Toward contemporary city branding in the digital era: conceptualizing the acceptability of city branding on social media

Indira Shakina Ramadhani and Petrus Natalivan Indradjati
Urban and Regional Planning, Institut Teknologi Bandung, Bandung, Indonesia

Abstract
Purpose – This study aims to propose a conceptual framework for the acceptability of city branding on social media. The conceptual framework of the acceptability of city branding is necessary to achieve a successful city brand in the social media era. It tries to develop the use of social media in city branding practices and its acceptability, especially in the areas of urban planning and development. The study also explores important issues in the use of social media and its acceptability in city branding practices.

Design/methodology/approach – This study was initially conducted using a literature review of relevant, recent, and trustworthy scholarly publications (books, journals, reports, and proceedings) about city branding and acceptability from the electronic database by using relevant terms and keywords to find the relevant literature. The next step was to identify the essential variable described in the literature and assess how these are connected to one another. The last step was to create a conceptual framework using the variables that were found and their interrelationships.

Findings – Social media is crucial for determining a successful model of city branding strategy. Incorporating social media in the city branding process may lead to emerging bottom-up forms of influencing the city branding process, creating better-accepted city branding from wider audiences and guaranteeing a long-term successful city brand. The results of this paper indicate that one can utilize social media user-generated content (from residents and visitors), local government-created content, peer interaction, electronic word of mouth (e-WOM), and the engagement and participation medium to understand whether city branding is accepted by stakeholders through nine dimensions of acceptability: knowledge, information diffusion, experience, attachment, congruence, behavioral intention, perceived quality, engagement, and participation.

Research limitations/implications – This research outcome can be used to evaluate and extend the classical theory of the acceptability of city branding, or even the overall umbrella term of branding, in the digital age. Despite its contribution, this study is not without limitations. The conceptual framework herein is best suited to a branded city with a high social media penetration rate to better represent real-life phenomena in the offline environment; in other contexts, it presents certain reliability concerns regarding its implementation.

Social implications – The conceptual framework herein is best suited to a branded city with a high social media penetration rate to better represent the real-life phenomena in the offline environment; in other contexts, it presents certain reliability concerns regarding its implementation.

Originality/value – This research highlight some acceptability dimensions of city branding practice and also emphasize social media platform as useful tool to understand people’s opinion, attitude and behavior. Combining these two concepts of the acceptability of city branding and the use of social media provides an opportunity to achieve the goals of meaningful, authentic and resilient city branding.

Keywords City branding, Acceptability, Social media

Paper type Research paper

Introduction
Cities around the world need to become fully capable of understanding and implementing successful city branding. In recent years, city leaders have been significantly concerned about the remaining competitiveness of cities due to the influence of globalization and economic, social and cultural reform (Bonakdar and Audirac, 2019; Dastgerdi and De Luca, 2019b), which has increased the need to intensify strategies to differentiate one city from another. According to Monteiro (2016), one way to address this issue would be to create branding for cities, known as city branding, to promote them and achieve differentiation.
Similarly, Kavaratzis (2004) believes that city branding functions as the means for achieving competitive advantage to increase inward investment and tourism as a policy basis and serves as a conduit for city residents to identify their city.

The common approach of city branding practices sees branding as the development of promotional tools and identity claims conducted through local government-led top-down and exclusive approaches (Kavaratzis and Kalandides, 2015). However, top-down branding practices led to a mismatch between the city’s identity and core values branded by the government and an understanding of the city in people’s minds (Zhang and Zhao, 2009). Lack of public feedback and participation indicates the absence of the city branding attempts to engage diverse city stakeholders in articulating and conveying the brand. Considering that promotional tools (slogans and logos) and top-down branding efforts have failed to provide the desired outcomes, more recent developments within the city branding literature have attempted to incorporate planning principles and a more participatory approach to facilitate interaction with the wider public, which has, thus far, been dormant (Bonakdar and Audirac, 2019; Kavaratzis and Kalandides, 2015). This participatory city branding needs to be concerned with creating an identity that is acceptable to all (Zhang and Zhao, 2009). Dastgerdi and De Luca (2019a) also found that stakeholder acceptability is the most important goal of city branding and, therefore, an essential factor to consider in achieving successful city branding.

In the digital era, social media has led to a more interactive, participative and engaging dialogue platform than traditional media (Steinmetz et al., 2020; Thadani et al., 2020). Cities can explore social media data as a new source to study urban dynamics and complement the traditional data used for urban planning (Santala et al., 2017); city branding is notably no exception in this regard. One can also consider social media to be an effective “tool” for city branding to create a value distinct from traditional methods (Uzunoglu, 2016; Thadani et al., 2020). Social media enables new opportunities to study the acceptability of city branding by understanding how people view and judge brands on social media platforms (So, 2015). However, it is more likely that previous studies on the acceptability of city brands have not considered the existence of social media as a powerful tool in this digital era for city branding practices (see Dastgerdi and De Luca, 2019a; Houghton and Stevens, 2011; Lasarte and Saso, 2017). Thus, this study aims to solve a question for further discussion in the field of contemporary city branding in this digital era: “how does one understand the acceptability of city branding on social media?” More research is required to understand the use of social media in these emerging forms of acceptability of contemporary city branding.

Therefore, this study aims to propose a conceptual framework of the acceptability of city branding – necessary to achieve a successful city brand – on social media, which is developed by relating the use of social media to city branding practices, especially in the areas of urban planning/development. A framework is constructed from interconnected concepts and explains their relationships, helping the researcher to answer the research problem (Adom et al., 2018). This study was mainly conducted using the following method. The first step was a literature review of relevant, recent and trustworthy scholarly publications (books, journals, reports and proceedings) about city branding and acceptability from the electronic database by using relevant terms and keywords to find the relevant literature. The second step was to identify the essential variable described in the literature and figure out how these are connected. The last step was to create a conceptual framework using the variables found and their interrelationships. The paper is structured as follows. It first presents a literature review on city branding and its acceptability as the main basis for developing the framework and then reviews the use of social media and its benefits in city branding practices. It subsequently generates a conceptual framework by finding the relationship between the two main concepts: city branding and its acceptability on social media. Finally, the conclusion is presented.
Overview of city branding
City branding involves neither promotion nor marketing
Branding is a broad concept that applies to many different fields. First, it usually refers to a marketing management perspective as an asset for product- and service-based corporations (see Clifton and Simmons, 2009; Kotler et al., 2009). Branding is also manifested in cities as they can be viewed as branded products (Van Assche et al., 2020). However, city brands are fundamentally different (Kavaratzis, 2009), and defining the particular identity of a city is more complex than a product (Winfield-Pfefferkorn, 2005). The purpose of city branding is to promote the city’s image and is different from product branding, which aims to increase sales (Cozmiuc, 2011). City branding is also distinct from corporate branding, although they share some common characteristics; Kavaratzis (2009, p. 29) stated that “the complexities involved in city branding are even greater than corporate branding and the difficulties are more acute”.

City branding forms a part of place branding, a general concept of the holistic branding process that aims to build value or the quality of reasonableness for the place being promoted as a geographical entity, including nations, regions, cities, destinations and retail centers (Briciu, 2013; Hankinson, 2015; Sutriadi et al., 2020). The term city brand has its own meaning and characteristics that refer to a place, and more specifically, a city. Scholars have attempted to conduct a systematic literature review and observe the development of the city branding concept (e.g. Hankinson, 2015; Lucarelli and Berg, 2011; Ma et al., 2019; Oguztimur and Akturan, 2016; Ward, 1998). One may initially observe an ambiguity in the terms promotion, marketing and branding, which may be misleading in considering the city branding concept. Ward (1998) explored the selling of places and cities in terms of marketing and promotion, whereas Lucarelli and Berg (2011) classified marketing and branding as distinct approaches to the promotion of cities. However, selling cities and the marketing approach have been severely criticized as artificial; false; detached from reality; ignoring the economic, social and cultural aspects of cities; and neglecting the process of reimagining cities (Oguztimur and Akturan, 2015). Hankinson (2015) found that place branding (including city, destination, rural, nation and regional branding) is developed from urban policies, tourism and marketing as the origin domains, while place promotion and marketing are the domains for development. Moreover, the terms city branding, city marketing and city promotion can be seen as representing a series of stages in urban development: city promotion is a one-dimensional strategy primarily aimed at attracting visitors to a city; city marketing includes policies that add value to the city by focusing on certain target groups; and city branding is a broader concept and more engaging than city marketing, effectively incorporating stakeholders as target groups in a self-reinvention process for urban development and applying policy instruments (Ma et al., 2019, 2021). Therefore, city branding is a complex concept with a greater connection to urban planning than marketing or promotion and consists of various activities related to urban governance policy instruments and strategies.

Contemporary city branding approaches
Misunderstandings regarding city branding practices arise from the exclusive use of promotional tools, such as slogans, logos and advertising campaigns (Kavaratzis, 2009). However, logos and slogans are a “weak instrument” without any intended meaning or value (Govers, 2013). New approaches to city branding must utilize not only the symbolic power of the public but also greater public participation to create, legitimize and authenticate urban imaginaries (Bonakdar and Audirac, 2019) in which a city brand is the outcome. Participatory city branding emerges in three senses: obtaining the harmonious involvement of numerous stakeholders, enabling the contributions of highly popular and influential people to attract
others and facilitating residents’ voluntary interest in the program (Uzunoglu, 2016). This involvement in city branding increases brand ownership and, thereby, promotes a greater sense of responsibility for its development (Braun et al., 2013). Representation and formulation of city branding accompanied by various stakeholders lead to an increased sense of brand ownership and sustainability (Dinnie, 2010). The participation of stakeholders is a key factor in city branding and is essential to achieving a successful brand, supports a more resilient branding model and warrants a certain amount of risk and negative images (Zenker and Erfgen, 2014; Monteiro, 2016; Biçakçi and Genel, 2017; Ripoll Gonzalez and Gale, 2020). The aforementioned studies have highlighted the importance of participatory approaches in achieving successful contemporary city branding that is authentic and resilient.

Kavaratzis and Kalandides (2015) identified focus groups as instrumental for participatory city branding as they are not only the main source of vision but also a means to validate, recommend and prioritize different strategic goals. In contrast, this practice only relies on making residents (in focus groups) feel important in the process and cannot be considered the correct participatory place branding approach. Zenker and Erfgen (2014) proposed three stages of a branding strategy to boost fully participatory city branding, which allows residents to influence not only the content and aims of branding but also the methods and tools of communication: a) analysis stage – capturing the component of place and defining a shared vision for it; b) structure stage – implementing a structure and developing guidelines for participation; and c) monitoring stage – supporting residents in implementing their projects and conducting successful measurements. With the evolution of the digital era, digital technologies have enabled participatory city branding practices, comprising participation on three branding process levels: brand analysis and conceptualization in online surveys, research and consultations about brand concepts; brand expressions or experiences in online promotions through social media, content sharing and moderating communities and online experiences; and brand delivery and evaluation in submitting online reviews, suggestions and amendments to existing strategies (Hereźniak, 2017). Bisani (2019) distinguished two types of stakeholder groups associated with the branding process: institutional and community. Alternatively, and from a similar perspective, the stakeholders can consist of city officials and citizens (Wäckerlin et al., 2020).

Scholars have argued that the primary factor for a successful city branding in line with its contemporary concept involves the stakeholders (Trueman and Cornelius, 2006; Dastgerdi and De Luca, 2019a). However, these stakeholders may consist of some groups, including local residents, visitors, business entities and government; of course, each group has various preferences that can be different and conflicting with one another (Zenker and Erfgen, 2014; Bayrakdaroglu, 2017). There is a need for city branding attempts to accommodate diverse perceptions of the city in one acceptable identity. Stakeholders who cannot see any direct benefit for themselves within the branding process are seen as a failure for city branding; hence, measuring the acceptability and its changes is a useful perceptual measure to identify different levels of awareness, the pace of change and the strength of brand ownership (Trueman and Cornelius, 2006). In addition, Dastgerdi and De Luca (2019a) argued that the acceptability of a brand by stakeholders is an important goal of city branding and significant in achieving a meaningful brand. Moreover, acceptance of initiated strategy is essential in developing successful planning and policy implementation (Busse and Siebert, 2018). Pledger et al. (2018) stated that sustainable planning depends on the efficient policy measures; a successful implementation of efficient policies, in turn, crucially depends on their public acceptance. Consequently, the key to success of city branding implementation as a part of urban planning domain also depends on public acceptance of the branding. Therefore, the acceptability of city branding plays an essential role in achieving associated goals and maintaining success; in other words, one cannot ignore its role in successful contemporary branding practices.
The acceptability of city branding

Acceptability has a wide spectrum of definitions used in a variety of fields, including engineering; the social, biological and environmental sciences; business and management; information technology; etc. On a general level, acceptance or acceptability are often used to describe a similar phenomenon concerning how potential users will respond and act if a particular measure or device is adopted (Vlassenroot et al., 2010); thus, no difference exists between the two terms. From the literature on urban planning and the social sciences, the terms are relevant to the conditions of urban space production: the resident’s assessment of the designed urban space, policies and projects reflects various levels of social acceptance of the development (Semmoud, 2014). In short, the acceptability of brands essentially reveals the reactions, judgments and assessments from the target audiences in a positive way; however, this concept is still abstract. Further definitions of the acceptability of a brand and how it should be measured, as evident in various general, product, place and city branding studies, are diverse, as reviewed in the following discussion.

From the product branding perspective, Lakshmi and Muthumani (2016) stated that the acceptance of a brand depends largely on consumers’ perception or opinion about the brand quality, which reflects their cognitive and emotional responses, language and actions and forces a certain behavior toward brands. The literature on general branding also uses the term brand acceptance to express the acceptability of brands (see Jahanvi and Sharma, 2021; Pan et al., 2018). Brand acceptance is dynamic and “can essentially be modeled as a process in which two groups of opinions, i.e. positive and negative, evolve within a population (i.e. the customers and potential customers)” (Pan et al., 2018, p. 678). This brand acceptance is distinguished by positive opinion and diffusion dynamics. Opinion dynamics consist of two different opinion states, either supporting the brand (positive opinion) or not (negative opinion). Diffusion dynamics consider people’s knowledge about the informational or promotive states in the population and the dynamic process of spreading the message (positive attitudes). Similarly, Jahanvi and Sharma (2021) explored the critical factors justifying brand acceptance through positive opinion statements toward brands, such as those regarding a sense of belonging to a city or confidence. Rossiter (1993) suggested a different view, proposing a seven-set model of brand awareness and acceptance. The three “end-state” sets constructed from this model – the acceptance, neutral and rejection sets – have been used as an evaluative tool. The acceptance set can be measured through consumer behavioral intentions toward brands that the buyer considers acceptable for purchase. This model of acceptability indicates the formation of attitudes toward behavior; as a result, Rossiter (2014) posited that acceptance is a brand attitude, the buyer’s evaluation of the brand with respect to its expected capacity to deliver on a currently relevant buying motive, at a positive level. However, overall, the literature on place or city branding does not widely employ the term brand acceptance and more commonly uses acceptability or acceptance (see Lasarte and Saso, 2017; Nartey, 2012; Rossiter, 2014).

The acceptability of brands described above may differ in the city branding context due to the complexity of its characteristics. The abovementioned studies refer mainly to the product branding perspective, offering tangible items (products or services) for purchase (Cozmiuc, 2011) and the marketing-oriented view (Oguztimur and Akturan, 2016), which have distinct characteristics from city branding. Although this categorization does not directly refer to the city branding strategy, it is adaptable and useful for this context with some adjustments. First, the acceptability of product brands considers the opinions of buyers, customers and consumers, whereas city branding involves those of many groups of stakeholders (residents, visitors, the government and businesses) with a variety of interests in the same territory (Dastgerdi and De Luca, 2019a). Second, a relationship between the acceptability of product brands and purchase intentions exists; however, in the city branding context, the positive behavioral intentions toward the city include positive word-of-mouth communication,
reflecting intentions to stay in or revisit the city and ambassador behaviors, referring to the consistency of residents’ behavior regarding the image and value of the place and their willingness to promote their brand as satisfied clients (Barreto, 2014; Magnoni et al., 2021). Third, the quality of the city brand can be reflected through that of the city features as perceived by people (or according to their perception). Anholt (2006) highlighted one significant difference between product and city brands: in the latter case, people are not willing to change their minds (perception) only because of effective advertising and marketing; they also consider the city’s conditions (how pleasant and exciting they imagine the city to be), people (how safe they think they would feel in the city and how easily they can find and fit into communities), policies (their perception of the basic qualities of the city’s accommodation and public amenities) and opportunities (how easily they can find employment, do business, or receive education in the city). In addition, Chan (2019) established some measurements of perceived brand quality based on the level of excellence and consistency in the quality offered by a city brand.

Scholars have also attempted to examine the concept of acceptability from the place and city branding perspectives, as explained in the following discussion. By unpacking a brand heritage experience, Mencarelli et al. (2020) highlighted the demonstration of some forms of resistance by other visitors who question or do not accept – partially or completely – the brand as a part of the heritage corpus. In other words, one can examine brand acceptance (and rejection) through brand experience. Brakus et al. (2009) explored four dimensions of brand experience: sensory, affective, behavioral and intellectual experience. These brand experience dimensions have also been applied in the city brand context to examine the experiences of residents and tourists (see Beckman et al., 2013; Magnoni et al., 2021). In applying them to a city-center brand, they include a) behavioral experiences in the city related to the physical body in terms of recreation, nightlife, or food; b) sensory experiences (arising from many senses, such as sight, smell, taste and sound) of the unique identity of a branded city; c) affective experiences resulting in various emotions (moods, feelings and sentiments) related to the city; and d) intellectual experiences resulting in heuristics or promoting freethinking that is stimulated by the city design, slogans and logos. Other studies have also examined urban icons as a part of city branding to explore the real experiences of brands. Urban icons, symbols or icons of a city, can effectively contribute to the development of a consistent city brand, provide a “quick reference” for a city and influence urban identities and people’s experiences (Castillo-Villar, 2016; Trueman and Cornelius, 2006). Thus, examining urban icon experiences serves as a tool to enhance people’s experiences within the city branding strategy. “These kinds of experiences were generated from direct contact with the contemporary urban icon or by the use of the contemporary urban icon for various purposes” (Castillo-Villar, 2016, p. 13).

Lasarte and Saso (2017) specifically discussed the acceptability of city brands as measured by the perceived usefulness of branding actions and residents’ attitude toward the brand. They also identified some key factors influencing this perceived usefulness, which is the fundamental basis for brand acceptance. The first involves their attachment to their place of residence. Studies have given more attention to the emotional attachment of residents or visitors to the city, which refers to the symbolic or affective attachment that reflects different levels of feeling attached to the territory depending on its characteristics (Lasarte and Saso, 2017; Poço and Casais, 2019). Second is the congruence between the brand and the city’s identity, which is high if the communicated brand coincides with the image of the city that the residents, as a part of that city, have. This identity–image match, where the communicated image from city officials is in line with the reality (current image) that people encounter in a city, implies a believable place brand for both internal customers (residents) and external clients (visitors) (Braun et al., 2018; Poço and Casais, 2019; Wackerlin et al., 2020). A city’s image is a complex and multifaceted aspect (Castillo-Villar, 2018). Lynch’s (1960) book
entitled *The Image of the City* presents the most well-known study on this topic and has introduced Lynchian elements of a city's image (landmarks, nodes, edges, paths and districts). Currently, a city's image is primarily linked to the domain of place branding (Wäckelin* et al.*, 2020), including city branding as well.

Authors have argued that another crucial factor in gaining acceptance of city branding is effective stakeholder engagement: according to Houghton and Stevens (2011, p. 2), "effective stakeholder engagement is crucial to the acceptance of city branding as an important and respected discipline within modern urban development and management". The authors identified some basic starting points for engaging stakeholders effectively: engaging hard-to-reach groups, all the city stakeholders who contribute to the city's functioning and other stakeholders based on evidence of their potential, assets, strengths and weaknesses; and creating an open dialogue. According to Henninger* et al.* (2016), stakeholders' engagement can be divided into four "levels" from highly active engagement to a lack of involvement, namely, the primary, secondary, tertiary and quaternary levels, based on their engagement in the branding process. Furthermore, another close concept regarding engagement, namely, participation, is also important for city brand acceptance; the absence of such a participative approach poses the risk of the public not accepting the design of a city brand (Lau and Leung, 2011; Dastgerdi and De Luca, 2019a, b).

The participatory and iterative approach to city branding set out in this paper is designed to generate and support a greater sense of ownership amongst the broadest possible range of stakeholders (Houghton and Stevens, 2011). Stakeholders need to participate in the overall city branding process from the analysis to the evaluation (Zenker and Erfgen, 2014; Hereźniak, 2017; Ma* et al.*, 2021), with more emphasis on the participation of internal stakeholders, such as residents, citizens, local communities, governmental organizations, etc. (see Braun* et al.*, 2013; Hereźniak, 2017; Lasarte and Šaso, 2017; Ma* et al.*, 2021; Monteiro, 2016; Zenker and Erfgen, 2014) rather than external clients, such as visitors or tourists.

From the discussions above, many studies have attempted to define and measure the acceptability of the brand concept using different dimensions. This section attempts to find which items were related to each other. The similarities between theories are considered not only from a city branding context but also using the overall branding concept. Kavaratzis (2009) and Vlassenroot* et al.* (2010) also carried out a similar exercise to build their conceptual models. Table 1 gives an overview of some of the theories used, which have evident similarities in their contexts; this is used as a basis for developing the conceptual framework.

The use of social media for city branding practices

A successful incorporation of efficient social media use has the potential to transform a stronger city branding through engagement and brand co-creation involving wider audiences (Sevin, 2016). Social media platforms have given rise to new ways of communicating information regarding place brands (Taecharungroj, 2019), including city brands. Through social media, "consumers are no longer passive recipients of the city/destination brand messages; rather they become the co-creators of the brand since the social media shifted power to them" (Özbölük, 2017, p. 888). In branding practices, social media channels have been used for communication with the target customers of branding strategies (Colliander* et al.*, 2015). Social Media Platforms (SMPs) is beneficial for city branding by its ability to provide two different communication levels at a mass communication level to broadcast their messages and at an interpersonal level to interact with users (Sevin, 2013). Moreover, the use of social media also leads to higher brand attitude and purchase intentions (Colliander* et al.*, 2015; Wang* et al.*, 2019); in other words, in
the context of this study, social media affects city brand attitudes and place-related behavioral intentions.

By its nature, social media could facilitate the collection of public opinions and enrich the data used in the decision-making process with real-life input (Santala et al., 2017). Social media content, as one element of user-generated content (UGC) and a rich source of online information on customer attitudes, opinions and experiences, offers a new way to observe a place, including cities, and its brand (Acuti et al., 2019; Liu et al., 2019; Taecharungroj, 2019). Another study also found that since UGC tends to focus on consumer dimensions, it is created by the general public rather than professionals and has a greater effect on the overall perception of brand value than firm-created content, which is controlled by professionals or companies (Schivinski and Dabrowski, 2016). On the other hand, firm-created communication on social media has a strong positive influence on gaining a favorable perceived quality of a brand and increasing behavioral loyalty (Grubor and Milovanov, 2017). Further studies have emerged on the importance of social media in the process of representing user-generated images of cities to provide a reliable measure of the perceived city image through visual and textual information (Acuti et al., 2018; Huang et al., 2021). In addition, the ability to create UGC on social media aids in exploring the level of place attachment through textual information (status captions), as investigated by Felasari et al. (2017).

Furthermore, social media can be beneficial in terms of city-related message (information) diffusion (Pan et al., 2018). Information on social media ecology can be disseminated relatively quick and easy to wider audiences (Sevin, 2016). SMPs facilitate real-time information dissemination (Lin and Kant, 2021). “The city branding messages, whether generated by city authorities or by users, can spread rapidly through peer-interaction via different actions such as like, comment, share, re-tweet or hashtag” (Uzunoglu, 2016, p. 3), utilizing those SMPs action features helps to expand city brand outreach to larger audiences (Sevin, 2013). Moreover, information sharing on social media could arise from electronic word of mouth (e-WOM; Barreto, 2014), with a distinction between “organic” word of mouth (a person

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Acceptability dimensions of branding</th>
<th>Context</th>
<th>References</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Knowledge</td>
<td>General brand</td>
<td>Pan et al. (2018)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Fashion, transport and technology brand</td>
<td>Jahanvi and Sharma (2021)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>Information Diffusion</td>
<td>General brand</td>
<td>Pan et al. (2018)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>Experience</td>
<td>Heritage place brand</td>
<td>Mencarelli et al. (2020)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>City brand</td>
<td>Beckman et al. (2013), Castillo-Villar (2016)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>General place brand</td>
<td>Magnoni et al. (2021)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>General brand</td>
<td>Brakus et al. (2009)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>Congruence</td>
<td>City brand</td>
<td>Lynch (1960), Braun et al. (2013), Lasarte and Saso (2017), Wäckerlin et al. (2020)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>City brand</td>
<td>Anholt (2006), Chan (2019)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>City brand</td>
<td>Lasarte and Saso (2017)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>General place brand</td>
<td>Magnoni et al. (2021)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.</td>
<td>Engagement</td>
<td>City brand</td>
<td>Houghton and Stevens (2011), Henninger et al. (2016)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.</td>
<td>Participation</td>
<td>City brand</td>
<td>Dastgerdi and De Luca (2019a, b)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>General place brand</td>
<td>Zenker and Erfgen (2014), Hereźniak (2017)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1. Overview of the similarities in the acceptability dimensions of branding
naturally telling others about a positive or negative experience with a product) and amplified or “fertilized” word of mouth (campaigns or other ways to encourage people to speak about a product). Notably, e-WOM, where people are willing to promote a brand, reflects ambassador behavior on social media (Barreto, 2014; WOMMA, 2011) and also has an impact on perceptions about brands appearing on social media (Grubor and Milovanov, 2017; Acuti et al., 2019).

Studies have recognized online brand communities based on social media as the most popular type of such communities, where all stakeholders can actively participate (Grubor and Milovanov, 2017); therefore, they currently play an important role in and serve as a tool for community engagement and participation (Steinmetz et al., 2020). Skoric et al. (2016) also found that online participation and engagement are related to social media and its informational, expressive and relational use. Social media acts as a virtual space that gives special groups and groups that are usually silent an opportunity to express their opinions and concerns (Santala et al., 2017), creating opportunities for proactively involving the overall city stakeholders in the city branding process. In addition, online communities can help develop the brand strategy, providing real feedback on how it is working and giving a greater relevance and appeal on the brand (Yan, 2011).

In summary, the key aspects of social media data that provide benefits for city branding practices are related to UGC, firm-generated content, peer interaction, e-WOM and the medium of engagement and/or participation. All these aspects reflect people’s thoughts on and reactions to issues, including city branding; in other words, social media helps one to understand the reactions and assessments of individuals, thus enabling measurements of the level of acceptance of a brand.

Discussion: conceptualizing the acceptability of city branding on social media
In the era of digitalization, one should not underestimate the challenges associated with city branding. Social media is crucial for the successful model of city branding strategy. It is the current new way of communication, allowing individuals in society to interact with each other and express their opinions, emotions and behaviors. SMPs serve as an ideal platform to enhance interaction, involvement and participation from a wider audience of participants. Hence, social media can be seen as an effective participatory branding tool, which results in achieving participatory city branding and its several benefits.

This section attempts to link the two concepts of the acceptability of city branding and the use of social media, as technology-based platforms might offer a new perspective on carrying out city branding practices that are meaningful, authentic and resilient in this digital era. As argued in this study, SMPs and their UGC are a powerful tool for identifying reactions to the city and its brand as perceived by stakeholders; therefore, they can ascertain the acceptability of a city brand. Social media can serve as a tool to understand the knowledge, information diffusion, brand experiences, attachment to a city, congruence, perceived quality, attitudes to behavior, engagement and participation as the acceptability dimensions of city branding. This paper proceeds further by internalizing the use of social media to achieve meaningful city branding. After merging the two main concepts mentioned above, a conceptual framework was created, as shown in Figure 1. The construct and proposed dimensions of the acceptability of city brands on social media are presented in Table 2.

Conceptual frameworks have both theoretical and practical implications. Regarding the theoretical implications of this study, a conceptual framework can be used to explain the acceptability of city branding on social media, suggested as the new approach to understanding current phenomena (regarding how people respond to and their acceptance of a brand) rather than using traditional methods. “Cities have a chance to explore social
media data as a new source to study urban dynamics and complement traditional data used for urban planning (Santala et al., 2017). Moreover, it can be used to evaluate and extend the classical theory of the acceptability of city branding, or even the overall umbrella term of branding, in the digital age. By its nature, social media as a participatory approach implies deeply engaged public participation in city branding attempts. In addition, incorporating social media into urban planning to define city brands helps reinforce the general public’s sense of belonging to the city. Taking all that into consideration, social media can result in emerging bottom-up planning forms of influencing the city branding process, creating better-accepted city branding and guaranteeing long-term successful planning for city brand. Regarding the practical implications of this study, social media data can provide city planners with detailed information on the level of acceptability of a city brand as judged by its target audience. Receiving this information can help the city evaluate its branding strategy and increase its competitiveness among other cities. Despite its contribution, this study is not without limitations. The conceptual framework herein is best suited to a branded city with a high social media penetration rate to better represent the real-life phenomena in the offline environment; in other contexts, it presents certain reliability concerns regarding its implementation. Another factor involves the limitations of social media itself, where its platforms are not neutral tools and introduce social and political bias (Feeney and Porumbescu, 2021). Based on this shortcoming, although social media accommodates the need for city branding practices in the digital era, future research should consider triangulation between social media analytics and traditional methods to test the consistency of this study’s findings and its operationalization. Further research can also lead to gaining a more holistic and deeper understanding.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Acceptability dimensions</th>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>References</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge</td>
<td>User-generated opinion on brand</td>
<td>Residents' and visitors' social media content contains messages (as positive e-WOM) that support the brand</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Local government-created opinion on brand</td>
<td>City government’s social media content contains messages (as positive e-WOM) that support the brand</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Information diffusion</td>
<td>Spreading of user-generated messages</td>
<td>Gaining social media peer interaction on positive messages posted by residents and visitors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Spreading of local government-created messages</td>
<td>Gaining social media peer interaction on positive messages posted by the local government</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experience</td>
<td>Brand experience</td>
<td>Sensory, affective, behavioral and intellectual experience of brand shared on social media UGC as positive e-WOM</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Urban icon experience</td>
<td>Urban icon experience of brand shared on social media UGC as positive e-WOM</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attachment</td>
<td>Emotional attachment of residents</td>
<td>The feeling of attachment to the city shared by residents on social media UGC as positive e-WOM</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Emotional attachment of visitors</td>
<td>The feeling of attachment to the city shared by visitors on social media UGC as positive e-WOM</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Congruence</td>
<td>Brand identity–brand image match from residents' viewpoint</td>
<td>Intended image (brand identity) is in line with perception of city image (brand image) on social media UGC by residents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Brand identity–brand image match from visitors' viewpoint</td>
<td>Intended image (brand identity) is in line with perception of city image (brand image) on social media UGC by visitors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceived quality</td>
<td>Quality of elements of city resources</td>
<td>Residents and visitors’ evaluation of the level of excellence and consistency in the quality of place condition, people, policies and opportunities in city through local government-created communication via social media content</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Behavioral intention</td>
<td>Intention to stay in or revisit city</td>
<td>Positive e-WOM on social media, both organic and amplified, about intention to stay in and/or revisit city</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ambassador behavior</td>
<td>Residents’ behavior that aligns with the image and value of the place and their willingness to promote the brand on social media</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engagement</td>
<td>Effective stakeholder engagement</td>
<td>Engaging all city stakeholders proactively and sensitively based on evidence from using SMPs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participation</td>
<td>Participatory approach in branding process</td>
<td>Enabling a fully participatory approach to city branding process (analysis, expression and evaluation) by using SMPs</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2. The acceptability of brands on social media
Conclusion
In light of the opportunities and challenges associated with the increase in social media use in contemporary city branding practices in this digital era, this study proposed and discussed a framework for the acceptability of city branding, a key driver for achieving branding goals, on social media. The research results highlight some acceptability dimensions of city branding – namely, knowledge, information diffusion, experience, attachment, congruence, perceived quality, behavioral intention, engagement and participation – related to its practice and process. City branding that is accepted by stakeholders is a crucial driver for achieving a meaningful brand. Furthermore, this study emphasized that SMPs provide useful insight into people’s opinions, feelings, behaviors, engagement and participation regarding city branding with the help of UGC (from residents and visitors), local government-created content, peer interaction, e-WOM and the engagement and participation medium. Combining the two concepts of the acceptability of city branding and the use of social media provides an opportunity to achieve the goals of meaningful city branding (associated with gaining the acceptability of a brand) and authentic and/or resilient city branding (associated with using social media as a participatory tool) in this digital era.

This paper has proposed an idea that highlights the use of social media to provide good opportunities for creating long-term successful city branding that is acceptable to the public. Social media serves as an appropriate communication channel for enhancing participatory city branding. In this point of view, it is necessary for local governments to employ the use of social media for their city branding attempts. Local governments can accelerate the use of social media to engage in more interactive communication and closer cooperation with the public. It is important to ascertain how communication and information dissemination is made between local governments and the public. This helps the cities find themselves to have an identity that resonates better with people’s perception of the city and evokes emotional attachment between people and their city that leads to more acceptable city branding. To sum up, the role of social media in contemporary city branding initiatives is very constructive and effective in determining the urban planning policies for city brand strategy, and therefore, improves the competitive advantage of the city.

References


**Corresponding author**

Indira Shakina Ramadhani can be contacted at: indirash09@gmail.com

For instructions on how to order reprints of this article, please visit our website: [www.emeraldgrouppublishing.com/licensing/reprints.htm](http://www.emeraldgrouppublishing.com/licensing/reprints.htm)

Or contact us for further details: permissions@emeraldinsight.com