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Research Paper

A hypothesis of the dimensional organization of the city construct. A starting point for city brand positioning

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ABSTRACT

The ever-changing fortunes of cities across the world, along with the increasing competition between economic centers caused by globalization, has stimulated the interest and need for instruments allowing researchers to compare cities across a range of dimensions. The literature review indicates that not enough research has been devoted to develop multidimensional models for city evaluations and that the existing models are biased towards specific stakeholder interests and cultural worldviews, thereby being apt to produce inconsistent and contradictory findings. This state of affairs negatively impact marketers, ability to formulate city brand positioning strategies, which are based not only on aspiration but also on a nuanced understanding of the empirical reality of the city. Through a grounded analysis of 473 measures of a selected range of city-ranking indexes, this study identified 37 item categories and, through a grounded theory in-text verification process, a hypothesis of a total of 16 evaluative dimensions was proposed. The paper proposes this as a starting point not only for comparative research, but also for city brand positioning and the continued measurement of progress on the implementation of positioning strategies for cities.

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1. Introduction

In the first half of the 20th century, industrialization gave rise to the “mass-production metropolis” (U.S. Congress, Office of Technology Assessment, 1995) and transformed many Western urban centers into successful and affluent cities occupying important and often specialized functions within the national economies (Parillo, 2005). Detroit was, for example, the center of the US automotive industry and similar to this, other cities grew in importance and prosperity around the manufacturing of consumer products for home markets. This development seemingly peaked at the beginning of the 1970s, when industries, businesses and workers began to relocate to the suburbs, leading to a gradual decline (US Congress, Office of Technology Assessment), as well as increasing levels of inner-city poverty and crime (Teitz & Chapple, 1998). During the 1980s and 1990s, the “post-industrial cities” (US Congress, Office of Technology Assessment), were further challenged by cheaper and often better imports from emerging markets. Thus, U.S. cities in the so-called “rust belt” have lost more than half of their manufacturing jobs between 1970 and 1990, and in many cases hundreds of thousands of residents (Kasadra, 1995). However, some cities have been able to thrive by replacing manufacturing with service industries such as finance, insurance and real estate and, in

some cases, have managed to reposition themselves from national cities to global cities (US Congress, Office of Technology Assessment). Thus, among scholars, it has come to be accepted that the shifting fortunes of large cities are intimately linked with the global market place. This acknowledgement has thus spawned a relatively new field of comparative research as well as the emerging field of place branding.

Kotler, Asplund, Rein and Haider (1999) posit that a city brand exists as the sum of an aggregation of evaluations by consumers and stakeholders expressed in dimensions. Clark (2008), however, argues that the current state of the comparative city research is not yet mature and that the existing models reflect a subjective array of different interests and agendas. This state of affairs not only exerts a confounding influence on the outcome of comparative research, but also challenges decision-makers' and marketers' city-brand positioning strategies, which essentially is an attempt to communicate an aspirational version of the city, which resonates with the belief dimensionality of consumers and stakeholders (Kavaratzis & Ashworth, 2006).

Despite the existence of multiple dimensionality models from the comparative city ranking literature, marketers seem to have a preference for traditional product and corporate brand dimensionality constructs, which are being applied in the formulation of place brand and positioning strategies without thorough consideration of their validity when transferred to constructs as complex as cities (Hankinson, 2012). The aim of this study is therefore to

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attempt a synthesis of the city ranking literature by formulating a hypothesis of an overarching multi-dimensional construct for the purpose of analyzing the perceptual organization of a city. This would assist in addressing the concerns-of-interest bias expressed by Clark (2008), as well as providing an analytical framework for formulating destination positioning strategies.

2. Literature review

The increasing competition between urban centers for investments, visitors and talent have increased the demand for city-ranking instruments by both private enterprises, which wish to identify the relative benefits of a location, and by city leaders, who strive to formulate position strategies for their locations as well as to measure the outcome of their place branding efforts. There is, however, little consensus on the range of dimensions required for capturing the “true” competitive profile of cities (Stepchenkova & Mills, 2010) and a review of the literature indicates that the various ranking models are based on very different understandings of competitiveness. This, in turn, translates into a complex relationship between the ontology of city ranking and the methods applied to arrive at this ranking.

2.1. The ontology of cities

A paper by Grant and Chuang (2012) outlines some of the ontological perspectives on the city construct: global cities, knowledge cities, intelligent cities, creative cities and nice cities. Global cities (Sassen, 2010) are defined by seven socioeconomic attributes: (1) the location of strategic corporate functions coordinating global commercial and financial activities; (2) a site for sourcing specialized services by the headquarters of multinational companies; (3) an urban environment characterized by a wide range of expertise and companies form very specialized fields within finance, IT and communication etc; (4) a highly specialized and networked service sector; (5) a globally integrated service sector; (6) a high degree of spatial and socioeconomic inequality due to the existence of high-value professionals; and (7) the existence of informal economic networks. These seven criteria tie the city construct to the globalization phenomenon addressed in the introduction (U.S. Congress, Office of Technology Assessment, 1995), as these attributes are functionally integrated with the global marketplace and in some cases even integral for the globalization process (for example, the finance industries in London and New York). While this model holds descriptive value in reflecting the reality of a handful of big cities, it does little in terms of providing insights into how to get from the B-list to the A-list of cities. Further, the model does not provide an adequate explanation for why certain smaller cities in reality are quite successful in a global perspective without possessing the full range of the global-city attributes. In this connection, scholars have articulated typologies such as knowledge cities, smart cities and intelligent cities with an emphasis on the third and fourth attributes of the global-city construct.

The “knowledge-city” typology seems to borrow from the term “knowledge economy” that the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) may have coined or at least used from the middle of the 1990s (The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, 1996). Grant and Chuang (2012) define knowledge cities in terms of advanced technical know-how and knowledge-management systems. However, a review of the literature indicates that this term is often used interchangeably with the term “smart city”, which is defined as a city where new digital technologies are integrated with traditional infrastructures (Batty et al., 2012). Grant and Chuang also propose a related typology: the “intelligent city”, which they suggest is different

from knowledge cities due to an emphasis on innovation. Other scholars, however, emphasize that intelligent cities are dependent on knowledge intensive locations and communities. It is thus argued that the knowledge management and digitalization associated with the knowledge-city typology is a necessary condition for the innovation associated with intelligent cities (Kominos, 2013). Further to this, some scholars appear to merge the knowledge city and intelligent city typologies and contrast this with the smart city topology. Thus, Cizelj and Sinkovec (2012) argue that knowledge cities are defined through their ability to transform knowledge into innovation and global competitiveness, whereas smart cities merely apply knowledge to solve problems within the city.

The critics of the smart and intelligent cities typologies argue that these cities have not been able to solve key social problems due to an overwhelming focus on technology. They therefore propose a “humanistic city” typology characterized by interactions between the three key dimensions of a city: its physical landscape, its collective memories or history, and its functionalities and institutions for the purpose of ensuring an environment conducive to mental health (Graziani, 2013). The following dimensions are associated with the humanistic typology: sustainability and eco-friendliness (Newman & Jennings, 2008), and good governance, which places the interest of the people in the center of development policies (Marsh, 2014). The typology seems originally to have been articulated by Florida (2002), who argues that diversity and tolerance are the main drivers of the urban economies, as these factors attract talents from all over the world. In other words, “creative cities” develop their urban spaces, economy and global competitiveness through cultural activities and cultural industries (Costa, 2008), such as design, fashion and music (Lorentzen & Fredriksen, 2008). In this manner, the creative ontology of cities departs from the more structural perspectives of the proponents of the global-city and knowledge-city typologies by hypothesizing that talent is not necessarily drawn to cities with the most obvious economic advantages but to cities where the global creative class wants to live for intangible reasons. Moreover, it is held that businesses follow these individuals and not the other way around (Florida, 2003).

Similar to the creative city is the “nice city” typology (Grant & Chuang, 2012). The latter typology is less dogmatic, in that it does not operate with the notion of a new social class – the creative class – as the driver of the modern economy (Florida, 2003). However, it emphasizes the agglomeration dimension (Clark, 2006), as well as the city’s ability to provide its residents with an enviable lifestyle measured by quality-of-life indicators such as education, health care, weather, crime and employment (Grant & Chuang, 2012).

Research has further documented that while economic and demographic factors are important city attributes, it is the intangible aspects of a city, which are the competitive factors (Eggert & Schwyer, 2007; Greenhalgh, 2008). Thus, from this review of the literature we may conclude that the diversity of city typologies supports the notion that a “city” is a multidimensional cognitive-emotional construct emerging through an interaction between the physical realities of cities and our subjective perception of these realities (Graham, 2002). However, the question remains, how to apply these typologies in urban developmental and positioning strategies, what the dimensionality of these typologies may be, or indeed whether these typologies are mere dimensions of the city construct itself. Without such operationalization, the referenced typologies mainly serve as aspirational ideals, disconnected from the empirical reality of the city. Thus, research has demonstrated that brand-positioning strategies based primarily on aspirations detached from the reality of the city as experienced by consumers and other stakeholders are more likely to suffer from symbolic overreach and consequently fall short of their goals (Copeland, 2001; Larsen, 2014).

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