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Research Paper

The 'mental topography' of the Shanghai city brand: A netnographic approach to formulating city brand positioning strategies

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ABSTRACT

Research has documented that social media facilitated word-of-mouth has become the most influential city brand communication channel. This online ethnography of the the Shanghai city brand experience applies a predetermined, 16-dimensional construct as the heuristic strategy for data gathering and analysis. It identifies the person-to-person encounters dimension as the most salient. Dimensions such as environmentalism, which in other studies has been identified as significant for the Shanghai city brand, appears to occupy a relatively low priority in the online discourse relating to Shanghai. These insights can be can be leveraged for the purpose of formulating a realistic brand positioning strategy for Shanghai, centered around the items constituting the encounters dimension. Further this study identifies that while the city branding associated with the World Expo in 2010 appears to be disconnected from the salience of the encounters dimensions, the Shanghai city branding campaign launched in 2015 is more congruent with the findings of this study as it draws on the historical uniqueness of Shanghai as being a space for inter-cultural encounters between East and West.

1. Introduction

Scholars within the field of city branding posit that the purpose of city branding is to impact word-of-mouth communication (Kavaratzis, 2004) and that the explosive growth in social media communication is changing the manner in which word-of-mouth influence is generated as individuals evolve into citizen-journalists (Sienkiewicz, 2014), who participate in co-construction of the city images through streams of social media entries (Stigliani & Ravasi, 2012). Thus, Braun, Kavaratzis, and Zenker (2013) argue that 'new and existing residents who can easily identify with the communicated place brand will likely become ambassadors of this place brand'. In this connection, the Nielsen Global Trust in Advertising Survey, polling more than 28,000 consumers in 56 countries, identifed that 92% of consumers trust word of mouth above any other form of marketing communication (Nielsen Company, 2012).

Research has further documented that consumers are more inclined to trust online reviews than more traditional channels of information and that electronic word of mouth positively impacts both destinations image and desire to visit (Jalilvand, Samiei, Dini, & Manzari, 2012). A study by Deloitte concluded that 77% of travelers are influenced by online reviews when purchasing a trip (Zuberance Report, 2011). With regard to Shanghai, a 2007–2008 study concluded that overseas tourists base their decision of visiting the city mainly on the recommendation of online networks (Xiaoxin, 2008).

The increasing importance of social media as a tool for interpersonal communication is in tandem increasing the importance of this communication channel for destination-branding strategies. Thus, a 2012 survey of 300 senior corporate communications and public-affairs practitioners operating in Asia Pacific (Public Affairs Asia & Ogilvy Public Relations, 2012) documented that word of mouth is seen as the most important city brand medium (59%), followed by public relations (51%), social media communication (40%), and traditional advertising (30%).

Consequently, political decision makers and marketers will have to not only be cognizant of the resident perspective but also try acritvely to leverage the multiplying impact of word-of-mouth communication on social media platforms (Conroy & Narula, 2009). Therefore, it can be argued that the success of city branding strategies are, as is the case for most marketing efforts, linked to an understanding of how the city can be positioned relative to key stakeholders' needs and wants in a manner that presents the city as having offerings that meet these needs and wants 'better' than other urban centers (Lee & Kotler, 2011). The literature on city branding, however, indicates that formulating the city brand positioning strategies might in practice be more spurious than guided by research-based insights on the various stakeholder perspectives. Further, in some cases the positioning and associated branding strategies appear to be driven mainly by political aspirations. Studies of city brand positioning strategies (Pike, 2009) have indicated that, quite often, the city branding perspective becomes confounded with local and geopolitical interests and aspirations. For example,

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Kowalik's (2012) study of trade fairs indicates that the projected brand image is often influenced by local officials' political aspirations.

China is currently engaged in a multi-year and multi-billion-dollar process of hosting mega-events such as the summer and winter Olympics in Beijing, the Asian games in Guangzhou, and the World Expo in Shanghai. Marketers typically view such events as being parts of a larger place branding effort aimed at attracting visitors, investment, businesses and new residents (Kotler, Haider, & Rein, 1993). In the case of Shanghai, a recent study of social media communication (Larsen, 2014) indicated a significant disconnect between the officially endorsed city brand values and the perception of foreign residents and visitors to this city, which arguably serves as an example of a city brand position strategy that is driven by political aspirations rather than based on consumer research (Larsen & Dehoff, 2016).

The aim of this paper is therefore to develop a research-based starting point for a Shanghai city brand positioning strategy. Considering that social media has become one of the most significant city brand communication channels, this study will sample discussion forums from social media platforms targeting foreign residents and visitors to Shanghai for the purpose of identifying the most salient dimensions of the online discourse. A positioning strategy may subsequently be formulated around these.

2. Review of the literature and theoretical foundation

2.1. Theoretical foundation

The attitude construct is a traditional realm of psychological research, which has contributed to a rich body of literature, where empirical studies have documented a causal relationship between experience and attitude formation, and that attitudes are stronger, more enduring, more accessible, and, therefore, more likely to influence behavior, when they are activated from the memory of personal experiences (Aiken, 2002). In this connection, Eagly and Chaiken (1993, pp. 10–12) proposed that attitudes consist of three elements, which can be empirically observed: (1) 'evaluations', (2) 'attitude objects', and (3) 'tendencies'. They further argue that it is the tendency or predisposition to evaluate certain objects in certain ways that is the true attitude and not individual examples of cognitive, affective, or behavioral evaluative responses (Eagly & Chaiken, 2007). Consequently, scholars such as Kotler, Asplund, Rein, and Haider (1999) argue that city brands can be conceptualized as the aggregate sum of stakeholder evaluations.

The theoretical literature on attitude formation posits, however, that the causal connection between experience, evaluation, attitudes and behaviors is tempered by intervening variables such as beliefs, associations and emotions (Chaiken & Baldwin, 1981; Zanna & Rempel, 1988) and the cues each person absorb and the meaning and interpretation applied to these (Pavlović, 2011). Scholars argue, however, that understanding the pre-existing image of the city is a necessity for formulating effective brand positioning statements that can lead to sustainable brand image strategies (Prophet, 2006).

Contemporary attitude research has departed from exploring the function of attitudes to exploring the dimensionality of belief structures and associated attitudes, and Kavaratzis and Ashworth (2006) argue that the city brand is a cognitive-emotional construct, which marketers must attempt to leverage by optimally positioning their idealized version of the city relative to existing belief structures. From this understanding of attitudes and brand perceptions, it follows that a multidimensional scaling method may be utilized to provide a spatial representation of the perceptional topography of individuals and groups (Goodrich, 1978; Wish, Deutsch, & Biener, 1970). Thus, Echtner and Ritchie (2003) emphasize the importance of approaching city brand image research with a dimensionality model that is as exhaustive as possible, in order to capture the nuances of the image perception as well as the relative importance of each of the perceptional dimensions. The following sections of this review will examine the literature pertaining to the popular image of Shanghai, as well as the local decision-makers' attempts to position Shanghai in the minds of the international audience. The aim is to illuminate pre-existing beliefs about Shanghai for the purpose of contextualizing the findings of this study in a broader theoretical and empirical frame of reference.

2.2. Historical images

Hu (2013, p. 258) argues that the image perception of Shanghai during the past century and a half has been defined by 'the different roles Shanghai has played in China's national development'. Up until around 1850, Shanghai was an insignificant village on the Yangtze River but with the ascendancy of the British Empire in Asia, China was forced to open several settlements to Western exploitation. Shanghai thus became a treaty city and, for better and worse, an urban space where a broad social spectrum of Chinese and Westerners could interact for the first time in history. Chen (2007) posits that in the eyes of most Mainland Chinese, Shanghai is the most Westernized city, and an urban space where Western and Eastern civilization mix and create a unique international atmosphere, which is very different from other large Chinese cities on the Mainland.

While the Chinese perspective on Shanghai may be fixated on its distinctively un-Chinese characteristics, Chen argues that Western observers, who are somewhat blind to the uniqueness of their own culture, are more perceptive of the Chinese characteristics. In other words, it is argued that in the imagination of Westerners and Chinese, Shanghai is at odds with the cultural worldview of both groups, representing something exotic, alluring, and even corrupt and amoral.

Shanghai, or at least the idea of Shanghai as an amoral city, has captured Western audiences for the better part of the 20th century. In books such as 'Sin City', 'Shanghai: City for Sale' (Clifford, 2001) or in Herge's iconic comic book from 1936 'The Blue Lotus', Shanghai has often been depicted as free from constraining Western morals and regulations in terms not only of business but also in respect of crime and sexual pleasures. Gulliver (2009) argues that the interwar period's fascination with Shanghai was at odds with the political and social realities of the time, and that other Asian cities, such as Tokyo, were undergoing a similar transformation. However, this 'idealized exoticism' stems, in Gulliver's view, from the symbolism derived from this city's free-wheeling capitalist lifestyle, standing at the edge of doom, poised to be invaded by Japan and later taken over by communists.

After almost 30 years of imposed isolationism, Deng Xiaoping rejected Maoism and began a process of opening to the West and experimentation with capitalism. Initially it was Shenzhen and not Shanghai, that got to play the leading role in what would be the re-creation of an entire nation over the span of a few decades. Brook (2013) argues that the colonial symbolism of Shanghai was too strong for the party official in Beijing to contemplate this city as the initial spearhead of modernization and there was a fear that the new economic zones would conjure the image of Shanghai's colonial concessions and 'release' its dormant anti-socialist and cosmopolitan spirit. These worries appeared to have abated after the 1989 Tiananmen Square uprising, where Beijing and not Shanghai was the epicenter of anti-socialist dissent (Brook, 2013). A few decades later, Shanghai had transformed into the 'flagship for China's global ambitions' (Gulliver, 2009, p. 120), although retaining a colonial fascination in the minds of many Westerners (Bennet, 2013).

2.3. Purpose and motives – branding Shanghai

What appears to be the first modern foray into an active city branding (Labbrand, 2010) may be the 2010 Shanghai World Expo. To observers it would appear that the Chinese authorities attempted to take control of the image of this city and distance Shanghai from its colonial past, while at the same time retaining its cosmopolitan and

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