

Asian city brand meaning: a Hong Kong perspective

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Abstract The idea of “brands doing good” is potentially intrinsic in all aspects of strategic and ethical branding. This study argues that city branding can be a site for “brands doing good”. City branding is consolidating its position in the branding literature. Two areas remain underdeveloped: the role of culture and a comprehensive answer to the question of what does a place mean to its residents? This quantitative study addresses these two gaps in the literature. Hong Kong is selected as a thought-provoking context to investigate the research issues and enables more attention to Asian city brands. The results indicate that social bonding through friends and relatives is the dominant brand association shaping city brand meaning. Additionally, a three-pronged approach to culture elevates culture to an important role in understanding the residents’ city brand meaning. The three prongs are: (1) inclusion of Confucius values as a brand association; (2) using intangible cultural heritage as a moderator in the model explaining city brand attitudes and (3) interpreting

material lifestyle activities like eateries as an integral part of the city culture. The results suggest that the Hong Kong city brand does much good especially through strong social, cultural and community core brand values.

Keywords City brand meaning · Intangible cultural heritage · City branding · Brand associations · Survey translation · Brands that do good

Introduction

The idea of “brands doing good” is possibly intrinsic in all aspects of strategic and ethical branding. That is, brands whether corporate or not-for-profit should “leverage their [brand] values” in such an endeavour (Roper and Fill 2012, p. 2012). Despite the criticality of this notion, and its implicit acceptance as a platform for branding, a robust literature is yet to emerge. This study argues that city branding can be a site for “brands doing good”. The city branding domain has advanced exponentially (e.g. Dinnie 2011; Gilboa et al. 2015; Kavaratzis 2004; Lynch 1960; Oguztimur and Akturan 2015). Although many cities have been evaluated (e.g. Dinnie 2011), there are relatively fewer studies of Asian cities. This study’s context is Hong Kong, a global financial hub and gateway to China and Asia, and the focus is on residents’ city brand meaning. Culture is accorded special consideration given its relative neglect in the city brand literature (Kavaratzis and Ashworth 2015).

Powell’s (2016) review of key topics and possibilities for further research from the 2016 issues of the *Journal of Brand Management* identifies various dominant themes, and discusses the emergence of brand management for cities and places, and the nexus between corporate branding and city branding. Powell draws particular attention to

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the works of Kerr (2006), Hankinson (2007) and Ashworth and Kavaratzis (2009). These three papers alone suggest a developing research interest in the domain. The global idea of the utility of the relationship between city branding and corporate branding arises in other leading journals (e.g. Merrilees et al. 2009, 2012, 2013). One unifying feature was the continuing development of the explicit nexus between corporate branding and city branding. More broadly, the focus on cities and city branding has attracted scholarly attention in a variety of related disciplines with other academic outlets such as *Cities* (Gilboa et al. 2015; Sevin 2014; Wang et al. 2015), and *Urban Studies* (Dinardi 2015).

Literature review

The review canvasses the city branding literature, particularly from the perspective of residents. The attention then shifts to branding and culture and heritage, and finally to specific studies on branding and Hong Kong. The emphasis on residents differentiates this study from those that focus on destination branding and for example inbound tourists.

Brands doing good

In the literature, the idea of brands doing good, or contributing in some way, arises mainly in the corporate social responsibly (CSR) and branding domain. For example, the literature tends to look at how CSR can help a particular brand through enhancing trustworthiness (Hillestad et al. 2010), or by building customer-based brand equity (Tingchi et al. 2014). A further dimension is added by bringing corporate heritage into CSR communications (Blombäck and Scandelius 2013). While laudable, the focus of these articles is creating a “good” brand rather than how the brand can contribute or “do good”. The further question thus remains: can branding do good as a concept and practice? An interesting practical example of brands endeavouring to do good is Unilever which aims to use the company as a force for good in society and has a mission to “make sustainable living commonplace” (Unilever 2017).

City branding

Interest in city branding attracts researchers and practitioners. Scholarly works in the domain have surged and cover both conceptual and empirical papers. Several major themes have emerged—the nexus with corporate branding (e.g. Ashworth and Kavaratzis 2009), the complexity of city branding and putting it into practice (e.g. Braun 2012; Dinnie 2011) and the experiences of city branding in many contexts (e.g. Dinnie 2011; Evans 2003; Zhao 2015).

Brand meaning

Keller (2013) indicates that brand meaning addresses the “what are you” question and suggests that brand associations are critical in this respect. Low and Lamb (2000) pioneer the notion that brand meaning can vary through different brand associations. Increasingly, brand associations are addressed in the city branding literature. Zenker and Beckmann (2013a, b) highlight the role of a network of associations assisting the identification of a place brand. Merrilees et al. (2012) demonstrate that city brand meaning differs between residents and businesses. The current study builds on these traditions and derives city brand meaning as the statistically significant brand associations, based on the relationship between a particular city brand attribute (such as shopping) and city brand attitudes.

Culture and city branding

Zhao (2015) explores the use of culture and history preservation in city branding, and the importance of local people, and by inference, residents, in city branding. Arguing that heritage can differentiate cities, Zhao (2015, p. 111) calls for further exploration of “local people’s perceptions of city branding”. van Gelder (2011) argues that there is a strong relationship between a city’s culture and heritage, and the extent to which the past is valued.

An increasing literature documents the nexus between cultural activities and city branding. For example, Mittilä and Lepistö (2013) explore the role of artists in place branding, while Hakala and Lemmetyinen (2013) demonstrate the value to the Turku city brand of hosting the 2011 European Capital of Culture. More generally, Kavaratzis and Ashworth (2015) usefully survey the literature on culture influencing place branding, noting a myriad of influences under the umbrellas of event hall-marking; personality association; flagship building and signature district. They conclude that the literature fails to fully articulate the relationship between culture and place branding. Conceptually, they link three related components: cultural activities, strategic emphasis of culture through place branding and place brand as a cultural resource. One of their goals, from their schema, is the need to “focus on better understanding the ways place-users actually experience a place’s culture and how they create in their minds place brand associations that are based on a place’s culture” (Kavaratzis and Ashworth 2015, pp. 170–171). The current paper very explicitly is orientated to such an objective, which is ultimately expressed in a three-facet approach to culture in a city brand association context.



Cultural heritage and intangible cultural heritage

These intertwined themes are approached from diverse perspectives in the literature. Bowitz and Ibenholt (2009) for example looked at the economic effects of cultural heritage. Relatedly, Tuan and Navrud (2008) examined how to capture the benefits of preserving cultural heritage.

In contrast, Hakala et al. (2011, p. 450) argue that the cultural heritage of a country could be defined as, “a composite of the history and coherence and continuity of the nation’s distinguishable characteristics”. They sought to develop measures of cultural heritage. Loo et al. (2011) noted that cultural heritage was becoming progressively relevant to the community in Hong Kong (p. 161). Scholars have approached the topic from various directions. One aspect receiving attention is the work of Leung and Soyez (2009), who investigate industrial heritage and mainly the built environment. In the Hong Kong context, they call for “a stretching of the concept of cultural heritage” to include “migration stories and cultures of migrant/minority sub-cultures”, and “contested heritage” (Leung and Soyez 2009, pp. 60–61).

Cultural heritage and festivals are the focus for several relevant studies. In their study of several festivals, Jaeger and Mykletun (2013) suggest that the festival creates a means for showing respect to the older people and traditions, while embracing modern ideas and younger people. Thus, the festival becomes a means of “connecting the past to the future” (2013, pp. 224–225). In a study of festivals and place, Lau and Li (2015, pp. 74–75) reasserted the importance of festivals in enhancing “the sense of place” for visitors and residents, for whom that sense attaches to everyday life. Moreover, they identified three festival meanings: social bonding, religion and heritage, and imagined locality.

Similarly, there are varied approaches to intangible cultural heritage. What is intangible cultural heritage? In essence, it is “made up of all immaterial manifestations of culture, [and] represents the variety of living heritage of humanity as well as the most important vehicle of cultural diversity” (Lenzerini 2011, p. 101). In practice, much of the emphasis on intangible cultural heritage is driven by UNESCO and the 2003 UNESCO Convention on Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, one aim of which was to help local cultural traditions survive (Kurin 2004).

Vecco (2010) builds a definitional bridge from tangible cultural heritage to intangible culture heritage. She appears to be suggesting that recognition of the latter is more amenable to an Asian gaze than a Eurocentric perspective of heritage (Vecco 2010, p. 324). Relatedly, Cartier (2008) draws attention to the emerging concern that in the rush to a consumer culture, local culture and heritage have been

undervalued, and thus implies a need to address intangible cultural heritage.

Confucian values

In a study of three Chinese societies (Hong Kong, Taiwan and China), Lin and Ho (2009, p. 2404) argued that Confucianism is “... the most important part of Chinese culture”. The current study adopts the approach of Cheng (2015). He clarifies that the use of the term, Confucian values, often conveys a meaning of doctrine or ideology comparable with Chinese tradition (Cheng 2015, p. 165). In the Hong Kong context, Cheng explains that Confucian values “refer to values shared by the people of Hong Kong who perceive traditional Chinese values as Confucian values”, which “...may not be traceable to the writings of Confucius” (2015, p. 165). He further notes the possible methodological problems with values potentially changing over time, and in different groups; taking inspiration from Cheng, the current study follows his lead and “attempt[s] to maintain a perspective while bearing in mind the existence of [potential] problems” (2015, p. 165).

The paper uses two items to denote Confucius values. The first item is deliberately quite general and all-encompassing. The paper takes this broad approach to avoid confusion with the various ideological debates and to allow respondents to make their own judgement. The authors believe that the item is consistent with Cheng’s (2015) explanation that Confucius values “refer to values shared by the people of Hong Kong who perceive traditional Chinese values as Confucius values”. The second item about showing mutual respect is one of the more common elaborations of Confucius values. The combined two items measure the adherence to Confucius values as a standalone phenomenon. It is about how citizens perceive the extent to which they adhere to Confucius values in living their lives. So it is about attachment of Confucius values and personal reflections.

The brand Hong Kong initiative

The Brand Hong Kong program is a government initiative (Brand Hong Kong 2015, 2016). Part of the premise of the agency’s work was to address the power shift with the political handover of Hong Kong from Britain to China, and its creation as a Special Administration Region (SAR) (one county, two systems principle) (GovHK 2017). The aim was to “position Hong Kong as a top international city”, and indeed “Asia’s World City” (Brand Hong Kong 2016). The agency actively works to project the brand, with major relaunches in 2010, and from 2015, promoting “Our Hong Kong” to external audiences (Brand Hong Kong 2017a, b, c), as well as to Hong Kong residents.



“Our Hong Kong” is our current campaign developed in 2015 that promotes Hong Kong’s soft strengths, achievements and aspirations. It reinforces Hong Kong’s core values and attributes and invites external audiences to consider experiencing the city for themselves to make it “Your Hong Kong”- as entrepreneurs, investors or visitors.

It also communicates a sense of collective pride through interesting real-life stories about Hong Kong and its people.

Brand Hong Kong (2017c).

Thus, the aim of the agency was to “do good” for multiple stakeholders, using the Hong Kong brand, rather than to only develop a good brand.

Despite all this branding activity, just a few related academic studies have emerged (e.g. Chu 2010; Shen 2010), with no apparent academic study of residents’ perceptions of the Hong Kong brand. Yet, city branding from the resident perspective is well-established as a branding research domain (e.g. Merrilees et al. 2007, 2009; Zenker et al. 2013). Moreover, there is no known analysis about the extent to which this branding initiative “does good” for Hong Kong citizens, despite the worthy aims of the programme and the ubiquity of Brand Hong Kong symbols and messages.

City branding and Hong Kong

To understand the context of contemporary Hong Kong, we turn to Shen and Choy (2005) who examined the well-being of residents before and after the 1997 handover. Their 2005 study found that the stability of Hong Kong was not altered and that residents “continued their style of living and experienced little change in their daily life” (Shir Ming Shen and Choy 2005, pp. 231–232). Simon Shen (2010) examines the rebranding of Hong Kong as “Asia’s World City” and its evolving identity as a world city in the context of changes after the 1997 handover to China. He analyzes the Brand Hong Kong campaign, aimed at building a higher profile for Hong Kong internationally and boosting the locals’ confidence in Hong Kong. Shen focuses in part, on whether the citizens would buy into the world-city tag, and argues for the improvement of “image construction and branding at the micro- and working-levels” (Shen 2010, p. 221). Relatedly, Chu (2010) reviews the emergence of formalizing of a Hong Kong brand and image, noting that the core values of the Brand Hong Kong program were “... progressiveness, freedom, stability, opportunity and quality” (Chu 2010, p. 40). Moreover, Loo et al. (2011) noted the need for the continuing maintenance and currency of city brands, and that Brand Hong Kong “was relentless” in this regard (p.

161). They also noted a shift to include the community in the vision of “what Brand Hong Kong should stand for in 2020” (Loo et al. 2011, p. 161), and by inference, embracing the community and thus “doing good”.

Methodology/approach

This study adopts a quantitative approach, well-established in the city branding domain (e.g. Merrilees et al. 2009; Zenker 2011; Zenker and Beckmann 2013a, b; Zenker et al. 2013, 2014), and focuses on Hong Kong residents. The specific emphasis is on determining the city brand meanings that residents infer. Resident stakeholders are free to ascertain their own city brand meaning, because they control their own perceptions. A consumer-led approach is the paradigm used.

Context

The deliberate selection of an Asian city for the study was predicated on several factors. Mandatory criteria were (1) an Asian city where there is global interest and city branding research might reveal new insights; (2) scope to explore culture and city branding and (3) access to a sufficient pool of resident respondents. To enrich the study, other preferred conditions were a city, which had existing efforts at city branding; access to relevant agencies to facilitate data collection and access to knowledgeable local research team members, to enhance relevance and authenticity. Hong Kong satisfied these criteria.

A multi-group SEM approach to studying culture in city branding

The study focuses on two aspects of Chinese culture: Confucius values and intangible cultural heritage. Confucius values represent another city brand attribute to explain city brand attitudes. To capture the role of intangible cultural heritage, the sample is split into two subgroups: high and low intangible cultural heritage. The extent to which Confucius values impact city brand meaning is likely enhanced by those residents recognizing intangible cultural heritage. A multi-group structural equation modelling (SEM) formalizes the effect of interaction among the two cultural variables.

Survey construction and data collection

Each scale measures a particular city attribute, such as recreation or job opportunities, on a five-point Likert scale. Table 1 provides the details. Where possible, the survey uses constructs from the literature. In particular, the five scales for shopping, brand attitudes, intention to stay, social



Table 1 Scale items, factor loadings, Cronbach alpha and AVE

	Factor loading	Cronbach alpha	AVE
Shopping		0.78	0.70
Wide choice of shopping areas	0.86		
Many mid-range shopping malls	0.86		
Interesting street markets	0.79		
Job opportunities		0.85	0.68
Wide range of quality jobs	0.84		
Offers career advancement	0.84		
Plenty of job opportunities	0.84		
Fosters creative industries	0.79		
Intention to stay in Hong Kong		0.77	0.81
Plan to live in Hong Kong as long as possible	0.90		
Content to live in Hong Kong for the next year or so	0.90		
Social Bonding		0.74	0.66
Ease of making friends	0.83		
Family and friends connect well	0.82		
Good for families	0.79		
Education quality		0.86	0.88
Excellence of education	0.94		
Access to quality education	0.94		
City brand satisfaction		0.85	0.87
I like living in Hong Kong	0.93		
I am satisfied with living in Hong Kong	0.93		
City brand attitudes		0.86	0.71
Proud to live in Hong Kong	0.88		
Overall lifestyle is good	0.86		
Rather live here than anywhere else	0.83		
Good reputation among residents	0.82		
Confucius values		0.76	0.81
Confucian principles are practised in Hong Kong	0.90		
In Hong Kong, people show mutual respect	0.90		
Intangible cultural heritage		0.82	0.74
Cheung Chau Jiao (Bun) festival	0.87		
Dragon boat festival	0.87		
Cantonese opera	0.84		

bonding and safety are taken from Merrilees et al. (2009). The scale for job opportunities is derived from recent studies (Merrilees et al. 2013; Zenker et al. 2013). The study also develops two new scales: Confucius values and intangible culture heritage. The development of the Confucius values scale is explained in the earlier section, Confucius values. The items for intangible cultural heritage were suggested initially by members of the Brand Hong Kong agency and expressed in their various publications (Brand Hong Kong 2015, 2016). The items were consistent with tenets of the Hong Kong Tourism Board (Hong Kong Tourism Board (HKTB) 2016). Our Hongkongese research team member verified the items, which are consistent with the research team experiences in the Hong Kong Museum of History (Hong Kong Museum of History 2016).

Data collection used a self-administered survey available to respondents in print or online, and in traditional Chinese (Cantonese) or English. The characteristics of respondents using either response mode generally exhibit little difference (consistent with Huang 2006; Lin and Van Ryzin 2012). Criteria for inclusion in the survey were that the respondent was 18 years or more of age, and resident in Hong Kong.

Special issues of cross-cultural research

The question of cross-cultural research continues to challenge researchers, particularly with the limitations of back translation as a sole means of translating surveys (Douglas and Craig 2007; Malhotra et al. 1996). Some identified



problems are skill limitations in the translators, linguistic problems with content areas and lack of knowledge of specific content areas (Sperber et al. 1994). For the current study, the skilled translators understood the linguistic issues and were very knowledgeable in the research content areas (branding and the Hong Kong context). The survey was prepared in English, and then two Cantonese-/English-speaking academics translated the English version into traditional Chinese (Cantonese) separately (that is, in parallel); next the translators explored differences together and with the English-speaking researchers. The team had to grapple with finding concept equivalence, in terms of language, and in terms of the Hong Kong context. Pilot testing with bilingual respondents helped to refine any remaining areas of concern.

Results

The statistical results are presented in two parts: preliminary results and SEM structural model estimation explaining respondents' city brand attitudes and respondents' intention to stay in Hong Kong.

Preliminary results

There are 422 useable responses for the Hong Kong sample, which is sufficiently large to conduct comparisons across two sub-samples. Response bias is not easy to assess, but the authors did check whether the sample is broadly representative of Hong Kong. Across indicators, there is evidence of a reasonable spread of respondents. In terms of monthly household income, the modal income group is \$20,000 HKD to \$30,000 HKD, with about 30% of the sample. The other five income groups above and below the mode are all well represented. About 12% of the sample indicated a monthly income level of under \$12,000 HKD, which is close to the level considered for welfare payments. At the other pole, 18% of the sample indicated a household income of more than \$65,000 HKD. In terms of housing types: owner occupied covers 44% of the sample; public rental housing covers 27%; private rental housing covers 17%; and subsidized home ownership housing covers 12%. Such a spread is broadly representative of Hong Kong. Location wise, the sample is well spread with 48% from New Territories; 30% from Kowloon; 20% from Hong Kong Island and just 2% from the more sparsely populated Outlying Islands. In terms of how the respondents identify themselves, 97% identify as Hongkonger/Hongkongese, or Hongkongese-Chinese, or as Chinese. Only 3% of the sample identify in terms of some foreign nationality.

It is also possible to check the representativeness of the respondent mix using official statistics. For example, the

official Hong Kong 2015 median household income is \$25,000 HKD (Census and Statistics 2015), which is not very different from the sample median of \$28,000 HKD. Throughout the distribution, there is a broad match; for example 16% of the population according to the official statistics earn \$60,000 HKD or more, while for the sample, 18% earn \$65,000 HKD or more. Given the sensitivity of collecting income data from households from non-official sources, the sample is remarkably close. The geographic location of respondents is also very close to the official statistics. Official sources (Census and Statistics 2016a) show 51% of the population living in the New Territories, compared to 48% in the sample; officially 30% living in Kowloon, compared with 30% in the sample; officially 17% living in Hong Kong Island, compared with 20% in the sample; and officially 2% living in the Outlying Islands, compared with 2% in the sample. Reproducing almost the exact geographic distribution of the official situation is difficult to achieve in an online survey. Finally, official statistics for housing type (Census and Statistics 2016b) enable further consistency checking. Officially, 35% of households are owner occupied, comparing with 44% in the sample; officially 31% are in public rental housing, comparing with 27% in the sample; officially 19% are in private rental housing, comparing with 17% in the sample; and finally, subsidized home ownership represents 15% of the population, while the sample figure is slightly less, at 12%. Thus, using the comparisons between the sample and official sources across three data categories, the match is close, indicating no evidence of major non-sample bias.

Several tests demonstrate reliability and validity of the scales. Table 1 shows measures of reliability for each scale, with all scales reliable with all Cronbach alphas greater than 0.70, in fact ranging from 0.74 to 0.86. Table 1 also demonstrates convergent validity with high factor loadings for the items in each scale. AVE (average variance extracted) greater than 0.50 also indicates convergent validity, with the AVE ranging from 0.66 to 0.88. Table 2 demonstrates discriminant validity across constructs. Using the Fornell and Larcker (1981) criterion, namely that the square root of AVE exceeds the correlation between pairs of constructs, all constructs discriminate against each other. Additionally, a good fitting SEM measurement model, summarized in the next section, indicates the comprehensive evaluation of construct validity. The structural model estimation indicates a high level of predictive validity.

Structural model results

The SEM measurement model indicates a good fit with the data ($n = 422$). The normed Chi-square (χ^2/df) is 1.71, appropriately below the benchmark of 3.0. The baseline fit indices include CFI = 0.99 and TLI = 0.98, both above



Table 2 Bivariate correlations and square root of average variance extracted (AVE)

Construct	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Social bonding	0.81						
2. Shopping	0.32	0.84					
3. Job opportunities	0.40	0.27	0.82				
4. Confucius values	0.40	0.11	0.27	0.90			
5. Education	0.35	0.17	0.49	0.24	0.94		
6. City brand attitudes	0.57	0.35	0.49	0.38	0.45	0.84	
7. Staying intentions	0.44	0.27	0.44	0.28	0.39	0.75	0.90

The bolded diagonal shows the square root of average variance extracted (AVE) for each scale
The other numbers are the inter-scale correlations

the 0.90 benchmark. RMSEA = 0.041, appropriately low and below the 0.08 benchmark, and indicates no major misfit between the data and the model.

The SEM structural model fit indices are also good. The normed Chi-square, χ^2/df , is 1.74, appropriately less than three. CFI = 0.98 and TLI = 0.97, both above the 0.90 benchmark for a good fit of the model with the data. RMSEA = 0.042 with a 90% confidence range of 0.029–0.054, with the entire range appropriately below the 0.08 benchmark. The demographic variable, respondent age, was initially included as a control variable. However, it had no influence and was henceforth excluded from the analysis.

The SEM model has also been rerun as a multi-group SEM using two subgroups—one for residents with high intangible cultural heritage and another one for residents with low intangible cultural heritage. The basis for splitting the sample uses the respondent average scores from the three items relating to intangible cultural heritage shown in Table 1. The average score is 3.93 out of 5. Scores less than the average are classified as low and the remainder, high. This approach enables discerning whether there are different city brand attitude determinants across the two categories of residents. The SEM model continues to have good fit indices. For the multi-group SEM, the normed Chi-square, χ^2/df , is 1.54. CFI and TLI are 0.98 and 0.96, respectively. RMSEA is appropriately a very low 0.036. All measures show good fit indices for the multi-group SEM.

All models show a high level of explanatory power. For the aggregate sample SEM, the model explains 58% of the variance of residents' city brand attitudes and 83% of the variance of residents' staying intentions. For the resident subgroup with high levels of intangible cultural heritage, the model explains 63% of the variance of residents' city brand attitudes and 86% of residents' staying intentions; for the low level of intangible cultural heritage subgroup, the model explains 59% of the variance of residents' city brand attitudes and 79% of residents' staying intentions.

Table 3 reports the structural model estimates. For the aggregate (total) sample, social bonding has the greatest

impact on city brand attitudes, with a path coefficient of 0.36 and a t value of 4.96. The next three influences on city brand attitudes, in order, are education (path coefficient of 0.23), job opportunities (path coefficient of 0.20) and safety (path coefficient of 0.15). The first four are all statistically significant at the 1% level. Shopping is fifth ranked, with a path coefficient of 0.09 and statistically significant at the 5% level. In last place is Confucius values. As expected, the path from city brand attitudes to staying intention is very large, 0.91, completing the two-equation model.

Table 3 also shows the multi-group path estimates. For the high and low subgroups, social bonding continues to be the dominant influence on city brand attitudes, with a path coefficient of 0.27 and 0.52, respectively. Social bonding plays a much greater role for the low intangible cultural heritage subgroup. Job opportunities and education also seem important influencers on city brand attitudes for both subgroups. However, three city brand attributes (shopping, safety and Confucius values) are important and statistically significant for the high subgroup, but negligible for the low group. There is clearly a different pattern of influences on city brand attitudes for the two subgroups of residents, differentiated by the level of intangible cultural heritage.

Discussion

The discussion focuses on interpreting the results with a view to ascertaining residents' city brand meaning. Concomitantly, the discussion draws out the contributions to theory and the practical implications. The remainder of the discussion emphasizes social bonding; culture; and an integrating diagrammatic representation of city brand meaning and considers the potential for Brand Hong Kong to do good.

Social bonding

Social bonding emerges as a dominant factor. Gustafson (2001) poses the fundamental question: "what does a place



Table 3 SEM structural model of residents' city brand attitudes and intention to stay in Hong Kong

Path in structural model	Total sample	High intangible cultural heritage	Low intangible cultural heritage
Social bonding → brand	0.36 (4.94)***	0.27 (3.51)***	0.52 (2.85)***
Shopping → brand	0.09 (2.10)**	0.19 (2.83)***	0.03 (0.35)
Education → brand	0.23 (4.05)***	0.25 (3.67)***	0.15 (1.44)
Job opportunities → brand	0.20 (3.49)***	0.14 (1.99)**	0.24 (2.38)**
Confucius values → brand	0.07 (1.23)	0.14 (2.09)**	0.02 (0.23)
Safety → brand	0.15 (3.11)***	0.22 (4.19)***	-0.05 (0.42)
Brand → intention to stay	0.91 (17.67)***	0.93 (13.94)***	0.89 (10.70)***

CR coefficients (*t* values in parentheses)

*** denotes significant at 0.01 level; ** denotes significant at 0.05 level; * denotes significant at 0.10 level

mean to its residents?" The answer begins emphatically with social bonding, which adds much to city brand meaning for residents. In other words, the primary explanation of what creates city brand meaning is not the buildings or even the leisure activities: it is the people. A people focus has received increasing attention in city brand studies (Freire 2009; Paganoni 2012; Zhao 2015). The current paper empirically demonstrates the dominant role of friends and relatives, that is, social bonding, as a brand association in shaping city brand meaning. This finding is a major contribution to the city brand meaning literature.

Culture: the role of Confucius values and intangible cultural heritage

Culture and cultural heritage are a special focus in the current paper, with two different facets: Confucius values and intangible cultural heritage. Firstly, in a distinctly, Chinese perspective, Confucius values are included as a potentially relevant brand association. The results shown in Table 3 are mixed. Certainly, for the sample as a whole, Confucius values have a positive, though relatively small role to play. However, the role of Confucius values increases substantially for the high intangible cultural heritage subgroup when multi-group SEM is run. Cultural heritage is unambiguously a cultural variable, measured very specifically (see Table 1). For the high intangible cultural heritage sub-sample of residents, there is a strong interaction between Confucius values and intangible cultural heritage, which reflects in the 0.14 path coefficient on Confucius values for the high subgroup in Table 3. For this subgroup only does culture impact on city brand meaning.

No effect is discernible for the low subgroup. That is, for residents with low importance attaching to intangible cultural heritage, there is a very limited role for both intangible cultural heritage and Confucius values. This nuanced finding is the product of complex analysis (moderation).

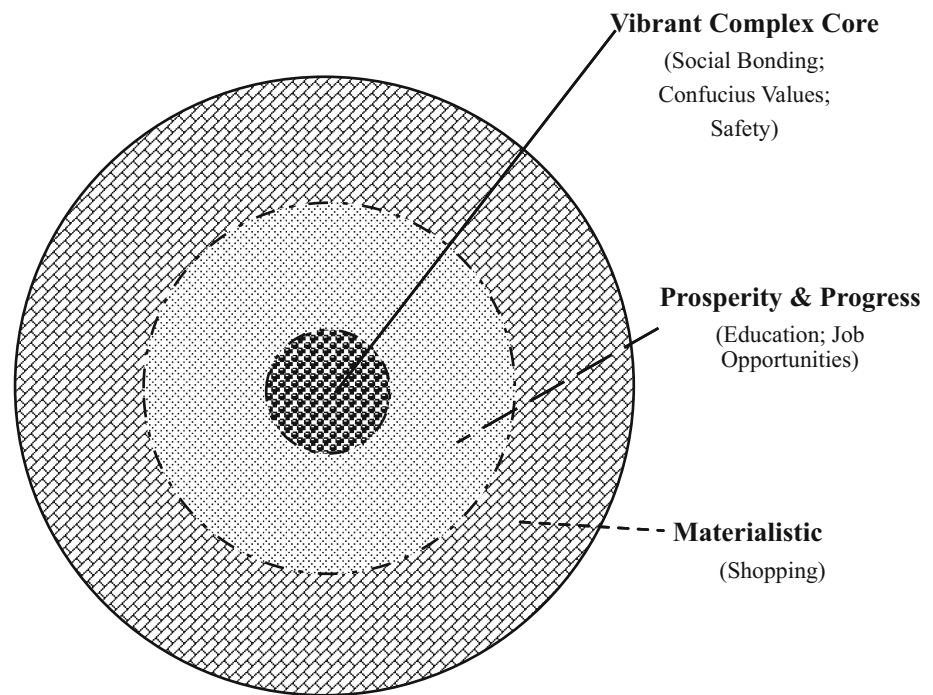
The current study embraces culture as a potentially major consideration in how residents infer city brand meaning. Intrinsically, the findings and their interpretation tackle the gap, acknowledged in the city branding literature, that culture is under-addressed (Kavaratzis and Ashworth 2015). The present study represents culture through both Confucius values and intangible cultural heritage. The interpretation above suggests an interaction between the two cultural variables. Culture, through intangible cultural heritage, is not universal in its influence, with about a third of the population disconnected from its influence in terms of giving meaning to everyday life. Again, this is a nuanced finding not previously addressed in the literature. Diversity of cultural orientation results in multiple city brand meanings. This outcome extends earlier work discussing the possibility of multiple city brand meanings, but not in the context of culture (Merrilees et al. 2012).

Proposed diagrammatic representation of Hong Kong City brand meaning

To further apply the findings, the paper proposes a diagrammatic representation of the Hong Kong city brand. Figure 1 depicts the city brand meaning as having three layers: the core, the inner layer and the outer layer. The basis for allocating significant brand associations to the layers is:



Fig. 1 Proposed diagrammatic representation of the Hong Kong city brand meaning showing porous boundaries to layers



- Core based on residents' core city brand values
- Inner layer based on residents' perceptions of city progress and job opportunities
- Outer layer based on residents' perceptions of material consumption in the city.

The core

To elaborate, the core of the brand meaning is a *vibrant, complex core* with three major brand associations: social bonding, safety and Confucius values. The nature of the core brand associations embraces the roles of intangibles, values and culture, factors that form an enduring platform for the fabric of society. Such a platform is inherently non-materialistic. The core seems to be more complex than other city brands (Merrilees et al. 2013) and potentially represents deep, inner meaning for the Hong Kong city brand. As such, the core brand meaning presents a sense of stability and reassurance for the residents of Hong Kong.

The inner layer

The next layer represents progressiveness and prosperity. Two brand associations appear here: job opportunities and education quality, and they represent residents' perception of the city's creative progress and job opportunities. Whereas the core focuses on retaining the essential self, the inner layer turns to the future for progress. *Staying the same* and *making progress with the brand* form an ongoing dialectic or paradox that all successful brands have to

manage (Merrilees and Miller 2008; Ooi 2011). The Hong Kong city brand seems to manage the paradox well, having a majority of brand associations that perform these two functions.

The outer layer

The outer layer represents materialistic manifestations of the brand. Membership of an attribute to the third layer encompasses the role of a city brand attribute corresponding to material consumption in some form, such as shopping, food or entertainment. Although there are many potential members of the third layer, the results indicate only one Hong Kong brand association that fits the description of this layer, namely shopping. In a sense, this might seem somewhat surprising because in a vibrant and energetic city like Hong Kong, one might have thought that more features, like food and recreation, would show up as part of brand meaning. In fact, the city life activities all score highly. For example, street food scores 4.3 out of 5. How do we reconcile these aspects? Yes, it is true that Hong Kong has a vibrant city life in terms of food, shopping and entertainment. However, the analysis suggests that for residents, at least, to a large extent, such material activities are not seen so much as an outburst of discretionary consumer spending, but rather more integrated into the cultural and social conduct of everyday life. Eating out with friends or family in Hong Kong is more a vibrant, social celebration of life (often inexpensively), rather than Western indulgence of premium food made by award



winning chefs. Thus, food and entertainment are often a cultural experience rather than a form of discretionary spending. The integration of eating and culture forms another facet of the role of culture in Hong Kong city brand meaning.

On a technical note, the discussion suggests that in the Hong Kong case, the boundaries between layers are porous. Specially, the consumption of food in the third layer and social bonding in the core indicates a connectedness, a nexus and even a symbiosis.

Theoretical contributions

The discussion reveals three major theoretical contributions. Firstly, social bonding emerges as the dominant influence of how residents find meaning in a place brand, helping to answer Gustafson's (2001) fundamental question about "what does a place mean to its residents?"

Secondly, the current study addresses the concern in the literature that argues that city brand studies have neglected culture (Kavaratzis and Ashworth 2015). In particular, a two-pronged approach to culture has been applied, with emphasis on two facets, Confucius values and intangible cultural heritage. As a third facet, the role of culture is further extended by identifying that consumption activities like food and shopping are inherently social and part of the social-cultural fabric of society in a Hong Kong setting. Thus, the paper's initial two-pronged approach to culture is widened to a three-pronged approach.

Thirdly, the paper proposes a three-layer representation (Fig. 1) to depict the structure of city brand meaning, namely: a central core representing the city's social and cultural foundation; a second inner layer representing city creative progress and job opportunities; and a third, outer layer representing the residents' material consumption. The representative figure is potentially applicable to other Asian cities, but in the Hong Kong case, the analysis suggests a strong core and a weak outer layer.

Given that the study applies to just one city, it would be rash to declare that the proposed representation of city brand meaning can be generalizable. However, the results have a distinctly Chinese character to them. The study's three-pronged approach to culture is primarily Chinese, covering Confucius values, Chinese intangible cultural heritage and a Hong Kong-orientated Chinese lifestyle of integrating eating and culture. Additionally, for Hong Kong, the core and the inner layer together are strong, representing most of the six city brand associations, while the outer material consumption layer is weak. Such a pattern has the potential to be an Asian rather than Western characteristic.

The Hong Kong brand: doing good

Generally discussions about brands doing good are focused on positive achievements in corporate social responsibility, especially in engaging with or contributing to their communities. That is, brands do good by providing benefits that do not necessarily equate with narrow financial interests. Effective brands operate as Roper and Fill (2012, p. 2012) argue by leveraging core brand values. City brands are entirely dedicated to serving the community and potentially represent exemplar brands that do good.

The Hong Kong brand does good by taking the city brand to a high level, as supported by the high positive brand evaluation scores in the resident sample. Eighty-five per cent of residents in the sample are satisfied with the Hong Kong brand. Doing good is reflected in the brand encompassing a wide range of everyday activities, including social, cultural, recreation and eating. The Hong Kong brand, especially the core city brand meaning, provides a sense of stability and reassurance that enables most residents to more fully enjoy most everyday activities. It is a case of doing good on a very large scale.

The Hong Kong brand revealed by the current study also does good in "the way" that it creates city brand meaning for residents. In particular, in Hong Kong, there is less emphasis on what might be termed, materialistic or superficial activities, as a source of brand meaning. The Hong Kong city brand is deeply rooted in spiritual (soul), cultural, social and visionary elements. Notwithstanding, from a resident perspective, a strong spiritual and visionary basis to brand meaning does not contradict a vibrant city and street culture of eating, shopping and recreation.

The cultural emphasis and the heavy weighting of the core and the inner layer of the city brand meaning point to a possible Asian approach to city brand meaning. Nonetheless, these two forces are tentative and form a proposition to be tested with other Asian city brands.

Practical implications

What are the implications of this study for the current Brand Hong Kong initiative? The current research examines the city brand from the resident stakeholder perspective, whereas Brand Hong Kong primarily targets external stakeholders including foreign and perhaps local business communities. Given the different audiences, Brand Hong Kong makes reference to core values, but is more focused on what is comparable to the Inner (middle) layer of creative progress and job opportunities. Potentially, the inner layer seems most appropriate to business investment and trade decisions. However, one presumes that business



investment could be partly conditioned by a strong social and cultural core and more broadly by a thriving, vibrant resident city brand experience. That is, strong marketing opportunities are likely to dominate foreign and local business investment, but a thriving, vibrant local city lifestyle culture could possibly enhance such investment.

Brand Hong Kong makes reference to the local culture already in their international negotiations. For example, one promotional tool includes chopsticks with one stick in Hong Kong colours and the other stick in the colours of the other country. A suggestion would be to take the cultural aspect further in future international collaborations. The aim should be to communicate (promote), fully and robustly, the vibrant Hong Kong resident city brand experience. Equally, the very strong core city brand meaning could be communicated (promoted) as a force of stability and social cohesion, which could be very attractive to foreign investment or partnerships in Hong Kong. Social stability and cohesion are particularly important given the evolving relationship between Hong Kong SAR and Mainland China.

Shen (2010, p. 220) argued that to have the "... acceptance of the world-city label by Hong Kong people", and it was important to link daily lives to that aspiration. Moreover, he identifies a need for cultural appreciation. Concurrently, proposed city rebranding efforts, in the forms of culture emphasis and vibrant city emphasis, directed at business stakeholders could equally be directed to local residents. Such redirection to residents, as an internal stakeholder group, perhaps by social media campaigns, could give extra confidence to them in handling the same uncertainty, essentially building on what is already very strong core city brand meaning.

Limitations and future directions

The study is limited to Hong Kong city residents. Testing in other Asian cities and other countries, more broadly, may yield different results. This limitation paves the way for future studies. The proposed diagrammatic representation of Asian city branding can inform such research studies.

Conclusions

Not only can city brands be good brands, arguably city brands are among the exemplar brands that help society. Thus, city brands can "do good" by creating a platform for residents' city brand experience. All aspects of a resident's day-to-day lifestyle can be enhanced under the auspiciousness of a strong city brand. However, not all city

brands are strong performers (Merrilees et al. 2013; Truman et al. 2007, 2008). In contrast, the Hong Kong city brand performs particularly well and is well received by its residents.

However, while it is reassuring to know that a city brand is performing well, there is an opportunity to explore more deeply how locals answer the question of "what does a place mean to its residents?" Such a question posed by Gustafson (2001) suggests the need to ascertain residents' city brand meaning. The original research in the current paper demonstrates that social bonding is the dominant determinant of Hong Kong residents' city brand meaning. A three-layer diagrammatical representation of city brand meaning is proposed, with Hong Kong having a strong core and inner layer. The proposed diagrammatic interpretation of a city brand is novel and shows that, potentially, a city brand can "do good" and can be a best practice template for Asian city brands and their impact on society. Culture is elevated as a useful integrating means of developing coherent, strong city brands. The study uses a three-facet approach to culture in city brands: Confucius values; intangible cultural heritage; and a Hong Kong-orientated Chinese lifestyle of integrating eating and culture. City brand scholars in both East and West are invited to re-examine city brands using a combined culture and city brand meaning lens.

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