

Exploring City Branding Strategies as Driving Factors for Citizen Engagement in Sports Mega-Events through Social Media Communication

-- A Case Study of Hangzhou 2022 Asian Games

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Abstract

In line with the global competition, city marketers have focused more and more on adopting branding techniques to differentiate themselves from other cities and promote their cities to various target groups. However, there has been little discussion about how to employ effective and efficient city branding strategies through communicative tools to enhance internal stakeholder engagement. Drawing from the literature on city branding, internal branding, and dialogic communication to assess the key contents and driving factors of citizen engagement strategy of Hangzhou 2022 Asian Games, this study illustrated the relevant practices of the engagement strategy which facilitated different levels of citizen engagement on social media platforms. The results offered evidence that the city branding strategy of stakeholder management contributed to the highest level of citizen engagement in terms of the number of comments and shares. The finding also emphasized the significance of engaging citizens by adopting the city branding strategy of brand identity.

Keywords

City branding strategies, Internal branding, Stakeholder engagement, Brand identity, Hangzhou 2022 Asian Games.

1. Introduction

The past thirty years have witnessed increasingly mobility of capital, commodities, and people due to cultural and economic globalization (Kavaratzis, 2005; Mayes, 2008). In line with the global competition, cities are increasingly competing with each other to attract companies, investors, visitors, residents, and most significantly qualified workforce (Kotler et al., 2004). To cope with these challenges, city marketers have focused more and more on adopting branding techniques to differentiate themselves from other cities and promote their cities to various target groups (Green et al., 2016; Mayes, 2008). According to Braun (2008), city branding refers to “the coordinated use of marketing tools supported by a shared customer-oriented philosophy, for creating, communicating, delivering, and exchanging urban offerings that have value for the city’s customers and the city’s community at large” (p. 43). While great majority of the city branding efforts are directed externally at visitors, business, and industry through communication tools to increase the city’s economic stature, it is the internal stakeholders who identify and define the brand and provide the actualization of the brand experience (Zenker & Martin, 2011). Based on this, internal stakeholders are regarded as central target groups in the place branding whose role is brand co-creators and ambassadors (Braun, 2011). Consequently, as city branding involves engagement and participation from internal stakeholders, city marketers should integrate the internal stakeholders’ satisfaction and commitment into the

success measurement of city branding. The number of contributions on city branding has increased considerably over the past two decades which focus on the concepts, processes, the measures of city branding (e.g., Andersson & Ekman, 2009), the strategies for city branding (e.g., Kaplan et al., 2010), and the culture of city branding (e.g., Colomb, 2011). Growing attention has also been paid to the internal stakeholders' engagement in the city branding literature which demonstrates that internal stakeholders play a significant role in influencing the decision-making processes (e.g., Golestaneh et al., 2021; Hanna & Rowley, 2011). So far, however, there has been little discussion about how to employ effective and efficient city branding strategies through communicative tools to enhance internal stakeholder engagement. To address this gap, this paper aims to examine the adoption of internal city branding strategies and the effectiveness of internal city branding communication through sports mega-events during the pre-game period of the Hangzhou 2022 Asian Games. Drawing from the literature on city branding, internal branding, and dialogic communication to assess the key contents and driving factors of citizen engagement strategy of Hangzhou 2022 Asian Games, this study illustrated the relevant practices of the engagement strategy which facilitated different levels of citizen engagement on social media platforms. Subsequently, relationship between the citizen engagement strategy and different levels of public engagement in the internal city branding was identified.

2. Literature Review

2.1. City Branding

Over the last three decades, city branding has gained momentum among politicians and city officials, whose aim is to "maximise the efficient social and economic functioning of the area concerned, in accordance with whatever wider goals have been established" (Ashworth & Voogd, 1990, p. 11). Sharing some similarities with the conceptualization of corporate branding such as possessing multidisciplinary roots, addressing various groups of stakeholders, obtaining a high level of intangibility and complexity, coping with multiple identities, and looking for long-term development (Kavaratzis, 2004), city branding is nonetheless more complex due to the involvement of multiple organizations and the great diversity of target groups and stakeholders (Kavaratzis & Ashworth, 2006). According to Green et al. (2016), city branding is the process of dual value creation, fulfilling the needs of central target groups and in the process creating value for the city. Many cities are coordinating their efforts to effectively and efficiently apply city branding to increase the economic stature and social function of the city (Zenker & Martin, 2011), which brings the issue of the implementation of city branding to public's attention. Viewing city branding as part of the administrative and political process, Braun (2011) puts the implementation of city branding in the context of urban governance and presents eight factors that would affect the consequences of city branding. The first four are political factors that take into consideration the fit of city branding with the city's overall governance framework (e.g., the city's political priorities, stakeholder management), and the last four factors are inherently associated with the concept and process of city branding (e.g., the authenticity of city branding, branding strategies regarding the target audience). Among these eight factors, two factors that are related to the strategic networks of various stakeholders deserve our special attention. The first is the stakeholder management which is central to the branding theory and features prominently in the city branding process. City branding is a coordinated process, arising from the network of external and internal stakeholders (Hankinson, 2004). Emphasizing the co-creation nature of building and safeguarding the city brand, Braun (2011) argues that adequate stakeholder management affects the city branding implementation in a positive way. In the same vein, Braun (2011) asserts that all the people and organizations that are pivotal to the functioning of the city should

be included as potential and existing target audiences of city branding, and that it is strategically appropriate to implement sub-brands for specific target groups. These two factors take into account the interests and functions of multiple stakeholders and echo the finding from previous literature that successful city branding “requires a brand congruence among stakeholders” (Golestaneh et al., 2021, p.214).

Hosing a sports mega-event is regarded as one of the most important milestones in the history of a city. Therefore, sports event-based branding has been increasingly employed by city marketers as an effective branding strategy. The profound effects of hosting sports mega-event include the significant development of the physical and environmental infrastructure, the strengthening of international visibility and reputation, and implementation of appropriate governance policies to achieve long-term prosperity (Grix & Brannagan, 2016). For example, hosting the Olympic mega-event would have enormous tangible and intangible impacts such as increasing economic growth, job opportunities, tourism revenues, and engendering pride of place (De Groote, 2005). The restructuring of the urban image and rise of the hosting city’s global reputation is intrinsically related to its continuous attraction of visitors, foreign investments, and competent workforce (Florida, 2008). In addition to the estimated tourism and economic impacts, the role of sports mega-event as a significant diplomatic tool in raising the soft power and strengthening the international reputation of the place has also been recognized (Grix & Brannagan, 2016).

The challenges of hosting sports mega-event with long-standing positive social, cultural, and economic impacts require the active participation and engagement of all the urban stakeholders. De Groote (2005) claimed that the commitment of all the stakeholders was a key element to optimally raise the potential of local supporters sharing the vision and having positive cognitive and affective evaluations of the sports mega-event. Misener and Mason (2006) also emphasized that the sports mega-event created good opportunities for the active involvement of citizens and developing their citizenship identity.

2.2. Internal Branding

According to Kavaratzis’s (2004) place brand management model, the action processes of city branding involve three layers of communication. A city communicates not only through formal intentional communications (such as advertising, public relations, the web), but also via communicative effects of a city’s behaviour, infrastructure, organizations, and landscape when communication is not set as the main goal. Kavaratzis (2008) distinguished between these two forms and referred to the latter form as primary communication and the former as secondary communication. Braun (2011) asserted that effective, credible, and genuine city branding didn’t not take place until the secondary communication aligned with the primary communication, which in turn would be reinforced by the word of mouth (tertiary communication). Central to achieving consistency in the three types of communication is the significant role of internal stakeholders. A considerable amount of literature has been published on internal stakeholders and their pivotal role in bridging the gap between the brand image in deliberate communication and the city’s reality and creating a genuine and believable place experience. For example, Govers (2011) claimed that an important factor related to success in place branding is a strong internal branding, namely, all the internal stakeholders “living the brand”. Incorporating customer equity and customer satisfaction into the lexicon of city branding, Zenker and Martin (2011) pointed out that citizen identification, satisfaction, commitment, and trust should be included as important measurements of success in city branding. The growing body of literature focusing on stakeholders’ engagement in place branding also demonstrated the recognition that internal stakeholders should participate in overall place design and decision making. In their analysis of the role of internal stakeholders in the process of city branding, Golestaneh et al. (2021) addressed the approaches and strategies focused systematically on

internal stakeholders and identified the internal branding strategies, brand co-creating, and greater internal stakeholder engagement as three factors most needed in the city branding. These studies conceptually and empirically supported the importance of internal branding in successful creation, development, and implementation of the city brand and called for the need to empower internal stakeholders by allowing them in the process of brand creation and fulfil their demands. However, little attention has been paid to the formulation and adoption of city branding strategies to enhance internal stakeholder engagement as well as the effectiveness of these strategies. This study seeks to bridge this gap by focusing on the social media-mediated internal city branding and exploring the dialogic communication between the sports organizing committee and its internal stakeholders as well as the internal stakeholder engagement outcomes. In the following, we will discuss city branding mediated by social media platforms and dialogic communication on social media.

2.3. City branding on social media and dialogic communication

The development of Web 2.0 and social media has innovated and transformed the channel through which a brand communicates with its multiple stakeholders, reforming the brand's relationship with the stakeholder groups. City governments at a global level have developed specific social networks to facilitate the online dialogue with stakeholders and guarantee their access to relevant contents, shifting from the top-down communication style to a new approach centering on citizen engagement and participation (Kolotouchkina, 2018). In the context of the dynamic social environments, Li and Feng (2021) argued that with the advent of new media and social media, younger generations tended to adopt the participatory citizenship style with a strong focus on volunteerism, political consumerism, and social networking, which was different from the elder generation. The experience of media production and consumption as well as information sharing is a salient feature of the technology-mediated city branding. In addition, the content sharing and generation create networked narratives, which refer to the digital content creation accompanied by the likes, shares, and comments on social media (Zhou & Wang, 2014). Therefore, the social media platform featuring interactivity provides new opportunities for authentic citizen engagement in city branding campaigns via collaborative economy and participatory governance, contributing to the promotion of city brand identity (Kolotouchkina, 2018). According to Bonsón and Ratkai's (2013) model, the level of engagement on social media can be measured through the metrics such as the numbers of like, share, and comment. The number of "likes" per post indicates the popularity of the social media messages and the frequency they attract the public's affective engagement. "Comments" received by the posts need additional engagement and sustained reaction. "Share" suggests a higher level of commitment and engagement than "comment" and "like" since the shared messages appear on the user's personal account and can be disseminated to other profiles (Ngai et al., 2020). The co-creation of brand image based on active stakeholder participation in online interaction and the reliance on social media platform to foster the internal stakeholders' sense of pride corresponds with the essence of public relations building on social media---dialogic communication featuring genuine dialogue with the public and valuable information dissemination (Kent & Taylor, 1998).

In line with the advancement of digital technology, Kent and Taylor (1998) advocated a "theory-based strategic framework" including five principles of dialogic communication that could be used as "guidelines for the successful integration of dialogic public relations and the World Wide Web" (p. 326). Characterized by genuine understanding and mutual equality, dialogic communication is defined by the authors as "any negotiated exchange of ideas and opinions" representing "communicative give and take" (p. 325). The five principles include "the dialogic loop, usefulness of information, generation of return visits, ease of interface, and rule of conservation of visitors" (pp.326-331). In addition, Kent and Taylor (1998) highlighted the

guidelines of “intersubjectivity”, willingness to negotiate a mutually satisfying agreement, and creation of shared meaning rather than dissemination of absolute truth. With the growing importance of social media, individuals and organizations have been able to interactively communicate with their stakeholders in various contexts including education, city governance, health, and business (Zhou & Wang, 2014). Researchers focusing on public relations on social media have investigated how governments, corporations, and non-profit organizations exploit the potential of social media to optimally develop relationships with publics (Nah & Saxton, 2013; Saxton & Waters, 2014). For example, Saxton and Waters (2014) explored how various nonprofit organizations employed Facebook for relationship management and claimed that their stakeholders preferred cooperative and dialogical communication and mutual equality. Scholars have also examined the impacts of social media on the processes and effectiveness of public relations. For example, drawing on surveys, Diga and Kelleher (2009) observed that public relations managers who employed social media more frequently tended to be more aware of their expert, prestige, and power.

Social media contents and the prestige of the government are the key determinants to enhance stakeholder engagement on social media. Content linked to personal experiences and adoption of appropriate communicative tools tend to stimulate response from users (Liu et al., 2020). As a key element of dialogic communication is the usefulness of information content, it is worthwhile to explore the content of the internal city branding strategies adopted by the 2022 Hangzhou Asian Games organizing committee via social media. Based on Kent and Taylor’s (1998, 2002) argument that organizations should provide information that is of generic, particular, and genuine value to public, this study incorporates the relational network brand model proposed by Hankison (2004) and Baker’s (2007) 7A destination branding model into the usefulness of information content since these two models take into consideration the brand management process in terms of stakeholder relationships and identify the interplay between brand infrastructure, stakeholder, and media, which was transferrable to the social media-mediated city branding. Embracing the aspects of brand communication and brand infrastructure, this model highlights the core identity of the brand and its interaction with stakeholders. Some modification was made in the context of social media. For example, in the original city branding model, the brand infrastructure refers to the accessibility and existence of the tangible (functional) built environment and the intangible (experiential) attributes that stakeholders could experience in person. However, as this framework was adapted for the social media communication, the brand infrastructure mainly refers to the introduction and exhibition of architecture, sports center stadium, transport infrastructure, and the natural environment through social media posts.

3. Research Methodology

3.1. Context and research questions

This paper aims to better understand the internal city branding strategies on social networking sites in the context of the 2022 Asian Games to be held in Hangzhou in September 2022, and identify the level of engagement and commitment of citizens in the pre-game period. In the Chinese context, having the attributes of being open, interactive, and transparent, microblogs have become increasingly popular in promoting the city’s image. According to Xinhuanet (2012), Hangzhou, the capital of Zhejiang Province, emphasized the importance of the interaction between government and citizens through an official microblog, Sina Weibo. Sina Weibo, which integrates the functions of Facebook and Twitter, is a Chinese microblog platform launched by web portals that fulfills the need for a participative and interactive communication style (Zhou & Wang, 2014). This microblog platform allows users to upload and share photos, music, and videos and provides channels for instant message sharing (Zhou & Wang, 2014). To

maximize the propagation effect, the government of Hangzhou opened their official Weibo account “The Asian Games Hangzhou 2022”, which attracted over one million fans and promoted the full-scale information about the city of Hangzhou and the Asian Games 2022. In this regard, the citizen engagement in the Hangzhou 2022 Asian Games is a particularly relevant topic. Drawing on an exploratory case study approach, this study aims to answer the following two questions:

How did the Hangzhou 2022 Asian Games Organizing Committee employ city branding strategies via dialogic communication to promote citizen engagement on Sina Weibo?

What was the relationship between the four dimensions of city branding strategies and different levels of citizen engagement (e.g., like, comment, and share) in the pre-game period?

3.2. Content analysis, sample selection and collection

This study adopted the quantitative content analysis, which was a non-invasive method widely employed in media communication and cultural studies to reveal the content or meaning of communicative messages exhibited in various channels in a systematic manner (Allen, 2017). Data collection consisted of posts from April 5th, 2021, to April 6th, 2022 and the count number of likes, comments, and shares per post for the one year time frame. The automatic data collection method (e.g., Weibo Crawler) was used to capture the social media data. First, all the posts on the official account of Hangzhou 2022 Asian Games for the one-year time were downloaded from Sina Weibo, the most popular SNS in China. Then all the posts (1652 posts all together) and their responses (e.g., likes, comments, and shares) were counted, and their frequencies per post were recorded for in-depth quantitative analysis. According to the sample size calculator operated by the Australia Bureau of statistics, a sample size of 312 posts was needed with the confidence level of 95%, the confidence interval of 0.05, and the standard error of 0.026. To answer RQs, the simple random sampling was used to retrieve the sample of 312 posts for an examination of the internal branding strategies and their effectiveness.

3.3. Coding scheme

Drawing on previous literature of dialogic communication and city branding, we examined the employment of dialogic communication in citizen engagement strategy mainly from the perspective of the usefulness of information. The content of the posts was manually coded to determine if the following four aspects were included in the city branding strategies: 1) Brand infrastructure; 2) Brand identity; 3) Brand communication; 4) Stakeholder management, on a sentence basis. The coding scheme was listed as follows (figure 1 and table 1).

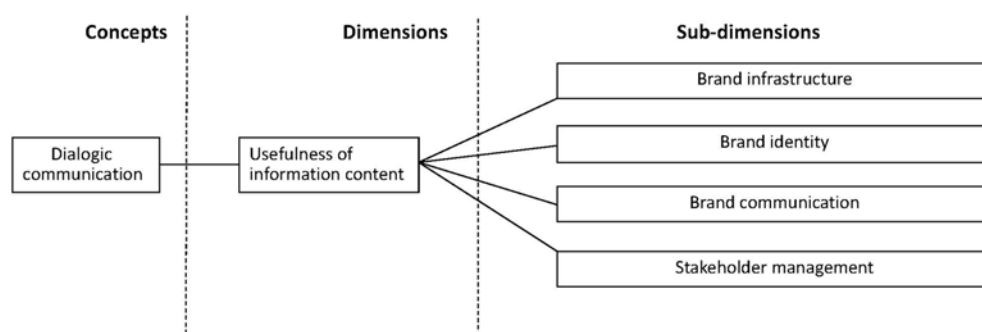


Figure 1. The relationship between dimensions and sub-dimensions in the coding scheme

Table 1. Usefulness of information content: city branding adapted from Hankison's (2004) model and Baker's (2007) model

Category	Sub-categories	Description
Brand infrastructure	infrastructure strategies and landscape strategies (tangible)	the built environment, public spaces considering urban design, green spaces, and architecture, museums, art galleries, theatres concert halls, conference and exhibition facilities, transport infrastructure and access, leisure and sports activities and facilities, public spaces
	Experiential attributes (intangible)	the natural environment, people, art, culture, education, how the destination will make visitors feel (e.g., relaxed, excited, or fascinated), the character of the built environment (e.g., historic, modern, green and spacious), descriptors related to security and safety
Brand identity	production of marketplace symbols	the choice and design of the place name, logo, color palettes, and photographs; historic plaques, decorations, sculptures, benches, planters
	enhancement of rituals, influencing experience, and what the place has come to be known for	street parties, parades, ceremonies, sales events, artistic performances
Brand communication	the activities associated with the communication of the brand identity	secondary communications as the promotional component (deliberate communication policies including public relations, campaigns, advertising and so on)
Stakeholder management	Consumer relationships	residents and employees, internal customers, managed relationships from the top

4. Findings

Since the adoption of city branding strategies under the usefulness of information category was coded on a sentence basis, the coded data was normalized by dividing the counted number of sentences by the total number of sentences in each post. Regarding questions 1, the normalized percentage of specific city branding strategies identified in each post were divided into four groups for comparisons. Since ANOVA has proven to be robust and valid in testing the difference between independent variables even if the normality assumption is violated (Blanca et al., 2017), one-way ANOVA was adopted in this study for statistical analysis. According to the test of the homogeneity of variance, the p value was 0.000, indicating that the assumption of homogeneity of variances was violated. However, according to Moder (2007), the ANOVA results can be replaced with those of Welch ANOVA, whose P value was 0.003 and smaller than the $\alpha=0.05$ value in this study. According to the one-way between-group analysis of variance, there was a statistically significant difference: $F(3, 1244) = 4.724$ at $P=.003$ level between the means of the normalized percentages of the adoption of the four city branding strategies. Post Hoc comparisons using Turkey HSD test (see Table 2) indicate that the mean score for brand infrastructure ($M=0.11$, $SD=0.31$) was significantly different from the mean score for brand identity ($M=0.19$, $SD=0.38$) and from the mean score for stakeholder management ($M=0.22$, $SD=0.39$).

Table 2. Post Hoc Comparisons between the four strategies of city branding

Post Hoc Tests						
Multiple Comparisons						
Dependent Variable: number						
Tukey HSD						
(I) sub-dimensions	(J) sub-dimensions	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval	
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound
band -infrastructure	brand identity	-.074893 [*]	.028810	.047	-.14901	-.00078
	brand communication	-.067041	.028810	.092	-.14115	.00707
	stakeholder management	-.104968 [*]	.028810	.002	-.17908	-.03085
brand identity	band -infrastructure	.074893 [*]	.028810	.047	.00078	.14901
	brand communication	.007853	.028810	.993	-.06626	.08197
	stakeholder management	-.030075	.028810	.724	-.10419	.04404
brand communication	band -infrastructure	.067041	.028810	.092	-.00707	.14115
	brand identity	-.007853	.028810	.993	-.08197	.06626
	stakeholder management	-.037927	.028810	.553	-.11204	.03619
stakeholder management	band -infrastructure	.104968 [*]	.028810	.002	.03085	.17908
	brand identity	.030075	.028810	.724	-.04404	.10419
	brand communication	.037927	.028810	.553	-.03619	.11204

*. The mean difference is significant at the 0.05 level.

In response to RQ2, which explored the effects of the adoption of different city branding strategies on citizen engagement, the four dimensions of branding strategies and citizen engagement in terms of likes, comments, and shares were examined. Considering that the dependent variables were count numbers and there was overdispersion of the outcome variables (e.g., likes, comments, and shares), Negative Binomial Regression (NB2) (Herbison et al., 2015) was employed to analyze data to improve the Goodness of Fit. Data was cleaned (e.g., deleting the outliers) before using NB2 to examine the associations between the multiple factors of branding strategy and citizen engagement in terms of the count numbers of likes, comments, and shares.

For the relationship between the four strategies of city branding and citizen engagement, the coefficient (indicated as B) and the incident rate ratio (indicated as EXP (B)) in Table 3, 4, 5 demonstrated that brand identity was the best predictor of likes, and stakeholder management was the best predictor of comments and shares. For every unit in the number of sentences on the city branding strategy of brand identity, the number of likes increased by 3.49 times. While for every unit in the number of sentences on the city branding strategy of stakeholder management, the number of comments and shares increased by 4.52 and 14.6 times respectively. In addition, except for the strategy of brand infrastructure, all the other three city branding strategies including brand identity, brand communication, and stakeholder management were positively associated with like, comments, and shares.

Table 3. Negative binomial results on the four strategies of city branding and the number of likes

Parameter Estimates										
Parameter	B	Std. Error	95% Wald Confidence Interval		Hypothesis Test			Exp(B)	95% Wald Confidence Interval for Exp(B)	
			Lower	Upper	Wald Chi-Square	df	Sig.		Lower	Upper
(Intercept)	3.897	.1828	3.539	4.255	454.531	1	.000	49.244	34.417	70.459
brandinfrastructure	-.891	.2971	-1.473	-.309	8.993	1	.003	.410	.229	.734
brandidentity	1.250	.2474	.765	1.735	25.508	1	.000	3.489	2.148	5.666
brandcommunication	1.006	.2430	.530	1.482	17.155	1	.000	2.735	1.699	4.404
stakeholdermanagement (Scale)	.668	.2296	.218	1.118	8.471	1	.004	1.951	1.244	3.060
1*										
(Negative binomial)	1.649	.1277	1.417	1.919						
Dependent Variable: likes										
Model: (Intercept), brandinfrastructure, brandidentity, brandcommunication, stakeholdermanagement										
a. Fixed at the displayed value.										

Dependent Variable: likes

Model: (Intercept), brandinfrastructure, brandidentity, brandcommunication, stakeholdermanagement

a. Fixed at the displayed value.

Table 4. Negative binomial results on the four strategies of city branding and the number of comments

Parameter Estimates										
Parameter	B	Std. Error	95% Wald Confidence Interval		Hypothesis Test			Exp(B)	95% Wald Confidence Interval for Exp(B)	
			Lower	Upper	Wald Chi-Square	df	Sig.		Lower	Upper
(Intercept)	2.193	.2186	1.765	2.622	100.621	1	.000	8.964	5.840	13.760
brandinfrastructure	-.976	.3682	-1.698	-.255	7.031	1	.008	.377	.183	.775
brandidentity	.828	.2978	.244	1.411	7.725	1	.005	2.288	1.276	4.101
brandcommunication	.694	.3002	.105	1.282	5.343	1	.021	2.001	1.111	3.604
stakeholdermanagement (Scale)	1.509	.2659	.988	2.030	32.196	1	.000	4.521	2.685	7.613
(Negative binomial)	2.365	.2027	1.999	2.797						

Dependent Variable: comments

Model: (Intercept), brandinfrastructure, brandidentity, brandcommunication, stakeholdermanagement

a. Fixed at the displayed value.

Table 5. Negative binomial results on the four strategies of city branding and the number of shares

Parameter Estimates										
Parameter	B	Std. Error	95% Wald Confidence Interval		Hypothesis Test			Exp(B)	95% Wald Confidence Interval for Exp(B)	
			Lower	Upper	Wald Chi-Square	df	Sig.		Lower	Upper
(Intercept)	1.069	.2592	.561	1.577	17.022	1	.000	2.913	1.753	4.842
brandinfrastructure	-.317	.4227	-1.146	.511	.564	1	.453	.728	.318	1.667
brandidentity	1.389	.3447	.714	2.065	16.245	1	.000	4.012	2.042	7.885
brandcommunication	1.632	.3846	.879	2.386	18.015	1	.000	5.116	2.407	10.872
stakeholdermanagement (Scale)	2.681	.2951	2.103	3.260	82.539	1	.000	14.604	8.189	26.042
(Negative binomial)	2.953	.2585	2.487	3.505						

Dependent Variable: shares

Model: (Intercept), brandinfrastructure, brandidentity, brandcommunication, stakeholdermanagement

a. Fixed at the displayed value.

5. Discussion

The purpose of this study was to explore how the internal stakeholder was engaged by the city branding strategies on Sina Weibo through dialogic communication. The results offered evidence that the city branding strategy of stakeholder management contributed to the highest level of citizen engagement in terms of the number of comments and shares. As a distinct feature of social media, share allows users to reproduce the messages and taps into the “scope of reach” of information (Liu et al., 2020), indicating a psychological and behavioral dimension of engagement. Thus, sharing is significant in disseminating the information about the Asian Games 2022 and promoting the image of Hangzhou. In addition, the findings demonstrated that the stakeholder management strategy was more frequently used in the city branding strategy in this case, which echoed the evidence that stakeholder engagement is central to the government’s success in employing social media platforms in city branding especially when the local communities are involved (Li & Feng, 2021). According to Baker (2007), stakeholders value the opportunity to support and contribute, and congruency across the groups will lead to collaboration and a unified place identity. In this pre-game period of Hangzhou 2022 Asian Games, the qualitative investigation of stakeholder management strategies in the sample posts revealed that some of the most popular adopted citizen engagement initiatives included the call for the design and creation of the Asian Games 2022 medal, the Asian Games 2022 mascots selection, and the volunteering programs targeting at all qualified citizens, especially university students. These series of stakeholder management initiatives through social media emerged as a driving factor in creating a sense of belonging and commitment among citizens and strengthening the opportunity to empower citizens. Emphasizing the co-creation nature of building and safeguarding the city brand through Hangzhou 2022 Asian Games, adequate stakeholder management affected the commitment and sense of pride of the citizens in a positive way.

The finding also emphasizes the significance of engaging citizens by adopting the city branding strategy of brand identity since the results offer evidence that brand identity contributes to the highest level of citizen engagement in terms of the number of likes. This is likely because “likes” are associated with the citizens’ affective reactions (Liu et al., 2020) and offering rich message content, such as introducing the key elements of the functional and experiential attributes of the sports events and building the image of the city of Hangzhou would more frequently attract citizens’ affective engagement. It is also worth noting that the strategy of brand communication is positively associated with the number of likes, shares, and comments, suggesting that activities linked to the communication of the brand identity are important in maintaining citizen engagement. With regards to brand infrastructure, NB2 results revealed that the adoption of brand infrastructure was negatively associated with like, comments, and shares. This is likely because citizens rely on their experience rather than social media as their key source of information about city infrastructure.

6. Conclusion

The results add to our knowledge on citizen engagement with city branding communication on Weibo. By extending the adoption of city branding strategies through dialogic communication to social media context, we found that the stakeholder management was the strongest driver among city branding strategies in generating citizen engagement with regard to comments and shares, followed by brand identity, which was associated with likes. This study advances research in city branding by focusing on the adoption of city branding strategies based on sporting event to enhance internal stakeholder engagement via the social media platform as well as the effectiveness of these strategies. The results have implications for effective

implementation of city branding strategies through sports mega-events on the social media platform to inspire and empower citizens and ensure an inclusive global event.

Due to the time limitation, the coding was done by the author alone. Future research should include a second coder and ensure the interrater reliability and checking to make the research more robust. In addition, the categories of city branding strategies via the social media platform could be refined to obtain more theoretically sound results.

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