



Research article

City re-imagined: Multi-stakeholder study on branding Hong Kong as a city of greenery

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the potential to enhance a city's international position and social development through mainstreaming urban greenery in its city branding exercise. The variety of services by urban greenery are theorised to be compatible with the economic and social purposes of city branding. Despite enjoying exceptional green cityscape with the presence of country parks and other green resources, the comparative strength is under-valued under Hong Kong's current brand. This Hong Kong-based study looks into the crucial linkages between city branding and urban greening by factoring in the perception of local residents, overseas investors/workers and tourists. The results from the questionnaire survey ($n = 240$) reveal that people generally favour incorporating more green elements into the brand, largely due to the positive relationship between urban greenery provision and quality of living. Together with the supplementary focus groups ($n = 10$) and email interviews, the findings throw light on the significance of these green resources in both projecting a liveable city image and enhancing the living quality for sustainable city development and management, as well as how adopting such brand can facilitate urban greening. The results offer new insights of city governance by highlighting the idea of branding a city green and the challenges in implementation.

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1. Introduction

City branding is actively pursued by many city governments around the world, with the keen competition for scarce resources (i.e. human capital and financial capital) ever intensified by globalisation (Kavaratzis, 2004; Konijnendijk, 2010). One obvious example is the exorbitant expense spent on developing tourist attractions and tourism campaigns by the local governments for destination branding to communicate the local images. These cities are desperately attempting to stand out from their peers by establishing their niche reputations, to reap socio-economic advantages for city development, including tourism, talent attraction and social cohesion. On top of putting in vigorous promotional effort, cultural mega events, heritage restoration and promotion, and iconic building construction are the three commonest means to construct a favourable city image (Hankinson, 2007; Kavaratzis, 2005; Riza et al., 2012).

To establish a genuinely distinctive brand, nevertheless, it is essential for cities to recognise, leverage and reinforce their comparative strengths. In this regard, some cities seem to have managed to put it into practice: Tokyo promotes itself as the origin and capital of anime and manga (Tokyo Convention and Visitors Bureau, n.d.), Kyoto emphasises its traditional Japanese experience with the well-preserved shrines and buildings (City of Kyoto and Kyoto Convention and Visitors Bureau, n.d.), and Silicon Valley is branded as the powerhouse of computer and information technologies (Visit California, n.d.). In terms of greening, Minneapolis, and Vancouver have availed their proximity to the nature to channel the image of "City by Nature" and "Spectacular by Nature" respectively (Meet Minneapolis, 2014; Tourism Vancouver, n.d.). They leverage the lush greenery in town to brand themselves green. Urban greenery is thus suggested to be a valuable asset in building a unique brand. Yet, with few empirical findings available, the benefits of adopting a green brand has remained unclear, rendering branding city green an opportunity neglected for sustainable city development.

The aim of this study is therefore to introduce branding a city green as a new city management measure towards sustainable

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development in the globalised era. Through a multi-stakeholder approach which involves local residents, overseas investors/workers and tourists in Hong Kong, this research further serves to establish the compatibility and interdependence between city branding and urban greening with its conceptual framework as well as reveal the challenges of branding an anthropocentrically-developed city green. The proposed relationship offers a new perspective to see urban greening as complementary, rather than dichotomous, to city development. This first-of-its-kind study also offers empirical findings on the perceived economic, environmental and social benefits and difficulties in branding a city green, enriching the discussions on city development through urban greening.

This research is designed to offer new insights not yet found in the existing literature. Although a series of Hong Kong-based perception studies on green space branding have been conducted by other researchers (see Chan, 2017; Chan et al., 2015; Chan and Marafa, 2016a, 2016b, 2014a, 2014b), this study attempts to apply a new set of conceptual framework and empirical findings from three different stakeholder groups to answer the questions of why and how urban greenery can be a city brand which contributes to sustainable development. Apart from questionnaire survey, it adopts focus groups and email interviews to deepen the discussions on the topic. These arrangements differentiate this study from others' works.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1. City branding

Kotler and Andreasen (1991) describes the image of a place as “a sum of beliefs, ideas, impressions that a people have of a place”. The image of a city can be brought up to a person's mind by seeing iconic buildings, open spaces and other exclusive urban features (Riza et al., 2012). On the other hand, city authorities can channel certain positive images to the audiences to shape people's perception of their cities by means of city branding (Ooi, 2011). Kavaratzis (2004) defines city branding as:

“... the means both for achieving competitive advantage in order to increase inward investment and tourism, and also for achieving community development, reinforcing local identity and identification of the citizens with their city and activating all social forces to avoid social exclusion and unrest.” (p. 70)

The abilities to differentiate oneself from the others, articulate the chosen image to the target audiences and establish competitive identity (Anholt, 2007) are essential in this process. Typically, city creates or reinforces its brand with the use of current situations and chances, such as quality of life, entrepreneurial innovation and landscape (Middleton, 2011). The process involves the consideration of turning them into “a saleable identity that is acceptable to all people” (Zhang and Zhao, 2009). Focusing on the environmental perspective, the landscaping work carried out before the Beijing 2008 Olympics, revitalisation of the High Line into an internationally well-known public park in New York and creation of Gardens by the Bay in Singapore suggest cities around the world are increasingly incorporating urban greening into their city branding strategies to present their environmentally-aware image and validate the intended brand story to the audiences.

While Anholt (after Johansson, 2012) suggests that brand image, equity, purpose and other marketing-based concepts are highly applicable to places, the fundamental difference lies in the fact that a company is profit-driven whereas city governance is viable-community-driven (Anholt, 2007). Rather than supplier-

consumer relationship, city branding involves diverse groups of actors (e.g. local residents, businesses, agencies and government bodies) from the beginning and is thus a “politically constituted practice” (Johansson, 2012). Dinnie (2010) points out that “[t]he process of identifying and agreeing upon a relevant set of city brand attributes requires stakeholder engagement rather than top-down coercion”. The addition to the branding process separates city branding from other marketing practice (Houghton and Stevens, 2011). Indeed, the inclusion of the diverse groups of stakeholders during the branding process implies city branding can foster the participants', especially citizens', sense of ownership and pride towards the city. Depending on the resources available (e.g. time, money, manpower) and perceived importance of stakeholder engagement, questionnaire, focus group, public forum and community workshop are the commonly observed methods to collect the views.

2.2. Urban greening

Along the development of the English language, “greening” encompasses at least two meanings. As a derivative of the verb “green”, it is, etymologically, the equivalent of *grenian* in Old English, which means “to become green, flourish” (Harper, n.d.). Representing vegetation with the colour green, “greening” refers to “the process of making somewhere greener by planting grass, trees, and plants there”, according to Cambridge Dictionary (n.d.). Such greening deals with the spatial arrangement of the environment. In a different context, the word has another meaning of “the process of becoming more active about protecting the environment”, as defined by the same dictionary. The colour green in the modern society has become symbolic to the natural environment as a whole. Phrases with the word “greening”, such as greening of product, building and city, can refer to as generally as the capacity building of energy efficiency, low carbon footprint and reduced impact on natural resources on the entities. As the primitive form, greening is a process of increasing the incidence of greenery by planting for environmental protection.

Nevertheless, claiming increased incidence of greenery in the city equals urban greening would be misleading. In fact, the process involves more than planting vegetation in the urban area. The concept of urban greening originates in the study of urban forestry. Miller (1997) suggests that urban forest is “the sum of all woody and associated vegetation in and around dense human settlements, ranging from small communities in rural settings to metropolitan areas”. Greening from the urban forestry perspective has been defined as “the management of planted and naturally occurring trees in urban and urban-interface areas” (Harris, 2004). Further specifying the activities by Nilsson et al. (2007), urban greening is “about making and keeping cities ‘greener’ by designing, establishing and managing multifunctional green areas”. From these definitions, urban greening requires not only creation but also proper management of the established elements in the cities.

In particular, the definition by Nilsson et al. deepens the discussion on urban greening. At the first glimpse, urban greening can make and keep cities “greener” because of the colour of the greenery created or managed. However, the word “greener” can be interpreted differently as environmental protection noted earlier. Urban greenery can shade buildings, regulate urban microclimate and alleviate heat island effect. It therefore reduces the energy need on air-conditioning of the neighbourhood. Its ability to sequester carbon dioxide through photosynthesis can contribute to a low-carbon community. Urban greenery is also suggested to enhance the local biodiversity, remedying the habitat loss of certain species due to urban sprawl. The environmental services brought about by urban greening can essentially transform a city's environmental

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