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City branding and the theory of social representation

MARCA CIUDAD Y LA TEORÍA DE REPRESENTACIÓN SOCIAL

MARCA DA CIDADE E DA TEORIA DA REPRESENTAÇÃO SOCIAL

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Abstract

City branding has as its objective to create an appealing image for tourists and investors, as well as strengthen local identity of local residents. These goals are achieved through the management and communication of the city's image. However, the city's image is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon that needs to be conceptualized for its proper management. The objective of this paper is to develop a theoretical analysis to understand the process of construction and communication of the city's image. Previous research has shown that individuals form their own images of the city, but at the same time share a public image of it. On the other hand, the urban landscape design has proved to be one of the most effective tools to design and communicate the city's image. Here, both elements are linked through the theory of the social representation that enables to conceptualize the city's image as a social construct. This different perspective of the city's image positions local residents as the most important target audience of city branding and the urban landscape as a key element to contextualize and strengthen local identity.

Keywords: city branding, city's image, theory of social representation, urban landscape, local identity.

Resumen

La marca ciudad tiene como objetivo crear una imagen atractiva para turistas e inversores, así como fortalecer la identidad local de los residentes locales. Estos objetivos se logran a través de la gestión y comunicación de la imagen de la ciudad. Sin embargo, es un fenómeno complejo y multifacético que debe conceptualizarse para su gestión adecuada. El objetivo de este trabajo es realizar un análisis teórico para comprender el proceso de construcción y comunicación de la imagen de la ciudad. Investigaciones anteriores han demostrado que los individuos forman sus propias imágenes de la ciudad, pero, al mismo tiempo, comparten una imagen pública de ella. Por otro lado, el diseño del paisaje urbano se ha posicionado como una de las herramientas más efectivas para diseñar y comunicar la imagen de la ciudad. Aquí, ambos elementos están vinculados a través de la teoría de la representación social, la cual permite conceptualizar la imagen de la ciudad como una construcción social. Esta perspectiva diferente de la imagen de la ciudad posiciona a los residentes locales como el público objetivo más importante de la marca ciudad y el paisaje urbano como un elemento clave para contextualizar y fortalecer la identidad local.

Palabras clave: marca ciudad, imagen urbana, teoría de la representación social, paisaje urbano, identidad local.

Resumo

A marca da cidade tem como objetivo criar uma imagem atraente para turistas e investidores, bem como fortalecer a identidade local dos moradores locais. Esses objetivos são alcançados através da gestão e comunicação da imagem de uma cidade. No entanto, a imagem da cidade é um fenômeno complexo e multifacetado que precisa ser conceitualizado para sua adequada gestão. O objetivo deste trabalho é realizar uma análise teórica para entender o processo de construção e comunicação da imagem da cidade. Pesquisas anteriores mostraram que os indivíduos formam suas próprias imagens da cidade, mas, ao mesmo tempo, compartilham uma imagem pública dela. Por outro lado, o design da paisagem urbana provou ser uma das ferramentas mais eficazes para projetar e comunicar a imagem da cidade. Aqui, ambos os elementos estão ligados através da teoria da representação social, a partir da qual é possível conceituar a imagem da cidade como uma construção social. Esta perspectiva diferente da imagem da cidade posiciona os residentes locais como o público-alvo mais importante da marca da cidade e a paisagem urbana como uma chave elementar para contextualizar e fortalecer a identidade local.

Palavras-chave: marca da cidade, imagem da cidade, teoria da representação social, paisagem urbana, identidade local.

Introduction

City branding is defined as a mean to achieve a competitive advantage that would allow the city to increase the attraction of investment and tourism, as well as strengthening local identity and avoid social exclusion (Kavaratzis, 2004). This competitive advantage is achieved through the management and communication of an attractive image of the city. For this reason, city branding is aimed to control the diversified procedures by which it can transform and communicate more effectively the desired image of the city.

The management of the city's image for the development of the city brand has been addressed by several empirical studies (Laaksonen, et al., 2006; Luque-Martínez, et al., 2007; Herstein and Jaffe, 2008; Zavattaro, 2012; Zenker, Eggers and Farsky, 2013; Fierro, et al., 2015). However, there are still few studies focused on the conceptualization of city's image from different disciplines beyond marketing (Harmaakorpi, Kari and Parjanen, 2008; Lichrou, O'Malley and Patterson, 2010). The nature of city's image is complex, multifaceted and susceptible to constant change (Laaksonen, et al., 2006). Therefore, the theoretical analysis of the city's image is critical for its proper management.

The purpose of this article is to present a conceptual framework that provides answers to questions that have been present since the origins of city marketing (Kotler, Haider and Rein, 1993): what determines a city's image? How can urban managers design and effectively communicate the city's image? Although they appear to be two separate questions, the formation and design of the city's image are processes that must be linked to the development of a city brand consistent with the reality perceived by the external actors and the inhabitants of the city.

This article is divided into two sections. In the first section, the goal is to answer the issues previously raised and to adapt the goals of city branding to the management of city's image. The second section is intended to link the processes of construction and design-communication of the city's image through the theory of social representation. This conceptual framework will be the theoretical basis for understanding the city's image as a social construction process that facilitates the relationship between individuals and the city.

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City's image as an object of study of city branding

The management of the city's image has been the main objective of the city marketing, and subsequently, the city branding. However, this discipline has forgotten to answer certain questions that have existed since its inception. What determines a city's image? How can urban managers design and communicate the image of the city? The answers to these questions will serve as a basis for developing an approach for the city's image from the principles of city branding.

What determines a city's image?

With the purpose of understanding the process of constructing the city's image from the principles of city branding, is necessary to bring together all the approaches of various authors on a single idea. Kotler, Haider and Rein (1993) define place's image as the sum of beliefs, ideas and impressions that people have of a place. The images represent a simplification of a large number of associations and pieces of information connected with the place.

However, the personal images on a place don't necessarily reflect the attitudes towards the place. The same image of the city can represent different meanings for two people, depending on the mood and attitude of each one. In addition, Blichfeldt (2005) argues that the image of a place is something that people generate for themselves in their minds by series of association of elements. Therefore, there is no strategy to create images in the minds of the people, but there can only be an attempt to project a consistent and clear image of the city.

From another perspective, Kavaratzis (2004) defines the city's image as the result of different and even conflicting messages sent by the city and separately formed in the mind of each individual, so each individual's encounters with the city are given through perceptions and images. Therefore, the city is not only a physical and objective space, but it is also a subjective space formed by the subjective perceptions of individuals. The intention of city branding is to provide a basis for identifying and unify a wide range of images and meanings attributed to the city in a single message.

Meanwhile, Luque-Martínez, et al. (2007) defines the city's image as a set of adjectival interpretations of the city, spontaneously associated with a given social and physical stimulus which would have previously triggered in the individual a series of associations. This set of associations form beliefs or stereotypes. Individuals form an image of an object through a chain or network of associations that are built over a period of time as a result of accumulated stimulation.

As previously mentioned, the city's image is formed from a network of interrelated elements and a structure of knowledge (beliefs and stereotypes) that summarize what we know about the city and the feelings it evokes. For this reason, city's image is perceived as a combination of cognitive and emotional elements (Luque-Martínez, et al., 2007). These attributes allow the individual to know and identify the characteristics of the city. In the context of city branding, a good image of the city positively impacts on the levels of citizen satisfaction and his pride of being part of the city. The satisfaction is influenced by the cognitive and affective feelings that the object stimulates in the consumer, in this case, the city's image.

Combining the previous perspectives, the city's image is defined as a process of bilateral communication between the city and the individual, in which the city sends a variety of messages while the individual chooses and structures the cognitive and emotional elements to form a network of associations of the city. It is worth mentioning that the encounters of the individual with the city are given through perceptions and images. Each individual has a personal image of the city and, therefore, is based not only on preset images by city branding campaigns. The larger the gap between the images perceived by the individuals and the images projected, lesser is the acceptance of the city brand.

Now, if the city's image is a creation in the mind of each person, how is it possible encompass all the individual images of the city in a single image? Although the city's images exist at an individual level, these often contain elements that are shared by a group (Neacsu and Neguț, 2012). Lynch (1960: 7) define these public

images of the city as "the common mental pictures carried by large numbers of a city's inhabitants: areas of agreement which might be expected to appear in the interaction of a single physical reality, a common culture and a basic physiological nature". In addition, although Laaksonen, et al. (2006) assert that each individual has a unique relationship with the city and, therefore, values and perceives different elements and meanings of the city's image, they also support the fact that there is a general image that encompasses all the individual images of the city.

After dealing with diverse approaches to the city's image from the field of city branding, it is possible to respond to the initial question, what determines a city's image? The city's image blends and simplifies all the tangible and intangibles elements that relate to the city. The image is formed from the encounters that we have with the messages communicates the city. These messages can be taken from the media, the culture or the direct experience (Kalandides, 2011). Each individual forms his or her own particular city's image, but also shares collective images due to a common physical and cultural environment. Therefore, city branding should focus on these public images to project an image true to the values, beliefs and ideas shared by locals and visitors.

How can urban managers design and effectively communicate the city's image?

The design of the city's image is one of the most complex issues to address for city branding. For this reason, it is necessary to analyze different tools and processes that have been used for this purpose. At the beginnings of city branding practice, policy makers and practitioners relied mainly on advertising and promotional strategies in order to transform the city's image (García, 2010). These practices are still present at the current city branding strategies but at the same time, there has been critics related to the ineffectiveness of such strategies (design of logo, slogan and advertising campaigns) to communicate a city's image coherent with the reality (Govers, 2013).

As mentioned in the previous section, the city's image communication is a complex process because every interaction people have with the city communicates something about the city's image (Kavaratzis, 2004). Although this outlook may seem chaotic and uncontrollable for city branding practitioners, a solid starting point for improving the city's image is to carry out concrete actions and real changes aligned to the city's image perceived by its inhabitants, such as the transformation of the urban landscape (Peel and Lloyd, 2008; Oliveira, 2015; de San Eugenio Vela, Nogué and Govers, 2017). Specifically, the role of advertising and communication should be limited to report on these improvements.

At support of the last assumption, Braun, Eshuis and Klijn (2014) validated the idea that a large part of the communication of the city's image effectively occurs through physical characteristics and the perception of residents and visitors about the city. In the case of advertising, especially the use of logo and slogan, the authors concluded that did not have a significant effect on the perception of the city's image. It is worth mentioning that the objective of this research is not to discredit the effectiveness of the advertising and promotion of the city as a method for

the transformation of the image of the city. However, this type of strategies can be used in conjunction with projects of urban design and urban planning. Zhu, Qian and Gao (2011) argues that advertising can serve as a link between urban reality and perceptions of the people. Therefore, the change in the physical environment and the advertising can be supplemented by an effective management of the city's image.

Adaptation of city branding principles to management of the image of the city

City branding provides principles relevant for the management of the city's image. The definition of brand is suitably adapted to the concept of image and adds on other aspects such as the identification and differentiation of city's image to attract investment, tourism, and future residents; as well as the increase of the satisfaction and local pride from residents. City branding is not just a matter of image and perception, but it is also an important phenomenon that generates a range of positive and negative impacts on economic, social, cultural and political areas of the city.

It is worth mentioning that the development of the theory of city branding has led special attention to local residents as a key piece to the success of the city brand. Local residents live and work in the city and, therefore, are the first affected by changes in the city's image (Reiser and Crispin, 2009). In addition, happy and proud residents of a city may be the central factor to reinforce the city's image and communicate it to other external audiences (Gilboa and Herstein, 2012).

Through the management of the city's image, it is possible to achieve the objectives of city branding. From this perspective, city branding has as objective to identify the points of coincidence between the images of the inhabitants of the same city, i.e. the public images of the city. This will allow the projection of a city brand close to the image perceived by the local residents.

Regarding the communication of the city's image, the design of the urban landscape has been established as an effective tool for this purpose. Urban regeneration projects and flagship development have been shown to have a great impact on the image of the city, e.g. Bilbao (Muratovski, 2012) and Barcelona (Hospers, 2010). However, the planning and design of urban landscape should not only focus on the attraction of external audiences (tourists, investments and future residents) but also in the strengthening of the local identity (local residents).

Although it was possible to adapt the objectives of city branding to the management of the city's image, another dilemma, related to the dynamics between the public image of the city and the urban landscape, is faced. The analysis on the relationship between these two elements is crucial to the theory of city branding because it is necessary that changes in the urban landscape show an attractive image for the outside without making local residents feel external or alienated from it. The following section will carry on a conceptual framework to link the construction of the public image of the city and the planning and design of the urban landscape.

The city's image as a social representation

Based on the current discussion, from a city branding approach city's image may be effectively managed through two strategies: analysis of the public image of the city and design of the urban landscape. Yet, it is necessary to establish a conceptual framework that links both elements into a single process. The process of construction of these images can be explained by the theory of social representation, which has Serge Moscovici as its precursor.

Jodelet (1984) argues that the social representation is one way of interpreting and thinking about our daily reality and a structure of social knowledge. This type of knowledge is taken through the experiences that we receive and transmit through tradition, education and social communication. Therefore, it is a knowledge socially developed and shared.

Social representations are formed by a content that is related to an object, thereby all social representations are a representation of something and someone. This point is important for city branding, due to the fact that collective image of the city is neither a duplicate of the real or ideal, nor the objective or subjective part of the city, but that is the process by which a relationship is established. Kavaratzis (2004) argues that city branding focus should be on the point of intersection between the objective and subjective part of the city. This point of interaction is the perception of the city formed by each individual that relates to the city.

Jodelet (1984) explains that the act of representing is the act of thought whereby the subject is related to an object. However, it is necessary to highlight two important aspects of this act. The first aspect is that the representation leads to replace the object by something else. In this case, the function of representation is very similar to the symbol. The second aspect is that the representation makes something absent become present. Therefore, in the representation we have the mental content of a particular act of thought that restores symbolically something absent and approximates something distant. This important particularity ensures the representation to its ability to merge percept and concept and image of their character.

The social representation involves a significant character and not only restores symbolically what is absent, but also the present. Therefore, the social representation always means something to someone and makes it appear something meaningful to the questioner. For this reason, social representation is not a simple reproduction, but a construction which brings to the communication part of autonomy and individual and collective creation (Jodelet, 1984).

Moscovici (1984) establishes two processes to explain how the social part transforms knowledge into representation and how this representation transforms the social: objectivization and anchorage. Objectivization is the process of making the abstract concrete, so it can be defined as a structuring and image forming operation. By putting in images the abstract notions, gives body to

the conceptual schemes. Therefore, the objectivization reabsorbs and materializes the excesses of meanings. This process is necessary for the construction of the city's image due to the fact that the individual only forms bonds with certain elements of the city and thus forms a schema that allows him to reduce in a single image the complexity of the city.

For its part, the anchorage is the process of social embeddedness of the representation and its object. Jodelet (1984) explains that the anchorage also refers to the cognitive integration of the object depicted within the existing system of thought and to the changes arising from this system. The individual does not build the city's image in the nothing, but it tries to align their perception of the urban reality with their values, beliefs and preconceptions. This allows the image to be conferred in meaning and may be used to interpret the city.

Both processes are visible when defining a collective image of the city. Individuals "objectifies" the city through the election of a network of cognitive and emotional elements that result in an image or conceptual schema. However, this image acquires meaning and usefulness from prior social and cultural frameworks, allowing the organic insertion of knowledge within an established thought.

The city's image is not a simple object isolated from society, but it is the way in which local residents interpret and relate to their city. Based on this premise, it is possible to understand better the effect of urban landscape in the image of the city. Urban regeneration projects affect not only the urban environment but also its images and the meanings that are rooted in the city and its identity (Reiser and Crispin, 2009). Cities are dynamic and subject to organic changes, so any change in the identity of the city affects the images related to it. Through a complex process of appreciation, the individuals identify themselves with the place by ascribing meaning and, therefore, their identity is represented on this. Added to this, Harmaakorpi, Kari and Parjanen (2008) claim that humans recognize in the urban and natural landscapes the same structures and processes that are part of their own identity.


Kavaratzis and Ashworth (2005) argue that city branding should focus on how the residents are related to their city, how they make sense of it and what are the most valued physical and symbolic elements. People create a sense of their city in their minds through direct experiences, the media representations (film, literature, painting, news) and planned interventions in the urban landscape. The theory of social representation allows to understand how information is processed to form stable images of the city, which

are the basis for the daily interactions with the urban environment. City branding has as main objective focus on the mental images of the local residents to make changes in the urban landscape that benefit the economic, social and cultural development of the city.

Conclusions

From the theory of social representation, the city's image can be understood as a social construction and a figurative scheme that serves to reduce the urban complexity and interact with the city by means of shared social and cultural frameworks. For this reason, any change in the city's image affects local residents. This new perspective of the city's image is relevant for city branding because it positions the inhabitants of the city as the most important actors in the development and success of the city brand.

The design of the urban landscape is an effective tool to transform the image of the city, but it is also important to understand the side effects associated with this type of action. The constant rejection of local residents towards the urban regeneration projects is a clear indication of the relevance of city's image in the way individuals create a sense of the city. Furthermore, although the urban landscape is an element that may affect the image of the city; it also serves as a mean to contextualize local identity of the city (Filep, Thompson-Fawcett and Rae, 2014). Then, if the aspiration is to build a city brand to strengthen social cohesion and local identity while at the same time projecting an attractive image to the external audiences, it is necessary to understand the meaning, the representation and the relationship of the individuals with their environment.

In the field of city branding, this theoretical analysis has the additional aim of stimulate discussion about the nature and management of the city's image. If the purpose of the city branding is to create an attractive image of the city, it is therefore essential to gain further insight into this phenomenon. The construction, design and communication of the city's image are processes that must be addressed in future research. Furthermore, it is also recommended to put together empirical studies based on the city's image as a social representation. Finally, it is essential to reestablish the city's image as an object of study of city branding and favor diverse approaches from different disciplines for its study, since the definition of a concept is the first step in developing a theory and strengthen the research field of city branding. 

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