

Research on the Mechanism of City Branding and the Role of Symbolic Labels

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ABSTRACT

As global market competition intensifies and inter-city rivalry grows increasingly fierce, both academia and industry have placed greater emphasis on city branding in recent years. City branding is not merely a cosmetic exercise but rather a strategic tool reflecting urban development objectives. It involves applying brand thinking to shape cities, highlighting their uniqueness and distinctiveness within the globalised context. Simultaneously, symbolic labels can highly condense the characteristics and nature of a city, with the extracted symbols possessing the advantage of rapid recognition. Therefore, incorporating a significant number of symbolic labels into the brand-building process can promote brand renewal, enhance brand recognition, and accentuate distinctive features.

KEYWORDS

City brand; Symbolic labels; Cultural symbols; Communication pathways

1 Introduction

Amidst accelerating global urbanisation and shifting regional competitive landscapes, effective city branding has become a critical task for national new urbanisation initiatives and sustainable urban development. Addressing issues of unclear cultural identity and poor brand recognition in city branding, this study employs semiotic theory, grounded theory modelling, and multidimensional empirical validation. It systematically reveals the operational mechanisms of symbolic labels in city branding from a symbolic labelling perspective. Initially, textual mining and in-depth interviews were employed to gather case study data. Subsequently, a combined approach of textual mining and case analysis provided preliminary insights into the operational mechanisms of symbolic labels within the examined urban brands. Theoretical findings indicate that symbolic labels emerge from the creative transformation of local knowledge within the context of digital-age symbol proliferation, offering fresh perspectives to overcome the cultural hollowness plaguing urban branding. Brands establish overarching strategic planning to define future objectives; labels, however, rapidly disseminate and embed brand goals through concrete, more perceptible symbols. Crafting a successful city brand requires steadfast adherence to core principles while continuously leveraging iterative innovation in labels. Only then can a distinctive and sustainably evolving brand personality emerge. This approach guides the selection of cultural symbols in city brand positioning and serves as a model for national image construction.

2 Concept and theoretical foundations of city branding

2.1 Definition and implications of city branding

City branding has evolved from a physical space marketing tool to a strategic asset. Early theoretical research often categorised 'city branding' as visualisation and marketing promotion of urban image, primarily employed for attracting tourists and investment. From a semiotic perspective, the connotation of 'city branding' has undergone significant expansion. As a system of meaning, it encompasses both the "signifier" – the formal symbols (denotations) such as city emblems and totems – and the 'signified' – the world of the city's spirit, collective memory, and intrinsic meaning.

A city brand represents the distinctive, differentiated, symbolic, and connotative cognitive evaluations, value forms, and cultural identifiers that emerge when a city's endowed resources—including political, economic, social, historical, cultural, and geographical elements—interact through interpersonal communication, mass media, marketing campaigns, and the social environment. Amidst deepening economic globalisation, social informatisation, cultural diversification, and urban distinctiveness, the city brand—as an intangible asset and spiritual essence of the city—serves as a crucial driver for high-quality urban development. It functions as a strategic, resource-based lever to multiply a city's comprehensive competitiveness, whilst its cultivation, dissemination, and marketing can activate cultural vitality, enhance cohesion, and elevate competitiveness^[1]. City branding is far from mere publicity; it requires character positioning grounded in the city's unique traits and strengths. Through systematic strategic planning, image design, cultural excavation, dissemination promotion, and sustained management, it shapes and reinforces a city's distinctive identity, core values, and competitive advantages. This elevates its global or regional recognition, appeal, and influence, thereby forging the city brand.

Urban branding serves as a vital instrument for sustainable development. Throughout their evolution, numerous cities

prioritise integrating economic, social, and cultural elements as central tasks, seeking to enhance urban competitiveness through brand image cultivation ^[2]. Contemporary interpretations have transcended mere image management, evolving into a foundational narrative for urban strategic development. The essence of branding now extends beyond superficial symbols to permeate all facets of urban governance.

2.2 Theoretical foundations of city branding

The theoretical underpinnings of city branding have evolved from a marketing tool perspective to a symbolic value theory, reflecting a paradigm shift in social science research. Early urban marketing theories treated brand building merely as a market expansion tactic, positing that leveraging distinctive local resources could forge competitive brands. However, semiotics-related theories have transformed research methodologies. There is now growing recognition that physical carriers such as landmark buildings and cultural symbols are not merely formal emblems but, more significantly, repositories of collective memory. Take Qingdao's 'City of Brands' as an example: Qingdao boasts numerous corporate brands like Haier and Hisense, which evolved from early industrial symbols into contemporary carriers embodying the city's spirit in public perception. These have become emblematic carriers of Qingdao's urban ethos. Qingdao's 'City of Brands' exemplifies this shift. The city hosts numerous corporate brands—such as Haier and Hisense—which evolved from industrial symbols into contemporary embodiments of Qingdao's urban ethos. Through urban brand identification coding—where secondary symbols coexist with primary symbols within a three-tier brand system—dominant secondary brands have achieved significant brand-building success ^[3].

Amid intensifying global market competition, rivalry between cities has become ubiquitous. Academics have explored whether branding influences urban competitiveness, while industry increasingly recognises the value of city branding. This endeavour serves both as an image-building initiative and a strategic approach unifying means and ends in urban development. Essentially, it involves applying brand thinking to orchestrate comprehensive city development, securing a position within the global urban competitive landscape and highlighting unique strengths. Symbolic labels offer a highly condensed expression of a city's ethos, leaving a profound impression on audiences through visual and linguistic symbols. Consequently, employing such labels in city branding proves particularly compelling. Their inherent attributes pinpoint the focal points for brand development while reinforcing public recognition of the city and establishing a distinct identity that differentiates it from others.

3 The mechanism of symbolic labels in city branding

3.1 Definition and classification of symbolic labels

From a brand semiotics perspective, symbolic labels facilitate a shift from unidirectional sender-receiver dynamics to multifaceted cognitive mediation. They represent an evolution beyond traditional brand identifiers—previously understood merely as visually recognisable symbols within communication frameworks—and exhibit notably high consumer acceptance. Consequently, symbolic labels hold significant importance in brand promotion. 'Symbolic labels' represent visual expressions of content bearing specific symbolic meaning, encompassing iconic architecture, cultural symbols, brand slogans, visual motifs, and even local specialities. Essentially, they distil the core attributes of complex urban spaces into recognisable city imagery, conveying abstract urban values through intuitive, sensory-driven concrete symbols. These labels function as 'cognitive shortcuts' formed during city brand dissemination. For instance, the 'City of Brands' represents Qingdao's extended urban brand image system, built upon its nationwide renown for brands through multiple classic product lines. This system encompasses not only a 'triple-integrated' brand city framework combining corporate brand systems, service brand systems, and institutional brand systems, but also pioneers a 'new path' towards standardised, systematised, and scientific brand development in brand city construction. Qingdao stands as one of the most influential exemplars in brand city development ^[3].

The production process of urban brand labels is the outcome of an interactive dynamic between symbolic power and collective memory. Shenzhen's transition from the 'world's factory' to the 'consumption capital' exemplifies this label evolution ^[4], reflecting the conflict and coordination between governmental planning and civic practices during industrial upgrading. However, when traditional manufacturing labels prove inadequate to support urban transformation, new labels require top-level policy design alongside iterative upgrades in commercial ecosystems and substantive shifts in citizens' lifestyles. Through bottom-up falsification, it becomes evident that successfully crafted symbolic labels must possess a degree of tolerance for error. They require strategic steadfastness while retaining flexibility to adapt to market dynamics.

3.2 The economic and social value of symbolic labels

The economic and social value of symbolic labels stems from their dual-value-added function as intermediaries of meaning – the transformation from symbolic attribution to value reproduction. In the era of the symbolic economy, a city's symbolic labels recode inherently regional resources into socially transmissible capital. These urban symbols, underpinned by their reconverted value, reconstruct the city's worth and catalyse transformations in modes of production, relations of production, and even social relations.

The creation of social value is a process moving from symbolic decoding to identity affirmation – ascending from initial symbolic transmission to the establishment of symbolic value. Once the spring culture was established as Jinan's urban image, the function of symbolic transmission was realised. The regional cultural reproduction driven by the Spring City then entered a phase centred on nurturing the spirit of the springs. This phase established an interactive network between the physical space of the 'Spring Living Circle' and the semantic field of the 'Spirit of the Spring City.' The 'old, traditional symbols' evolved into a medium co-created by the citizenry^[5], maximising the traditional function of marking. In crafting its city brand, Tokyo has not severed the connection between its past and present. When creating symbols for the contemporary era, it deliberately maintains a juxtaposition between the old and new eras. Here, the 'encounter of old and new' label is employed, transforming Tokyo's city branding into a tool for young people to engage in identity formation.

Symbolic labels are not static; they embody both context and dynamism, requiring authentic urban DNA to reshape vibrant imagery. They rely on multifaceted empowerment—economic, cultural, and governance—to cultivate a distinctive urban character capable of sedimenting and transforming public perception while galvanising collective sentiment.

4 The interactive relationship between city branding and symbolic labels

4.1 Synergy between brand positioning and label selection

Within the evolution of city branding theory, the relationship between brand positioning and label selection has shifted from a synchronous static alignment to a bidirectionally dynamic coupling. This transformation marks a paradigm shift from static calibration to dynamic synergy in city branding. Previous positioning involved relatively direct distillation of urban functional traits (e.g., port city as trade hub), while labels corresponded to more intuitive physical landmarks (e.g., New York – Statue of Liberty). In semiotic terms, this constituted a linear signifier-signified correspondence, overlooking the continuous reshaping of urban identity. Urban brand positioning is no longer a simple binary distinction, but involves abstract extraction of the city's spiritual core and culturally encoded genetic traits. This demands that the city's labelling operations not only compress symbols and maintain redundancy, but also employ dialectical thinking capable of accommodating semantic diversity. This resolves two issues: the rigid semantic boundaries inherent in labels themselves, and the reductionist tendency towards misinterpretation and overgeneralisation. For instance: Qingdao's transformation from a manufacturing base into a 'City of Brands' stems from its positioning within the 'brand economy'. This approach involves building an industrial ecosystem centred on corporate brands like Haier and Tsingtao Brewery. Through label evolution guided by positioning, it fosters symbiotic value between corporate brand clusters and the city's label^[3].

Within the dimension of symbolic resonance, synergy transcends utilitarian rationality to achieve harmonious alignment with emotional empathy. Conventional approaches merely treat labels as information carriers, emphasising transmission. Yet Tokyo's brand-city practice demonstrates that when such label systems become deeply embedded within a city's cultural core, their symbolic significance transcends mere conveyance. They exist as markers of collective identity. Tokyo's choice of 'Where Tradition Meets the Future' as its label stems from this principle, enabling it to become a trigger for collective public memory.

The collaborative pathway methodology achieves a strategic shift from top-down planning to co-creation. Once labels are opened as spaces for collective symbolic interaction, brand positioning can harness the strengths of both approaches. This allows for simultaneous absorption and replenishment of cultural nourishment, ultimately establishing the label as a sustainable bearer of urban culture. It cultivates a city brand capable of continuously nurturing a favourable environment.

4.2 Enhancing brand influence through label propagation

For a city's public relations, the influence of its brand is realised through the reshaping of meaning and elevation of perception generated by its various symbolic labels during dissemination. Throughout the journey from symbolic encoding to cognitive resonance, this process is continually accompanied by the evolution of the symbolic system and the expansion of the network of meanings. Within the brand recognition process, new brand perception systems are

constantly formed, laying a robust foundational logical support for city brand creation. Crafting a city brand transcends mere image-building; it serves as a vital tool for urban development. Its essence lies in applying brand thinking to effectively manage and operate a city, enabling it to rise above the global landscape. Symbolic labels represent a city's unique identity, offering a concise expression of its characteristics while forming a distinctive visual and verbal symbol system. Thus, in city branding, we must judiciously employ symbolic labels to inject fresh vitality.

Taking Qingdao's 'City of Brands' tag as an example: during its initial dissemination, cognitive disparities led to corporate brands existing in isolation while the city brand remained ambiguous among residents. This necessitated developing a 'trinity' brand system to unify individual enterprises' signifiers and integrate them into a cohesive signified, thereby elevating fragmented city and commercial brands into a super-symbol of urban innovation. Secondly, building upon Quanzhou's silhouette of red-brick ancient dwellings, overlaying logos and text from contemporary local footwear and apparel brands like Anta and Cabin enhances external recognition of Quanzhou as the 'World Cultural Manufacturing Capital' and 'City of World Heritage'. Moreover, Quanzhou leverages its strengths of 'rich history, diverse culture, and abundant heritage' by thematising its cultural resources. This transforms tourist attractions into thematic tourism IPs^[6] brimming with immersive scenarios and narratives. Meanwhile, the springs and the Spring City serve as cultural carriers for Jinan, having witnessed the city's development over nearly two millennia. Amidst the tide of modern urbanisation, they should evolve with the times to jointly cultivate a brand atmosphere that preserves and promotes traditional culture. By linking these elements, the city can leverage the cultural significance of its springs and the driving force of its urban brand to form a mutually reinforcing, virtuous cycle. This approach will support Jinan's bid to secure World Heritage status for its Spring City designation. As symbolic tags on urban labels are not static but possess visual appeal and vitality, they must be tailored to the city's actual conditions and socio-economic development factors. Utilising such content as urban tags enables people to form accurate perceptions of the city, fostering a deeper understanding of its unique charm and essence.

5 Practical examples of symbolic labels in city branding

In today's globalised world, regional culture serves as the soul of a city's brand and its competitive edge over rivals. Integrating regional culture is a crucial lever for enhancing a city's brand competitiveness, ensuring each city possesses its own 'cultural calling card'^[7]. As the world moves increasingly towards integrated development, the necessity for China's cultural identity as a 'cultural calling card' has emerged within this global context. China's city branding has evolved from simple image projection to competing on symbolic value, a shift observed across regions.

Following Qingdao's designation as one of China's first national brand economy demonstration zones, the emergence of its 'City of Brands' label exemplifies the mutual construction of industrial heritage and urban image. On one hand, Qingdao leveraged corporate brands like Haier and Tsingtao Brewery to construct a productive signifier system. On the other, under the moral capital coupled with urban landscape symbols such as 'red-tiled roofs and green trees' and the quality pledge of 'Made in Qingdao,' it transformed and shaped the potential energy of corporate brands into kinetic energy for the city brand^[3].

Quanzhou holds representative significance in crafting its 'World Heritage City' brand. The fragmentation of cultural resources and blurred urban identity stemming from its role as the Maritime Silk Road's origin point once constrained the realisation of its brand value. From the perspective of bidirectional translation—where cultural themes are transformed into resource-based scenarios—the city has developed its 22 heritage sites into a narrative axis titled 'To understand Song and Yuan China, look to Quanzhou.' By translating tangible heritage into immersive experiences such as the 'Maritime Silk Road Cultural Experience Centre,' it has achieved a paradigm shift from heritage preservation to value creation^[8].

On one hand, nurtured by regional cultural influences, urban development can cultivate distinctive humanistic character. For instance, Dalian has forged a unique city brand imbued with cultural charm, promoting itself as the 'Romantic Capital, Fashionable Dalian'—a brand widely recognised both domestically and internationally^[9]. Conversely, taking Xining's city branding initiative as an example, research on the 'World's Coolest City' concept was conducted based on Xining's urban attributes and developmental status. This led to the proposal of establishing 'World's Coolest City – Xining' as the primary city brand strategy, alongside the creation of an international exchange mechanism for cool cities. This further strengthens the city's public diplomacy and grassroots friendship interactions^[10].

Cultural symbols, as emblematic labels, play a crucial role in city branding. Incorporating the cultural elements of the Northeast Three Rivers region into its city branding highlights the geographical attributes of the urban image. Furthermore, integrating distinctive cultural symbols into the construction of the city's brand identity can enhance its brand recognition^[11].

The aforementioned examples validate the flexible construction of symbolic labels: transitioning from industrial to cultural symbols, historical to contemporary symbols, and technical to value symbols enables city brands to transcend the

crisis of signifier fixation inherent in labels. Through this leap, brands achieve a dynamic equilibrium state, ensuring perpetual vitality. Simultaneously, this cognitive leap in city branding represents a semiotic repositioning of the brand-building process, yielding competitive advantages. For urban brand image design, grounding efforts in regional cultural elements elevates the overall quality of such design. Applying regional cultural elements to urban brand image design facilitates more accurate city portrayal, yielding greater expressive power and emotional resonance. Rooted in the cultural DNA and aesthetic characteristics of Chinese cities, and leveraging industrial development to propel the parallel advancement of economic and cultural spheres, constitutes a vital mission for Chinese cities in their brand development and communication endeavours. China's vast territory encompasses regions with markedly distinct cultural characteristics and uneven economic development. To translate each city's unique cultural resources and aesthetic traits into economic benefits, it is essential to strategically integrate these distinctive elements into economic development, thereby elevating the strategic level of city branding and communication^[12].

6 Summary

This paper employs text mining methods and in-depth interviews to gather relevant case data. By integrating text mining with case studies, it provides an initial analysis of the operational mechanisms of city branding and symbolic labels for the subjects under investigation. It systematically examines the role of symbolic labels in city branding, revealing their central position as an expressive tool in this process. By precisely designing symbolic labels that integrate multifaceted elements—such as traditional cultural DNA and modern industrial strengths—while attracting broader target audiences, cities can formulate scientifically grounded brand strategies. This approach enhances local identity and social cohesion, guiding cities towards building globally competitive, differentiated brands that better address developmental challenges. However, this study retains limitations in data sources and methodologies. Future research should employ more diverse methodologies and comprehensive data to explore the relationship between city branding and symbolic labels, as well as how symbolic labels can be leveraged for city branding. This would effectively guide city branding efforts in managing the relationship with symbolic labels and investigate their underlying mechanisms.

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