

# City Branding Research and Practice: An Integrative Review

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## **Abstract**

Closing the gap between theory and practice presents a major challenge for branding. However, a disconnect has formed between city branding research and practice. This paper argues the divergent evolutionary paths of city branding research and practice contribute to this disconnect. Specifically, we review the evolution of city branding research and practice through a macroscopic lens in order to delineate major shifts in the philosophies and assumptions shaping each trajectory. In terms of practice, we map the development of city brand management over five waves covering primitive attempts to adjust what cities mean to people, boosterish city promotion, entrepreneurial urban governance, formalised city marketing and, finally, a rhetorical city brand focus. We then identify four major waves in city branding research: (1) initial possibilities, (2) application and adaption of existing branding theory, (3) development of a critical lens and (4) progressive approaches that intersect with the co-creation branding paradigm. As well as providing a basis for mutual understanding and collaboration between researchers and practitioners, examination of both evolutionary paths indicates major research gaps in the city branding literature that appear particularly pertinent to bridging the city branding theory-practice gap.

**Key words:** city, brand management, organic brands, practitioners

## **Introduction**

Advancing city branding theory and practice is of increasing global importance. As stakeholder groups throughout the world attempt to manage city brands for various purposes

(e.g. tourism, business, international relations), and each stakeholder groups' efforts expand, scholarly interest in city branding continues to grow (Dinnie, 2011b; Lucarelli and Berg, 2011; Oguztimur and Akturan, 2015; Warnaby *et al*, 2015). However, developing considerably late in comparison to long traditions of civic 'boosterism' and place promotion (Kavaratzis and Ashworth, 2005, p. 506), city branding research initially lagged behind city branding practice. Then, for reasons not yet fully understood, practice stagnated as theory progressed (Ashworth and Kavaratzis, 2009; Govers and Go, 2009; Kavaratzis, 2012). Now, over a decade into the 21st century, scholars often characterise city brand management as simple (Kavaratzis, 2015) and preoccupied with logos and slogans (Govers, 2013; Kavaratzis and Hatch, 2013). Contrastingly, some city branding researchers (e.g. Kavaratzis *et al*, 2015) have begun to re-think the nature and management of city brands by engaging with the co-creation branding paradigm and a number of other theoretical perspectives in innovative ways. Even so, the city branding literature is still considered emerging (e.g. Dinnie, 2011b; Hankinson, 2015; Lucarelli and Berg, 2011) and overall theoretical refinement limited (e.g. Ashworth *et al*, 2015, p. 2; Oguztimur and Akturan, 2015). More pointedly, a major disconnect has formed between research and practice within city branding and the broader field of place branding (Kavaratzis, 2015).

The gap between city branding research and practice presents an ongoing challenge inhibiting overall advancement of the field. Researcher-practitioner collaboration (e.g. workshops, meetings) and research insights that acknowledge 'real world' city brand management issues, such as budgets and time constraints are important to facilitate more practical theories, more theory-driven practice and, in turn, more effective city brand management (Kavaratzis, 2015). However, establishing common ground between researchers and practitioners is necessary to foster collaboration and theories that acknowledge the various challenges of city brand management. In particular, city branding researchers must understand how the philosophies and underlying assumptions of contemporary city brand management came to be. Conversely, practitioners may also benefit

from greater understanding of the philosophies and assumptions underpinning research in this area. Therefore, this integrative review examines the evolution of city branding from both a practical and scholarly perspective. Further, in contrast to previous reviews of city branding research (e.g. Lucarelli and Berg, 2011; Oguztimur and Akturan, 2015), we adopt a macroscopic lens, focusing on broader evolutionary shifts or waves in the philosophies and underlying assumptions of both researchers and practitioners, rather than the details of specific publications or management techniques. Moreover, in synthesising the major waves of city brand research and practice, the identification of major research gaps is possible. As a result, this paper makes a unique and valuable contribution to the current literature and lays a solid foundation for future research in this important area of brand management.

### **Purposeful Literature Review Approach**

The purpose of this paper is to delineate broad evolutionary shifts in the philosophies and underlying assumptions of:

1. City branding practice (i.e. attempts to adjust what cities mean to people); and
2. City branding research (i.e. scholarly investigations that deal with city branding in some way from a branding or marketing perspective).

Although our investigation focuses on *city branding*, many developments in city branding research emanate from the broader conversations surrounding *city marketing*, *place branding* and *place marketing*. Moreover, some city branding literature utilises different terminology such as urban or town branding (Lucarelli and Berg, 2011, p. 11). Further, place branding research (e.g. Parkerson, 2007; Zenker, 2011) often assumes a city focus (Warnaby, 2009, p. 405). Thus, we did not automatically exclude publications based on managerial (i.e. marketing, branding) or geographical (i.e. place, urban) focus.

In terms of city branding practice, our review is based on assessment of city branding strategies and techniques within existing literature. Spanning several disciplines (e.g. branding, urban studies, geography), this literature includes analysis of promotional material

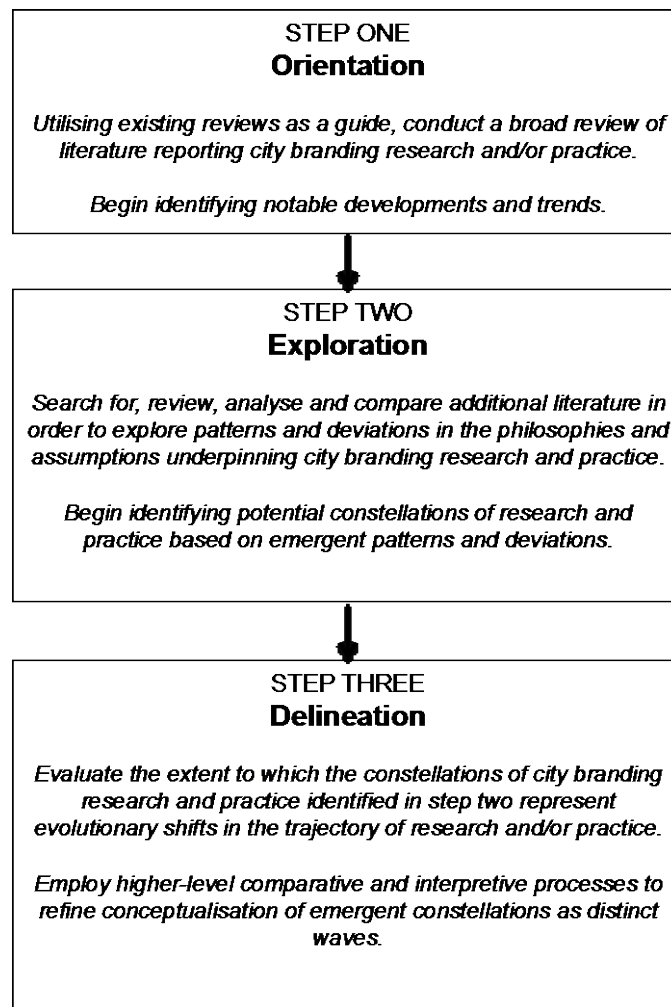
(e.g. Ward, 1998a, 1998b), practitioner reports (e.g. Whitt, 1987), magazine articles (e.g. Greenberg, 2000), stakeholder interviews (e.g. Chang, 2000) and case studies (e.g. Goodwin, 1993; Roberts and Schein, 1993; Short *et al*, 1993). This approach enabled delineation of broad evolutionary shifts in city branding practice from a historical and global perspective.

For the purposes of this paper, a *broad evolutionary shift* refers to a movement or change in the philosophies and assumptions underpinning research and/or practice that could impact (e.g. shape, re-direct) the overall trajectory of either domain. Although the quantity of publications associated with a particular shift contributes to overall impact, implications of the shift for the future of city branding takes precedence when evaluating impact from an evolutionary perspective. Our focus on city branding also directs definition of *philosophies* (i.e. positions on the fundamental nature of cities and brands) and *underlying assumptions* (i.e. anything that is accepted as true about cities and brands). While clear definitions delimit our investigation, the following section outlines the methodology of this purposeful literature review.

## **Methodology**

Based on the logic of purposeful sampling, whereby researchers prioritise instances (i.e. publications) that illuminate issues relating directly to the research purpose (Patton, 2002, p. 46), this review is necessarily qualitative in nature. More specifically, we employed a three-step methodology to delineate broad evolutionary shifts in city branding research and practice (see Figure 1 below).

**Figure 1. Purposeful literature review methodology**



**Step 1: Orientation**

Commencing in early 2015, step one (see Figure 1) involved consulting published reviews of city branding research and practice (e.g. Ashworth and Kavaratzis, 2009; Kavaratzis, 2004, pp. 59–66, 2005, pp. 329–334, 2007; Kavaratzis and Ashworth, 2008, pp. 151, 154–160; Lucarelli and Berg, 2011; Skinner, 2008). As well as orienting the researchers to the overall development of city branding research and practice, these reviews directed us to an initial set of publications for retrieval and subsequent analysis. Online databases provided access to electronic publications while print-based publications were accessed through institutional libraries. Although the most recent review available when we commenced step one was published in 2011, our familiarity with more recent city branding research and the contrasting

state of city branding practice directed the inclusion of additional publications in the initial set. Additionally, we monitored the publication of new city branding literature for indications of more recent shifts in both research and practice. More specifically, analysis of publications associated with each domain (i.e. research and practice) required slightly different processes.

In relation to city branding research, we first read and summarised each publication within the initial set. While developing initial summaries, we evaluated potential indications of the philosophies and assumptions underpinning the researchers' approach including, but not limited to, broad conceptualisation of city brands and brand management, research problems or questions, theories considered and relative emphasis on particular issues. Miles and Huberman's (1994) approach to matrix-style data displays provided a mechanism to record and compare initial summaries while preserving chronological ordering and evaluating possible developments and trends.

We also developed matrix-style data displays (Miles and Huberman, 1994) to facilitate analysis of publications reporting on city branding strategies and techniques throughout history. Initially, we ordered particular strategies and techniques chronologically. Given urban development and city branding intertwine with a range of political, cultural, social and economic factors (Kotler *et al*, 1993, pp. 5–14; O'Connor, 1998, p. 230; Roberts and Schein, 1993, p. 32; Sadler, 1993; Whitt, 1987, p. 16; Zukin, 1982, p. 16), we also recorded details of contextual factors in a separate column. Gradual expansion of the matrix enabled comparison of time periods, identification of notable developments and consideration of possible trends. However, exploration of the extent to which particular developments and trends relate to evolutionary shifts required a more purposeful review of additional literature.

### **Step 2: Exploration**

Although employing the analytical processes of step one, the second step of our methodology (see Figure 1) involved purposeful selection of additional publications. Literature cited in the initial set of publications (see step one) provided a source of additional publications to explore patterns and deviations further. The matrices expanded considerably as we reviewed and summarised additional literature. Then, as patterns and deviations in approaches to research and practice became clearer, we revised and refined the structure of each matrix. To illustrate, application and adaption of corporate branding theory to the city branding context emerged in step one as a potential 'pattern' within city branding research. During step two, we identified this pattern as part of a larger constellation of research applying and adapting branding theory based on the assumption that cities and other branded entities (i.e. corporations, services) are considerably similar. As such, we revised the matrix by inserting a new column to group publications relating to this emerging constellation. Ultimately, step two culminated in *four* constellations of city branding research and *five* constellations of city branding practice. These constellations became the major waves delineated in this paper. However, at the end of step two, description of each constellation was only very general in nature. Therefore, step three focused on clarifying the nature of emergent constellations in more detail.

### **Step 3: Delineation**

The analytical processes of steps one and two compared research-based publications and approaches to city brand management practice. More interpretive in nature, step three (see Figure 1) involved comparing: (1) individual publications/practices to emergent constellations identified in step two and (2) the distinguishing features of such emergent constellations. These higher-level comparisons enabled conceptualisation of each constellation more specifically in terms of philosophies and underlying assumptions and more direct assessment of each constellation against the criteria of a broad evolutionary shift. Crucially, these interpretive processes helped to evaluate the temporal parameters of each constellation,

associated overlaps and the extent to which the assumptions of one constellation shape the next in true *evolutionary* fashion. While we returned to both matrices throughout step three, we also developed extended descriptions of each constellation and associated overlaps.

Step three culminated with a clear conceptualization of nine distinct yet overlapping waves in city branding practice (five) and city branding research (four), referred to as *waves* hereafter. Finally, we assigned labels to capture the essence of each wave. Two labels, 'boosterish' and 'entrepreneurial', appear in the literature reporting on historical forms city brand practice. The 'primitive' label originated from Ward's (1998a, p. 35) discussion of city marketing before the 18<sup>th</sup> century although our investigation indicates that city brand management practices remained primitive (i.e. very basic, unsophisticated, random) until the 19<sup>th</sup> century. We devised labels to encapsulate the philosophies and assumptions underpinning the remaining six waves.

Purposeful in nature, the methodology of this paper departs with the quantitative tendencies of systematic literature reviews (e.g. predetermined search terms, frequencies, percentages, fixed categories) such as Lucarelli and Berg (2011) or Oguztimur and Akturan (2015). That is, rather than reviewing every publication within a particular period, we *purposefully* selected and analysed indicative publications that helped to explore emergent patterns and deviations in the philosophies and assumptions that underpin research and practice. Further, we could not have specified all the various factors of research or practice that signify philosophies and underlying assumptions in advance. For instance, the tone of some publications became an indication of critical research that questions the assumptions of earlier city branding literature. Predetermined search terms could have also overlooked important publications, leading to partial mapping of the one or both trajectories. Similarly, a variety of publication types (e.g. books, book chapters, editorials, journal articles) shape the academic conversation surrounding city branding and, subsequently, the evolution of city branding research. Multiple publication types were especially crucial to mapping early city branding

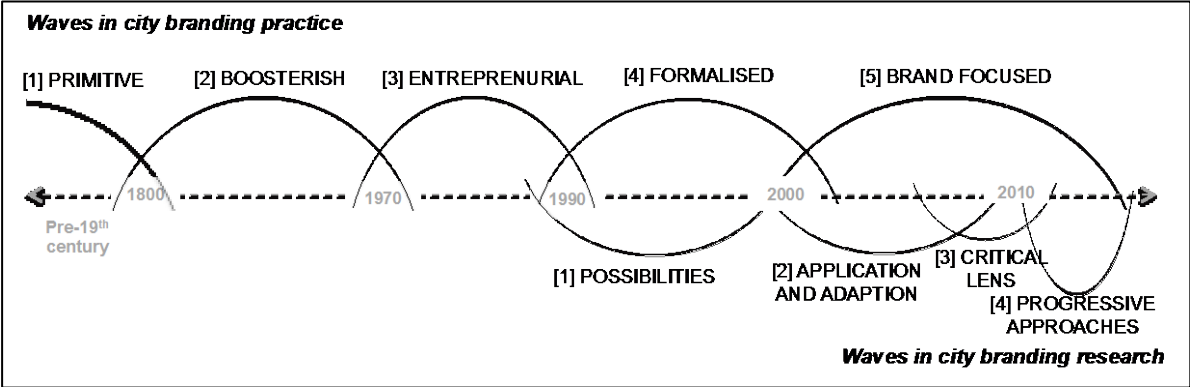


practice. In view of this, we evaluated the empirical foundations and overall quality of each publication, but we did not filter publications by outlet type. Having outlined our purposeful review approach, attention now turns to examining the divergent evolutionary paths of city branding research and practice.

**Divergent Trajectories**

Depicting the major waves of both city branding research and practice, Figure 2 maps the ensuing sections of this paper. Although characterised by distinct philosophies and underlying assumptions (see Tables 1 and 2), each wave shapes the next in its respective trajectory to some extent. As such, overlaps between the waves are both *chronological* (i.e. as a wave emerges, the previous wave continues for some time) and *evolutionary*. Overall, the waves of city branding practice have more of a rolling quality in that the assumptions of each wave underpin that of the next with consequential developments and shifts, but no major disjunctions. In contrast, we identify the development of a critical lens within city branding research as an important disjunction within this trajectory. Even so, the philosophies and assumptions underpinning earlier waves (i.e. possibilities, application and adaption) still shape proceeding waves by providing a basis for more critical (and progressive) scholars to challenge and oppose. We highlight the nature of this disjunction and other notable overlaps throughout the paper. Commencing well before scholarly investigation of city brands, we discuss the trajectory of city branding practice first.

**Figure 2. Divergent trajectories of research and practice**



**Table 1. Evolutionary path: City branding practice**

<b>WAVE</b>	<b>DEFINING PHILOSOPHIES AND ASSUMPTIONS</b>
<b>PRIMITIVE</b> Pre 19 <sup>th</sup> century	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Governments and the urban elite (e.g. landowners, entrepreneurs, investors, aristocrats) control urban space and cities more broadly</li> <li>• The management and promotion of cities should advance the interests of governments and the urban elite</li> <li>• Shaping how people perceive the city can help to advance the interests of governments and the urban elite</li> </ul>
<b>BOOSTERISH</b> 19 <sup>th</sup> century–late 20 <sup>th</sup> century	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cities compete against other cities for resources (e.g. people, investment)</li> <li>• The city's identity should be consciously designed and promoted to particular audiences (e.g. investors, workers, tourists) in ways that advance the interests of governments and the urban elite</li> <li>• Promotion of cities should project a particular identity (e.g. the 'industrial city')</li> <li>• Cities should be promoted through whatever means are accessible (e.g. newspaper advertisements)</li> </ul>
<b>ENTREPRENEURIAL</b> 1970s–1980s	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Manipulating the city's image is imperative to appealing to particular audiences and achieving various other urban planning and policy objectives (e.g. investment, tourism, export)</li> <li>• In order to remain competitive, cities should adopt 'business-like' management practices</li> <li>• Private-public partnerships are important to achieve city marketing and urban planning objectives</li> <li>• Entire cities can be remodelled to reinforce the desired city image</li> </ul>
<b>FORMALISED</b> Late 1980s–early 2000s	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Promotion is central to enhancing the city's image</li> <li>• Sophisticated city marketing employs marketing terminology and principles, customer-orientation in particular</li> <li>• Cities should be designed and/or rebuilt around stakeholders' needs (i.e. customer-orientation)</li> <li>• Flagship developments (e.g. convention centres) and events that attract attention enhance the city's image</li> </ul>
<b>BRAND-FOCUSED</b> 2000–present	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sophisticated city branding, an essential component of 21<sup>st</sup> century urban place management, treats the city's image as a 'brand' by embracing brand management techniques (e.g. promotion, slogans and logos)</li> </ul>

**Table 2. Evolutionary path: City branding research**

<b>WAVE</b>	<b>DEFINING PHILOSOPHIES AND ASSUMPTIONS</b>
<p><b>POSSIBILITIES</b> Late 1980s–2000</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Although cities may require different marketing perspectives and approaches, city marketing represents a promising addition to urban place management</li> </ul>
<p><b>APPLICATION AND ADAPTION</b> 2000s–2010</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Brands and brand management are central to marketing cities effectively</li> <li>• Similarities between cities and other branded entities (e.g. corporations) are substantial and, therefore, application and adaption of mainstream branding theory is sufficient to inform effective city branding management</li> </ul>
<p><b>CRITICAL LENS</b> 2005–2011</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Substantial differences between cities and other branded entities (e.g. complexity, uncontrollability) prevent the effective application and adaption of mainstream branding theory without considerable new theory development</li> <li>• City brand management implicates unique ethical considerations such as the exclusion of some resident groups and potential erosion of the city's natural distinctiveness</li> </ul>
<p><b>PROGRESSIVE</b> 2010+</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Multiple stakeholders (e.g. residents, media, tourists) co-create city brands</li> <li>• City brands are inherently complex and uncontrollable, thus demanding more collaborative and participatory approaches to city brand management</li> </ul>

### **City Branding Practice**

Although only recently identified as such, city branding is a centuries-old practice (Ashworth, 2009, p. 10; Goodwin, 1993; Kavaratzis and Ashworth, 2005; Papadopoulos, 2004). More specifically, city branding practice evolved over five overlapping waves: (1) primitive, (2) boosterish, (3) entrepreneurial, (4) formalised and (5) brand focused (see Figure 2 and Table 1). Terminology aside, each wave encompasses attempts to adjust what cities mean to people (i.e. city branding). However, city branding practice has not improved remarkably over this time, resulting in a contradiction between the age of this field and its maturity. To understand how the philosophies and assumptions underpinning contemporary city branding practice came to be, we must start by examining the first wave of city branding practice.

## ***Primitive***

The assertion of power drives much city brand management (Greenberg, 2000; Short *et al*, 1993). From before the 19<sup>th</sup> century (see Figure 2 and Table 1), a small yet powerful group of 'urban elite' (e.g. landowners, entrepreneurs, investors, aristocrats) controlled the governance, growth, development and promotion of urban space (Harvey, 1985; Molotch, 1976; Roberts and Schein, 1993). Together with formal governments (Tuan, 1975), the urban elite stimulated the first wave of city branding. Fragmented techniques such as investment in the arts (Whitt, 1987), selective portrayal of cities through education, propaganda (Tuan, 1979), maps and postcards (Zukin, 1995) characterise primitive city brand management. Although limited remaining evidence prevents detailed recount of this wave, Ward (1998b, p. 10) refers more specifically to official statements issued by authorities such as the Governor of Georgia in the 18<sup>th</sup> century to encourage settlement of new land. Selective emphasis on the advantages of the land (e.g. fertile land, security, water) in these proclamations exemplifies early attempts to manipulate perceptions of the city in order to advance the interests of the government and the urban elite. This illustration also highlights the role of land exploration by America (and Europe) as a key factor propelling early city branding practice (Ward, 1998b). More broadly, governments and the urban elite employed primitive city branding techniques to convey grandeur and monumentality and, ultimately, reinforce their power (Philo and Kearns, 1993; Zukin, 1995).

## ***Boosterish***

While the assertion of power remains a central city branding impetus (Kalandides, 2011; Sevin, 2011), around the 19<sup>th</sup> century (see Figure 2 and Table 1), governments and the urban elite began consciously designing and promoting place identities to vaguely defined target audiences (Ashworth, 1994; Greenberg, 2008; Kavaratzis and Ashworth, 2005, 2008). For instance, a coalition of businessmen promoted Atlanta as an advanced and energetic industrial city to investors throughout the 1920s (Garofalo, 1976). Manufacturing industries

became an important target audience as many cities entered periods of economic hardship (Burgess, 1982; Ward, 1998b). The nationalisation and globalisation of markets further intensified a sense of inter-urban competition (Kavaratzis and Ashworth, 2005, p. 506; 2008; Ward, 1998b). Although more conscious in nature, boosterish city brand management relied heavily on crude promotion, particularly advertising (Ward, 1998a, 1998b). For example, railroad companies, an increasingly powerful stakeholder group with a direct interest in migration and travel, disseminated masses of print advertisements enticing people to explore new land, suburbs and resorts (Ward, 1998a). More broadly, lack of strategic planning often led to ad hoc implementation and fragmentation throughout this second wave (Corsico, 1994; Kavaratzis, 2004; Kavaratzis and Ashworth, 2005, 2008). Despite an ongoing lack of strategic planning, the shift to entrepreneurial styles of urban governance around the 1970s (see Figure 2 and Table 1) stimulated more sophisticated and widespread application of marketing techniques to cities (Goodwin, 1993).

### ***Entrepreneurial***

Entrepreneurial urban governance refers to local governments exhibiting businesslike characteristics such as risk taking, extensive promotion and aggressive pursuit of economic development and employment growth (Harvey, 1989; Hubbard and Hall, 1998). Three main factors ignited obsession with city *images* during this third wave of city branding practice: (1) public-partnerships (Greenberg, 2000; Hubbard, 1996a; Roberts and Schein, 1993), (2) deindustrialisation and (3) competition between cities for investment, service-based industry, appropriately skilled workers and tourists (Goodwin, 1993; Grodach and Loukaitou-Sideris, 2007; Hubbard and Hall, 1998; Young and Lever, 1997). Boosterish techniques such as promotion (Bouinot, 1994; Burgess, 1982; Sadler, 1993) and public art displays continued (Miles, 1998). However, mega-events and large-scale redevelopment projects increased (Crilley, 1993; Hubbard, 1996b; Philo and Kearns, 1993; Short *et al*, 1993). Illustrating the latter, Syracuse (New York) was remodelled around service industries and consumption, with old manufacturing plants renovated into office space and a toxic waste site transformed into

a multi-million dollar shopping mall (Roberts and Schein, 1993, p. 24). Property developers and other urban elite employed a range of these entrepreneurial city branding techniques to re-imagine Los Angeles in ways that advanced their own interests (Goodwin, 1993). Preoccupation with city images throughout the 1970s fostered ongoing affiliation between city brand management and *imagineering* within cognate fields such as geography and urban studies (e.g. Archer, 1997; Harvey, 1989; Holcomb, 1993). Then, in the late 1980s, the assumption that “image is everything” infiltrated urban planning and management (Greenberg, 2000, p. 250; Hubbard, 1998, p. 199), thus spurring more formal city marketing.

### ***Formalised***

Principally, greater customer-orientation (Bouinot, 1994; Hall, 1998; Holcomb, 1993) distinguishes formalised city marketing and the fourth wave of city branding practice (see Figure 2 and Table 1). That is, public authorities and private enterprises began designing cities around stakeholders’ needs (Hall, 1998). Under pressure from escalating deindustrialization and inter-urban competition (Andranovich *et al*, 2001; Camagni, 1994; Kotler *et al*, 1993), many industrial cities such as Glasgow were literally reconstructed to appeal to professional service industry workers (Holcomb, 1993). Two concurrent developments may have enabled more formalised and customer-oriented city marketing: (1) specialised urban marketing agencies (Bouinot, 1994; Holcomb, 1993) and (2) dedicated city marketing literature (e.g. Ashworth and Voogd, 1988; Gaido, 1994; Kotler *et al*, 1999; Kotler *et al*, 1993). In spite of an increase in resources, nearing end of the 20th century, implementation of most formal city marketing plans remained limited to simple and piecemeal promotion (Ashworth, 1994; Corsico, 1994; Kotler *et al*, 1993).

### ***Brand Focused***

Since 2000, city ‘branding’ has increasingly become standard practice throughout the western world (Brown and Campelo, 2014; De San Eugenio Vela, 2013; Dinnie, 2011b;

Giovanardi *et al*, 2013). Rapidly developing cities of the eastern world such as Singapore (Chang, 2000; Ooi, 2008) and Shanghai (Dynon, 2011; Kong, 2007) are also becoming more 'brand' focused (Dinnie *et al*, 2010). The overall increase in city branding campaigns encourages a greater sense of perceived inter-urban competition (Boisen *et al*, 2011, p. 136). Other contextual factors including the increasing mobility of people and capital (Ashworth *et al*, 2015, p. 4) and European integration (Kavaratzis and Ashworth, 2005) reinforce that cities must actively compete to ensure economic development and sustainability. Moreover, a plethora of stakeholder groups ranging from governments to export agencies, trade groups, convention bureaux, tourism organisations, foreign affairs ministries, chambers of commerce, financial institutions and trade associations now attempt to manage the city brand for various purposes (Boisen *et al*, 2011; Govers and Go, 2009; Hospers, 2010; Stubbs and Warnaby, 2015). However, slogans and promotion-oriented communication still tend to dominate implementation of city brand focused strategies (Ashworth and Kavaratzis, 2009; Govers, 2013; Hospers, 2010; Kapferer, 2011; Kavaratzis and Hatch, 2013). For instance, every European city claims to be the cultural hub of its region (Kavaratzis, 2007, p. 709). In Asia, the Chinese Communist Party used the 2010 Shanghai World Expo to promote Shanghai as a 'harmonious city', a particular version of the city's future and associated ideologies (Dynon, 2011). Stakeholder engagement also remains limited, especially with residents (Braun *et al*, 2013; Kavaratzis, 2012). Broadly, city branding practitioners generally do not base their day to day practice on theoretical underpinnings (Kavaratzis, 2015). As such, the fifth and ongoing wave of city *branding* practice appears simply rhetorical in nature (see Figure 2 and Table 1).

All five waves, discussed here, describe attempts to manage what the city means to people. The extensive history of city brand management reinforces the idea that cities, in fact, *mean something to people*. However, the current lack of true brand orientation and apparently limited overall effectiveness of city branding practice highlight the importance of ensuring theoretical advancements within city branding research have practical impact.

## **City Branding Research**

While city branding is a centuries old practice, scholars only began to investigate the phenomenon and management of city brands from a marketing perspective in the last three decades. During this comparatively short time, city branding research has evolved considerably (Lucarelli and Berg, 2011). Specifically, Figure 2 and Table 2 identify four major waves in city branding research: (1) possibilities, (2) application and adaption, (3) critical lens and (4) progressive approaches. Examination of these four waves indicates major research gaps surrounding the non-marketer-controlled forces that shape what cities *mean to people*. Identification of these research gaps and the philosophies and assumptions that underpin the present state of city branding research begins with review of city branding's conceptual roots.

### ***Possibilities***

Among the first scholars to consider entrepreneurial urban governance from a marketing perspective, Ashworth and Voogd (1988, p. 65) describe city marketing as a “very promising avenue to explore”, while urging that realising this potential demands broader management perspectives. Subsequently, Ashworth (1994) highlights three distinct city marketing characteristics: (1) the multifunctional and multidimensional nature of cities (see also Corsico, 1994), (2) diverse stakeholder groups attempting to simultaneously manage and market the city and (3) unique market dynamics such the inability to control place product consumption. Despite the evident challenge in directly applying mainstream marketing theory, advancements in not-for-profit marketing, social marketing and image marketing literature reinforced the possibility of effectively applying marketing principles to cities (e.g. Ashworth and Voogd, 1988, 1994). However, nearing the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the theoretical basis of city marketing remained considerably unclear (e.g. Van Den Berg and Braun, 1999). Thus, from 2000, scholars began applying and adapting more specific marketing theory to cities.



### ***Application and Adaption***

The second wave of city branding research, spanning the years 2000 to 2010 (see Figure 2 and Table 2), focuses more explicitly on city *branding* (Kavaratzis, 2005, 2007). For example, many scholars (e.g. Caldwell and Freire, 2004; Dinnie *et al*, 2010; Iversen and Hem, 2008; Kavaratzis and Ashworth, 2005) explore the applicability of branding constructs such as umbrella brands, innovation, core values, differentiation, brand identity and brand personality to city brands. On the whole, the application and adaption of corporate branding theory attracted the most interest (e.g. Ashworth and Kavaratzis, 2009; Hankinson, 2007; Kavaratzis, 2009; Kavaratzis and Ashworth, 2008; Trueman *et al*, 2004). Indeed, corporate brands and city brands share the challenges associated with diverse products or ‘touch-points’ and multiple stakeholders (Kavaratzis, 2004, 2005; Kavaratzis and Ashworth, 2005). Therefore, the second wave of city branding research assumes substantial similarities between cities and other branded entities (e.g. corporations) enable the effective adaption of mainstream branding theories. Around 2005, a third, overlapping wave emerges as a more critical lens in the discourse forms and some scholars begin to acknowledge the substantial differences between cities and other branded entities (see Figure 2 and Table 2).

### ***Critical Lens***

Widespread discussion of three main issues signal development of a critical lens within city branding research: (1) uncertainty, (2) ethical considerations and (3) uniqueness. Firstly, and most broadly, numerous scholars explicitly note the uncertainty surrounding city brands and city brand management (e.g. Anholt, 2005, 2008; Braun, 2011; Holden, 2007; Kavaratzis, 2007; Lucarelli and Berg, 2011; Parkerson, 2007; Sevin, 2011; Skinner, 2005; 2008; Zenker, 2011). For instance, Blichfeldt (2005), Freire (2005) and Kapferer (2011) question whether it is even possible to manage cities as brands. Secondly, multiple scholars highlight the ethical considerations of city brand management (e.g. Dinnie, 2011a; Dynon, 2011; Hornskov, 2007; Kavaratzis, 2007; Lucarelli and Berg, 2011; Sevin, 2011; Warnaby, 2009). For example,

selective targeting may encourage partial representation of the city that, in turn, could erode a city’s natural distinctiveness (Boisen *et al*, 2011). Thirdly, many city branding scholars, adopting a critical lens, underscore the inherent uniqueness of city brands, and thus, the need for major new theory development. Specifically, consensus emerged that city brands are more complex and uncontrollable than product, service or corporate brands. As shown in Table 3, a multiplicity of brand elements and stakeholders underpin the complexity of city brands. Conversely, co-ownership and co-management increase the uncontrollability of city brands. Additionally, discussion of complexity and uncontrollability indicates a further uniqueness in that city brands develop and evolve *organically*. A major research gap surrounds this particular uniqueness (i.e. non-marketer-controlled or ‘organic’ city brand meaning-making processes).

**Table 3. City brands: Inherent uniqueness**

INHERENT UNIQUENESS	CONTRIBUTING FACTORS
<p><b>(1) City brands are more <u>complex</u> than other branded entities (e.g. products, services)</b>            (Boisen <i>et al</i>, 2011; Hornskov, 2007; Hospers, 2010; Parkerson, 2007; Zenker, 2011)</p>	<p><b>Interrelated yet varied elements</b> (Blichfeldt, 2005; Pike, 2005; Warnaby, 2009)</p> <p><b>Diverse stakeholders and target audiences</b> (Davidson, 2006; Dinnie, 2011a; Freire, 2009; Hospers, 2010; Pike, 2005; Warnaby, 2009; Zenker, 2011)</p>
<p><b>(2) City brands are more <u>uncontrollable</u> than other branded entities</b> (Blichfeldt, 2005; Hornskov, 2007; Hospers, 2010; Parkerson, 2007; Skinner, 2005, 2008; Trueman <i>et al</i>, 2007; Zenker, 2011)</p>	<p><b>Co-ownership (i.e. no single individual or stakeholder group ‘owns’ the city)</b> (Blichfeldt, 2005; Boisen <i>et al</i>, 2011; Dinnie, 2011a; Hospers, 2010; Sevin, 2011)</p> <p><b>Co-management (i.e. multiple stakeholder groups attempt to simultaneously ‘manage’ the city brand)</b>            (Blichfeldt, 2005; Pike, 2005; Skinner, 2008; Warnaby, 2009)</p>

### *Organic Origins*

Much of the uncontrollability and complexity of city brands stems from the fact that city brand meaning forms organically. That is, the meaning of cities to people can develop independently of conscious attempts to adjust that meaning (Braun, 2011; Freire, 2005). Rather, a range of uncontrollable or *organic* factors such as history (Braun, 2011), education, literature, the arts (Hankinson, 2004) and media mould city brand meaning (Papadopoulos and Heslop, 2002). Therefore, unlike corporate brands, city brands are not launched in the strictest sense (Govers and Go, 2009, p. 14; Parkerson, 2007). Accordingly, city brand management essentially aims to adjust what cities *already* mean to people (Hornskov, 2007; Skinner, 2008, p. 919). Adding further complexity and uncontrollability however, the meaning of cities continues to evolve constantly (Aitken and Campelo, 2011), and organically, irrespective of city brand management attempts.

### *Organic Evolution*

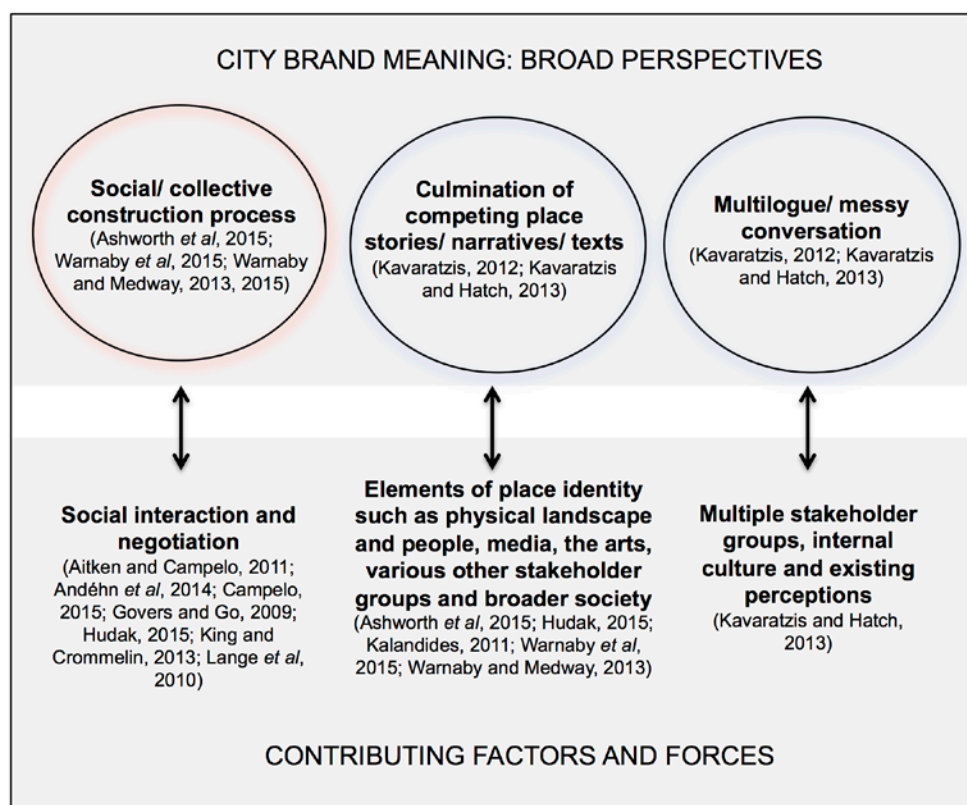
A myriad of forces that operate outside marketing's control constantly shape city brand meaning (Papadopoulos and Heslop, 2002). According to the third wave of critical city branding research (see Figure 2 and Table 2), these forces include first-hand experiences in the city (Ashworth, 2009, p. 10), interactions with residents and word-of-mouth (Blichfeldt, 2005), along with previously-mentioned organic factors such as media (Hornskov, 2007), literature (Ashworth, 2009, p. 10), the arts, history (Kapferer, 2011) and education (Parkerson, 2007). More broadly, Parkerson (2007, p. 265) asserts cities grow organically and chaotically as most of the information shaping city brand meaning arises from an array of forces other than intentional city brand management. Similarly, Skinner (2008, p. 916) underscores the inseparability of city brands and culture, both of which, according to Skinner, develop gradually and beyond the control of city brand management groups. Moreover, Hornskov (2007) contends a range of autonomous forces such as local community groups and independent cultural organisations contribute to city brands (e.g. forging layers of city brand meaning, resisting conscious attempts to adjust existing meaning). Nonetheless,

branding scholars “neglect – or at least underappreciate” that city brands primarily comprise of associations that marketers cannot control (Blichfeldt, 2005, pp. 395–396). Therefore, even as a critical lens developed within city branding research, the organic origins and evolution of city brand meaning remained in relatively uncharted territory several years into the 21<sup>st</sup> century (e.g. Blichfeldt, 2005; Hankinson, 2004).

### **Progressive Approaches**

Around 2010, as show in Figure 2, a fourth wave of progressive city branding research emerges (see also Table 2). Building upon the previous critical wave, progressive city branding research accepts city brands are inherently uncontrollable and complex. As such, scholars contributing to this latest wave pursue more fluid and dynamic conceptualisations that resonate with the co-creation branding paradigm sweeping mainstream branding literature (see for example Allen *et al*, 2008; Iglesias *et al*, 2013). As shown in Figure 3, three broad overlapping perspectives emanate from progressive city branding research.

**Figure 3. Progressive approaches**



Research that aligns with each broad perspective on city brand meaning emphasises different contributing factors and forces (see Figure 3). In this sense, progressive approaches to city brand meaning support that factors and forces 'other' than city brand management contribute to city brand meaning. However, these progressive approaches do not engage with organic (i.e. non-marketer-controlled) meaning-making processes, per se. Therefore, more specific insights into the factors and processes that drive organic city brand development and evolution are limited. For instance, Giovanardi *et al* (2013) find that various stakeholder groups interpret city brand meaning, independently of intentional branding effort. They deduce city brands exist irrespective of city brand management (Giovanardi *et al*, 2013, p. 379). Similarly, Govers and Go (2009) and Zavattaro (2014) reinforce that cities have meaning to people before deliberate attempts are made to alter that meaning. Relating more to organic city brand evolution, Ashworth and Kavaratzis (2015, pp. 122–123) suggest that culture un-self-consciously shapes city brand meaning. Relatedly, Evans (2015, p. 146, 151) points out that while more city brand management groups are attempting to engineer cultural clusters, many clusters still emerge and evolve organically as a result of small firms, creative entrepreneurs, informal networks and not-for-profit organisations. Thus, some progressive city branding research supports that city brand meaning develops and evolves organically, but knowledge of non-marketer-controlled meaning-making processes remains quite limited. Rather, many scholars (e.g. Braun *et al*, 2013; Campelo, 2015; Govers and Go, 2009; Hudak, 2015; Kavaratzis, 2012; Kerr and Oliver, 2015; Lange *et al*, 2010; Stubbs and Warnaby, 2015; Therkelsen, 2015; Warnaby and Medway, 2013, 2015) use the notion of city brand co-creation as a basis for advocating more collaborative and participatory approaches to city brand management. Indeed, the co-creation paradigm suggests a need to re-think how city brands are managed and this emphasis on the practical implications of progressive scholarly perspectives is promising given the disconnect between research and practice in this domain. However, a primary focus on management implications detracts from the intricacies of city brand meaning development and evolution, the organic nature of these processes in particular.

While the organic process driving city brand meaning remain unclear, scholars contributing to the progressive wave of city branding research (e.g. Campelo, 2015; Campelo *et al*, 2014; De San Eugenio Vela, 2013; Govers and Go, 2009; Hudak, 2015; Kavartzis and Hatch, 2013; Warnaby and Medway, 2013) highlight another issue that should be explored to progress beyond rhetorical city brand management: what, fundamentally, do cities mean to people? Indeed, brand meaning conceptualisations emanating from various waves of city branding research (see for example Table 4) support Stubbs and Warnaby's (2015, p. 102) suggestion that city brand meaning encompasses a "kaleidoscopic blend" of dimensions. However, the considerable variety of potential dimensions creates fragmentation and confusion, rather than comprehensiveness and clarity. Indeed, these conceptualisations emanate from diverse research. For example, many city branding scholars focus on a particular stakeholder groups' perspective (e.g. tourists, business tourists or residents). Further, some research considers more particular issues such as dimensions of citizen satisfaction and commitment (e.g. Zenker *et al*, 2009). Hence, considerable confusion surrounds what cities mean to people, an issue that should, arguably, weigh heavily in practice given the purpose of city brand management is to essentially adjust what cities already mean to people.

**Table 4. City brand meaning dimensions**

<b>SOURCE</b>	<b>FOCUS</b>	<b>CITY BRAND MEANING DIMENSIONS CONSIDERED</b>
Hankinson (2004)	<i>Destination marketers' perceptions of destination brand images</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Activities and facilities (e.g. good shopping)</li> <li>• Business tourism (e.g. conference facilities)</li> <li>• History, heritage and culture (e.g. historical not modern)</li> <li>• Ambience (e.g. cosmopolitan)</li> <li>• Main economic activity (e.g. leisure oriented)</li> <li>• External profile (e.g. reputation)</li> <li>• Accessibility (e.g. transport)</li> <li>• People characteristics (e.g. youth oriented)</li> <li>• International reputation</li> <li>• Economic development (e.g. recent expansion)</li> <li>• Industrial environment (e.g. declining industry)</li> </ul>
Laaksonen et al (2006)	<i>Techniques for conceptualising the city as people experience it</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Observation level (i.e. themes to which perception is attached such as built environment, culture, industry)</li> <li>• Evaluation level (i.e. attitudes that are connected to perceptions such as certain areas of the city are beautiful/ugly)</li> <li>• Atmosphere level (i.e. subjective impression such as unkind, inflexible and feelings such as frustration)</li> </ul>
Anholt (2006)	<i>Measuring world city brand images</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Presence (e.g. international status, familiarity, notable achievements)</li> <li>• Place (e.g. physical aspects, climate)</li> <li>• Pulse (e.g. vibrant urban lifestyle, leisure activities)</li> <li>• People (e.g. nature, culture)</li> <li>• Potential (e.g. economic and educational opportunities)</li> <li>• Prerequisites (i.e. basic qualities of the city such as accommodation)</li> </ul>
Zenker et al (2009)	<i>Resident satisfaction and commitment</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Urbanity and diversity (e.g. shopping, cultural activities, atmosphere)</li> <li>• Nature and recreation (e.g. low pollution, tranquillity, open spaces)</li> <li>• Job chances (e.g. wages levels, promotion opportunities)</li> <li>• Cost efficiency (e.g. cost of living)</li> </ul>
Zenker (2011)	<i>The concept and measurement of place (city) brand components</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Characteristics (e.g. physical environment)</li> <li>• Inhabitants (e.g. diversity, culture)</li> <li>• Business (e.g. employment opportunities, business climate)</li> <li>• Quality (e.g. living conditions)</li> <li>• Familiarity (e.g. reputation)</li> <li>• History (e.g. historical events)</li> </ul>
Lucarelli (2012)	<i>Framework to analyse and evaluate city brand equity</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Events and activities (e.g. European Capital of Culture)</li> <li>• History and heritage (e.g. Communism)</li> <li>• Process and institution (e.g. public hearings)</li> <li>• Artifacts and spatial planning (e.g. museums)</li> <li>• Graphics and symbols (e.g. logos, slogans)</li> </ul>

Existing conceptualisations of city brand meaning dimensions present two further limitations. Firstly, given the lack of knowledge surrounding organic city brand meaning-making processes, these conceptualisations could align more with desired city brand identities than what cities already mean to people. Secondly, while theoretical advancement hinges on relationships (Whetten, 1989, pp. 492–493), the conceptualisations highlighted in Table 4 give limited consideration to systemic interrelations between the dimensions of city brand meaning. Indeed, some notable conceptualisations consider the potential interrelationships between city brand meaning dimensions. For example, Anholt (2006) models the components of the Anholt-GMI City Brands Index as points on a hexagon, suggesting

interrelationships between a city's presence, place, pulse, people, potential and prerequisites (see Table 4). Moreover, through qualitative investigation of how people experience the city, Laaksonen *et al* (2006, p. 216) find that perceptual themes (e.g. built environment) are usually connected to evaluation (e.g. that aspect of the built environment is 'ugly') and attribution of some affect (e.g. irritation). Further, Laaksonen *et al* propose three interconnected perception levels: (1) observation, (2) evaluation and (3) atmosphere. On the whole however a clear understanding of city brand meaning dimensions, and how those dimensions interrelate, represents a major research gap that could be contributing to the disconnect between city branding research and practice.

### **Further Clarification**

As with any naturally occurring developmental path, the waves of city branding research and practice identified in this paper (see Figure 2) correspond to evolutionary shifts in the trajectory of each domain, rather than all-encompassing, absolute or discrete phases. For instance, some city branding research published between 2005 and 2011 does not embrace a critical lens. Rather, these years coincide with a wave of research questioning the very nature of city brands and city brand management in ways that could impact the overall trajectory of city branding research. Similarly, some city branding research published before 2010 (e.g. Pryor and Grossbart, 2007) embrace a critical lens while also embodying some progressive philosophies and assumptions (see Table 2). On the other hand, some city branding research published after 2010 (e.g. Brandt and de Mortanges, 2011; Hanna and Rowley, 2011) mainly reinforces the philosophies and assumptions of the second 'application and adaption' wave of research. Waves in city branding practice are also not all-encompassing or discrete. To illustrate, some contemporary city brand management strategies engage multiple stakeholders (e.g. Hernandez-Garcia, 2013; Lange *et al*, 2010, pp. 76–82; Northover, 2010). However, our review indicates that top-down managerial approaches remain dominant and, thus, a wave of collaborative approaches is yet to



develop. As such, a major gap remains between the theory and practice of city brand management.

## **Closing the Gap**

This paper demonstrates how the divergent evolutionary paths of city branding research and practice contribute to an overall disconnect between scholars and practitioners in this domain. Further, we argue, as well as a greater understanding of day to day pressures faced in the 'real world' of city brand management (see Kavartzis, 2015), more appreciation of the evolution of practice is essential to contextualise what might seem to branding researchers as a rhetorical brand focus. In particular, the preoccupation with idealistic city 'images' introduced by entrepreneurial urban governance, a defining period in the evolution of city branding practice, arguably underpins the ongoing lack of true brand orientation. Conversely, synthesis of the evolution of city branding research into four major waves helps to contextualise the current state of this research domain for practitioners who, according to Kavartzis (2015), believe that research tends to overlook the realities of city brand management. In particular, the organisation-centric marketing and branding theory that directly informed early waves city branding research appears to have fostered a lingering assumption that city brand management groups control city brand meaning and other factors such as budgets and deadlines. While the recent progressive wave of city branding research signals promise, several research gaps must be addressed to help overcome the unique challenges of city brand management.

This integrative review of city branding research and practice identifies three consequential research gaps that, once addressed, can advance the field in both respects. Firstly, discussion of the organic origins and evolution of city brand meaning within the critical wave indicates that non-marketer-controlled city brand meaning-making processes should be explored. Indeed, these processes, and city brands more broadly, are inherently complex and uncontrollable. However, can city brand management groups support these processes in

ways that facilitate strategic brand management objectives? Secondly, scholars could also engage more actively with a further issue highlighted in more critical city branding research: the ethical considerations surrounding attempts to adjust what cities mean to people. For instance, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, does city branding still involve the assertion of power, perhaps by a contemporary urban elite? How are the benefits of city brand management strategies distributed? How can the meaning of cities to people be managed more 'ethically'? In particular, can participatory and collaborative approaches to city brand management be implemented more ethically, that is, balancing the need to engage multiple stakeholders while negotiating their inevitable differences (Dinnie, 2011a, p. 73; see also Lange *et al*, 2010, p. 78)? Thirdly, a renewed focus on what cities mean to people and the fundamental purpose of city brand management (i.e. to adjust that meaning), is of direct value to enhancing true brand orientation in practice and forging a solid theoretical base. Essentially, comprehensive understanding of what cities mean to people precedes effective adjustment of that meaning.

The overall disconnect between city branding research and practice must be addressed to overcome the issues facing this area of brand management. Ensuring that researchers and practitioners 'work together' on multiple levels is pivotal to rectifying this disconnect. Specifically, further research and theoretical advancement is necessary to equip various stakeholder groups with the tools to effectively adjust what cities mean to people, despite the inherent complexity and uncontrollability of that meaning. We identify three research gaps particularly important in this regard: (1) non-marketer controlled meaning making processes, (2) the ethical issues surrounding city brand management and (3) the fundamental nature of what cities mean to people. However, scholarly insights and theories should also be communicated to the various stakeholder groups attempting to manage the city brand. Mutual understanding between researchers and practitioners facilitates this communication in two main ways: (a) encouraging researchers to consider the assumptions or taken for granted beliefs that underpin most current practice when articulating the practical

implications of their findings and (b) equipping practitioners with a better understanding of the assumptions underpinning the theories that aim to inform their practice. Establishing more common ground also enables direct researcher-practitioner communication in a collaborative workshop or conference setting (see for example Kavaratzis, 2015). Moreover, practitioners and scholars can benefit from critical reflection upon the trajectory of their respective fields. Indeed, other areas of branding inquiry and disciplines characterised by a prominent theory-practice gap could benefit from our purposeful review approach. In addition, the methodology developed in this paper could be of use to a range of other research contexts in which reviewing pertinent literature can achieve a specific investigative aim (e.g. identifying, mapping and comparing streams of thought). Delineating the philosophies and assumptions shaping the divergent evolutionary paths of city branding research and practice, this paper contributes towards addressing the theory-practice gap that has formed within this emerging and increasingly global field of brand management.

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