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### DEVELOPING A CONCEPTUAL MODEL OF CITY IDENTITY: MEANINGS, DETERMINANTS, AND CONSEQUENCES

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#### ABSTRACT

As research interests on city branding continue to increase, the role of residents as internal stakeholders in the development of city identity has gained limited attention from previous researchers of place/city branding. Given the fierce competition among cities and nations in gaining the desirable edge as tourist destinations in recent times, researchers are charged to consider the central role of residents in developing city branding strategies. Additionally, the role of internal stakeholders, most especially city residents in the development of a viable city/place brand identity models have been understudied in the literature. In other words, there is a lack of understanding of the contributions and implications of internal publics on the development of a thriving city brand. Therefore, many scholars and practitioners of place branding management

call for a model of brand identity to develop a place branding strategy that highlights the importance of internal publics. Following a critical and comprehensive review of multidisciplinary literature using a conceptual approach, a model is finally developed. As such, this paper put forth a conceptual model on the determinants of city identity development from the perspective of city residents. Also, the model highlights the consequences of city residents' involvement in the development of city identity.

## INTRODUCTION

Cities and nations have continued to develop efficient and systematic methods of projecting themselves as successful brands hence the fast-growing literature on place branding (Anholt, 2002). Therefore, place branding has remained a significantly visible theme in the body of marketing and brand management studies (Anholt, 2002; Kotler & Gertner, 2002; Konecnik & Gartner, 2007; Balakrishnan, 2009; Pike, 2009). These studies are unanimous on the fact that successful place brand relies on four different types of publics, e.g. visitors, residents and workers, businesspeople and exporters (Baker, 2009; Cai, 2009). These publics can, however, be regrouped as internal publics (residents and workers) and external publics (visitors and tourists). A recent study by Sevin (2014) described that place branding strategy for a city could not dismiss the complexities of differential perceptions and interactions among stakeholders of the city. Furthermore, the city branding definition are inherently varied due to the distinctiveness of the stakeholders' point of views, e.g. residents view the city as a place to live, tourists view the city as a place to visit (Merrilees, Miller and Herington, 2012).

In the parlance of place brand management and development, residents are the most crucial public. At one hand, they serve the purpose of channel members which intervenes in the communicative relationship between the stakeholders (local government) who are responsible for projecting the image of a place and their external publics. Thus, the importance of residents as active members in the process of developing a viable place brand cannot be overemphasized (Stylidis et al., 2015). On the other hand, place or city residents are critical in the sense that they represent the facets of internal stakeholders in the brand identity model (Mohamad, Bakar, Ismail, Halim & Bidin, 2016). In other words, residents are stakeholders who are the representative body and occupying the brand identity of a place (Mohamad, Ismail & Bidin, 2017; Baker, 2009; Cai, 2009; Konecnik Ruzzier & Ruzzier, 2009). Hence, residents have an undeniable role in shaping visitors' perceptions, attitude and behaviours towards a place (Ryan & Aicken, 2010). Despite this obvious importance of residents in building strong place brand, previous researchers have focused more on external publics. In other words, the importance of residents' participation in the co-creative process of building strong place brand has been understudied. In other words, there is a need to extend the sole focus of empirical studies on place branding mainly from the image or tourist perspective and focus more on the internal-resident or identity perspective. Many previous researchers including Ashworth and Voogd (1990),

Govers and Go (2009), Insch and Florek (2010), Kavaratzis (2012), Zenker and Seigis (2012) and Zenker et al. (2017) have in one way or the other indicated resident as the most important factor in determining the viability and success of a place brand. This is because the image a visitor or tourist would hold of a place is often reflected through the identity of its residents. For instance, a number of empirical studies (e.g., Baloglu & McCleary, 1999; Gartner, 1994; Gunn, 1972) in the realm of place and city branding have demonstrated that the perceived positive image of a place enhances tourists' attachment and loyalty to the place. Also, a significant number of studies have been done to identify the drivers of place image from the perception and viewpoints of visitors and tourists. More so, some of the previous studies have indicated that residents are a significant source of information that is critical to the formation of visitors' perceived image. Despite this, researchers have neither focus on the drivers of place identity from the perspectives of place residents, nor investigate the consequences of residents' perceptions in terms of their attachment and loyalty with the place in conspiring with their active participation in a place branding initiative and as responsible agents of a place brand.

By focusing more on a tourist in place brand management, it shows that previous studies have concentrated more on place brand image than place identity. However, researchers (Merrilees, Miller, & Herington, 2009; Pike, 2009) have contended a good development strategy of a place brand should ensure equity between the image and identity of the place. Hence, a two-dimensional approach that incorporates the factors of place image and place identity should be identified for place branding development (Konecnik Ruzzier & Ruzzier, 2009). Consequently, previous studies have been able to demonstrate the importance of place image on tourists' behaviour and attitude. However, the goal of place branding is not limited to place brands that strongly attract a tourist but also include a brand that residents can strongly identify with. In other words, a place brand is not completely successful if it seems appealing to its external publics (tourists) and maintain an incongruent identity with the internal publics (residents).

Additionally, the majority of the published studies (e.g., Baloglu & McCleary, 1999; Gartner, 1994; Gunn, 1972) on external public or from the perspective of the city image have over the time systematically identify the drivers of place/city image formation. There is a consensus among the image-based studies that there are three types of drivers or agent of city image formation namely; (i) organic which consist of information sources that are not derived directly from marketers e.g. online reviews and tourists word-of-mouth actual visitations, and direct experience; (ii) induced agents which could be the destination promoters; and (iii) strategists and/or the autonomous agents who are the producer of the online and offline news articles, films and pop culture (e.g. Hou, Lin, & Morais, 2005; Lee et al., 2015; Prayag & Ryan, 2012). However, the literature has been, less assertive in identifying the drivers and agents of city identity, especially from the perspective of internal publics (Comle-Pujol, de san Eugenio-Vela & Frigola-Reig, 2017).

Understanding the drivers of city branding identified from the perspectives of internal publics of a city does not only help city promoters and brand strategists to create a place brand that strikes a balance between the dwellers of the place but also, benefits by ensuring that city residents who are primarily the channel members in the communication process of a city brand are effective in communicating a unifying story of the place to visitors and tourists. For instance, previously, place marketing strategists primarily tie the elements of place brand identity around the functional attributes such as the beautiful landscapes, architectural designs, advanced infrastructures, etc. Meanwhile, the marketing of a place is often done through the identities of its residents, architecture and structures. In other words, these identities contribute hugely in shaping visitors' perceptions, attachment and loyalty to the place brand. Additionally, past research in place marketing (e.g., Grisaffe & Nguyen, 2011; Park et al., 2010) suggest that emotional attachment may enhance tourist loyalty. For example, the tourists may be more prone to publish post positive reviews online and may disseminate positive word-of-mouth about the place to their peers personally furthermore, several tourism scholars (e.g., Qian & Zhu, 2014; Tsai, 2015) have demonstrated that place attachment may reinforce visitors loyalty and revisit behaviour. Similarly, residents' perception of their identities determines their attachment and loyalty with their place brand. However, limited empirical findings are extant in the literature on how the drivers of place brand identity enhance place attachment and subsequently the loyalty of city residents of their city.

Considering that a place brand identity is used to convey clear and distinct information about the place, the characteristics of a place brand identities are what set apart the place from other places. Hence, beyond any marketing, promotion and communication strategies for developing place brand, the development of a distinctive story which is identifiable by the residents of a place is paramount in developing a viable and successful place brand (Pride, 2002). In other words, the image of a place must be developed through the relatable characteristics of the residents' identity (Mohamad, Nguyen, Melewar, & Gambetti, 2018). Such identities often revolve around their culture, history and structures. When these identities or the story revolving around the residents' identities are relatable to the residents' they tend to become more attached and loyal to their city. However, the current body of literature in this realm is not only devoid of the empirical proof on the connection between drivers of city identities and residents' attachment and loyalty, but also, but the far limited study has also attempted to explore the conception and the dimensionality of the resident's attachment and loyalty to their city. Therefore, this study sets out to identify the characteristics and drivers of the city identity especially from the internal place branding perspectives and examine the connections between the city identity, residents place attachment and resident loyalty. The remainder of this paper presents a section on literature review on place branding with a focus on the key role of residents; followed by a review on the drivers of city identity development; subsequently, the effects of city identity is discussed. The following section

presents the proposed conceptual model. Finally, a section on implication and conclusions is presented at the end of this paper.

## REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

### Place Branding: The Key Role of Residents

According to Braun et al. (2013), the internal publics who are otherwise known as the resident population have a triangular role in the developmental strategies of place branding. Hence, the importance of residents in the course of place brand cannot be overemphasized. As residents contribute to the place branding framework through first; residents' behaviours and attitudes towards the place brand, second; residents contribute as brand ambassadors who live, represent and disseminate the image of place brand through their own identities and finally residents also contribute by playing a critical role in the political legitimization process of any place branding ideation. In essence, residents determine whatever image a place carry and thus, the image of place often represents the identities of the residents.

The ambassadorial role of residents in the process and strategy of place brand have also been emphasized by Zenker and Erfgen (2014) who argued that it is near impossible to come up with place brand image without the inclusion of residents from the ideation process up until implementation stage. In summary, they opined that the role residents in place branding cuts across the projection of place brand objects, the implementation of place brand structure and lastly residents contribute to the success of place brand by supporting and living the actual image projected by the place.

In a similar way, Kavaratzis and Hatch (2013) and Kladou et al. (2016) explained the importance of place residents in the process of place brand development as their involvement will ensure a bottom-up strategy towards the development of a viable place brand. They added that a successful place brand is developed and managed through consistent negotiation, deliberation and contestation among all involved stakeholders (Adamu, Mohamad & Abdul Rahman, 2018; Adamu, Mohamad & Abdul Rahman, 2016). The reason for such deliberation is because place brand is concocted out of the identities of its residents. Hence, there must be a balance between the image and identity of a successful place brand by ensuring that the image of a place truly represents their identities which often revolve around their cultural identities, historical architectures and structures. Such balance is achieved through the deliberation among different stakeholders which include residents, local governments and the business communities (Kavaratzis & Hatch, 2013). In other words, the interactions between stakeholders further emphasize that successful place brand is a co-created product of internal publics, local government, business communities and also the visitors (Kavaratzis 2012).

In ending, the role of place branding goes beyond the ideation stages but also extends to implementation stage whereby residents practise, live and shape whatever image projected by a place brand. In essence, it is important to

establish a place brand model that combines the viewpoints of all its stakeholders (Kavaratzis & Kalandides, 2015; Thelander & Sa'we, 2015).

## THE DETERMINANTS OF CITY IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT

### Cultural Identity

According to Govers and Go (2009), place brand identities are driven by many aspects e.g. historical, political, religious and cultural discourses. Additionally, cultural geographers and environmental psychologists have recurrently emphasised cultural identities as the most influential and dynamic representation of a place (e.g. Agnew, 1987; Creswell and Hoskins, 2008; Kalandides 2011; Massey, 1994). Other researchers such as; Hatch and Schultz (2002) have demonstrated a strong nexus between culture, identity, and image.

In the context of city branding, residents are allowed to express the cultural features that for them already form part of the place identity. Due to this distinctiveness, past research defines city branding as a reflection of the overall identity of the community's history, culture or heritage (Hankinson, 2004; Merrilees et al., 2012). Hence, cultural identity that corroborate the residents' way of living must be taken into importance when developing the city brand identity concept. For example, the city of Paris has been branded as a place for people who is chic (*aka fashionista*) and therefore, the marketing efforts for the place is to encourage more shopping heaven for the fashion community (Rabbiosi, 2015). Thus, cultural identity of a city is somewhat a tangible factor that is measured based on how the residents express their identity in daily basis. Furthermore, past research suggests that an effective place branding focus on the congruency of the complexities of cultural identity with city identity that can be communicated clearly (Konecnik & Go, 2008). Conclusively, the process of developing a city brand identity must incorporate relevant local cultural characteristics for the purpose of making the place brand unique and attracted to both residents and visitors (Konecnik & Go, 2008).

### Historical Structure

Place branding mirrors various aspect of place identities including its economic and socio-political activities as well as its histories (Gnoth et al., 2005; Papadopoulos et al., 2005; & Van Ham, 2008). Thus, an acceptable place brand image revolves around the culture and history of the place (Konecnik & Go, 2008). In other words, historical heritages in terms of activities, structures, infrastructure and landscapes are an integral part of city identities which must be embedded in the place brand stories in order to project an image that will be accepted by both internal publics and external publics (Hong Fan, 2014).

The importance of incorporating historical heritage into the place branding stories does not only make place brand relatable to it residents it also helps them appreciate their own heritage so much so that they will be willing to play the role of an ambassador for the place brand that will be ready to market and promote their city to visitors and tourists alike. Additionally, when a place

brand is built around a city's historical characteristics, it naturally succumbs residents to accepting and supportive of the place brand. Many universally accepted place brands such as London and Paris have also tied the historic characteristics and structures. By doing so, the place brand becomes acceptable and attracted to not only external publics but also and primarily to their residents who in return helped preserve the equity of the place brand.

### **Architecture**

One of the most important principles of the place branding project is to preserve cultural and historical significance. Hence, the process of place branding based on architectural design involves several important factors, such as architecture landmarks, integrated design languages and city branding identity closer together (Kirby and Kent, 2010). Therefore, the major features of a place including the physical designs, landscapes and infrastructure are among the determinants of the uniqueness of a place brand. Researchers such as Kirby and Kent (2010) have argued that the presentation of the architectural elements in communicating a place brand makes a place brand easily distinctive among competitors. In other words, architectural designs distinct a place identity from others as architectural designs are often unique and often the perfect logo for a viable place brand. In conclusion, this paper offers that architectural designs are unique identities and a branding catalyst that must be embedded in the branding project of a place branding (Klingmann, 2007).

## **THE EFFECTS OF CITY IDENTITY**

### **Place Attachment**

Place attachment is not a new concept and have been studied extensively in previous years. However, the place attachment has many definitions based on differential context of research carried by many scholars. Therefore, it will be difficult to give an absolute meaning of the concept since there were a myriad of research on tackling how to define the concept succinctly. Although, similar terms have discussed by many scholars (e.g: Kasarda & Janowitz, 1974; Sarason, 1974; Gerson et al., 1977), there was no consensus on the concept. One of the terms used as a generic concept that embraces others, place attachment is a component of place identity.

Recently, there seems to exist a certain consensus in the use of the term 'place attachment'. In general, place attachment is defined as a special bond or link between people and specific places. For example, Shumaker and Taylor (1983) defines it is 'a positive affective bond or association between individuals and their residential environment' (p. 233). Hummon (1992) considers it 'emotional involvement with places' (p. 256), and Low (1992) defines it as 'an individual's cognitive or emotional connection to a particular setting or milieu' (p. 165). These definitions may be appropriate to describe a special feeling from an individual toward certain places. In a nutshell, the concept of attachment conceptually reflects the willingness to maintain close contact with the object of attachment (Ainsworth & Bell, 1970; Bowlby, 1969,

1973, 1980). Thus, the concept of attachment is operationally used to reflect residents' willingness to embrace and remain in touch with the stories and identities of their city image.

### **Loyalty**

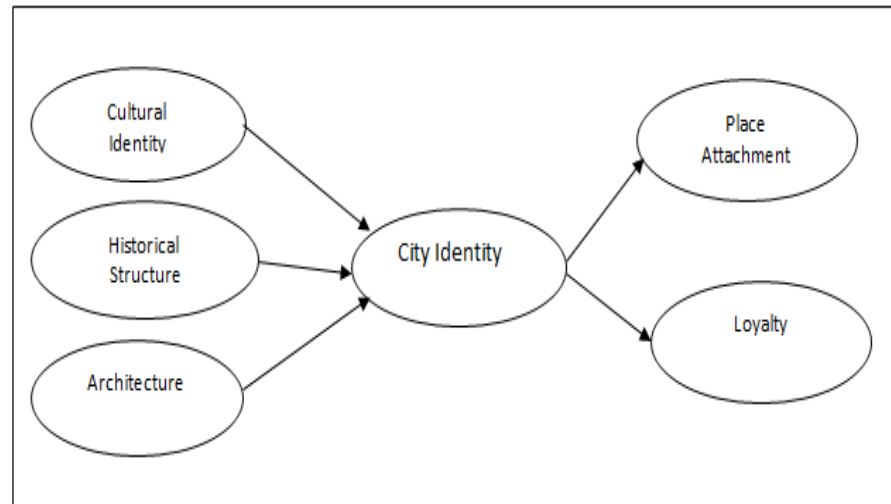
Marketing scholars have studied factors that determine a customer's loyalty to a brand for years (Oliver, 1999) because it brings profit to a brand (Kumar, 2013). In urban tourism, loyalty is advantageous in the form of repeated visitors to a place (Yuksel et al., 2010). In the city, branding relies on an excellent residents and/or visitors' experiences related to the uniqueness of the city in which they are located. Therefore, it is highly important for the city management to build a strong relations with the community to guarantee the residents' loyalty. Loyalty is possible to obtain among residents by making them live an unforgettable experience in relation to the place. The city brand is considered a place-based brand with a strong relation to the place in which it is located. A unique experience is a key determinant to increased resident's attachment and subsequent loyalty.

The literature review reveals that, limited findings on place loyalty from the perspective of residents. However, the few studies on place loyalty such as Florek (2011), have demonstrated the importance even though from the tourist and visitors' perspectives by asserting that loyal tourist does not only re-visit a place but also recommend the place to others. The conclusion of previous studies on place loyalty has been in line with mainstream marketing studies. On this basis, it will be interesting to explore loyalty from the perspectives of place residents in order to proffer clear definitions of residents' loyalty and as well as to describe the consequences of place identity and place attachment from the residents' perspectives.

### **Proposed Conceptual Framework**

The conceptual framework proposed in this study is presented in Figure 1. The framework is proposed to explain cultural identity, historical structures and architectures are drivers of place identity which is expected to lead to residents' place attachment and loyalty. The proposed conceptual framework offers that, if the cultural identity, historical structure and architecture are well perceived as the identities of a place by the residents, their attachment and loyalty are enhanced.





**Figure 1** A Conceptual Model of City Identity

## IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The model proposed in this paper is an attempt to broaden the existing knowledge on the importance of residents in shaping and driving effectiveness of a city brand. The model focuses on novel factors that can drive city identification from the perspective of city residents and also explores the consequences of city identity. In other words, this model attempts to provide a constructive insight for future researchers to consider exploring the relationships between the antecedent factors namely; cultural identity, historical structure, city architectural design on city brand identity. Additionally, the impact of city identity on residents' behaviours such as; city attachment and loyalty to the city brand should be considered.

Additionally, future researchers should consider exploring the concept of city identity using a mixed-method approach to come up with additional factors that are not included in the proposed model in this study. Also, future studies should consider developing and validating measurements for the novel variables such as; cultural identity, historical structure, architectural design and city identity that are presented in the proposed model.

## CONCLUSIONS

In the context of the place brand development and management, various researchers have argued that place brand developers and researchers mostly overlooked the role of residents in the course of developing a viable and universally acceptable place brand. Hence, the literature is replete of studies on place brand image, a few studies have focused on the drivers of place identities especially by focusing on the influence of cultural identities, historical architecture and structures in shaping place identities and enhancing residents'

attachments and loyalty. This paper, therefore, presents a conceptual model that graphically explains that if a place identity is developed through cultural, historical structure and architecture it will enhance residents' attachment and their loyalty to the place brand.

The expected contribution of this study is twofold. First, this study attempts to bridge the gap in the budding literature of place branding by highlighting the role of residents in developing successful place/city brand identity. Secondly, this study also contributes by establishing the link between perceived city brand identity and attachment and loyalty of city residents. As such, this study will unveil the effectiveness of city residents as channel members in communicating a unifying identity of the Malaysian City in a way that convinces and appeals to visitors and tourists. The findings from this study will enable Malaysian City marketers, promoters and strategists to consider incorporating the residents of Malaysian City marketing strategies for advancing the rank of Malaysian City in the list of tourist destination among Southeast Asian cities.

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