

Chapter 37

Building City Brand Through Social Media: The Effect of Social Media Brand Community on Brand Image

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ABSTRACT

The recent transition from city marketing to city branding heralds a new era of representation and signification of cities as brands where conscious and planned practices are used to promote them as any other economic commodity. Given the tremendous impact of social media on brand image, city branding has to embrace this new channel to promote their cities as brands. On social media platforms users forming a brand community can significantly influence the brand image by co-creating the user-generated contents. Today, users search for information online and their behaviors and responses are influenced by online social networks and community practices. In addition, they perceive information from online social community highly credible and useful. As traditional firm generated information is losing its persuasive power to social media, it is never late for managers of city branding to embark on social media platforms to support online social media brand communities which in turn would influence city brand image positively by engaging users. Social media provides an excellent platform for users to form social media brand communities, where they can share inside knowledge and discuss about brands. The greater credibility of user generated contents on these platforms can significantly influence the user perception about the brands. The focus of this paper is to investigate challenges and opportunities of online social media brand communities in influencing brand image.

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INTRODUCTION

The practice of place marketing and promotion is not new as since the nineteenth century urban places around the world are trying to sell themselves as ‘tourist attractions’, ‘cultural capitals’, and ‘world cities’ to vie for competitive place advantage where place acts as a marketable commodity of leisure, heritage, and culture (Ward, 1998). This practice led to city marketing which is defined as, “...to create strategies to promote an area or the entire city for certain activities and in some cases to ‘sell’ parts of the city for living, consuming, and productive activities,” (Smyth, 2005). Thus, marketing started to play a key role in intensifying the competition for inward investment, tourism revenues and residents at various spatial scales (Kotler, Asplund, Rein, & Heider, 1999). As a part of various marketing strategies city marketing used wide range of promotional campaigns such as logo, slogans, advertising, public relations, subsidies, tax breaks, ‘flagship development¹’ projects, architectural design, trade fairs, cultural and sporting events, heritage, public art, and culture to market their cities (Ward, 1998).

The deep penetration of marketing into the board room of cities’ policy makers started with the concept of ‘entrepreneurial city²’ (Griffiths, 1998). It proposes to run the cities in more businesslike manner with distinctive characteristics of risk taking, inventiveness, promotion and profit motivation (Hubbard & Hall, 1998). Soon the use of marketing theories and practices in urban governance and urban administration led to treating our cities as brands. And subsequently, building their image (city brand or city image) to promote and market these cities became one of the agenda of the policy decisions leading to strategic transition from city marketing to city branding (Kavaratzis, 2004).

The recent transition from city marketing to city branding heralds a new era of representation and signification of cities as brands where conscious and planned practices are used to promote them as any other economic commodity.³ Thus, building city image is at the core of city branding strategy, and the importance of city marketing mix that facilitate image formulation and image communication are crucial towards this (Kavaratzis, 2004). The changing environment around largely due to digital revolution has provided us with new mix of image formulation and image communication such as emails, blogs, online ads, online catalogs, social media, and many more. Among these emerging and new communication mix social media has profound effects on not only promotional activities but also on user behaviors. Therefore, the significance of social media as a communication mix towards building brand is paramount in this digital world.

Social media has transformed the relationship between users and brands (Singh & Sonnenburg, 2012) and the way information is shared and consumed on digital platforms (Goh, Heng, & Lin, 2013; Trusov, Bucklin, & Pauwels, 2009). This new relationship has created online social media brand community which is redefining the brand image in this digital marketplace (Algesheimer, Dholakia, & Herrmann, 2005; Forrester, 2014; Zaglia, 2013). Thus, users of online social media brand communities are engaged in the co-creation of brand image through user-generated contents, firm-generated contents and various online social activities. Furthermore, consumer search in this online environment is influenced by social contagions. In addition, due to social contagion the perceived usefulness and trustworthiness of the information is valued more in such an online environment. Therefore, contents and online social activities together ultimately have a significant impact on the brand image. Implications from the online social media brand communities can be used effectively to manage and build city brands.

Thus, online as social media platforms have given rise to niche online brand communities where users join and co-create the contents relating to their experience about the products and services, and share common brand practices (Laroche, Habibi, Richard, & Sankaranarayanan, 2012). These social

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