

# **City elements propelling city brand meaning-making processes: Urban reminders, the arts and residential behavior**

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## **Abstract**

City branding literature discounts the non-marketer-controlled aspects of city brand meaning co-creation as part of everyday, socio-cultural meaning-making. Engaging a fundamental gap within this theoretical oversight, the present paper explores how socially constructed and, thus, inherently uncontrollable elements of the city communicate symbolic messages about the city during the course of daily urban life. Specifically, the paper contributes to marketing theory by conceptualizing how (1) urban reminders, (2) the arts and (3) residential behavior emit symbolic messages in highly interrelated ways that see these elements propel the interconnected meaning-making processes enveloping city brands. Subsequent critical discussion further demonstrates how the more holistic view of city brand meaning-making processes that we develop opens up a fresh lens to grasp more of city brand meaning co-creation, advance intellectual debates around city branding and, ultimately, expand the frontiers of marketing theory.

## **Keywords**

City brand, meaning, history, the arts, residents, constructionist, semiotic

## **Introduction**

Governments, multinational corporations, property developers and other powerful groups project particular versions of the city (e.g. innovative, exciting, creative, cultural) to advance their interests (Gotham, 2002; Greenberg, 2008; Harvey, 1996; Therkelsen et al., 2010). Particularly, much of what is *done by* the city, from events and slogans, to urban planning and industrial policy, forms part of deliberate attempts to communicate symbolic messages that reinforce various desired city brands (Ashworth, 2009; Bennett and Savani, 2003; Hunt and Zacharias, 2008; Therkelsen et al., 2010). However, 'everything a city consists of' and 'everything that takes place in the city' also communicates symbolic messages about the city (Kavaratzis, 2004: 67; see also Giovanardi, 2012: 39). Crucially, from a marketing theory perspective, governments and other city brand management groups are unable to control the symbolic messages that emanate from what the city consists of and what takes place in the city, that is, *the city's fundamental elements*. To illustrate, uncontrollable smells (Henshaw et al., 2015), first hand encounters with people on the sidewalk, personal stories (Blichfeldt, 2005) and art all convey symbolic messages that shape what cities mean to people (i.e. city brand meaning) (Ashworth, 2009: 10; Kalandides, 2011: 36; Parkerson, 2007: 264). However, city branding literature, repeatedly, focuses on the symbolic messages emanating from intentional city branding efforts (Blichfeldt, 2005: 395; Green et al., 2016). For instance, Henshaw et al. (2015: 157) note that some smells emerge 'organically' or 'unintentionally' (i.e. as a by-product of activities other than intentional city branding), while focusing on the use of smell within intentional city brand management. Given the ongoing theoretical orientation towards more controllable forms of symbolic communication, the manner in which smells and other fundamental city elements communicate symbolic messages about the city, in the course of everyday urban life, remains unclear. This gap, and a broader theoretical leaning towards more controllable aspects of city brands, restricts marketing theory to a narrow understanding of city brand meaning co-creation as part of everyday, socio-cultural, meaning-making.

## **Socially constructed city elements and everyday meaning-making**

Knowledge of what the city consists of and what takes place in the city (i.e. *city elements*) remains under continuous social construction. That is, dynamic combinations of socio-cultural factors (e.g. governments, media, cultural values, capitalism) continuously construct common sense knowledge of intangible city elements such as

urban legends and more tangible city elements such as ‘corporate buildings’, ‘parks’ and ‘residents’ (Cresswell, 2004: 30; Harvey, 1996; see also Berger and Luckmann, 1966). Such socio-cultural factors incorporate mixed motivations, historical contexts, ideological viewpoints and interests. The casual conversations through which people characteristically make some sense of the urban realm (see Tuan, 1980: 462–463) further stimulate the continuous construction of intangible and tangible city elements. Thus, similar to language and other sign systems (e.g. visuals, objects), which figure in the broader social construction of everyday knowledge and realities (Bignell, 2002: 6–7), these social constructs circulate in society before (and after) we take them up and use them. More pointedly, ongoing construction of the city’s fundamental elements, and any ensuing symbolic messages about the city, form part of socio-cultural meaning-making and everyday urban life.

Intentional city branding efforts may attempt to manipulate socially constructed city elements to communicate contrived symbolic messages. For instance, city authorities may host the World Outgames, a sporting and cultural event that encourages the participation (and surface inclusion) of artists and athletes irrespective of sexual orientation, seeking to communicate symbolic messages about the city as ‘open minded’ (see Mueller and Schade, 2012: 85). Similarly, development and promotion of gay neighborhoods may form part of an attempt to communicate symbolic messages such as tolerance, liberation and diversity (see Hunt and Zacharias, 2008). However, such manipulation effectively stimulates ongoing revision of how individuals and groups understand what the city consists of and what takes place in the city (e.g. ‘residents’, ‘neighborhoods’, ‘events’). Hence, the expansive and uncontrollable social construction of such city elements persists. Therefore, limited consideration, of how city elements communicate symbolic messages about the city during the course of everyday urban life, confines marketing theory to a narrow understanding of symbolic communication about cities particularly, and city brand meaning co-creation more broadly.

Understanding how socially constructed city elements communicate symbolic messages about the city as part of everyday socio-cultural meaning-making is of direct relevance to future marketing theory. Branding scholars often underscore the importance of advancing from contemporary top-down management philosophies, whereby management groups ‘do’ city branding ‘to a place’ (e.g. Hudak, 2015; Kavaratzis and

Hatch, 2013; Kavaratzis and Kalandides, 2015; Kerr and Oliver, 2015; Medway et al., 2015: 66). Instead, these scholars advocate management philosophies that facilitate the co-creation of city brand meaning between multiple stakeholder groups (e.g. tourists, residents, media). However, without understanding how socially constructed city elements potentially communicate symbolic messages about the city, as part of everyday socio-cultural meaning-making, we cannot fully understand and/or ideally facilitate the complex processes through which multiple stakeholder groups co-create city brand meaning. Accordingly, the purpose of this paper is to pursue more comprehensive understandings of the non-marketer controlled aspects of city brand meaning co-creation by exploring *how socially constructed city elements communicate symbolic messages about the city in the course of everyday urban life*.

This paper is structured in two main parts. Based on critical review and synthesis of social science literature, the first part of the paper contributes to marketing theory by conceptualizing how (1) *urban reminders*, (2) *the arts* and (3) *residential behavior* communicate symbolic messages about the city in different, yet highly interrelated, ways. We then situate this conceptualization within a more holistic view of the interconnected meaning-making processes that envelop city brands (i.e. *city brand meaning-making processes*). Critical discussion in the second part of the paper further demonstrates how this more holistic view opens up a fresh, critical lens through which marketing scholars can grasp more of city brand meaning co-creation. Specifically, we shift attention to further expanding theoretical understandings of the non-marketer-controlled aspects of city brand meaning co-creation on the more *micro-level* (i.e. personalised meaning construction) and the more *macro-level* (i.e. interplay between city elements, intentional city branding, stakeholders and socio-cultural factors). The second part, in particular, concurs with work theorizing the multi-level 'co-creation' of markets, value and/or meaning between multiple actors as interrelated and messy socio-cultural processes that call for holistic perspectives (see Cova and Dalli, 2009; Laamanen and Skålén, 2014; Peñaloza and Mish, 2011 for unique yet analogous illustrations). However, building on conceptual development in the first part of the paper, our critical discussion distinctly advances understandings of how the socio-cultural meaning-making processes that envelop city brands play out as part of everyday urban life.

## **Conceptual development: Socially constructed city elements emitting symbolic messages**

Table 1 outlines the three-phase procedure undertaken to review and synthesize varied literature (e.g. marketing, tourism, urban studies, geography, sociology) pertinent to the purpose of the paper and the particular objective of each constituent phase. Table 2 provides examples of the literature reviewed in Phase One. More fundamentally, the purpose of this paper directs engagement with three elementary principles of semiotics, the study of how signs (e.g. objects, events, behaviors) communicate meaning:

1. Signs consist of (1) a sign vehicle (i.e. signifier, meaningful form or expression) connected with (2) some meaning (i.e. the signified, content, concept communicated or mental representation evoked) (Barthes, 1967; Bignell, 2002; Nöth, 1990: 79).
2. Sign vehicles range from marks on a page and sounds that embody words to objects, gestures, behaviors and arrangement of shapes and colors in photographs (Barthes, 1967: 47), although words and other forms of verbal language help people to think about, understand and distinguish various signs (Bignell, 2002).
3. Culture and society, rather than nature or biology, determine what verbal and non-verbal signs mean (e.g. concepts connected with the word 'child' or the color and form of 'red' 'traffic lights') (Bignell, 2002; Mick, 1986; Mueller and Schade, 2012: 84).

Indeed, embracing a specific semiotic orientation and/or theory (which are many and diverse, see Mick, 1986: 197–201 for précis) could facilitate future investigations. However, these three more elementary semiotic principles, together with social constructionist understandings of knowledge and place (see Berger and Luckmann, 1966), underpin our exploration and conceptualization of how socially constructed city elements communicate, or rather 'emit', symbolic messages about the city.

**Table 1. Three-phase review procedure and conceptual development.**

Phase	Objective	Key component processes	Key output
Phase One	<p>Identify an initial set of potential city elements that literature (e.g. see Table 2) suggests:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Form part of what the city is thought to consist of or what is thought to take place in the city;</li> <li>▪ Shapes the meaning of cities to people; and</li> <li>▪ City brand management groups are unable to control</li> </ul>	<p>Exclude potential elements that contribute chiefly to the social construction of other elements (e.g. written discourse, education, newspapers, direct experience)</p>	<p>Initial set of 5 potential city elements:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. History</li> <li>2. Physical land characteristics/resources</li> <li>3. Geographical events</li> <li>4. The arts</li> <li>5. Residential behavior</li> </ol> <p>(Informs Phase Two)</p>
Phase Two	<p>Examine how the initial set of 5 potential elements communicate symbolic messages about the city, including more direct consideration of:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ How people encounter city elements in everyday urban life; and</li> <li>▪ How the elements are socially constructed.</li> </ul>	<p>Purposefully select, review and synthesise literature utilising various search engines and search term combinations (e.g. <i>history</i> and <i>city brand meaning</i>), also considering literature engaged in Phase One relevant to Phase Two objective</p> <p>Reconceptualise initial set of 5 potential elements according to ensuing insights</p>	<p>Reconceptualisation of:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ History as a combination of <i>tangible</i> and <i>intangible urban reminders</i></li> <li>▪ Physical land characteristics/resources a form of <i>tangible urban reminder</i></li> <li>▪ Geographical events as a form of <i>intangible urban reminders</i></li> </ul> <p>Conceptualisation of how three different but related city elements emit symbolic messages about the city:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Urban reminders</li> <li>2. The arts</li> <li>3. Residential behavior</li> </ol> <p>(Informs Phase Three)</p>
Phase Three	<p>Examine potential interrelationships (i.e. nexuses) between the three city elements</p>	<p>Purposefully select, review and synthesis literature utilising various search engines and search term combinations (e.g. <i>art</i> and <i>residents</i>), also considering literature engaged in Phase Two relevant to Phase Three objective</p>	<p>Advanced understanding of how the elements emit symbolic messages in highly interrelated ways</p>

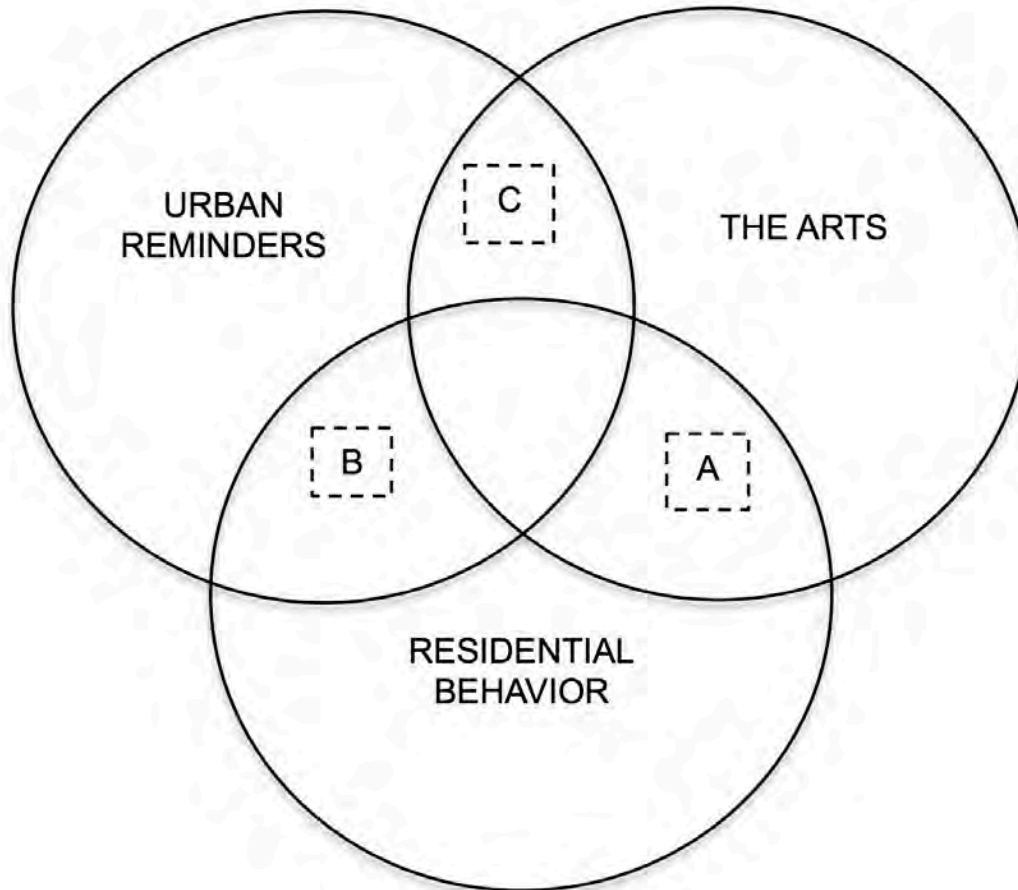
**Table 2. Examples of literature reviewed in Phase One.**

Source/s	Potential socially constructed city elements
(Gunn, 1972)	Geographical events Written discourse (e.g. newspapers, geography books, fiction, nonfiction) History and geography lessons (e.g. books, teacher's interpretation)
(Gunn, 1988)	Newspapers, periodicals, books (e.g. children's geography, history books) Physical land characteristics/ resources
(Gunn, 1997)	Media (e.g. newspapers, documentaries) Literature (e.g. novels, non-fiction) Education Word-of-mouth (e.g. friends, family)
(Gartner, 1994)	Direct experience Word-of-mouth Requested personal sources information News and popular culture
(Hankinson, 2004)	Literature Education History The arts
(Blichfeldt, 2005; Braun et al., 2013)	Residential behavior

Figure 1 depicts three socially constructed city elements that emit symbolic messages about the city in different, yet highly interrelated, ways: (1) urban reminders, (2) the arts and (3) residential behavior. In contrast to intentional city branding efforts that intend to communicate symbolic messages in ways that establish certain understandings in certain audiences, these city elements express, discharge, send forth or 'emit' symbolic messages about the city as part of everyday socio-cultural meaning-making. We, thus, adopt the term 'emit' hereafter to reinforce this distinction. More specifically, tangible and intangible urban reminders (e.g. architecture and folk tales) emit symbolic messages about the city's distant and more recent past. Artistic representations of the city, as well as artistic output thought to embody a sense of place, emit symbolic messages about the city's past, present and future. Residential behavior, as in how 'residents' are understood to go about their daily lives, conversing in the street, eating food, listening to music and wearing clothes, emits symbolic messages about values, beliefs and lifestyles. Examining interrelationships between the elements (i.e. Figure 1 components A, B and C) offers further insight into the nature of each.

Initially, however, we conceptualize how the elements emit symbolic messages about the city, commencing with urban reminders.

**Figure 1. Socially constructed city elements emitting symbolic messages.**



### **Urban reminders**

Socially constructed urban reminders (see Figure 1) emit symbolic messages about the city's distant and more recent past. More specifically, *tangible* urban reminders, such as architecture, and *intangible* urban reminders, such as folk tales, constantly emit symbolic messages about the city during some point or period in time.



### ***Tangible urban reminders***

Some aspects of the city's physical environment and spatial layout, inherited from previous inhabitants and events, emit symbolic messages about the city (Lewicka, 2008). More pointedly, socially constructed aspects of the city's physical environment (i.e. 'historical' buildings, 'traditional' streets, 'quintessential' Parisian cafés) emit symbolic messages about various events, interactions and behaviors that are thought to have taken place there. For example, 'medieval' churches, building facades and canals emit symbolic messages about Utrecht (Netherlands) centuries ago (Mommaas, 2004: 513). Of course, the physical form of tangible urban reminders evolves through renovations, deterioration, demolition, altered uses and so on. However, ongoing social construction of the city's built environment (e.g. newspaper representations, city branding advertisements, casual conversations, tour guide descriptions) 'preserves' particular structures and areas as tangible reminders of the city's past. For example, Kulturbrauerei, a building complex in Prenzlauer Berg (Berlin) that once housed a brewery, symbolizes the district's past (Kalandides, 2011: 32). Further, 'historical' architecture thought or believed to embody a sense of the city, during a particular time, can enable people to vicariously experience the city as it was (Curtis, 2009: 51). Such 'historical' architecture represents another potential form of tangible urban reminder emitting potent symbolic messages about the city's past. More nuanced aspects of the city's physical environment and spatial landscape, such as cafes and shop signs, can also emit symbolic messages about the city's past (Lees, 1994: 457), depending on the social construction of these details (e.g. travelers sharing memories of 'quintessentially Parisian' cafés). We now extend this conceptualization further to socially constructed *intangible* urban reminders such as folk tales, legends and stories that also emit persuasive symbolic messages about the city.

### ***Intangible urban reminders***

Constantly constructed through casual conversation and manipulated by socio-cultural institutions (e.g. the media, education), folk tales and other urban stories morph over time (Lewicka, 2008). Thus, the symbolic messages about the city that such 'intangible' urban reminders emit also evolve. For example, the myth of an elegant, confident, sensual and stylish Parisian woman, commonly known as *la Parisienne*, has long been considered an incarnation of Paris (Humphrey, 2012: 257) that reinforces the city's 'cultural superiority' and overall 'aura' (Rocamora, 2006: 50, 54). Humphrey (2012: 260–

262) examines how *Miss.Tic*, a counter-culture graffiti artist, draws upon the *la Parisienne* myth to question prevailing notions of femininity in her work. People interact with this art as they walk and otherwise move about Paris. Hence, due in part to the actions of this artist, and the broader ongoing social construction of the *la Parisienne* myth, this dynamic intangible urban reminder emits symbolic messages about Parisian women and Paris as a place. This illustration also highlights that tangible urban reminders (e.g. graffiti walls) and intangible urban reminders (e.g. myths) may intertwine.

Tangible and intangible urban reminders are socially constructed and thus fluid. However, the symbolic messages that these city elements emit, especially those associated with celebrated and popular city narratives, endure, in various forms, for centuries (Blokland, 2009; Cresswell, 2004). For instance, Miami Beach (Florida) has evolved considerably since the city's 'Art Deco phase' (Molotch et al., 2000: 818). However, urban reminders including myths and architecture, connected with this 'phase', continue to emit symbolic messages about the city (Curtis, 2009). Further, multiple stakeholder groups, including those groups directly seeking to brand the city, attempt to manipulate how people understand the past for various purposes (Kalandides, 2011; Lees, 1994; Lewicka, 2008; see also for example Kong, 2013). Such attempts further stimulate the ongoing social construction of urban reminders. For example, sanctioning and preserving 'historical' monuments (e.g. Warnaby et al., 2010) stimulates the social construction of tangible urban reminders to 'important' past events. Further, urban planners and other groups with vested interests in the city brand (e.g. investors) exert considerable influence upon the appearance of urban environments (Ashworth, 2009: 14; Giovanardi, 2012: 39; Hunt and Zacharias, 2008: 49–50). Ultimately, however, the social construction of urban reminders unfolds beyond the control of groups seeking to brand the city. Moreover, these groups are unable to control how people interact with the city's physical environment and spatial landscape during the course of everyday urban life (Warnaby et al., 2010), or how people construct more personalised meaning from the symbolic messages they interact with (Harvey, 1996: 322; Lynch, 1960: 1–2). Adding further uncontrollability, individuals and collectives construct 'the past' differently (Lees, 1994: 463) and some aspects of what is thought to have taken place in the city dissolve entirely (Cresswell, 2004: 85–93; Kalandides, 2011). Therefore, urban reminders represent a highly dynamic city element continually emitting symbolic messages. A

second city element, the arts, feeds this dynamism by empowering the social construction of urban reminders.

## **The arts**

Supposedly 'culture-led' urban regeneration and city branding strategies have drawn upon the arts for over a century (DiMaggio, 1982; Whitt, 1987), continuously reinforcing social construction of 'the arts' as a fundamental element of what the city consists of and what takes place in the city. However, how do the arts emit symbolic messages about cities in the course of everyday urban life? Our review and synthesis of social science literature (see Table 1) indicates that various arts sectors, from 'high culture' (e.g. museums, opera, theatre), to 'popular culture' (e.g. commercial fashion, music, food) (DiMaggio, 1982: 33), emit symbolic messages about the city through (1) explicit artistic representation of place and (2) artistic output embodying a sense of place. Thus, we refer to these sectors collectively as *the arts* (see Figure 1).

### ***Explicit artistic representation of place***

Depiction of cities in artistic output (e.g. a film set in New York City) shapes what cities mean to people (Donald, 1999). Further, some artistic place representations transport people to faraway places, enabling vicarious experience of other worlds (Relph, 1976; Tuan, 1975; see also Berger and Luckmann, 1966: 25). Crucially, however, rather than duplicating or mirroring reality (Tuan, 1975: 161), artists often represent cities selectively, abstractly and idealistically (Relph, 1976). Hence, explicit artistic representations emit *symbolic* messages about the city. These representations simultaneously stimulate social construction of other city elements, namely, urban reminders and residential behavior (e.g. a painting depicting a legendary figure).

### ***Artistic output embodying a sense of place***

Narrow focus on explicit artistic representations of the city overlooks how artistic output, socially constructed as embodying a *sense of place*, also emits symbolic messages about the city. For example, people associate live performances, films and other output produced in Westergasfabriek, a creative milieu in Amsterdam, with this milieu's dynamic, experimental and innovative atmosphere (Bonink and Hitters, 2001: 236). The output does not necessarily depict Westergasfabriek, Amsterdam, or any particular place. However, thought to embody a *sense of place*, this output emits symbolic

messages about Westergasfabriek. To provide another more succinct illustration, the media (e.g. fashion magazines) and other socio-cultural institutions construct 'Parisian fashion' as an embodiment of Paris (Rocamora, 2006: 46). In turn, this output emits symbolic messages about 'Paris'. Similarly, the feel of a leather jacket thought to embody a sense of Florence, the taste of 'authentic' Brazilian coffee, or the sound of Chicago jazz, could also emit symbolic messages about cities as people produce, listen to, participate in, observe or otherwise consume this output during the course of daily life.

Some artists intend to imbue their output with the 'essence', atmosphere and 'state of mind' of certain places (Molotch, 2002: 666). Still, artists cannot control how people, groups and society understand their output. Rather, art galleries, museums, journalists and consumers construct shared understandings, potentially leading to taken-for-granted knowledge that a particular artistic output embodies a sense of place. Additionally, consumers re-work the symbolic messages that this output emits (Venkatesh and Meamber, 2006: 13), sometimes reinforcing a shared belief that particular output embodies a sense of place. For example, people who live and work on farms in Australia intentionally rub their *Akubra* hats in the dirt to make them look worn (Lobban, 2015). This consumption behavior stimulates social construction of the Akubra hat as a physical embodiment of 'Australian working life' (see for example Lobban, 2015: para 2). Thus, while people consume primarily to express their sense of self (Nöth, 1990: 443; Venkatesh and Meamber, 2006; Zukin, 1998: 835), consumption behaviors encourage the social construction of artistic output, including everyday objects (e.g. the Akubra), embodying a sense of place. Further, as our initial discussion of the role of 'artistic' production and consumption milieu in symbolic communication about cities alludes, the arts intersect with the third city element: residential behavior (see Figure 1).

### **Residential behavior**

City branding scholars conceptualize the contribution of residents to city brands in various ways (e.g. Braun et al., 2013; Freire, 2009; Hudak, 2015: 48; Kalandides, 2011; Kerr and Oliver, 2015: 67; Warnaby and Medway, 2013: 355–356). However, the particular dynamics of how residents emit symbolic messages about the city, in the course of urban life, and through their everyday behavior, remain unclear. Synthesis of insights from city branding, and cognate social science disciplines, indicates that

residents emit symbolic messages about the city through (1) explicit place representations and (2) emblematic behaviors. These representations and behaviors comprise 'residential behavior' as a social construct.

### ***Residents' explicit place representations***

Residents regularly express personal constructions of the city through voice (e.g. face-to-face conversations), text (e.g. social media posts) and images (e.g. short films) (Braun et al., 2013: 21; Henshaw et al., 2015: 161–162; Hudak, 2015). Rather than depicting the city objectively, residents draw upon socially constructed knowledge to convey more personal place representations. Arousing and enriching conversations about where one lives or once lived, these residential behaviors also stimulate ongoing social construction of other city elements. Consider, for example, how one New York City resident stimulates ongoing social construction of numerous city elements through text on her blog, *New York Notes*:

The myriad neighborhoods [sic], each a distinct city in itself. The historic buildings and monolithic towers. The museums and galleries housing the history of art and culture. The evolving roster of restaurants, bars and cafés that are some of the best and coolest in the world. And the people, some born here, others from across the globe, who have welcomed me and my family with open arms and warm hearts (New York Notes, n.d.: para 1).

Reference to museums and galleries (i.e. tangible urban reminders) as 'housing the history of arts and culture' also highlights how residents' explicit place representations can shape the symbolic messages about the city that these elements emit (New York City is significant in the world of art and culture, refined, cultured, artistic etc.).

The manner in which residents convey explicit place representations can also emit symbolic messages about the city. For instance, car bumper stickers bearing slogans such as 'New Orleans: Third World and Proud of It' (see Gotham, 2002: 1743; Hudak, 2015: 44) emit symbolic, potentially emotive and comic messages about the city. Regardless of any explicit place representation though, use of such bumper stickers is, in itself, a symbolic behavior that could indicate residents are 'passionate' or perhaps

'irreverent'. As such, residents' explicit place representations also involve emblematic residential behaviors.

### ***Emblematic residential behaviors***

A person's ordinary everyday behaviors convey their internal values and beliefs (Williams, 1965: 57). More broadly, habits, assumptions and routines (e.g. cooking, clothing, talking) communicate messages about how a particular group of people see the world (i.e. how things are) and their way of life (i.e. how we do things around here) (Edensor, 2002: 17–23). When recognised as 'emblematic' (i.e. recognizable, typical, characteristic) of the people who live and belong in the city, residential behavior such as language, food, dance and dress emit symbolic messages about the city. For instance, the way that Pittsburgh (United States) locals speak (e.g. 'nebbly' instead of nosy, 'dahntahn' instead of downtown) and other odd city rituals such as claiming parking spots with milk crates, emits symbolic messages about Pittsburgh (e.g. quirkiness) (Hudak, 2015: 44, 46). Consider also Zukin's (2001: 11) characterization of New York City as a dirty, chaotic and oppositional city where people are forthright about their differences and the harsh reality of daily life. Thus, residents emit symbolic messages about the city, even when not explicitly representing the city.

People who interact with socially constructed emblematic residential behaviors during the course of everyday urban life may use the symbolic messages emitted by these behaviors to draw conclusions about residents' values, beliefs and lifestyles, and the city's broader social environment. For instance, everyday 'Milanese' business practices signify the importance of the past, family, friendly relations and trust to Milanese people (Bovone, 2005: 377). Depending on how a person interacts with these symbolic messages about the city, the Milanese way of doing business may shape beliefs about Milan's social environment (e.g. traditional, respectful) and the overall meaning of Milan to that individual. From a more historical perspective, around the 19th century, illegal trading, prostitution and rough manufacturing work emitted symbolic messages about the area of Hoxton in London (e.g. dirty, socially deprived) (Pratt, 2009: 1045). Despite considerable attempts to re-brand Hoxton, and likely misalignment between contemporary constructions of past residential behaviors and how current Hoxton residents go about their daily lives, connections with edginess and filth persist (Pratt, 2009: 1053).

As a socially constructed city element, 'residential behavior' may encompass a range of people and behavior sets (e.g. 'cosmopolitan' Singaporeans, 'traditional' Singaporeans). However, everyday knowledge of 'residential behavior' and associated categories of 'residents' may not reflect all, or most, people who live in the city. Thus, sidewalk encounters that do not align with taken-for-granted knowledge of how residents of the city behave might lead to the conclusion: '*he mustn't be from around here*' or '*this area has changed*'. Examining the nexus between residential behavior and the arts (see component A Figure 1) further dissects how the latter inspires the former, and vice versa.

### **Nexus: Residential behavior and the arts**

The 'arts' that residents produce and/or consume fuse with the city's social fabric (Bonink and Hitters, 2001: 228). More pointedly, the production and/or consumption of 'art' often features in how 'residents' are thought to behave and, thus, ensuing symbolic messages about the city. Looking first at artistic production, young artists bring a sense of 'style', 'new ideas' and 'cool' to various districts of New York City (Zukin, 2001: 7). Put differently, the behaviors through which these artists construct personal brands (e.g. dress, social greetings, hairstyles) simultaneously emit symbolic messages about the areas they congregate. Emblematic consumption behaviors also emit symbolic messages (e.g. sophisticated, refined, elite) about the city as a place. For instance, in a music context, Oakes and Warnaby (2011: 410) highlight that conspicuous consumption of a particular musical genre can become a recognizable 'public statement of affiliation to the values associated with that genre'. Similarly, producing and consuming rock and roll music emits messages about working class values and lifestyles (Lipsitz, 1984). Engaging with more explicitly multi-sensory artistic contexts, such as music, helps to further penetrate the nexus between residential behavior and the arts.

Emblematic residential behaviors are integral to the social construction of artistic output that embodies a sense of place. To illustrate, culturally-diverse musicians play music in New York City's streets and subways (Tanenbaum, 1995). The emblematic behaviors of these musicians (i.e. person playing an instrument in the street) emit symbolic messages about the city (e.g. creative people live and belong in New York City) (Tanenbaum, 1995: 222–223). People often gather spontaneously to enjoy the

sound and atmosphere as the musicians play. This collective act (and emblematic consumption behavior) signals that New Yorkers 'need more than packaged, mediated, and controlled cultural experiences in their lives' (Tanenbaum, 1995: 225). Additionally, however, the behavior of the musicians and their audiences stimulates the social construction of the music played as embodying a sense of New York City. In turn, the *sound* of this music emits symbolic messages about the city (e.g. diversity, freedom) (Tanenbaum, 1995). While shared understandings of New York City's urban music scene have evolved over centuries, some production and consumption-orientated milieux emerge and recede at various points throughout history, thus stimulating ongoing social construction of tangible and intangible urban reminders (e.g. venues, legends).

### **Nexus: Residential behavior and urban reminders**

In the short term, residential behaviors, such as shopping, live music, voting, praying and celebrations, bring urban places 'alive' (Lees, 1994: 443). Or, as Kerr and Oliver (2015: 67) aptly describe, human behavior transforms an outdoor basketball court from a slab of concrete to a 'place of sport and socialisation'. As time progresses, residents' explicit place representations and emblematic residential behaviors can foster the social construction of tangible and intangible urban reminders to the past as elements of the city (e.g. 'that is where our championship basketball team trained'). Further, contemporary understandings of how earlier 'residents' utilized certain spaces can also stimulate the social construction of tangible urban reminders to the more distant past. For example, public squares and boulevards in Paris represent tangible reminders of how residents once behaved there (e.g. marching, military parades, joyous ceremonies) (Lees, 1994: 457). Similarly, a Jewish synagogue and cemetery in Prenzlauer Berg (Berlin) provide urban reminders of the character that a Jewish community is understood to have brought to the district around the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries (Kalandides, 2011: 33). Of course, various 'residents' flow through particular areas. For instance, waves of Irish, Jewish, German, Italian, Eastern European, Haitian, Puerto Rican and Chinese immigrants have inhabited the Lower East Side area of Manhattan (New York) (Cresswell, 2004: 3). 'Bohemian counter-cultures', 'homeless people', 'squatters', 'artists' and the 'upper-middle class' have also called this area home (Cresswell, 2004: 3). Thus, as 'residents' move around the city, what constitutes emblematic 'residential' behavior for particular areas evolves and urban reminders adapt.



Residents, other people (e.g. tourists), various socio-cultural institutions (e.g. media, education) and intentional city branding efforts continually construct folklore and stories (i.e. intangible urban reminders) about how 'residents' behave. As Tuan (1980: 462–463) states, 'customary behavior gains significance as it is captured and recreated in a story'. Some residential behaviors, such as storytelling (Lewicka, 2008: 211; Mittilä and Lepistö, 2013: 149), other forms of conversation (Berger and Luckmann, 1966: 68) and traditional celebrations (Blokland, 2009: 1594), are particularly influential in the ongoing social construction of intangible urban reminders. Hence, urban reminders and residential behavior remain in constant interaction (see component B Figure 1). Urban reminders also interlace with the arts (see component C Figure 1).

### **Nexus: Urban reminders and the arts**

Intangible urban reminders (e.g. myths, fables, legends) often feature city residents who produce and/or consume art (Mittilä and Lepistö, 2013: 149), thus reinforcing construction of 'artistic' production and consumption as 'emblematic' residential behaviors. Additionally, some groups construct artistic output as tangible urban reminders to the past. Consider, for example, the Aboriginal engravings that remain alongside graffiti style markings of European settlers in a sandstone rockshelter near Mount Elliot (Queensland, Australia). These artistic outputs emit symbolic messages about the events thought to have taken place in this area (Winchester et al., 1996: 1). Further, artists who claim to draw creative inspiration from a city's past (e.g. Lipsitz, 1984) stimulate social construction of the ensuing output as embodying a sense of the city in that time. Moreover, the symbolic messages that artistic outputs emit can reinforce selected elements of first-hand experience (Tuan, 1975: 161), depending on how people interact with that output and broader meaning frames. To provide a simplified example, a person who once lived in Vienna interacts with paintings depicting the Austrian capital differently to someone who has never visited this city.

Artistic production and consumption behaviors contribute to the social construction of another major tangible urban reminder: the particular *locations* that these behaviors are thought to take place. For instance, the Franz-Club (East Berlin) is considered a legendary music and entertainment venue (Kalandides, 2011: 31), due in part to how past residents utilized this space. The ongoing social construction of such 'artistic' venues fosters tangible urban reminders emitting symbolic messages about the

city (e.g. 'cultured', 'grungy', 'hip') during loosely-agreed-upon time periods. Hence, the fundamental elements that constitute what the city is thought to consist of and what is thought to take place in the city (i.e. urban reminders, the arts and residential behavior) interact constantly.

### **A more holistic view of city brand meaning-making processes**

Attempting to isolate urban reminders, the arts or residential behavior would inhibit a comprehensive understanding of how these socially constructed city elements emit symbolic messages about the city. For instance, as 'residents' move into and around the city, the 'past' is retold and new 'artistic' milieux replace dying 'traditions'. In terms of city brand meaning, these elements represent overarching mechanisms that trigger complex semiotic processes. The multifarious and interweaving signifiers at play include: (1) *aspects of the city's physical environment and spatial layout* (e.g. building structures, street corners), (2) *behaviors* (e.g. person busking in the street), (3) *images* (e.g. photographs in a fiction book), (4) *everyday objects* (e.g. clothing items, food), (5) *words* (e.g. stories told about the past, song lyrics) and (6) *sounds* (e.g. instrumental music). Ongoing social construction of what constitutes the city and what takes place in the city enables these signifiers to emit (i.e. express, discharge, send forth) an indeterminate range of symbolic messages about the city such as 'traditional', 'cosmopolitan' and so on. To reiterate, seemingly mundane everyday behaviors become emblematic 'residential' behaviors; a particular instrumental music is thought to embody a sense of place, or a derelict building encapsulates the city's past. Thus, the endurance of socially constructed city elements, and ensuing symbolic messages about the city, should not be underestimated, even as intentional city branding efforts intensify.

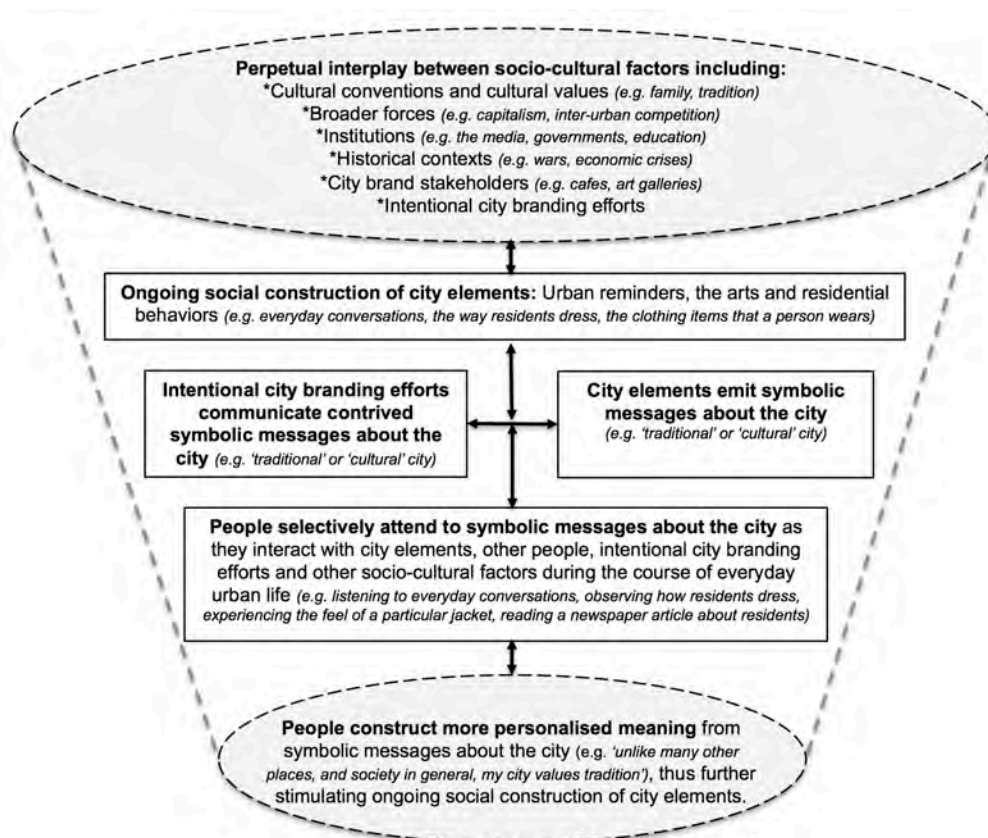
The three socially constructed city elements propel (i.e. spur on, drive forward) the socio-cultural meaning-making processes that envelop city brands, including:

- The perpetual interplay of intentional city branding efforts (which may be collaborative, co-created etc.), city brand stakeholders going about 'their business' and other socio-cultural factors (e.g. cultural values, historical contexts) that stimulate the ongoing social construction of what the city consists of and what takes place in the city (i.e. urban reminders, the arts, residential behavior 'propel' these meaning-making processes by offering some shared form and meaning to everyday urban thought and experience);

- Symbolic communication about cities (i.e. urban reminders, the arts and residential behavior emit symbolic messages about the city in different, yet highly interrelated, ways while inviting manipulation and contestation of these elements by various individuals and groups);
- Attendance to, and construction of more personalised meaning from, symbolic messages about the city as people interact with socially constructed city elements, other people, intentional city branding efforts (which may attempt to manipulate city elements) and other socio-cultural factors during the course of everyday urban life; and
- The more personalised meaning that people construct from symbolic messages about the city, in turn, further stimulates the ongoing social construction of the city elements.

Hence, conceptualization of how the elements emit symbolic messages throughout the first part of this paper enables a more holistic view of these constantly overlapping *city brand meaning-making processes* (see Figure 2 for visual encapsulation).

**Figure 2. Encapsulation of city brand meaning-making processes.**



## **Advancing a more comprehensive understanding of city brand meaning co-creation**

The conceptualization and ensuing more holistic view of city brand meaning-making processes developed in the first part of this paper (see Figure 2) opens up a fresh critical lens for marketing scholars to develop more comprehensive understandings of city brand meaning co-creation as part of socio-cultural meaning-making and, more particularly, everyday urban life. Specifically, we now turn attention to demonstrating how this lens can advance intellectual debates around city branding and broader marketing theory by offering enhanced insights into the non-marketer-controlled aspects of city brand meaning co-creation on both:

- A more '*micro-level*' (i.e. individual people constructing more personalised meaning from symbolic messages about the city; see also smaller oval Figure 2); and
- A more '*macro-level*' (i.e. the perpetual interplay between socially constructed city elements, intentional city branding efforts, city brand stakeholders going about 'their business' and socio-cultural factors; see also larger oval Figure 2).

### **Micro-level city brand meaning co-creation**

People attend, selectively, to an indeterminate and potentially inconsistent mix of symbolic messages about cities as they interact with socially constructed city elements (i.e. urban reminders, the arts, residential behavior), other people, city branding efforts and other socio-cultural factors (e.g. media, education, cultural values). People construct more personalised meaning from this selective mix while casually making some sense of urban life, effectively co-creating city brand meaning on a micro-level.

The critical lens opened up in the first part of this paper also helps to understand, more precisely, how people construct narratives around the city as they synthesize various symbolic messages (i.e. rather than attending to isolated messages). Consider one resident's description of Prenzlauer Berg (Berlin): '...this was the place where the East German intelligentsia lived. All of the unconventional people who did not fit into the system. Then we had the Franz-Club right at the end of the street and that was a legend' (Kalandides, 2011: 31). This comment suggests the resident has interacted with (1) emblematic residential behaviors (e.g. how the intelligentsia and unconventional people lived), (2) urban reminders (e.g. stories featuring past residents, the legend surrounding

the Franz-Club, the original location of the Franz-Club) and (3) the arts (e.g. music and entertainment produced and consumed within the Franz-Club). Even when expressed through short descriptions, as in this example, more personalised city narratives feed back to further stimulate the ongoing social construction of city elements (residents quoted in the media, travelers sharing adventure stories etc.). Of course, after some analysis of official and promotional texts, it may be relatively straightforward to identify intentional city branding efforts that resonate with this more personalised city narrative and, thus, assume some contributory role. However, the lens developed in this paper illuminates more of the socio-cultural meaning-making processes that intersect with and transcend intentional city branding efforts (see Figure 2). Expanding the parameters of marketing theory in this way helps to contextualize intentional city branding efforts within a more holistic view of city brand meaning-making processes attune to expansive, persistent social construction of the city's elements and the more micro-level city brand meaning co-creation that plays out as people negotiate the urban realm.

Although casual, transient and perhaps cursory, the sense that people make of urban life, while interacting (first-hand, virtually, vicariously etc.) with socially constructed city elements, may be of relevance to personal identity projects (see Belk, 1988 for early discussion but also Stone et al., 2017) and, thus, broader consumption and marketing theory terrains. For instance, the brief description of Prenzlauer Berg quoted above (from Kalandides, 2011: 31) packages a self who appreciates subtle resistance against the mainstream and is knowledgeable about social movements. To illustrate further, consider how blogger *Garance Doré* constructs a self (e.g. where I come from, where I belong, what I remember, what I believe, what I know and who I am in this moment) in relation to multiple 'places', and constituent socially constructed city elements (residential behavior and urban reminders most evidently), while discussing the myth that all Parisian women exude style and elegance:

If you want my Corsican point of view, by way of Marseille, Paris, and New York, I think that the cliché of the Parisian has some truth, but at the same time, and you know, I'm definitely not one... I'm a southern girl. The Mediterranean is pumping through my veins. I come from a completely different culture than Paris and I remember feeling so out of place when I first got there. It was tough to adapt. But I learned to know and love

the Parisienne... And after all, Paris is a city of clichés and it's one of the reasons we love it, right? (Garance Doré, 2013: para 38–41).

Perhaps especially as we progress in increasingly 'rootless' and (supposedly) 'placeless' (see Cresswell, 2004: 43–49; Relph, 1976) times, socially constructed city elements (see Figure 1) could offer additional ripe, yet malleable, meanings with which people can construe themselves, relate to other people, 'experience' 'place/s' and, more generally, make sense of contemporary urban life. Eyeing fresh insights into everyday urban sense-making through the lens opened up in this paper could, thus, also contribute towards advancing marketing research into 'place' consumption dynamics (e.g. travel, recreation, (online) community involvement, socialization) and interrelated consumption practices across various domains such as food/diet (see Askegaard and Kjeldgaard, 2007; Kong, 2013; Zukin, 1998 pointing to such interrelations).

### **Macro-level city brand meaning co-creation**

Given the historical and global prevalence of city branding (Green et al., 2016; Kavartzis, 2004), it is important to underscore that people interact, often simultaneously, with socially constructed city elements *and* intentional city branding efforts. For instance, around the late 1960s and 1970s, governments and private corporations (e.g. lifestyle magazines, real estate groups) portrayed New York City as, *inter alia*, a safe and hip place for 'young social-climbing urbanites' to live, work and shop (Greenberg, 2008: 11). These contrived symbolic messages about the city omit both: (1) the daily struggles of local residents enduring austerity measures, lay-offs and crime and (2) a cultural renaissance developing in the city's underground art world and 'on the walls of the subway cars criss-crossing the street' (Greenberg, 2008: 11). Regardless, for many people, New York remained a gritty working class city (Greenberg, 2008). Therefore, drawing upon the lens opened up in this paper, perhaps the city's 'hardworking', 'unemployed' and 'rebellious' social groups continued to emit symbolic messages throughout the 1970s and beyond. Further, city elements that did not fit into the desired city brand (e.g. behaviors emblematic of 'rebellious' artists, the venues they congregate around, output embodying New York City's 'darker side') may have continued to emit messages about an 'underground' art world (see Currid, 2008: 28–35; Greenberg, 2008 for indicative discussion). Of course, other intentional city branding

efforts may have, simultaneously or successively, sought to manipulate less 'desirable' city elements (e.g. portraying New York City's cultural and artistic scenes as enticing consumption opportunities, see Greenberg, 2008). In turn, however, as Figure 2 reinforces, this selective manipulation stimulates the ongoing and inherently uncontrollable social construction of each element (and constituent nexuses) that people interact with everyday.

The lens provided in this paper also energizes critical intellectual debates around city branding by enabling advanced perception of how socially constructed city elements and intentional city branding efforts intertwine on even deeper levels. Continuing with the above example, could intentional efforts to portray New York City as a 'safe' and 'hip' place for 'young social-climbing urbanites' have also stimulated the social construction of New York City's 'underground' art world by, essentially, providing an official or sanctioned point of reference against which other city elements could be meaningfully constructed as 'underground'? Further, could omission of local residents' daily struggles and emphasis on 'social-climbing urbanites' have fostered meaningful social construction of an alternative version of a 'New Yorker' as 'working class' and 'hardworking'? Emblematic residential behaviors constituting the latter could be particularly conducive to the identity projects of people residing in New York who do not (aspire to) fit the 'social-climbing urbanite' mold. In other words, can intentional city branding efforts stimulate the expansive social construction of city elements in contrasting or contradictory ways, even if not igniting more surface level resistance (e.g. grassroots, counter or guerilla style branding)? Indeed, 'no sign can have meaning except inasmuch as it is differentiated' from all other signs (see Bignell, 2002: 9; Mick, 1986: 197, 203 for discussion). Such penetrations illustrate how the more holistic view of city brand meaning-making processes, advanced in this paper, shines fresh light on the deep, *constitutional*, intertwining of socially constructed city elements and intentional city branding efforts. More broadly, the 'less intentional' dimensions of city branding efforts (e.g. provision of official or sanctioned points of reference) could, in some cases, eventually outweigh more intentional dimensions (e.g. selective manipulation of particular city elements to communicate contrived symbolic messages about the city). The former dimensions are perhaps more diffuse and challenging to discern overall. However, these insights offer constructive momentum and enhanced foundations for

more critical and comprehensive marketing theory perspectives on the socio-cultural nature of city branding.

The more holistic view of city brand meaning-making processes, encapsulated in Figure 2, also enables advanced perception of the interplay between various city brand stakeholders (e.g. journalists, residents, local art galleries, tourists, cafe owners) and socio-cultural factors. Fundamentally, the lens developed in this paper further illuminates the role of various stakeholders in the ongoing social construction of city elements, even when not consciously involved in participatory, supportive or resistive city branding efforts. For instance, popular hangouts such as Andy Warhol's Factory, mixed-use venues such as the nightclub-restaurant Max's Kansas City and countless art galleries may have been instrumental in the ongoing social construction of city elements emitting symbolic messages about New York City's 'underground' art world and a sense of 'cultural renaissance' around the 1960s and 1970s (see Currid, 2008: 26–27, 29, 30, 31 for indicative examples). As well as providing informal nodes for creative exchange, such stakeholders possess numerous socio-cultural resources of special consequence in this context, ranging from friendship-based connections with rogue artists, tastemakers, editors and critics, to an overarching aura of credibility that attracts interest and enables influence (see Currid, 2008). These resources offer great city branding potential in terms of stimulating the social construction of city elements, perhaps in ways that support (or at least do not contradict) desired city brands. Of course, dynamic socio-cultural forces also surround New York City during this period including: the rise of the symbolic economy and the commercialization of art, fiscal crisis, rising poverty, poor job prospects, declining tourism, increasing inter-urban competition and shifting real estate markets. Greenberg (2008) also chronicles mixed, yet highly influential, media coverage, cultural values such as freedom and complex historical contexts of class and race-based prejudices.

City brand management groups are unable to control socio-cultural factors such as job prospects and cultural values, or how various stakeholders go about 'their business'. Still, understanding the nuanced socio-cultural resources that enable stakeholders, such as small-scale art galleries, art dealers and bloggers, to interactively stimulate the social construction of city elements could illuminate strategic avenues for enriching (or at least not inhibiting) these resources. Speaking even more directly to the



contemporary impetus for participatory city branding (see for example Kavaratzis and Hatch, 2013; Kavaratzis and Kalandides, 2015: 1379; Medway et al., 2015; Warnaby and Medway, 2013: 358), such avenues could, in turn, support the meaningful social construction of city elements in ways that facilitate (yet not control or ‘manage’) city brand meaning co-creation. *Meaningful* here refers to city elements that offer some relevant form and shared sense to contemporary thought and everyday urban experience. Of course, if resonating culturally, these elements would invite manipulation and contestation by individuals (e.g. towards personal identity projects) and various groups (e.g. journalists) as part of the perpetual, expansive and inherently uncontrollable social construction of what the city consists of and what takes place in the city. Nonetheless, in the case of residential behavior at least, could supporting the circulation of more, and more different, social constructions of who lives and belongs in the city, *in itself*, represent a viable step away from top-down city brand management that prioritizes consistency and control?

## **Conclusion**

The conceptualization and holistic view of city brand meaning-making processes developed in this paper (see Figure 1, Figure 2) do not challenge the notion that multiple stakeholders, including those contributing to intentional branding efforts, co-create city brand meaning. Rather, this paper advances the literature in terms of theory building by providing a fresh, critical lens for marketing scholars to view *more of* the complex processes through which various stakeholders co-create city brand meaning as part of socio-cultural meaning-making. Crucially, this lens enables us to grasp, to a greater extent, a domain that contemporary marketing theory appears to fall short: the inherently uncontrollable aspects of city brand meaning co-creation caught up with everyday urban life.

## **Future research directions**

While ‘real’ world examples from extant literature illustrate arguments throughout the paper, further empirical research is necessary to get closer to the meaning-making process that envelop city brands. As highlighted above, greater understanding of the nuanced socio-cultural resources that enable various stakeholders to stimulate ongoing social construction of city elements could point to strategic avenues for facilitating (but

not controlling or 'managing') city brand meaning co-creation. Case study research could also help to examine the interplay of socially constructed city elements, more personalised city narratives, intentional city branding efforts, various stakeholders and socio-cultural factors within particular contexts. Moreover, people are exposed to more symbolic messages about cities than they can make sense of (Holloway and Hubbard, 2001: 48; Lynch, 1960: 1). Therefore, such research should prioritize a more in-depth phenomenological understanding of how people selectively attend to and construct meaning from these messages. However, signs and symbols permeate everyday realities (Berger and Luckmann, 1966: 41; Bignell, 2002: 7; Mick, 1986: 196). Therefore, the socially constructed city elements that propel city brand meaning-making processes should remain a key thread in marketing theory moving forward because this is where the magic of urban life and, thus, the meaning of cities to people, radiates.

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