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Understanding cities through city brands: City branding as a social and semantic network

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ABSTRACT

More and more towns, cities, regions, and countries are investing in branding campaigns in order to establish a reputation for themselves, and to have a competitive edge in today's global market. In their essence, branding campaigns are places' attempts to define themselves to target audiences. However, the literature and practice of place branding have focused on the competition of brands at the expense of exploring the relations between people, symbols, meanings, and physical characteristics of cities. Therefore, current branding measurement scales and indices used to understand the defining characteristics of places are problematic. This article first analyzes three of the prominent place branding indices: Anholt-GfK Roper City Brands Index, FutureBrand Country Brand Index, and East–West Nation Brand Perception Index. Subsequently, it proposes an analytical framework combining two network analysis methods – social and semantic – to evaluate place brands, called "*Define–Measure–Visualize*" (DMV). In order to argue for the feasibility of the proposed method, a sample dataset is created based on tweets about Boston and New York City. By introducing a consumer-centric and communications-based approach and exploring the connection between cities, people, and messages, the findings of this research can be used in understanding cities/places, measuring the success of branding campaigns, and managing future campaigns.

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Introduction

This research aims to present a place branding measurement model that is capable of capturing the complexity of cities, regions, and nations,[1] and of their brands, with the ultimate objective of a better understanding of how places are perceived by different audiences. This is indeed a complicated task as places are intricate phenomena, involving geographic, economic, social, cultural, and many other components (Landry, 2006). Additionally more and more places are investing in branding campaigns in order to have a competitive edge in today's global market, and to establish a reputation for themselves (Anholt, 2010). In other words, these places attempt to define and communicate what they believe to be their distinctive and defining characteristics to target audiences (Chen, 2012). Such strategies and communication campaigns add a second layer of complexity to the already complicated nature of places because places do not have concrete uniformed identities and are seen differently by different audiences.

There is still a need to make sense of and draw meaning from this complex nature of places. It is important to know where a place stands and how it is perceived as without sound measurement, branding cannot go beyond being "just talk" (Aaker & Joachimsthaler, 1999, p. 141). There are several measurement practices and studies using various methods such as quantitative perception surveys (Anholt, 2006a), interviews gathering qualitative data (Laaksonen, Laaksonen, Borisov, & Halkoaho, 2006), concept maps (Brandt & de Mortanges, 2011), repertory grid analysis (Hankinson, 2004a), and importance satisfaction analysis (Insch, 2010). Even though several of these models have shown various levels of success, it is not possible to argue that they present a comprehensive model in which we can measure place brands.

This article presents a more exclusive model in the following four sections. Firstly, a literature review on place brands, place branding, and measurement is introduced. The second section describes and examines three prominent models [Anholt-Gfk Roper City Brand Index (ACBI), FutureBrand Country Brand Index (FCBI), and East–West Nation Brand Perception Index (NBPI)]. Thirdly, "Define–Measure–Visualize" (DMV) model is introduced which is influenced by earlier work on relational branding (Hankinson, 2004b), and perception and network analysis (Zenker & Beckman, 2013). Subsequently, the feasibility of DMV is demonstrated through an example case, followed by limitations of this study and conclusion.

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[1] This article assumes that city, region, and nation branding refer to similar processes taking place at different bureaucratic levels (Lucarelli & Berg, 2011). Therefore, "place branding" and "place" are used as umbrella terms to refer to all these processes and levels – including cities – throughout the paper.

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Literature review

Definitions

'Place brands' and 'place branding' have been defined with the help of several disciplines such as marketing theories (cf. Kavaratzis, 2005), public relations (Szondi, 2010), international relations (Potter, 2009; van Ham, 2001), public administration (Eshuis, Braun, & Klijn, 2013) public diplomacy (Gilboa, 2008; Szondi, 2008), communication (Kaneva, 2011; Sevin, 2010), and geography (Boisen, Terlouw, & van Gorp, 2011). Thus, it is not surprising to find that the consensus within the literature is on what place branding is not, rather than what it is (Kavaratzis & Ashworth, 2006). Indeed, as Lucarelli and Berg (2011) argue, there seems to be different approaches even in the nature of the activity itself – let it be marketing, promotion or branding.

The main premises behind place branding are that when a place is named, several associated concepts are invoked in individuals' minds (Kavaratzis, 2004) and these associations can be manipulated to create a better brand for a place. Therefore, place branding concentrates on creating a brand management system focused on the identity (Freire, 2005), and distinctive and definitive characteristics (Zhang & Zhao, 2009) of a particular place. Parallel to these definitions of branding, Zenker and Braun (2010) provide a comprehensive definition of a place brand and argue that a brand is a "*network of associations in the consumer's mind based on the visual, verbal, and behavio[u]ral expression of a place, which is embodied through the aims, communication, values, and the general culture of the place's stakeholders and the overall place design*" (p. 5). This is to say, as a social phenomenon, a place brand is based on the perceptions of target audiences – which might or might not be influenced by the physical and communicative aspects of a given city.

Place branding and measurement

Scholars have introduced various measurement models in place branding employing various theories and methods. Zenker, Knubben, and Beckman (2010, p. 5) categorize these attempts under three headings based on their research methods: qualitative methods using free brand associations, quantitative methods measuring attributes through standardized questionnaires, and mixed methods combining qualitative and quantitative data through network analysis. Given the fact that the theoretical background of place branding is based on several disciplines (Ashworth & Kavaratzis, 2010), a categorization based on how these studies interact with disciplinary boundaries is also helpful in understanding the current state of the literature. Within this approach, there are three possible alternatives: (i) employing corporate marketing and branding measures, (ii) adapting corporate marketing and branding measures to place branding context, and (iii) devising models specific to place branding.

Kaplan, Yurt, Guneri, and Kurtulus (2010) employ already established branding methods to cities. These scholars bring the concept of brand personality from marketing discipline to define and measure city brands. The research extracts six dimensions – namely excitement, malignancy, peacefulness, competence, conservatism, and ruggedness – to evaluate the brands of three Turkish cities. Their study is based on the argument that "brand personality dimensions are applicable to place brands" (Kaplan et al., 2010, p. 1298).

Insch and Florek (2008) attempt to adapt different customer satisfaction indices to create a model of place satisfaction that determines "the interrelationships between objective and subjective place qualities and the individual assessments of residents" (p. 142). Arguing that residents are the main stakeholders of cities, the authors direct their research question and model at this specific group. The results of such a satisfaction analysis can be used in place management and resource allocation (Insch & Florek, 2008). Instead of directly using customer satisfaction analysis, the authors adapt the concepts to the context of places.

Baxter and Kerr (2010) devise a model specific to place images and place identities by using semantic-differential scale. In their model, they initially identify a list of concepts that can be used to describe a place. Subsequently, they put these concepts on a five-point differential scale and gather data through a survey research from different target groups including the residents. The researchers argue that their model helps place marketers to identify the gaps "between place identity and place images" (Baxter & Kerr, 2010, p. 15). Zenker, Eggers, and Farsky (2013) propose a model by using choice-based conjoint analysis and network analysis. The researchers aim to examine the nature of competition between German cities and demonstrate the importance of city images in this competitive environment. Their model is based on the argument that decisions regarding places – in this case the decision to move to a new city – are highly complex thus require a more elaborate inspection of a city's perception by target audiences (Zenker et al., 2013, p. 137).

At this moment, it is important to clarify the difference between adapting outside methods to place branding and devising specific models. In both approaches, scholars use data gathering and analysis methods available in virtually all social science disciplines. Yet, in the former approach scholars tend to fine-tune existing measurement scales – such as satisfaction analysis in the example explained above – whereas in the latter approach, proposed measurement models are novel and are designed specifically for places. Given the unique and complicated nature of places, the DMV model argues the need for using place branding specific models and builds one using available methods – namely social network analysis and semantic network analysis.

Contemporary practices

This section focuses on three place branding measurement practices (ACBI, FCBI, NBPI) with the objective of identifying their strengths and weaknesses. There are several branding scales used by practitioners such as Anholt-GfK Nation Brands Index, Saffron European City Brand Barometer, and Creative Cities International—The Vitality Index. The practices included in this study are chosen through a purposeful sampling understanding to capture the variation among prominent practices. All three indices are widely used and discussed in the literature (as seen in Go and Govers (2011)) and employ different data gathering and analysis processes.

In order to provide a succinct analysis of these indices, a comparative framework is created. The framework borrows fundamental social science concepts in order to assess these indices. Basically, three questions are raised about their (i) operationalization of the place brand concepts, (ii) instruments used to measure the brands, and (iii) lastly reporting styles of the results.

Given the fact that city brands are not material phenomena that can be directly measured, a measurement scale first needs to define what it seeks out to measure: A *valid* measurement scale should be able to accurately represent the social phenomenon that it seeks to measure. Each measurement scale should include an implicit or explicit definition of 'place brand'. By asking whether the scales define place branding adequately and include all the relevant dimensions, *construct validity* of their city branding definition is evaluated.

Secondly, the instruments of measurement – namely data gathering and analysis processes – are discussed. In other words,

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