Just Because You Could, Doesn't Mean You Should: Exploring if (and When) Cities Should Brand Through a Case Study of The City of London, Ontario

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Abstract
Cities in Canada and abroad are engaging in place branding initiatives without any true understanding of whether they are likely to succeed. A key reason for this uncertainty is that there is a lack of understanding of what local conditions are needed to ensure the best chance for success. This study addresses this uncertainty in two ways: first, a theoretical framework is developed to identify local characteristics and conditions that are requisite for place branding; and second, the City of London, Ontario is used as a case study to examine whether small and midsized cities should be branding. Based on an extensive review of the literature domain a framework of seven criteria was developed: is there a need? Is there something to be branded? Is there local capacity and knowledge? Is it part of strategic planning? Is there leadership? Is there coordination? And is the process inclusive? Based on interviews with sixteen key stakeholders in London (both local officials and community stakeholders), it is clear that the city meets very few of these criteria. This suggests that London—and likely most other small and midsized cities in Canada and abroad need to be measured in their approaches to place branding.

Keywords: Place branding, Urban governance, Cities, London, Ontario

Résumé

Les villes au Canada et à l'étranger s'engagent à des initiatives de placer la marque territoriale sans véritable compréhension s'ils vont réussir. Une des principales raisons de cette incertitude est le manque de compréhension des conditions locales qui sont nécessaires pour assurer les meilleures chances de réussir. Cette étude adresse cette incertitude en deux façons: première, un cadre théorique est développé pour identifier les caractéristiques locales et les conditions qui sont nécessaires pour placer la marque territoriale; et deuxième, la ville de London, Ontario, est utilisée comme un cas d'étude pour examiner si les petites et moyennes villes devraient être marquées. Basé sur un examen critique du domaine de la littérature, un cadre de sept critères a été développé : est-ce qu'il y a un besoin? Est-ce qu'il y a quelque chose à marquer? Est-ce qu'il y a des capacités et des connaissances locales? C'est partie de la planification stratégique? Il y a du leadership? Il y a de la coordination? Et le processus est-il inclusif? Basé sur des entrevues avec seize parties prenantes à London (les fonctionnaires locaux et les parties prenantes communautaires), c'est clair que la ville ne répond pas à la plupart de ces critères. Ce suggère que London—et probablement la majorité des autres petites et moyennes villes au Canada et a l'étranger a besoin d'être mesurer en leur approches de placer la marque territoriale.

Mots clés: Placer la marque territoriale, Governance urbaine, Villes, London, Ontario

Introduction

The City of London, Ontario—like most midsized cities in advanced economies—faces an identity crisis, to which place branding is often put forward as the solution. Place branding is often described as the development and communication of a specific place-based image that is meant to promise and deliver local advantages to a desired target audience. In the case of London, suggestions have been put forward to move the city's brand image away from the historical 'Forest City' moniker and towards 'Canada's London' (Daniszewski, 2013) or 'New London' (Maloney, 2015); brand concepts meant to set the city apart from its English (and much more prominent) counterpart. Indeed, the recent suggestions for reimaging London's brand suggest it sees itself in a turf-war with London, England. These place brand suggestions also appear to be externally focused, positioning the city in a positive light for new residents, businesses, and investments.

London in not unique. In many advanced economies, small and midsized cities are attempting to brand and reposition themselves in the face of mounting political and economic challenges: declines in manufacturing and other traditional economic sectors; increased global competition for increasingly footloose talent, business, and investment from emerging markets (Arku, 2014; Wolfson & Frisken, 2000). In many cases, place branding is viewed as a quick, silver bullet solution to address these economic development concerns (Cleave et al, 2017). The place branding initiatives favoured by cities and their governments—which by and large are redressing and relabelling—have been criticized for being superficial (Anholt, 2005, 2010; Rantisi & Leslie, 2006), simplistic (Kavaratzis, 2004), and ineffective at shaping perceptions (Cleave & Arku, 2015a; Cleave et al, 2017), resulting in a "shallow and lackluster brand profile" for cities (Merrilies et al., 2013: 43). As Ashworth (2010) describes, the misuse of place branding can prove to be a futile effort, and a waste of scarce public resources.

A commonality of these misplaced place branding efforts is that cities will proceed with them without having the proper local capacity and necessary resources (Ashworth, 2010; Hankinson, 2001). From this, the pertinent question is, *when are local conditions right for cities to consider place branding?* It is important for local governments to determine whether they have a mix of local conditions that, working together, provide the best opportunity for place branding success.

To address this broad question, this research draws from an extensive survey of the place branding literature to develop a place branding framework that identifies local conditions that are important for a city to help ensure a robust place branding exercise. Though there is clear local interest in place branding in London, this paper investigates whether there is the local capacity and resources that are needed. Through this case study a broader understanding can be developed of the local conditions that need to be considered when determining whether to a place branding initiative should be commissioned.

What is Place Branding?

A place brand is the selective and symbolic image (or reputation) of a place held by the consumer (such as talent, residents, businesses, and investors) and the city (Braun, 2012; Hankinson, 2001; Johansson, 2012; Kavaratzis & Ashworth, 2005; Stock, 2009). As Hall (1999) notes, the outcome of place branding efforts should create a clear and distinct image of the city, which truly differentiates it from other competitors, by forming specific associations of quality. However, place branding also extends beyond simply developing an image, as it also has to deliver the city's long-term competitive advantages that the place brand promotes. Indeed, successful cities must understand the needs of specific target consumers, and then find ways to both communicate the local advantages as well as having the local infrastructure in place to satisfy them more effectively than their competitors. To achieve this, place branding needs to be viewed as a "process whereby urban activities are as closely as possible related to the demands of targeted customers so as to maximize the efficient social and economic functioning of the area concerned in accordance with whatever goals have been established." (Ashworth & Voogd, 1990: 11). As a result, place branding needs to be far more than a logo or slogan, which as Cleave et al. (2016b) note is how it is typically described by local governments, and instead needs to be seen as "a strategic lens, a decision-making tool" (Allen, 2007: 61) where place branding is the compass (see Govers, 2011), that guides the development of cities to allow consumer-place connections and associations to form by exposing them to, and follows through on, the long-term advantage the city has to offer.

A major critique of place branding is that many place branding initiatives fail because they are poorly thought out and designed, or used to solve problems they are not designed for, such as using a logo or a slogan to stimulate migration (Ashworth, 2010). As more and more places begin to adopt place branding strategies, cities need to be smarter to ensure that they stand out from their competitors. To address this, Anholt (2005, 2010) suggests that branding exercises need to be part of broader policy development and not a separate activity, as integration with all other forms of policy avoid a silo effect—where communications, public affairs, promotion, and economic development are coordinated, rather than considered independent city functions.

Additionally, place branding needs have a balance in its scope: not so narrow that many segments of the target audience are ignored (Cleave & Arku, 2015b), but not so broad that brand becomes generic or unable to communicate effectively with differing segments of the audience (Zenker & Braun, 2017). The latter is often the case, as place branding tends to focus on tourism development and management but it is only one of the many functions of a place (Hankinson, 2007; Kerr, 2006; Zenker & Braun, 2017). Therefore, place branding should aim to address many functions of a place (usually the positive and attracting features), without jeopardizing a consistent image of a city.

Conceptual Framework: Identifying Important Local Conditions for Place Branding

There have been countless answers on how to do place branding (Allen, 2007; Anholt, 2005; Kavaratzis, 2004; Braun, 2012; Govers, 2011), but there is limited theoretical knowledge on when and where to do place branding. Ashworth (2010) identifies six key points as to what a place brand 'should be doing' to be successful: knowledge in the local government on what they are doing; an organizational structure; being part of a larger development plan; a clear understanding of the problem; a product that is already improving; and a chance of success. The implication of these six key points is that every city is not currently in a position to undertake place branding.

Expanding on Ashworth (2010), the research domain and practical examples of community place branding efforts (described below) were examined to identify the common points of criticism and adulation. Based on the commonalities that were identified from this theoretical and practical base, broad conditions of similar issues were generalized, and together were built into a conceptualization of the interconnected local conditions important to place branding (Figure 1). In the place branding literature, there have been few attempts to quantify or develop metrics for local input conditions, instead focusing on measuring place branding outcomes and success. Therefore, while this model outlines the key local conditions that were identified; however, due to their complexity, it is difficult to develop specific metrics that quantify each condition (see Hansen, 2010). As a result, they are explored here through more general and qualitative means to identify their key components, taking a broader perspective of the conditions that need to be considered when a local government is deciding whether they should place brand (see Eshuis & Edwards, 2013; Hansen, 2010; Johansson, 2012; Pasquinelli, 2010).

Does the city need to (re)brand? Specifically, does the city currently have an existing place brand? If so, how closely does the brand represent the current conditions and goals of the city? These questions emerge from

marketing literature, where Balmer and Soenen (1999) describe a brand's success as hinging on the alignment of its actual, communicated, and desired identities. If the identity elements diverge, then it will be difficult to promote an accurate meaningful identity. In essence, cities must manage the alignment of how they promote themselves (the promise of advantage) with the realities of the place now and in the future (the ability to deliver on the promise). In theory, the greater the alignment, the more likely the branding effort is to influence the target audience into decision-making that provides value to the city, such as talent attraction.

Perhaps the best example of a need to rebrand is the City of New York. In the late 1970s, the city had the reputation of being a dangerous and violent city, despite being a world leader in arts, culture, and economy. The 'I Love New York' rebranding of 1977 provided the opportunity for New York to overcome this negative stigma, and change how it was perceived. Indeed, the positive associations of the new brand helped overcome negative perceptions that has been associated with the city. This change in perception has been identified as a key contributor to the revitalization of the city's tourism industry. In fact, it could be argued that the success that New York has had has been a key inspiration to other cities believing—whether it is appropriate or not—that a rebranding will solve their woe.

Is there something to be branded? Within the place branding literature, Colbalt, Ontario demonstrates an example of product development. As Stern & Hall (2010) describe, Colbalt went through a period of transition in the latter half of the 20th century, *as* several prominent residents and outsiders initiated efforts to transform the Town of Cobalt, Ontario, into a tourism destination based on mining heritage. To support this historical-destination based branding, the town worked to have itself designated a national historical site by Parks Canada (Stern & Hall, 2010). As a result of building a brand off of an existing foundation, and then supporting through local action, Colbalt was able to develop a product that it could easily promote, as it was based on the local realities.

The 'place-as-product' analogy, drawing from the 4Ps (price, product, promotion, and place) framework of marketing literature has infiltrated both urban-cultural geography and place branding. While price is becoming increasingly integrated into place branding efforts (see Cleave et al., 2016; Zenker et al., 2013), most place branding efforts focus on place (the city), promotion (visual identities, marketing and advertisements), and product. From a place branding perspective, the idea of needing and underlying product to support the brand emerged from tourism and destination research, where

> the need to provide clear product differentiation in an increasingly competitive, globalizing marketplace that rests on memorability and emotional connection with consumers, delivered through all points of contact in the product/service value chain. (Allen, 2007: 61)

Just as a brand is meant to position a product to the consumers, place branding entails identifying a city characteristic worth branding that differentiates the city and provides it with a competitive advantage. Kavaratzis (2004, 2009) suggests that place brands can be seen as a reflection of the government actions, economy, landscape, and infrastructure, and other factors such as geography and history need to be considered, allowing the place-product which is to be sold represents the local actual identity of a city.

Is there local knowledge of what place branding entails? As Anholt (2005, 2010) and other academics and practitioners note, place branding often fails because there is a lack of understanding of what it is—that place branding extends beyond the logo and slogan to a much deeper understanding of place and strategic urban management. This suggests that a those involved in branding projects have to understand that place branding is far more comprehensive than an exercise in graphic design (Allen, 2007; Anholt, 2005; Ashworth & Kavaratzis, 2009; 2009; Pasquinelli, 2010).

Examples abound of poorly managed place branding. Cleave et al (2017) reveal how the branding of Vaughan, Innisfil, and Port Hope in Ontario had failed or was poorly received because they focused their efforts on designing new logos instead of broader branding strategies. Conversely, the City of London may actually represent a city where there is in-depth understanding of place branding, as the *London's Community Economic Roadmap* (2015: 16) describes the city's position on place branding as:

> More than the development of a logo, tagline, or slogan—it requires a brand identity with community traction and buy-in, strong stewards that will ensure the brand is communicated consistently over the long term, and a commitment from stakeholders to deliver on the core messages of the brand.

The implication is that the city at least officially acknowledges that place branding is more than a simple redressing, though whether this understanding is put into practice during the next rebranding initiative remains to be seen.

Is the place branding part of strategic planning? Allen (2007) and Oliveria (2014) suggests that place branding needs to be considered as part of a broader strategic planning process, that guides urban and economic development rather than reacting to it. Place branding represents a strategic lens to shape development, Cleave et al. (2016b) and Govers (2011) have argued that place branding has to lead urban development and economic development policy—not follow it; for a city to undertake place branding, there has to be a development strategy in which place brand is both integrated and can act as the banner for. Yet, most place branding efforts have been heavily critiqued as not being integrated into broader urban and economic policy, leading to the fast policy solutions (such as focus on logos) that communities like Vaughan, Innisfil, and Port Hope adopted. Even in places that seem to have a strong product to brand, a lack of strategic planning can cause difficulty. Stern & Hall (2010) note that focusing on historic-tourism based branding continued, rather than broke, the dependency relationships that characterize resource regions, and ultimately the current branding has the range of possible economic development options available to the community. Alternatively, Cleave et al. (2016) identify that the City of Kitchener used place branding as a way to change how it was perceived—from a blue-collar manufacturing town, to a creative, high-tech one, by using their branding efforts as the guidepost for the rest of the urban, social, and economic development that occurred in the city.

Is there leadership to guide the branding process? Is there coordination between different stakeholders? And i*s the place branding process an inclusive one?* These three factors draw heavily from the corporate branding literature and are heavily inter-related. Underlying these concerns is that there is a need for strong leadership to guide the branding process, to coordinate all the stakeholders, and ensure that the process is inclusive. During the branding planning process, the leadership must put in place mechanism to ensure a successful delivery on the brand promise. Such mechanism must include regular education, training opportunities for those directly involved in place branding projects, and policies for oversight of the projects.

Place branding is often critiqued for being a top-down process. While in theory place branding should be developed from a local identity, this often is not true, and instead is developed from a small group of elites making decisions on what think local identity is, what the brand will be and what its goals are. There are numerous examples throughout the literature (see Eshuis & Edwards, 2013; Kavaratzis & Ashworth, 2005; Pasquinelli, 2010) where place branding has been critiqued because lack of inclusion caused brands to be poorly conceived. To be successful, therefore, the city has to be willing to draw from a plurality of sources and stakeholders. In Canada, Rantisi & Leslie (2006) describe the successes of Montreal cultural branding and development of a design metropole through the inclusion of private businesses in the city. Without this buy-in, the brand project would not have stakeholders to communicate the brand, nor a strong product to underpin the communicated identity. In essence, strong coordination was needed to fortify what Balmer & Soenen (1999) would describe as Montreal's actual identity.

In addition, there needs to be coordination between all those involved in the branding. Indeed, drawing from organizational corporate-branding theory (Allen, 2007; Cleave & Arku, 2015b; de Chernatony & Riley, 1998), there is a strong argument that every member of a place, from residents, to businesses, to local government are all conduits through which the place brand is communicated. Therefore, it is vital to not only have inclusivity, but coordination between stakeholders as well. Indeed, without this coordination, it is likely that there will be many conflicting brands. As Kavaratzis (2009: 35) states, "given that consistency is vital, would a set of brands each addressed to one of those audiences even make sense? How can a place deal with their radical different and often conflicting expectations?" This sentiment extends beyond theory. Empirically, Cleave and Arku (2015) reveal how Brantford, Ontario possesses over forty brands that are in use simultaneously.

Case Study: The 'Forest City'

London, Ontario has been known as 'The Forest City' since the mid 1850's (The London Plan, 2016), though interestingly, initially this moniker did not come from the natural landscape of the city but its isolation (it was a city in a forest, not a city of forests). Over the following century and a half, London allowed the positive associations with this nickname to become a key part of its local identity and branding, positioning itself as one of green space and nature in an attempt to stand apart from other cities. The 'Forest City' brand was codified in

the development of the city's logo in 1980 and was maintained in a modernized logo in 2000. In 2013, the city introduced a second brand with the tagline 'Canada's London' to coincide with the city's hosting of the figure skating world championships, with the goal of increasing awareness of London at an international level and to specifically differentiate it from London, England (Daniszewski, 2013).

Figure 1: Framework for Successful Place Branding
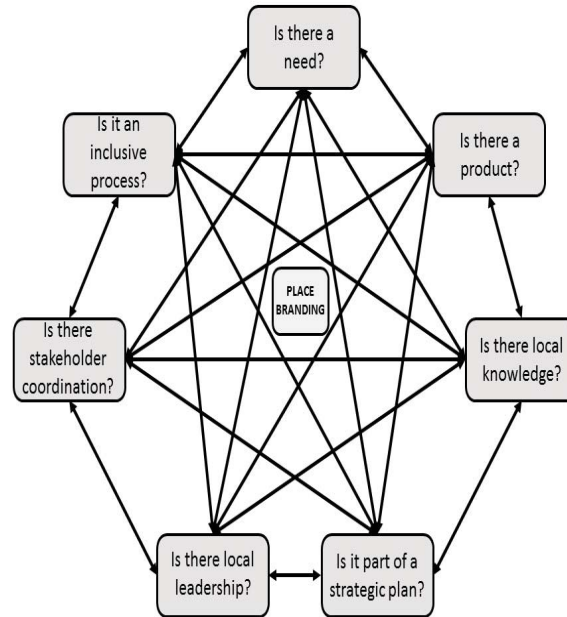
It is increasingly clear, however, that 'The Forest City' brand is no longer reflective of London's realities. This has been made clear through two recent documents the city has developed: *The London Plan* and *London's Community Economic Development Roadmap*. *The London Plan* represents the overall master plan for the City of London, while the *Economic Development Roadmap* outlines the strategic economic plan for London (though, interestingly, it was adopted first). Both identify broad strategic goals for the city, and provide specific tasks to achieve in reaching these goals. Both documents are forward looking and identify the need for a new brand for the city, stemmed from changes to the city, rendering the 'Forest City' brand obsolete.

Though the city has supported urban forestry and tree planting to help reinforce the notion of a forest city (The London Plan, 2016), it has fallen behind many other Canadian cities in the forest and greenspace it contains (Sher, 2008). Beyond that, the recent economic development strategic plan for the city noted "the lack of a strong community brand as a challenge" (London's Community Economic Roadmap, 2015: 15). Additionally, London's Community Economic Roadmap (2015) underscores the necessity for London to be a successful player in "the fierce competition for needed talent and skilled workers" (p. 15) and to "advance the growth of the city's cluster of healthcare research and enterprises" (p. 33). In both cases, the 'Forest City' brand appears ill-equipped to address these goals. Therefore, there is a perceived need for London to consider a new place branding strategy. It is unclear, however, whether London is in a strong position to undertake a new place branding initiative.

Methods and Data Collection

The goal of this study was to determine *when are local conditions right for cities to consider place branding?* For this paper, a case study was suitable, as it employs in-depth study of a bounded phenomenon or area, used to elucidate the features of a similar phenomena; and is understood as a way for defining cases, rather than analyzing or modelling relationships (Gerring, 2004). In this study, place branding presents a bounded phenomenon, which occurs at the level of a city. As a result, the City of London represents the correct level of analysis for a case study of place branding; and additionally, provides information that can be generalizable to other similarly scaled units

that experience the same phenomena (i.e. other cities and place branding). Finally, this study attempts to define the institutional environment where place branding could occur, allowing lessons learned in London to be generalized as a broad conceptual model that can be used to explain the process of place branding in other cities.

To explore this goal for the specific case-study of London, in-depth interviews were conducted with two groups: local officials (n = 9) and community stakeholders (n = 7). These totals reflect the responses to the twenty invitations for participation that were extended. Participants were selected via purposeful sampling, which stresses for the most 'information-rich cases' (expert participants with strong experience in the subject matter)—where a wide range of perspectives can be collected (Baxter & Eyles, 1997; Dunn, 2005). A primary consideration when selecting participants was their position, and prior experience and knowledge of the branding process to allow for reliable and valid perspectives to be explored. This unfortunately excluded other community-based groups (e.g. Neighbourhood Associations, Civic clubs) that may have an interest in place branding, but are not currently included in any place branding discussions or many broader urban development projects in London, which are limited to a limited range of stakeholders.

All participants were selected from public sources, including London and corporate websites. Local officials were selected based on their involvement in the place branding process and a variety was selected to ensure representation across multiple municipal departments and 'at arm's length' municipal organizations. Community stakeholders were selected based upon their size and involvement in economic development activities and local branding efforts within London (i.e. the downtown, by the local economic development corporation; however, there was little experience with the overall city brand as the city has not rebranded). In both groups, senior-level employees that possess a historical perspective of London and had a positive reputation in the community were targeted. The characteristics of each participant are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1: Characteristics of Interviewees

Local Officials (City of London)	City Councillor
	City Councillor
	Director – Economic Development
	Director – Marketing
	Manager – Urban Design
	Senior Planner – Planning and Development
	Planner – Planning and Development (Heritage)
	Planner – Planning and Development (Heritage)
	Planner – Planning and Development (Heritage)
Community Stakeholders	Workforce Director – Local Economic Development Corporation
	General Manager – Local Economic Development Corporation
	Executive Director – Chamber of Commerce
	President – Downtown London
	Chief Executive Officer – Small Business Centre
	Chief Executive Officer – Convention Centre
	Director – London Tourism Office

All interviews were conducted face-to-face at the location of the participants choosing. The interview times ranged between approximately 20 minutes to 90 minutes, averaging 35 minutes. The interviews were coded along the themes derived from the theoretical framework. These themes were: need (for place branding), product, knowledge (of place branding), strategy (that place branding is connected to), leadership (to guide place branding), coordination (to implement place branding), and involvement (in the place branding process). The goal of this research was to explore the local conditions in London as described by the framework, with the goal of qualitatively examining (rather than developing specific metrics to quantify city branding) London's need, readiness, and capability to undertake place branding, and to empirically explore the conceptual framework.

Results

The outcomes of the interviews are summarized around the seven themes that make up the conceptual framework (as summarized in Table 2). Direct quotations are used to illustrate the perspectives, comments, and opinions to support the conclusions of the study. To add further understanding, the perspectives of the study participants are discussed and contextualized within the conceptual framework and existing literature. The outcome of these results and discussion is the answer to the question *when are local conditions right for cities to consider place branding?* In this particular study, the findings were used to explore the levels of capacity and interconnections between the seven conditions identified in the theoretical model. This allows for a more nuanced examination of the environment in London, identifying potential areas of strength and weakness, and contextualizing them in a way where they may present information that can be generalized to explain the processes of place branding in other cities, rather than passing a summary on whether London should use place branding.

Table 2: Summary of Results

Criteria	Evaluation
Need?	• There is a need for place branding in London, as there is a lack of an overall lack of a strong image that represents London as a place.
Product?	• There is a product/foundation to build a brand upon • The product being suggested (focusing around quality of life and place) are not significantly different from many other brands that other communities use, so it is unclear if this product truly represents a long-term interest
Knowledge/ Capacity	• There was considerable division in the level knowledge and understanding of place branding • Some officials and stakeholders only had a limited or superficial understanding; • Others held a much more in-depth knowledge of place branding • This lack of knowledge might influence which products are considered good options to underpin the brand, who should be included in the branding process, and the form that place branding should take
Part of Strategic Planning?	• For some place branding is understood to be part of a strategic plan for the city. • There are assumptions that this will be derived from strategic planning documents – which currently are limited or avoid discussing place branding's role in guiding development; • Stronger strategic planning would allow a unique product which highlights the locational, long-term advantages to form the basis of the brand
Leadership?	• While no one is currently positioned to lead the place branding, there are a number of local officials and community who were identified as strong candidates to lead the process. • Stronger leadership may lead to better inclusion and coordination
Coordination?	• Currently limited or no coordination between stakeholders and local officials on place branding • Stronger coordination will allow for more coherent brand communication
Inclusiveness?	• Limited inclusion of the public/plans to include the public in any potential place branding efforts. • Inclusiveness may lead to a better understanding of what London actually is and how to best brand it

To ensure anonymity, pseudonyms are used (O1, O2, O3… for local officials and S1, S2, S3 for community stakeholders).

Does the city need to (re)brand?

Based on the perspectives of the municipal administrators and the stakeholders, it is clear that they feel that London needs to consider rebranding. There was unanimous agreement that there is currently no strong brand for the city. At worst, it was seen as not having a brand, and at best the brand was described as weak and ambiguous. As several local officials commented "I don't think London has a brand and I think that's its problem" (O1) and "I think London has struggled a bit in finding the brand, or the fact there may not be one brand" (O8). There was agreement of this sentiment within the community stakeholders: "it's not that it's good or bad [the brand]—people don't have a perception. London is non-existent in other people's lives" (S2). Even when there was acknowledgement of the brand, it was heavily criticized, as the existing "Forest City" brand was described as ambiguous:

> Currently London's brand I guess for a number of years has been the Forest City. It's held up well for what that means…but what does that indicate to you as far as it's the Forest City? It's not the exciting city, not innovation. Some other municipalities take on those kinds of terms to provide more ideas about the city - like are we innovative and are we trying to do things? Forest City means - yeah that sounds nice (S1).

The implication of this weak or ambiguous brand is that it is not making any impact on a target audience. As one local official argued, "[what is] an outsider's view of London? They don't know. It's seen as off the map" (O4). These perspectives are supported by *London*'s *Community Economic Roadmap* (2015: 48), which list "brand strength and awareness" as one of the major weaknesses that the city currently needs to address in its community development policy initiatives.

Overall, it is clear that there is not alignment between the communicated identity and the actual identity of London (Balmer & Soenen, 1999). In fact, the perspectives of the officials and stakeholders strongly indicate that London either has no communicated identity, or, more likely has one that is weak, tired, or poorly-focused, making it unlikely to be successful in attracting attention and consumption with their current brand. Within both place branding research and practitionership, it is argued that a malaise—as the respondents argue exists in London—may actually do more to facilitate economic declines because of the stigma of a weak and misaligned brand (Anholt, 2006; Cleave et al., 2016). As a result, there appears to be a pressing need for London to consider a rebranding initiative.

Is there something to be branded?

There was consensus among both local officials and community stakeholders that London had features and local advantages that could be branded, including focusing on London's "big city amenities, but small town feel" (S4), the ability to "live, work, and play" in the city (S5), and other similar themes of the city being "rich in high quality of life" (O5), and having a "diverse economy" (O7). One local official explained,

> My general perception of London is a place that has an inordinate amount of potential and needs to catalyze that…I think it's a city that is on the cusp of becoming a big city that needs right investment…it gives us a great tool in the future to attract people to our city (O1).

This suggests that there is potential for a place branding effort to develop a brand image that is representative of what London is actually like, aligning the communicated brand and the local identity. It must be noted, however, that the concepts of 'live, work, and play' and quality of life are not particularly unique, and it seem unlikely that a brand focusing on these areas would differentiate the city from the scores of competitors in Ontario and abroad that also promote themselves in these areas.

Is there local knowledge of what place branding entails?

The responses of the local officials and community stakeholders suggest there is a mixture of knowledge over what place branding was. It ranged from simplistic or undeveloped conceptions, including "an effort to give a place an identity through a logo" (O1), that "place branding is like any other type of branding process where you are trying to project a specific image and recognition of that place based on a name or a logo" (O6), and "it's simply a communication to a target market" (O9). However, there were also several deeper interpretations. As one summarized:

> It's not about having a logo, much deeper than that—must encompass everything that your organization, culture, who you are and who you want to be—how you want to be perceived by your customers. When we talk about place branding, we are turning a city into a commodity and brand it as a commodity (O4).

Among the local stakeholders, there was unanimity, as none could fully describe what place branding was. In particular, there was considerable confusion over what place branding is, with one stakeholder noting "It's a term that really needs more defining" (S7) and another admitting "I'm not sure I know what it is" (S6).

As a result, it appears that in London there is a lack of knowledge about what exactly is place branding, suggesting that it will be difficult to use it as a strategic lens for local development, and therefore, be unlikely to create any change in the city's development trajectory.

Is the place branding part of strategic planning?

Among the local officials and community stakeholders, there was further disagreement on whether place branding was part of London's strategic planning. One local official adamantly noted that place branding was "definitely part of a larger strategy" and vital for attracting businesses (O7). For those who felt that place branding was linked with strategic planning, it was commonly associated with the city's latest strategic planning document (The *London Plan*). A few participants noted the influence of the *London Plan*: "It [the brand] will deliver the message of the London Plan" (S3) and, "I think a lot of people see the London Plan as an effort to create a foundation and create the place which ultimately leads to the brand" (O1). This demonstrates the perceived importance of the *London Plan* in terms of outlining and defining the place brand, suggesting a link to strategic planning.

A potential limiting factor of place branding's role in strategic planning is that there is confusion over where the planning policies would come from. As one participant commented on the official plan: "I wonder if many of the councillors and the local stakeholders see the formation of the brand coming out in the *London Plan*" (O3), suggesting that all branding strategies would emerge from the London's master plan and the policies and processes that are developed from it. Interestingly, this suggests a disconnect between perceptions of key stakeholders and the realities of London, as place branding has not been fully engrained into the strategic planning of the city, though many appear under the impression that it is. Although those interviewed identified place branding as part of London's strategic planning, it is essentially ignored in the *London Plan* and *London's Community Economic Roadmap* as there are there are scant details on how place branding can actually play a meaningful role, and the documents offer no tangible pathways to branding.

Additionally, several concerns were raised that any place branding was not directly connected with London's strategic planning. As several participants noted, "The brand is a specific thing that the city has decided to pursue, but it's not in our strategic plan" (S6), and "I don't think we have an official strategy on place branding" (O2). This was expanded upon by one official, who argued:

> If we don't think about what we want London's brand to be and how we want external audiences to see us, how can we move the city in the right direction…and how can we do that if it isn't in our plans? (O5).

The implication is that if place branding is not included in London's strategic planning, it will be difficult for place branding to play any role in guiding local development, meaning it is unlikely that the city will be able to follow through on the long-term advantages promised by the brand. When potential consumers sense unfulfilled

brand promises, there is a strong likelihood of the brand becoming a hindrance, rather than an advantage.

Is there leadership to guide the branding process?

One area of agreement across all local officials and community stakeholders is that they feel that the local government possesses the right leadership to handle place branding policy development and implementation in London, "I think the current council and senior management are the right leaders and agree that we need to support London [and its place branding efforts]" (O3) and, "I think there are lots of willing participants [to take on place branding policy] and we have the leadership from city administration and council" (S2). However, despite there being faith in the leadership team currently in London, the local officials were actually pessimistic over whether this group would take action:

> I don't foresee branding to be that important and it not being priority, because we have to again devote time and money in order to be a proper job. And quite frankly I don't think it's on their radar (O9).

This statement clearly suggests that leadership requires not just talent and skill to facilitate the place branding process, but also political will. It is also notable that local government is identified as the only source of leadership, despite there being energy and willingness among other community stakeholders. Despite the optimism, therefore, the actual leadership found in London appears to be limited.

Is the place branding process an inclusive one? Is there coordination between different stakeholders?

It is clear that neither of these two processes is occurring in London. Instead, each stakeholder appears to be acting in its own 'silo' and developing their own brands without strong consideration for what is happening in the rest of the city: "I've heard many people say there are too many silos—independent, own goals, not sharing or connected in the way we should be" (S2). There is no coordination between stakeholders that are involved in the place branding process, making it difficult to integrate London's key assets to develop a certain positive image:

> So we have the EDO, the convention centre, and the LEDC—the three primary drivers of new investment into the city. There's no integration of trying to convey a certain look. There just seems to be a lack of interest or understanding that we have to play on the same page (O9).

The participants commented: "You have to have all the right people around one table talking—you need a city-wide [place branding and] economic development plan" (O4) otherwise "we are just competing against one another and not coming out on a unified front" (O2). The interesting implication of these perspectives —and those of the other officials and stakeholders—is that they take a very restrictive view on who should be participating. None of the participants suggested that the public should play a role in any place branding efforts, instead identifying that the responsibility should fall on key stakeholders and the local government. The implication of this lack of inclusivity and coordination has affected London's brand. As one stakeholder noted "I don't think there is a cohesive brand identity" (O2).

Based on these responses, it is clear that London needs to consider both including a greater range of stakeholders in the place branding process and coordinating those involved. The acknowledged 'silo' effect only strengthens the argument towards the uncoordinated efforts, as each stakeholder in the branding process is left to their own devices to produce their own place brands.

So, are conditions right in London?

It is clear that London needs a new place brand. Even *London's Community Economic Roadmap* is pushing for a rebranding of the city. The traditional 'Forest City' branding no longer appears to be relevant to the urban, social, and economic development goals of the city; and in fact, it appears that it is no longer able to generate interest or communicate the local advantages of London to any external audiences. Indeed, there is also a considerable confusion over what London's brand is, with some actually stating that London does not have a brand. However, it is also certain that London should not charge head-first into a new place branding initiative without first taking stock. While it is possible that the 'Forest City' brand could become so toxic or ineffective that any

brand would suit it better, the situation is not so desperate. Indeed, London has the opportunity to ensure that it has the correct local conditions to ensure that the city is setting itself up for the best opportunity for success. There currently are some areas where London appears to be on the right track including, acknowledgment of a need, some notion of the product that could underpin the brand, and some institutional knowledge about what is needed to undertake a successful place branding initiative. Nonetheless, there are also several key areas of weakness that would need to be strengthened before place branding should be seriously considered.

When examining the stakeholder and official's responses, it is clear that there are several interconnected issues where current limitations actually work to weaken other key local conditions. In particular, the lack of strong leadership and strategic planning are vital cogs in understanding the current situation in London.

For example, the city needs to engrain place branding into its strategic planning, so there is alignment with the brand goals and the development goals of the city. There are currently questions about what local advantages need to be communicated in the place brand—as these long-term advantages are what will fulfill the promise of the brand. This study found that most of the product being suggested revolves around quality of life and place. While a useful start, these ideas have to be merged with the strategic plan to ensure that directions the city takes reinforce these ideas and find some way to differentiate from competing places. Once there is greater coordination with the strategic planning, a clearer brand image will likely emerge.

Interestingly, strategic planning and leadership are also related, as the city's strategic documents identify potential leaders (such as members of the city council, as well as leaders from the convention centre, chamber of commerce, and London Economic Development Corporation). However, the current lack of enthusiastic leadership—particularly within the city council—limits the capability of London to find and organize willing stakeholders, as there is no one driving the process. In fact, the misplaced perception that the local political council has to drive the place branding process appears to stifle any momentum towards coordination. As Cleave et al. (2017) note, other cities have relied on a 'group of champions' from the community to drive their place branding efforts. While the nascent stages of this group appear to exist in London, it is likely going to require someone outside of council to kick-start process and take a leadership role. Indeed, finding strong leadership may also help to address several other limitations that appear to exist in London. Eshuis & Edwards (2013) argue that place branding needs to be inclusive of all community members to be meaningful, while corporate brand theory (Allen, 2007; Kavaratzis, 2009) suggest that all those included in the place branding need to be working together and consistent in their messaging. Not only does this provide legitimacy to the place branding process, it helps facilitate coordination of the way London is promoted, lead consistent and coherent brand message.

While London also faces other challenges, such as a somewhat variable understanding of what place branding is among its key stakeholders (and in fact, strong leadership could ensure all stakeholders have a proper understanding of what place branding is through education and training), the two main areas that appear to be currently holding it back are strategic planning and leadership. While not a guarantee of success, addressing these areas may create an environment in London where there is a strong foundation from which a place brand can be built.

Conclusion: Implications for future place branding

Based on recent scholarly evidence (see, for example, Cleave & Arku, 2014; Khirfan & Momani, 2013; Rantisi & Leslie, 2006; Zenker & Rütter, 2017) London's situation as depicted in this paper is not unique in regards to place branding, and therefore the lessons learned from this study can help city governments understand the complex conditions associated with place branding. It can also help them develop a better understanding of the current environment in their community and whether it currently has the conditions that best allow place branding, and if not, where potential areas of growth and strengthening are needed. A benefit of this research is that it can act as a framework to guide policy interventions for local governments in Canada and abroad in their local economic development strategies. This framework for place branding suggests a more integrated and comprehensive approach to solving urban problems, as compared to previous attempts at place branding, which are often piecemeal, ad hoc, and ineffective. This represents a more measured approach to place branding, and has the potential to benefit a city and its residents by ensuring public resources are only spent when it is both necessary and appropriate.

It should be noted that not every city will weigh the seven criteria equally and it is up to each local government to determine how the criteria are weighed against each other (as with the case of London, where strategic planning and leadership were the areas of greatest need), nor will the areas interact in exactly the same way across places. While this study assumes a relatively equal weighting, it does not hold it as an absolute truth. A final, important, point is that meeting all of the criteria does not guarantee place branding success. Instead, it helps conceptualize an environment where the city is in the best position to proceed, and hopefully, succeed.

Acknowledgements

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