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## COHERENCE IN THE DESIGN OF OFFICIAL AND UNOFFICIAL TOURISM WEBSITES: ENHANCING CITY BRAND

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### ABSTRACT

*Branding plays an important role in city identity. One way to achieve a strong city brand is through a coherent tourism website. If the messages are not clear on the website, either through the text or the visual content, then tourists may not visit the city, leading to economic loss, among other things. This paper explores the coherence of the text and visual content of London's official tourism website as well as one unofficial tourism website through a series of content analyses. Findings reveal that the main messages of the text from the official tourism website emphasise London's historic and contemporary culture whereas the visual content only seems to focus on heritage. The unofficial tourism website appears to promote lesser-known attractions and contemporary culture. The paper concludes with how London can better characterise its diverse brand and how it can differentiate itself from other cities.*

*Keywords: city branding, coherence, official tourism websites, strategic design*

## 1 INTRODUCTION

'Well-designed objects are easy to interpret and understand.' (Norman, 2002, p. 2) This quote definitely can be applied to city branding, as a poorly-designed city brand can result in confusion, uncertainty about a place and its assets, and may negatively impact visitor numbers. Tourism websites, both official and unofficial, can help to minimise these negative impacts, but only if the design of the textual and visual content is coherent. 'Coherence describes to what extent a design is "unified", the extent to which it is free from inner contradictions, and can be perceived as a whole.' (Dorst, 2006, p.49) How cities create coherent content on their tourism websites is not well-known; this paper begins to answer this question and provides ways for cities to consider potential branding strategies, both as a means to an end (i.e. creating a great city brand) and as a means of differentiation from other cities.

For this paper, my research question is: How do coherence in the design of official and unofficial tourism websites contribute to city branding? To answer this question, a case study of London's official tourism website was examined.

## 2 RESEARCH FRAMEWORK

### 2.1 RESEARCH CONTEXT

One strategy that city branding experts use to construct and strengthen a city's brand identity is through promoting cultural/tourist attractions on websites

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(Plaza, 2011, p. 47). Websites are one of the information tools at tourists' disposal, and cities' representations of local life presented in linguistic texts and visual images become 'the codified and authorised versions of local culture and history' (Jack & Phipps, 2005, p. 82). Strategy that city branding experts use to Official tourism websites represent a certain character of a city, and show what types of cultural content and cultural facilities are available there. They manage, produce, and re-introduce the cultural attractions of the city through urban spatiality, which impacts the city's brand identity (Neill, 2003, p. 2). Existing literature about tourism websites have been limited to the following contexts: brand-building elements in the US state tourism websites (Lee et.al., 2006), destination branding and official tourism website (case studies of Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia, Sutanto et.al., 2010), user interface design to develop perceived city image (case study of Uganda, Lepp et.al., 2011), measuring website performance (Google Analytic, Plaza, 2011), tourism marketing and website usefulness (Woodside et.al., 2011), and tourist activities in multimodal texts of tourism websites (case studies of Croatian and Scottish, Nekic, 2014). Given a lack of theory about official and unofficial tourism websites, my research will consider the coherence of text and visual content on such tourism websites, providing new material for scholars and practitioners in city branding. As such, I have employed a case study using a mix of qualitative and quantitative research methods to answer the following research question: How do coherence in the design of official and unofficial tourism websites contribute to city branding?

## 2.2 RATIONALE OF CASE SELECTION

A single case study of London is presented here, with data collected from the city's official tourism website as well as one unofficial tourism website for comparison purposes. This case study is part of my PhD thesis, in which I investigate five international case studies. I chose to focus on London because of its brand value, tourism reputation, and popularity within recent academic literature.

### **Brand value**

A city brand index is not an absolute way to measure a city as a brand, but it gives an insight to understand about the city's current status with regard to city image and city brand recognition. For example, City Brand Index (Anholt-GfK, 2014) shows the impact of the cultural production of cities to enhance image and brand value. In this sense, two rationales can be identified as to why London was selected for the case study: 1) London is one of the most highly-ranked of the top five cities since 2006 to the present day with Paris, New York and Sydney (The Anholt-GfK Roper City Brands Index™, 2007-2014; The Guardian's The world cities with the most powerful brands, 2014); 2) The city's approaches to enhancing its historic and cultural environment increase the sustainability of its city brand.

### **Tourism reputation**

London has produced a variety of cultural attractions, such as historic places and museums, which forms a vital part of the cultural environment of the city. For example, 'a cultural heritage of world-class museums, galleries, parks and gardens' has been identified as the main attractions for London (Page, 1995, p. 61-63). Historically, London has built a reputation in popular tourism

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destinations that benefited from its position as the capital city and central driver to the UK economy (Ledkin et.al., 2007, p. 97).

**Popularity within recent academic literature**

London was selected as the subject for study because of its prominence in recent academic publications pertaining to branding, tourism, city image and re-imaging strategies from different perspectives. For example, Tyler (2009) discusses crisis management in London from an economic approach, Pratt (2009) mentions urban regeneration as a promoter of the cultural economy and Kaika (2010) alludes to, rebranding London with the idea of inventing the city as an architectural icon.

**3 METHODOLOGY**

The overall approach for the analysis is a comparison study of content analysis, an 'observational research method' that is used to systematically evaluate the meanings and implications of the contents (Krippendorff, 2012). A component of quantitative method, counting activity was used to support the analysis.

**3.1 DATA SOURCES**

The data for this paper were based on the textual and visual content from London's official tourism website (Visit London, www.visitlondon.com), collected from 26 May 2013 to 26 June in 2013. One, unofficial tourism website for London also was critically reviewed to understand what content might be missing from the official tourism website as well as what an unofficial tourism website might choose to highlight (Time Out, www.timeout.com/london). This data were collected between 18 October and 10 November in 2013. Time Out was chosen as the main example of an unofficial tourism website of London because of its reputation and authority. During the data collection period, a set of tables was created, based on the original content from the official and unofficial tourism websites.

**3.2 TYPES OF ANALYSIS**

Three types of analysis were used to critically examine London's official and one unofficial tourism websites: 1) textual analysis, 2) visual analysis, and 3) an analysis of design coherence between textual and visual data.

TYPES OF ANALYSIS	DESCRIPTION
Text	Two key questions underpinned textual analysis: 1. What are the most important tourist/cultural attraction categories (e.g. museums, shopping) found on the official tourism websites? The criteria to identify the most important categories is based on the frequency and the rich context in each category; and 2. What are the main textual messages of the official and unofficial tourism websites? This analysis is based on an examination of the main categories, the overall website content, the volume of the tourist/cultural attraction examples from the categories, and the key messages of the introductory headings.
Images	Two areas were explored in the visual analysis:

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	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. General analysis, which focuses on the reflectivity of the main textual message(s); and</li> <li>2. In-depth analysis across four dimensions: 1) content design-tone, theme, text/heading effect, storyline; 2) image design-composition, colour and quantity of images; 3) city brand communication-cityscapes, city brand identity and city brand story; and 4) cultural capital-primary examples, symbolic meaning, implication of the examples, cultural hub, introducing local designers.</li> </ol>
Gap Analysis Between Text and Images	<p>Gap analysis was conducted across three areas:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Coherence between the text and the visual images in terms of the main message(s);</li> <li>2. Gaps between the text and the visual images in terms of main message; and</li> <li>3. Identifying limitations and opportunities from the results of the gap analysis.</li> </ol>

### 3.3 CONTENT ANALYSIS

#### 3.3.1 *Textual Analysis: Primary Cultural/Tourist Attractions*

##### **Official tourism website**

Based on the most frequently-cited examples of tourist/cultural attractions found throughout the official tourism website, two key findings emerge:

- The most promoted tourist/cultural attractions on the official tourism website are: Greenwich (mentioned 9 times on the website), Victoria & Albert Museum (mentioned 7 times), the British Museum, the Natural History Museum, the Science Museum and Hyde Park (all mentioned 6 times).
- The most frequently-mentioned categories of tourist/cultural attractions on the official tourism website are: museums/galleries (mentioned 31% of the time on the website), shopping (mentioned 25% of the time), historic/cultural districts (mentioned 25% of the time), historic place (mentioned 9% of the time), entertainment/sport facilities (mentioned 5% of the time) and literary/royal character (mentioned 5% of the time).

In general, the richness of London's world famous iconic attractions helps create the city's cultural character. The major sites, from the museums to the royal palace, show tourists the value of the city's cultural heritage (Sales et.al., 2009; Kaika, 2010). In particular, the iconic museums of London are 'premier attractions' through their popularity and reputation, and have played a role in reflecting the urban cultural history and enriching the city's cultural image (Gimblett, 1998, p. 132).

##### **Unofficial tourism website**

Time Out is a main example, and London Town, <http://www.londontown.com> was chosen for an additional example, due to its popularity and different perspectives on London's attractions. One of the major commonalities between the official website and the unofficial websites of London focuses on the famous museums. However, the selection of the examples on the unofficial tourism

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websites show a different perspective from the official website: 1) Time Out, introduced the new popular museums of London, e.g. Design Museum, London Transport Museum, and Wellcome Collection with evening events of the museums; 2) London Town, re-introduced distinctive small museums with varied themes as a main category (annual event programmes); from the photography exhibition at the Victoria and Albert Museum to the history of package design at the Brand Museum.

3.3.2 **Text Analysis: Introductory Headings of the Official and Unofficial Tourism Websites**

Based on the most frequently-cited examples of tourist/cultural attractions from the official tourism website, the main message of the text is to convey the richness of the history and cultural liveliness of the city and its urban culture. Within this context, a few of the interesting introductory headings can be used to support the main message: *London icons: From Big Ben to the red telephone box, find out which London icons real Londoners prefer and why; There's always something new: From a pop-up burger joint in East London to a blockbuster exhibition at one of London's galleries.* However, there is a lack of introduction and balancing regarding cultural diversity, from the architectural style to the multi-cultural character of the city (Hatziprokopiou, 2009, p.14). In contrast, the main textual message of the unofficial tourism website focused on a new released film in the UK rather than showing places of London. The introductory heading of the unofficial tourism website is informative on promotion of current events rather than the city's iconic attractions.

3.3.3 **Visual Image Analysis: Main Message from the Visual Images of the Official and Unofficial Tourism Websites**

For this analysis, the main content of the first page of the official and unofficial websites were selected. (See Figure 1)

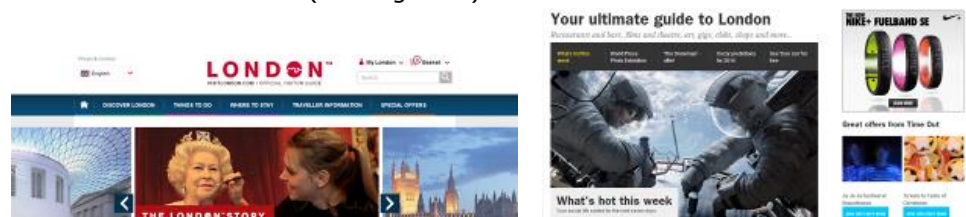


Figure 1 –The main images on the first page from the official tourism website (left) and Time Out London (right).

Based on the visual analysis, London's official tourism website illustrates iconic cultural attractions in a simple design composition. The set of images on the official website reiterates the main textual message of the website: the richness of the city's cultural heritage. For instance, the images of the Queen and the British Museum, the Tower of London, and historic houses highlight the major cultural/tourism attractions in the city. In particular, famous historical architecture such as the Big Ben and Westminster Abbey are two of the main examples in the "Discover London—Virtual tour of London" section of the official tourism website. A range of varied images in the Museums category of tourist/cultural attractions reflects the rich and lively cultural context of London.

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In contrast, the unofficial tourism website was showing the current-release film at the BFI London Film Festival. The impact of the images of the co-created film by British–American as a main cultural attraction can be interpreted in two ways: 1) promoting a global film to appeal more broadly to tourists; 2) presenting the image of the American actors for London’s main visual images can be confusing for tourists and their perception of the city’s image and the city’s cultural identity.

**3.3.4 Visual Image Analysis: Visual Communication Syntax**

London’s official and unofficial tourism websites were analysed across three dimensions:

**Thematic tone**

The tone of the official tourism website is based on the history of London, and creates a classically-narrative impression. The selected images of the Queen, Big Ben and the British Museum and its linear organisation show the familiarity of the images. In comparison to the official website, Time Out London is focused on a singular image of the film, which is about the characters’ particular motions through space. The official tourism website delivers a message about the variety of symbolic heritage in physical form while the Time Out offers audiences curiosity in terms of London’s relation to film.

**Storytelling**

Both the official and unofficial tourism websites use introductory headings for clear visual communication to bring about an image of the city. For example, *London’s story* displays images about the historical storyline of the city. However, both websites fail to connect between the textual design and the visual images. In comparison to the official tourism website, Time Out London’s textual message, *What’s hot this week?* is more informative than narrative. In this sense, design coherence is low.

**Content selection**

The official tourism website limits its content to the historical context. For example, the images of the iconic museums on the official tourism website are interrelated with two important factors: 1) museums are closely connected with their exhibitions and themes, and introduce new genres through contemporary arts; 2) London has a reputation with regard to creative industries, artists and designers, and this includes the museum industry of the city. In comparison to the official tourism website, Time Out London’s image of an internationally promoted, 3-D science fiction thriller indirectly delivers a message of London’s ‘future-oriented’ image in terms of its film industry and digital technology.

**3.3.5 Gap Analysis between the Text and the Visual Images**

London’s official website is primarily communicating the city’s iconic heritage (e.g. museums). In terms of emphasis on heritage, a series of central tourist/cultural attractions confirm the main message of the text. The analysis of the text and the visual images demonstrates the city’s value and reputation in

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cultural heritage. Both the main messages of the text and the visual images are focused on historic and iconic cultural attractions in terms of popular larger museums, historic architecture and the Royal family. However, there are small gaps between the text and the visual images of the official tourism website: while the main message in the analysis of the text focuses on the mix of traditional and contemporary places (e.g. the popular iconic museums to the East London's art galleries), the main message of the analysis of the visual image shows the emphasis on traditionally-popular heritage (e.g. British Museum).

#### 4 **FINDINGS**

The research interrogated the question set out in the Introduction: How does the design of an official tourism website contribute to the enhancement of city brand identity? From the analysis, the major findings from the official website of London are as follows:

- London's official tourism website consists of communication about the city's meaningful and popular heritage based on history.
- The strongest cultural category is museums, followed by galleries, shopping, districts, architecture, entertainment facilities and literary/royal character.
- London's official tourism website consistently and repeatedly shows iconic cultural attractions.
- The unofficial tourism website shows a different perspective to re-introduce the city's hidden cultural heritage (e.g. digital technology development for film).

#### 5 **CONCLUSIONS & IMPLICATIONS**

This research helped to answer a research question about the contribution of the design of official tourism websites to constructing a city's brand identity. The key findings of the analysis show the importance of primary tourist/cultural attractions as being part of London's brand heritage. The findings, particularly those from the unofficial tourism website, also illustrate that London's official tourism website does not appear to highlight lesser-known cultural heritage. For example, the city has produced a number of small museums with a selection of themes and exhibitions: there are 323 museums in London include associated organisations such as the Art Fund (Museums Association, 2015). This cultural heritage has been developed as part of London's cultural capital, and contributes to the sustainability of the city's cultural meaning. As a way forward, web designers and branding strategists within London should reconsider the hidden cultural attractions to develop niche heritage. Doing so might help shape London's brand identity in the future.

London has developed a range of global brands in museums, department stores and shops, parks, hotels, teashops and literary characters. These brands emerged in the 18-19<sup>th</sup> century, and have achieved an internationally-distinctive reputation in different fields of cultural industry. Such cultural production in the brand portfolio can be interpreted as key drivers in two ways: 1) creating and enhancing the city brand identity, 2) sustaining London as a strong city brand.

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Both these themes can play a role in characterising London's brand as well as helping to differentiate itself from other cities and brands, now and in the future.

***Museums' reputation: lead brand***

The museums/galleries category is the primary focus for the promotion for London's cultural vibrancy. In particular, the emphasis on internationally-distinctive and popular museums textually and visually supports the brand reputation of the large museums in constructing city brand. According to the London Visitor Survey in 2008, museums/galleries is one of the key 'influence/pull factors', alongside history/heritage, parks and gardens, theatre/music/arts, shopping, restaurants and bars. The promoted museums on the website also imply the influence of major cultural production in London in tourism and city branding. The museums on the website were established before the 20th century except the Tate Modern, and have played a role in the cultural representation and identity of the city. From a branding perspective, these museums have built their brand values in terms of brand name, architecture, exhibition themes and the effect of constant promotion via the media. The design of the official tourism website uses the global museum brands to enhance the cultural environment for tourists in London.

***Shopping culture legacy: streets to afternoon tea***

Shopping was another category that was promoted highly on the official tourism website. In general, a shopping category of popular tourism destinations consists of location, streets, buildings and brands. Fashion stores and popular brands are central elements in the construction of a reputation for larger cities. London has built a significant reputation in fashion and shopping historically (e.g. Bond Street) (Edwards, 2006, p. 73) in which the city has produced a number of brands as cultural heritage. For example, a number of popular and historic department stores including Harrods and Selfridges; Westfield Stratford, a shopping centre near the Olympics site in Hammersmith (Tyler, 2009, p. 423); and Fortnum & Mason have been transformed into must-see tourist attractions. These attractions not only present consumption for tourists; they have influenced London's cultural image and cultural identity. As a result, these brands, from fashion to tea culture, have established positions of London as city brand.

***Place branding: iconic architecture***

According to the European Commission (1998) there were approximately 200,000 protected monuments in the European Union, and 2.5 million buildings of historical interest. Divergent historic places with interesting storytelling of London affect the design strategy of the official tourism website. For example, Buckingham Palace, Big Ben and the Tower Bridge are pieces of iconic architecture that have played important roles in defining the city's cultural values. The emphasis on promoting the historic buildings has contributed to creating London's brand in terms of 'history-oriented' tourism.

***Further study***

The role of tourism websites in promoting and shaping a city's brand and identity is strong and will continue to influence how people, both residents and tourists, view cities. My PhD research continues the work began here, by



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critically examining official and unofficial tourism websites for four additional, world-class cities. I also am undertaking an in-depth case study of an official and unofficial tourism website for another, UK city. By speaking with the professionals who design, create and generate content for these websites. I will have a better understanding of the content design processes around the development of city branding online, which should improve and make more coherent tourism websites in the future.

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