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Article

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Enhancing stakeholder engagement: Using the communication perspective to identify and enhance stakeholder communication in place management

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to create a model based on a dialogical approach among city branding stakeholders using the Coordinated Management of Meaning (CMM) framework. This study combines conceptual and theoretical frameworks with a case study to explore how the dialogical approach enhances coordination among stakeholders. The findings reveal that integrating CMM's communication perspective into stakeholder analysis provides a deeper understanding of stakeholder communication and city branding strategies. This approach, which includes shared meaning, coordinated actions, and contextual interpretation within stakeholder mapping, results in an easily applicable communication model for multiple stakeholders involved in city branding initiatives. The paper also offers practical steps for initiating and coordinating dialogue among stakeholders. Furthermore, this paper contributes to the field by expanding on stakeholder mapping based on relevant pillars for place branding and utilizes a case study to illustrate a dialogical approach by demonstrating the value of applying CMM for effective place management processes.

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Stakeholders are recognized as the utmost important element in place management and, respectively, place brand management. This relationship has been in the interest of many academics and practitioners, especially the ones focusing on utilizing the stakeholders' role in the ongoing process that places go through while establishing, enriching, or maintaining an image. It should be noted that the representatives of the stakeholders belong to various industries, such as public and private.

In the past decade, there has been a growing body of research focused on nation and place branding (Anholt, 2007, 2008; Govers, 2011). However, despite these efforts, a consensus regarding the terminology and language used to discuss place branding as a whole is still lacking. Hanna et al. (2008) noted a shift in the focus of discussions from tourism to business and marketing, with terms such as 'destination', 'place', and 'location' being employed differently within these contexts.

Expanding on the insights provided by Hao et al. (2021), the fragmentation within the field of nation branding may initially appear as a weakness, leading to challenges in establishing a unified theoretical framework. However, delving deeper, one can perceive this diversity as a strength. The multifaceted nature of nation branding allows for a multidisciplinary approach and methodologies to be applied, fostering innovation and adaptability within the field. A more nuanced approach. Rather than striving for uniformity, embracing diversity within nation branding enables researchers and practitioners to tailor

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strategies and interventions that resonate authentically with diverse audiences, especially for the ones coming from outside of the existing geographical context of nation branding research. Moreover, the difficulty in generalizing conclusions in the field (Hao et al., 2021, p. 64), underscores the intricacies inherent in nation branding efforts, highlighting the need for context-specific approaches tailored to each nation's unique identity.

Recent studies have begun to explore aspects like place brand identity, image, and personality, but there is still a need for more attention on stakeholder engagement in city branding.

Stakeholder engagement and collaboration

Stakeholder engagement in place branding is one of the most important endeavors, as various stakeholders play crucial roles in shaping a city's brand. The level of involvement and significance of stakeholders often depends on their willingness to act. Collaboration among stakeholders is necessary, even though they often work independently toward the same goal. Govers (2018) emphasized the role of collaboration among the public sector, private entities, and civil society. However, the lack of sustainable leadership in both public positions and the private sector poses a challenge to successful place branding efforts.

Active stakeholder participation is crucial to overcome the existing communication gaps among stakeholders. Establishing an effective stakeholder network can help break free from the potential status quo. Scholars and practitioners differ in their opinions on the type and roles of internal stakeholders in place branding (Golestaneh et al., 2022). Nevertheless, the positive impact of place branding efforts on cities, regions, and countries is undeniable. It becomes imperative to foster brand-place associations and encourage meaningful stakeholder engagement to drive positive change (Mariutti & Giraldi, 2020).

Dialogical approach and case study

This paper aims to contribute to the conceptual and theoretical framework of city branding by employing a dialogical approach. Our research seeks to enhance the understanding of coordination among stakeholders involved in city branding by utilizing a mix of theoretical concepts and a case study. Drawing from Boisen et al. (2018), who describe marketing communication as a sender-to-receiver transmission-based style, we examine how the municipality of Prishtina predominantly relies on one-way public communication, sharing routine daily activities and projects.

We acknowledge the need for enhanced coordination between stakeholders in city branding by adopting a CMM-based dialogical approach. This will, in turn, advance the understanding of stakeholder engagement and collaboration. The approach mentioned above can also be used to promote a more inclusive and practical approach to city branding.

Literature review

The current literature review attempts to identify the developments and challenges related to city branding. It focuses on its multidisciplinary nature and highlights the importance of understanding stakeholder relationships and citizen involvement.

In their systematic research on a decade-long country branding research, Tijani et al. (2024, p. 4) noticed that a significant portion, accounting for 24 papers (54.5%), didn't integrate theoretical frameworks. Conversely, 14 studies (31.8%) opted for conceptual models. The remaining studies applied theories like the 'Product-country Image (PCI) Framework,' 'Categorization Theory,' 'Country Branding Framework,' 'Bourdieu Sian Theory,' and the 'Theory of Reasoned Action.' Given the observed lack of integration of theoretical frameworks in the study of place branding, as highlighted by Tijani et al. (2024), a clear gap necessitates applying a theoretical approach to country branding. With a significant portion of research neglecting theoretical underpinnings, utilizing theories like the Coordinated Management of Meaning (CMM) becomes imperative. By acknowledging this gap and building upon existing research, our current paper seeks to advance the field of place branding, specifically city branding, by combining concepts from a communication theory like CMM with a practical case study, in our case, stakeholder mapping.

This integration enhances the conceptual framework of city branding endeavors and provides valuable insights into stakeholder communication, perception management, and the cultivation of city identities.

Stakeholder communication in the context of city branding has garnered attention within organizational studies, particularly in management literature. Initially rooted in practical business strategies, this concept evolved into stakeholder theory, which comprehensively explains the relationship between organizations and the public (Koschmann & Kopczynski, 2017, p. 1). Central to stakeholder theory is recognizing the interdependent relationship between organizations and the public, emphasizing the need to prioritize public interests in decision-making (Koschmann & Kopczynski, 2017, p. 2). However, Acharya and Rahman (2016, p. 299) conducted a thematic review on place branding research where they, among many findings, pointed out that the stakeholder aspect had fewer articles mentioning it and thus scored last from all other identified themes from 46 reviewed case studies.

Going forward, on stakeholders and city branding, the question arises: Which stakeholder group holds more significance? Is it the public stakeholders with policy-making power, private stakeholders with vested interests, or citizens residing in the city? Adopting a holistic approach enables a deeper understanding of the inherent complexities in this process. As Pearce (2007) asserts, all individuals are agents contributing to the formation of social worlds (p. 52). In the context of city branding, the impact of stakeholders is inevitable, irrespective of their intentions. Thus, regardless of their respective positions, all city stakeholders play a role, intentionally or unintentionally, in shaping the city's image.

In advocating for a more inclusive and pragmatic approach, we propose the active stakeholder as a critical component of a holistic view of stakeholder involvement in place branding. Scholars such as Richelieu (2018) and Golestaneh et al. (2022) support this perspective, emphasizing the importance of a participatory approach in place branding. Richelieu explicitly highlights the significance of incorporating sports, economic, commercial, and social dimensions, asserting that a participatory approach is crucial to place branding (Richelieu 2018, p. 256). When leveraging sports as part of a place branding strategy, public stakeholders often adopt a more holistic approach (Richelieu, 2018).

By examining the existing literature, we find a growing consensus on the need for inclusive and participatory approaches in city branding. Engaging a diverse range of stakeholders, including public and private entities, is essential to shape and promote a city's brand effectively. Such an approach acknowledges the interdependent relationship between stakeholders and the importance of considering multiple dimensions in place branding efforts.

From now on, this research paper aims to contribute to the field by exploring practical strategies and case studies that exemplify the benefits of inclusive stakeholder engagement in city branding.

There are two important conclusions according to Crane and Livesey (2003) that one can reach when analyzing literature on stakeholder communication. The primary conclusion is characterized by one-way communication which to work requires tremendous coordination including management and it is incredibly hard for companies to try and impact the meaning that is created within each involved group of stakeholders. We suggest labeling this type of stakeholder communication as transmission-based stakeholder communication. However, the second conclusion acknowledges the dialogue-based approach which is more efficient but requires attention that has not yet been given as it is deserved. One must keep in mind complications that might derive from employing the dialogic model if not effectively used, that is it might produce unwanted situations and feedback based on superficial arguments and cynicism. However, the dialogic approach enables the creation of richer discussions that might even lead to noise that can contribute to the division of people into smaller groups (Crane & Livesey, 2003). To avoid the precisely mentioned situation, we suggest labeling this type of stakeholder communication as a dialogic-centered approach which can be further expanded through the theory of coordinated management of meaning (CMM).

City branding

Authors Hanna et al. (2021) conducted a detailed systematic literature review on place and destination branding covering a two-year period (2017–2019) and concluded that published articles are scattered in different journals from fields such as tourism, branding, and marketing (p. 113). Additionally, among other things, they argue that because of the non-transferability of the findings, being that most studies focus on a single-place case study, and lack of longitudinal studies which would be useful in

understanding how places evolve in relation to place branding (Hanna et al., 2021, p.114). On the other hand, Asnawi et al. (2018) advocate for a more holistic perspective in the discourse on city marketing or place branding, emphasizing a shared objective of cultivating a more enticing and competitive local community for a target demographic, encompassing both visitors and investors.

The exact origins and growth of city branding as a separate area of study have been difficult to determine. However, a study by Lucarelli and Olof Berg (2011) sheds light on the timeline of city branding research. Although their research analyzed articles published from 1988 to 2009, it provides insight into the interdisciplinary and somewhat theoretical foundations that have shaped the field's development in the last decade (Lucarelli & Olof Berg, 2011, p. 9). Since then, the field has advanced by addressing both theoretical and practical needs, especially in addressing the challenges faced by practitioners and city brand managers.

According to Florek and Insch (2020), local authorities should take a more hands-on approach to improve city branding by focusing on enhancing the city brand experience. Moilanen's (2015) study of ten European cities found that there are common challenges, such as conflicting activities by different stakeholders, conceptual ambiguity, and varying interpretations of branding objectives. Involving citizens in the city branding process is crucial, and Moilanen (2015, p. 222) suggests that empowering citizens to become ambassadors for the city brand can have significant benefits.

Poland has been extensively studied in the context of place and city branding. Researchers Pawlak and Hajduk (2019) discovered that residents of Rzeszow valued cultural diversity, community openness, tolerance, and cultural activity. Similarly, Glińska and Gorbaniuk (2016) study found that technical infrastructure and public services played a crucial role in shaping the city's image. These studies demonstrate the diverse priorities of stakeholders in city branding.

Kavaratzis and Ashworth (2006) examined the challenges involved in aligning the interests of multiple stakeholders in city branding efforts. They emphasized the different roles of 'users', 'owners', and 'governors' in determining a city's image. Brandt and Mortanges (2011) used Brand Concept Maps (BCM) to analyze the perceptions of local and international students about Liege, Belgium, as a university town. The study revealed that the young population, vibrant nightlife, cultural amenities, and supermarkets were common perceptions, while locals had concerns about cleanliness and safety.

The branding process for King Abdullah Economic City (KAEC) began before it was even built. In a study by Shoaib and Keivani (2015), they used Actor-Network Theory (ANT) to examine how various stakeholders perceived the project based on their own socially constructed ideas. The authors emphasized the importance of understanding these perceptions before the city was physically constructed.

Case of city branding Prishtina

Kosovo declared independence in 2008 (Tansey, 2009), making Prishtina one of Europe's newest capital cities. Prishtina is also one of the region's most lively cities, with its youthful population and thriving music scene. According to the Kosovo Agency of Statistics, as of 2020, the population of Kosovo was 1,798,188, with over 40% of them being young people between 25-54 years old and over 200,000 living in the diaspora. The last census was conducted in 2011, and Prishtina has a population of 198,897 and covers an area of 523 km².

It has been suggested that Prishtina needs to implement a place management/branding strategy. The city's vice mayor, Donjeta Sahatçiu, has confirmed this and stated that the communication strategy of the city government has expired and needs to be renewed, along with the branding kit. However, these documents have not been made available by her or her team, nor are they accessible on the official municipality website.

In the past, the city was led by a Harvard graduate named Mr. Shpend Ahmeti, who aimed to transform the city's image and increase the efficiency of the municipality's operations. However, he faced opposition from opposing parties in the assembly (Fazliu, 2017). Mr. Përparim Rama, a well-known Albanian architect who moved from the UK, succeeded him, and won the mayoral election (Brezar, 2021).

Currently, the city's organogram does not show an active Marketing office or place branding office within the city's structure. Two sections, the sector for public communication and the sector for public policies, may be related to place promotion. However, the reports available on the website only convey specific messages from the municipality to their intended audience.

Prishtina has limited competition from other Kosovo cities regarding its place branding; however, lately, there has been tremendous local competition amongst other capital cities in the region. As the capital city, Prishtina has yet to apply any branding approach to recognize its competitive advantage. The list of cultural, music, and sports events is significant from various sources. However, the information is scattered within multiple channels, either on the main website of the event organizer itself, social media accounts, or hosting companies that actively function in the city. The table below represents a few brand elements identified in Prishtina (Table 1).

Visiting Prishtina, one can quickly notice the urban lifestyle, entertaining and affordable life. Streets are always complete; people are always on a walk but take their time. The most crucial part, coffee shops are always jam-packed! Bloggers have labeled Prishtina a city with rich coffee culture and compared its coffee with Italian coffee. Jo Piazza (2016) claims that Italy invented the macchiato, but Kosovo has perfected it. Most coffee/snack places have live music in the evening regardless of the session, specifically during summertime when the diaspora also extensively visits Prishtina.

Diaspora has a significant role in the daily functioning of Prishtina and adds itself to the list of imperative stakeholders. Most of Kosovo's diaspora lives in Switzerland, Germany, USA and are scattered worldwide (Marleku, 2013, p. 417). Since diaspora profoundly preserves the language and culture, its initiatives are welcomed and supported in Prishtina. Almost every Kosovar family has someone abroad (Paca, 2015, p.3), and their first destination choice is Kosovo. Another reason the diaspora plays a significant role in Prishtina's branding is that the young diaspora brings the best practices from abroad and obligates Prishtina to offer services that improve their lives, such as cuisine, hospitality, and event management.

The Information Technology literacy level is very high in Prishtina. Schools and Universities play a significant role in that. However, the IT sector was improved once private companies started offering professional programs and preparing the young generation for the future. Since the demand was high, the number of companies also increased. The centers have developed an innovation hub, TechPark Prishtina, Outsource program, an ICT festival, and educational programs. Their graduates are in high demand in Prishtina and abroad. The municipality of Prishtina hosted its latest IT conference focusing on Girls in IT. Participants spend three days sharing experiences and expertise in the sector of IT manipulated exclusively by female leaders and engineers (Stikk, n.d.).

Another example is the Kosovo International Summer Academy, a ten-day program that brings together young individuals from across the globe in Prishtina, Kosovo (Hajdari et al., 2024). During this immersive experience, participants engage in informative lectures and pre-arranged activities. The academic segment of the program features esteemed professors from various countries, as well as lectures by politicians and representatives of civil society from Kosovo and the region. This multi-perspective approach fosters critical thinking and builds credibility among participants by ensuring they receive comprehensive information from diverse angle (Hajdari et al., 2024).

Stakeholder identification framework

The number of stakeholders influencing a place can vary. The following table visualizes the stakeholders shaping Prishtina's place branding. The list includes the public sector, private sector, and the diaspora and its thorough description is done based on their mandates, relevant entities/departments/sectors, initiatives, and tasks related to place brand management (Table 2).

Table 1. Prishtina's brand elements.

	Prishtina
Proud	Prishtinali (for many generations)
Brand essence	Urban – coffee culture, lots of music spots.
Surface	523 km ²
Inhabitants	198,897
Young population	over 40% of young population between age of 25-54
Values	Active, talented, English speaking young population
Life	Food, music, affordable, diaspora remittance
Entrepreneurship	IT sector blooming – IT outsourcing services

Table 2. Stakeholder identification (authors).

	Municipality of Prishtina	Government of Kosovo	Private sector	Diaspora
Mandates	Four years mandate through election from the people for both the assembly seats and the mayor. The way how the mayor is elected gives them a higher degree of autonomy.	Four years mandate through election from the people for the parliament who then elect the prime minister who has the main executive power. The president of the country is also elected by the parliament with fewer executive powers.	No mandate, for various companies, from small enterprises (family-owned) to larger franchisees. Licensees to operate in the private sector related to IT, culture, sports, etc. are provided by the central governance and some special permission to function and/or pay taxes in Prishtina.	Most of these types of organizations are registered as non for profit – NGOs. Strong link between Albanian diaspora and their home country. No specific mandate, the last years their number has increased
Relevant entities/ departments/ sectors	-Sector for public communication -Sector for public policies -Directorate of Culture: Tourism sector administration, City Theatre, Municipality library City Stadium National recreational park Germia etc.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ministry of Culture, Youth and Sports Ministry of Industry, entrepreneurship, and trade Ministry of foreign affairs and diaspora 	Companies relevant: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> IT sector Foundations: Millennium Foundation Sunny Hill Foundation Companies registered as Superbrands Kosova. 	Kosovo diaspora is one of the largest platforms <ul style="list-style-type: none"> culture sector sport sector education sector innovation sector Germin - connecting diaspora with the homeland.
Initiatives	Previous two mandates with the same mayor: invested in city's image, infrastructure, and community engaging activities.	Mandators from the local and central governance for the last two mandates were represented by different political orientation; initiatives in most cases were not coordinated. Central governance has bigger budget to finance and support activities, but only few initiatives are recorded and make available for the public.	Ongoing community included initiatives. In the case of IT sector, internship or part time jobs, Girls in IT yearly conference. Sunnyhill Foundation supports local talents, all funding from Sunny Hill Festival goes for charity. Millennium foundation related activities to Sustainable Development, tourism related initiatives. Kosovo International Summer Academy Superbrands Kosova proofs quality of companied from various fields.	Identifying young and successful talents living in diaspora <ul style="list-style-type: none"> advocacy and diplomacy diaspora investments diaspora philanthropy diaspora professionals youth and education
Tasks related to place brand management	Cooperates with the Central governance in developing projects in the field of culture, tourism, sports. Research and supports. cultural, music and sports events. Hosts and runs international events: Manifesta Biennaial, Sunny Hill Festival, Holds regular community engaging activities	State level campaign: 'Young Europeans'. Publishes official reports on the tourism trends. Develops Tourism Development strategy. Runs internal campaign for attracting mostly the diaspora.	Private sector applies various promotion mix elements. Most common are: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Advertisements (printed, broadcasted and digital) Sales Promotions/ sponsorships Digital marketing – social media Public Relations/ event management. Most of them related directly to their field of interest/ type of business, some local businesses add the origin of product keyword which makes it identify Kosovo 	Updated website Frequently applying talks, discussions, conferences. Active social media account. Identification of the talents, promoting them, finding individuals values with their homeland values. Diaspora school Global Albanian Youth Network. NOTE: diaspora activities are not strictly divided among Albanians living abroad.

Disclaimer: the list of private sector and diaspora representatives were chosen from the authors as the more relevant ones.
A common absence among all mentioned stakeholders was the attempt for talent attraction, values identification, image-building strategies etc.

Dialogue between the municipality and the private sector exists, thus authors propose its further development through the lenses of Coordinated Management of Meaning. Based on the mapping stakeholders in the city of Prishtina, we offer a stakeholder engagement communication model for the Municipality of Prishtina, the Government of Kosovo, the Private sector, and the Diaspora (Table 2):

1. Municipality of Prishtina:

The Municipality of Prishtina should focus on the following communication strategies:

- Establish a Sector for Public Communication responsible for managing communication with stakeholders.
- Develop a comprehensive public policy framework and regularly communicate updates and progress to the public.
- Engage with the community through community-oriented initiatives like infrastructure development, cultural events, and recreational activities.
- Enhance place branding by promoting stakeholder engagement inputs on tourism, sports, and cultural activities.
- Maintain an updated website and active social media accounts to disseminate information and engage the public.
- Regularly publish reports on urban tourism trends and host regional events focused on networking.
- Cooperate more with the central government to develop joint cultural, tourism, and sports projects.

2. Government of Kosovo:

The Government of Kosovo should adopt the following communication strategies:

- Establish clear communication channels with the public, including the Ministry of Culture, Youth, and Sports, Ministry of Industry, Entrepreneurship, and Trade, and Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Diaspora.
- Publish official reports on tourism trends and share updates on the progress of initiatives.
- Develop a Tourism Development strategy and run internal campaigns to attract diaspora members.
- Implement a state-level continuous campaign to rebrand the concept of 'Young Europeans' which was a one-attempt at place branding.
- Foster advocacy and diplomacy to engage with the diaspora and attract investments and philanthropic activities.
- Identify and promote successful talents from the diaspora through various initiatives and platforms.
- Foster partnerships with relevant stakeholders to support youth and education initiatives.
- Develop initiatives to connect with the diaspora beyond attempts to have public institutions named after the diaspora. Practical partnerships are needed to provide opportunities for diaspora professionals to come and share their experiences locally.

3. Private sector:

The private sector in Prishtina should employ the following communication strategies:

- To not stop only utilizing various advertising channels to promote their products and services, but to request to be part of the municipal-led events targeting the foreign public.
- Maintain active social media accounts and an updated website to interact with customers and promote their businesses.
- Conduct talks, discussions, and conferences to showcase their expertise and industry knowledge.
- Collaborate with the municipality and government on projects related to IT, culture, sports, and other relevant sectors which are gaining much-needed attention regionally and internationally.
- Support local talents and community initiatives through foundations and charity events.
- Participate in initiatives like the Superbrands Kosova to demonstrate the quality and credibility of their businesses.

4. Diaspora:

The diaspora should focus on the following communication strategies:

- Establish platforms like Germin to connect with the homeland and engage in advocacy and diplomacy.

- Identify and promote young and successful talents from the diaspora who can contribute to the development of Kosovo.
- Encourage diaspora investments and philanthropic activities to support initiatives in Kosovo.
- Foster youth and education programs to strengthen ties between the diaspora and their home country.
- Collaborate with the government and private sector to implement talent attraction strategies and initiatives.
- Leverage social media, websites, and other communication channels to share success stories, promote cultural activities, and engage with the community.

All stakeholders must collaborate, coordinate their efforts, and share information to ensure effective communication and stakeholder engagement. Regular meetings, joint initiatives, and open dialogue can facilitate more robust relationships and improved stakeholder communication.

Using CMM as a theoretical lens

While the mentioned stakeholder communication engagement model based on the stakeholder mapping of the city of Prishtina is either started or will be in the future, we recommend further improvement of those points through the help of coordinated management of meaning theory. In our example for the city of Prishtina, Pearce's (2007, p. 53) provides a list of questions, which are the questions asked by those willing to take the communication perspective on social worlds. We argue that those questions are one of the suggested methods for improving communication between the key stakeholders in city branding. These questions might seem underwhelming as they introduce a sense of curiosity required by all sides involved in the dialogue rather than only from the responding side. Moreover, when faced with communication situations where one or both participants have the chance or are requested to act on it, it is suggested to start with the question: 'What are we making together?' This question does not invoke some sophisticated grammatical response. However, it is the right question to be asked in such a situation as the participants in the communication process often represent their vision of how the conversation should go by relying on which side has more power or leverage and viewing the communication process in such a way would be an issued opportunity. Related to the present case of City Branding, the suggested question can be utilized to open a dialogical process among the stakeholders as if they can start coordinating the language around their common goal, which is helping the city establish its branding from which both public and private stakeholders can benefit. Public and private institutions often use different languages to describe the same or similar things. In this case, when asked the question of what are we making together? The stakeholders can express their version of the story, leading to a richer discussion on city branding.

The second suggested question by Pearce (2007, p. 53) is: 'How are we making it?' This question helps the dialogue take shape by inviting participants to discuss the steps they envision to help the city create its image or reputation. The third question: 'What are we becoming as we make this?' It helps participants retain their originality along the way, regardless of the future city branding, and steps taken to make that a reality should be treated carefully by the stakeholders. If not, the very uniqueness of stakeholders ready to engage in city branding could be lost due to the transformations the participants in the communication process could recommend. These transformations could be different policies or more practical transformations such as street design, urban development, or similar. The fourth and final question is: 'How can we make better social worlds?' While participants now have a clearer idea of what they are planning to make together and what steps need to be taken to make that happen, also by understanding their identities while the change is happening, finally ask how to create a better social world is the readiness to use the change to engage with the opportunity to do so.

The following suggested questions by Pearce (2007, p. 53-54) are more suitable for those observing a communication event involving other participants while attempting to understand or evaluate the same process.

- How was it made? How is it re-made in the ongoing process of social construction?

These questions enable the stakeholders to review past communication strategies used in city branding. At the same time, it allows them to question the impact of such strategies in social reality. What types of stories are told and re-told in order to motivate stakeholders to further collaborate on the topic of city branding?

- Who participated in making it? Who didn't?

While identifying or mapping the stakeholders, we need to know which ones were more active in meetings and which did not participate. Doing this will allow us to identify specific stakeholders and push for their participation in future meetings where city branding strategies will be discussed. On the other hand, the fact that those stakeholders were not initially part of the conversation can tell us a lot about what needs to be done in the future to ensure their engagement.

- What was the quality of the process by which it was made?

We can use this part to agree on what instruments will be used to evaluate whether the city branding process is producing positive results. Stockholders here work on creating myriad data-collecting methodologies that will measure people's perception of the city before and after specific strategies are applied.

- Having been made, what does it, in turn, make? That is, how does it affect the ongoing process of social construction?

Finally, after using the set of suggested questions to start, develop and evaluate joint meetings and collaboration aimed at city branding, stakeholders should be aware of what type of social reality is being created. If an inevitable outcome contradicts the city branding strategy's initial goal, stockholders can reconsider their steps and make necessary changes for the following dialogical process.

While the questions mentioned above are helpful in situations where one is an active participant in a communication process, Pearce (2007, p.54) suggests a set of practical questions if one is an observer of a communication process where other people are involved. In other situations, however, where one can be participating but also observing the unfolding communication process, a case in point taken by Pearce (2007, p. 54) is a hypothetical situation of being a manager to run a company in a better way, or perhaps organizing in and leading a meeting. In such situations, Pearce argues that he can increase the odds of making better social worlds by asking the following questions:

- How can I/we act in ways that prevent the occurrence of undesirable events and objects?
- How can I/we act in ways that intervene in and improve already existing undesirable events and objects?
- How can I/we act in ways that call into being preferred events and objects?

Coordinating actions

When using CMM's depiction of coordinating actions, Pearce (2007, p. 80-81) describes a situation where the author and another colleague analyzed a meeting using the CMM approach. They noticed how the meeting discussions resembled ebbs and flows, where certain participants would agree with certain voices (people) while others would choose to stay silent. Even though this is not an ideal model of coordination, it depicts the human tendency to be selective when it comes to coordinating more easily with people with whom they agree and ignores the ones they disagree by either staying silent or just waiting their turn to say something that would not be feedback on what was said but rather what it was intended to be said by the participant regardless of the context that the communicators created in

the first place. Coordination is used here to point out particular patterns of communication that would be identified by the observer rather than simply describing a coordinated behavior (Pearce, 2007, p. 81).

Continuing from this, we can extend this concept when arguing in favor of a dialogic approach that needs to be taken by the respective stakeholders involved in the city branding process. Moreover, when approached by public managers or any public institution, what other stakeholders (businesses and residents alike) are listening could be detrimental to the continuation of the dialogue or ending it. Going back to Pearce's example of the meeting, when participants in the dialogue would identify specific patterns of communication being labeled as constructive versus the ones that would not be given importance if they do not comply with the expectations of other stakeholders, the facilitators of the meeting should be able to identify those moments and help the participant move to a more constructive dialogue. This potential situation is convenient coordination.

One of the reasons why we chose to use the 'asking questions' approach that fuels the communication perspective rather than offering statements which are usually seen as the product of an intellectual discussion, is Pearce's explanation of the importance of having the 'what can I do about it' attitude rather than the ability to have a perfect test score or win a quiz (Pearce, 2007, p.58). By doing so, we can suggest a more even playing field for stakeholder communication regardless of their public or private background. Additionally, the mentioned question-oriented approach will make it less attractive to start the dialogue by laying down hard facts like statistical data on why certain things 'cannot be done' when discussing city branding.

While there is substantial literature on city branding (Braun, 2012; Kasapi & Cela, 2017; Lucarelli & Olof Berg, 2011; Ripoll Gonzalez & Gale, 2023; Shirvani Dastgerdi & De Luca, 2019), there is a need for more literature focused on how to enhance the dialogical process among stakeholders by providing practical tools such as the ones suggested in this paper.

Bennett and Savani (2003, p. 78) point out the need for coordination in the decision-making process, especially between strategic decision-making and its application. The inclusiveness of essential stakeholders, such as marketing staff, was reported in only one case in Bennett and Savani (2003, p. 78) study. Public managers who are part of local governments usually make important decisions regarding place marketing (Bennett & Savani, 2003). Furthermore, the same study points out that residents were under-represented in rebranding (Bennett & Savani, 2003, p. 78).

It is argued that public managers can contribute to a clear brand concept and bring the necessary expertise to organize and develop the branding process while coordinating with other stakeholders simultaneously (Eshuis et al., 2017, p.922). However, when it comes to the inclusion of the residents in the branding process, the fact that they present multiple voices could mean a less clear brand concept (Eshuis et al., 2017, p. 922).

Including companies that come from various sectors will lead to sourcing different ideas about the actual branding; this could lead to a needed compromise, but in the end, it is expected to develop a brand that is successful and enhances competitiveness, and therefore it is seen as something that contributes positively to the process of branding (Eshuis et al., 2017, p. 922).

Methodology

The research adopts a post-positivistic approach grounded in social constructivism, facilitating the utilization of applied communication theory (CMM) to support stakeholders' dialogic approach in city branding. Moreover, it integrates multiple tools while attempting to provide a clear framework that supports the use of a communication theory such as CMM and stakeholder analysis through a real-life case study of a city. This paper aims to develop a theory-centric conceptualization by integrating the Coordinated Management of Meaning with a case study. The case-study approach was employed to identify stakeholders in Prishtina, using inductive reasoning to generate a conceptualization or theory (Johansson, 2007). This approach aligns with previous practices in city branding research, as demonstrated by Eugenio-Vela et al. (2019), who explored community stakeholder involvement in place branding for the Empordà region in northern Catalonia, utilizing stakeholder-focused and participatory methodologies within the conceptual framework of place branding and spatial planning.

The purpose of the present case study, through mapping the city's stakeholders, serves as an illustration of the importance of identifying proper stakeholders before suggesting dialogical communication model for city branding. While mapping stakeholders and using the information to continue creating a communication model that will foster the dialogue among stakeholders can be complex, such attempts have been done before. Ferretti (2016), has successfully demonstrated that there is a possibility of combining stakeholder analysis with cognitive mapping and multi-attribute value theory as an integrated approach for policy support. Integrating a case study approach with CMM provides a comprehensive method for understanding stakeholder communication in city branding initiatives. Through case studies, researchers can explore real-world scenarios, gaining insights into stakeholder interactions within city branding contexts. Additionally, CMM offers a structured framework for understanding communication's role in shaping social contexts, emphasizing the co-creation of meanings through interactions. Applying CMM to city branding enables the examination of communication processes between stakeholders, aiding in the formation and dissemination of the city's brand identity.

This integrated approach allows researchers to delve into the complexities of stakeholder communication in city branding, revealing underlying patterns, conflicts, and collaboration opportunities. By enhancing theoretical understanding and providing practical insights, this approach informs the development of more effective communication strategies and branding initiatives tailored to urban contexts' specific needs and dynamics.

Discussion

The present research suggests an alternative method to enhancing stakeholder communication, in city branding, by empowering identified stakeholders from both the public and private sector to engage in a stakeholder-centric communication process. Research has shown that stakeholder engagement is essential for policymaking (Bryson et al., 2018). Furthermore, effective communication strategies that consider stakeholder expectations, preferences, and beliefs can foster greater legitimacy and acceptance of policy initiatives (Liu & Hsieh, 2019). Inclusivity and participatory communication approaches are also fundamental for policymakers to build trust and collaboration among stakeholders (Bryson et al., 2018). While this proposition holds validity, we propose an avenue that promotes greater efficiency through the utilization of practical tools offered by the Coordinated Management of Meaning (CMM). This can be achieved by actively engaging in various meetings, including city hall hearings, conferences, interpersonal settings, cultural events, and similar forums. It is essential to recognize that CMM should not be regarded as a rigid theoretical framework that requires strict implementation in order for it to work. On the contrary, a foundational understanding of the construction of social realities, as opposed to their mere discovery, is sufficient for its practical application. Later, CMM focused paradigm can serve as a basis for comprehensive discussions guided by inquiry-oriented questions, as opposed to being solely focused on grammatical aspects (Pearce, 2007, p. 61).

Dialogic model and communication perspective

It is almost impossible to discuss the development of the dialogic approach without doubting that the intellectual explanation will not do the concept justice. Nevertheless, our attempt here is to acknowledge the complexity of the foundation of the dialogical approach without turning into an essay on the dialogical approach. Namely, an article by Christians (1988) dwells in the depths of dialogic communication theory and cultural studies by giving an in-depth historical development of the inquiry, among other things. Christians (1988) starts by giving a relatively straightforward historical development of the dialogical approach by starting with Ancient Greece (hermenia), then the Enlightenment era (a dualistic approach), the Counter-Enlightenment (post-Cartesian era), and the Present (Verstehen-understanding), (p. 4-13). While all traditions, historically speaking, might differ in terms of the intellectual explanation of the dialogical approach, all of them have a common denominator, which is the image of a human being, or as Christians (1988, p. 26) puts it: *'As dialogic theory illustrates, to come closer to the foundation of the communication process, we must reach the center of human nature'*.

Stewart's (1978) essay delves into the underpinnings of the dialogic approach to communication, drawing from the fields of phenomenology, existential phenomenology, and philosophical anthropology. Within this context, Stewart (1978) asserts the importance of exploring language perspectives, including the insights offered by Heidegger and other scholars.

Nevertheless, we aim to further the understanding of the current use of dialogical communication based on practical applications rather than the philosophical basis of dialogical communication.

The exploration of dialogical communication models in place branding has garnered attention from various authors. Hinson et al. (2020) delve into this topic, while Safitri et al. (2022) examine corporate communication through websites, and Santos et al. (2021) focus on tourism websites. Additionally, Lucarelli and Cassel (2020) discuss the dialogical approach in the realm of policymaking and regionalization strategies.

It is crucial to recognize that the dialogic model requires adequate time within any social context to address tensions and foster collaboration for the benefit of multiple stakeholders. A case in point is the city-wide public dialogue project described by Pearce and Pearce (2000, p. 406), which yielded favorable outcomes after three years of employing a dialogic approach. This success was attributed to the concept of 'dialogic virtuosity', a notion encompassing passionate and skillful engagement (Pearce & Pearce, 2000).

Recognition of conflicting viewpoints

CMM concepts treat conflicting views as an opportunity to build a more sustainable relationship. An environment where all stakeholders can voice their different opinions and concerns that can be opposing is crucial for city branding development. It can also help build trust among the stakeholders involved in city branding.

Recognition of stakeholders' socio-cultural diversity

Considering that, according to CMM, people construct their social reality based on the available socio-cultural resources, recognizing this notion could present an essential part of more sustainable city branding. One such diversity is sourced from Diaspora engagement and participation in City socio-cultural diversity. Diaspora brings an interesting mix of connection to the 'old place', or the place where their 'family roots' are, and a cultural dimension of the places where they are currently residing.

Understanding the narrative and stories about the place

Considering that we make sense of the world through storytelling, it is crucial to understand stakeholders' narratives about the city. Applying a mixed methodology of qualitative and quantitative research can be helpful for both policymakers and the private sector to identify the dominant narratives that can be used in return to co-create branding messages aimed at the domestic and foreign public. In this way, treating stakeholders as active participants can increase the feeling of ownership and commitment to the city branding process (Figure 1).

Conclusions

When it comes to city branding, cities grapple with multifaceted challenges, ranging from conventional issues such as uniqueness and identity creation to more complex concerns regarding sustainability, inclusivity, and safety. Simultaneously, they must address distorted perceptions held by foreign audiences (Cassinger, 2018, p.80). As of this complexity, we must admit that engaging in one-way or proactive stakeholder communication does not necessarily mean creating an effective city branding strategy by default. Furthermore, it might unveil some significant issues of such an approach that were not recognized before. For this reason, there is a possibility that the same sought-after dialogic approach could lead to the impossibility to function as an organization, distort interpersonal relationships, and increase identity fragmentation (Crane & Livesey, 2003).

After researching citizens' participation in city branding, Hakala (2021) offered three main conclusions to help us understand the importance of the current models based on dialogical communication in city

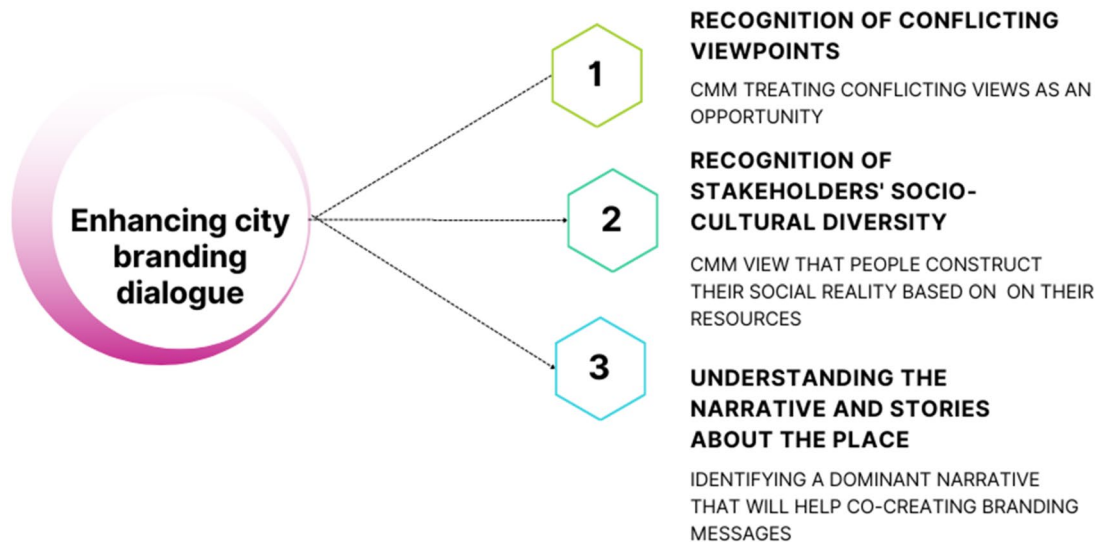


Figure 1. Enhancing city branding dialogue model.

branding. One of the conclusions was that citizen engagement while focusing on opportunities for participation is highly important in increasing the commitment toward the city, which in turn also impacts the city brand (Hakala, 2021, p. 293). In such a situation, city officials are of crucial importance as they are the ones who initiate the citizen engagement process. According to Hakala (2021, p. 294), the second conclusion is that citizen engagement in the process should be holistic, where all citizens would equally have a chance to have their voices heard. Finally, the third conclusion involves not treating all residents as one homogeneous group but having custom-designed groupings based on demographics, including their place of origin and culture (Hakala, 2021, p. 294).

We suggest the following points to keep in mind when applying the dialogical approach to stakeholder communication by employing CMM concepts.

Context

The environment in which communication takes place. Who are the stakeholders that are involved in participating in the communication process? Who is initiating the call to meet? Where is the meeting taking place? How are discussion points decided?

Framing

It understands the shared meaning deriving from the involved stakeholders by including their beliefs, viewpoints, assumptions, and expectations. This phase is vital for the potential disagreement.

Delivery

Delivering communication by adapting to stakeholders' expectations. Using multiple forms and channels of communication.

Clarity of communication goals and objectives

Prior to asking for feedback, there is a need for clear communication of goals and objectives. Including but not limited to understanding what information needs to be communicated, who the target audience is, and what outcomes are expected and wanted from the created communication process.

Inclusive and participatory communication approach

Building an inclusive and participatory communication process is essential for stakeholder integration. Stakeholders should meet in an environment where sharing ideas and perspectives without being judged and where feedback is respected.

Communication accommodation is suggested here to bridge the gap between different speech codes used by public managers, businesses, and residents.

Feedback mechanisms

Feedback mechanisms are designed to maximize communication goals and objectives by respecting the stakeholders involved. Using a mixed methodology such as surveys, interviews, focus groups, social media analysis, and other forms of gathering and analyzing feedback is recommended.

An integrated approach combining stakeholder mapping and communication theory, such as the Coordinated Management of Meaning (CMM), provides a comprehensive framework for effective city branding. It enables stakeholders to develop a clear framework supporting the application of communication theory and stakeholder analysis in real-life scenarios. This approach empowers stakeholders to examine communication processes, facilitating the formation and dissemination of the city's brand identity (Figure 2).

The implementation of city branding is affected by the governance setting where the branding is developed, and choices made during the same process (Braun, 2012). According to Eshuis et al. (2017, p. 931), the dyadic collaboration of both public managers and businesses in the process of developing place marketing enables positive outcomes on related policies and in making the branding clearer. Moreover, they argue that the involvement of specific stakeholders like public managers and businesses can impact place marketing beyond promotion by increasing the chances of impacting other policies related to place marketing (Eshuis et al., 2017, p. 931).

Including stakeholders and place marketing content is significant to place branding. Hence, the ability to choose a clear brand concept will positively impact place marketing related to specific policies such as spatial planning or leisure (Eshuis et al., 2017, p. 931). Being able to select a clear brand concept has a positive influence on the impact of place marketing on other policies. In other words, if the place brand concept is clear, it will more likely be used in spatial planning and tourism/leisure policies.

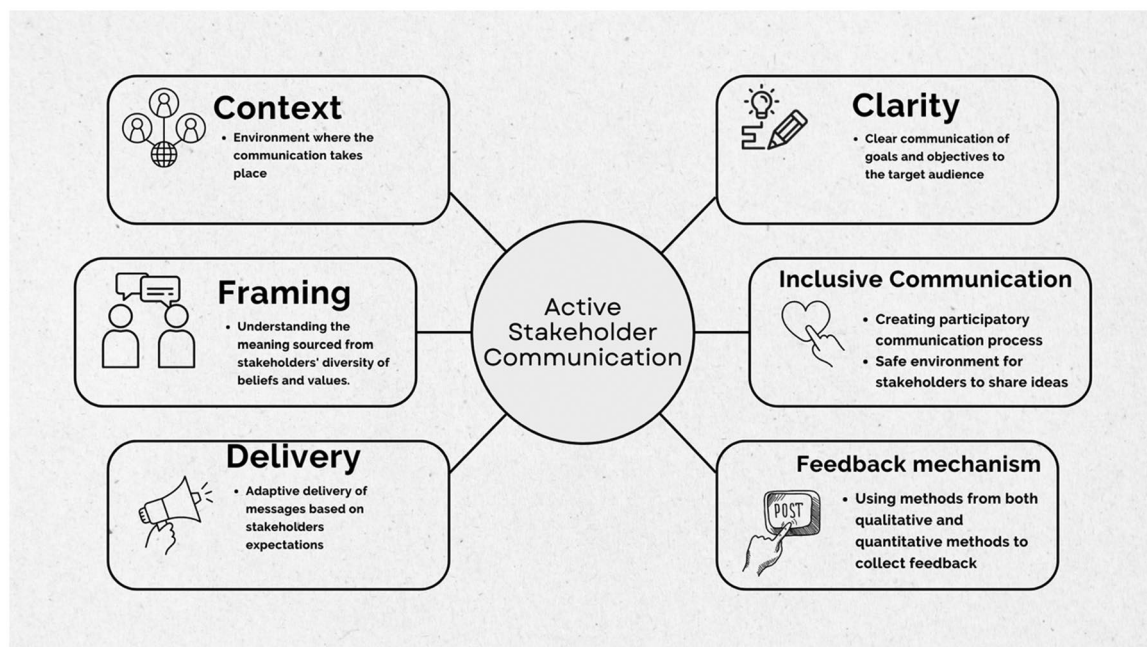


Figure 2. Adapted from Eshuis et al., 2017, p. 923.

The model (Eshuis et al., 2017, p. 931) helps us understand the negative effect of miscommunication among the stakeholders on what clear branding concept to choose for city branding.

In conclusion, this research emphasizes the significance of establishing shared meanings among stakeholders to effectively design city branding strategies. The process involves active dialogue, allowing stakeholders to understand each other's perspectives, needs, and expectations, reducing misunderstandings, and fostering collaboration (see Figure 2). Central government or municipal institutions, as key stakeholders with more resources, should take the lead in promoting open and transparent communication to create a common ground for cooperation.

To align efforts and work towards shared goals, stakeholders must coordinate their actions. Multi-layered shared meanings, derived from multiple perspectives, offer a foundation for developing collaborative projects and initiatives to address common challenges in city branding and achieve sustainable outcomes (see Figure 1).

Considering that contextual complexity differs from one person to another, contextual interpretation becomes vital. Understanding and recognizing the importance of cultural, social, and political contexts where stakeholders operate will lead to more effective communication strategies. Recognizing and accepting diverse perspectives and stakeholders' interests and creating opportunities for them to express their viewpoints will enable them to contribute to the decision-making process.

Fostering dialogue through various channels is essential to identify and address issues during ongoing communication. Encouraging a learning mindset among stakeholders will facilitate continuous improvement and adaptation. Empowering stakeholders with relevant information and resources, along with providing opportunities for active participation, ensures inclusivity and equitable decision-making in city branding.

Establishing all-inclusive feedback loops enables two-way communication and real-time information sharing for the city branding process. Regularly soliciting feedback from stakeholders allows for evaluating the effectiveness of communication efforts and making necessary adjustments. Exclusivity of data should be avoided to maintain an open and transparent communication process.

We argue that the successful implementation of shared meaning, coordinated actions, contextual interpretation, multiple perspectives, dialogue, continuous learning, empowerment, and feedback loops will contribute to a more effective and sustainable city branding process. By working together and valuing diverse viewpoints, stakeholders can create a stronger and more unified brand for their city.

Implications

The research on dialogical communication in city branding holds significant implications for policymakers (public institutions) and city branding practitioners. Firstly, it emphasizes the importance of contextual understanding in communication processes, as highlighted by scholars such as Eshuis et al. (2017) and Hakala (2021). Policymakers and practitioners must consider various contextual factors, including stakeholder involvement, meeting dynamics, and decision-making processes, to tailor communication strategies effectively.

Fostering an inclusive and participatory communication approach, promoted by the communication perspective (Pearce, 2007, Fernández-Cavia et al., 2018, Ripoll-González & Lester, 2018), can be used to highlight that citizen participation increases commitment to the city and positively influences its brand. Moreover, it emphasizes the holistic involvement of all citizens and the need for tailored engagement strategies based on demographic factors. Consequently, this will help creating environments where stakeholders feel comfortable sharing ideas without fear of judgment promotes collaboration and integration.

Governance settings significantly impact city branding implementation. Collaborative efforts between public managers and businesses can enhance place marketing outcomes and influence related policies positively. Additionally, selecting a clear brand concept is crucial for effective place marketing, impacting policies like spatial planning and leisure.

Fostering shared meanings among stakeholders through active dialogue is essential for designing effective city branding strategies. Central government and municipal institutions play a vital role in promoting transparent communication to facilitate cooperation. Coordinating actions, interpreting

contextual complexities, embracing diverse perspectives, and fostering continuous learning are critical elements for sustainable outcomes in city branding. Establishing inclusive feedback loops ensures ongoing communication and evaluation of efforts, leading to a more unified city brand.

In conclusion, fostering shared meanings among stakeholders through active dialogue is essential for designing effective city branding strategies. Central government and municipal institutions play a vital role in promoting transparent communication to facilitate cooperation. Coordinating actions, interpreting contextual complexities, embracing diverse perspectives, and fostering continuous learning are critical elements for sustainable outcomes in city branding. Establishing inclusive feedback loops ensures ongoing communication and evaluation of efforts, leading to a more unified city brand.

Limitations

The study proposing the utilization of Coordinated Management of Meaning (CMM) tools to improve stakeholder communication in city branding highlights several constraints. Firstly, although employing CMM provides a practical method, it is crucial to understand that it is a flexible framework. This indicates that its applicability can vary based on context, potentially limiting its usefulness across diverse city branding scenarios. Furthermore, the effectiveness of CMM in enhancing communication heavily relies on stakeholders' willingness and comprehension to engage in dialogue, which might only sometimes be assured.

The historical and philosophical foundations of the dialogic approach, which underlie CMM, present another challenge. Despite scholars extensively exploring the theoretical underpinnings, there is a need to translate these ideas into practical city branding applications. This suggests that the study may require additional efforts to offer actionable insights for practitioners implementing dialogic communication strategies in real-world settings.

Time-intensive nature of dialogic communication poses a practical obstacle. As Pearce and Pearce (2000) city-wide public dialogue project demonstrated, achieving favorable outcomes demands significant time. This limitation raises concerns about the feasibility of implementing dialogic approaches within time-sensitive city branding initiatives, where quick decisions are often necessary.

Although the study acknowledges the importance of recognizing conflicting viewpoints, socio-cultural diversity, and narratives in city branding, it must provide more explicit guidance on effectively navigating these complexities. By offering concrete strategies for managing conflicting perspectives, leveraging socio-cultural diversity, and understanding stakeholders' narratives, the proposed approach could effectively foster genuine engagement and collaboration among stakeholders. Thus, while the research may provide theoretical insights, it must comprehensively address practical challenges city branding practitioners face.

Ethical approval

All procedures performed in this study were in accordance with the 1964 Helsinki Declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards. The study did not require any approval by an ethics committee because it did not involve any human participants.

Authors contributions

Conceptualization, EL. and BL; Methodology, EL., BL., LH, JK; Analysis, LH., JK, BL, EL; Investigation, EL, BL., LH. and JK; Writing – Original Draft Preparation, BL, EL, LH., JK; Writing – Review and Editing, EL, BL, LH., JK.

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Disclosure statement

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Data availability

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