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# Strengthening the city's reputation in the age of cities: an insight in the city branding theory

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## Abstract

City brand is a valuable asset that improves the competitive advantage of the city in the globalisation era. Relying on uniqueness and utilising various methods, cities endeavour to promote their reputation and sustainability level by attracting the capital and human resources. In the intense competition between the global cities, recognition of the factors that enhance the city's reputation will improve urban planning and management framework. This study explores how the city could obtain the reputation that it deserves through a more in-depth study of the city branding phenomenon. For this purpose, some of the city branding practices criticised using the empirical analysis method. The finding highlights that although city branding with its complex nature is an effective tool for promoting the city's reputation, residents and their priorities have an insufficient concentration in many city branding practices.

**Keywords:** City brand, Competitive advantage, Globalisation, City's reputation, Sustainability

## Introduction

Cities and megacities are faced with the impacts of globalisation and are confronted by reforms in their economic, cultural and social mosaic. Rapid growth in competition among cities is one of the globalisation consequences, which is seen in different levels and activities range (Kavaratzis 2005). Given the free movement of capital and people in the 'age of cities', it is essential for the sustainability of the city to maintain residents satisfied with the city. In the attempt for responding to the demands of competition and attract the specified target groups, there has been an increasing interest in city branding within academia and the public authorities during the last four decades (Oguztimur and Akturan 2016). Interest in city branding may be perceived as a component of a broader recognition framework that cities can benefit from implementing coherent strategies concerning the management of their resources and reputation (Dinnie 2010, p. 3). In a world where cities aggressively compete to increase the investment by public and private

sectors, reputation is one of the key success factors. City's reputation is both a lens through which information is observed and a decision criterion (Middleton 2010). The inappropriate understanding of the factors that affect the city's reputation cause sometimes urban managers and policymakers act without specific plans and strategies or, in some cases, take independent and even conflicting actions. This may cause many disadvantages to cities and, generally, the public interest of citizens due to the cost of lost opportunities. Cities adopt various methods to represent their own reputation and credibility (Ashworth and Kavaratzis 2009) and therefore, achieving a global model of city branding could be a complicated and challenging task. However, the recognition of the factors enhances the city's reputation and will lead to an efficient urban planning and management framework. This study explores how the city could obtain the reputation that it deserves through a more in-depth study of the city branding phenomenon by establishing a systematic and rational correlation among these factors.

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## Theoretical framework

A brand is a set of images, characteristics, or feelings that consumers remember when they think of a specific symbol, product, service, organisation or place (Kavaratzis and Ashworth 2005; Simeon 2006). In the creation of a brand, the main challenge is to determine the core of brand identity and its starting point, that is a brand essence (Florek and Janiszewska 2013). According to Kapferer (1999), “before knowing how we are perceived, we must know who we are”, and thus, he suggests that brand identity must be established before one considers what brand image is or ought to be. Kall (2001) explained that “the purpose of identity is to define the meaning, intention and reason for the brand; the identity needs to precede the image”. Besides, the branding process links directly to place management. It means that all activities undertaken by the place’s authorities are aiming at improving consumers’ perceptions about the area that is being branded. Urban planners or place managers use a range of marketing methods and techniques that create the brand identity of the place.

The image of the city can be considered as one of the most significant key concerns both for city identity as well as city branding. According to Boyer (2011), city image offers a sense of identity, well-being, and belonging. They formed the basis of memory systems; they attracted attention and made a place memorable, storable in mind. City image can be best interpreted at the intersection of city branding and city identity since the image is an indispensable part of both (Riza et al. 2012). Also, some studies (Bigné et al. 2001; Hussein et al. 2018; Shirvani Dastgerdi and De Luca 2019a) confirm a positive relationship between the city image and satisfaction of visitors.

City branding is conceptualised from different angles, and there is a variety of starting points and perspectives in its literature (Oguztimur and Akturan 2016; Shirvani Dastgerdi and De Luca 2018a). Although City branding is formed in the marketing literature (Berglund and Olsson 2010), it is an interdisciplinary mix of marketing, architecture, urban planning and tourism studies as a research field (Zenker and Martin 2011; Oguztimur and Akturan 2016). According to Kavaratzis and Ashworth (2005), City branding takes place within a communication system that intimately connects the overall city image and identity. Also, it may be considered innovation in the overlapping fields of marketing and communication (Popescu 2017a). Nevertheless, one of the objectives of city branding is to create uniqueness, which makes the city differentiable from others in the age of cities (Ashworth 2009, p. 9). It aims at attracting resources to the cities in a way that ensures the quality of place and wellbeing of the citizen (Björner 2013; Popescu 2017b).

Baker (2007) has found that in the city branding process, the image and identity of a particular destination play an essential role in making a city uniqueness. Before the city branding process can begin, it is paramount to understand how the city sees itself and how it wants to be perceived externally. Accordingly, the identity of the city brand depends mainly on the identification of stakeholders and their accompaniment in the representation and formulation of a brand, which leads to an increased sense of ownership and sustainability of brand (Van Gelder 2011, pp 36–38; Shirvani Dastgerdi and De Luca 2019b). In general classification, key stakeholders of city branding include entrepreneur groups, investors, residents and visitors (García et al. 2012; Shirvani Dastgerdi and De Luca 2018b).

Kavaratzis (2004) introduces six essential subjects in the city branding process. These involve (1) what the city indubitably is; (2) what the city says it is; (3) what the city feels it is; (4) whom the city seeks to serve; (5) what the city is seen to be; and (6) what is encouraged and expected? On that basis, he proposes that branding can be understood within a three-level communication framework. The first level refers to physical and visible aspects from which a city can be understood. The second level consists of advertisement 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. Therefore, what should be noticed in branding of a city is that how characteristics of a place, i.e., architecture and history, economic and products, cultural activities, can be transformed into a justifiable identity which is acceptable to all people (Shirvani Dastgerdi and De Luca 2019c). Moreover, a key factor in the success or failure of city branding strategies is the identification of stakeholders and their accompaniment in the representation and formulation of a brand, which leads to an increased sense of ownership and sustainability of brand (Dinnie 2010).

Reputation reflects people’s prevailing attitude toward something—in this case, a city. Such a view enables cities to counteract competition and offer intuitive, relevant and customised value to target groups (Abimbola 2009). In the literature, it is discussed that reputation is a more stable indicator of performance than brand or image. In this regard, image only concerns more recent perceptions, whereas reputation is derived from multiple images over time (Fombrun and van Riel 1997). In other words: “reputation requires nurturing through time and image consistency” (Markwick and Fill 1997). Reputation is a crucial driver of people’s attitudes and behaviours towards a particular object (Sims 2002). City’s reputation can be seen as influential over decisions regarding investment, residential location, and tourism (Braun et al. 2018).

## Research methodology

This research presents a more in-depth study of the city branding phenomenon to explore how the city could obtain the reputation that it deserves. Data derived from the secondary literature and some of the city branding practices criticised using the empirical analysis method.

In search, selection and exclusion of the literature, a methodological procedure applied, which are explained below:

### Search criteria

- Only open access database.
- Just peer-reviewed journals.
- Empirical and reviewed studies.
- Explicitly addressing the 'city branding'.

### Selection criteria

- Initial focus on keywords and title.
- Empirical justification (name of the city).
- The used methodology.

### Exclusion criteria

- Studies focused on different geographical scales other than cities.
- Conference proceedings.
- Book chapters.

Following the mentioned procedure, the 24 case studies recognised in the secondary literature and selected for empirical analysis (Table 1).

## Data analysis

Globalisation and economic crises are phenomena that reforming the socio-economic mosaic of cities. The fact that cities today are in intense competition with each other for attracting resources and human resources have discussed in many studies. Moreover, a few scholars have pointed out the competition between cities and countries in some cases.

It can be discussed that studies on urban economics themselves are a reaction to the appearance of the new competitive environment between cities, which applies the city branding as a beneficial tool for identifying and increasing the credibility of cities. The prosperity of economic activities in the host city can increase the value added for properties, employment, income and

**Table 1 The 24 selected case studies based on secondary literature**

No.	Case study	No.	Case study
1	Stresa	13	Malang
2	Isfahan	14	Tehran
3	Pekalongan	15	Turin
4	Saint Petersburg	16	Genoa
5	Irbid	17	Venice
6	Sibiu	18	Piacenza
7	Liverpool	19	Kharkov
8	Dubai	20	Budapest
9	Istanbul	21	Seoul
10	Doha	22	Amsterdam
11	Qatar	23	Cluj-Napoca
12	Barcelona	24	Florence

tax levels that are effective in improving the quality of citizens' life.

Cultural activities and human development of the community is one of the imperatives for city branding. In this regard, mega-events are considered as cultural capital, which remains in the memory of citizens even for a long time after the ending. The perception of residents' view of the city is of great importance in terms of the cultural dimension in city branding. Therefore, in the first step, it is necessary to understand the identity of the city and highlight its tangible symbols such as cultural heritage, landmarks, historical events and, if no feature available, the implementation of substantial architectural projects. In cultural activities, the perception of strengths of the place and participation of citizens in the creation of city image is mentioned as the foremost step in the realisation of an impressive city brand.

Advertising and media are a part of city branding process that shares the unique aspects and strategic goals of the city. Advertising strategies, along with executive management, have a significant impact on the introduction of the city and its competitive advantages. Associated with the participation of stakeholders, advertising strategies are summarised in abstract terms of motto and logo of the city. Measures and evaluating the effectiveness of advertising tools can be considered as one of the most significant tasks of media management. These measures include a wide range of activities such as the development of technology to cover cultural-sports events, development of satellite networks and establishment of online advertising bases.

Given the various motivations in boosting city image and creation of the city brand, the support of policymakers and participation of government in city

branding projects are important for domestic policy-making. On the other hand, some studies were conducted about the impact of national identity on the identity of cities. Therefore, foreign policy-making and the communication and interaction of government with the world can be considered as another compelling factor in the realisation of city image.

A proper city image plays a crucial role in the creation of successful city brand. Using the content analysis method, Table 2 presents a classification of factors influencing city image, and indirectly city branding, including economic performance, media and advertising, cultural activities, policy making and urban planning.

### Discussion

Findings of this study suggest that city branding is influenced by a set of factors at higher levels that play a key role in its success or failure. There is not just a single strategy for city branding; however, what matters in the first step is a comprehensive understanding of the current city image. This image can be interpreted from the perspective of tourists and residents (Shirvani Dastgerdi and De Luca 2019d). Therefore, the participation of these groups in expressing their views on the city is very constructive and effective in determining the urban planning policies. Also, the role of cultural activities in understanding the differences and forming the identity and image of the city is considerable. Human development and enhancement of the level of education in the community can enhance the image of the city and influence the success of the city brand. Another important step towards the formation of city image is targeted planning for holding the important cultural or sports events at regional to international levels or those related to the city branding objectives (Grichting 2013). So, the cultural and educational policies of the society play a vital role in a successful process and thus, it is essential to consider the city branding as public policy (Hereźniak 2017).

It should be noted that tourism is often supposed to bring numerous economic benefits, as it creates jobs and positively affects the destination. However, mass tourism has also caused several financial troubles. Many destinations have to deal with seasonal fluctuations and therefore changes in demand. In this sense, Florence could be a good example of a prosperous city that attracts numerous visitors to itself as a consequence of globalisation and benefits from its economic potential at an ideal level. However, job opportunities in this city could be discussed from two aspects. Firstly, Job opportunities often are dominated by the tourism industry. Secondly, it is difficult to find a stable job, referring to changes in the volume of tourism in different seasons. It seems that although tourism activities are defined as an advantage

of economic development in global cities, these activities become central to the economy of cities and deteriorate many other economic opportunities which could be created by the promotion of globalisation level and the use of experts and investors in these cities. Although tourist presence can contribute to the sustainable development of economic and social conditions for the residents, it can also provoke the rise of environmental pressures. In other words, tourism plays a vital role in the economy of cities, while its job opportunities remain limited to recreation and leisure. This issue can also be discussed when the benefit of renting houses to tourists has emerged as a significant challenge to find an affordable apartment for citizens in touristic cities (Shirvani Dastgerdi and De Luca 2019a).

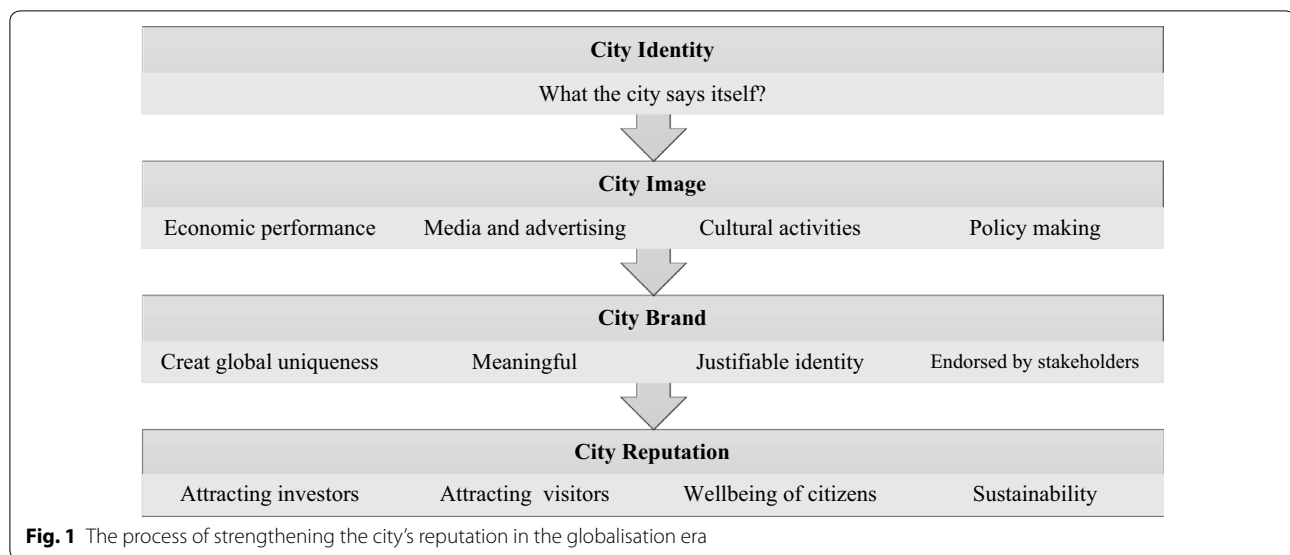
Since communities change over time, the city image should be continually reviewed and enhanced. In the process of strengthening city's reputation using the city brand strategy (Fig. 1), urban planning requires paying particular attention to activities that boost the image of a competitive city in terms of human health, citizens' quality of life, job creation, developing public spaces and environmental innovations. Besides, proper identification of city identity and developing a sufficient participatory and communication approach guarantees the acceptability of city brand. The proper identification of interest groups and planning based on the participation of stakeholders enhance the sense of belonging to the city brand. However, the analysis of the factors shows the fact that very few of the case studies refer to the citizens and their experience of the city, specifically in the city image category. Understanding residents' perception of the city and their level of support is considered vital in city branding process (Stylidis 2016). This finding may suggest that in the analysed cities, the brand is seen predominantly as an external phenomenon with very little or no impact on the residents (Insch and Walters 2018).

The findings also show that the political structure of countries affects the formation of city brand (Aysu 2013). Since cities need massive investments in the improvement of their urban infrastructure to create or boost their brands, the role of government is of great importance as a supporter and investor in strategic projects. However, Barcelona and Budapest are among the cities that turned to successful examples of city branding in the world by bypassing the communist political regime. Brexit can be perceived as another example of the dependence and subjugation of cities to a political system. Great Britain leaves Europe, while London, the capital of Britain, overwhelmingly voted to remain in (Menon and Salter 2016). As BREXIT has opened the new opportunity for business trades, European cities are willing to take the advantages of the situation (Popescu 2017b). Paris, Frankfurt,

**Table 2 Effective factors on city image**

	Sub category	Category	Concept
City image	Economic performance	Competitive advantage	Improvement of quality of life environment, knowledge-based economy with cultural and tourism activities, reduction of uncertainty in decision-making for investment
		Value-added	Enhancement of productive services, the increased value of estates and capital, increase in taxes, business boom
		Economic development	The attraction of investors, elimination of geographical boundaries for economic purposes, brand as intangible capital, competition between cities and countries
		World economy	Hosting for world financial institutions, connection to the world economy, application of tourism capacities as a part of the world economy
	Cultural activities	Improving the city identity	Detection of city differences, recognition of city identity, regeneration of cultural heritage, emphasis on city landmarks
		Improvement of the image of the place	Detection of strengths of place, recognition of residents' view about the city, recognition of visitors' view about the city, participation of citizens in the creation of an ideal city image
		Human development of community	Development of cultural policies, Promotion of level of education of citizens, the competitive advantage of universities, globalisation of universities
		Global events	Targeted hosting for global events, events as cultural capital, partnership as sister cities and expansion of international interactions
	Policy making	Competitive strategy	Competition between cities in the world with different motives, the attraction of economic and social capital, sustainable urban development
		Domestic political structure	Type of political system, the activity of cities under supervision of national policies, city branding as public policy, government participation in investment and city branding
		Foreign political structure	Role of the national brand index in the attraction of resources, the impact of national identity on the identity of cities, foreign affairs, replacement of non-oil economy
	Media and advertising	Cultural advertising policies	The utilisation of the media in the introduction of the city brand, constructive changes by cultural tools
		Improvement of the advertising infrastructure	Development of technology to cover cultural-sports events, development of satellite networks, the establishment of online advertising bases
		Development of promotional and advertising Package	Application of logo, suitable slogans, effective public relations, the illustration of the city as the best choice, targeted advertising
	Urban planning	The strategic plan	A balance between global pressure and local needs, attention to city brand location, recognition of stakeholder interests, utilisation of stakeholder powers, recognition of identifying characteristics of the city, promotion of a sense of belonging to the city brand
Urban development projects		Connection of construction projects for branding purposes, development of urban public spaces, development and renovation of urban infrastructure, inspiration from global tourism models	
Management of city brand		Meaningful branding, dynamic brand management, proper identification of interest groups, decision-making based on the engagement of stakeholders, urban managers' stability in city branding objectives, the connection between political organisations	





Luxemburg and Dublin are developing their attractions for investment and headquarters functions for the EU market; Estonia is typically tech-savvy by offering e-residency for British digital entrepreneurs (Clark 2016). In this sense, recognition of local contexts, complexities and challenges of cultural production must be central to city branding policy, given that “the same policies produce different effects and impacts under various institutional and social, cultural and economic contextual situations” (Pratt 2010). The lack of such an understanding at the centre of policy has resulted in “Xerox” policies that are copied from one place to another with no acknowledgement of different local social and economic contexts (Pratt 2009). Moreover, branding objectives and policies must balance the globalisation pressures and local needs to enhance the quality of the city as a place to live. However, long term economic changes at the regional and international levels, on the one hand, and political changes at organisational and national levels, on the other hand, have a potential to influence the formation, rate of changes and realisation or instability of the city brand (Kulibanova and Teor 2017).

## Conclusion

Globalisation and economic crises are phenomena that have accelerated the competition between cities toward the attraction of capital and human resources. Cities' effort for sustainability in the globalisation era provides a basis for the tendency towards city branding that is created by defining a unique city image and city identity, accepted by the stakeholders. This study

attempted to present an insight into the various factors at different levels that affect the city brand and accordingly, the city's reputation. The results of this research highlight strengthening reputation of the city in the globalisation era require a meaningful and creative combination of city identity and city image through city branding strategy. Also, the empirical analysis of branding practice in 24 cases reveals most of the researches on city branding have focused on tourists as stakeholders, and the brand is seen predominantly as an external phenomenon with less or no influence on the residents. Cities are not only tourism destinations and focusing the marketing effort on attracting visitors not only perilously limiting the effectiveness of branding strategy, but also the city's character itself. By focusing exclusively on branding the city for tourism, the city's form and, more importantly, its spirit acquire a meaning not necessarily according to the aspirations of city residents. Lastly, strengthening the reputation of the city through branding strategy is a dynamic and continuous process that should be considered as a long-term and public policy at all level. This process forms in a complex and multidimensional context including economic, cultural, political, media and urban planning; in which various stakeholders participate through a variety of ideas, motives and goals. These variables influence the formation, rate of changes and realisation or instability of the city brand. The next step would be to test and develop this hypothesis further through a series of in-depth case studies.

**Authors' contributions**

The authors contributed equally to this work. Both authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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**Availability of data and materials**

The datasets used and analyzed during the current study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

**Competing interests**

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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