



Research paper

Starting conditions for the green branding of a city

Chung-Shing Chan^{a,*}, Lawal M. Marafa^a, Cecil C. Konijnendijk Van Den Bosch^b,
Thomas Barfoed Randrup^c

^a Department of Geography and Resource Management, The Chinese University of Hong Kong, Sha Tin, N.T., Hong Kong

^b University of British Columbia, Canada, Forest Sciences Building, 2424 Main Mall, Vancouver BC V6T 1Z4, Canada

^c Department of Landscape Architecture, Planning & Management, Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences, Sweden



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ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to investigate the starting conditions of green resource branding in Hong Kong and Copenhagen. The study is based on the application of the Green Brand Hexagon (GBH) that measures multi-dimensional attributes of a green resource brand. Two surveys were conducted in Hong Kong (n = 395) and Copenhagen (n = 217), sampling inbound visitors. The results show that visitors in Hong Kong tend to believe that green brand attributes are connected to the economic benefits of a greener urban environment, while the green aspects related to international status and public policies are relatively stronger in Copenhagen. Hong Kong has a square green resource brand structure that combines interconnected green resource attributes, whereas Copenhagen keeps a hexagonal structure with more dimensions but a simpler composition in each dimension.

1. Introduction

Green branding has recently been recognized as an important strategy for improving city governance, liveability and competitiveness (e.g. [Insch, 2011](#)). Biophysical green spaces such as public parks, trees, and landscapes that are widely visible to and accessible by the public are a major contributor to green city branding ([Konijnendijk, 2010](#)). These are regarded as urban green spaces ([Zhang, Tan, & Diehl, 2017](#)) or, more broadly, urban green resources ([Chan & Marafa, 2014](#)). They strengthen local identity ([Matsuoka & Kaplan, 2008](#)), develop a society that balances human and nature ([Register, 2006](#)), offer opportunities for destination marketing ([Hui & Wan, 2003](#); [Tamanini, 2012](#)), and create an attractive brand that appeals to various types of visitors and users ([Braiterman, 2011](#)).

A well-projected and positively recognized brand can transcend geographical boundaries to influence location-decision behavior ([Anholt, 2007](#); [Giovanardi, 2012](#)). Brand creation requires starting from an understanding of the identity or the essence of a place ([Govers & Go, 2009](#)). Whereas the construction of brand identity is the process of selecting elements to represent the identity of a brand ([Blichfeldt, 2005](#)), city branding is regarded as "the process of designing, planning and communicating the name and the identity, in order to build or manage the reputation" of the city ([Anholt, 2007](#), p. 4). Consequently, city branding should start from the selection of a specific theme of

attributes and the conversion of the desirable attributes to brand identity. This notion applies to cities attempting to develop a green brand in the sense that their urban green resource availability and attributes should be meticulously considered in the process. A user perspective can assess whether or not a city has the potential to establish a green brand based on its urban green resources. Whereas citizens' perception of the attributes of a green city brand represents the local recognition of these urban green resources, visitors' perceptions can be considered as the 'starting conditions' of green branding, which contribute to a destination with nature-based or eco-leisure attractions ([Chan & Marafa, 2016a](#); [Chan, Peters, & Marafa, 2015](#)). These conditions characterize the uniqueness of urban green resources, generate a specific green brand identity, and contribute to the foundation of green branding.

More importantly, the similarities and differences in the green resources among cities configure the attributes representing their green resources, which may include both visible green spaces and intangible characteristics such as international status and policy aspects. Such a combination of attributes is an important quality to attract visitors who are potential immigrants to a city. This paper argues that the attributes of urban green resources, such as the provision and characteristics of ecological resources, parks and green spaces, and natural landscape, represent a special set of conditions and status of a city. These specific green attributes are able to build a strong and positive image and

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: ccs_johnson@cuhk.edu.hk (C.-S. Chan), lmaraafa@cuhk.edu.hk (L.M. Marafa), cecil.konijnendijk@ubc.ca (C.C. Konijnendijk Van Den Bosch), thomas.randrup@slu.se (T.B. Randrup).

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generate a green brand for a city that attract certain groups of visitors or potential immigrants. The process of branding these urban green resources is to understand and characterize how target groups perceive the green attributes and in turn to promote the values of these attributes to them.

This paper elaborates on the phenomenon of green city branding by presenting a comparative study of Hong Kong and Copenhagen. These two cities were selected because of the variety in their characteristics of green spaces and available resources, despite which they still champion in some of the global and regional ranking exercises in terms of liveability and green environment. The comparison may indicate that even a compact metropolis like Hong Kong can take advantage of distinctive attributes and a specific green brand structure. On the other hand, a well-known green city like Copenhagen may not be comprehensively competitive in green branding. Policy makers and city marketers can, therefore, learn to build on stronger green assets (Parkerson & Saunders, 2005).

When examining various results of city ranking exercises, Copenhagen appears very often in a top position, whereas Hong Kong is often considered less competitive in terms of liveability and environmental quality. However, when public parks (especially Country Parks) and other green spaces are taken into consideration, the ranking of Hong Kong would be much higher (e.g. *The Economist Intelligence Unit [EIU], 2012*, for the ‘Best Cities’ rankings and *Arcadis, 2015*, for ‘Sustainable Cities’ rankings). Statistics on territory-wide urban green resources in Hong Kong also show that these resources are more widely available to the public and even have a higher coverage than many other cities in the world do (*EIU, 2012*). All this information supports the need for a common platform or framework to study and identify the distinctiveness of the urban green resources in each city. Although the green brand of an individual city (*Chan, 2014*) and the discrepancy between resident and visitor brand perceptions have previously been investigated (*Chan & Marafa, 2016b; Chan et al., 2015*), there is still a lack of comparison among cities on a global scale.

This study examines the inbound visitor perception of the multi-dimensional green brand attributes of two cities. Visitor perception refers to a collective impression of a place understood and interpreted by the visitors (*Rajesh, 2013*), which contains (strong or weak) degree and (positive or negative) direction (*Ukwayi, Eja, & Unwanede, 2012*). Such a perception can be generated both through direct experience and other sources of brand information communication (*Govers & Go, 2009; Rajesh, 2013*). Through directly experiencing or indirectly forming expectations of the urban green resources in Hong Kong or Copenhagen, the respondents were able to express their overall perception of a green resource brand through a number of questions measuring different dimensions of the brand.

To connect green resource attributes and green branding, it is essential to borrow a well-established place branding framework to structure and measure these attributes (*Anholt, 2006; Moilanen & Rainisto, 2009*). A scheme deconstructing and analyzing an urban green resource brand was established by scholars who proposed a hexagonal structure for a green brand: namely the Green Brand Hexagon (GBH) (*Chan & Marafa, 2014*).

Based on the visitor perception in the two selected cities, this paper addresses two research questions corresponding to the above research problem. Firstly, is there any significant difference in visitor perception of the attributes between Hong Kong and Copenhagen? Secondly, do the green resource brands in Hong Kong and Copenhagen possess distinctive structures? Both questions will be answered through an analysis of the visitor ratings on the GBH's attributes. The research findings add a new perspective to city classification for place branding researchers, further suggest an alternative destination position for city marketers, and put forward a new option for decision-makers

developing a destination marketing policy. The findings will also provide some insights to city marketers and urban planners about placing a greater emphasis on the strengths of a city when positioning it as a green city or creating a green brand based on these assets.

1.1. Literature review

Place branding is no longer purely destination-marketing focused because of the complexity of place which involves the structuring of spaces and the relationships among different users and stakeholders of the place (*Ashworth & Kavaratzis, 2009; Hankinson, 2004*). Geographers have become more and more involved in the study of place branding because it is related to the competition among different geographical locations (*Kerr, 2006; Pike, 2011*): their input is particularly valuable when a brand connects to the natural environment (*Braiterman, 2011; Chan & Marafa, 2014*), green cities (*Birch & Wachter, 2008; Kahn, 2006*), and sustainable development (*Baycan, 2011; Dinnie, 2012*).

A particular aspect or a combination of aspects related to a green city, such as green spaces, urban forestry, biodiversity, energy, urban agriculture, waste management and recycling, may have the potential to become a strong and competitive advantage to attract target people. These people are usually inbound visitors in the first instance, before the brand and the experience of the brand influence their locational decision (*van Gelder, 2003; Zenker, 2011*).

Among various green city aspects, the largely visible and publicly accessible green spaces, such as public parks, urban trees and natural landscapes, continue to play an important role in enhancing the attractiveness of cities (e.g. *Chan & Marafa, 2016b; Chan et al., 2015; Evans & Bohrer, 2000; Gulsrud, Gooding, & Konijnendijk van den Bosch, 2013; Konijnendijk, 2008*). This is the reason why many places promote their natural features such as native species, national parks and the scenic countryside as tourist attractions in an attempt to stand out from other regions (e.g. *Forristal & Lehto, 2009; Gross, Poor, Sipos, & Solymosy, 2009*). Many city governments also wisely utilize urban green resources like greening and tree planting in mega-events, community revitalization, and competitions (*Beatley, 2000; Konijnendijk, 2010*). *Braiterman (2011)*, for instance, elaborated on a number of success stories from Seoul (a range of green initiatives from public transport to river revitalization), Tokyo (vertical greening) to New York (replacement of concrete structures by parks) and San Francisco (conversion of parking spaces to mini-parks). *Gramon-Suba and Holt (2012)* also provided a case of integrating green urban design in the branding strategy of Budapest. These are good practices where urban green resources not only improve the quality of the environment for urban dwellers but also create a brand for a city.

Extending further from destination or place promotion, the creation of a green brand based on these visible green resources is a constructive way of post-modern urban development, which often integrates with multiple themes of sustainability (e.g. *Chan & Marafa, 2018*). City branding is more than a marketing campaign (*Govers, 2013*): it also links stakeholders' interests with those of outsiders' (*Fok & Law, 2018*). Branding urban green resources requires framing and structuring the visible and invisible attributes of these green resources. Green resource branding leads to an understanding of how stakeholders perceive this green brand identity. When targeting at tourists, for example, such an understanding of the green brand identity would then refer to tourists' perception of the attributes measuring this green brand. Brand identity is a full set of unique characteristics or attributes of a theme (e.g. green) recognized by the target stakeholder group at a given point of time (*Anholt, 2007; Avraham & Ketter, 2008; Bell & de-Shalit, 2011; Govers & Go, 2009*).

Chan and Marafa (2014, 2016b), for example, addressed the dearth

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