

Making Hidden Voices Visible:

Representing the City Brand as Seen by Residents

Qian Chen

cq2242906@163.com, WISA, UWTSD, UK

Abstract: City branding has long been an important part of urban construction and development, and in mainland China, where the urban landscape is highly homogenised, city branding is becoming a tool that the rulers of each city wish to use well to help the city be recognised and remembered. City branding is by default the responsibility and achievement of those in power, and in the branding process, the government has always acted as the decision maker, using a top-down approach in which residents are merely spectators, or even learnt about the brand after it has been launched, along with an external audience. This approach can accomplish the task of brand design more efficiently, reflecting the thinking and vision of those in power, but the views of the residents are often ignored, and their efforts towards the development of the city and their desire to improve the city's reputation are not seen in the branding process, which will result in a sense of detachment, and even a certain degree of rejection of the residents towards their city's brand. In fact, residents, as an integral part of the city, have an important say and representation in city branding, and their evaluation of the city can directly influence the external world's perception of the city. This study attempts to use a bottom-up approach to give residents the opportunity to express their complex emotions and feelings about the city in which they live, to represent the comprehensive experience based on a longer period of time in pictures, to promote the emergence of deeper place attachment, to strengthen the city brand from the perspective of authenticity. It can provide intuitive data for public manager and city brand design agencies.

Background

City branding in mainland China emerged at the turn of the century, Qingdao, Chongqing, Dalian and a few other cities were the first to start branding strategy, Dalian is characterised by the formation of a unique "city brand" through the construction of the city's environment, through the city's branding effect to attract investment and enterprise development, thereby promoting the development of the city; Qingdao's selling point is to support the development of enterprises, the establishment of corporate brands within the city area, such as the well-known Haier, Hisense, Tsingtao Beer, Shuangxing and so on, through the formation of corporate brands with a famous brand "brand city", thus promoting the overall development of the city. After Chongqing became the only municipality directly under the central government in the west, there was an urgent need to improve the city's image, so the design of the city logo was completed through public calls and targeted purchases from famous designers, which was an uncommon practice in China in 2006.

It was not until 2007 that the full form of city branding began to emerge, specifically the

tourism branding of a province (a larger administrative division than a city): In 2007, Shandong province analysed the overall characteristics of the province's more than ten cities and abandoned the once-popular approach of using historical heritage or scenery as the content of the brand, and launched the concept of "Hospitable Shandong", under which the province's sixteen cities advertised their tourism under a unified brand image, choosing to use the traditionally strong medium of CCTV's prime-time advertising slot. The move worked wonders over the next two years, directly helping to boost tourism revenues in Shandong province significantly more than any other province, as well as giving millions of TV viewers a generalised impression of the province. The results inspired several provinces and cities to follow suit, and two years later almost every province had launched its own tourism brand in a similar way. Around 2010, several CCTV channels were packed with local tourism branding films in prime-time commercial breaks that followed a remarkably similar pattern:

1. the rhythm of the musical setting was soothing, the soundtrack was dignified and atmospheric, and most of the narrators were male voices with a firm and emotional tone;
2. The picture is exquisite, the first half of the film mainly shows natural scenery and historical heritage;
3. The second half of the film shows the achievements of urban development and construction;
4. Most show the city from a grandiose perspective.

As a direct result of this trend, the attention of tourists has been divided, and the growth of tourism revenue in Shandong Province has slowed down significantly, but at the same time, the other places that have got a share of the market pie have not replicated Shandong's great success, and even after tourism has become an increasingly important way of life in China, the promotion of brand image in many places is still in a stalemate due to the fact that the brand image is too similar: if the advertisements stop being published, all the previous investments will be ineffective, but continuing to invest will also lead to a stagnation. In fact, urban policies of image development and city-marketing are basically cheap, and many towns fell into the trap of serial reproduction of promotional policies—to use the expression introduced by Harvey (1989) in the framework of his “entrepreneurial city” thesis—and saw their message disappear in the crowd of similar urban images in the marketplace (Jessop, 1998). Some places try to keep updating their advertisement content, but a brand that lacks continuity and consistency is hard to penetrate.

Through observation, it can be seen that tourism branding in Shandong province, even today, has reached a level that many other cities have failed to reach: the brand has shifted from simply promoting "what I have" to "what tourists can get", this conceptual shift is in line with social exchange theory (Cook, et al. 2013) and consumer psychology, and can help indecisive potential consumers to make a decision; at the same time, the brand slogan fully mobilises the energy of local residents, and the recognition and widespread dissemination of Shandong's long-standing hospitality at the government level will undoubtedly encourage the residents to continue with their customs and habits. The concept of Shandong tourism branding is in line with the findings of place attachment theory: Place marketers should acknowledge the role of residents as brand ambassadors and aim to mobilise civic pride and the sense of belonging of

residents as a means of communicating the place brand (Braun, E., Kavaratzis, M., & Zenker, S. 2013). Many cities or provinces imitating Shandong's tourism brand have only copied superficial practices such as promotional channels and advertising models, and have not carried out in-depth excavation and effective integration for the place brand, which is one of the reasons why they have not gained as much success as Shandong's tourism brand.

Identity change

Using residents as an important element of city branding will potentially breathe life into the city brand and make it more authentic. The success of Shandong's tourism brand is one example, and there are many other famous cases that illustrate the validity and necessity of this approach. Berlin's 'Be Berlin', for example, is a slogan that transcends the city's many historical legacies and moulds Berliners into something to be proud of. As a famous city, such a slogan appeals to external visitors and stimulates curiosity, but the language demonstrates more affirmation of internal stakeholders, successfully evoking a sense of pride and identity among residents, which in turn can have a significant impact on tourism. Place identity theories tend to suggest that the primary dynamism in influencing a resident's attitudes toward tourism may originate from his or her self-concept of the place (Wang, S., & Xu, H. 2015).

Residents are generally enthusiastic about participating in city branding, but current research suggests that while some cities are aware of the need for resident participation in the branding process, they only involve residents at the later stages of the process, with the more core aspects of the earlier stages of the process, including brand positioning and audience analysis, remaining opaque. Policy makers tend to favour a more “simple and efficient” approach to this work, rather than a city branding approach, which is more difficult to co-ordinate. But doing it effectively requires an approach that is more democratic and exploratory than much standard practice (Houghton, J. P., & Stevens, 2011).

However, the involvement of residents only in the later stages of city branding efforts will also have a positive impact in both directions for residents and the city. For urban residents in developing countries such as China, the opportunity to pause and examine the environment and self, and the relationship between the two, is difficult in the ultra-fast-paced life, and the rapid changes in urban environments can easily lead to disorientation and isolation, bringing about a state of being disconnected from the outside world even though one is in the midst of a crowd, which is a factor that has a direct impact on the mental health and well-being of urban residents. Participation in the branding of the city in which they live can increase residents' connection to the city and stimulate a sense of self-efficacy, which are elements in the formation of place attachment. Places are incorporated into the identity structure if they provide people with feelings of distinctiveness, continuity, self-efficacy and self-esteem (Joaquim Araújo de Azevedo, A., João Ferreira Custódio, M., & Pereira Antunes Perna, F., 2013). For cities, the fact that residents become more attached is proof that the city is attractive, which will have a direct effect on attracting potential tourists, new residents and external investments. Place marketers should recognise the pivotal role of residents as brand ambassadors and endeavour to harness their civic pride and sense of belonging as powerful tools for communicating the place brand (Braun, E., Kavaratzis, M., & Zenker, S. 2013).

A city brand formed with the participation of its residents is also clearly more local, enabling the city to develop its own identity outside the logic of top management, which would be an effective way for cities to avoid homogenisation. The aim is to create a place oriented to the diversity of needs, fulfilling all the functions of a place, with an identity and personality that becomes the city attractive and differentiable itself from others (Riza et al. 2012; Kladou et al. 2017).

Theoretical Framework

City branding in mainland China is led by the local government, and the government's ideas are involved in all aspects of the design, including but not limited to the selection of designers, delivery channels, image positioning, and the writing of promotional slogans, etc. Generally, proposals are formed through consultation between the government's departments of tourism, finance, transport, and investment promotion, and then handed over to the designers to be carried out in concrete terms. This model obviously takes care of the multiple demands of the place, and after these complex and diverse demands are interpreted and processed by designers, the information conveyed becomes a vague and generalised image of the place.

The Chongqing city image logo released in 2006 was customised by the Chongqing Municipal Government from a renowned Hong Kong design company, paying a high design fee, even if that's the case, the government tried to influence the designer's work in many ways. The lead designer, KAN Tai-keung, admitted at the end of the project that the Chongqing city logo project was one of the most difficult in his decades-long design career due to his insistence on making a design that was acceptable to the public, taking two years to complete and costing more than the design fee. Nearly 80,000 people voted for Chongqing's image logo through media websites, and 42.38 percent of them voted for "Chongqing for All", "Grand Hall Racing with River" and "Grand Hall and River"-the other two programmes received significantly lower votes (Chongqing Evening News, 2006). See the fig 1 and fig 2. The results of the voting show that the residents want the "people" factor



Fig 1. The logo which was voted by 42.38% participants means "Chongqing for All".



fig 2. the unseccesfull programmes and the Grand Hall of Chongqing

to be emphasised, rather than landmarks such as the "Great Hall". In fact, landmarks or historical heritage are important city images in a city, but not city brands (Riza et al., 2012).

Local governments are interested in attracting a large number of tourists in the construction and branding of tourist attractions, and the choice of CCTV as an advertising channel clearly reflects this thinking. This leads to a lack of clear audience targeting: firstly, the high cost of advertisement slots forces the spots to be as short as possible, but the limited length is not enough for external viewers to understand an unfamiliar and heavy content, so the viewers are required to have a certain level of prior knowledge of the content they are talking about before they can be aroused to explore further, but it is difficult to impress the external viewers who are completely unaware of the culture they are talking about, and the communication of the message is much less effective. The effect of the message is greatly reduced. Secondly, the aim of the film is obviously to attract external tourists or visitors, without considering the demands of the local audience - the residents of the city, resulting in a sense of alienation between the local audience and the image of the city presented in the film, and failing to resonate with the residents. They may oppose place branding efforts aimed solely at potential new residents (Bennett and Savani, 2003), resulting in a feeling of alienation between residents and the communicated place brand (Braun, E., Kavaratzis, M., & Zenker, S. 2013).

Existing research has shown that residents have an extremely important role in city branding, and that residents' evaluation of the city is an important criterion for outsiders to aware the strengths and weaknesses of the city's image, and that even if outsiders have their own perception of the city through their feelings, they may question the authenticity of their city brand due to the negative evaluations of the residents. The existing research argues that the participation of residents as co-creators of the city brand is essential (Braun et al. 2013; Kavaratzis 2017; Compte-Pujol et al. 2017), since they are the core agents in generating city authenticity and sign the identity of a city (Hereźniak and Florek 2018). Residents are defined as at least three roles by Braun et al (2013): as unified parts of the place brand as they inherit the history and custom from ancient time; as agent for the place brand who contribute reputation; and as citizens and voters who are vital for the political legitimisation of place branding. The necessary coherency between the place brand, its values, its propositions and all measures that communicate the brand requires that local people support and assist in the process for place branding to be effectively developed (BRAUN, E., KAVARATZIS, M. and ZENKER, S., 2013).

But an obstacle that undermines the process of city branding was found by some of the research: the lack of effective internal communication between public managers and residents (Casais, B., & Monteiro, P. 2019). The lack of residents' perception of their city's brand is also evidence that city managers' efforts in city branding strategies and promotions are not having the desired effect: external communications are not reaching out-of-town audiences, and more locally-focused residents are not developing a deeper connection to the city as a result of the brand. Strategy makers need to make a choice: who is the city brand for?

Looking at the most popular destinations in many cities today, some common patterns can be

seen: places that retain the character of the city are often the most popular with tourists, and while they may not have survived in order to create a tourist attraction, today it is these types of locations that have become the attractions that represent the city. If this contingent causality is grafted onto the present, it can be hypothesised that if the city brand is targeted at local residents, the relationship between residents and the city can be facilitated, and given the important role that residents play in the city, this facilitation will give the city brand a sense of authenticity that fully reveals the local personality that is unique to the city (see Fig 3). The contradiction between the homogenisation of city brands and the more personalised experiences sought by travellers or top talent may thus be resolved.

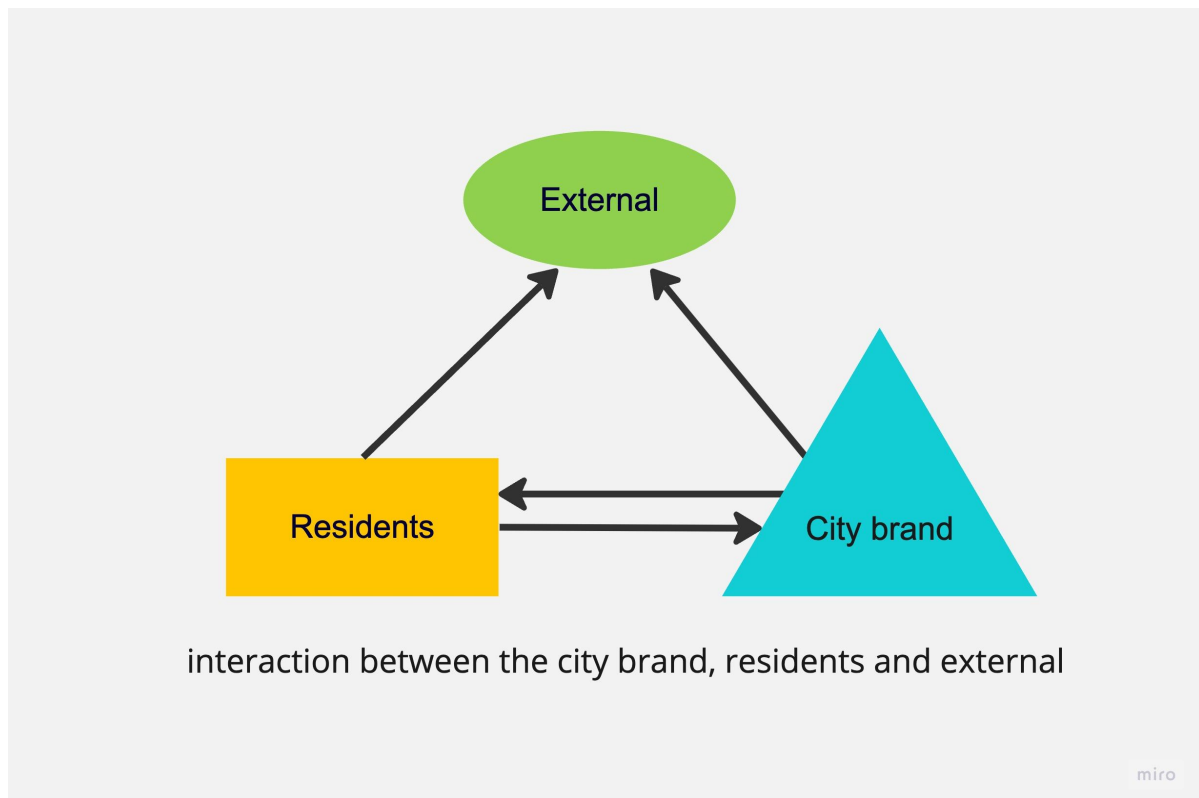


Fig 3. Interaction between the city brand, residents and externals

Method

There are two reasons why a bottom-up approach is difficult to implement: firstly, it is unlikely that city dwellers will ever reach a complete agreement on their ultimate values; everyone's views and perspectives will be biased, and even differences in the area in which they live will result in different evaluations of the city. Secondly, cities are highly integrated complexes in which residents have lived for many years and have extremely complex and even contradictory feelings about the city, which are difficult to express fully in a short language, and language constraints may also create barriers to understanding. The citizens have not to share a common place identity about the city (Insch and Walters, 2018) considering it is dynamic (Kavaratzis and Hatch 2013). Coupled with the fact that it is generally difficult for interviewees to open up to an unfamiliar interviewer, traditional language-based research methods can only distil the thoughts of interviewees and fail to reproduce the full range of moods and emotions, which results in less than optimal validity of

the research findings.

The empathetic nature of art is able to achieve the realm of "situational integration". Art is good at conveying emotions, both in terms of the type of emotion and the depth and nuance of the emotion. The advantage of art is that it allows people to let go of the psychological pressure to be precise and specific, and gives them a freer tool for expression. But not everyone is brave enough to put pen to paper, and many will refuse to participate for fear of not having the skills to draw. Therefore the participants of this practical project are set to be people of different ages who have been professionally trained in art, firstly this ensures that the intention of the project is fully understood and secondly their professionalism contributes to the integrity and aesthetics of the picture, making it more suitable for dissemination.

The researcher will conduct in-depth interviews with the interviewees and the key words covered in the interviews will be presented as images. The basic element of the image is the human body, and the respondents will be encouraged to anthropomorphise the city they have lived in for many years, showing external features such as gender, age, and size. Elements of the city such as things and landscapes that have different meanings to the respondent will replace organs within the body, reflecting the respondent's perception of these elements in terms of function. The background of the picture is open and respondents are encouraged to use colours, graphics, pictures and other elements of artistic design to enhance the overall atmosphere of the picture.

Questions Design:

How many years live in Changsha?

Where do you live in Changsha?

Have you lived in other cities for a long time?

What do you think about tourists?

If you had a free choice, would you stay in Changsha?

What do you like most about Changsha?

What do you hate most about Changsha?

Where/what do you feel most attached to?

Where would you go for leisure?

Do you support city publicity? What do you think about city branding? ("Leisure Capital of Central China" 2005/Shanshui Zhoucheng 2013/Hot Changsha 2023/Happy Changsha, Flavourful Star City 2023 0731-Aura Shining)

What is the clearest symbol of Changsha?

Where would a good friend from abroad introduce you to?

If anthropomorphised, the age of Changsha : gender:, with Changsha things representing eyes:/ nose:/ ears:/ mouth:/ stomach:brain:road sections/ heart:/ muscles:/ lungs:/ kidneys:/ arms/ legs:/ blood vessels:

Character background (colours/graphics etc):

What features of the shape would be very Changsha-esque:

Typical expressions:

What's missing?

AI drawings of Changsha/Hunan people, do you think it fits?

Four keywords to summarise Changsha:

What animal does it look like?

Even if the respondent has a background in artistic training, there is still a need to consider the feasibility of the approach, and there is a risk that requirements that are too complex will make it difficult for the respondent to co-operate. The study will examine several possible means of expression to help residents with artistic expression:

1. Generating images with the help of AI. The rapid maturation of AI tools offers a potential tool for research, with the advantage of being extremely fast and sometimes providing unexpected results with the potential for meaningful inspiration, at a fraction of the cost. Currently a small amount of data has been obtained through small scale stress testing and fed into several different AI drawing tools including midjourney, VEGA AI, Stable Diffusion, YIGE, etc., with results falling short of expectations. Through reviewing related information, it was found that a series of tasks such as constantly adjusting cue words and providing reference drawings may be required to get a rich and accurate picture. In 2022, designer Jason M. Allen made headlines as the first prize winner of the Colorado State Fair Art Competition with his painting titled "Théâtre D'opéra Spatial," created using the AIBPS Midjourney AI system. However, during the interview, he revealed that the process involved generating images over 800 times through the AI system and conducting repeated tests to finally achieve a satisfactory result. This indicates that the AI system did not directly produce the expected satisfactory work and required significant effort and iterations to arrive at the desired outcome.

2. Another approach to generating images based on the interviewee's description could involve employing a painter or illustrator. By narrating the details from the interview, the painter can create a visual representation of the character, relying solely on the textual description. This method offers the advantage of more artistic freedom, enabling the artist to express multiple details creatively.

However, there are certain drawbacks to this approach as well. Creating an image through traditional art can be more time-consuming compared to using AI-generated images. Additionally, the final output may be influenced by the painter's individual artistic style, preferences, and aesthetics, potentially impacting the accuracy or interpretation. Additionally, the final output may be influenced by the painter's individual artistic style, preferences, and aesthetics, potentially impacting the accuracy or interpretation of the portrayed character.

3. Design a touch-screen interactive system that breaks down the drawing process into steps, providing a number of possible options for each step, with each respondent using these

materials to organise the picture themselves. This method adapts drawing to collage, which reduces the difficulty of drawing and allows for the extension of the range of respondents to the entire population, not just those with a background of artistic training.

The method was inspired by an exhibition of immersive Mucha drawings that the researcher visited in Paris. The first half of the exhibition focused on the life and important paintings of the artist Mucha, while the second half, with the help of multimedia and interactive technology, disassembled some elements of Mucha's classic works into optional parts so that visitors were able to do the work of assembling them on their own in a few steps, such as composition, figures, decoration and colours. The participants will be able to get a painting with Mucha's characteristics, and at the end, they will be able to enter their email address to get a copy of the painting. After the visitors have made the input of information in the first half of the exhibition, they get the opportunity to review and integrate the information in this session, and then think about it through repeated attempts of collage, and finally complete the output in the form of paintings. The exhibition design helps the information of the exhibition to be internalised in the minds of the visitors, forming a long-term and deep memory. In some events, the system can also provide an interactive experience for visitors from other places to reinforce the connection between external visitors and the city.

Objectives

Residents are encouraged to look back and take stock of the city they have lived in for many years, the process itself helps to place the point of view at a distance, immersing the resident for a longer period of time, where many memories are reawakened, where each person's unique experiences and stories of what has happened in the city are expressed, and a deeper attachment to the city develops, and the bond between the resident and the city is strengthened. The most important agents that form perceptions in peoples' minds are their own experiences (Govers, R. 2013). Residents are therefore likely to become the best advocates for the city brand and develop a sense of ownership and responsibility to shape the city brand in a more positive way. The use of collage posters or commissioned paintings allows the complex emotions and feelings of residents towards the city to be reproduced in their entirety, and these works can provide visual data that can help governors and brand designers to understand the attitudes of residents. At the same time they are evidence of the city's encouragement of resident expression and participation, and could be considered for promotion in the city as a long term project, especially if used intensively after major events, with the results compared to previous results to test whether they are recognised by the residents and have played a sufficient role in improving the city brand. Cole (2006) indicated that resident empowerment represents "the top end of the participation ladder where members of a community are active agents of change and they have the ability to find solutions to their problems, make decisions, implement actions and evaluate their solutions" (p.631). After all, residents are an integral part of the city and an integral part of the city brand, and their recognition will be the greatest success the city brand can achieve.

Reference

- Braun, E., M. Kavaratzis, and S. Zenker. (2013). My city – my brand: the different roles of residents in place branding. *Journal of Place Management & Development* 6 (1): 18–21.
- Casais, B., & Monteiro, P. (2019). Residents' involvement in city brand co-creation and their perceptions of city brand identity: A case study in Porto. *Place Branding and Public Diplomacy*, 15, 229-237.
- Compte-Pujol, M., J.D.S. Eugenio-Vela, and J. Frigola-Reig. (2017). Key elements in defining Barcelona's place values: The contribution of residents' perceptions from an internal place branding perspective. *Place Branding and Public Diplomacy* 14 (4): 245–259.
- Cook, K. S., Cheshire, C., Rice, E. R., & Nakagawa, S. (2013). Social exchange theory. *Handbook of social psychology*, 61-88.
- Gieryn, T. F. (2000). A space for place in sociology. *Annual review of sociology*, 26(1), 463-496.
- Govers, R. (2013). Why place branding is not about logos and slogans. *Place Branding and Public Diplomacy*, 9, 71-75.
- Grichting, A. (2013). Scales of flows: Qatar and the urban legacies of mega events. *Archnet-IJAR: International Journal of Architectural Research*, 7(2), 173.
- Harvey, D. (1989). *The condition of postmodernity* (Vol. 14). Blackwell: Oxford.
- Hay, R. (1998). Sense of place in developmental context. *Journal of environmental psychology*, 18(1), 5-29.
- Hereźniak, M., and M. Florek. (2018). Citizen involvement, place branding and mega events: insights from Expo host cities. *Place Branding and Public Diplomacy* 14 (2): 89–100.
- Houghton, J. P., & Stevens, A. (2011). City branding and stakeholder engagement. In *City branding: Theory and cases* (pp. 45-53). London: Palgrave Macmillan UK.
- Jessop, B (1998) The narrative of enterprise and the enterprise of narrative: place marketing and the entrepreneurial city. In *The Entrepreneurial City: Geographies of Politics, Regime, and Representation*, T Hall and P Hubbard (eds.), pp. 77–99. Wiley, New York.
- Joaquim Araújo de Azevedo, A., João Ferreira Custódio, M., & Pereira Antunes Perna, F. (2013). “Are you happy here?": The relationship between quality of life and place attachment. *Journal of Place Management and Development*, 6(2), 102-119.
- Kavaratzis, M. (2017). The participatory place branding process for tourism: Linking visitors

and residents through the city brand. In *Tourism in the city*, ed. C. Pasquinelli and N. Bellini. New York: Springer.

Liu, Y., Hultman, M., Eisingerich, A.B. and Wei, X.(2020). How does brand loyalty interact with tourism destination? Exploring the effect of brand loyalty on place attachment. *Annals of Tourism Research*, 81, p.102879.

Low, S. M., & Altman, I. (1992). Place attachment: A conceptual inquiry. In *Place attachment* (pp. 1-12). Boston, MA: Springer US.

Mowen, A. J., Graefe, A. R., & Virden, R. J. (1997). A typology of place attachment and activity involvement. Paper presented at the Northeastern Recreation Research Symposium (pp. 89–92). Bolton Landing, New York.

Riza, M., Doratli, N., & Fasli, M. (2012). City branding and identity. *Procedia-Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 35, 293-300.

Cole, S. (2006). Information and empowerment: The keys to achieving sustainable tourism. *Journal of sustainable tourism*, 14(6), 629-644.

Grichting, A. (2013). Scales of flows: Qatar and the urban legacies of mega events. *Archnet-IJAR: International Journal of Architectural Research*, 7(2), 173.

Stedman, R., Beckley, T., Wallace, S., & Ambard, M. (2004). A picture and 1000 words: Using resident-employed photography to understand attachment to high amenity places. *Journal of Leisure Research*, 36(4), 580-606.

Wang, S., & Xu, H. (2015). Influence of place-based senses of distinctiveness, continuity, self-esteem and self-efficacy on residents' attitudes toward tourism. *Tourism Management*, 47, 241-250.