The rebranding of Oldham is a positional shift in the perception and strategic image of the town. The commissioning of Hemisphere Design and Marketing Consultants, an image consultancy organisation, by the Oldham Partnership to handle this critical aspect of the renewal of the town was meant to usher in a new era for the township and the borough at large. Oldham’s history presents a mixed picture of world dominance and subsequent dilapidation and chaos as reported in the Oldham Evening Chronicle (2008). The heydays of king cotton vanished over time from the 1940’s through to the 1970’s culminating in economic meltdown, which led to racial confrontations in 2001. The study reflects the way the stories relating to the history of Oldham have impacted on the shaping of the brand. Boje (2008) argues that every workplace, school, government office or local religious group if not any organisational setup is a storytelling organisation and that wherever people are involved they are known by their story. In this regard, Oldham’s stories shape its image and there are many diverse stories projecting the town’s standing in the face of the various stakeholders. The study reviews the approach to branding in the light of the work by the consultant, i.e. a marketing consultancy organisation called Hemisphere.

This paper argues that the crisis of 2001, when there were race riots that attracted local and international media, helped put Oldham back on the national and international focus for the wrong reasons. The issue was about Oldham facing chaos instead of there being a breakthrough in development or innovation that would help in shaping the town for a better future. The consultant (Hemisphere) employed a simplistic model to capture the ethos of the new Oldham. It is inconclusive whether the recommended image really makes a difference in the shaping of the new image of Oldham. The logo represents “oneness” of the diverse communities of Oldham and seems to answer to political whispers about cohesion rather than a well-grounded marketing approach which clearly informs and recommends a branding approach. The paper observes that by not addressing some sensitive issues that could help consolidate the development
Introduction

The dilapidation of the once “king cotton” town of Oldham and the subsequent violence and turmoil in the wake of race confrontations in 2001 created an ugly and extremely repulsive standing for the Oldham town and the borough at large (Oldham Evening Chronicle 2008). At that point Oldham could be described as unattractive for a whole range of stakeholders as residents lost pride as the workforce was hopeless; investors saw a void of opportunities; the infrastructure was tattered; higher education found no purpose, and above all the place sent out echoes of chaos and mayhem as a result of the scars from the ugly scenes of 2001. The Richie commission was appointed to investigate Oldham immediately after the chaos and issued what has come to be known as the Richie Report (2001), which starts by acknowledging the good old days of Oldham, “The town whose main historic claim to fame was that it was once cotton spinning capital of the world” (Ritchie Report 2001, p. 2). Some of the highlights of their observations on the report on Oldham were:

- **Oldham is a town without strategic direction.** In our view this results from a major failure of political and corporate governance in the town.
- **There is no commonly held view of the type of place Oldham wishes to be, its’ economic, social and environmental priorities over the long term, and the way in which it will achieve good community and race relations.**
- **A particular aspect of citizenship is recognising the challenges which go with being a culturally diverse town.** There is no forum where people can openly discuss the really hard issues of race relations, including the stereotypes and myths about other communities, in an unthreatening environment.
- **Developing the leaders of tomorrow is important in every town and city, and as a process in Oldham may itself help to draw communities together.**
- **The message of this report, in each of the Chapters, are that a transformation in people’s attitudes can only come about if accompanied by transformation of the town’s physical, social and economic environment.**

Abstract cont’d...

and the image of the town, the consultant did not comprehensively tackle the key issues that underpin place branding and more specifically in regard to the challenges facing Oldham.

**Keywords** Branding, Rebranding, Place marketing, Town branding, Positioning, Oldham
in the town, previous attempts to tackle this and what we consider is now necessary to make a real change. In particular, we focus on the regeneration vehicle which we consider to be necessary.

(Ritchie Report 2001).

From the above, it is clear that the perception of Oldham is one of a “failed town” that appeared to have fallen from the apex of its success, into the abyss. At the core of the crisis bedevilling Oldham were a number of issues, for example, incompatible racial communities; lack of investment; the absence of a strategic vision and direction; lack of aspiration; a general failure to attract investment, and traffic that could fuel growth and development in renewing a local economy in free fall (Ritchie Report 2001).

In the view of the authors, Oldham had become a Siberia a place that everyone knows where it is, but nobody would want to visit. In that regard Kadembo (2009) concluded that:

... a place such as a town or borough like Oldham is both a social hub and an economic hub whose continued prosperity depends on the positioning and sustained renewal in the face of the environmental dynamics... the pattern of renewing places is a cornerstone for repositioning and rebranding places that have suffered exclusion and social degradation but that calls for a strategic and sustained effort by the community and other stakeholders.

(Kadembo 2009, p. 57)

Therefore Oldham’s process of positioning or rebranding presents challenges to the parties involved as they face the prospects of renewing the town and reshape the prospects of Oldham. Given that issues about Oldham are attracting debate and discussion certainly that is a positive for the development that a new momentum in developing the town has taken shape relative to the paradigm of the time and would need a strategic fit. The days when Oldham was the world’s leading town in cotton spinning are long forgotten, and an Oldham “cotton town” does not hold sway in the modern day. Oldham is a town in the neighbourhood of the expansive city of Manchester in the Northwest of England and that puts pressure on the town of Oldham to make strides towards a prosperous position. While the negative portrayal of gloom epitomised in falling productivity and subsequent race confrontations created a negative perception of the town and would not attract investment. In hindsight, the authors observed that the contrary may be true, in that the crisis in race confrontations was probably the best thing to happen to the town and its surrounding townships in recent times; given its state of stagnation and bitterness. The race confrontations that created the crisis thrust the town, and the borough at large, into the national and international spotlight, which culminated in the implementation of the regeneration programme to restore the pride and dignity of Oldham (Ritchie Report 2001).

In the review by the researchers, the infrastructural and social developments of Oldham since 2001 have not completely wiped out the perceived negative aspects, but have helped redirect and reinvigorate Oldham towards a new destiny. The ‘Oldham Partnership’ which is an organ
of the town’s mechanism for transformation has also taken on board the agenda for re-branding the town as evidenced in the commissioning of the branding project by the consultancy Hemisphere. A marketing consultancy firm, Hemisphere was hired to execute the process of re-branding Oldham, culminating in a new image designed to project the values that should now carry the town into a challenging and hopefully progressive future.

**Study objectives**

This study sought to weigh the recommendations made by Hemisphere (2008), the image consultancy which developed the new branding for Oldham Metropolitan Borough Council. The argument is largely centred on a number of key issues that underpin the essence of branding. Essentially the objectives of the study are to evaluate the image of Oldham before the re-branding process; to outline the conceptual frame relating to the notion of branding; to assess the extent to which the recommendation for the new branding fit in with the conceptual frame; and to make suggestions or confirm the consultant’s recommendations and justification on the best approach to re-branding Oldham in the light of the conceptual frame. The study brings to the fore key issues that underpin the branding of a town in the light of the multiple stakeholder position of a town or a place in general.

**Literature review on effective branding**

Paddison (1993, p. 340) observes that,

*Rather than advertising per se, place promotion has sought to rebuild and reconstruct the image of the city, allied to which has been a strategy of targeting specific types of activity which both reflect and bolster the image.*

Warnaby and Medway (2004) argue that places cannot be marketed like goods, that is, commodification of places is not automatic, but there has to be some adaptation of the marketing tools. In the same vein the branding of goods and services cannot be straight-jacketed onto towns because places have significantly different characteristics compared to goods. Therefore the thought process and conceptualisation needs to consider other facets which do not come into contention in respect of the conventional marketing of goods and services such as the multiple stakeholder nature of places, much of the activities are local government run and that does not readily render itself to conventional marketing and that the diverse town history has a huge impact on the branding of the town.

Cardwell and Freire (2004) argue a similar point when they observed that there is a general consensus amongst practitioners and academics that places can be branded like goods and services and this underpins the hearts and minds of stakeholders. There are many definitions that have been put forward about branding, for example:
...in simple terms, a brand is an entity that offers customers (and other relevant parties) added value based on factors over and above its functional performance. These added values, or brand values, differentiate the offer and provide the basis for customer preference and loyalty.

Knox (2004, p. 106)

De Chernatony et al. (2003, p. 1100) offer a slightly different view to that of Knox, when suggesting that a brand is a cluster of functional and emotional values which promise a particular experience. Essentially, these views suggest that a brand gives a service or product a personality that makes that service or product stand out against competitors (Cardwell and Freire 2004). Knox and Bickerton (2003) point out that the establishment of a corporate brand is underpinned by the marketing mix variables and the development of a brand management system, which appears to tie in with the general ethos of the broad literature on this particular area of study.

Hankinson (2005) referred to eight clusters of brand image attributes: physical environment, economic activity, business tourism facilities, accessibility, social facilities, strength of reputation, people characteristics and destination size as influencing the branding of a city or a destination. These factors are important for the image of a town and it is important that efforts are made to address those factors for the organisation. Similarly, Hankinson (2005) puts forward three key points on the unique characteristics of place marketing that mirror the challenges that the re-branding of Oldham needed to consider as follows:

- **First, places exist both as holistic entities or nuclear products and as collections of contributory elements or individual services and facilities.**
- **Second, the place product can be assembled uniquely by each visitor from their experiences of a chosen set of individual contributory elements.**
- **Third, places are multi-functional. ... offer historical buildings, shopping facilities, sports facilities and entertainment venues.**

(Hankinson 2005, p. 25)

In the case of a “city” the physical structures, the behaviour of people, the symbols that identify the city, and what people say tend to shape the brand image associations. Grace and O’Cass (2002) present a model (see Figure 1) that shows the different brand images for goods and services. This model brings to the fore the crux of the matter in the phenomenon of images which is about people’s perceptions. The researchers would argue that in the case of a town or a city this is about local people, visitors and any other special interest groups, as investors, etc. who come into contact with Oldham by way of information or visiting.

Oldham has been transformed over the last five years in that the city has a new infrastructure, and has been socially re-engineered via massive construction and reconstruction of both the town centre and the residential areas. This has resulted in movements of society thus creating new perceptions in the view of the stakeholders.
Binstock van Rij (1996, p. 20) says that,

*A brand image is conveyed in messages embedded in a communication style, a configuration of symbols, and content. Customers use the differences between brand images to make their choices among products that are essentially alike in a material sense.*

Cardwell and Freire (2004) conclude that brands have two main dimensions of representationality and functionality which drive stakeholders away or towards the brand. These factors relate to what the brand means and what the brand does. Boje (2008, p. 4) sees every entity from the perspective of a story; stating that: “Every workplace, school, government office or local or religious group is a storytelling organisation.” Therefore, one could argue that Oldham is a story that says something about itself, and it is that story, be it positive or negative which sticks in the minds of stakeholders.

### Key strategic issues in the re-branding of Oldham

Wheeler (2006) suggests nine variables that underpin the organisational brand as vision, meaning, authenticity, coherence, differentiation, flexibility, sustainability, commitment and value. In the main this amounts to an integrated approach in the key issues relating to the branding process. As for Oldham, one is prompted to ask the questions about the existence of such variables, and whether they are integrated.

The promotional manual *Think you know Oldham? Think again...!* encapsulates what the corporate message is emphasising in using phrases such as: “Great People, Great Place, Great Prospects” as its slogan, and appears on the cover page of the document. These claims are clearly an attempt to portray Oldham as a place of preference in making these assertions.

The aims of the Oldham Town Centre Partnership business plan April 2006-March 2009 (2006, p. 11) are:

---

**Figure 1 Key dimensions for branded products and services**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>UNIQUE TO PRODUCTS</th>
<th>COMMON TO BOTH</th>
<th>UNIQUE TO SERVICES</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Feelings</td>
<td>Core Product/Service</td>
<td>Servicescape</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-Image Congruence</td>
<td>Experience with brand</td>
<td>Word of mouth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Image of user</td>
<td>Employees</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Grace and O’Cass (2002, p. 108)
to improve the image of the town centre and promote it as a sub regional shopping, leisure, tourism and commercial destination

to further enhance the communication and co-operation within the town centre and between all town centre organisations and individuals

to encourage and facilitate improvements to the physical environment of the town centre and to ensure high standards of maintenance

to continue to improve and promote the safety, security and accessibility of the town centre to all its users

to promote the town centre as a focus for community cohesion and encourage ownership of the town centre as ‘common ground’ for all sections of Oldham’s community

to aid the process of inward investment into the town centre to monitor the performance of Oldham town centre and the town centre management initiative

These factors are meant to facilitate the development of Oldham as an attractive town destination for the different stakeholders and enhance the standing of the town and the borough at large.

**Oldham’s Community Strategy – Planning for Sustainable Communities 2005-2020**

Page 3 of the strategy document states the mission as follows:

*Our Values, on which we will build a better future, will continue to shape everything we do:*

- We believe in good, safe, living environment for everyone present and future
- Oldham, a place where everyone is proud to live
- We believe in an inclusive and openly democratic Oldham
- We oppose all forms of unfair discrimination
- We believe that everyone has rights and also responsibilities
- We believe in an open Oldham in which all benefit fairly
- We believe in a multi-faith, multi-cultural and multi-racial society
- We believe in the worth of every person in Oldham

Oldham Community Strategy (2006, p. 8)

The factors presented above focus on creating a harmonious and constructive society which are critical for purposes of community cohesion. The commonality and integration of communities is the core of the strategy. The borough has aligned itself to the Northern Way agenda (ie, the development of a significant national contribution in the Northwest of England) and the fifteen year Housing Market Renewal for the transformation to be realised in its blue print strategy document. The main issues of focus are: community
cohesion, a strong and vibrant economy, health and well-being for all, safe and strong communities, well educated and highly skilled people, children and young people – our future, an improved and valued environment. Trueman et al. (2004) argue that poor perceptions of a city can adversely impact on the image of a city and have far reaching consequences for its future development. From this, one would argue that Oldham may not be exceptional in regard to its quest for a better brand image. The different sections of the community need to be integrated and work together towards a common purpose driven by a clear vision, with a dynamic champion leading the change agenda.

The community strategy document clearly states on page 4 that the vision for 2020 is meant to ensure that; “The world will see the Borough as a transformed place” (Oldham Community Strategy 2006, p. 4).

The re-branded Oldham town

The consultancy, Hemisphere, were commissioned to rebrand Oldham in light of the crisis of the past and the need to re-establish Oldham as a preferred destination for a variety of stakeholders. Their observations and recommendations are as outlined below.

The consultant’s report states that:

*The aim of this rebranding project is therefore to arrive at a strong, positive and distinctive brand positioning for Oldham that will inform all of the borough’s communication activity across its varied partnerships, helping to reposition Oldham to its key target audiences and improving how it is perceived, locally, regionally, nationally and internationally.*

(Hemisphere 2008, p. 2)

In developing the new image, the consultant collected data on the following: existing perceptions of Oldham identify and understand how the new image of Oldham would be viewed by the different stakeholders. The factors considered would include its brand, creating a means of communicating the new Oldham brand in written and visual form and devising a marketing and communications strategy to convey Oldham’s new image to its target audiences. The framework employed in developing the new brand mirrors Ghodeswar’s (2008, p. 6) approach, “positioning the brand, communicating the brand message, delivering the brand performance, and leveraging the brand equity...”.

Hemisphere (2008) argues that the sense of potential, opportunity for youth, accessibility and location, diversity of environment, hard-working and resilient, practical and down-to earth, vision for the future not evidenced or understood, low aspiration and lack of self-belief, insular and backward looking, fractured community issues about the built environment were the underpinning factors impacting on the development of a new brand. It is important to emphasise that a lot of the factors needed to improve in line with the vision and demands for rebranding a town.

The then director of strategy and resources is quoted as saying that,
Branding is managing the reputation and what we have been hearing from people is some out-of-date about Oldham as a place and as a council

(BBC 2001)

The Oldham of the future

The different stakeholders suggested that the image of Oldham they desire would be devoid of the issues that have been raised about the borough and its shortfalls. Hemisphere (2008) points out that the future image of Oldham should provide a better living environment where services are easily accessible and the different stakeholders cooperate in ensuring Oldham is a better place. This is a desire for the stakeholder groups who provided feedback on the branding of the town.

The combination of attributes, personality and brand values help to create and articulate Oldham’s point of distinction, giving it a new sense of its identity and future that builds upon where it has come from. The main attributes that help shape the image of a town as is the case with Oldham include: cultural diversity; a young population; 50% of the countryside is green; a strong community cohesion setup; easy accessibility and in the proximity of expansive Manchester; enterprising and home to hardworking people. (Hemisphere 2008). The personality of the town is characterised by caution, innovation and constructive thinking. The brand values of Oldham are summarised as friendly/inclusive/contributing, pragmatic/intelligent/wise, productive/positive/moving forward (Hemisphere 2008). The different elements of the brand pyramid come together to create Oldham’s brand positioning. It gives the council and the Oldham Partnership the basis for promoting Oldham (the brand attributes), it identifies what the messages are (the brand benefits), it indicates how they can make Oldham’s offer distinctive compared to other places (the brand personality) and provides the clear themes behind the vision for the borough that they are trying to create (the brand values and brand essence). In the main, addressing the different brand elements addresses a number of questions: “What Oldham looks like?”; “What Oldham says?”; “What Oldham does?“; (This is tantamount to asking the strategic questions “Where are we now?”, “Where do we want to be?”, “How are we going to get there?” “What are we going to do once we get there?”)

The reality of re-branding Oldham in the mirror of the conceptual frame

The wealth of literature on branding and place marketing leaves one in no doubt that branding is a key tenet of place marketing; Cardwell and Freire 2004; (Kadembo 2009) and guides consumer decision making (Binstock van Rij 1996)

Solomon et al. (2008) argue that brands provide the recognition factor for marketing success in regional, national and international markets. Bradley (2003) asserts that a brand would be as strong as the organisation behind it,
related investment and the ability to keep the promise made which is difficult to uphold. Balakrishnan (2008, p. 63) provides the reasons why places cannot be branded like goods and services as the past history; geographical constraints (location, weather, resources, infrastructure and people), inherited names, stakeholders – destinations are run by governing bodies which often report to their citizens and are influenced by other stakeholders, limiting the decisions they can take and personal, consumer, business and government service dependency.

The rebranding of Oldham cost £100,000 (approximately USD150,000) to re-launch (BBC 2008) a new logo with green ring which is meant to represent “Oldham One”, that is, a united town of diverse ethnicity. The repositioning/rebranding (of Oldham?) put emphasis on brand identity or image at the expense of what Oldham offers to the different stakeholders. The use of the framework that encompasses the brand attributes, the brand benefits, brand personality, the brand values and brand essence helped capture the diverse issues that shape a town brand as argued by Bradley (2003).

The analysis captures the story element that projects the history of Oldham over time and relate that to the current situation and history (Boje 2008), and the idea that place branding is multi-faceted (de Chernatony and McDonald: 2003; Hankinson 2005; Wheeler 2006). It is therefore irrefutable that the branding of Oldham takes a multidisciplinary approach, thus encompassing marketing, town planning, social development, history etc; which conform to the views expressed by Bickerton (2000). Overall, the approach used closely mirrors the body of literature (Kadembo 2009) and guides consumer decision-making (Binstock van Rij 1996) that epitomises the essence of branding.

**Conclusions**

The rebranding of Oldham town as recommended by Hemisphere (2008) presents an image that portrays the best aspirations for the town in the desire to reconstitute community cohesion. However, the town identity on its own does not complete the true re-branding of the town. For example, branding is not just about what an organisation or individual says, it incorporates much more. From the analysis of the assertions of the report, one is reminded about the political implications which might have swayed the tone and focus of the report, probably at the expense of a well grounded approach. Oneness is politically appealing, but an investor, a tourist; or an employee may find no meaning in putting emphasis on that phenomena. To portray Oldham as one united borough of seven diverse townships does not in itself create a good brand.

Therefore, the Oldham brand, while sounding ideal, does not seem to make a strong case in selling Oldham as a tourist destination, an investment destination, a sporting destination etc. The oneness sounds like an attempt to appease those who might have been aggrieved in the mayhem of 2001. In the view of the researchers, the new image of Oldham only tells half the story of selling Oldham as it seems to be directed at those already living in Oldham to make them feel part of a cohesive town and wide borough.
are many issues that need to be addressed in creating a brand that appeals among them; infrastructure, training, investment incentives, security for the residents of the borough and the town at large, participation in the main stream of the local economy, tourist attractions and the general upkeep of the town and the respective townships across the borough.

In the main the conclusions of this paper are that the consultant’s recommendations do not go far enough, tend to be simplistic and do not engage the gamut of the strategic ethos. There is no substance in “sloganeering” without a strategic, team-driven, cohesive total approach cutting across both the social and business fraternities. More is needed in establishing the conceptual frame in shaping both a brand for Oldham, and a befitting story that would project Oldham as a desirable destination for the worker, the tourist, the investor and the homeseeker.

References


Cantle, T. et al. (2006), Challenging Local Communities to Change Oldham, Institute of Community Cohesion, University of Coventry.


de Chernatony, L. and Segal-Horn, L. (2003), The criteria for successful service brands, European Journal of Marketing, Vol. 37, No 7/8, pp. 1095-1118.


Hemisphere Design & Marketing Research Consultants (2008), Rebranding Oldham Summary: Brand research and Analysis Report.


Oldham Evening Chronicle (2008), “When King Cotton reigned supreme” [online], The Chronicles of Alda, 12th December 2008. Available at: http://www.oldham-chronicle.co.uk/news-features/14/reviews-news/17552/when-king-cotton-
reigned-supreme.[Accessed 14th September 2009].
Oldham Metropolitan Borough (2007), Think You Know Oldham? Think Again.
Oldham Metropolitan Borough (2007), Tourism Development for Oldham Borough.

About the authors and correspondence

Ernest M. Kadembo is a senior lecturer in the Department of Strategy and Marketing at the University Campus Oldham which is a part of the University of Huddersfield. Ernest has wide academic interests embracing strategy, quality, marketing, branding, change management, entrepreneurship and international business.

Corresponding author: Mr Ernest M. Kadembo, University Campus Oldham, University of Huddersfield, Oldham Business Centre, Cromwell Street, Oldham, OL1 1BB, UK
T +44 (0)161 2135049
F +44 (0)161 2135001
E e.m.kadembo@hud.ac.uk

Howard Jackson is a principal lecturer in the Department of Strategy and Marketing at the University of Huddersfield, where he is responsible for the marketing programmes. Howard joined the University after working in industry for twenty years where he worked for a variety of companies from SMEs to large multinationals, as well as running his own consultancy business. As an academic he has a broad range of teaching and research interests in marketing related areas.

Mr Howard Jackson, Principal Lecturer, Department of Strategy and Marketing, University of Huddersfield Business School, Room BS1/42, Firth Street, Queensgate, Huddersfield, HD1 3DH, UK
T +44 (0)1484 473084
F +44 (0)1484 473148
E h.jackson@hud.ac.uk
Denis Feather is a senior lecturer in the Department of Strategy and Marketing at the Business School of the University of Huddersfield. His research focus is in academic identity, culture, HE in FE, HE, and scholarship, and he has successfully published in refereed journals.

Dr Denis Feather, Senior Lecturer/Year 2 BABS Tutor, Department of Strategy and Marketing, University of Huddersfield Business School, Room BS2/14, Firth Street, Queensgate, Huddersfield, HD1 3DH, UK
T +44 (0)1484 472131
F +44 (0)1484 473148
E d.feather@hud.ac.uk

Nadio Granata is a Senior Lecturer in Marketing at the University of Huddersfield, a company Director and Chartered Marketer. Nadio has a background in SME sales and marketing and is a regular speaker at industry facing events. His teaching is focused on Market Research; Sponsorship and Event Management and his research area of interest is around place marketing. Nadio is a Fellow of the Higher Education Academy and a Member of the Association of Marketing.

Mr Nadio Granata, Senior Lecturer, Department of Strategy and Marketing, University of Huddersfield Business School, Room BS2/12, Firth Street, Queensgate, Huddersfield, HD1 3DH, UK
T +44 (0)1484 473090
F +44 (0)1484 473148
E n.granata@hud.ac.uk