

Towards a City Branding System: The Concept and the Case of Amsterdam

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ABSTRACT : Many city administrations acknowledge the necessity of city branding to sustain the city's competitiveness. Research has provided diverse notions of city branding and presented relevant factors and processes, and emphasized the importance of developing a more realistic and integrated framework to branding cities. However, there has been little consensus about why and how cities transform an entrepreneurial mind into a city branding paradigm. Literature is short of providing a realistic and holistic framework applicable to city brand management. Aiming to clarify the characteristics of city branding, our research suggests a systems approach to branding cities. With particular reference to managing the brand Amsterdam, the study outlines brand management process in terms of strategic interaction and intent, branding governance, city brand and its effects. Our research refers to the concept of city branding as a strategic, proactive, and systematic process for city brand management. Even though this research is limited to the descriptive study on the case of brand Amsterdam, the study contributes to extend the urban marketing discipline into a city branding theory and to introduce a city branding system. Further research needs to expand theoretical and empirical levels including more cities and to compare the dynamics within the city branding system.

Key Words : City Brand, City Branding, Branding System

요약 : 대다수의 도시행정가들은 도시의 경쟁력을 지속하기 위해 도시브랜딩의 필요성을 인정한다. 기존 연구들은 도시브랜딩에 대한 다양한 논점들을 제공해 왔고 관련 요소들과 과정들을 제시하고 있다. 그럼에도 불구하고, 도시들이 '왜' 그리고 '어떻게' 기업가적 마인드를 도시브랜딩 패러다임으로 전환할 것인가에 대해서는 동의된 바가 거의 없다. 또한, 도시브랜드 관리를 위해 적합한 현실적이고 총체적인 기틀을 마련하는 데 있어서도 상당히 미비한 상태이다. 이러한 문제의 근본원인은 본질적 개념에 대한 이해의 부족에 기인한다고 보면서, 본 연구는 도시 브랜드의 개념 정립을 우선적으로 명확히 하고자 한다. 더불어 도시브랜딩의 특성을 살펴보고 도시브랜딩을 위한 시스템적 관점을 제시하는 데 목적을

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두고자 한다. 본 연구는 실무적으로 필요한 도시브랜딩의 과정적 측면을 강조하면서 이론적으로는 기존의 도시마케팅 이론을 도시브랜딩 차원으로 확장시키는 데 기여한다. 현재의 연구는 시스템적 접근의 도시브랜딩을 위한 방향성을 제시하는 데 초점을 맞추고 있다. 따라서, 향후의 연구는 도시브랜딩 시스템 모델을 근간으로 해 보다 많은 실증적 경험사례를 확보하고, 브랜딩 거버넌스를 위한 다이내믹스 및 메커니즘을 파악하는 데 집중될 필요가 있다.

주제어 : 도시브랜드, 도시브랜딩, 브랜딩 시스템

I. Introduction

In the current globalization era, cities, as the dynamic and driving force of nations, are increasingly the pivot of national development and international competition. More and more cities strive to differentiate themselves from others and to communicate with internal and external stakeholders. In view of the necessity of city development and management, cities have recently emphasized the branding perspective.

City branding is designated for managing the cities aiming to sustain competitiveness of the city and furthermore the country. Research on city branding has progressively evolved within the academics as well as the practice, implicitly or explicitly. By the beginning of the 1990s there was a serious attempt to create a place marketing approach to the understanding of marketing implications for urban planning and management(Kotler et al., 1993; Ashworth and Voogd, 1990). Since then the authors have emphasized the necessity of managing a city brand, which in turn has provided the clues to investigate city branding.

Seoul is the city which has put importance on

place and city marketing since the time of the opening of the Local Autonomy in 1995. In particular to holding the World Cup with Japan in 2002, Seoul metropolitan government established the City Marketing Team in 2001 and invigorated diverse marketing activities along with developing a city brand 'Hi Seoul'. The Government still exerts itself to marketing the 'Hi Seoul' brand, internally and externally. Yet, over the decade there has been little consensus about whether the 'Hi Seoul' brand has been managed effectively. As a main reason, our research assumes the lack of understanding the concept of city branding. In general, the academic research has provided diverse notions regarding city brand management among the disciplines, ranging from place marketing throughout city brand marketing to city branding. However, even though the Government has set the core strategy to create city brand equity, its policy decision has targeted city marketing, particularly emphasizing products from a specific sector such as tourism, based on a city image. In reality, there has been a lack in clarifying the nature of city branding in comparison with the city marketing perspective, which has led to a recognizable gap in

determining the city brand and managing it.

Classically, it has been known that marketing cannot be other than 'the conscious and planned practice of signification and representation' (Firat and Venkatesh, 1993) and that branding is the complex integrating all the strategic elements into one success formula (Aaker, 1996). Research on city or place branding has highlighted the importance of developing an integrated framework or a system which can conjoin branding elements (Anholt, 2007; Kavartzis, 2004; Hankinson, 2001). However, even though there is a growing need for efficacy of city branding in practice, cities still continue city brand management in a narrow way rather than a holistic one. This, in turn, leads to the difficulties in attaining satisfactory results from the management.

In order to manage the city brand effectively, therefore, it is necessary to determine what a city brand is and how the city brand can be managed holistically. Accordingly, our research aims to clarify the nature of city branding which ranges from the city brand development to its management. And we advance to suggest a systems approach which integrates the strategic elements of city branding. With respect to the research purpose, we point out two questions: what is the concept of city branding, and how can a systematic city branding be established to manage a city brand.

To understand the concept of city branding, first, we take various theoretical and practical viewpoints as illustrated in a variety of

literature sources and characterize the city branding. Secondly, we advance to an empirical observation to configure how the city brand can be developed and managed, focusing on a Dutch experience. Exploring the empirical evidence, our research discusses the necessity of building a conceptual framework, especially based on a systems approach.

City branding has been debated in the fields of urban economic development, place and city marketing, and city competitiveness, implicitly and explicitly. Our research contributes to extend the disciplines into city branding and to provide the basis for developing it towards systems theory. Further research is proposed into explaining the dynamic relationship within the systems by exploring diverse empirical findings.

II. City Branding

From the theoretical discipline, city branding differs from the marketing perspective distinctively (Kavartzis, 2004). The latter refers to a process that can be used to accomplish economic goals set by the city administration and planning board, and its application is largely dependent on the city's image and promotion towards the market and consumers. By contrast, city branding addresses the strategic vision of the city and presents a wide range of development goals for the city and its citizens without being confined to the economic domain. In the city branding perspective, it is

essential to invigorate a strategic plan for the city's brand management based on the city vision and goals.

Based on the application within the branding perspective, the literature has endowed the nature of city branding with corporate branding. City brands resemble corporate umbrella brands to some extent(Rainisto, 2003). The main suggestion of corporate branding is that the whole organization is branded, not just each product. Even though public place management corporations may have difficulty in projecting a single corporate identity, applying corporate branding to cities claims a treatment of the city brand as the whole entity of the city products(Kavaratzis and Ashworth, 2006: 189).

Places ranging from cities to countries would use different dimensions to evaluate each type of geo-brand, which leads to differences in branding a city, a region and a country(Freire, 2006; Caldwell and Freire, 2004). Based on the place's scale, especially being compared to nation branding, city branding characterizes some specificity. First, cities are perceived more from a functional perspective of their brand identity while countries are perceived in terms of a representational perspective of their brand identity. Therefore, second, city branding enables embedding its strategic determination in the functional entities of a city brand. Third, city branding is considered to be simpler, smaller and easier to envisage as a single entity than a nation's complex branding. Fourth, it is easier to

generalize about city branding effects as compared to nation branding effects. Fifth, the actions of government concerning city branding are usually more technocratic(functional) than political. Sixth, even though the city brand is considered to be rather weak as compared to the nation brand, the loyalty towards a city brand is rather strong(Paswan et al., 2003).

City branding comprises a strategic management of a city's vision. It is a holistic process, from yielding a brand concept for the city development to communicating the brand throughout the market, and ultimately accomplishing sustainable competitiveness for the city.

III. Empirical Observation

By the vigour of renewed globalization, the value added in cities is created largely through intellectual capital applied to products, processes and services(Landry, 2000: xiii). The notion of "creativity" has moved centre-stage given the dramatic shifts in global terms of trade and the repositioning of cities worldwide(UNCTAD, 2008: 18). Every city is now creative, and at least 80 of them have adopted "creativity" as a brand(Holden, 2007). Creativity provides a strategic value to the cities in this competitive era. A creative city connotes the innovative and creative capability of the city.

Seoul is no exception to the global trend. Since its selection as the World Design Capital by the International Council of Societies of Industrial Design(ICSID) in 2007, Seoul has

actively tapped into creative resources to enhance its urban attractiveness and global competitiveness. Over the past few years, Seoul has laid a secure foundation as a creative city. It is the time for Seoul to take a great leap forward as the top tier leading global creative cities. Currently, there is an imperative need to manage the creative Seoul using a branding approach. The government of Seoul metropolitan city focuses on how to establish its strategic brand and manage it.

Leading to the emergence of the concept of a "creative city", the idea of a creative economy has been applied specifically to economic and cultural development of the city(UNCTAD, 2008). According to Howkins(2001), in the year 2000, the creative economy was worth \$2.2 trillion worldwide, and it was growing at 5 per cent annually. Especially, there have been significant developments in the European

context(Table 1).

Particularly, a cluster of Northern European nations-Finland, Sweden, Denmark, the Netherlands, and Belgium-appears to have distinctive assets(values and attitudes) that are associated with the ability to attract creative talent from elsewhere. Therefore, it is meaningful to understand how these countries are managing their city brands based on creativity. However, it is quite complex to grasp the whole entities of these city brands. Even though cities throughout Europe are increasingly adopting the concept and techniques of branding for the use within place marketing, there is as yet little consensus about the nature of city branding(Kavaratzis and Ashworth, 2006).

In order to select an empirical observation that is suitable to our research purpose, we highlight the emphasis of leveraging the brands on the internet to establish and maintain a

Table 1. The World's Creative Economy(1996~2005)

| Economic group | | 1996 | 2000 | 2005 |
|-------------------------|---------|---------|---------|---------|
| World | | 189,214 | 228,695 | 335,494 |
| Developing economies | | 55,997 | 89,827 | 136,231 |
| Economies in transition | | 21 | 1,490 | 3,154 |
| Developed economies | | 133,195 | 137,378 | 196,109 |
| | Europe | 100,924 | 99,936 | 151,489 |
| | America | 26,842 | 31,116 | 36,921 |
| | Asia | 4,312 | 5,451 | 6,296 |
| | Oceania | 1,117 | 875 | 1,403 |

Note: Creative economy is based on 'exports(f.o.b. in millions of \$)' of 'creative goods'.

Source: Adapted from the UNCTAD(2008: 238)

| Helsinki | Stockholm | Amsterdam | Copenhagen | Brussels |
|--|---|---|--|--|
|  City of Helsinki |  CITY OF STOCKHOLM |  |  KØBENHAVNS KOMMUNE |  City of BRUSSELS |

Figure 1. Brand Slogans of Five Cities in Northern European Region

market leadership position(Bergstrom, 2000). Our research manifests how the capital cities of the these countries represent their brand slogans throughout the official web-site of the city government(Figure 1) and limits to focus on the one of the creative cities. Based on the brand slogans of the cities, we notice the specificity of brand Amsterdam.

Even though the idea of the “creative city” emerged in the 1980s, it became more publicly introduced in the early 1990s. Since then Amsterdam has been referred to as the one of the leading creative cities such as London or New York(UNCTAD, 2008). When we reflect that an emerging task for the modern-day city is to harness the innate creativity of its citizens(Gilmore, 2004), our research is interested to explore how Amsterdam has developed the distinctive brand slogan and if there is a relevance between the brand slogan and creativity. Accordingly, our research advances to explore branding Amsterdam.

This research is exploratory in nature, and we intend to understand, without imposing any kind of reference or preconceptions(Freire, 2006). For the case of branding Amsterdam, we analyse relevant documents qualitatively and explore some evidence to understand the city branding.

IV. Branding Amsterdam

General Background

The capital city of Amsterdam belongs to the Amsterdam metropolitan area located in the Western part of the Netherlands. From the demographic status, Amsterdam is the fastest growing municipality. The highest percentage of non-Western foreign Dutch nationals can be found in Amsterdam.

Municipalities are responsible for a wide range of policy sectors, and share many of their responsibilities with the central government, being relatively independent. Like most municipalities in the Netherlands, Amsterdam is run by a city council, governed by a mayor, aldermen, and the municipal council. However, unlike most other Dutch municipalities, Amsterdam is subdivided into fifteen boroughs(stadsdelen). Local decisions are made at borough level, and only affairs pertaining to the whole city, such as major infrastructure projects, are handled by the central city council.

According to the European Cities Monitor 2008, the city of Amsterdam takes the 6th place after London, Paris, Frankfurt, Brussels and Barcelona, in a hierarchy of 34 European cities. In terms of a list of pull-factors for businesses, Amsterdam scores high on the factor “languages

spoken", for which it is the second-most attractive city(after London) in Europe. On what is considered the most important pull-factor for businesses, "availability of qualified staff", Amsterdam ranks 5th.

In particular to strengthen creative industries, policies in Amsterdam primarily aim to give a new impetus to Amsterdam as a metropolis of international standing that attracts highly skilled professional workers and tourists. Regarding the implementation of a creative city policy, Amsterdam is taking a more pro-active approach rather than a re-active one. The municipality looks actively for initiatives that support policy objectives, rather than waiting for initiatives to come.

1. Launching a New Symbolic Approach

Historically, the Amsterdam brand has been symbolized through a coat of arms, in the centre of which there are three St Andrew's crosses. These are found on its flag as well as on present day objects such as bollards. Its official motto "Valiant, Determined, Compassionate" was bestowed on the city after World War II.

Coming to the new century, Amsterdam was confronted with the intensive market competition and dynamic changes of international market environments. Under these market forces Amsterdam was placed comparatively in a weak position to profile its distinctive image characteristics. Besides, city promotion seemed to be fragmented. Nobody took the final

responsibility for the 'Amsterdam' brand name.

Recognizing the relevance of Amsterdam's image and the attitudes of companies, visitors and inhabitants towards the city's development, public and private organizations(such as Amsterdam's Municipal Council and representatives of promotional organizations) were concerned about the situation of brand Amsterdam. They expressed the necessity to present Amsterdam more effectively and to distinguish itself in the global market. In particular, they ensured to change the concept of appealing Amsterdam and to combine its energies for conceptual changes. Being commissioned by the responsible alderman of Economic Affairs in 2002, Amsterdam has started to re-brand itself.

2. Adopting the Branding Principles

Branding Amsterdam took three principles in terms of actors, activities and strategic fit. First, all urban actors should present themselves as a whole to the outside world. Secondly, Amsterdam's identity and image should be combined and balanced in considering four types of activities: the development of a strong and attractive position and image for Amsterdam; efficient and accessible supply of Amsterdam's products and services to maintain public support and attract new investors; promotion and communication; emphasis on inhabitants' civil pride. Thirdly, the critical elements of these activities should be arranged at the central level. Therefore, branding

Amsterdam needs to be aligned with the municipal as well as national policies.

3. Creating a Brand 'I Amsterdam'

A conceptual approach was taken with the basic question 'where is the power of Amsterdam, now and in the near future?' It started with defining target groups-business decision-makers of international enterprises, logistics service providers, creative industries, knowledge workers, active city dwellers, international visitors and the inhabitants of Amsterdam-and typifying Amsterdam's profile by key values(creativity, innovation, spirit of commerce, and excellence).

Moreover, for the medium-long term, a new brand concept needed to extend into the creative development of distinctive dimensions such as business city, knowledge city and residential city, being linked to key values of excellence and intellect. It also needed to be embodied in both existing and new events and festivals showing what Amsterdam stands for. Some dominant themes emerged: the passion of 'Amsterdammers'(the involvement of self-willed and creative Amsterdam people); Amsterdam as a finely-woven 'social midfield'; one vision and a common direction with regional and national cooperation; and bottlenecks in the functioning of the promotional organizations.

As part of the process famous Amsterdammers (the people of Amsterdam) were selected to

create new brand carriers(i.e. stories, icons, images, festivals, events and people) of Amsterdam that highlight the aspects of the Amsterdam identity. Ultimately in September 2004, '*I amsterdam*'(Figure 2), a tagline for a unique and symbolic concept, has been proclaimed to represent Amsterdam's people as its strongest asset that combines Amsterdam's creativity and innovation and to facilitate the communication message toward target audiences that want to make an excellent choice for business, education, visiting and living.



Figure 2. New Brand Concept of Amsterdam:
I amsterdam

Conceptually, the brand Amsterdam was created and innovated with not one dimension but an entire range of creative dimensions as strong as possible to increase Amsterdam's competitiveness. Thereby, it took advantage of the strengths of its current image based on strong dimensions such as 'cultural city', 'historic/canal city' and 'meeting place', referring to values such as creativity, innovation and spirit of commerce.

4. Organizing a Branding Governance

The process in branding Amsterdam was

finalized with strategic decisions translating the concept of brand 'I amsterdam' into the responsibilities and tasks of the organizations concerned.

It was recommended that the municipality of Amsterdam organized the input of all public and private parties relevant to the brand Amsterdam. Once every four years the Municipal Council sets out the city branding policy based on key values, brand carriers and the priority of the creative dimensions, presenting a progressive vision on Amsterdam's image in the long term. For this policy development, the Municipal Council initiated the fund for carrying out policy priorities.

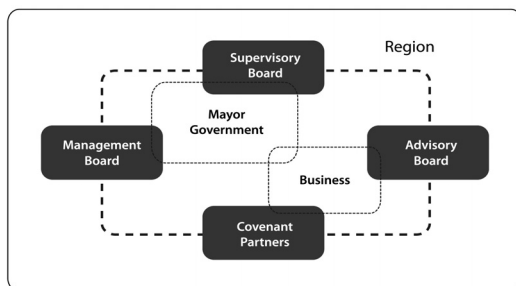


Figure 3. Organization of the Amsterdam Partners
(Source: adapted from <http://www.amsterdampartners.nl/>)

Highlighting the added value of the brand Amsterdam on the regional and national policy level, 'Amsterdam Partners', a new public-private control platform, was established in 2004. The Partners (Figure 3), consisting of authoritative Amsterdammers from government, scientific community, companies and social organizations,

have taken responsibility of the daily management of the brand Amsterdam.

One of the main activities of the Partners was not only to increase visibility of the new brand 'I amsterdam' but also to give special permission to the official partners and non-partners which intend to use this motto. The Partners takes an annual foreign trade mission to the Netherlands, establishing new business contacts with companies and organizations. To facilitate national and international communication, it provides the Portal Amsterdam and coordinates the international news on Amsterdam through an integral monitoring system. It arranges festivals, events, and training programs on hospitality.

5. 'I amsterdam' Effects

The 'return on the brand' consists of three components: mental position (rise of preference for Amsterdam), investment and purchasing behavior of target groups, and market position of Amsterdam compared to its most important competitors.

V. Towards a Systems Approach to City Branding

Research on city branding has highlighted the managerial approach that is applicable to branding multidimensional factors of the city. Brand management is the glue that binds together a range of different tools that until now have only produced a fraction of their potential effect because they have been

operating in a fragmented and ineffective way(Anholt, 2007). This notion of brand management provides a specificity to city branding, being different from the marketing perspective.

Yet, there is a recognizable gap in the literature and the case of branding Amsterdam, our research pinpoints three characteristics of city branding to reduce the gap between actual and potential effects.

First, city branding is a strategic process creating and managing the essence of a city brand. We take notice of how the city brand 'I amsterdam' has been created in a strategic way. As an initial step in branding Amsterdam, there was a shared recognition that Amsterdam was positioned in a weak profile internally despite the competitive market forces externally. Analyzing the current situation of the brand, Amsterdam focused on the change of the brand concept, combining the strengths of Amsterdam. A new concept was forged through key values(i.e. the creativity and passion of 'Amsterdam people'). Finally, 'I amsterdam' as a new city brand was created and communicated as the message towards target markets for business, education, visiting and living. Currently, there is at least a general agreement in the marketing literature that the brand is more than an identifying name given to a product and is also not a synonym for a single catchy slogan(Kavaratzis and Ashworth, 2006). The brand 'I amsterdam' is beyond a name or a slogan. It is both a strategic value as

the whole entity of the products which Amsterdam has and a strategic motto to be communicated towards the stakeholders, internally and externally.

Secondly, city branding is a proactive process organizing the stakeholders and taking a partnership to city brand development and management. Like a corporate branding, the overarching role of the brand requires management at a high level in the organization, internally and externally(Hankinson, 2007). Within the process of branding Amsterdam, we learn that it is imperative to build up a branding governance. From the initial phase, Amsterdam has recognized the necessity of an organization which can take a responsibility for the 'Amsterdam' brand name. With the development of 'I amsterdam', Amsterdam Partners was established as the platform for government, industry and organizations. In particular, being chaired by the mayor of Amsterdam, the Partners takes a proactive role to improve, promote, and monitor Amsterdam's identity and image. In fact, governments are challenged to make stakeholders in the corporation "live the brand"(Anholt, 2007). The successful city branding induces the government to take a visionary leadership throughout the branding networks, coordinating the departmental activities involved in the branding process, and communicating the city brand across a wide range of stakeholders.

Thirdly, the application of brand management practices to the city or place brand has

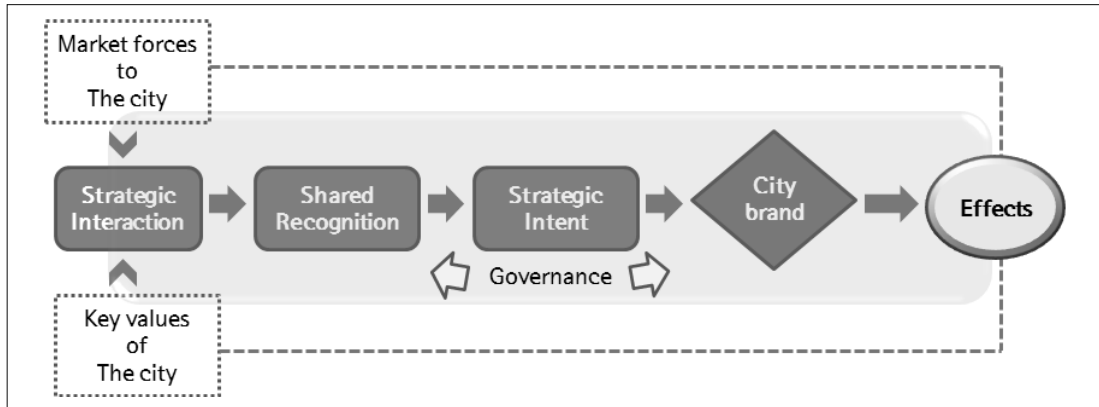


Figure 4. City Branding System

addressed some of the structural and strategic dilemmas (Kerr, 2006: 278). Therefore, research asserts the necessity of building a framework or system for city branding. On the one hand, if there is an agreement that the city brand can operate as an umbrella that can cover a multitude of stakeholders and city branding can create the feeling in the minds of people who encounter the city, then one needs to create an integrated framework that will clarify all aspects of developing a city brand and give guidance for managing it (Kavaratzis and Ashworth, 2006). On the other hand, the guiding principles and the framework represent a further step towards a more structured approach to the brand management process (Hankinson, 2007).

In sum, city branding is a systematic process which intertwines strategic and structural elements on the basis of a temporal sequence. For effective city brand management, in essence, it is necessary to confirm a strategic interaction between internal and external aspects of the city management, to decide a strategic intent

for city brand development, and to envisage institutional mechanisms of branding governance. These parts integrate into a framework, which configures the branding system (Figure 4) for the city brand management.

VI. Conclusion

Cities for the past decades were increasingly dependent upon marketing of urban places. The context in which marketing became accessible to city administrators was provided by defining an entrepreneurial approach to urban governance (Kavaratzis, 2004), which facilitated local governments to transform urban politics into a business-minded city. However, despite the necessity of developing policies to pursue economic and social development of the city, public planning agencies focused on the city's image, complemented by limited marketing application of promotional techniques.

While the city marketing perspective made an effort to sell the city's products, city branding results in a strategic approach to the

city's development and management, conjugating social and cultural diversities of the city with the brand's core values. The advent of city branding enables city administrators and planners to take an initiative role in defining the strategic value and message of the city and managing them in a cooperative manner with the stakeholders. Since the 2002 WorldCup, Seoul has extensively made efforts in marketing activities. However, there has been difficulty in acknowledging how the brand Seoul has been managed effectively. Reflected from branding Amsterdam, we assume that it is time for the Seoul metropolitan government to take a proactive approach for this period of transition from a marketing to a branding paradigm.

Essentially, a city is seen as a complex adaptive system where a more holistic approach creates "systemic creativity", which usually implies taking measured risks, widespread leadership, and crucially being strategically principled(UNCTAD, 2008). Aiming to clarify the nature of city branding, our research extends urban marketing theory into city branding and suggests a systems approach. In the systems approach, a wide variety of behavioral science concepts concerning organizational change and effective management were operationalized(Beer and Huse, 1972), and there have been diverse experiments at systems levels. Our research refers to city branding as the strategic, proactive, and systematic process for city management. We assert that the systems approach to city

branding can lead to a new and normative step in scientific research.

Meanwhile, our research has a limit to exploring the dynamics within the branding process and defining suitable mechanisms that keep everyone focusing on the central objective of the city. In further research, we need to define the roles of branding stakeholders and their relationships. The roles can then be connected to the governance perspective and effective mechanisms in new public management. Furthermore, we need to explore a variety of findings on the theoretical and practical levels, and replicate the study.

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