The collapse of the ‘myth of longevity’ and the construction of alternatives: The case of the Okinawan health food industry

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Abstract - The purpose of this paper is to undertake an in-depth examination of the building and collapse, as well as the subsequent rebuilding of a place brand using the case of Okinawa Prefecture and its health food industry.

We review place brand studies, clarify their characteristics, and explain their special nature. Furthermore, we described the activities for justifiably acquiring a place brand and the loss of that justification, and rebuilding the brand by implementing various policies as alternatives. We use the discourse analysis (Grand et al., 2004) to analyse the brand evolution using industry annual reports, various data from the Okinawa Prefectural Government (OPG) and interviews with representatives of the OPG. This paper shows that we must examine the place brand, where place dependence is high and possibility for relocation is low, from a new perspective. Simultaneously, we have shown that maintaining and repairing a place brand, in the face of collapse, can have practical implications as well.

1. INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this paper is to clarify the situations in which a place brand is built, followed by a collapse of the brand identity, which is subsequently rebuilt through a skilful employment of alternatives to the brand. We use the health food industry in Okinawa Prefecture, Japan, as an example case. In contrast to corporate-owned brands, a place brand is an intangible asset of a place; thus, its al dependence is high, and, at the same time, its possibilities for relocation are considerably low. The effects of a collapse of place brand on the corporations that are active in the place in question are extremely large. Further, case studies are still commonly used in place brand studies, as a mere discussion of the conceptual framework is inadequate (Hanna and Rowley, 2011). It is also common for such case studies to lead to short-term brand promotion, the purpose of which is to improve a place’s image (Martinez, 2012). Thus, one can argue with confidence that clarifying the building, collapse, and rebuilding of such a place brand will make not only a theoretical but also a practical contribution.

For that reason, in this paper, we review place brand studies, clarify their characteristics, and explain their special nature. Furthermore, we examine the difficulty in relocating a brand through a discussion of economic rent and sustained competitive advantage. We use the discourse analysis (Grand et al., 2004) to analyse the brand evolution using industry annual reports, various data from the OPG and interviews with representatives of the OPG. We discuss the implications of the construction and deconstruction of place branding from a practical perspective.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW OF PLACE BRANDING AND ALTERNATIVES

2-1. Review of place branding.

The topic of place branding is moving from its infant stage into adolescence. In application, it is receiving widespread attention: many regions, cities and nations have established their place brand, are working on it, or have at least already given it some thought (Govers and Go, 2009).

Tourism marketing in the latter half of the 1960s is considered to be the first domain in which place was mentioned as a target (Kobayashi, 2014). The tourism industry had typically offered products regarding individual facilities (e.g. hotels, religious buildings, and amusement parks); combining facilities for a single place (locality) is a characteristic of place-related marketing in tourism (Mountinho, 1989). Nonetheless, the place approach was simply an appendage of the primary trend in tourism, namely, the use of single-type facilities.

O’Leary and Iredal (1976) focused on marketing activities specifically for place, yet this primarily consisted of an appeal for marketing research to more closely note
place as a provocative future field. Fundamental research on place-related marketing began with Burgess (1982), who stated that aggressive advertising and promotion of place impact not only private companies’ business, but also the local economy being promoted. A variety of research approaches for place branding appeared in the 1990s. These include the discussion of place marketing in relation to regional strategy by Ashworth and Voogd (1990), and tracing the relationships between place branding and changes in urban structure by Berg and Braun (1999), showing that place branding was an essential element in economic revitalisation, as well as gaining prominence in competition between potential destination cities.

The concept of ‘place’ gained a firm position in marketing with the publication of Marketing Places by Kotler et al. (1993). The serious economic difficulties of the US state and city governments were the backdrop for this book. According to the authors, at the beginning of the 1990s, two-thirds of U.S. states and 5,000, or three-fourths, of all municipalities directly faced revenue shortfalls and threats of civil servant layoffs and cuts in public services. To solve these problems, Kotler et al. (1993) emphasized the importance of ‘place’ in strategic marketing, based on a long-term vision. For regional and local revitalization, the authors, situated in the marketing domain, ‘sold’ the region, inducing tourists and companies to establish businesses, and performed marketing activities to establish a regional (state, local, and city) image. Thus, ‘place’ joined goods and services as a marketing target, and its branding was noted as having marketing value equivalent to product branding (Tanaka et al., 2012).

Aaker’s (1991) brand equity theory further stimulated the discussion regarding ‘place’ marketing. The idea of considering value—or the original source for a ‘brand’—as equity had a major impact on place branding. Aaker (1996) noted brand equity’s importance, arguing that a variety of marketing activities resulted in the formation of prior knowledge of an intangible asset, or the brand’s image, within consumers’ minds (i.e. potential customers). This knowledge then had major impacts on customers’ purchasing activities. The author also emphasized the importance of brand identity formation for goods and services as a part of brand management, based on the brand equity concept (Aaker, 1996). ‘Brand identity’ is an ideal brand image with favourable impacts on marketing activities, which forms a sustainable competitive advantage. Brand value is offered to customers based on this brand identity, and a relationship is established between the brand and its customers. Basic brand strategies are created and established, in these and other ways, by involved private companies, other organisations, and facilities.

The brand equity idea was appropriated by editors from Place Branding, a scholarly magazine whose first issue appeared in 2004. Anholt (2004) discussed the formation of a new place branding theory based on the brand equity concept, and defined place branding as ‘the practice of applying brand strategy and other marketing techniques and disciplines to the economic, social, political, and cultural developments of cities, regions and countries’ (Hanna & Rowley, 2011, p. 459). Although other researchers did not set such strict limits to this idea as Anholt, they also viewed ‘place’ as a brand, and thought of place branding as an introduction of the most recent branding theories and techniques into place marketing (Dinnie, 2004, Aitken & Campelo, 2011, Hanna & Rowley, 2011). These researchers argued that place branding involved not only image-creation strategy, but also the place brand’s formation as an intangible asset as the result of a variety of marketing activities; they also indicated the importance of maintaining and strengthening the place brand. Therefore, “Place branding has proven to be a popular practice and has become a central part of the contemporary place management agenda” (Ashworth, et al., 2014).

Such discussions, regarding place as a marketing target, were also initially introduced in Japan. Nakajima (2008) believed that the first use of ‘place branding’ in Japanese was in the Nikkei Sangyo Shimbum in 1982. Akutsu and Amano (2006) considered place branding as a marketer’s linkage to a place with names, text, symbols, design and combinations thereof, with the intention of differentiating said place from other places (Japan Centre for Regional Development, 2006). Dentsu (2009) proposed that place branding involved the treatment of a place in the same way as a product brand, such that people perceive some kind of added value in the place name itself. The place branding would stimulate a desire to buy a product from that place, or to take up residence there, such that the locality (or community, or region) is considered by consumers as a unique, specific ‘place’. Here, place branding research was a comprehensive domain, which included not only the branding of the place itself, but also the branding of goods and services that are produced in, or otherwise pertain to, a place.

This section has thus presented a simple literature review regarding how place became a marketing target, and how place branding has been considered. What becomes clear is the fact that, over recent years, place has become a specific marketing target. Further, the application of the brand equity concept to place, hitherto limited to discussions regarding private companies’ goods and services, demonstrates the further expansion and development of place-related marketing research. Nevertheless, place branding research also involves unique, domain-specific concepts that differ from those for other kinds of brands.

2-2 Review of Brand Crisis

The logic of marketing in recent years has prioritized creation of new markets and creation of value to secure market share, employing sustained marketing strategies as attempts to create suitable new products and secure earnings. This has led to the appearance of numerous products that are similar to each other and decreased the degree of product
differentiation, resulting in commoditization. While place brands are attracting attention as means of avoiding such commoditization, they are susceptible to obsolescence of the brand as a result of the breakdown of the value resources used in the branding, such as Okinawa’s representation of “longevity,” or to changes in their images. In some cases this results ultimately in an inability to appeal to consumers.

Academic interest in consumer related consequences of brand crisis is rising, robustly documenting their negative effects (Dutta and Pulling, 2011: Ahluwalia et al, 2000: Dewar and Lei, 2009). Pulling et al (2006) proposed two general classes of negative publicity that may affect brand attitude; (1) performance related and (2) values related. Research in organizational crises makes a distinction between events that arise because of technical or product failures and those that are social in nature.

The concept of the place brand holds that if an image is made a brand value then it calls to mind regional resources more diverse than a simple corporate image, and in the absence of a concrete, specific core the image tends to be abstract and easily diffused. In addition, the regional culture at the root of a place brand follows a process of limitless change, consisting of creation, development, extinction, and then creation once again. It cannot be denied that this both opens up possibilities for and casts a spell on consumers and marketers alike.

Holt (2004) argues that an iconic brand must have consistency. In other words, it must demonstrate a sustained commitment to the values extolled by its mythology. A brand seen to be attempting too quickly to link the devotion of its followers to commercial profit will lose trust and efficacy (Holt, 2004).

While it is important to research consequences of brand crises, it is equally important to realize that how place marketers respond eventually determines the extent to which consumer confidence in the brand involved is restored.

2-3. Place branding as economic rent.

The development of place branding research in recent years has been possible due to the premise that a place brand (Kavaratzis & Ashworth, 2005, Anholt, 2010) is a resource unique to a place, or a resource that cannot be transferred to another different place. Underpinning this is classical economics’ concept of ‘economic rent’; this is the source of sustainable competitive advantage, an idea that has been largely impacted by business strategy theory’s resource-based view (RBV).

Researchers of the RBV have focused on resources that differ for each company, and that involve large costs multiple times over; if a company can acquire such resources, it may possibly also gain a competitive advantage. Barney (2002) used Ricardo’s economic rent concept to discuss the relationship between resources and sustainable competitive advantage. Economic rent exists originally—it cannot be increased, and is an indestructible gift of nature; in practice, it is the economic significance of land used for farming (Barney, 2002). Land differs from other production elements in that, for example, its total output of grain is a relatively fixed amount, one that cannot be easily increased. As differences exist in the fertility of grain-producing land, each parcel of land has differing product costs and harvest quantities.

When a private company is substituted within this schema, in reference to land as a resource, the economic rent here is sustainable competitive advantage. Namely, each company has different resources that are difficult to transfer to other companies, and the competitive advantage obtainable from specific resources persists without change. Other companies that attempt to obtain similar resources and imitate the first company experience difficulty in doing so, as the resources are fixed and finite. The result is a ‘sustainable’ competitive advantage that continues in time

Specifically, resources differ between, and cannot be transferred from, one firm to another.

Thus, with the incorporation of Ricardo’s concept of economic rent, Barney demonstrated that resources acquirable from sustainable economic advantage are unique and non-transferable. When considered from an economic rent perspective, within a resource-based view (RBV), place branding is formed from the unsubstituted resources as a private company’s sustainable competitive advantage.

2-4. Management for legitimacy acquisition

There is no guarantee that a place brand, once established, will remain unchanged. Moreover, because place branding is based on non-transferable economic rent, this includes the possibility of change and dissolution, and its competitive advantage may be lost, as with a private company’s brand. Dzenovska (2005) discusses the erosion of Latvia’s place branding, as place branding everywhere faces dangers from natural disasters, such as earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, or tsunamis, or unexpected negative events in politics or society. For example, Japan’s Tohoku region had a variety of place-branded products and services, and provided these to consumers both in Japan and abroad. However, that advantage was lost with the enormous damage caused by the earthquake and tsunami on March 11, 2011, as well as the disaster-related nuclear power plant meltdown in Fukushima.

In such a case, those who have worked to establish the place brand may choose either to abandon the brand or to re-establish the place brand. The concept of legitimacy acquisition, as noted by Suchman (1995) for private companies, is relevant in this instance. According to Suchman (1995), ‘legitimacy’ is a prerequisite for securing a company’s continued existence; it serves as the cornerstone for obtaining the resources needed for production activities, as well as stakeholders’ long-term, continuous support (Parsons, 1960, Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978). The company must gain this legitimacy by constantly striving to close any gaps between itself and society until equilibrium is reached, and unanimous consensus is reached that the company has achieved legitimacy. Naturally, this does not mean that a company only passively responds to
The Okinawa Prefecture, located in the westernmost corner of Japan, forms an arc found approximately at the midpoint between Kyushu and Taiwan, and to the east of mainland China. It covers 400 kilometres (248 miles) from north to south, 1,000km (622 miles) from east to west, and comprises more than 160 beautiful small islands, of which only 48 are inhabited. The only prefecture in Japan enjoying a subtropical oceanic climate, its annual average temperature is mild at 22.4°C. These islands, made of Ryuku limestone and surrounded by wide expanses of blue ocean, are home to brightly coloured tropical fish and coral reefs. The region boasts high levels of biodiversity, rarely seen anywhere else in the world and is, at times, referred to as ‘the Galapagos of the East’ (Okinawa Prefecture, 2016).

The Okinawa Prefecture is also known as the islands of longevity. Sho (1988) explains that ‘(t)he most important factor to peoples’ long lives in Okinawa is the wisdom of its traditional diet that has been handed down from their ancestors’. Furthermore, Sho (1988) points out that the unique Okinawan diet has been formulated over the years while being influenced by many factors including its geographical location, historical background, and the Okinawans’ own awareness of their food culture.

For instance, an annual average temperature of 22.4°C, with relatively minor fluctuations throughout the year, allows seniors to be active and spend time outdoors. Furthermore, as the oft-quoted Okinawan saying ‘Nuchidô-takara’, meaning ‘life is a treasure’ indicates, Okinawans are highly aware of the pricelessness of life itself and take great interest in their own health. Another advantage to living in a subtropical climatic zone is that the people have access to food available in both tropical and temperate climatic zones, which promotes a cuisine that makes use of a wide variety of ingredients.

Okinawa was a kingdom— independence of Japan—called Ryukyu between the late 14th and the late 16th centuries, and conducted its own trade with a wide range of partners including China and the Southeast Asian countries, which allowed the kingdom to prosper independently. One of its oldest trading partners, China, has left its mark on the way Okinawans think about their diet. ‘Iryo-dôgen’, the philosophical saying behind their diet can be interpreted as ‘Since both curing sickness and eating serve to maintain health, they derive from the same source’. In Okinawan language, food is sometimes referred to as ‘Nuchi-gusui’ (life’s medicine), demonstrating their long-held belief that food itself has medicinal effects and contains nutrients, leading to the development of healthy eating habits that have been passed down for generations.

3. CASE: THE LONGEVITY OF OKINAWA AND ITS FOOD CULTURE

This paper examines how the Okinawans’ longevity and food culture helped the place branding of Okinawa by analysing the policies implemented by the Okinawan government, as well as the strategies adopted by local corporations. It also cites population data, especially a decreasing life expectancy, to demonstrate that its place brand is no longer secure that legitimacy, the company must work to repair it.

The need to gain, maintain and repair of legitimacy also applies to place branding discussions. Whether due to the blessings of nature or the wilful efforts of interested parties, the established place brand must receive the approval of local society, governments, and companies active in that place. However, as aforementioned, the place brand is perpetually in danger of erosion or destruction due to natural disasters, scandals, or other untoward events. The interested parties in such cases must work to repair and re-establish the place brand’s legitimacy, especially as place brands cannot be easily transferred from one locality to another. These parties must regain symbols that serve to ground the place brand’s legitimacy, or they must assign a novel meaning to the local place brand.

Regarding these points, the next section addresses longevity, or long lifespans, and Okinawan food as examples of place branding, and discusses the acquisition and maintenance of the island prefecture's place branding. Alternatives are also introduced that can be used to investigate the ways in which to repair a place brand that has deteriorated due to longevity and food aspects.

3-1 Methodology

We use the discourse analysis (Grand et al., 2004) to analyse the brand evolution using industry annual reports, various materials published by the OPG. We also conducted in-depth interviews (conducted at 4 p.m. in April 2016, at the Okinawa Prefectural Office) with members of the government responsible for its longevity-related policies. Interview lasted 60 minutes and followed a semi-structured interviewed guide.

3-2 Shaping longevity and food in Okinawa

The Okinawans held belief that 'Sickness and eating serve to maintain health', which is held belief that 'Sickness and eating serve to maintain health', which is held belief that 'Sickness and eating serve to maintain health', which is...
principle for stimulating its economy and industry (Kakazu, 2000).

The first step was to invite Dr. Hiroshi Nakajima, the then Secretary General of the World Health Organisation (WHO), to Okinawa in 1995. The intent was to have the proclamation of a ‘World Longevity Region’ issued as part of a commemoration project being held, marking the 50th anniversary of the end of the Second World War as well as the Battle of Okinawa. The prefecture did receive a favourable response from Dr. Nakajima regarding the proposal for the proclamation, and was eventually recognised as a World Longevity Region during the commemorative ceremony, with world-renowned longevity researchers in attendance (Prevention Division, Environmental Health Department, Okinawa Prefecture, 1996).

Moreover, subsequent to the village of Ōgimi-son being recognised as the ‘world’s longest living region’ in 1996, the prefecture introduced the ‘Policy for Creating and Differentiating the Wellness Island Okinawa’, which was created to serve as the guiding principle for the Okinawa Prefectural Industrial Creation Action Program. This 10-year plan to promote industrial development in Okinawa proposed the following: 1. Conduct domestic and international PR activities to improve the image of ‘Wellness Island Okinawa’; 2. Develop and promote Okinawa’s health food industry while making optimal use of the image of longevity the prefecture evokes; 3. Upgrade tourism-related industries; 4. Establish commercialisation programs supporting international expansion as well as the creation of a national expansion network; 5. Create new industries, including new food-related businesses; and 6. Build an international distribution network and create specialised distribution hubs. These six interconnected elements serve as the core of strategic development (Okinawa Prefecture, 1997). Furthermore, according to Okinawa’s Challenges, Economic Globalisation, and Regional Prosperity published by the Okinawa Development Finance Corporation in 2000 (the same year the Okinawa Summit was held), the average life expectancy for men in Okinawa rose from 72 to 77 years, while that for women increased from 75 to 85 years, all in just 20 years between 1979 and 1999. Okinawa was now proudly the world’s healthiest region and its ‘health and longevity’ brand established quite rapidly, helped into existence by this ‘healthy island’ image (Kakazu, 2000, p.44).

The Okinawa Prefecture subsequently hosted the Okinawa International Conference on Longevity in 2001. Although Okinawa had already been recognised as a World Longevity Region prior to this event, later interviews with prefectoral staff involved with the conference revealed that the prefecture hosted it so that it could also be recognised academically as the longest-living region in the world. In other words, the purpose of the conference was to trumpet Okinawa’s longevity to the world.

‘In 2001, the Okinawa International Conference on Longevity was held. I was actually involved in the event… The backstory of it is that we wanted to have famous academics from all over the world come and announce to the world that Okinawa is a longevity region, while we were developing all those health foods. Although various discussions and forums were hosted during the event as well, it seems to me that the bottom line was that we wanted the recognition. I suppose it can be called a branding strategy. That is how it was’ (Interview conducted on April 11, 2016).

This branding strategy by the Okinawa Prefecture was successful and the image of ‘Okinawa = Longevity’ became widely recognised in Japan as well as overseas. For instance, The Okinawa Program by Wilcox et al. (2001) became a bestseller in the United States in 2002, while Time, one of the most influential American magazines, ran a feature article titled ‘How to Live to Be 100’ to highlight Okinawa’s health and longevity. Furthermore, National Geographic ran a feature on longevity in Okinawa in its November 2005 issue titled ‘The Secrets of Long Life’, Okinawa’s ‘longevity brand’ was now well known worldwide.

According to Wilcox et al. (2001), Time, and National Geographic, the important factors for Okinawa’s longevity include the climate, culture, a close-knit society, and food and diet, which were found to be especially crucial. Furthermore, as the idea of ‘Okinawa = longevity’ took root, the health food industry was seen as one in which Okinawa held an advantage over other prefectures and even other countries. This realisation in turn, led to the creation of the formula ‘Okinawa = longevity = health’, giving a shot in the arm to various product developments making optimal use of this ‘island of longevity’ brand. As a result, between 1994 and 2001, the out-of-prefecture shipment value of Okinawan products grew by 25% per year. Shipment value for health food products, Okinawa’s main commodity, also grew steadily, exceeding JPY10 billion in 1999, and reaching JPY17.7 billion in 2003 (Okinawa Prefecture, 2012a).

3-4 Collapse of the ‘myth of longevity’

Okinawa Prefecture built its longevity brand identity at the regional level; however, it was revealed in 2002 that the Okinawan men’s average life expectancy had dropped from 1st in the nation to 26th (out of 47 prefectures) by 2000. At the time, this phenomenon was referred to in Okinawa as the ‘Shock of 26’, and had a significant impact on the population.

Nevertheless, the abovementioned Okinawa Prefectural Industrial Creation Action Program’s plan was to ‘actively promote industries by making optimal use of our image of health and longevity as well as the resources that help Okinawans enjoy long lives, including Okinawa’s rich tradition of nature tourism, moderate climate, food culture, and medicinal herbs’. Meanwhile, thanks to the support of
the OPG, the health food industry and Okinawan products were more popular than ever. In fact, the booming sales of health products reached their peak at JPY18.1 billion in 2003 (Okinawa Prefecture, 2012a). For this reason, the Okinawa Prefecture refrained from publicly addressing the ‘Shock of 26’ at the time.

The prefecture chose to act in a similar manner when average life expectancy was published for 2005. The fact that average life expectancy for men in Okinawa was ranked 25th according to the statistical data for 2005 was not widely discussed. Rather, it chose to highlight the fact that the life expectancy for women in Okinawa was ranked first in the nation. The prefecture also made an extensive effort to promote services and products that embodied the idea that ‘going to Okinawa makes one healthy’, or ‘eating Okinawan food makes one healthy’ in order to promote Okinawa as the ‘healthy prefecture’ to the rest of Japan. Its hope was to firmly establish the ‘Okinawa = longevity’ brand as an outcome of all its promotional efforts. The news of the decline in life expectancy, however, was spreading. The Okinawan crops also suffered damage from cyclones and other weather-related incidents, and there was a gradual downturn in the shipment value of health foods that set in after peaking in 2003 at JPY18.1 billion. It eventually plummeted to JPY6.2 billion in 2009.

Worse still, in 2010, the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare released the ‘Life Table by Prefecture’, revealing that the average life expectancy of women in Okinawa was now ranked 3rd in the country, down from 1st, at 87.02 years while men were 30th at 79.40, which was even lower than their previous ranking.

3.5 Repair to the ‘myth of longevity’

The legendary longevity of Okinawans was now a thing of the past. The prefecture, however, went about implementing different policies to address this issue both within and outside Okinawa. To its people, the government of Okinawa clearly announced that they were losing their grip on the monopolisation of longevity, and implemented various public health policies based on the premise of ‘restoring health and longevity’. For instance, the prefecture drew up the ‘Roadmap Towards Restoration of a Healthy, Long-living Okinawa’ in January 2016 to re-establish the once healthy and long-living society with the goal of getting ranked ‘first in average life expectancy for men and women by 2040’. To this end, the prefecture put in place a plan to encourage joint efforts between the public and private sectors by strengthening collaborative relationships among and between a range of players, including the people, regions, schools, medical facilities, universities, research institutes, and government agencies (Okinawa Prefecture, 2016). The government also actively used television public service announcements to encourage people to ‘become more active’, ‘reduce calorie intake’, and ‘reduce alcohol intake’.

Meanwhile, the government employed significantly different approaches towards its out-of-prefecture audience. The Okinawa Social Welfare Corporation, a government-affiliated organisation, explained the situation as follows:

‘Okinawa was quite a bit poorer than other prefectures before the Second World War in terms of diet. Very few people were able to eat white rice regularly. As the vast majority of Okinawans subsisted mainly on potatoes, their diet naturally ended up being low-calorie, low fat, and rich in fibre, which led to us being healthy and enjoying long lives. There was no concern about metabolism for Uchinân-chu (Okinawan word referring to ‘people of Okinawa’) before the war. The longevity seen in Okinawa was made possible by those healthy seniors.

Under U.S. occupation after the war, however, American food was suddenly everywhere in Okinawa, and it drastically changed our diet from low-calorie/low-fat before the war to high-calorie/high-fat. When we look at the Okinawans’ fat intake over the past 55 years, it has surprisingly been consistently higher than the national average by approximately 5%. The cumulative effects of that unhealthy diet still persisting to this day are the cause of Okinawa’s decline in health and longevity, which continues to worsen’.

The explanation here is that the decline in health and longevity would not have even occurred in the first place, had the Okinawan diet remained the same; however, the US occupation of Japan after the Second World War brought drastic changes to people’s diets and caused the decline in longevity. A similar explanation was given in other publications issued by the prefecture. For instance, Health Okinawa 21, an action plan established by Okinawa’s Department of Health and Welfare, also states that the introduction of the American-style diet is what caused the decline of longevity in Okinawa. However, the prefecture has published no material to further elaborate on the cause-and-effect relationship between changes in diet and shorter life expectancy. In fact, there has been no change in the
Okinawans’ American-style diet since 2000, when the prefecture was actively advertising the ‘Okinawa = longevity’ brand nation-wide and abroad.

One wonders, then, why the Okinawa Prefecture suggested that dietary change caused life expectancy to drop. It can be surmised that behind this reasoning was the fear that the ‘implosion’ of the ‘Okinawa = longevity’ brand would significantly damage the health food industry, one of the island’s core industries. In fact, the prefecture, to this day, considers the health food industry to be one of their main industries and provides support to it based on the Okinawa Promotion Plan established in 2002. Furthermore, the latest version of the prefectoral administration’s policy plan, the Okinawa 21st Century Vision Plan, states that policies on health and longevity shall be the top priority. The following is the explanation provided:

'Developed countries have a high level of needs in areas such as health, longevity, security, safety, environment, and education. Being able to address these needs will therefore engender new economic growth. Okinawa’s traditions and regional culture contain within the foundation a life of security and safety, as well as our diet that promotes health and longevity, to provide answers in response to these needs and concerns. Okinawa’s initiatives will resonate all over the world (Okinawa Prefecture, 2012b, p.10)'.

The government, therefore, needed this narrative to be about the ‘external’ factor influencing and damaging the ‘Okinawa = longevity’ formula. Therefore, the changes in diet were chosen to be that detrimental factor.

4. DISCUSSION

Until now, we have considered in depth place branding, with a focus on longevity, in Okinawa. What became clear here was the construction and collapse of the place brand, ‘Okinawa = longevity’, followed by its repair. We will continue an examination of this in this section.

Against the backdrop of the longevity of Okinawans, following the reversion of the prefecture to Japanese sovereignty in 1972, Okinawa Prefecture actively promoted it both within Japan and abroad, and aimed for a justification of this place brand to grow its economy. The first step in this direction was the declaration of Okinawa as a ‘World Longevity Region’, with World Health Organization (WHO) certification. This led to recognition of the longevity of Okinawans, with subsequent research tying Okinawa’s health food to longevity. Moreover, this was promoted through various media outlets, leading to brand consolidation.

Brand equity similar to that recounted by Aaker (1991) (i.e. intangible asset value that continues to be accumulated in the ‘container’ of the brand) was developed through various marketing activities. With continuous reinforcement, this was linked with creating competitive advantage for the health foods of Okinawa Prefecture based on a ‘meaningful difference’ with other locales, bringing in big profits.

However, the brand basis was extremely precarious. As shown in the preceding section, this place brand had been dependent on simple and unequivocal statistical indicators of Japan being number one in longevity in the world. Owing to this, a worsening of those results would mean that the premise of the regional brand would be lost. This became apparent starting in 2000 and soon Okinawa Prefecture’s brand lost in the indicator rankings.

At any rate, it was not the case that Okinawa Prefecture just accepted this loss. The reason for this was its use of place branding as economic rent, as described above. Unlike branding by an ordinary corporation, the possibility of relocating a place brand is considerably low. Therefore, if Okinawa Prefecture had not taken preventive measures, it would have had a huge negative effect on the regional industries employing the place brand. On the other hand, showing that this is an intrinsic problem is tied to causing the place brand of ‘Okinawa = longevity’ to collapse. Accordingly, Okinawa Prefecture proposed and implemented various policies for improving the average longevity of those residing in the prefecture, and actively promoted the fact that the collapse was extrinsic and because of people outside Okinawa and Japan, who were the primary consumers of Okinawan health food. Consequently, it made consumers aware that Okinawa, which was ‘originally’ a place of health and longevity, ‘ended up’ confronting problems.

Therefore, it became possible to protect the corporations that had been using the place brand. Additionally, one can conclude that the Okinawa Prefecture is attempting to rebuild the myth of ‘Okinawa = longevity’ by improving its indicators.

5. CONCLUSION

In this paper, we undertook an in-depth examination of the building and collapse, as well as the subsequent rebuilding of a place brand using the case of Okinawa Prefecture and its health food industry. We used the discourse analysis to analyse the brand evolution using industry annual reports, various data from the OPG and interviews with representatives of the OPG. We described the activities for justifiably acquiring a place brand and the loss of that justification, and rebuilding the brand by implementing various policies. This paper shows that we must examine the place brand, where regional dependence is high and possibility for relocation is low, from a new perspective. Simultaneously, we have shown that maintaining and repairing a place brand, in the face of collapse, can have practical implications as well.

In future, we will examine this case in greater detail and elucidate the ways in which managers and policymakers continue to modify the place brand, thereby furthering the development of place brand-related research.
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NOTES

(1) This does not mean that economic rent continues in perpetuity. For example, technological innovation could enable harvest quantities equivalent to, or higher than, those of the most fertile land, or a natural disaster could mitigate the land’s fertility, etc.

(2) The Prefecture of Okinawa came under the rule of the American government after the end of the Second World War in 1945 and reverted back to Japan in 1972, which is why Okinawa has been included in Japanese statistical data since that year.

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