

# Chapter 40

## City Branding and the Power of Netnography in the Era of Social Media

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### ABSTRACT

*The development of Web 2.0 tools has changed the ways that cities communicate and build their brands. A growing number of travelers are influenced by user generated content, presenting a number of challenges and opportunities for city branding. This chapter will focus on the use of Internet and social media as international marketing communications techniques for cities and destinations. The chapter offers insights to city branding practitioners on how online city branding is carried out and suggests that using social media is an appropriate strategy to promote cities because of its participative and interactive nature. However, it is also emphasized that city branding practitioners should evaluate social media as an opportunity to get closer to customer, instead of a mechanism to be controlled. Exploring implications for practitioners, the chapter can be regarded as an important contribution to an area which is still fairly new and unexplored. The chapter also contributes to the city branding literature by introducing the use of netnography in city branding research.*

### INTRODUCTION

We live in an era where technology shapes and leads people's life. As one of the most concrete examples of developments in communication technologies, internet usage is gradually increasing all over the world. The internet has become a platform where people interact and communicate with each other. Consumers are increasingly using internet in their product preferences and purchase behavior. Many organizations recognize the need for marketing communications via online channels. They are also aware of the rich data available in computer-mediated environment about consumer preferences in purchase decision. Internet is also becoming one of the most important distribution channels in tourism industry. People are getting information about the destinations they want to go and making their reservations and pay-

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ments via internet. As internet allows the opportunity to access information in low cost, at any time and all over the world, it has become an important marketing tool for destination marketing organizations.

Destination marketing is a composition of not only the management of the tangible physical attributes, such as natural geography, built environment and attractions, accommodation and transport means, but also intangible social and cultural factors (Cooper et al., 2005). According to World Tourism Organization (2004), “destination marketing covers all the activities and processes to bring buyers and sellers together; focuses on responding to consumer demands and competitive positioning; is a continuous coordinated set of activities associated with efficient distribution of products to high potential markets; and involves making decisions about the product, branding, price, market segmentation, promotion and distribution”. City marketing which can be approached as a special application of destination marketing, is the promotion of a city, or a district within it, with the aim of encouraging certain activities to take place there (Smyth, 1994). Cities all over the world have been applying marketing practices and gradually adopting a marketing philosophy (Karavatzis, 2009). Cities satisfy functional, symbolic and emotional needs like brands (Rainisto, 2003) and the penetration of marketing practices in the promotion of cities, led to “city branding” which means to use branding as an approach to integrate, guide and focus city marketing. City branding is also seen as a good starting point (Kotler et al., 1999) and the appropriate way for describing and implementing city marketing (Karavatzis, 2004). According to Kavaratzis (2004), the objective of city marketing is the city’s image, which in turn is the starting point for developing the city’s brand.

There is a need to redefine destination marketing as a two-way dialogue with customers, rather than a traditional one-way conversation (Jucan et al., 2013). One-way conversation with consumers was pervasive when destination marketing organizations created their brands. Consumers are no longer passive recipients of the city/destination brand messages, rather they become the co-creators of the brand since the social media shifted power to them. The social media revolution has turned the traditional one-way destination marketing on its head and initiated a two-way conversation with consumers participating in the development of a city/destination brand. Destination marketing organizations left the traditional marketing efforts and now benefit heavily from the opportunities offered by technological developments. In addition, since there is a strong bond between technology and image, they use technological systems as a tool for creating an effective and dynamic image for destinations (Pender & Sharpley, 2005). Recent research suggests that increasing use of the internet and social media can have an influence on involvement of people in city brand building process. Social media and online forums can be used to communicate citizens’ views and preferences. It has been suggested that online forums can create dialogic citizenship (Paganoni, 2015) and generate direct and strong user participation (Florek, 2011).

Social media in city branding is a growing research area and the demand for research will continue by the growth in social networks in recent years. This chapter examines the role of internet and social media in city branding with the aim of contributing to the existing literature. The chapter provides a review of the literature on social media use in city branding and provides insights into city branding strategies in the era of Web 2.0. The chapter seeks to answer how online city branding is carried out and what are the main opportunities social media adds to city branding strategies and why should cities use them in their brand building process.

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