

THE ROLE AND IMPORTANCE OF PEOPLE DIMENSION IN CITY BRANDING IN DIGITAL AGE

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SUMMARY

City branding, as a relatively new concept and research topic, has been positioned as one of the most important factors for overall city image and its further development. Besides location, infrastructure, natural beauty, heritage, prerequisites and potential, people are also seen as an integral part of city branding, especially in digital age. Local population represents an important pillar of city branding due to its characteristics, hospitality (joviality and friendliness), as well as lifestyle (relaxation, enjoyment in food and drink, friendship, music). The aim of this paper is to analyze the role and importance of the local population in city branding in the digital age. This paper may be valuable for city leaders and residents who are involved in the city branding process, because it analyzes and provides guidance on how the local population affects the general atmosphere of the city and its brand in the digital age.

KEYWORDS: digital age, city branding, local population, brand strategy, city leaders.

ULOGA I ZNAČAJ LJUDI U BRENDINGU GRADA U DIGITALNO DOBA

SAŽETAK

Brendiranje grada, kao relativno nov koncept i tema istraživanja, pozicionirano je kao jedan od najvažnijih faktora celokupnog imidža grada i njegovog daljeg razvoja. Pored lokacije, infrastrukture, prirodnih lepota, nasleđa, preduslova i potencijala, ljudi se takođe vide kao sastavni deo brendiranja grada, posebno u digitalnom dobu. Lokalno stanovništvo predstavlja važan stub brendiranja grada zbog svojih karakteristika, gostoprimstva (veselost i druželjubivost), kao i načina života (opuštenost, uživanje u hrani i piću, prijateljstvo, muzika). Cilj ovog rada je analiza uloge i značaja lokalnog stanovništva u brendiranju grada u digitalnom dobu. Ovaj rad može biti dragocen za gradske čelnike i stanovnike koji su uključeni u proces brendiranja grada, jer analizira i daje smernice o tome kako lokalno stanovništvo utiče na opštu atmosferu grada i njegov brend u digitalnom dobu.

KLJUČNE REČI: digitalno doba, brendiranje grada, lokalno stanovništvo, strategija brenda, gradski lideri.

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INTRODUCTION

City branding has become very popular not only in academic fields and research areas, however in the practice of functioning and further development of cities (Kavaratzis & Hatch, 2013; Glinska & Kilon, 2014). It represents a means for achieving competitive advantage and activating city development potential through rational and emotional engagement with the city and its everyday life (Hemelryk Donald & Gammack, 2007). Each city brand is based on opinions and perceptions of its strengths and weaknesses regarding its reputation as a city to visit, study in, invest in, trade with or even live in (Historic England, n.d.). In this sense, a city brand should be suitable for local population, visitors, but also for business people and investors (Dejanović & Lukić, 2018). For that reason, it is necessary to understand and include all components that are important in the process of city branding (Freire, 2009). Anholt-GfK City Brands Index, which is one of the most common methodologies for measuring city brand power, observes and analyzes six key components that determine a city brand: presence, place, prerequisites, people, pulse, and potential (Volos, 2018). City branding has been often criticized and characterized as selective practice in which are dominant interests of a selected group of stakeholders, such as politicians or boards of directors (Eshuis, Klijn & Braun, 2014). Their interests might not always be aligned with the interests and ideas of other stakeholders which are more included in the overall functioning of a city. Furthermore, in recent years it has become harder to differentiate cities according to “hard” factors, such as infrastructure, monuments, economy, and so called “soft” factors, such as friendliness of local population prevailed (Morgan, Pritchard & Pride, 2011). Several authors emphasized that participation of local population is very important not only in the process of city branding (Jeuring & Haarsten, 2017), but also for overall city brand and image (Freire, 2009; Braun, Kavaratzis & Zenker, 2013; Rehmet & Dinnie, 2013; Zavattaro, 2014).

The aim of this paper is to analyze the role and position of the local population in the city branding process in the digital age. When it comes to city branding, the local population determines the culture and lifestyle in a city, and represents active partners and co-producer of public goods, services, and policies (Braun, Kavaratzis & Zenker, 2013; Jeuring & Haarsten, 2017). Each city should be seen as a living city with a soul based on a smart combination of activities and incentives of determined, independent and self-conscious citizens (Vasilić, 2018). Furthermore, cities depend on their local population for social, economic and cultural environments. Complete satisfaction of the local population in certain city represents the key goal of any city leader, because they have become aware that local population has the potential to enhance or harm the city brand (Insch & Florek, 2008). In the digital age, every citizen has access to various social and professional networks and can post, comment, like and share information and opinions about the city. That makes the city branding process more complex, however decision makers are well-informed. Visitors more and more share their opinions and experiences on various social networks such as: Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Trip Advisor, etc. making those social media a valuable tool for city branding.

The paper is organized as follows. The first part of the paper deals with city branding – its role, importance, and key characteristics. The second part of the paper examines the role of the local population in the process of city branding in the digital age.

THE ROLE AND IMPORTANCE OF CITY BRANDING

A good city brand has a great influence on activating development potential of the city itself with the goal to make the city as a magnet for attracting investors, tourists, sponsors, etc. (Hemelryk Donald & Gammack, 2007; Cleave, Arku & Gilliland, 2016). City branding is the sum of perceptions that people have about a city based on their experience, and what they heard about it from others (Herget, Petrů & Abrahám, 2015). There are many advantages for cities who have city brand strategies. Raszkowski (2012) has identified that, regarding social perspective, good city brand strategy provide:

- Perception of the city as a place for spending quality time;
- Higher level of confidence in local authorities;
- Extended opportunities for carrying out important activities;
- Strengthening the local identity;
- Higher level of local creativity;
- Activating the sense of cultural identity;
- Better relations among particular social groups in the city;
- Higher social participation in local problems solving.

The city brand strategy should be consistent with the local development strategy, because in this way is established a strategic harmony that enables the realisation of development goals. It is important to determine the organisational or institutional framework in which the brand strategy is created and realised. The project principle is applied in most cities. Project management is mainly entrusted to the city council, committee or board that consist of the most responsible city leaders. At a lower level, teams consisting of experts from different fields are formed (architects, urban planners, designers, historians, sociologists, marketing experts, etc.). Their task is the realisation of individual activities in the design and implementation of brand strategy. Apart from them, the so-called „brand ambassadors“ (mostly celebrities), who need to adequately present the brand to a wider audience, are included in the project. Consultants, or specialised agencies that deal with city branding, have an important role in such projects. Also, the role of non-governmental organisations (citizen associations), whose main goal is to identify and protect interests of minority groups in the branding process, should not be ignored (Dejanović & Lukić, 2018).

PEOPLE AS A COMPONENT OF CITY BRANDING IN DIGITAL AGE

One of the most popular means of city brand power evaluation is Anholt-GfK City Brands Index (CBI), which consists of six components used to perceive and evaluate city brands. These components are (Anholt, 2006):

Presence is a component of city brand power evaluation, that shows whether a city is famous, that is, recognisable by a wider audience. This component reflects city status, importance and its accomplishments in different segments of human activities such as science, sport, culture, etc.

Place is also an important component of the city brand that includes its physical outdoors aspects such as terrain, climate, hydrography, etc.

Prerequisites. City must fulfill certain prerequisites in order to develop its brand. These prerequisites include the level of infrastructure development - public transport, parking

lots, number and quality of parks, sports grounds, hospitals, schools, kindergartens, hotels, etc.

Pulse. This component includes the way of life, how people spend their free time in the city, events, shops, theatres, restaurants.

Potential shows the economic opportunities that are available in the city, but also opportunities for business and education.

People. The impression that people leave is often crucial when it comes to city evaluation. Friendly, warm, kind attitude and hospitality of local people increase city brand power. On the other hand, a restrained, cold, repulsive, and hostile attitude decreases the attractiveness of the city and lowers its brand rating. In Anholt-GfK City Brands Index (CBI) there are the following statements for people dimension:

- Everyone feels jovial and hospitable in this city.
- Everyone is cold and full of prejudice against the visitors in this city.
- It is easy to settle in and live in this city.
- Everyone feels safe in this city.
- Visitors feel that they are welcomed in this city.

All above listed components reflect the overall quality of living and working in some cities, but also its culture, residents, safety, and visible attractions (Pompe, 2017). The focus of this paper is the local population who is deeply involved in city branding and represents its integral part (Freire, 2009; Braun, Kavaratzis & Zenker, 2013). Local population shapes the culture and personality of the city and has the role of a differentiating factor between different city brands. It is responsible for interaction with visitors and many of them return to a city because of the friendliness and hospitality of the local population which make them feel at home (Hunt & Stronza, 2014; García, Vázquez & Macías, 2015). Some of the statements which clearly point out the role and importance of local population in the city are:

What is the city but the people (United Nations, 2017).

The cities of the future are people-friendly cities (Kielgast, n.d.).

There are several important reasons why the local population is important in the city branding process. Local population leads to (Braun, Kavaratzis & Zenker, 2013):

1. Improvement of quality and effectiveness of local policies in cities;
2. Reducing of the communication gap between public institutions and residents;
3. Strengthening the sense of belonging and care in local environments;
4. Strengthening democracy in the city.

Local population plays an important role in city branding through informal networks, word-of-mouth communication and various social media (travel blogs, websites reviews, etc.) (Jeuring & Haartsen, 2017). People are social beings who have a large number of daily social interactions with others (family, friends, colleagues, investors, visitors, etc.) (Bisani & Choi, 2016). It is believed that involvement of the local population in the city branding process leads to strong relations with important stakeholders, which will ultimately affect the overall quality of living (Malek & Costa, 2014; Hereźniak, 2017).

By using various social media, residents may disseminate positive, but also negative news and information about some city. Some of the most popular social media are: Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, TripAdvisor, YouTube, etc. Those who are in the team for city

branding should use social media to collect information and process them in order to make data-driven decisions. Social media are more valuable than traditional communication means due to their possibilities to reach a large number of people geographically dispersed, and to collect fast feedback at low costs (Gümüş, 2016). Furthermore, social media are used in planning travels and in searching various travel information regarding upcoming events and other visitor experiences.

Conceptualization of holistic city branding strategies should include the local population of the city as a very important stakeholder group because it knows how cities function and this knowledge can help in further development of a city brand (Zavattaro, 2014). Furthermore, the local population has sincere motivation to stay and improve the city and it represents great city brand ambassadors (Rehmet & Dinnie, 2013).

CONCLUSION

The interest of both - academic community and city leaders for city branding will continue to increase, because of the growing competition between cities to attract the best talents, investors, tourists, cultural and sports events, etc. For that reason, it is very important to consider the key elements that shape the city brand, including the people who live in it.

This paper emphasizes the role and importance of the local population in the process of city branding in the digital age. During the analog age, the local population expressed its dissatisfaction with life in the city by leaving it or by voting to different city governments in local elections. However, in the digital age, the local population gets much more opportunities to express its views and opinions, especially through social media and networks.

Local population as the lifeblood of the any city should be deeply included in the process of conceptualization and implementation of city branding strategy and its overall image. With a motivated and engaged population who share its ideas and thoughts about future development of the city, the overall quality of city branding strategy may be increased. Consequently, that will have a positive effect on overall attractiveness and further economic development of the city.

This paper may be valuable for city leaders, who are involved in the city branding process, because it analyzes and provides guidance on how local population affects the general atmosphere of the city and its brand. It can be also interesting for each resident in any city who can become aware of its role and importance in the process of city branding.

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