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## Research Paper

## The emerging Shanghai city brand: A netnographic study of image perception among foreigners



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## ABSTRACT

The World Expo 2010 was a pivotal event aimed at demonstrating that Shanghai is an attractive, modern and comfortable city, infused with traditional Chinese values and ready to compete for talent and investments with other global cities. Through a netnographic analysis of online discussion forums for foreigners residing in, or visiting Shanghai, this study documents the attitudes of these online community members towards life in this city. These attitudes are identified as predominantly negative with an emphasis on pollution, congestion and rudeness of the local population. This study thus identifies a dissonance between the officially communicated brand identity and the word-of-mouth communication on social media. This paper proceeds to recommend leveraging the identified positive aspects of Shanghai's image such as excitement, affordability and safety for future branding efforts.

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## 1. Introduction

In its 11th Five Year Plan for Shanghai, China has formulated a strategy to develop this city into the world's leading center of commerce and finance by the year 2020 (Wang, Shibusawa, Leman, Higano, & Mao, 2013). Some researchers (e.g., Chen, 2009; Ye, 2004) argue that Shanghai, with its continued success in attracting foreign investments, already possesses the attributes associated with a globally competitive urban center as defined by<sup>1</sup> Sassen (2010, pp. 127–129) and is thus challenging not only Hong Kong and Singapore, but also London and New York in terms of global economic importance (Yang & Lim, 2010).

Scholars, however, argue that in the modern, knowledge-based economy, competitiveness is intimately connected with innovation (Jansson & Powers, 2006). Cities of today are no longer only competing for a share of foreign direct investments; they also compete to attract growing innovative companies, international students, business schools, research centers, and highly skilled knowledge workers (Clark, 2006). While Shanghai, in comparative studies (Grant & Chuang, 2012), scores relatively high on the “global

city dimension”<sup>2</sup> (71.2/100), it scores quite low on the “knowledge dimension”<sup>3</sup> (65.83/100). Consequently, scholars argue that one of the factors constituting a challenge for Shanghai's international competitiveness is a lack of human capital and expertise within the realm of research and education (Clark & Moonen, 2011), as well as a general lack of English proficiency (Yang & Lim, 2010). Scholars have subsequently identified a need to attract entrepreneurs and skilled professionals through migration (Yusuf & Wu, 2002).

These challenges are also recognized in the 11th five-year plan (Deutsche Gesellschaft für Technische Zusammenarbeit, 2009). Consequently, Wang Yu<sup>4</sup> has announced a new campaign to attract foreign talent to Shanghai (Zhen, 2011) with the goal of increasing the number of foreign specialist working within the strategic economic areas (Xiaoyi & Fieshang, 2010).

Research by the Human Capital Institute has documented that while economic development may be a necessary criterion for attracting talent; the intangible aspects of a city are the qualifying criteria in the relocation decisions of knowledge workers (Eggert & Schwyer, 2007). A grounded theoretical study of corporate decision-making has further documented that personal preferences, priorities, and perceptions strongly influence where and how relocation takes place, and that the impressions, image, and market perceptions of the location are among the key factors considered (Greenhalgh, 2008). In this connection, researchers

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<sup>1</sup> A destination for strategic corporate functions, headquarters of multinational companies, transport and information hubs, as well as internationally noteworthy cultural activities.

<sup>2</sup> The global city dimension pertains to a city's influence on international commerce and finance.

<sup>3</sup> The knowledge city dimension relates to the degree that economic specialization promotes the development of knowledge-intensive activities.

<sup>4</sup> Deputy Director of the Organizational Department of the Communist Party's Shanghai Committee.

argue that while Shanghai objectively has achieved a position of global economic importance, this is not yet reflected in the public perception of the city's image and brand (Jing & Rong, 2010). Thus, the Anholt-GfK Roper City Brands Index indicates that Shanghai remains outside the top 30 city brands (Zhao, 2011).

With the purpose of improving China's international image and status, its government has invested considerable sums in what some scholars consider a decade long brand building campaign in the form of mega events,<sup>5</sup> inclusive of the 2008 Olympic Games in Beijing and the 2010 World Expo in Shanghai (Shin, 2012). Kavaratzis (2004) posits that destination branding can be conceptualized as forms of communication. Primary image communication includes officially sanctioned use of myths, slogans, and logos, and secondary image communication manifests in prestigious buildings, urban redevelopment, and the hosting of major international events. Kavaratzis further posits that the purpose of primary and secondary image communication is to impact tertiary image communication, which is accomplished through "word-of-mouth." In this connection, researchers argue that word of mouth has become the most important medium for city branding (Public Affairs Asia & Ogilvy Public Relations, 2012) and that social media is fast becoming the most important channel for word-of-mouth communication (Conroy & Narula, 2009).

This study aims to examine the word-of-mouth communication about life in Shanghai through analyzing social media interactions on websites specific to expatriates and visitors to Shanghai. These findings will then be contrasted with the official city brand values, identified in connection with the 2010 World Expo with the purpose of formulating recommendations for the ongoing city branding of Shanghai.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Cities and branding

In recent years, city branding has become an important tool applied by governments to enhance their cities' global competitiveness toward facilitating the inflow of investments, knowledge workers, tourists, and new businesses (Clark, 2006). Research has identified three general components of city branding efforts (Jing & Rong, 2010): (1) the development of products intimately connected with the city; (2) efforts to develop an attractive image; and (3) targeted marketing activities. Kavaratzis (2004), however, argued that there is a consensus that image development is the primary focus of city branding and it is utilized to facilitate word-of-mouth endorsements.

The purpose of branding is to facilitate a positive attitude towards a company's products and services by meeting consumers' "physical and psychological needs through functional and symbolic values" (Kavaratzis, 2004, p. 65). A brand is thus a cognitive-emotional construct, where the individual prescribes a specific meaning or a personality to the brand (Stigel & Friman, 2006). Theorists therefore argued that successful branding must ensure a high degree of correspondence between the communicated brand values and the actual lived experiences with the product (Copeland, 2001).

Research has also documented that consumers tend to choose brands with personality traits similar to their own self-perception (Seimiene, 2012). Toward facilitating this connection, Aaker (1997, p. 351) proposed a model for describing and expressing brand personality that consisted of five dimensions: "Sincerity, excitement, competence, sophistication, and ruggedness." Similarly,

other scholars have proposed brand personality models for cities, for example, Simon Anholt's six dimensional model that included "Presence, place, pre-requisites, people, pulse, and potential" (as cited in Zeinalpour, Shahbazi, & Ezzatirad, 2013, p. 319); and the model attributed to Trueman and Cornelius: "Symbolic presence, sense of purpose, pace of life, personality, and power" (as cited in Kavaratzis, 2009, p. 32).

To what degree it is possible to transfer branding paradigms from the realm of corporations and products to those of cities remains an important question. Some scholars argued that people primarily encounter places through perception and images, which are beyond the control of any brand strategy (Kavaratzis & Ashworth, 2006). The heterogeneous nature of a city's population and the consumers of city brands presents marketers with a complex challenge: conceptualizing a brand, which is reasonably aligned with the realities of the city and articulating a brand personality most stakeholders can identify with (Jansson & Powers, 2006). In other words, a city branding campaign cannot hope to copy the choreography and control on display in, for example, Disney Land, where management can exert control over all the touch points between The Magic Kingdom and the consumers (Van Maanen, 1991). In contrast, real cities are dependent on the quality of services and goods produced by a heterogeneous amalgamation of stakeholders and local residents' positive attitude towards visitors, which research has demonstrated is contingent on perceived personal economic benefits rather than the ambitions of any given city branding campaign (Kwon & Vogt, 2010).

### 2.2. City branding through mega events

Scholars posited that the prestige associated with mega events is transferrable to the host destination (Chen, 2012) and that hosting such events therefore creates the potential to transform a city or country's international brand (Whitson & Macintosh, 1996). The International Olympic Committee considered this to be the case for the 1988 Games in Seoul and argued that the Olympic Games facilitated South Korea's re-integration into the world community and a reappraisal of Korean culture (International Olympic Committee, 2012). Accordingly, similar motivations underpin Tokyo's successful bid for the Olympic Games, which is seen as a response to the perceived assertiveness of China and an attempt to reassert Tokyo's status as a global city relative to Beijing (Kelly, 2010).

The earlier stated differences between the realities of a corporation and a city, create a challenge to utilize mega events for the purpose of destination branding, because such symbolic orchestrations may not meet the majority of the city's stakeholders' physical and psychological needs, such as improving the quality of life and self-identification. Further, the organizers run the risk of symbolic overreach, which may lead both residents and visitors to focus on the contrast between the brand communication and their actual lived experience in the city. The complexity of this challenge was illustrated during the 2008 Beijing Olympics, where the brand vision was articulated in the "One World, One Dream" slogan (Bu, 2009), which Liu Qi<sup>6</sup> interpreted in the following way:

One World, One Dream, is an embodiment of the wisdom of hundreds of thousands of people. It is a slogan that conveys the lofty ideal of people in Beijing as well as in China to share the global community and civilization and to create a bright future hand in hand with people from the rest of the world. It expresses the firm belief of a great nation, with a long history

<sup>5</sup> Large-scale events, such as the Olympic Games or World Expo.

<sup>6</sup> President of the Beijing Organizing Committee for the Games of the XXIX Olympiad.

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