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Demand- and supply-side perspectives of city branding: A qualitative investigation

Magnus Hultman^{a,*}, Abena A. Yeboah-Banin^a, Liam Formaniuk^b^a University of Leeds, UK^b Marpak Extrusions Ltd, UK

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ABSTRACT

City branding has become an invaluable source of differentiation for cities around the world as competition between places continues to grow. The current study addresses gaps in extant city branding literature by investigating the brand vision model on a second-tier UK city, Leeds, from the perspective of both brand steerers and brand consumers. The qualitative research approach and case study results from brand steerers and consumers reveal that a high degree of buy-in exists among leading brand steerers. Furthermore, findings indicate some significant differences between the steerers and citizens' vision for the city's brand that prevents the two sets of viewpoints from being strongly aligned; although communalities exist between stakeholder groups, the supply side is taking a more strategic direction whereas the demand side is more pragmatic. Managerial and theoretical implications provide practical recommendations for managers as well as broader suggestions for the research area in general.

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1. Introduction

With prominent cities such as London, New York and Amsterdam allocating substantial resources towards branding (Braun, 2012), tourism destination marketers and city planners are becoming increasingly conscious of the branding concept (Ekinci, Sirakaya-Turk, & Preciado, 2013; Hultman, Skarmas, Oghazi, & Beheshti, 2015; Kavaratzis, 2004). Along with this trend is increased scholarly attention to what academics describe as city branding: branding and marketing cities to (potential) residents, visitors, and investors (Merrilees, Miller, & Herrington, 2009). Academics have examined many issues, including city brand image and personality (Hosany, Ekinci, & Uysal, 2006), residents' brand attitudes (Merrilees et al., 2009), branding implications for satellite cities (Merrilees, Miller, & Herrington, 2013) and frameworks for effective city branding (Kavaratzis, 2004).

Despite this breadth, exciting opportunities remain. The literature suggests that cities realize the benefits of branding via an integration route connecting city brands with key targets and stakeholders (Kavaratzis, 2004). Integration requires a close fit between stakeholders' physical and psychological needs, and the city brand's own functional and symbolic attributes (Hankinson & Cowking, 1993). However, city branding research emphasizes a top-down branding strategy bias placing city planners at the top and from where researchers study their roles as influencers of local stakeholders' brand perceptions (Kavaratzis, 2004). If stakeholder buy-in is critical to realize a city's brand aspirations

(Braun, Kavaratzis, & Zenker, 2013), an even more critical concern should be whether there is and should be congruence between the supply and demand sides of city brand visions. In other words, do demand and supply side visions converge on critical indices such as the envisioned future for the city brand?

Closely related is lack of research into understanding city brand administrators' dual roles as audience and stakeholders. Being residents or, at least, visitors themselves, city brand administrators occupy both the supply and demand sides of the city branding equation and are thus exposed to opposing (converging) forces. If different stakeholders can have different brand aspirations (Merrilees et al., 2009), understanding brand administrators' brand attitudes constitutes an important first step in defining the extent of advocacy that should accompany city branding. In other words, where disparities exist between brand administrators' own brand perceptions and the articulated vision, there may be a need for internal brand advocacy at the administrator level. More critically, such incongruence may have far reaching implications for the ability to gain external stakeholder buy-in.

Lastly, with deepening globalization, smaller cities have a heightened need to enhance their visibility through image management (Judd, 1995) and niche creation (Markusen & Schrock, 2006). While bigger cities must also manage these factors, evidence suggests that the case for smaller cities may be more nuanced. For instance, compared to top-tier cities, second-tier cities are unique in terms of their residents' behaviors, attitudes, and values (Frideres, 2006). The current literature does not explore how these unique characteristics of the city brand visioning process and its implications.

To help resolve these issues, this study combines De Chernatony's (2001) brand vision model with a case study approach to assess stakeholder attitudes towards a second-tier UK city, Leeds. Specifically, the

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: m.hultman@leeds.ac.uk (M. Hultman), bnaay@leeds.ac.uk (A.A. Yeboah-Banin), lformaniuk@gmail.com (L. Formaniuk).

study explores the supply and demand side visions for the Leeds city brand emphasizing its objectives, values, and future. By supply and demand side visions, the study refers to current and aspirational views of the Leeds brand among brand administrators (supply) and brand targets (demand). The supply-side elements include local authorities, visitor and conference bureaus, and tourism organizations (Bramwell & Rawding, 1994), whilst the demand side encompasses all of the city's current and potential users (including residents, tourists, and businesses) (Braun, 2012).

This study therefore offers several contributions to the literature. By exploring parallels between supply and demand side visions of the Leeds city brand, the study brings a holistic picture to the discourse on stakeholder engagement in the city branding process. This enables a dual perspective on the key issues in brand visioning that highlights the key considerations for brand advocacy. The evidence from a second-tier city also offers fresh perspectives in this regard. In addition, by examining the brand vision perceptions of city brand administrators, the study breaks new ground by incorporating them as bona fide brand targets with brand attitudes. To the extent that their brand attitudes may coincide with or contradict their decision roles, understanding brand administrators' vision is critical for city brand advocacy, buy-in, and delivery.

2. Conceptual background

2.1. City brand vision

Brands are arguably an organization's most powerful asset. Brands ensure that stakeholders can distinguish between market offerings and make them attractive. Brands thus represent opportunities for profit as firms can leverage their benefits (Lindemann, 2010; Murphy, 1990). To deliver the benefits of distinctiveness and attractiveness, however, brands must be vision-driven with "clear direction that people can understand, embrace, and follow passionately" (Mathieu, 2005, p. 13). According to De Chernatony (2001), this vision presents a strategic intent for the brand that must appear exciting to stakeholders and generate enthusiasm. The brand vision thus becomes the platform for consumers' engagement with the brand.

For destination and city branding, brand vision management means managing perceptions to influence mental maps about a place and to tie them to targets' present and future needs (Kavaratzis & Ashworth, 2006). Earlier city branding discourse had disagreements on whether cities have product characteristics that make them amenable to branding (Skinner, 2008; Virgo & De Chernatony, 2006). More recent discussions, however, tend to converge around the notion that places are akin to corporate brands (Merrilees et al., 2013) in that they are subject to multiple stakeholder interests. As such, both corporate and city brands are complex and have dense constituencies (Kavaratzis, 2004), which for the latter includes leaders, investors, residents, employees, and customers. In addition, city brands carry additional complexities arising from the associated political and public interest factors (Ashworth, 2008).

Braun (2012) links political and public interests to the governance setting in which city branding occurs, and argues that city brand administrators' understanding of the brand and the political priorities behind their decisions are fundamental to achieving brand coherence. However, because city branding is a network-led process representing public-private synergies, a common vision across stakeholder groups is critical. If stakeholder buy-in is integral to branding (Kotler, Asplund, Rein, & Haider, 1999), then understanding supply and demand side visions for city brands is central to gauging the extent of shared vision and buy-in.

To understand brand vision, scholars have developed several brand analysis frameworks. Kavaratzis's (2004) city image communication model that tracks the use of a layered communication system to build images that feed into desired city visions. Anholt (2006) uses a brand hexagon framework suggesting that the essence of a city brand lies in

its physical attributes, pulse, presence, potential, people, and perquisites. There is also Hildreth's (2008) city brand barometer that provides criteria for measuring city brands' strength, and finally De Chernatony's (2001) brand vision model.

This study adopts the De Chernatony model because enables an analysis of the vision construct as applied to city brands. According to Virgo & De Chernatony (2006), the complex nature of city brands creates the potential for multiple (competing) visions that only serve to dilute and weaken the strength of the city brand. The De Chernatony (2001) brand vision model presents a three-pronged approach to assess and build successful brand visions strategically. In proposing the model, De Chernatony emphasized the role of visionary leadership to transfer the conceived brand vision across stakeholder groups to reach congruence.

According to the model, a brand's vision comprises stakeholder perceptions of the brand's purpose, values, and its envisioned future. First, a brand's vision lies in the stakeholders' associations with its current status related to how they perceive the brand's values. Second, brand vision emphasizes a purpose (i.e. the brand's intended benefits and its promise to stakeholders). These two components then feed into the envisioned future environment (outlining perspectives on the brand's desired state over a ten-year span) (De Chernatony, 2001). Because brand vision perceptions vary across stakeholders, gauging levels of (in)congruence across groups requires a model that enables a comparison of identifiable vision elements. Accordingly, the current study adopts the three-pronged components of the De Chernatony (2001) model (see Fig. 1) as the framework to compare supply and demand side brand visions.

3. Methodology

This study's case city, Leeds, is the second largest metropolitan district and the third most populous local authority in the UK (BBC, 2014). As the UK's fastest growing city, Leeds' £56 billion economy supports a population size of three million. Outside London, Leeds is the largest center for financial services with a growth forecast of 25% in the next decade. More than £3.8 billion was expended on large-scale development projects in the last decade with a further £5.5 billion of current investment in construction (Leeds City Council Website).

In 2011, the Leeds City Council launched a new vision for the brand, with the intent to become "the best city in the UK by 2030." The city plans to cultivate open, fair, and welcoming communities characterized by prosperity and sustainability to realize this vision.

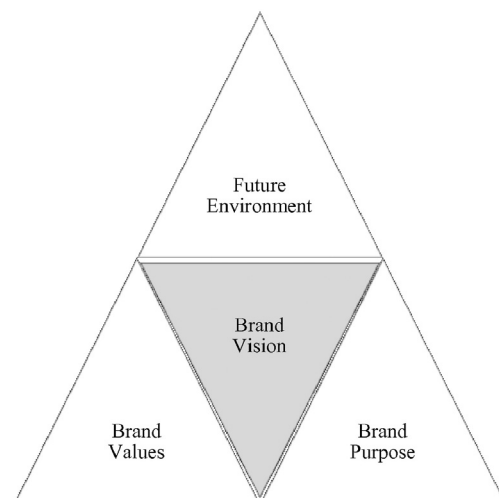


Fig. 1. Brand vision model.

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