The Branding of Arts and Culture—An International Comparison

Marta Massi and Paul Harrison

This paper explores the approach of arts and cultural organisations towards branding in Italy and Australia. Data were collected through extended interviews with general managers and marketing managers of 18 arts and cultural organisations, including museums, galleries, theatres and festivals of both countries. Through the analysis of the data collected, five initial elements emerged when seeking to classify the branding paradigms of the organisations, viz., the orientation of the brand management, the type of brand management, the level of customers’ involvement in the brand “idea”, the degree of consistency in branding and attitudes toward risk in branding. For this article, we focus on two particular elements, the orientation of the brand management and the degree of consistency in branding, as these elements have an important influence on how an arts organisation will strategically manage its brand.

On the basis of the assumption that branding is driven by different factors in different countries, the paper identifies two main paradigms/models of branding characterised by specific drivers: marketing tools and strategies in Australian arts and cultural organisations; history and tradition of the cultural product/offer in the Italian ones. What emerges in this study is that the importance of brands in the arts and culture context should not be underrated by arts and cultural managers. Both models (the Italian and the Australian) represent valid examples for managers to look at in relation to the brand management process.
Introduction

The importance of branding a product or an organisation is widely recognised in the business sector. A brand—defined by the American Marketing Association (2008) as “a name, term, sign, symbol, design, or combination of them, which is intended to identify the goods and the services of one seller or group of sellers and to differentiate them from those of competitors,” can be a valuable contributor to the awareness of a product, and has the potential to benefit business performance. It is arguable that branding is a powerful means of differentiation, and can help to develop competitive advantages for firms and minimise the firm’s vulnerability to competition.

However, despite the importance of brands being duly recognised in the commercial arena, brand management “has received only scant attention,” (Ewing and Napoli 2005, p. 841), in the arts and cultural sector, where it has been suggested that it is a “new phenomenon,” (Colbert 2005, p. 67). This reluctance to apply the concept of the brand to the arts sector may be a consequence of the traditional idiosyncrasy and aversion of many arts and cultural organisations to marketing, and to a market orientation (Diggle 1976; Colbert 2000). Traditionally, the management of arts organisations has been considered as separate from other types of businesses, since “it was assumed that different rules would apply to the management of these organisations, just as different rules applied to artists” (Kolb 2000, p. 15). Indeed, in the past arts and cultural organisations have looked at marketing with “suspicion and even hostility,” in that marketing was regarded as “a practice not wholly honourable and somehow too ‘slick’ for their high calling” (Raymond and Greyser 1978, p. 130).

On the contrary, organisations with a marketing orientation (Avlonitis and Gounaris 1999), have benefited from the application of marketing and particularly branding. Brands have been developed and managed by businesses in order to build strong awareness, i.e., “the likelihood that a brand name will come to mind and the ease with which it does so,” (Keller 1993, p. 3). In this way, the goal of the marketing communications efforts has been to make the brand function as a heuristic able to affect purchase decisions about brands within the consideration set (Hoyer and Brown 1990; Keller 1993). Even though arts and cultural organisations might resist the application of typical marketing approaches, it is critical for them to recognise the importance of brands in order to build a strong and trustworthy reputation among target audiences, and other stakeholders, such as funding bodies, producers and donors. Since scant research has been conducted into branding in arts and cultural organisations, this research sought to examine how these types of organisations approach and relate to branding from a corporate perspective.

The paper is organised in three parts: after the explanation of the research question and of the methodology, the key findings will be presented and discussed in order to define different models/paradigms of branding. Finally, an insight of the managerial implications of the research outcomes will be proposed.

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1 Referring to arts and cultural organisations we mean those-visual or performing arts-organisations with a product focus rather than a market focus. As Colbert (2003, p. 30), explains, “An example of a product-oriented enterprise would be a chamber music ensemble, a modern dance company or a museum of contemporary art. An example of a market-oriented enterprise would be a commercial undertaking such as a Hollywood film.”
Research question and methodology

The paper explores the branding approach of arts and cultural organisations in Italy and Australia, and examines their management of branding strategy, tactics and process. In order to investigate the adoption and management of brands by Italian and Australian arts and cultural organisations, a qualitative research approach was adopted. The qualitative approach, based on in-depth interviews, was chosen as the most appropriate, given the exploratory nature of the research (Goodyear 1990).

A comparative study was conducted upon organisations (e.g., museums, theatres, festivals and galleries) from countries that are different from each other, due to, amongst other things, important cultural, political and social attitudes toward the arts and culture. Italy was chosen as a country of interest, predominantly because of its long art and cultural traditions, and its placement in Europe, which has greatly influenced international culture. Characterised by a presence of cultural, historic and artistic heritage on its territory (UNESCO World Heritage List), Italy is actually one of the few countries in the world where the Constitution includes the guardianship of the historical and artistic heritage of the Nation in its fundamental principles and in the Republic’s duties (article 9), and where an important verdict by the Constitutional Court (151/1986), ratifies the centrality of the aesthetic and cultural value… able to influence the economic and social status.

Australia was chosen as an interesting country to investigate the phenomena of arts branding predominantly because it has a relatively new (Western) arts and cultural sector. Australia represents a nation with a more recent history and heritage (in the context of Western art and culture), where the acknowledgement of the artistic, aesthetic and cultural value of indigenous art is a recent phenomenon, and where 77 per cent of the Australian population supports the statement that “we should all learn more about the arts” (Costantoura 2000, p.11). In Australia, the funded arts are required to utilise marketing and management techniques as part of their funding arrangements. In addition, the Australian arts and cultural sector draws upon influences from Europe, the United States and Asia in creative development, and is highly influenced by managerial trends from the United States and the United Kingdom (Palmer 1998).

Both Italian and Australian organisations were selected on the basis of advice provided by an arts marketing experts’ panel in each country, consisting of arts managers, arts bureaucrats and arts academics (five members each). Each panel was asked to provide a list of 10 “front-of-mind” arts brands, and no restrictions were placed upon them to list performing arts organisations, museums, galleries, or festivals. As such, the researchers were provided with an eclectic mix of arts organisations, with the opportunity to examine all art forms in the branding process. This was considered an important element, as previous research has suggested that branding in arts organisations may be different depending on the artform. Organisations were then selected on the basis of regularity of their nomination, i.e., if more than three panel members selected an organisation.

Data were collected through face-to-face interviews with general managers and marketing managers of a total of 18 Australian and Italian arts and cultural organisations including museums, galleries, theatres and festivals. Managers in Australia interviewed for this research included representatives of two major performing arts centres, three major museums, four major performing arts organisations and two arts festivals—representing the cities of Melbourne, Canberra, Sydney and Brisbane. In Italy, the researchers interviewed Directors-General of seven important arts organisations, including a major festival, a lyric theatre based in Venice, a performing arts company based in Rome, and major museums based in Florence, Turin and Venice. As discussed earlier, each of these organisations were chosen as important and “front-of-mind” arts and cultural organisations by the expert panel.

Key findings

Through the analysis of the data collected, five initial elements emerged when seeking to classify the branding paradigms of the organisations, viz, the orientation of the brand management, the type of brand management, the level of customers’ involvement in the brand “idea”, the degree of consistency in branding and attitudes toward risk in branding. For this article, we focus on two particular elements, the orientation of the brand management and the degree of consistency in branding (see Table 1) as these elements have an important influence on how an arts organisation will manage its brand. We use this knowledge to provide a framework to explain branding in cultural organisations in Australia and Italy.
Key issues
Australia
Orientation of brand management
The brand is managed according to a strategy and a remarkable part of the budget is invested in its development,
“We run in terms of our brand in our overall marketing spend. Through this system, everything we do is branded…”

Consistency in brand management
A high degree of consistency and coherence is used in branding the organisations,
“We are very much consistent across all our marketing and communications materials with how we present ourselves and we are very serious about that. We make sure we do that properly—we sort of keep everything consistent…”

Italy
The brand—identified with the prestigious history and heritage of the organisations—is not addressed at a strategic level, neither managed through marketing tools,
“We have few communication tools…in that the brand is very famous and we do not look forward to communicating it and to making it more and more famous…”

The orientation to change and renewal is a characteristic of the brand management in these organisations,
“We have not had the same logo and graphics all the time. We have changed every two, three years: a factor that is characteristic of our identity is the change…”

Table 1: Key Issues in Branding
Orientation of brand management

Perhaps the major difference emerging from the analysis regards the interpretation of the "idea" of the brand, particularly in relation to brand management, and to the target audience. Italian organisations tend to identify their brand with their long and prestigious history and heritage, and strongly refute the idea that the brand could be managed at a strategic level through marketing tools. In other words, these organisations allow the brand, which managers already rely upon having a high degree of awareness and recognisability, to manage itself through the heritage of the organisation, and through the content of their cultural offer/product. In addition, many Italian organisations refute the need to develop the brand beyond what the brand already represents—by virtue of its history and heritage—and place a considerable emphasis on the high quality of their cultural products/offer in the direction of their branding. This is similar to findings by Kapferer (2006), in relation to different interpretations of luxury brands in Europe, versus the management of brands in the US that is more akin to the Australian experience, which we discuss later.

According to the Italian managers’ perspective, the brand is strongly linked to the cultural offer of the organisation, and the brand management process starts directly from the artistic and cultural content presented. In addition, the Italian cultural organisations strongly reject the idea that marketing, with its focus on the audience (or customer), could take precedence over artistic content. For instance, the marketing manager of one of the Italian museums stated,

"It is clear that there are marketing and communication initiatives, that is my task...but everything is developed in cooperation with the scientific project that depends on the Museum Director and, in some way, I shape the content that is transmitted to me, particularly in an organisation of such a value, where there is nothing to invent, but there is so much to communicate that we have to choose what to communicate and in what way to do it. Because the issue here is not what we communicate, but the way to do it. We have the content and it satisfies everyone."

2 Brand management is the process through which firms apply marketing techniques to a brand or product in order to increase its perceived quality, i.e., the value perceived by a customer with respect to a brand/product (Aaker 1992), and its brand equity, i.e., "the differential effect of brand knowledge on consumer response to the marketing of the brand" (Keller 1993, p. 2).
Thus, the quality of the cultural offer is preeminent and inspires the whole brand management so that organisations prefer to invest the majority of their resources in order to improve and optimise their cultural product/offer rather than to develop communication and marketing campaigns. For example, an Italian gallery director stated,

“We have few communication tools in that the brand is very famous and we do not look forward to communicating it and to making it more and more famous. Undoubtedly, as a public institution that utilises public contributions, we have to concentrate our resources on the core business that is the production of events [rather than marketing activities]. That is why investments in communication are residual.”

Alternatively, Australian organisations use their brand predominantly as a tool to communicate with their audience. In these contexts, the brand is used to broaden the audience. In other words, communicating the brand, rather than the content, takes precedence in marketing activities. For instance, the Marketing Director of one of the museums stated,

“We are an audience-orientated organisation...we’re very audience focused and we would see our audiences as our broad community, our stakeholders, the international community, our visitors through the door...so a very broad audience and through that our reputation and brand are absolutely essential. So yes, but really it comes through as an audience focus.”

The orientation to the audience in these organisations is also evident from the resources that they channel into the development of the brand itself in order to increase its level of recognisability, and to broaden its audience through marketing activities. For instance, one of the museums invests a major proportion of its budget to develop its brand,

“We run in terms of our brand in our overall marketing spend. Through this system, everything we do is branded. They are not selling exhibitions or anything. But it’s probably, pure brand without any tactical element at all...probably about a quarter or a third of the budget...it’s significant for an organisation like ours.”

Similarly, at one of the performing arts companies, the brand itself is a tool to position the organisation, i.e., to market it in order to create a distinctive and competitive image in consumers’ minds (Trout and Ries 1972), and to broaden its audience, including the youngest segments,

“It was about positioning the company also more as a commercial entity as well...the fact that the [company] is a not-for-profit is fine...but we are trying...it’s also the change in perceptions of [the work of the company] as an art form...about being a little bit more athletic” and positioning it as being serious and commercial. Whereas the fluffiness to it [the performance] is fine and everyone gets that, but we can position that through the imagery a bit more effectively.”

Finally, the brand strategy of one of the art galleries is focused on the audience,

“What we actually did do is some work about the output for the, for the visitor. We found this sort of expression ‘to illuminate life’. And we think that this is pretty much about what galleries do everywhere in the world, but we really wanted that part of the benefit for the visitor to come out into our vision...Now that’s a very big...it’s a big statement. It’s certainly not an advertising statement or anything, but it’s certainly our departure point for the brand then to take it as inspiration for the brand strategy going forward.”
Consistency in brand management

The branding literature suggests that brands should be managed according to the logic of consistency (see, for example, Aaker 1991; Balmer and Gray 2003). Within this logic, brand meanings need to be supported over time with similar or “reinforcing” messages. It is clear then, from the marketing literature, that a certain amount of coherence and consistency is essential to the construction and development over time of the brand, and to guarantee recognisability and awareness of brands. However, a degree of flexibility in branding may be useful so that consumers can develop a strong commitment to products and brands, rather than a “momentary attachment” (Firat and Shultz 1997, p. 195).

Audience-focused organisations, such as those examined in the Australian context, tended to be highly consistent and controlling in their branding, both from a visual and from a content perspective, in order to achieve their brand awareness and recognisability goals. For example, for one of the Australian festivals, consistency was necessary in order to build a coherent image of the organisation despite the continuing changes in branding due to the frequent changes of artistic directors (in the past decade, this organisation has had six different ADs), “We are very much consistent across all our marketing and communications materials with how we present ourselves and we are very serious about that. We make sure we do that properly...we sort of keep everything consistent. Our branding strategy was really about finding something that we could consistently apply year to year even though each director was going to come in and want to do something quite different.”

Furthermore, at one of the Australian Museums, consistency in branding was fundamental, “So it works together as a family, so our brand strategy is around being a family of brands. So it’s moving from the clutter to being a family. And its aim…Our brand strategy simply aims to raise our profile by communicating in a consistent and coherent way. And our objective was then to develop a visual identity system that would demonstrate how to visually represent ourselves.”

Indeed, the brand at this organisation originates from the intention of management to both systematise and organise a multiformal and inconsistent variety of original brands—what they defined as “the clutter.” Thus, the whole branding process, commenced in 2006, can be interpreted as an effort to recompose and classify the “chaos” and the disorder that characterised the previous brand concept, and to reduce the ambivalence and the confusion generated by the multitude of brands.

Thus, it is arguable that a consistent image and value set make it easy for the audience to understand and recognise the brand, despite dramatic changes in artistic content. In this way, a “network” of brands make it possible to position the brand in a clear and coherent way in the people’s perception. This approach was seen as an asset by one of the Australian galleries in that it allowed them to differentiate the sub-brands without eliminating the link between them,

“At that point was to say okay, [name of organisations] is going to be a brand architecture, whereby we want to put all of the investment into that brand. And it was…based on the Tate model¹ . I really do use the Tate as my branding model for brand architecture because I wanted this for [name of organisation], like the Tate, to really be the hero and master brand, and I could see that there was some opportunity then beneath that as a sort of sub-brand level to establish [first sub-brand] and [second sub-brand], as two distinct entities of the overall brand. And that they would both give and take from the brand in terms of its credentials and gravitas, but that would also give back to the brand.”

Alternatively, Italian organisations felt comfortable in frequently changing their identity. For instance, the Marketing Manager of one of the museums in Italy states, “We have not had the same logo and graphics all the time. We have changed every two, three years: a factor that is characteristic of our identity is the change.”

In addition, the Marketing Manager of one of the Italian festivals stated, “The trademark is ours. We give the guidelines² to others to use it. From a graphic point of view the brand has been historically revised … The brand follows an evolution. The current brand is almost 2 years old… From a graphic point of view, the brand has always been changing.”

¹ The Tate model refers to the family of four art galleries—including Tate Britain, Tate Modern, Tate Liverpool and Tate St. Yves—housing the UK’s collection of British art from 1500 and of international modern art. The Tate is mentioned here as an example of an organisation with a well-defined brand architecture organised according to a hierarchic criteria (e.g., master brand, sub-brand, etc.)

² The brand guidelines consist of a document whose purpose is to provide an easily comprehensible guide to the standard usage of the brand visual identity (logo and colours) and of the brand value set and personality. Organisations such as firms often utilise this vademecum in order to ensure a consistent and coherent brand image.
Finally, for another gallery, graphical coherency in branding is not considered at all, “Everybody in our organisation prints it in the way that he likes it. We don’t have a consistent visual identity.”

In the Italian organisations, therefore, the brand name (or brand “idea”) is characterised by such a level of awareness and recognisability that the organisation can decide to change its own visual identity periodically or to not manage it without diminishing its brand awareness.

Discussion

Through the analysis of the interviews, it can be argued that Italian and Australian arts and cultural organisations have two very different approaches to branding. Italian cultural organisations, based upon tradition and heritage at both an organisational and cultural level, tend to place an emphasis on the artistic content/product, and to use marketing techniques as secondary tools since they believe that they do not need to increase their brand awareness, which they perceive to be already strong. Alternatively, Australian organisations expend major human and financial resources on communicating and marketing their brands in order to broaden their audience. We now provide a summary of the branding approach of organisations in both countries, and seek to provide an interpretation as to why these countries might approach branding in different ways.

In the Italian context, the interviews revealed that management of the brand is tacit and implicit, and in most cases a traditional (or Kotler\(^6\) style) brand strategy has not been developed. They reveal an idiosyncratic aversion to the use of strategies, and of marketing in general, for the arts sector, yet they have strong brand recognition (as evidenced by their nomination as “front-of-mind” brands from the expert panel and consistent high levels of audience attendance). In these contexts, the brand is interpreted as an emanation of the cultural product/o\(^6\)ff er in that it can benefit from the product’s heritage made of history, tradition, quality and prestige generated over many years.

Furthermore, by relying on a strong brand with a focus on the product as a means of communicating the brand, supported by an elevated degree of awareness, these organisations were able to adopt a risk-taking approach to branding through very little typical branding tactics, delaying brand management, or not to managing it at all. Thus, in the Italian organisations, the main objective of the entire process is culture-driven and consists of the use of the content as a means to develop and improve the cultural experience of the consumer/audience.

Alternatively, the organisations in the Australian sample tended to concentrate their resources on communicating and marketing their brand in order to increase its degree of awareness and to broaden their audience base. In these contexts, the process of branding is started by the application of marketing tools, and takes place through a systematic collection of data regarding the stakeholders’ perception of the brand, as well as the provision of other marketing intelligence, such as segmentation and stakeholder motives for attendance.

On the basis of the data collected in this way, a set of brand values and the brand visual identity are defined and then communicated to different audiences by the means of a major investment in terms of financial resources and budget. Furthermore, in order to increase the degree of brand awareness, these organisations develop their brand—and not the product/o\(^6\)ff er—through marketing research, audience segmentation, advertising and promotion.

Thus, two different branding paradigms can be elaborated, an Italian (or perhaps European) classic model, with a focus upon a unique and prestigious cultural offer/history—that is a brand in itself—and on the cultural growth of the consumer, and an Australian modernist model, that seeks to manage and control the brand, with a focus on the audience and their needs, and the marketing tools that enable explicit and utilitarian benefits such as entertainment and leisure value to be communicated to a target audience.

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\(^6\) Philip Kotler, Distinguished Professor of International Marketing at the Kellogg School of Management at Northwestern University, USA, is mentioned here as a world expert in marketing, who is author of several marketing textbooks. The Kotler style refers to the traditional marketing discipline—as it is explained in Marketing textbooks—and is mentioned in contrast to “the Italian organisations’ style” that do not apply traditional marketing strategies and techniques.
As shown in Figure 1, the drivers that inspire the brand management process in the Italian organisations are predominantly:

1. **History/Tradition**: these organisations are characterised by a unique and peculiar heritage of history and tradition, prestige, the quality of the cultural offer, and of territoriality and access (the location in “international” tourist-oriented cities such as Venice). In these contexts, the brand has been communicated for many years without the need for it to be formalised. Instead, the marketers at these organisations rely on simply positioning the offering to the audience on the basis of the elevated degree of quality of the cultural product/offer that it represents.

2. **Cultural growth experience**: the main objective of these organisations is to provide the audience with a culture-driven service (rather than entertainment or leisure), in order to give a contribution to the individuals’ growth (obviously there will be degrees of entertainment in the experience, but the motivation of the organisation is predominantly one of cultural growth). In the light of this, the enjoyment of the cultural offer is interpreted as a unique and special experience that seeks to enrich the cultural experience and understanding amongst members of the audience.

Alternatively, the brand management approach in the case of the Australian organisations is focused upon:

1. **The Brand story**: these organisations—whose foundation in most cases is relatively recent—cannot rely upon the same heritage of history and tradition of the Italian organisations. Thus, the history of the organisation is replaced by the story of the brand, defined through the subjective perception of the stakeholder and audience. The creation of a brand story is then the basis for the definition of a brand strategy (e.g., a family of brands).

2. **Leisure experience**: far from representing a unique and peculiar opportunity of cultural enrichment and growth, the experience offered by these organisations is interpreted as a leisure activity. In fact, it is arguable that the unintended outcome is one of low involvement (although some directors did suggest that they would like to have higher involvement from audiences) and routine-like activity, although, as discussed previously, this may not be the “official” intention as highlighted in marketing materials. That these organisations consider the leisure industry’s operators, including shopping malls, cinemas and sports events as their own direct competitors is emblematic of this interpretation. Thus, in these contexts, competition is based upon the time and entertainment resource and not on the cultural offer/product as for the Italian organisations (e.g., artistic/production competitiveness).
Conclusions and managerial implications

On the basis of these considerations and taking into account the limitations of the study, it is arguable that organisations in Australia and Italy approach their brand in different ways. However, the importance of the brand as a means of communicating to its audience is still relevant to the arts and cultural sector.

First, as a tool able to express, in a distinctive way, the personality of an organisation, the brand is an important tool of differentiation whose role cannot be neglected even in the contexts with a high degree of brand awareness and equity. In fact, the importance of the brand in the arts and culture context comes from its capacity to attract partners’ attention in the business sector and to develop collaborative partnerships and relationships (sponsorships, co-branding, etc.) that can be beneficial for both participants. These partnerships can generate revenues that can be reinvested in order to develop the cultural product/offer (as in the case of Italian organisations) or the brand itself (as in the case of Australian organisation) in order to achieve new audience segments. The brand is, therefore, a fundamental asset able to allow cultural operators to survive in a highly competitive market and to achieve their specific mission, whether it be the offer of a leisure, or of a cultural enrichment experience.

Second, as characteristics of intangibility and inseparability with services are evident in the arts and culture sector, the brand can function as a “short-cut” for audiences to indicate the quality of the cultural product, allowing the organisation to reach an audience even in the absence of those objective references that allow the audience to evaluate ex ante the cultural product. Although the strategic approach to branding in these organisations may not follow a traditional marketing path, there is no doubt that branding is still being used by audiences—despite the absence of a formal process.

Thus, the importance of brands in the arts and cultural context should not be underrated by arts and cultural managers. Both models (the Italian and the Australian) represent valid examples for managers to look at in relation to the brand management process. Italian organisations could start considering marketing tools and techniques in order to keep their degree of recognisability high, to broaden their audiences and to attract new sponsors and partners. This might become more pronounced with the emergence of new offerings and competition, particularly as younger audiences reject “old-fashioned” forms of art. Alternatively, Australian organisations could start to focus on the quality of their product/offer in order to integrate the leisure experience with cultural elements, and to fulfil not only functional, but also symbolic needs of customers (Park et al. 1986). This may be difficult (but not impossible) in the Australian context; however, as the leisure element presents itself as an important part of Australian culture.

The paper provides an initial exploration into how Australian and Italian arts and cultural organisations manage their brand at a corporate level. The analysis aims to be illustrative, rather than exhaustive or definitive. In addition, the researchers recognise that the data are only taken from a corporate perspective, without taking into account consumer responses to the brand. It focuses on a small sample of organisations in order to explore their different approaches to branding. Future research will further examine corporate approaches beyond the marketing perspective, as well as examining the success or otherwise of these branding approaches, particularly in relation to audience and other stakeholder responses.
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Dr Marta Massi is a post-doctoral scholar in the Department of Marketing and Communication, Lumsa University, Rome, Italy. Dr Paul Harrison is a Senior Lecturer in Marketing in the Deakin Business School, Deakin University.