

Residents and the place branding process: socio-spatial construction of a locked-down city's brand identity

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Abstract

Purpose – Building on Kavaratzis and Hatch's (2013) identity-based place branding model, this paper aims to explore the spatial and social dimensions of the place brand identity formation process and how residents used social media to participate in the process of shaping a city brand during a crisis.

Design/methodology/approach – Adopting an interpretive and social constructionist approach, this study analyses a sample of 187 short videos created and posted by Wuhan residents on the social media app Douyin during a COVID-19 lockdown. The authors read the videos as cultural texts and analysed underlying social processes in the construction of place brand identity by residents.

Findings – This study develops an adapted conceptual model of place identity formation unfolding in four sub-processes: expressing, impressing, mirroring and reflecting, and each sub-process subsumes two dimensions: the social and the spatial. In addition, this study empirically describes how residents participated in place branding processes in two ways, namely, their construction of city brand identity via communicative practice and their exertion of changes to a city brand during a crisis. The model reveals how place brands emerge and can be transformed.

Originality/value – This paper amplifies Kavaratzis and Hatch's (2013) identity-based place branding model by testing it in an empirical study and highlighting the social and spatial dimensions. This paper contributes to research about participatory place branding by exploring how residents participated in the



place branding process. This study analysed short videos on social media, a new communication format, rather than textual narratives dominating past studies.

Keywords Place branding process, Place brand identity, Participatory place branding, Resident, City, Crisis, Transformation, COVID-19, Lockdown, Social media, Video, Douyin, TikTok

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

The literature on participatory place branding (PPB) (Braun *et al.*, 2013; Golestaneh *et al.*, 2021; Kalandides, 2018; Kavaratzis, 2017; Kavaratzis and Kalandides, 2015; Zenker and Erfgen, 2014) emphasizes the importance of stakeholder engagement in the place branding process, where residents (as an important type of internal stakeholders) are considered to be vital co-creators of place brands (Braun *et al.*, 2013; Hudak, 2019). Kavaratzis and Hatch's (2013) identity-based place branding model has been a useful and widely cited framework to conceptualize the place branding process. While subsequent studies have used its ideas as the rationale for more robust PPB frameworks (Casais and Monteiro, 2019; Hudak, 2019; Kavaratzis and Kalandides, 2015; Pedeliento and Kavaratzis, 2019), the model has yet to be fully applied methodologically to theorize residents' participation in the PPB process. Kavaratzis and Hatch's (2013) model for identity-based place branding introduces four sub-processes of place brand identity formation – *expressing*, *impressing*, *mirroring* and *reflecting*, which occur through stakeholder dialogues. The notion of *dialogues* among stakeholders implies the need of understanding the communicative role of residents in the place branding process, specifically how the four sub-processes unfold in residents' practices of expressing the place identity.

According to Mahnken (2011), place brand identity entails socio-spatial interactions among local institutions, actors and residents. Previous literature has emphasized the importance of space and sociality as dimensions in the conceptualisation of place (Agnew, 1987; Boisen *et al.*, 2011; Dematteis, 1994; Tickamyer, 2000), making place brands “inherently relationally spatial” (Lucarelli and Hallin, 2015, p. 100). In light of the ongoing digitalization in society, these two dimensions raise important questions regarding how residents contribute to place brand formation in their communicative practices. Emerging social media platforms such as TikTok give stakeholders new ways to create and communicate messages regarding place brands. To enrich existing models of identity-based place branding (Kavaratzis and Hatch, 2013) and the PPB perspective, this paper empirically explores the spatial and social dimensions of the place brand identity formation process by demonstrating how residents' use of social media can contribute to the transformation of a city brand during a crisis.

The COVID-19 pandemic represents a particularly good opportunity to study *sociality* and *space* in relation to residents' participation in place branding processes. The pandemic has wrought enormous social changes (Kirk and Rifkin, 2020; Peters, 2020; Žižek, 2020), disrupted people's way of life and work (Belk, 2020; M. C. Campbell *et al.*, 2020; Kirk and Rifkin, 2020; Sheth, 2020) and damaged cities' brand reputation (Voytko, 2020). According to Rossolatos (2020), the lockdown of many cities during the pandemic was particularly pertinent to place branding, as it implied a new way for citizens to experience the public space intersubjectively. The lockdown and related social distancing measures have consequences on place brand identity as implied by Proshansky *et al.* (1983, p. 61): “place identity is developed by thinking and talking about places through a process of distancing which allows for reflection and appreciation of places.” From a sociality perspective, the pandemic placed a premium on the notion of interpersonal relations as interpersonal links and interactions turned out to be more salient and valuable for people than ever before (Bradshaw and Hietanen, 2020; Nowland *et al.*, 2018; Wiberg, 2020). In terms of the spatial perspective, containment measures like the lockdown meant that

residents could not physically be near fellow residents or use public spaces, thus shaping their relationships with space (de Rosa and Mannarini, 2021). The pandemic was characterized by changes brought by sudden, intense and unplanned events. Disruptive events like lockdowns mean a transformative process, in which a new city brand could emerge resulting from residents' practices of collaboratively coping with adversity, thereby reshaping the city's brand identity.

As the place where the COVID-19 epidemic broke out, the Chinese city of Wuhan implemented a 76-day lockdown, a dramatic virus containment measure for a city in the early stage of the global pandemic. It was a historic shock to the evolution of the city brand. While Wuhan's residents followed the government's order by staying at home to keep physical distance from others, they stayed connected via social media. They created and posted short videos on China's popular short video app Douyin to share how they were experiencing the lockdown while living through a "landscape of quarantine" (Bonazzi, 2020). The lockdown precipitated residents' participation in the reconstruction of their city brand as they created short videos on social media collectively expressing and rewriting the identity of their city.

Interpretive analysis of 187 short videos created and posted by Wuhan residents on social media during the lockdown allowed us to examine how the city brand identity formation process played out in the spatial and relational dimensions. We draw on Kavaratzis and Hatch's (2013) identity-based place branding model to map out the city brand identity formation process during the lockdown as enacted by residents' videographic and communicative practices on social media in four sub-processes: *expressing*, *impressing*, *reflecting* and *mirroring*. We highlight two important dimensions – *sociality* and *spatiality* – within the model to see how they occurred in the sub-processes. In addition, we explore how residents participated in the place branding process and how they exerted changes leading to the transformation of the city brand during a crisis.

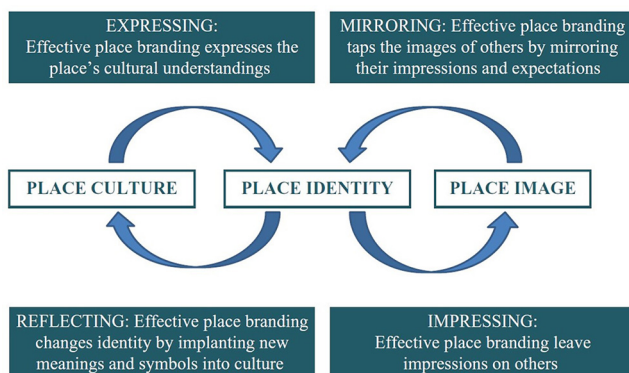
Literature background

This study draws on and contributes to two connected theoretical areas. The identity approach to place branding is applied as a conceptual tool to understand how city branding unfolds as a process, while the PPB perspective prompts us to unravel how residents, as an important type of stakeholders, participate in the place branding process.

The identity approach to place branding

The creation of identity has been a core topic in marketing theory (Black and Veloutsou, 2017), including its application in the context of *places* (Boisen *et al.*, 2011). Dematteis (1994) notes that identity is "a set of attributes capable of representing something similar to the personality of an individual." Identity refers to distinctiveness, not being "the other" (Kalandides, 2011), and originates from individual human identity personality. Identity can be applied to places, enabling places to distinguish themselves, but as with human identity, "place identity is a process, never immobile or fixed" (Kalandides, 2011). "Place brand identity" is accordingly the starting point (Kavaratzis, 2004) in the creation of the essence of a place brand (Hanna and Rowley, 2011). If the brand of a place is not anchored in its identity, then place branding will lead to an empty brand, which is meaningless for its internal stakeholders (Pasquinelli and Teräs, 2013), highlighting the centrality of identity in place branding and marketing.

Kavaratzis and Hatch (2013) brought identity into place branding by borrowing from Hatch and Schultz's (2002) organisational identity model. Kavaratzis and Hatch's (2013) identity-based place branding model (Figure 1) consists of four sub-processes that take place simultaneously in a non-linear manner. Kavaratzis and Hatch (2013, p. 78) point out that "identity is not the outcome of the process but the process itself." The four sub-processes link three elements – place culture, place identity and place image to construct an identity



Source: Figure courtesy of Kavaratzis and Hatch (2013, p. 80)

Figure 1.
The identity-based
place branding model
of Kavaratzis and
Hatch (2013, p. 80)

for a place brand. Place culture is the context of internal definitions of identity, while place image is the site of external definitions of identity, and how these two definitions influence each other is the process of place identity (Hatch and Schultz, 2002). In the sub-process “expressing,” stakeholders capture and articulate cultural features, cultural understandings and characteristics about a place. The sub-process “impressing” means place branding leaves impressions on others and informs their perceptions or image. In the sub-process “mirroring,” changes in external images are mirrored in the brand. The process picks up changes in the external view and works them into the other parts of the branding process. In the sub-process “reflecting,” alterations in external images of identity are reflected in the place identity conversation, and this produces new cultural understandings.

Kavaratzis and Hatch’s (2013) model is conducive to theory development in place branding scholarship in several potential areas. First, it is purely conceptual, as it transfers a theoretical model from an organisational study, thus demanding empirical tests or substantiation (Kavaratzis and Hatch, 2013). Second, Kavaratzis and Hatch do not describe how the four sub-processes occur through stakeholders’ practices (Pedeliento and Kavaratzis, 2019). Third, the model does not emphatically show the two dimensions – *sociality* and *spatiality* – in the constitution of place brand identity. Although Kavaratzis and Hatch (2013, p. 81) allude to the importance of “relations, interconnections, and interactions” in forming the place brand identity, how the social character plays out in the four sub-processes is not elaborated in the model. Transported from the field of organisation studies, this model largely omits the spatial dimension that is central to the issue of place (Agnew, 1987; Boisen *et al.*, 2011; Dematteis, 1994; Lucarelli and Hallin, 2015). How the social and spatial characters play out in the processes forming place brand identity needs concretization and clarification. Fourth, Kavaratzis and Hatch’s model asserts the evolutionary and dynamic nature of place brands, enabling further exploration of how changes occur in the place branding process, here specifically how place branding works in a crisis.

Participatory place branding

Place branding research has introduced concepts of stakeholder participation, co-creation and coproduction (Braun *et al.*, 2013; Golestaneh *et al.*, 2021; Kavaratzis, 2017; Zenker and Erfgen, 2014) and departed its traditional top-down managerial perspective (Balakrishnan, 2009; Hanna and Rowley, 2011). The term “participatory place branding” (PPB) refers to an

inclusive and participatory way of a place brand's formation process, which facilitates and encourages interaction and fluidity leading to stakeholder engagement (Kavaratzis, 2017, p. 102) co-creating the meaning of a place brand (Golestaneh *et al.*, 2021; Kavaratzis and Kalandides, 2015).

As key stakeholders, residents have been viewed as informants, beneficiaries and a target audience in place branding (Kavaratzis, 2017). Residents and local communities can be active partners and co-producers of place brands (Braun *et al.*, 2013; Kavaratzis, 2017; Zenker and Erfgen, 2014) when they provide advice to place branders and serve as brand ambassadors to external stakeholders (Braun *et al.*, 2013; Casais and Monteiro, 2019). In the communication realm, residents can share place stories on social media (Casais and Monteiro, 2019; Hudak, 2019; Taecharungroj, 2019), where places can be framed in discursive or narrative forms (Lichrou *et al.*, 2008). Despite the recognition of the importance of residents as stakeholders, more research is needed to understand how residents engage in the PPB process and how they contribute to the transformations of place brands that are in perpetual flux.

The context

The city of Wuhan, with a population of 12 million, is strategically located in central China as a transportation hub. After the outbreak of the pandemic from there, the Chinese government implemented a lockdown that lasted for 76 days (January 23–April 8 in 2020). Residents were confined to their apartments; most people and vehicles were not allowed to move in the city; all retail and leisure activities were suspended; and face masks and social distancing became mandatory. Shocked by this disruption, Wuhan's residents experienced mental distress, anxiety and fear in the initial phase (Zhao, 2020a). They ordered groceries via e-commerce apps and posted and shared their experiences on Chinese social media such as Douyin, WeChat and Weibo. During the lockdown, Wuhan's residents lived in two main spaces – the home (physical) and social media (digital).

Wuhan's residents' life in the lockdown was relevant to a wider audience – people from other parts of China and the whole world watched the unfolding drama in the city. The attention Wuhan drew from audiences outside China and in the international media (Illmer *et al.*, 2021) further globalised the city brand. Audiences learnt about Wuhan from reports on traditional media and social media. Owned by the Chinese tech giant ByteDance, Douyin is a fast-emerging short video social network app for users to post and share self-created short videos. It is the domestic twin of its international counterpart – TikTok (Kaye *et al.*, 2020). Hosting 15 s to 60 s user-generated videos, Douyin is designed to encourage the production and dissemination of viral videos (Serrano *et al.*, 2020). Douyin occupied a significant space for Chinese consumers during the pandemic given its large number of users – in 2020, it had 600 million daily active users (He and Disis, 2021). During the lockdown, the state-owned Wuhan Broadcasting Group organised a short video competition on Douyin with the hashtag #Wuhan folks stay-at-home combating the pandemic# to support residents to endure the period and mitigate negative effects.

Method

We adopted an interpretive and social constructionist approach in this study (Belk *et al.*, 2012; Hirschman, 1986; Spiggle, 1994). The authors read the videos as cultural texts and interpreted underlying social processes in the construction of places by stakeholders (Warnaby and Medway, 2013).

The initial step was to collect the short videos. Wuhan Broadcasting Group compiled a final collection of 177 videos on Douyin (of 13,000 submissions to the competition) that were

deemed exemplary. To compensate for the potential limitation of the organiser's selection procedure, we obtained additional videos from Douyin by doing a search using the keywords "Covid-19+Wuhan+stay-at-home." We stopped the search when we reached data saturation; that is, there were no more videos that could provide new conceptual dimensions or evidence. Our sample contains 187 videos totalling 3 h and 11 min. A deep understanding of the context was achieved through immersion in it by the first author, a native of Wuhan living in Europe. He witnessed the unfolding of the lockdown drama in Wuhan by viewing feeds on Chinese social media, tracking news on Chinese and global media and communicating with acquaintances in the city.

Second, we translated non-linguistic data into textual output by transcribing the voiceovers into text and *writing* the visual data to support our knowledge claims (Belk and Kozinets, 2005). For some videos, we provide extra descriptions in the Appendix [1]. Screen captures were generated by "freezing" the movements of videos into stills for analysis. We created an Excel spreadsheet to log each video covering the dimensions: spatial arrangements, sequences/plot, what people/subtitles say, who, actors' doings, rehearsed or spontaneous, noteworthy objects/signs/symbols, technical aspects (editing, special effects), sound (music, rhythm) and categories (emic and etc). After an analysis of 50 videos by the three authors independently, the findings were compared. Although the first author is a Chinese native and the other two are Westerners, their analyses yielded a similar reading of the videos. Where necessary, disagreements were discussed and coding was further clarified (Campbell *et al.*, 2013).

Third, an iterative analytical process was used, moving back and forth between theory and data (Belk *et al.*, 2012). We used Kavaratzis and Hatch's (2013) identity-based place branding model as the conceptual scaffolding to operationalize the analysis. The four sub-processes (expressing, impressing, mirroring and reflecting) in this model served as the organising elements and categories of data analysis; that is, our analysis was directed toward a search for specific data falling into these categories by coding how residents undertook these activities. The analysis of the extra dimension of spatiality was grounded in the wider literature about space and place (Agnew, 1987; Boisen *et al.*, 2011; Francois-Lecompte *et al.*, 2017; Giovanardi and Lucarelli, 2018; Kalandides, 2011; Lucarelli and Hallin, 2015; Tickamyer, 2000). We looked at space-specific building blocks – spatial context, spatial scale and spatialising strategies, identifying how residents used and transformed spaces. For an analysis of the sociality dimension, we reached patterns and themes inductively and at the same time were inspired by well-established concepts in the marketing literature – hometown (Arnold *et al.*, 2001), community (Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001), tribes (Cova and Cova, 2002) and reciprocal giving (Mauss, 1976).

Findings

Interpretive analysis allowed us to provide an empirically grounded illustration of the four sub-processes that facilitated the formation of Wuhan's brand identity during the lockdown, based on the identity-based place branding conceptual model of Kavaratzis and Hatch (2013). In each of these four processes, we specifically detailed the social and spatial dimensions of how residents contributed to brand formation. The analysis is summarized in Table 1.

Expressing

In the videos, residents expressed their cultural understanding, cultural features and distinctive characteristics of the city that formed a part of the place's identity. Residents' expressions

Table 1.
Summary of findings and the extended model of identity-based place branding process based on Kavaratzis and Hatch (2013, p. 80)

	Expressing		
<i>Definition:</i> Residents expressed cultural understanding, cultural features and characteristics of the city. Sub-themes:	<i>Sociality dimension:</i>	<i>Spatial dimension:</i>	<i>Changes exerted by residents:</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Residents established social connections among family members, between neighbours and among fellow residents Residents demonstrated a unified local community and formed the internal culture of the city 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Spatial context: Residents' homes, neighbourhoods and public spaces inaccessible to residents which they missed Spatial scales: Ranging from intimate distances among family members to public distance Spatialisation strategies: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Limited space at home prompted various creative spatial solutions To express and show characteristics of the material, tangible environment of the city 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Before: besieged by a crisis, residents faced existential threats; the virus-ravaged city emitted a sentiment of fear, trauma and depression Residents' actions: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Expressed tangible characteristics of the city; pondered on the city's streets Implemented spatialising strategies at home Expressed community culture Videographic and communicative practices on Douyin After (outcomes): <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Enhanced emotional attachment to the city Enhanced common emotional bond among fellow residents Spatialising strategies at home as solutions and responses to crisis Signs of spirit of recovery from the pandemic 	

(continued)

Impressing

<p>Definition: Residents created and posted videos to leave positive impressions on audiences and inform their perceptions or image of Wuhan Sub-themes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Creativity in family members' activities doing meaningful and fun things together while staying at home • The residents interacted with an imagined audience (the public) through artistic performances in the videos to leave a positive impression about the city 	<p>Sociality dimension:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Family members worked together to achieve collective resilience and resourcefulness in coping with the lockdown to leave a positive impression on external audiences about the city • Residents interacted with audiences through artistic performances to leave a positive impression about the city 	<p>Spatial dimension:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Spatial context: The home and the digital space for interactions between residents and audiences • Spatial scales: Intimate distances at home, the geographic scope within the city and the national geographic scale • Spatialisation strategies: Limited space at home prompted resourceful spatial solutions by family members shifting interactions to the digital space 	<p>Changes exerted by residents:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Before: as the place where the COVID-19 epidemic broke out, Wuhan's reputation was damaged in the media and the minds of external audiences • Residents' actions: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Family members did meaningful and fun things (artistic performances and entertainment) together at home; continued or tweaked existing activities (DIY projects, haircutting by a family member and physical exercises) – Videographic and communicative practices on Douyin • After (outcomes): <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Demonstrated residents' collective resilience, creativity and resourcefulness in coping with the lockdown – Constructed a positive image of the city based on the rationale that residents and their lives are the "bread and butter" of places (Braun <i>et al.</i>, 2013, p. 20) and residents are the lifeblood of place brands (Hudak, 2019). Residents formed an integral part of the city brand, and the city was as creative and resilient as its dwellers
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(continued)

Table 1.

Table 1.

Mirroring	
<p><i>Definition:</i> Changes in the external image were mirrored in the city brand. As internal stakeholders, Wuhan's residents picked up changes in the external audiences' view and adapted their practices to create a new image – a grateful city emerging from the crisis. Residents thanked external stakeholders like medics</p>	<p><i>Sociality dimension:</i> The relationships between internal and external stakeholders – the external audiences cheered Wuhan's residents and frontline workers supported Wuhan in the battle. Wuhan's residents rewarded the medics and frontline workers with gratitude. The residents and frontline workers were in a reciprocal relationship</p>
<p><i>Spatial dimension:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Spatial contexts: Residents' balconies, the physical distance between internal and external stakeholders, and the digital space for interactions between them • Spatial scales: The geographic scope within the city and the national geographic scale • Spatialisation strategy: Shifting interactions to the digital space 	<p><i>Changes exerted by residents:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Before: at the beginning of the pandemic, external audiences had a negative image of Wuhan as a city associated with the virus' start, and Wuhanese were shunned by others • Residents' actions: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Expressed thanks to the medics and frontline workers – Videographic and communicative practices on Douyin • After (outcome): created a new image – a grateful city emerging from the crisis

(continued)

Reflecting	
<p>Definition: Residents viewed the city and themselves in new ways, and they instilled new meaning to the city brand – “Heroic City” and “Heroic People.” Wuhan city’s enriched identity was absorbed back into the culture through reflection</p>	<p>Sociality dimension: On-going conversations between internal stakeholders (residents, generating a new place culture containing the meaning of “Heroic City,” and “Heroic People”) and external audiences (new image about the city)</p>
<p>Spatial dimension:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Spatial context: Residents’ balconies, the physical distance between internal and external stakeholders, and the digital space for interactions between them • Spatial scales: The geographic scope within the city and the national geographic scale • Spatialisation strategy: Shifting interactions to the digital space 	<p>Changes exerted by residents:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Before: the city’s reputation was tarnished by the outbreak of the pandemic • Residents’ actions: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Displayed “heroic people” and “heroic city” slogans in videos and reflected on such labels – Videographic and communicative practices on Douyin • After (outcomes): <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Chinese Government, media and citizens described Wuhan’s residents as “heroic people” and the city as a “heroic city” – The city’s negative image was changed; “heroic city” emerged as a new image among external audiences
<p>Source: Authors’ own creation</p>	

Table 1.

focused on the nature of the city at that time, their activities during the lockdown, community culture and support in fighting the pandemic.

First, the videos expressed some tangible characteristics of the place. Besieged by a crisis, the residents faced existential threats in the face of imminent death posed by the virus. Wuhan served as the backdrop in which residents' videos were created. The city under lockdown was an object on which the residents reflected. At the beginning of the pandemic, the virus-ravaged city emitted a sentiment of fear, trauma and depression. In Videos 46, 145 and 181 (Description 1 in [Appendix](#)), the residents pondered on the city's streets which were empty, quiet and gloomy. The entire city was silent.

Some of the videos captured the territorial identity of the city by narrating its material, tangible environment – landscape, streets or familiar urban settings, where residents live together. Iconic places as residents' shared memories appear in Video 149, in which an engineer drew a series of paintings on a roll of toilet paper to show that he missed the city. The paintings depicted the bridge across the Yangtzi River, the Jiangnan Wharf, the Yellow Crane Tower and Wuhan University. The city evoked memories among the video makers, who expressed how they missed the dynamic urban life. The videos manifest residents' strong emotional attachment to the city, which is "an affective bond or link between people and specific places" ([Hidalgo and Hernández, 2001](#)).

Second, the expressions were about activities at home as spatialising strategies during the lockdown. For Wuhan's residents, staying at home was a way of complying with social distancing rules with the home offering a sense of security and serving as the spatial context. Family members spent all their time in the same apartment carrying out a range of activities assuming the roles of family members, students, workers, online shoppers and video producers. Home, as the spatial scaffolding, prompted residents to organize their lives as solutions and responses. Family members improvised and carried out activities that were not done at home previously including doing outdoor exercises in the living room (Videos 24, 27 and 108; Videos 125 and 174), having a haircut done by a family member (Videos 79) and family members dancing to shoot a video (Video 120). The home, as the social setting, transitioned into make-shift offices, gyms or broadcast studios as activities moved from public to private spaces.

Third, residents' videos also expressed the internal culture of who "we" were as a community, conveying a communal sense of place identity. Residents were linked by shared emotions and experiences around a brand ([Cova and Cova, 2002](#)) – in this case, the city. The city became the new "linking value" for residents, who bonded around concerns of the territorial object.

During the lockdown, all the residential compounds were sealed off. Video 178 documents inter-neighbour relationships and how neighbours were watching and caring for each other. A resident saw that the curtains of a neighbour's window were blowing outside, as its owner had forgotten to close the window. The owner had gone to the outskirts before the lockdown and could not return. From February 15 to April 12, the curtains were visible, blown by the wind in the rain and snow. The neighbour shot the curtains daily and uploaded the videos on social media, which became viral and were relayed on multiple social media platforms. Viewers were emotionally engaged and expected the owner to come back to close the window. The video ended with the owner's return to take in the curtains and the words "happy ending," implying a recovery from the pandemic.

The song *Wuhan Folks* (as an object) was created by Wuhan's residents at the beginning of the pandemic and went viral. It was performed by residents in multiple videos, and it was used as background music for many videos in our sample. The song became a common

emotional thread expressing many residents' sentiment of "loving the city as my hometown." Excerpts of the lyrics include:

This is my home, where I grew up. I've walked on the big bridge across the Yangtzi river many times. I miss the Wuhan style dry noodle no matter where I go in the world. I miss the bustling late night of the city as well as food on the streets at night. I miss the famous poem about the Yellow Crane Tower, and I've recited each line of it many times. My beloved Wuhan, which only I can criticise. I only allow others to praise it. My beloved Wuhan and Wuhan folks. This is my home, and we will guard her. If she needs me one day, I will lend a hand.

Community efforts to fight the pandemic are seen in the videos. For example, residents shouted "Come on, Wuhan!" (*Jia You Wuhan* in Chinese Mandarin) (the slogan is an object) to cheer and encourage all residents to work to survive in the situation, positively impacting the morale of the people, thus using the name of the city as a rallying cry and invoking the institution of the city. The slogan appears as written signs in Videos 9, 102 and 143 (Description 2 in [Appendix](#)), vocal signs (humans shouting in Video 179) and human gestures (arm movement) (Video 142), all of which belong to a unified symbolic artifact that demonstrates the enactment of a community feeling of togetherness ("we-ness") and the shared will to overcome the odds:

- *Summary of the sociality dimension* ([Table 1](#)): In expressing the characteristics and identity of the city, residents established social connections among family members, between neighbours and among fellow residents. They demonstrated a unified local community and formed the internal culture of the city.
- *Summary of the spatial dimension* ([Table 1](#)): Spatial contexts include residents' homes, neighbourhoods and public spaces that residents could not access but missed. The spatial scales for residents ranged from intimate distances among family members to public distances where residents were physically separated. In terms of spatialisation strategies, limited space at home prompted various creative spatial solutions in coping with the lockdown. One spatialisation solution of residents was expressing the characteristics of the material, tangible environment of the city: streets, iconic scenes and landscapes, and familiar public spaces.

Impressing

Residents created and posted videos to leave positive impressions on the audience and inform their perceptions or image of Wuhan. The city brand was constructed by residents constantly performing certain activities ([Cresswell, 2004](#)). Creativity and resilience in the residents' activities were seen as family members tried to do meaningful and fun things together while staying at home, continuing or adapting existing activities. Home-bound projects and activities included do-it-yourself projects (cooking together in Video 172), a family member giving a haircut (Video 79), physical exercises (Videos 24, 27, 108, 125 and 174) and family members dancing for a video (Video 120). Such activities indicate family members' collective resilience and resourcefulness in coping with the lockdown. Sports and other physical activities were done to strengthen the immune system.

A large proportion of our sample features residents' artistic performances and entertainment – singing, dancing, painting, calligraphy, writing and playing musical instruments. The lockdown unleashed creativity among residents, who were resourceful and created spectacles or humour in the videos. In Video 120, three family members (father, mother and son) were ostentatiously dancing to music in front of a mobile phone, and their postures were staged and acted. Video 9 (Description 3 in [Appendix](#)), entitled "Hold on,

don't panic," has a series of posters repurposing vintage propaganda posters. Each poster offers a sentence as a tip on how to live during the lockdown. The background music is quirky with a strong beat, and the overall video is full of humour, nostalgia and amusement. Everybody on Douyin became a showman or entertainer. Residents became ambassadors for the city brand through artistic performances generating symbolic attributes for the city. Such performances became impression management in front of external audiences, constructing a positive image that the city was as creative and resilient as its members:

- *Summary of the sociality dimension (Table 1)*: Family members worked together to achieve collective resilience and resourcefulness in coping with the lockdown to leave a positive impression about the city. Through artistic performances in the videos, residents interacted with the audience in the city and beyond to leave a positive impression of the city.
- *Summary of the spatial dimension (Table 1)*: Spatial contexts include the home and the digital space for interactions between residents and the audience. The spatial scales ranged from intimate distances among family members at home to the geographic scope within the city (with fellow residents as the audience) to the national scale (with audiences outside the city). In terms of spatialisation strategies, limited space at home prompted resourceful spatial solutions, and the physical distances between residents and their audience (in the city and beyond) forced interactions to move online to replace face-to-face interactions. Digital apps like Douyin became the new sociable space.

Mirroring

The sub-process "mirroring" means that changes in the external image were mirrored in the city brand (Kavaratzis and Hatch, 2013). At the beginning of the pandemic, external audiences had a negative image of Wuhan as a city associated with the virus' start (Voytko, 2020), and Wuhanese were shunned by others. Wuhan's residents, as internal stakeholders, adapted up changes in the external view and worked them into the branding process. They adapted their practices to create a new image – a grateful city emerging from the crisis.

The "mirroring" sub-process contains the relationships between internal and external stakeholders. The external stakeholders include people spatially outside the city watching developments in the city via mediated experiences, and they cheered Wuhan's residents with emotional support. In addition, external stakeholders include frontline workers, most of whom were from other provinces in China. Following the lockdown in January 2020, China's Central Government mobilised the whole country to help in controlling the epidemic in Wuhan, sending more than 40,000 medical workers from other provinces to Wuhan (Liu and Wang, 2020). In addition, the Government organised thousands of social workers and volunteers to help in distributing groceries and other supplies to each residential compound, transporting medical workers and residents with urgent needs within the city, and disinfecting streets and neighbourhoods.

In the video sample, there are repeated instances of Wuhan's residents' appreciation for the medics and other frontline workers who fought for them during the darkest moments of the outbreak. The residents and frontline workers were in a reciprocal relationship, engaged in acts of "reciprocal" giving (Mauss, 1976). On the one hand, in the battle against the pandemic in Wuhan, medical professionals, social workers and volunteers offered a "gift" – their services and sacrifices in combating the pandemic. Doctors and nurses sacrificed themselves for the greater good, exposing themselves to the sick and the virus. Many worked

longer shifts, full of exhaustion. On the other hand, residents were grateful and felt obliged to give a “gift” to frontline workers.

In many videos, residents thanked frontline workers artfully through paintings, songs, dancing, calligraphy, poems and musical performances. In Video 37, an elementary female student painted images of different frontline workers (medics, social workers and volunteers) in various working situations and talked about the action behind each painting to pay tribute. Wuhan’s residents did various artistic performances in videos to thank frontline workers. In Video 66, an elementary school girl sings a song to wish that medical workers finish the task and return soon. In Video 156, a female teacher danced with hand gestures, while an adult female played “The sound of angels” on a saxophone to pay tribute to doctors in Video 84. A male taxi driver wrote the script and delivered a China-styled allegro speech to pay tribute to people working on the frontline in Video 126.

Besides staged performances, there are naturally happening moments of residents appreciating medical workers. In April, the situation in Wuhan turned around, and medical workers dispatched to Wuhan finished their tasks and returned to their own provinces. When they left Wuhan on buses, some residents stood on their balconies seeing them leave and shouted: “Thank you!” “Thank angels in white coats!” and “You have worked so hard” (Video 180). Two residents waved to the medics while displaying a piece of white cloth with the expression “Thank you, angels!” from their balcony (Video 187):

- *Summary of the sociality dimension* (Table 1): The sociality dimension mainly lies in the relationships between internal and external stakeholders – external audiences cheered Wuhan’s residents, and frontline workers supported Wuhan in the battle. Wuhan’s citizens appreciated the medics and frontline workers.
- *Summary of the spatial dimension* (Table 1): Spatial context includes residents’ balconies, the physical distance between internal and external stakeholders and the digital space for interactions between them. The spatial scales ranged from the geographic scope within the city (residents versus frontline workers in the city) to the national scale (residents versus external audiences who cheered Wuhan’s residents). In terms of the spatialisation strategy, because of the physical distance between residents and external stakeholders (in the city and beyond), interactions shifted to digital sites and apps as the new sociable space.

Reflecting

Before the pandemic, Wuhan was positioned as a transportation hub located in central China and as “China’s Chicago” (Taylor, 2020). The city’s reputation was tarnished by the outbreak of the pandemic. Residents changed the city’s negative image by portraying it in a positive light in their videos, making it a heroic one. This heroic city emerged as a new image among external audiences. In January 2020, China’s Central Government adopted a lockdown in Wuhan to prevent the spread of COVID-19 to other areas of the country and residents’ abode by the order and stayed at home for 76 days and nights. They consciously contributed to the war against the virus by staying safe at home and not adding to the burden being shouldered by medical professionals, buying valuable time for the rest of China containing the epidemic. During and after the lockdown, the Chinese Government, media and citizens described Wuhan’s residents as “heroic people” and the city as a “heroic city” (Zhao, 2020b). In Video 187, a resident stood on his balcony holding a piece of cloth with the Chinese text “Heroic City” and “Heroic People.” Having survived the pandemic and resumed a normal life (Illmer *et al.*, 2021), Wuhan and its residents endured trials and emerged victorious (Porterfield, 2020). The city transformed from a “landscape of

quarantine” (Bonazzi, 2020) to a place with pride. The two titles, as accolades, were earned by the city and its members. Such labels reflect how residents saw the city and themselves and instilled new meanings and symbols to the culture in the city’s brand identity (Pedeliento and Kavartzis, 2019). The new labels represent alterations to the external image of the city identity, reflected in place identity conversations, producing new cultural understandings (Kavartzis and Hatch, 2013). The city brand identity was enriched, and the enriched identity was absorbed back into the culture through reflection (Kavartzis and Hatch, 2013):

- *Summary of the sociality dimension (Table 1)*: There are ongoing conversations between internal stakeholders (residents, generating a new place culture with the meanings of “Heroic City” and “Heroic People”) and external audiences who had a particular image of the city. The new round of internally formed and expressed identity will leave an impression on external audiences.
- *Summary of the spatial dimension (Table 1)*: The spatial context includes residents’ balconies, the physical distance between internal and external stakeholders and the digital space for interactions between them. The spatial scales ranged from the geographic scope within the city to the national scale (many viewers of the videos were Chinese people outside the city watching the unfolding of events in Wuhan). In terms of the spatialisation strategy, because of the physical distance between residents and external audiences in the city and beyond, the interactions shifted to online and digital apps like Douyin.

Discussion and conclusion

Theoretical contributions

This study conceptualizes place branding as emerging and transforming through identity-forming processes containing relational and spatial dimensions, which are communicated and enacted by residents. It contributes to the place branding’s conceptual and empirical research in three areas: amplifying the identity-based place branding model of Kavartzis and Hatch (2013) through empirical substantiation and highlighting the spatial and social dimensions in the model; adding knowledge and empirically grounded insights to PPB research about the communicative practices of residents constructing place brand identity – a perspective which dovetails with Kavartzis and Hatch’s (2013) view of place identity as an ongoing conversation and branding as an instrument of expressing; and adding insights to existing PPB perspectives by revealing that residents can exert changes leading to the transformation of a city brand during a crisis. Additionally, this study connects the two streams of research – identity-based place branding and PPB, which have certain areas of overlap.

Place brand transformation via processes containing spatial and relational dimensions

This study substantiates and enriches Kavartzis and Hatch’s (2013) identity-based place branding model with an empirical study and tests its applicability. Our undertaking joins earlier efforts at amplifying the model of Kavartzis and Hatch (2013) (Kladou *et al.*, 2017; Pedeliento and Kavartzis, 2019) by shedding light on how a city brand identity was relationally and spatially formed and enacted by residents in four sub-processes (see our adapted model in Table 1).

Our analysis shows that the Wuhan city brand emerged through a series of actions that are social or relational. The relational construction of the place brand identity was enacted

via various types of relationships in different processes where the residents were the focal stakeholders: residents bonding together as a community in the “expressing” sub-process, residents interacting with the audience to leave a positive impression about the city in the “impressing” sub-process, the reciprocal relationship between the residents and frontline workers in the “mirroring” sub-process and on-going conversations between residents and external audiences for the new city image of a “Heroic City” in the “reflecting” sub-process. The contents of the videos hinge on the meaning of solidarity and togetherness as residents and other stakeholders maintained the social fabric while coping with the lockdown.

Residents’ videos provided spatial delineation and spatial identity to the city. Our analysis highlights how the spatial dimension of the city brand was constructed in the place branding process. First, in the four sub-processes, we identify various spatial contexts: residents’ homes, apartment balconies, neighbourhoods, public spaces that residents could not access but missed, and the digital space for interactions between stakeholders. Some of the videos talk of the spatial story of the city showing material/physical settings and tangible elements. For example, in the “expressing” sub-process, residents showed empty and silent streets during the lockdown and missed iconic landmarks in the urban sphere where they congregated earlier. Such spatial factors resonate with the component of “infrastructure” in the strategic place brand-management model proposed by [Hanna and Rowley \(2011\)](#) as “infrastructure” includes the environment, landscape, functional (tangible) place attributes and their renovation and regeneration. Second, our analysis sorts out the spatial or territorial scope ([Hospers, 2006](#)) in each of the four sub-processes ranging from intimate distances among family members at home to the geographic scope within the city to the national geographic scale. Third, our analysis maps out residents’ spatialization strategies: creative and resourceful spatial solutions by family members at home or shifting interactions to the digital space. Social media became the new sociable space enabling social interactions without spatial limitations ([Cronshaw, 2021](#)). Douyin served as an intermediary between residents and frontline workers in their reciprocal relationship in the “mirroring” sub-process.

Place brand transformation via residents’ communicative practice in participatory place branding

Residents’ communicative practice is a key component when transforming place brands, as residents can mediate among stakeholders and communicate the spatial capacity of a city. Similar to the notion of [Braun et al. \(2013\)](#) that residents can work in *tertiary* communication via their word-of-mouth activities, our findings reveal that residents contributed to the city brand identity formation processes via the role of *communicator*.

Fitting into the type of “participation as practice” in the conceptual framework of [Kalandides \(2018\)](#), residents of Wuhan performed communicative practices on videos revealing their spatialising strategies under certain constraints, resulting in the representation of the city. In the sphere of spatial expressivity ([Giovannardi and Lucarelli, 2018](#)), residents visually and discursively documented their quarantine lives and represented their homes and city to the outside world, leading to a transformed city brand.

The city brand, as a living entity, was constructed by the substances of the city – residents and their life. This reasoning is based on the notions that residents are the “bread and butter” of places ([Braun et al., 2013](#), p. 20), and place personality is constituted by the set of human characteristics associated with the place brand ([Hanna and Rowley, 2011](#)). Documenting how they inhabited their city during a crisis, Wuhan residents reified the city brand.

Residents' communicative practice dovetails well with the model of [Kavaratzis and Hatch \(2013\)](#), which assumes that the four sub-processes are about identity conversation and place branding is a dialogue among stakeholders. The four sub-processes can be viewed as four communicative and expressive practices performed by residents. The labels of the four sub-processes in the original model are verbs, implying that each process means actions done by stakeholders.

Place brand transformation exerted by residents' participation in participatory place branding

Change is a significant factor in developing and sustaining a place brand as suggested by [Golestaneh et al. \(2021\)](#). The crisis in this study meant a transformative occasion for residents, a key type of internal stakeholders, to involve and make a change in the brand identity of their city.

Residents' dwelling practices during the lockdown indicated the resilience and the ability to "bounce back" from a crisis of themselves as well as their city. They transformed the city brand through their communicative and videographic practices, turning the negative external perception of the city into positive images (sub-processes of *impressing*, *mirroring* and *reflecting*). Our adapted model (see [Table 1](#), the column on the extreme right) maps out how residents exerted changes and transformed the city brand during a crisis. The following discussions are based on our *re-reading* of the findings in the four sub-processes interpreted earlier in the Findings chapter.

In the sub-process of "Expressing" (the column on the extreme right in [Table 1](#)), facing existential threats and living in a virus-ravaged city filled with fear, trauma and depression, residents expressed tangible characteristics of the city and pondered on the city's streets via videos. They documented their spatialising strategies at home and expressed community culture by capturing moving events in neighbourhoods. Such actions led to multiple outcomes: enhanced emotional attachment to the city, an emotional bond among fellow residents, solutions and responses to the crisis and a spirit of recovery from the pandemic.

In the sub-process of "Impressing" (the column on the extreme right in [Table 1](#)), before the lockdown, the reputation of Wuhan was damaged in the media and the minds of external audiences. Residents, who were working together as family members, did meaningful and fun things at home, continuing or tweaking existing activities. Consequently, the videos showcased residents' collective resilience, creativity, and resourcefulness in coping with the lockdown thereby constructing a positive image of the city. The city emerged to be as resilient and creative as its dwellers because of the logic that residents are the lifeblood of place brands ([Hudak, 2019](#)).

In the sub-process of "Mirroring" (the column on the extreme right in [Table 1](#)), at the beginning of the pandemic, external audiences developed a negative image of Wuhan as a city associated with the virus, and Wuhanese were shunned by others. Residents expressed their appreciation in various ways to the medics and frontline workers leading to the emergence of a new image of a grateful city rising from the crisis.

In the sub-process of "Reflecting" (the column on the extreme right in [Table 1](#)), the city's reputation was tarnished by the outbreak of the pandemic. Residents displayed "heroic people" and "heroic city" slogans in videos and reflected on such labels, with this image emerging among external audiences.

Our perspective that the Wuhan city brand was reframed by residents' expressions leading to a transformation echoes the non-static (or fluid) view of place brand identity held by [Kavaratzis and Hatch \(2013\)](#). For conceptualizing how place brands emerge and unfold as transformations, we propose a blank (or generic) model of an identity-based place branding process for replication by future research, based on the original one of

Kavaratzis and Hatch (2013, p. 80) (see Table 2). This extended model can be used by researchers studying how a place brand forms its identity enacted by the actions of stakeholders during a crisis or transformation. The model consists of four sub-processes: expressing, impressing, mirroring, and reflecting. The definition of each sub-process (the leftist column in Table 2) remains the same as the original model of Kavaratzis and Hatch (2013, p. 80), but future studies can explore the social dimension (the second column in Table 2) and spatial dimension (the third column in Table 2) in each sub-process. Additionally, future studies need to look at how certain stakeholders exert changes within each sub-process (the column on the extreme right in Table 2) to understand how a place brand is transformed in on-going processes of becoming.

Managerial implications, limitations and future research

With social media such as TikTok and Douyin, consumers and tourists have a chance to contribute freely to online discussions, performances and brand building concerning destinations (Du *et al.*, 2022; Shao *et al.*, 2019). In this study, residents communicated many unintended messages (Braun *et al.*, 2013), which were not conceived and planned by place marketers in an instrumentalist and determinist approach. Therefore, place branders need to balance top-down and rationalist planning and spontaneous participation of stakeholders in place branding practices. Residents shared their mediated experiences of the city beyond

<i>Expressing</i> Definition: Stakeholders capture and articulate cultural features, cultural understandings and characteristics of a place	Social dimension	Spatial dimension	Changes exerted by stakeholders in a crisis or transformation of a place brand: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Before • Actions • After
<i>Impressing</i> Definition: Place branding leaves impressions on others and informs their perceptions or image	Social dimension	Spatial dimension	Changes exerted by stakeholders in a crisis or transformation of a place brand: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Before • Actions • After
<i>Mirroring</i> Definition: Changes in external images are mirrored in the brand; the process picks up changes in the external view and works them into the other parts of the branding process	Spatial dimension	Spatial dimension	Changes exerted by stakeholders in a crisis or transformation of a place brand: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Before • Actions • After
<i>Reflecting</i> Definition: Alterations in external images of identity are reflected in the place identity conversation, and this produces new cultural understandings	Spatial dimension	Spatial dimension	Changes exerted by stakeholders in a crisis or transformation of a place brand: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Before • Actions • After

Source: Authors' own creation

Table 2.
A blank model of the identity-based place branding process for replication in future studies based on Kavaratzis and Hatch (2013, p. 80)

their spatial limits, shaping and substantiating the brand essence of a city digitally. The leveraging of new social media platforms means that place branders need to determine which techniques residents use to create alternative portrayals of a place, including how residents' stories are captured, edited and formed.

Like any research, this study has some limitations. Our sample derives from a particular cultural context and relies largely on a list with the state-owned media organisation acting as a gatekeeper. Ideological intentions behind the competition existed as positive aspects of the city were selected and emphasized, while negative aspects were omitted. For residents' behavior, this study lacks supplementary data collection techniques (e.g. residents' diaries or interviews) to gain additional insights into video producers' reflections and intentions behind their work. This study focuses on how one type of stakeholder (residents) acted as the main driver of a place brand, without addressing other stakeholders such as external audiences and their interactions. We do not capture audience responses to the videos such as comments or sharing. Our study is a snapshot of a critical period of Wuhan, not the historical context nor the evolvement of the city brand.

Our model can inspire further theoretical development and empirical efforts. Researchers can test our model in different contexts to further evaluate its applicability, adaptability and generalisability. To understand external audiences' engagement in the city branding process, future projects can include social media analytics and external audiences' responses to the content on social media. Qualitative interviews can be conducted to understand how external viewers perceive the messages in the videos created by the residents. Wuhan's residents' short videos are interesting for external audiences who could be prospective tourists to the city, and the impact of these videos on the decision to visit the city can be investigated. Further empirical research can study the Wuhan city brand in three different stages (before the pandemic, during the lockdown and after the lockdown) to track the evolution of the city brand identity.

Note

1. For a copy of the videos and their screen captures mentioned in this paper, please contact the first author.

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Appendix. Descriptions of some videos

Description 1. Expressing – Videos 46, 145 and 181

Video 46 shows the empty street of Si Men Kou and Jiang Cheng Avenue, two famous spots of the city. Video 145 shows an empty and quiet residential neighborhood. Video 181 shows the empty street seen from the window of an apartment.

Description 2. Expressing – Videos 9, 102 and 143

Entitled "Hold on, don't panic," Video 9 features a series of posters in vintage style. In one of them, a worker was raising one arm and shouted the slogan "Come on, Wuhan! Wuhan will win!" Video 102 shows the text "Come on, Wuhan!" in red neon lights on the surface of a building. In Video 143, the slogan consisting of four Chinese characters appears on four cards played by a boy.

Description 3. Impressing – Videos 9

Video 9 is entitled "Hold on, don't panic" with a series of fun posters. As good examples, we selected six posters whose titles are:

- (1) The turn-around point of the pandemic has not arrived. Hold on and do not panic!
- (2) If you stay at home, the virus will have no way to wield its power.
- (3) Get to bed early and get up early. Talk less and do more physical exercises.
- (4) Online courses at home can also make you an A level student.
- (5) Work hard in the kitchen cooking dishes with all kinds of recipes.
- (6) Posting a video, doing some chats and drinking some wine. Spending great time.

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