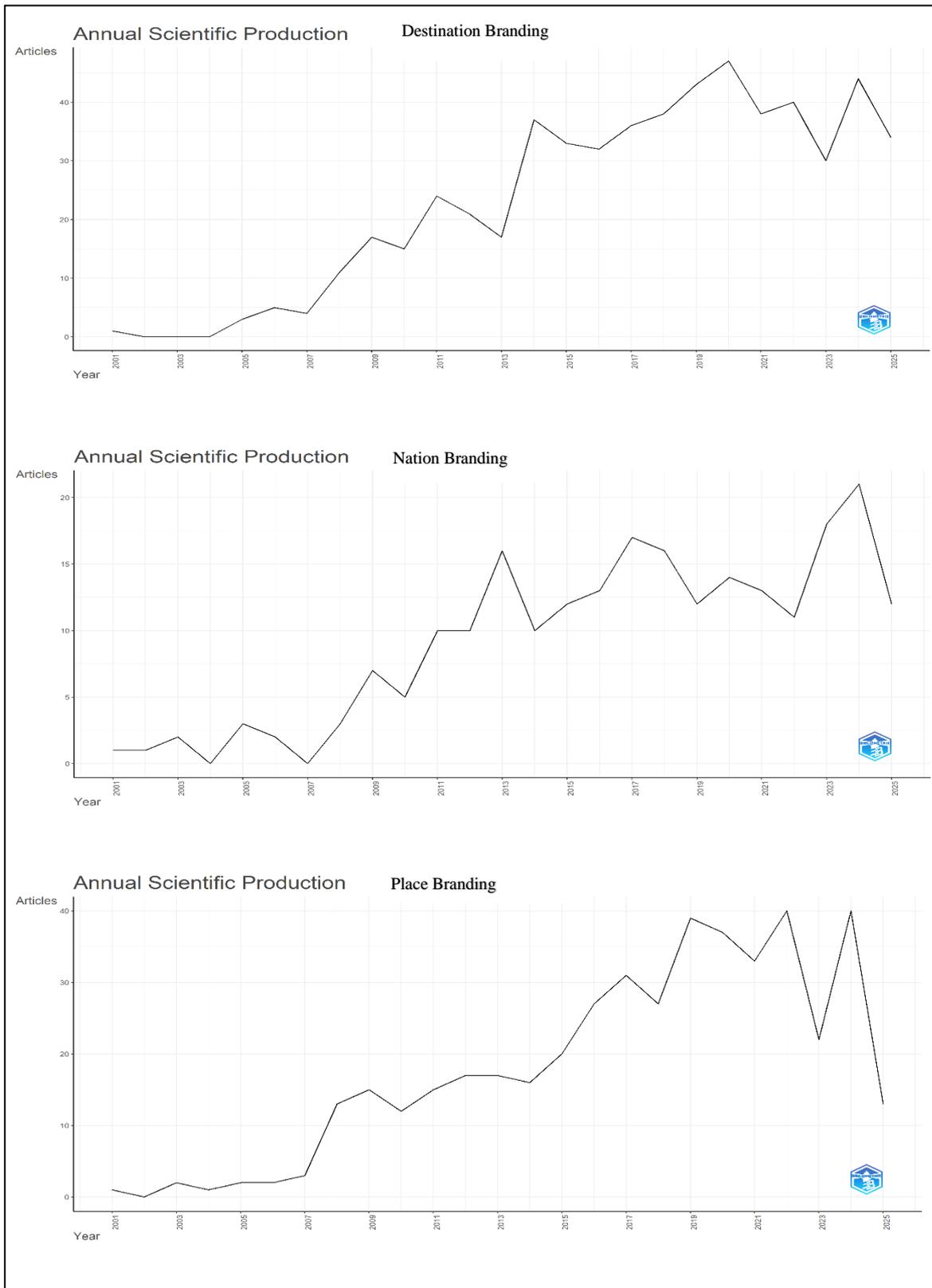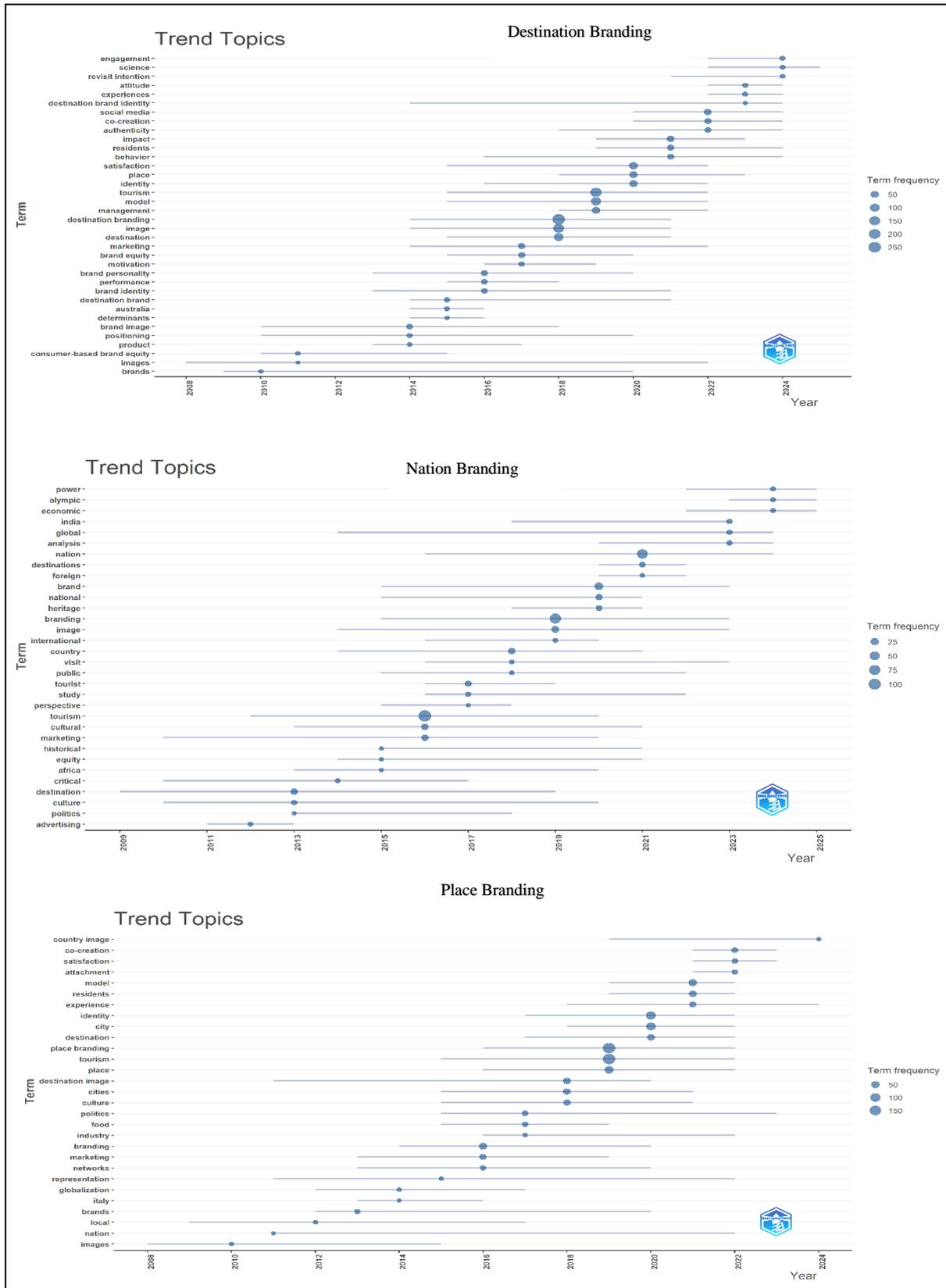

Source: Created by author

As can be seen in the thematic map graph related to place marking, the analysis was conducted on four main themes. The main themes highlighted are "social media experience, service quality satisfaction, smart city, geography, and urban transformation." Emerging themes are "tourist destination, overtourism, Airbnb,

gentrification, and touristification." Niche themes are "destination management, experience economy, experiential marketing, local positioning, regional branding, and local sustainability development."

Figure 3. Trend Topics Of Destination Branding, Nation Branding and Place Branding

Source: Created by author

Basic themes are "city policies, governance, creative industry, destination management, tourism, and identity." As seen in the thematic map graph related to nation branding, analysis was conducted on four main themes.

The main themes are "Airbnb, political economy, soft power, nation branding, cultural diplomacy, authenticity, heritage management, destination marketing, and destination image."

Figure 4. Thematic Maps of Destination Branding, Nation Branding and Place Branding

Source: Created by author

The emerging themes are "slum tourism, imagination, history, reflection, world creation, and competitive stakeholder analysis." The niche themes are "sports diplomacy, Olympic Games, Olympic accommodation businesses, innovation, country reputation, storytelling, grief tourism, sociology, neoliberalism, and

citizenship." The basic themes are "cultural events, festivals, marketing strategy, tourism, identity, cultural tourism, creative tourism, cultural heritage, and consumption volume." As seen in the thematic map graph related to destination branding, the analysis was conducted on four main themes. No research studies were found on the main and emerging themes. Niche themes highlight place and identity management, including "city, local community co-creation, place branding, inclusion, brand identity, and identification." Basic themes highlight destination branding and tourism image, including "destination, equity, branding, and experience."

Figure 5. Word Cloud of Destination Branding, Nation Branding and Place Branding

Source: Created by author

As seen in the word cloud graph related to place marking, the highest level (188) is for "place marking" (183) "tourism", (84) "identity", (74) "city", and a total of 50 levels, while the lowest levels (10) were found to be 'behavior' and "community". As seen in the Word cloud graph related to nation branding, the highest level is "nation branding" and "tourism" (72) at the highest level, followed by "image" (34) at the second highest level, 'identity' (31) at the third highest level, "public diplomacy" (18) at the fourth highest level, and a total of 50 levels, while neoliberalism was found to be at the lowest level (5). As can be seen in the Word cloud graph related to destination branding, destination branding is at the highest level (256), tourism is at the second highest level (169), image at the third highest level (150), model at the fourth highest level (109), and a total of 50 levels, while intention was found to be at the lowest level (14).

Results

Today, governments are building nation branding initiatives for trade, tourism, and international propaganda. Nation branding is a relatively new concept compared to place and destination branding. Although the concept of place branding appears to be closer to nation branding in terms of terminology, it is also frequently used in the branding of destinations for tourism. The concepts of nation branding, place branding, and destination branding are crucial for tourism. Due to the nature of tourism's capital structure, it is composed of qualities tied to a location, such as nature, culture, and history. These three space branding theories also play a key role in tourism development and experience within this framework.

In tourism research, space branding is mostly examined in terms of destination branding. In destination branding, places positioned as destinations have largely been tourist cities. The characteristics of a city are important indicators of its marketability from a tourist perspective. The marketability of cities has become a key issue in attracting tourists to destinations (Lucarelli and Berg, 2011). However, according to Papadopoulos (2004), place branding studies are more partial in nature. Nation branding, on the other hand, has a broader perspective as it commonly involves the branding of states (Sarı, 2024). Looking at the geographical structures of some island states in particular, most of them have geographical areas as large as places that are considered tourist destinations. Therefore, in order to define the boundaries of the terminological context of place branding, geographical area alone is not sufficient, and differences also arise in terms of organization. For example, the main stakeholder in nation branding studies is defined as the state or government, and this is often similar for place branding.

However, the main stakeholders in destination branding are DMOs. Therefore, destination branding differs from the other two types of branding in this respect. When comparing the concepts of national branding and place branding, place branding cannot be clearly defined in terms of geographical boundaries, suggesting that it can cover a wider geographical area than national branding. For example, place branding efforts can be carried out for geographical continents such as Asia and Europe, as well as for organizational partnerships such as the European Union and the United Nations. In this respect, the geographical impact and organizational structure created by the concepts of nation branding and place branding allow them to be distinguished from each other. Figure 6 shows how the types of place branding differ from each other. Accordingly, it is suggested that the space branding ecosystem be defined as follows: "place branding" at the outer perimeter, "nation branding" at the middle perimeter, and "destination branding" at the inner perimeter.

Figure 6. Recommended Terminological Context
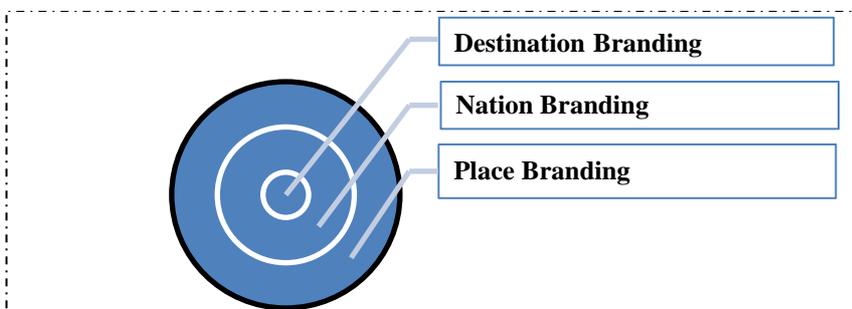
Source: Created by author

This research classifies intertwined place branding theories in the relevant literature from a terminological perspective. This clearly demonstrates the research's contribution to the relevant literature. The etymological origins of most concepts are insufficient to account for their terminological origins. This situation creates limitations, particularly in explaining terminologies based on a specific theory. Future research should strive

to distinguish relevant terminologies from one another using different methods, which is necessary for the development of theories. In this regard, more distinctive research is needed for theoretical development.

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