

CITY BRAND-IMAGE ASSOCIATIONS DETECTION CASE STUDY OF PRAGUE

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ABSTRACT

The study focuses on the primary associations that are evoked by the city of Prague, as well as on the differences that can be seen between the professionals and the general public in this regard. One of the main objectives is to highlight the growing importance of the city branding in today's hyper-competitive environment, which creates a demand for empirical studies of a similar nature. Therefore, in this paper, we pay attention to the analysis of selected attributes of the brand of Prague. Special attention is paid to its visual attributes represented by the logo of the city. Our analysis is based on two surveys carried out in 2012. While analysing attitudes to the selected attributes of the Prague brand, we used the polarity profile method as a simplified form of semantic differential.

Keywords: city brand, place brand, city brand image, Prague

INTRODUCTION

The popularity of the place image concept has at the start of this century become a central concept of postmodern theories. Many researchers refer to Hunt [7], for instance, to show how perception of a place is often of even greater meaning than its actual reality [14].

In terms of its future development, we should look at the wider context in which marketing of a place gradually evolves into its branding. According to many [e.g. 7, 8, 9], the shift from city marketing to city branding is a further stage in the development of marketing practices applied to places of various sizes. We should mention here another important attribute of the current period, which is the increasing sophistication of processes enabling a change in image. Their nature and scope even lead many experts, but especially non-experts, to identify them with branding [15]. In practice we therefore meet with content association of the two terms, image and brand.

Smith [15] states that firms have started to appreciate the value of creating a place brand, or at least a montage of such sites that form an interesting mix of commercial opportunities, tourist attractions and usable branding tools. He refers, for example, to the thematic "Nike Towns" shopping centres, which can be seen as a result of ever more intensive commodification of traditional places and subsequent creation of strong ties between brand names and cultural franchising. Evans [5] gives as examples of such "franchise" agreements the Spanish city of Bilbao with the Guggenheim foundation and local branches of London museums and galleries. He describes it as "hard branding", which he understands as an attempt at using commodity fetishism and expanding the brand life not just geographically but also symbolically [5]. From this we can see that the

processes of forming an image and of branding greatly overlap; drawing a line between them is often impossible. Despite this, however, it is necessary to differentiate between these terms.

1. SOME NOTES ON DETERMINING PLACE BRANDS

Commodification of places and their perception brings with it a whole set of complications connected with the places' internal heterogeneousness. As Ashworth and Voogd [1] state, the inner complexities of a place, a result of its large number of diverse elements and facilities, makes it practically impossible to realize them all at the same time and even more so to consider all their possibilities of use. Hence researchers argue that the only way to commodify a place is through strict selection of just some of its many characteristics. One result of this, of course, is a certain schematic simplification in the form of a brand.

The application of traditional branding to places requires that the brand is dealt with as representing the whole town or city as one product. This is much more difficult, however, than in the case of commercial companies. For the purposes of branding, Kavaratzis and Ashworth [9] consider a place (whether country, region, town or urban quarter) as a "brand or multidimensional concept consisting of functional, emotional, relational and strategic elements which together create a unique set of associations connected with the place in the minds of the public." [9].

Another view of this phenomenon, again emphasizing its complexity, is offered by Simon Anholt [13]. He defines place branding as "management of place image using strategic innovation and coordinated economic, commercial, social, cultural and government politics."

A city brand (as one of the possible types of place brand) is thus a promise of something created and formed in the minds of people and identified with three key concepts: the identity, image and communication of the city. While the identity of a brand is defined by the 'sender' (i.e. as the owner of the brand wants it to be perceived), the image of the city brand is the real picture created in the mind of the recipient (as the brand is perceived in reality). Selected components of the city identity have to be communicated to target groups as attractive ones [13]. In terms of the possible formation of a city brand image, it is necessary to perceive this as the result of the interacting system of its components.

In specialist literature, we find of course a whole range of varying approaches to place branding which we cannot describe in detail here. What is important is that all interpretations and innovative ideas contribute to useful and interesting discussion as well as to addressing new questions in the development of place branding theory and practice.

For the purposes of this study, it is important to state that studies of city branding are amongst the most numerous in the field of place branding. The reason for this perhaps lies in the ever-increasing and ever more intensive competition between cities for capital, industry, qualified professionals, tourists, students and new inhabitants.

2. AIMS AND METHODS OF THE STUDY

There is no one standard method used when analyzing image. Individual methodical approaches and procedures are chosen ad hoc in accordance with the specific task in hand, though most are a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods. Together

with observation and experiment, one basic method of data collection used for analyzing image is asking questions through personal interviews, written questionnaires and telephone and email surveys.

In this article we focus on comparison of the perceptions of the Prague image brand by the expert and non-expert communities, our assumption being that these perceptions will be different. We see the value of this approach in the possible application of the information obtained in the everyday marketing of the city. This marketing should take account of these perceptual differences.

We obtained the input data for our comparison from two surveys carried out in February and March 2012. The first survey involved interviewing experts who had been deliberately chosen from local and foreign specialists in the area of place/city branding and marketing and who worked in the field of tourism. In total we approached 31 experts, 15 of whom worked in the Czech Republic, 16 of whom were from abroad (New Zealand, Finland, France, Greece, Holland, Hungary, Germany, Poland, Portugal, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden and Great Britain). The target group of the second survey was the general public from neighbouring countries. This survey used a non-random sampling process with 218 respondents aged 15 and over from neighbouring countries taking part.

We used the polarity profile method when analysing attitudes to the selected attributes of the Prague brand. This is a simplified form of semantic differential method in which the respondent evaluates the object in question using a rating scale, in our case the 5 point Likert scale with 14 evaluated dichotomic pairs. On opposite ends of the scale are antonymous evaluative items which create a basic dichotomic profile (semantically differentiated). The spontaneous evaluations of the respondents are then quantified with the resulting weighted score average of the individual dichotomic pairs graphically represented on a vertical line.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

PRIMARY ASSOCIATIONS EXPERTS AND NON-EXPERTS MAKE WITH THE CITY OF PRAGUE

When examining primary associations we were guided by the work of Hildreth [6], who defines 'city brand' as the "general set of associations and perceptions created by a given city". Our task was to discover the primary associations experts and non-experts have with Prague. We asked them the question: what first comes to your mind at the mention of Prague?

In total the experts provided 61 mutually exclusive associations with the cognitive elements of the brand image dominating. Almost a fifth of replies (19.7%) referred to the city architecture and its buildings (Table 1.). Generally it was Prague's bridges (especially Charles Bridge), towers ('Prague of a hundred spires'), historical buildings and historical centre (Hradčany, Staré Mesto) which were mentioned here. The city architecture dominated in both the replies of the Czech experts (20 % of them mentioned it) and of the foreign experts (19%). The results confirm the fact that Prague is an architectural treasure admired by tourists from all over the world.

Table 1: What first comes to your mind at the mention of prague?

<i>Experts</i>	%	<i>Non-experts</i>	%
Architecture	19.7	Charles Bridge	39.1
History	16.4	Prague Orloj	21.4
Capital of Czech Republic	11.5	Prague Castle	6.3
Beautiful City and Sites	11.5	Hradčany city area	5.5
Culture and Cultural Heritage	6.6	Wenceslas Square	5.5
Tourist destination	6.6	“City of a Hundred Spires”	3.4
Home, Birthplace	4.9	Capital of Czech Republic	1.3
Czech Republic	4.9	The Vltava River	1.3
Famous People Associated with the City	3.3	Beer	1.3
“Prague Spring” event	3.3	Friends	1.3
Other	11.5	Other	13.8

The survey shows how the city architecture is undoubtedly a reflection of its history and the important events which have happened there. 16.4 % of the experts associate Prague with its historical role, some even describing it as the ‘mother of cities’ or ‘mother of Old Europe’ (Table 1.). This historical association was thus the second most commonly mentioned (20 % of experts from the Czech Republic and 12.9 % of foreign experts mentioned it). Another common association is its role as the administrative centre of the Czech Republic. Here we can see that the brand of the city can be extended to cover the whole country, especially for some of the foreign experts, 10% of whom equated Prague to the Czech Republic. Other associations were more general in character: for example, Prague – beautiful city (Czechs - 10%, foreigners - 13%). The cultural association was made in approximately 6.6% of all the expert replies (Table 1.), Prague’s image as a cultural city or metropol being stronger for the foreign experts (9.7% of answers) than for the Czechs (3.3%). Another 6.6% of all expert answers perceive Prague primarily as a tourist destination with its large numbers of tourists especially in the historical centre. 10% of Czech experts see Prague as their home or birthplace. Almost 11.5% of expert answers are very diverse (these include the Vltava, beer, romance, spectacular scenery). As well as these, we also received a negative association in the form of low levels of safety and vulnerability to thieves and racketeers.

Most of the non-expert replies (97.8 %) were positive and most commonly referred to various historical sites. The most frequently mentioned, seen as a symbol of Prague and key urban feature, was Charles Bridge, which was mentioned in almost 40 % of all answers (Table 1.). The second most common answer was another famous historical monument: the Prague *orloj* or astronomical clock (21.4 % of all answers). The third most common association for Slovaks, albeit with a much lower share of responses, was Prague Castle (6.3 %). The following associations were also given: Hradčany, Wenceslas Square, work, great city life and the Prague metro.

EVALUATING THE PRAGUE LOGO

An important communication tool which promotes a brand both internally and externally is a logo. This visual means of communication serves as a way of identifying a given place and also of making it more easily remembered by tourists and investors. Prague’s current logo was created in 2002 by the Najbrt graphic studio [14].

One of the basic aims of Prague’s branding is to increase the awareness and visibility of the city and certain target segments. In the case of the selected group of experts, however, familiarity with the logo was not very great; though only one local expert had never seen it before, fewer than a third of the foreign experts recognized it. The group of

non-experts were evenly divided: 49.5% of respondents had never seen the logo before, though the majority of them (nearly 70%) were amongst those who had never been to the city. On the basis of our survey, we can hypothesize that it is mainly young people who are familiar with the logo; the older the person, the less likely they are to recognize it. To give reasons for this here would be mere speculation and a separate survey would be needed to determine their exact nature.

As for the aptness of the Prague logo in relation to the character of the city, expert opinions were divided. More than 80% of the foreign experts did not think it was very apt while only 53% of the Czech experts were of the same opinion. Of the general public, only 47% expressed a positive attitude towards the logo. Attitudes were even more negative when people were asked whether they thought the logo reflected the most important attributes of the Prague city brand. 68% of those asked think that the current city logo fails to capture the character of the place sufficiently.

One of the deliberate aims of the logo designers was to communicate to the target groups of investors, tourists and local inhabitants the openness and trust of the city's people towards foreigners. Our findings, however, did not demonstrate a clear fulfilment of this aim with almost 70% of foreign experts (representative of one of the main target groups) not picking up on this aim. Paradoxically, however, 60% of the local experts did discern the above attributes encoded in the logo. The general public have very similar perceptions with almost 60% of those asked considering the logo to be sufficiently clear in expressing the attributes intended.

Although these results cannot be generalized for all the target groups which the city concentrated on as part of its branding strategy, they still provide a certain reflection of how the visual attributes of the Prague brand are perceived by the wider public and create space for discussion about how the current logo of the city could be changed as well as space for a more widely conceived survey.

A POLARITY PROFILE OF THE PRAGUE BRAND IMAGE

The average ratings of the strength of the Prague brand image were positive both from the expert and non-expert respondents. The most highly rated attribute in both groups was the city's level of interest and attractiveness to tourists, the scores being 1.26-1.35. The worst rated attributes were different in each group: the experts rated the perception of local cuisine quite lowly (score of 2.97) whilst the non-experts were most critical of safety in the city (3.09).

More detailed examination reveals basic differences in the perception of the city brand between local and foreign experts (Figure 1). The most pronounced difference in opinion was in the perception of the level of job opportunities (a difference in score of 1.06 points). This cognitive aspect of the brand image may reflect the lower interest of non-Prague respondents in this specific area. Our findings also revealed a dichotomy in the internal and external perception of the 'friendliness of Prague inhabitants', the average (self) rating of the local experts being 0.62 points worse than that of the foreign experts. Conversely the local experts judged the uniqueness of the city more highly than the foreign experts (a difference of 0.53).

With non-experts, we identified a deviation in the perception of the Prague brand in relation to the nature of the information upon which this image was formed (primary or secondary) [11]. Our assumption that respondents with personal experience of the city would rate most attributes more highly proved to be correct (Figure 2). The biggest differences of opinion were about the quality of the local cuisine and the number of attractions in the city. In both cases the given attributes were judged more harshly by those people who had never visited the city, a fact which may be explained by the claim that the secondary image of Prague is worse than the reality.

Figure 1. A polarity profile for the city of Prague showing responses of Czech and foreign experts (extreme points of deviation are circled)

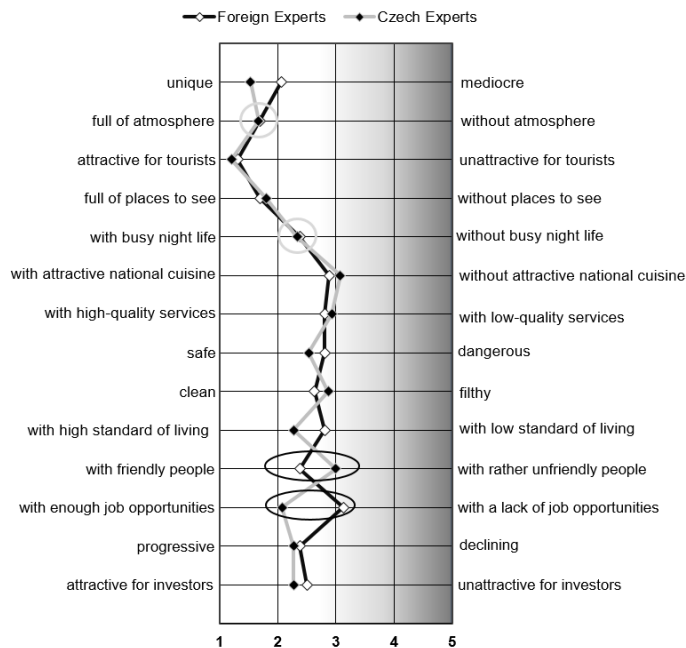
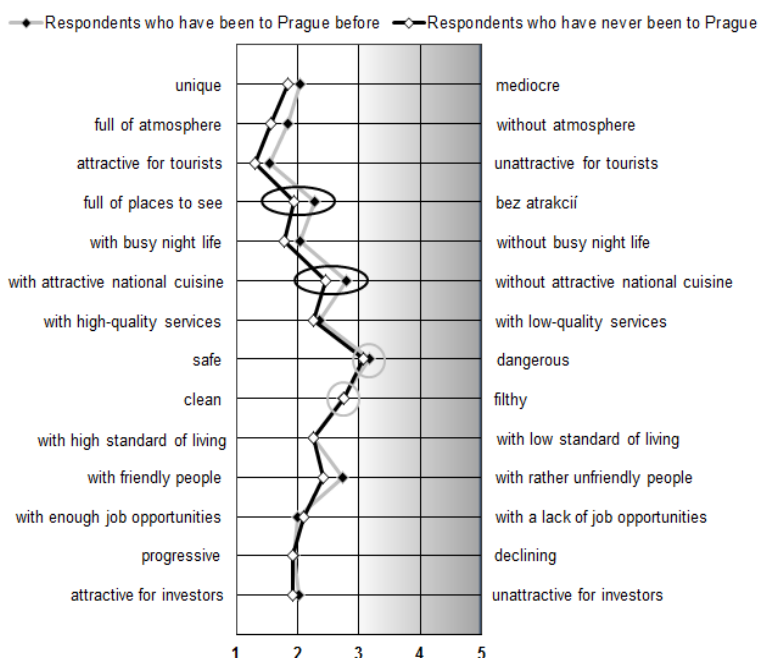


Figure 2. A polarity profile for the city of Prague showing responses of non-experts (extreme points of deviation are circled)



Despite the fact that such a claim may be seen as being hypothetical with further research needed to confirm it, it does to some extent reinforce the fact that as the capital of the Czech Republic, Prague is a popular tourist destination famous for its well preserved cultural and historical heritage. Often we hear Prague referred to as “the mother of cities“, “the city of a hundred spires“ or “golden Prague“. As well as tourists, the city is also attractive to other groups such as investors, business people and students. Given this fact, it is essential that Prague takes care of its brand and develops it in such a way that it attracts even more attention from these target segments. The greater interest of academics could help in this; in specialized academic journals the branding of Prague only ever receives the minimum attention.

CONCLUSION

In the case of both surveys carried out, our findings show that Prague evokes strongly positive images and impressions in the observed target groups with the cognitive elements of the brand image dominant. The respondents in our survey most frequently associate Prague with its architecture, its various architectural features and buildings (Table 1). These results indicate that Prague’s rich and famous history is a very strong factor in the creation of its brand, one which transcends the limits of the city and the state. The results also confirm the claim that Prague is an architectural treasure attracting the attention of people from all over the world.

Evaluation of the visual attributes of the Prague brand showed their negative perception both amongst the expert community and the non-expert one (Table 2). There was consensus between the two groups about the dominant image-forming architectural features as well about which famous people were associated with the city, the former president Vaclav Havel being the most frequently mentioned by both groups. The inability of many respondents to think of any regular events taking place in Prague shows some failings on the part of the city event marketing.

Table 2: Comparison of the expert and non-expert perception of the prague city brand

<i>Rated brand attribute</i>	<i>Experts</i>	<i>Non-experts</i>
Primary associations with the city of Prague	1. architecture 2. history 3. capital city	1. Charles Bridge 2. Prague orloj 3. Prague Castle
Symbolic expression of brand perception using just a few words	1. history 2. city of a hundred spires 3. culture / energy / beautiful	1. beautiful / enchanting 2. history 3. city of a hundred spires
Famous people associated with the city	1. Vaclav Havel 2. Karol IV. 3. Franz Kafka	1. Vaclav Havel 2. Karel Gott (popular singer) 3. Charles IV.
Characteristic events with which the Prague brand is associated	1. Prague Spring (1968) 2. Prague (half)marathon 3. Prague NATO summit	1. None 2. Music concerts and festivals 3. Sporting events
Image-forming architectural sights	1. Charles Bridge 2. Prague Castle 3. Hradčany	1. Charles Bridge 2. Prague orloj 3. Prague Castle
Evaluation of the Prague logo	1. It does not capture the city’s character (68%) 2. Foreign experts feel it does not capture the openness and friendliness of the local people (70%); local experts have the opposite opinion (60%)	1. It does not capture the city’s character (68%) 2. It captures the openness and friendliness of the local people (60%)
The most highly rated attribute of the city brand	Interesting tourist destination	Interesting tourist destination
The worst rated city attribute	Local cuisine	Safety in the city

Even though these results cannot be generalized to cover all target groups (investors, tourists, residents etc.), they do still provide a certain indication of how the visual attributes of the Prague city brand are perceived by the wider public and create space for further discussion or for a more widely conceived survey.

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