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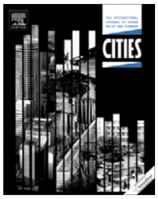

City branding and the Olympic effect: A case study of Beijing

Li Zhang [a,*], Simon Xiaobin Zhao [b]

[a] School of Social Development and Public Policy, Fudan University, 220 Handan Road, Shanghai 200433, China
[b] International Center for China Development Studies, Department of Geography, The University of Hong Kong, Pokfulam Road, Hong Kong

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ABSTRACT

City branding is a common practice adopted by many cities in the context of intensified urban competition for mobile resources, markets, opportunities and attention. This paper examines the effectiveness of efforts to brand Beijing, the capital city of China. Based on an analysis of official branding strategies through the Olympics, and an attitudinal survey of peoples' understanding of Beijing, the paper investigates to what extent the current campaign has caught the city's good attributes. The paper finds a mismatch between the identity and core values as branded by the city government, and the realities as experienced by visitors and residents. The paper argues that the Beijing Olympics could only have limited impacts on the city's brand.

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Introduction

Globalization has increased global shifts of resources, capital and people, and has intensified the competition among cities for attention, influence, markets, investments, businesses, visitors, talents and significant events. City branding, which is regarded as a strategic instrument to publicize a city's competitive advantages, becomes a common practice to market the city's history, quality of place, lifestyle, and culture for opportunity, prestige or power in capital accumulation in a competitive environment (Langer, 2001; Morgan et al., 2002; Berci et al., 2002; Evans, 2003).

A city needs to adopt the right strategies in order to brand itself successfully. Successful city branding depends greatly on the identification of distinctive and defining characteristics possessed by the city in question. Characteristics of a city are both functional and non-functional qualities, which include, among others, city appearance, history, cultural attractions, demographics, economics and governance, people's experience of the city, and people's perception of the city. Consensus on the city's identity and core values, between the city authorities and the general public, is one of the key factors in achieving the success of city branding. Mega-events are regarded as a valuable opportunity for broadcasting the identity and core values of the host city. Nonetheless, creating a distinctive identity that captures the unique spirit of a city is easier said than done. Challenges vary from one city to another.

With rapid economic growth and closer integration into international markets, several Chinese cities, such as Beijing and Shanghai, are now competing for a place in the global city roster. City branding becomes more and more strategically important in this context. Beijing, the capital city of China, was awarded the right to host the 29th Olympiad on July 13, 2001, and Beijing authorities tried to make use of this opportunity for city branding. Though Beijing has a long history as a political center, dating back over eight centuries, it has a relatively short history of branding. Rigorous studies that evaluate Beijing's brand from both theoretical and empirical perspectives are few.

The objective of this paper is to examine the effectiveness of Beijing branding by reviewing theoretical insights discussed in the literature and by investigating the understanding of the general public vis-à-vis the city. It analyzes to what extent Beijing's branding has caught the city's good attributes, and goes on to identify the lessons one can learn for the improvement of a city's branding. Special attention is given to the examination of whether a recent mega-event, such as the Olympics, can help Beijing to be re-branded. This study shows that, though Beijing has certain good qualities that can be used for such purposes, its identity and core values—as branded by the city government—have not been well accepted by the general public. People maintain their own readings of what the city is about, and there exists a mismatch between the city's identity and values, as branded by the city government, and urban realities experienced by its residents. While the Beijing Olympics have physically changed part of the city's realities, the Olympics *per se* have not fundamentally changed people's experience of the host city.

The methodology adopted by this research is, by nature, essentially interpretative, one that blends the development of theoretical insights, which guides empirical analysis, with case studies, which can enrich existing theories (Carson et al., 2001). Our evaluation of

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[*] Corresponding author. Tel.: +86 021 55665375; fax: +86 021 65107274.
E-mail addresses: lizhangfudan@fudan.edu.cn (L. Zhang), sxzhao@hkucc.hku.hk (S.X. Zhao).

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Beijing branding is based mainly on a review of the literature of city branding and study of relevant government documents, interviews with officials from the Marketing Department and the Technology Department of The Beijing Organizing Committee for the Games of the 29th Olympiad (hereafter BOCOG), and an attitudinal survey conducted in two periods (18th–24th March 2008, a few months before the Beijing Olympic Games, and 9th–13th September 2008, the period shortly after the Games). Questionnaires were randomly distributed at two sites: (1) Tiananmen Square, a landmark and a hot scenic spot for visitors and in the center of Beijing city, (2) the Sanlitun and Houhai Area, the well-known and most popular night-life spot that attracted many foreign tourists. Taking reference of both Anholt's and Kavaratzis's frameworks for the evaluation of city branding, we categorized the questions into four parts, based on the official objectives to brand Beijing as an international city, a famous cultural city, a livable city, and a great host of the 29th Olympiad. These objectives were specified in two government documents: *Beijing City Master Plan (2004–2020)* and *The Olympic Action Plan*. The questions aimed at seeking the people's understanding of Beijing's identity and branding effects. The questions were mostly objective, insofar as respondents had to rate them by an agreement scale, with 5 being the highest score, the strongest agreement and 1 being the lowest score, the strongest disagreement. There were also open-ended questions where respondents were able to provide additional views and make suggestions in free-text form. In total, 100 people participated in the surveys. Among them, 30% of respondents were Beijing residents, 30% were domestic visitors, and 40% were foreigners who visited or worked in Beijing.

The rest of this paper is organized as follows. The following section reviews strategies commonly used in city branding as well as important considerations for the evaluation of city branding, as discussed in the literature. This is followed by an analysis of the case of Beijing. The analysis is done, first by narrating the official designation of the city's identity and core values, and then by discussing public perspectives on the officially-designated identity and values. The final section extracts lessons from our empirical investigation.

City branding: strategies and evaluation

City branding draws its inspiration from product branding and marketing. The brand of a product embodies a set of physical and socio-psychological attributes as well as beliefs that are associated with the product (Simoes and Dibb, 2001). Branding is a deliberate strategy to select some attributes of a product as core values in order to facilitate the process by which consumers confidently recognize and appreciate those attributes (De Chernatony and Dall'Olmo Riley, 1998). From those core values, the product's identity can be formed. Though some (e.g. Peterson, 1981) object that cities are not products that are involved in direct transactions in markets, proponents of city branding (e.g. Morgan et al., 2002; Kavaratzis and Ashworth, 2005; Anholt, 2007) argue that the concept of product branding can indeed be transplanted to city branding. They profess that a city can be viewed as an "entity", to whom an "identity" is ascribed with a set of stable values fostered from the long course of urban development (Kavaratzis and Ashworth, 2005). Like a product that possesses utility values, a city can generate utility functions that "customers" (investors, visitors and the resident population) can directly experience through daily business transactions and related activities. Cities can be viewed as spatially extended products and cities can compete with each other in a way that is similar to competition between products. Cities therefore should be treated as "products" to be marketed, through tourism development and through branding activities.

One crucial strategy within city branding is the creation of the city's identity, which should be developed from a range of contextual variables such as history, demography, economy, politics and policies. A city usually has certain identifiable images or core values perceived by its people. For example, Paris is perceived for romance, Milan for style, New York for diversity and dynamics, Washington for power, and Tokyo for modernity. In this paper, city branding refers to a strategy that presents a city with an unforgettable identity and an instrument that can convey a city's core values with agility. The city's identity is a complex mixture of a city's spatial configuration and its socio-cultural values. City branding needs to synthesize various characteristics and to transform them into a unique and irreplaceable identity (Smidt-Jensen, 2006).

A key challenge of city branding is the difficulty of delimiting a city's identity and core values in a manner that is widely acceptable, easily marketable, presentable and open to experience in a daily manner. In this regard, strategies of product branding may be less appropriate in the context of a city where ownership, stakeholder involvement and branding development are more complex (Kavaratzis, 2009). The city is a residential place of multiple social interest groups and a physical space of multiple contested visions of urban values. A big challenge to city branding thus lies in creating and profiling an identity from diverse values that are not always intangible and that may represent different interests of various social groups in the city. City branding has to be concerned with how culture and history, economic growth and social development, infrastructure and architecture, landscape and environment, among other things, can be combined into a saleable identity that is acceptable to all people. This pinpoints the reality that city branding is inevitably going to lead to disputes over competing representations, understanding, and identification of the city. The city's identity and core values cannot be simply seen as neutral statements of fact, but must appear as claims, justifications and accusations exchanged with a variety of interests. Construction of a city's identity and core values becomes the most contested aspect of city branding.

Accordingly, a crucial issue of urban branding is how the city is understood. The branding can be thought of as a success if it is able to deliver core urban values that are deemed valid, distinctive, appealing, durable, and communicable (Gertner and Kotler, 2004). Since many cities have quiet similar characteristics to present, a strategy of city branding is to create unique values, so distinguishing one city from another. While city authorities have their own aspirations and in most cases are responsible for the implementation of city branding, people communicate their experience with the city on various occasions and in various forms, acting as "ambassadors" to represent the city. People often translate their perceptions (imagery, feelings, evaluations and judgments) into their own understandable identity of the city. City branding should convey both the intention of city authorities and the experience of people. If the city's identity and core values are incongruent with what can be experienced by city residents and visitors, there is a great risk that city branding would consist of rather lofty values that are not accepted by the general public.

In his study of branding experience of European cities, Kavaratzis (2004, 2008) comes up with six key questions that city branding should be answered. The questions include (1) what the city indubitably is; (2) what the city feels it is; (3) what the city says it is; (4) what the city is seen to be; (5) whom the city seeks to serve; and (6) what is promised and expected? On that basis, he proposes that branding can be understood within a 3-level communication framework. The first level refers to physical and observable aspects from which a city can be seen. The second level consists of propaganda tools that a city adopts to market itself. The third level is people's communication about a city through their voices, and those of the media. In the process of city

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