Chapter 16
Branding Cities in the Age of Social Media: A Comparative Assessment of Local Government Performance

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Abstract This chapter is a comparative study of how three local governments—Cape Town (South Africa), Philadelphia (Pennsylvania, USA), and Myrtle Beach (South Carolina, USA)—use social media platforms in their city branding attempts. Theoretical arguments in the fields of corporate and city branding point out the potential of these new communication platforms to change how brand-related content is created and shared with target audiences. However, the practice is understudied. The study first explains the potential of social media in branding through media ecology, city brand communication, and brand co-creation theories. Second, the performance of the aforementioned three cities on social media is evaluated by analyzing their Twitter and Facebook presence. The findings suggest that there is room for improvement for local governments in their employment of social media for city branding campaigns. The chapter concludes with recommendations for practitioners.

16.1 Introduction

This chapter sheds light on the use of social media by local governments in their attempts to influence how they are perceived by publics, or in other words, to build and promote their place brands (Lucarelli and Berg 2011). Social media, despite their short history as an electronic communication method, emerged as a viable platform to disseminate messages and create relationships with target audiences (Jansen et al. 2009). Following an "engage or die" understanding, various corporations and organizations have integrated social media into their overall branding

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strategies (Solis 2011). The main puzzle in this research is articulated around the aspiration to determine whether the local governments have shown similar incentives to increase their activities online.

Social media—regardless of the specific platform in question—have the potential to bring two important changes to the practice of place and destination branding. First, local governments are able to create multimedia content with relatively smaller budgets compared to traditional media platforms such as print or television (Mendes 2013). Consequently, during the last couple of years, there have been various digital communication campaigns in place branding—from a stone skipping robot controlled by internet users[1] to citizens acting as the spokespersons for their country.[2] Second, social media platforms gave the local governments a virtual office (Auer et al. 2012). Cities started to enjoy a digital embodiment. For instance, through Twitter, individual users can directly talk to and interact with places such as San Francisco (@onlyinSF)[3] and Paris (@Parisjecoute) (Sevin 2013).

Within this context, the objective of this research is to assess whether local governments have been able to benefit from the possible changes introduced by social media platforms. There are two research questions asked: (1) *What is the content shared by local governments on social media for place branding purposes*? and (2) *What is the role of digital "engagement" or "two-way communication" in social media branding campaigns*? The former question is posed at the content of the messages disseminated, whereas the latter inquires about the relationships created with the target audiences. The answers to the research questions are given by an analysis of social media communication practices of three cities that have been deemed as prominent adopters of new media technology in their marketing and branding attempts: Cape Town (South Africa), Philadelphia (Pennsylvania, USA), and Myrtle Beach (South Caroline, USA) on Twitter and Facebook.[4]

The existing research on the implications of social media on the specific practices of city and place branding is limited. With certain exceptions (such as Björner 2013; Braun et al. 2013; Sevin 2013), the main foci of these studies have been on the role of individuals in contributing to the branding processes and the changing definitions of brands accordingly. Building on these approaches, this chapter highlights

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[1] Information about Sun Valley's *Skippy the Stone Skipping Robot* can be found here http://skip-town.visitsunvalley.com/

[2] The first country to launch a country Twitter account controlled by its citizens was Sweden. Information about Sweden's *Curators of Sweden* can be found here http://curatorsofsweden.com

[3] "@" in front of a word denotes a Twitter username. The exact URL for the webpage is http://www.twitter.com/username (e.g. http://www.twitter.com/parisjecoute).

[4] Given the fact that place branding is predominantly driven by practice (Lucarelli and Berg 2011), my case selection follows the innovation and best practice awards given in the field. All three cities' use of social media has won numerous awards and have been recognized as the best uses of social media by Travel+Leisure Magazine in 2012 and 2013. This chapter sees the industry awards and praises as determinants of "best case" status and subsequently argues that these three cities represent the desired employment of social media tools in branding, in other words, are "typical cases" (Gerring 2009). This case selection is appropriate for an explanatory research that aims to identify and analyze expected social behavior (Seawright and Gerring 2008).

the role of the primary responsible users—local governments—in digital branding campaigns. Furthermore, the performance of local governments is evaluated to assess whether the potential of social media platforms is realized in the case of city branding.

The chapter is structured as follows. First, the arguments presented in the introduction part, specifically the two potential changes brought in by social media, are substantiated theoretically through city brand communication (Kavaratzis 2004), media ecology (Postman 2000), and brand-co creation (Hatch and Schultz 2010; Potts et al. 2008) studies. Respectively, these theories present frameworks to study the different levels through which places communicate with these stakeholders, the impact of the specific media platform/technology on the communication platforms, and the involvement of stakeholders in brand creation. Second, the methodology for the empirical study is shared. Subsequently, the findings of the analysis are introduced. The chapter is concluded by introducing recommendations to practitioners based on these findings.

16.2 Branding Places in a Digital Environment

Michael Porter (1990) is one of the first scholars to argue for the importance of certain characteristics of nations—such as domestic competition and labor market—for economic success. Porter (1990) posited that despite the scholarly discussions on homogenization of global markets, the differences between nations constitute the basis of their competitive advantages. It is possible for countries to establish more supportive business environments and thus help their own companies prosper in international markets (Marmier and Fetscherin 2010). In addition to organizational and structural changes, the success of these nations in international markets also depends on "softer" factors such as culture and values (Porter 1990). In other words, the key to national advantages is in accepting and creating national differences (Aronczyk 2013).

This newly found appreciation for the unique identities of countries entered a new era when Simon Anholt, an advertising professional and a policy advisor, argued that the perception of countries might also be influential in their success in global economy. Anholt (1998) proposed a novel concept that drastically altered the way national identity and reputation are understood: *nation brands*. The concept practically argues that the perceptions of a given country by the rest of the world have political, social, and economic impacts (Anholt 2007). The same branding understanding has been applied to regions, cities, towns, and other places of different sizes, thus helping Anholt's insightful proposition pave way to a new field of study and practice generally known as place branding.[5]

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[5] Place branding is used as an umbrella concept that covers branding activities of various administrative regions including but not limited to cities and nations.

16.2.1 Moving from Spaces to Places

Place branding literature has welcomed contributions from a variety of disciplines ranging from public relations (Szondi 2010) to international relations (Van Ham 2001) and marketing (cf. Kavaratzis 2005). Unsurprisingly, there is a plethora of definition of place branding. The academic consensus argues that place branding goes beyond establishing a visual brand identity (Kavaratzis and Ashworth 2006). In other words, it is widely accepted that even though creating new logos stays as an inherent part of campaigns (Fan 2010), place branding goes beyond introducing these elements. Fundamentally, studies are based on the assumption that when a place is named, several associated concepts are invoked in individuals' minds (Kavaratzis 2004). It is further argued that even the concept of "place" itself is a social construction of a space by individuals and societies by assigning meanings to a specific geographic area (Boisen et al. 2011:137). Place branding, thus, refers to the attempts to monitor and manipulate these meanings and associations.

The different approaches to the study of place branding can be categorized under three broad categories: production, appropriation, and critical studies (Lucarelli and Berg 2011). Production studies analyze the processes through which brands are created and managed. Appropriation studies look at how brands are perceived and consumed by target audiences. Critical studies argue for the impacts of branding processes on the existing social, economic, and cultural environments. As a whole, place branding—and city branding in the case of this research—covers the entire process in which brands are managed, received by audiences, and influence the existing structures. The brand of a city, on the other hand, is "a network of associations in the consumer's mind based on the visual, verbal, and behavio[.]ral expression of a place" (Zenker and Braun 2010:5).

There are two main obstacles in the process of creating and managing the brand of a place. First, as Anholt (2010) argues that places lead individuals' perceptions through providing high-quality products and caliber services. In order to establish a new brand, it might be necessary to implement structural and policy changes. Yet, it should be noted that individuals can interact with a place through various channels such as direct and indirect experiences, mediated messages (Govers 2011). Kavaratzis (2004) combines all these interaction channels and introduces three methods through which places can communicate their brands to target audiences. The primary method of communication is closer to Anholt's arguments and is carried out by implementing policies in the fields of landscape, infrastructure, and bureaucratic structures (Kavaratzis 2004). By changing its behavior, a place can create a new image for itself in the minds of target audiences. The secondary communication is the formal, e.g. marketing, communication geared towards changing the perceptions (Kavaratzis 2004). Places can disseminate their messages through various media platforms with the intention of raising their profiles. The last area of communication refers to the "word of mouth" (Kavaratzis 2004). It is carried out by consumers, competitors, and other stakeholders that articulate their views about a given place. Even though local governments might attempt to control the first two, tertiary communication is beyond their direct reach.

The second obstacle stems from the process through which a place brand is created. A place is not owned by a specific entity; therefore, any stakeholder might claim responsibility for its branding process (Braun 2011). The administrative body of a place does not necessarily have the legitimacy or the capability to single-handedly spearhead its branding attempts (as seen in the cases of Finland in Hakala and Lemmetyinen 2011 and; of Ankara in Hayden and Sevin 2012). Therefore, a place brand is best understood as a "dialogue, debate, and contestation" (Kavaratzis and Hatch 2013:82) among parties and is the outcome of a negotiation and deliberation process between various stakeholders, including but not limited to citizens, civil society groups, bureaucrats, and target audiences (Sevin 2011). This approach to place branding is closer to the "brand co-creation" understanding of the corporate studies where external stakeholders, including consumers, are seen as having control over the meaning of brands, in addition to the companies who own the brands (Hatch and Schultz 2010). The ownership of place brands and the responsibility of creating and managing these brands are determined through the interaction between stakeholders (Aitken and Campelo 2011).

When the concept of "co-creation" was introduced around a decade ago (Prahalad and Ramaswamy 2004), it was perceived as a novel and a critical argument (Hatch and Schultz 2010). The concept practically argues that the company-centric value creation understanding is outdated and needs to be replaced (Prahalad and Ramaswamy 2004). This understanding represents the traditional business transactions where companies are responsible for creating a product, a service, or a value in general while customers passively consume. Co-creation defines a more active role for the customers who interact with the companies and create their own experiences (Prahalad and Ramaswamy 2004). In the case of branding and place branding, co-creation argues that target audiences need to be presented with ample opportunities to interact with companies and places to create their own experiences (Hatch and Schultz 2010; Kavaratzis and Hatch 2013). Such experiences become an important—if not the most important—aspect of brands.

To sum up, the brand of a place can be seen as the meaning given to a specific geographic space by relevant stakeholders, while place branding refers to the attempts to influence these meanings. Co-creation in place branding posits that audiences actively take part in establishing brands. Place branding practice and study are influenced by corporate branding, yet are distinct due to the unorthodox nature of communicative aspects of branding and the ownership of brands. The next section builds on these premises and outlines the changes brought to place brand communication and co-creation within a new media ecology: social media.

16.2.2 Place Branding and Social Media

Social media have been influential in place branding and well-adopted (Braun et al. 2013; Yan 2011). The relatively low cost of operating on this new medium was particularly encouraging for cities and other local governments that do not

necessarily have the means to promote themselves in traditional media platforms (Sevin 2013). Besides their financial advantages, these platforms also became relevant advertising venues. Over 70 % of the internet users have accounts and actively monitor social media (Pew Research Center 2013), making digital engagement a high priority for place branding. Last but not the least, social media also allow the employment of different content forms, such as video and audio, simultaneously and encourage innovative place branding projects.

The experience of Iceland and its *Iceland Naturally* branding campaign is an illustrative case of place branding in social media. The campaign started out as a pilot project in the United States to increase the brand presence of Iceland among American audiences and to position the country as a pure and unspoiled natural environment (Gudjonsson 2005:293). Apart from its offline activities, *Iceland Naturally* engaged with target audiences through social media, primarily through Facebook and Twitter. Both platforms are used to disseminate messages and interact with users. Additionally, the branding campaign hosts trivia games and sweepstakes to grab audience attention. *Follow the Fish* was such a campaign where individuals could enter to win a round-trip ticket to Iceland to visit the country's sustainable fisheries through Facebook.[6] Similarly, the city of Sun Valley in Idaho created "Skippy," a stone skipping robot. Internet users could remotely control the robot to skip stones at a lake in Sun Valley to win a week-long trip. The project attracted the attention of thousands of internet users (Skip Town with Sun Valley 2012).

The impacts of a new medium should not be solely deduced to its logistical and financial aspects. The school of media ecology argues that in order to understand communication processes taking place in a new medium, it is necessary to study the medium (McLuhan 1967). As summarized in the quote by Marshall McLuhan (1964), one of the most prominent figures in media ecology field, "the medium is the message". Content studies cannot be separated from medium studies as the medium has a considerable impact on how individuals interact with each other (Strate 2008). When local governments employ social media in their attempts to engage in place branding campaigns, they should be aware of the impacts of this particular medium on the entire process: namely communication and co-creation aspects.

In the case of place branding, social media presents opportunities for secondary and tertiary communication processes (Kavaratzis 2005). Digital communication takes places between the branding campaigns and the target audiences as well as among the individual users interested in the place. Looking at the medium as the message, it is important to understand the changes brought in by the peculiarities of these new platforms to the practice of place branding (McLuhan 1967). As argued above, first and foremost of all, place branding campaigns make use of Twitter, Facebook, and other similar platforms to disseminate their formal messages (Fouts 2010; Go and Govers 2010). Equivalently, individuals also make use of social media platforms to gather information about given places and make informed decisions

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[6] More information about the sweepstakes can be found here http://www.icelandnaturally.com/boeing2013/

(Munar 2011). For instance, travellers have started to use social media search results before they settle on their final destinations (Xiang and Gretzel 2010). In the lack of direct experience, individuals need to rely on indirect resources. In other words, if a given individual has not visited a place, his or her impression is going to be based on the information relayed from other resources. During the last decade, social media platforms emerged as a highly sought-after information source (Gretzel and Yoo 2008). The reputation—and brand—of a place is influenced by the online word-of-mouth created in social media platforms (Litvin et al. 2008).

As argued before, co-creation theory in place branding assumes that place brands "are co-created by a multitude of people who encounter and appropriate them" (Kavaratzis and Hatch 2013:72). A brand is not necessarily a combination of the products and services combined by a place and its strategic communication activities. The involvement of various stakeholders, including target audiences, and the interaction between them also contribute to a brand. Social media facilitates both the practice and the study of such interactions and contributions. For instance, Twitter enables users to communicate directly with each other as well as indirectly as a group. As the social media traffic is publicly available and observable, research can use data generated in these platforms to examine the place branding processes.

In this section, theoretical underpinnings that encouraged the two research questions posed by this chapter are explained. Succinctly stated, social media is a new platform through which the perception of a brand can be changed (Jansen et al. 2009) and the behaviors of individuals can be affected (Fischer and Reuber 2011). Moreover, the individuals also have the opportunity to contribute to the branding process by actively generating content and sharing their impressions (Yan 2011). Thus, place branding is co-created by various stakeholders through content generation and engagement. In order to assess whether local governments are able to make use of new communication technologies, the first research question is posed at the content of the messages shared. The second research question investigates the relationships between local governments and other stakeholders in digital platforms to present a complete picture of place branding processes. The next section explains the research methodology in more detail.

16.3   Methodology

In order to understand how local governments make use of the unique opportunities of social media in place branding, this research asks two questions:

1. *What is the content shared by local governments on social media for place branding purposes*?
2. *What is the role of digital* "*engagement*" *or* "*two-way communication*" *in social media branding campaigns*?

The answers to these questions are given primarily by analyzing the content and behavior of these three cities' official marketing accounts on Twitter for all three

cities: @capetowntourism for Cape Town, @visitphilly for Philadelphia, and @ myrtlebeach for Myrtle Beach. The majority of the Twitter-based data gathering and analysis was carried out within the *R* environment (R Core Team 2014).[7]

Data collection took place in August and September 2014 by scrapping individual tweets sent by the aforementioned accounts. Data was gathered by using the *twitteR*: *R based Twitter client* package (Gentry 2013). This particular package enables the users to access the web application programming interface of Twitter. In other words, *twitteR* functions as a tool to get data from Twitter. The package was used at three different times to scrap the most recent tweets sent. A separate dataset was created for each of the three accounts. Subsequently, the datasets were manually cleaned by identifying duplicate entries. The final datasets included the most recent 3,200 tweets sent by all three cities, summing up to 9,600 tweets.[8]

In order to answer the research questions, there is a need to analyze both the content produced on social media and the usage patterns. This is why tweets were divided into three parts. The first part included the text of the tweets and used for content analysis. The second part included descriptive indicators about the tweets and the account, such as the number of tweets sent and number of links sent. The third and last part examined the relationships between users by looking at the inclusion of other users in a tweet in the forms of *retweets* and *replies*. Thus, the first part is used to answer content-related questions, whereas the latter two provided information about the usage patterns.

The content was analyzed by using *tm* package in the R environment (Feinerer et al. 2008). The software was used for two different purposes. First, *tm* was instrumental in identifying the most frequently used terms, and the relationship between these terms. Basically, the software counts the number of times a given word was used in all the tweets sent by the city and calculates the physical proximity of these words to each other. If a given set of words is used frequently together, these words were grouped together. Second, *tm* was also used to uncover the association between the city's name and other terms. The software calculated which terms were used most frequently and physically close to the name of the city. The findings were visualized with *igraph* (Csardi and Nepusz 2006) and *wordcloud* (Fellows 2014) packages. Both packages are visualization tools in the R environment, with the former being used to create cluster dendrograms or tree graphs showing the relationship between the words (cf. Fig. 16.1). The latter is used to represent the frequency counts of words by creating a geometric shape of all the words and assigning sizes based on frequencies (cf. Fig. 16.2).

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[7] R is an open-source software and a programming language used for a variety of research methods. There are individual "packages," or software add-ons that can be installed to carry out specific research methods. Further information about R can be accessed at http://www.r-project.org/

[8] Twitter allows the researchers to scrap the most recent 3,200 at each request. After requesting the tweets at three different times, I ended up with different number of tweets per account based on their daily tweet volumes. In order to create comparable datasets, I decided to limit each dataset to 3,200 tweets.

Fig. 16.1 Word dendrograms

Fig. 16.2 Word cloud

The second part, descriptive data, was analyzed to establish the background information for the content of the tweets and the interaction between the users. Additionally, at the *followers* and *following* figures—respectively number of users subscribe to the Twitter updates coming from the city's account, and of other accounts the city subscribes—were manually gathered by visiting the account pages on Twitter.

The third part was used to understand the relationship between the cities and other users and was conceptualized as an egocentric network (Wasserman and Faust 1998) with the official Twitter account of the cities being at the center. An egocentric network puts one user in the center of the network and analyzes its interactions with other users (Wasserman and Faust 1998). Within the framework of this research, the Twitter accounts of all three cities are put in the center of a social network that is composed of all other users the cities interact. The analysis focused on identifying the frequency of interactions between the cities and other Twitter users. Network analysis and visualization were done in *gephi*, a network analysis software used to explore and visual social networks (Bastian et al. 2009).

The analysis is triangulated by an impressionistic study of the activity on the Facebook accounts of three cities: *CapeTown.Travel*, *VisitPhilly*, and *myrtlebeach*.[9] The content and interactions on Facebook are analyzed in order to assess the similarities and/or differences between the two popular platforms. It should be noted that Facebook analysis was carried out following the Twitter analysis with the sole intention to assess whether the findings on Twitter were solely platform-specific or were also observed on other popular social media platforms.

16.4   Findings

All three cities have been actively using Twitter as part of their communication strategies. Table 16.1 shows the level of activities for each account. VisitPhilly account is older and has generated a larger volume of tweets than the other two combined. The accounts all have a positive follower to following ratio. In other words, more users subscribe to the updates of the cities than the cities do. The same behavior is observed in most of the popular Twitter accounts (twittercounter 2014). However, it should be noted that there is not necessarily a golden ratio follower/following ratio on Twitter.

VisitPhilly has generated significantly a higher volume of tweets than the other two accounts. The same pattern was also observed within the period included in this research. MyrtleBeach and CapeTownTourism had an average of 10.6 and 11.7 tweets per day, respectively, while VisitPhilly sent out 21.2 tweets a day.

Table 16.2 shows the summary of the structure of the tweets. The first two columns look at the relationship between the content and outside in content. *Outside links* column shows the frequency of the tweets that included a hyperlink that forward users to an outside resource. *Hashtag* refers to the tweets using Twitter's proposed way of categorizing subjects by using a # symbol followed by a word—also known as hashtagging. All three accounts use Twitter to disseminate information available on non-Twitter platforms through links. MyrtleBeach has the highest

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[9] The names given here are Facebook handles. The actual pages can be visited at the URL www. facebook.com/handle, e.g. http://www.facebook.com/CapeTown.Travel Please note that Facebook handles are case sensitive.

Table 16.1 Descriptive statistics[a]

	Active since	Tweets	Followers	Following	Follower/following ratio
VisitPhilly	2008	31,327	78,734	3,098	2,541/1
MyrtleBeach	2009	14,004	14,552	551	2,641/1
CapeTownTourism	2009	17,342	54,868	9,762	562/1

[a]Up-to-date figures as of September 15, 2014

Table 16.2 Number of tweets with links, references, and hashtags

	Tweets with/out of 3,200			
	Outside links	Hashtags	Other users	Retweet
VisitPhilly	2,110	1,015	2,223	116
MyrtleBeach	3,075	1,964	1,274	130
CapeTownTourism	1,950	2,221	2,350	946

number, with 96 % of its tweets including an outside link. This high number is caused by the fact that the account uses Twitter to forward its followers to its own website—myrtlebeach.com—and the content available over there.

Hashtags indicate that the accounts attempt to affiliate the content they share with other shared content by labeling them. Yet, the most frequent hashtags used by the accounts tend to be the ones they establish. Except for two hashtags used by VisitPhilly, the top five hashtags refer to the projects and slogans created by the accounts. For instance, MyrtleBeach uses *#myrevents* and *#myreats* to categorize its events- and restaurant-related content. CapeTownTourism labels most of its tweets with *#lovecapetown* and *#welovecapetown* hashtags. VisitPhilly, in addition to its own hashtags, uses *#free* and *#twchats*. The former hashtag indicates promotional campaigns and giveaways. The latter stands for "travel weekly chats" and is used by avid travellers to share information with each other.

The tweets also include references to other tweets. Moreover, these references are predominantly not *retweets* or the sharing of a content that was previously shared by another users. The non-retweet references to another user indicate that the accounts attempt to directly include certain users in their conversations. Table 16.3 shows the users with the ten highest interaction levels.[10]

VisitPhilly predominantly interacts with local attractions and other officials. Similarly, MyrtleBeach uses Twitter to communicate with the landmarks, movie theaters, events, and other attractions in the city. CapeTownTourism differs from the first two as it communicates with non-official city marketing campaigns, as well as its own employees, frequently.

In terms of content shared by the accounts, the research focused on word frequencies and affiliations. Figure 16.1 shows the most frequently used words,

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[10] In the cases where two or more users are tied for the tenth place, they were all included in the list.

Table 16.3 Users with highest interactions

VisitPhilly		MyrtleBeach		CapeTownTourism	
Saxbys	Local at.	brookgreensc	Local at.	cityofct	Official
Philamuseum	Local at.	alabamatheatre	Local at.	vandawaterfront	Local at.
Pennslanding	Local at.	broadwayatbeach	Local at.	capetown	Marketing
Visitbuckspa	Local at.	thecarolinaopry	Local at.	gotosouthafrica	Official
Thebarnes	Local at.	medievaltimes	Local at.	wdc2014	Local at.
Franklinsqr	Local at.	pelicanbaseball	Local at.	48hrsincapetown	Marketing
Theovalphl	Local at.	palacetheatremb	Local at.	ctcarnival	Local at.
july4thphilly	Local at.	marketcommon	Local at.	tablemountainca	Local at.
Pafacademy	Local at.	ripleysaquamb	Local at.	fazielahw	Employee
Dibrunobros	Local at.	legends_mbsc	Local at.	enverduminy	Employee
phlvisitorcntr	Official			futurecapetown	Local group
				wtmafrica	Local group

Table 16.4 Word associations

Philadelphia	Myrtle Beach[a]	Capetown
Top	Blog	Stadium
Picks	Events	Outside
Ale	Resorts	Photograph
Festivals	Things	South Africa
Koozies	Hotels	Canon

[a]The list for Myrtle Beach is edited to exclude names of months from association list

grouped together based on their proximities to each other. The dendrograms are drawn in three clusters.

In each case, the first two clusters solely include one word, which is closely related to the city's name. The last clusters include 14 words that are affiliated with the other two clusters. The branches within the clusters show which word pairs or groups have been used together more frequently.

The third clusters essentially are composed of generic concepts or touristic aspects. Apart from minor exceptions—such as phillytowns and myreats—the concepts do not necessarily give us an idea about the main characteristics, peculiarities, or identities of the cities. It is even difficult to use these concepts to determine to which city the graph belongs.

The further analysis of word association reveals similar results. Table 16.4 lists the five words most closely associated with the city's names. The associations are based on generic concepts or events that are promoted. In the case of Philadelphia, the concepts predominantly revolve around a highly promoted beer festival. Myrtle Beach associations are relevant to the content on myrtlebeach.com—an event calendar and a hotel finder. Cape Town lists photography-related concepts as it shares content from photo-sharing websites.

Table 16.5 Facebook pages[a]

	Active since	Likes
VisitPhilly	2009	404,670
MyrtleBeach	2010	569,953
CapeTownTourism	2009	333,254

[a]Up-to-date figures as of September 15, 2014

Following the aforementioned findings on Twitter, the research focus shifted to Facebook. As Table 16.5 shows, all three cities enjoy a higher number of users subscribing to their accounts. Users interact with the content published by the cities by "sharing," "liking," or "commenting." Users also post their own content to the pages.

The messages revolve around marketing campaigns. During the time covered in this research, VisitPhilly shared content about the summer festivals, MyrtleBeach about summer deals, and CapeTownTourism about its Table Mountain promotion campaign. The interactions between the cities and other Facebook users were observed to be limited to local attractions, officials, and other marketing platforms. There has been little to no interaction with "ordinary" individuals. In rare occasions, the cities replied back to the questions coming from individuals.

16.5 Discussion

This chapter attempted to assess whether local governments were able to realize the potential and unique capabilities of social media platforms in their place branding attempts. The activities of three cities on Twitter and Facebook were analyzed to answer two research questions focusing respectively on the content of the messages and the nature of interaction between users.

Theoretical works in the field of communication and branding argue that organizations need to be aware of the characteristics of social media and can innovatively produce platform-specific content and promote a two-way communication between places and target audiences, rather than a message exposure. The academic literature also presents numerous successful examples of such usage from the corporate world. The findings of this research, though, argue local governments are not using social media platforms as effectively as they could.

Social media enable the local governments to promote the unique characteristics of their cities in a relatively less costly platform. The concepts of place brands and place branding are based on an assumption that cities have unique characteristics that they can promote (Anholt 2007). However, Twitter and Facebook presence of Philadelphia, Myrtle Beach, and Cape Town suggests that the cities tend to market short-term events rather than work towards establishing a brand (Govers 2011; Pike 2008). Social media is more likely to be used as a marketing and an advertising outlet. As Fig. 16.2—as well as the text analysis—shows, the content shared by three cities include event-based and generic concepts.

One of the most important—and unique—possibilities provided by social media in the field of branding in general and place branding in specific is brand co-creation. Yet, as it was apparent especially in Twitter analysis, social media is used to disseminate content created by the cities. Evident in the Twitter following/follower ratios, the cities are more interested in establishing an audience base that subscribes to their updates, rather than engaging in genuine conversation.

The ego-centric network shows limited interaction with other users. In all three networks, the official Twitter accounts of the city are placed in the middle and their relations with other users are shown. The smaller unlabeled dots are the other users that the city has interacted with at least once. The labeled dots are the ones with the highest interaction frequency (cf. Fig. 16.3). Thus, there is not necessarily a network, but rather the city interacting infrequently with various users. Therefore, it is not possible to argue that the Twitter accounts became digital offices or virtual platforms where stakeholders negotiated the meaning of brand identity.

Succinctly stated, social media presents various opportunities for especially smaller cities to brand themselves. Moreover, given the fact that there are ample opportunities for negotiating the meaning of brands (Andéhn et al. 2014) and for co-creating brands (Kavaratzis and Hatch 2013), place branding on social media has the potential to be more persuasive. Based on the findings of this research, it should be argued that there is room for improvement in the use of social media by local governments to brand their cities.

The originality of this research stems from its methodology and its findings. Prior research in place branding argues that audience participation is necessary for a successful branding campaign (Lucarelli and Berg 2011; Zenker and Erfgen 2014). It is also argued that social media is an inherent part of place branding (Fouts 2010). Even in the case of teaching place branding, faculty members acknowledge the importance of social media and encourage students to employ these platforms during their in-class branding campaigns (Alon and Herath 2014). Similar to corporate branding, the lines between brand managers and audiences are getting blurry in place branding where internet users can be seen as content creators and distributors (Ketter and Avraham 2012). This particular research aimed to see whether the potential changes in the new media ecology are observed in the practice. The findings do not provide substantial evidence to argue that local governments are successfully utilizing social media platforms.

It should be noted that this study is not with its limitations. The findings and discussions are based predominantly on the analysis of Twitter usage and limited to the most recent 3,200 tweets per account. A longer study should be carried out to increase the confidence in the findings by assessing whether they are observed across time. Secondly, Facebook study was done in an impressionistic way to assess the findings of the initial analyses. A larger netnographic study (Kozinets 2002) might shed light on how and why people are more active and engaging on Facebook and present lessons for local governments. Last but not the least, case selection limits the generalizability of the findings. As an explanatory study, the case selection focused on introducing the best practices as typical cases of social media and place branding (Seawright and Gerring 2008). Future research should increase the diversity of the cases both in terms of the practitioner actor and social media platform.

Fig. 16.3 Network maps
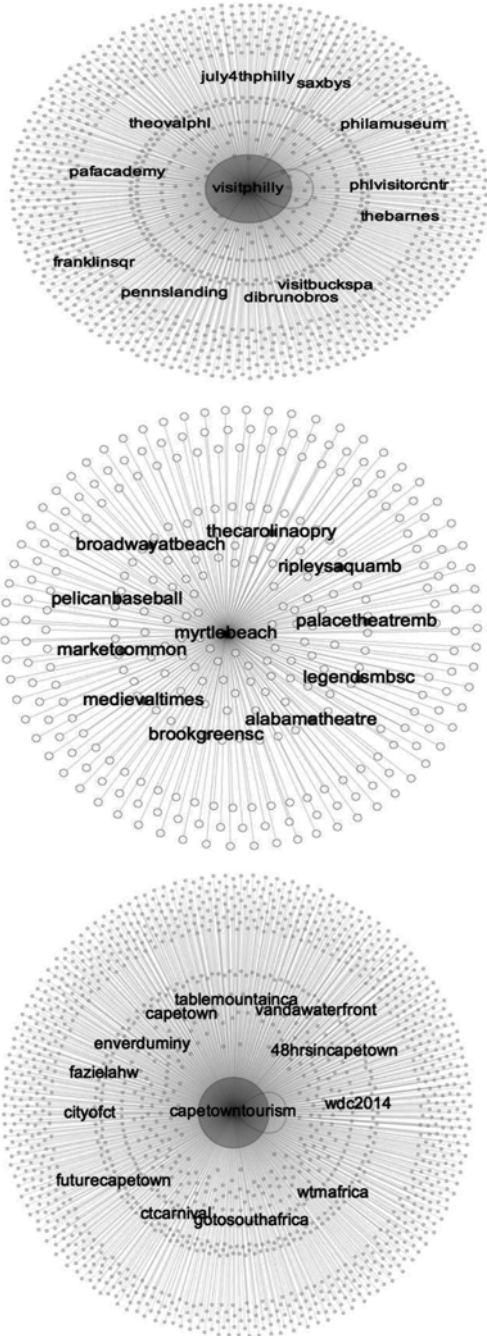
16.6 Conclusions and Recommendations

This chapter started out with an attempt to combine three separate theoretical strains to establish a research framework. *Media ecology* is introduced to choose the subject of the study. Instead of focusing solely on the messages disseminated on new platforms, social media is conceptualized as a system that affects both the content and the relations between users. Place branding communication justifies the focus on the content as secondary communication and the social networks as tertiary communication. Lastly, brand co-creation sets the borders of this research and provides further justification for the augmented role of relation and interactions in branding and of social networks in communication.

Social media has proved itself to be an indispensable communication platform. Particular social media websites—such as MySpace and ICQ—might lose their popularity in time and be replaced by new ones—such as Vine and Tumblr. Some might be popular only in certain regions—such as Orkut in India and Brazil. Yet, the fundamental idea is with us to stay: users are actively creating content and relations online. In line with the earlier research, this chapter started with the argument that social media has an unprecedented potential to change place branding (Björner and Sevin 2013; Ketter and Avraham 2012; Yan 2011; Zavattaro 2014). Yet, at the end, it is up to the local governments, city managers, and other destination branding officials to fulfill this potential. In line with the field of place branding and the objective of this book, the chapter is concluded with three recommendations to the practitioners.

First and foremost of all, *it is time to monitor and engage with the audiences*. Social media platforms do not follow the one-way and one-to-many communication understandings of traditional media (Smith 2013), but is based on a two-way and one-to-one communication understanding. It is indeed a new ecology. The "social" aspect of social media shows that the structure of communication is changing. Mass media communication theories used to argue that information would flow from media outlets to the audiences. However, social media information flow depends on the characteristics of social relations between users, rather than media outlets. The brand of a city is expected to be created, negotiated, and changed in a social environment. Therefore, being aware of the ideas of target audiences is an important component of contemporary branding communication. Local governments should invest in identifying the existing relations and in creating new social networks to effectively disseminate messages.

Second, *social media is fast but branding takes time*. A tweet can be sent relatively quickly, and various messages might be disseminated easily to online audiences. However, a place brand requires tedious work and long-term communication campaigns. The fast pace of digital communications does not change the fact that it takes time to create brand identities.

Last but not the least, practitioners should *get ready for the next platform*: *Web 3.0*. The digital landscape is always changing with new tools emerging everyday. Talks about a new web paradigm, Web 3.0, have already started (Hendler 2009). Practitioners should be ready for the next paradigm.

Successful incorporation of efficient social media use has the potential to transform place branding. Brands can no longer be created behind closed doors and then shared with audiences. On the contrary, failure to include audiences in brand creation processes is likely to damage the credibility of the messages. Through engaging the audiences and monitoring conversations taking place in the social media ecology, local governments can carry out important parts of their secondary and tertiary communication online.

In summary, local governments are yet to fully embrace the possibilities brought in by social media in the field of place branding. Currently, social media platforms are seen as relatively affordable outlets for direct dissemination of messages en masse. But as argued theoretically and observed in the corporate world, it is possible to use social media for stronger brands through engagement and brand co-creation.

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