



## Research Paper

## The emerging Shanghai city brand: A netnographic study of image perception among foreigners

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## ABSTRACT

The World Expo 2010 was a pivotal event aimed at demonstrating that Shanghai is an attractive, modern and comfortable city, infused with traditional Chinese values and ready to compete for talent and investments with other global cities. Through a netnographic analysis of online discussion forums for foreigners residing in, or visiting Shanghai, this study documents the attitudes of these online community members towards life in this city. These attitudes are identified as predominantly negative with an emphasis on pollution, congestion and rudeness of the local population. This study thus identifies a dissonance between the officially communicated brand identity and the word-of-mouth communication on social media. This paper proceeds to recommend leveraging the identified positive aspects of Shanghai's image such as excitement, affordability and safety for future branding efforts.

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## 1. Introduction

In its 11th Five Year Plan for Shanghai, China has formulated a strategy to develop this city into the world's leading center of commerce and finance by the year 2020 (Wang, Shibusawa, Leman, Higano, & Mao, 2013). Some researchers (e.g., Chen, 2009; Ye, 2004) argue that Shanghai, with its continued success in attracting foreign investments, already possesses the attributes associated with a globally competitive urban center as defined by<sup>1</sup> Sassen (2010, pp. 127–129) and is thus challenging not only Hong Kong and Singapore, but also London and New York in terms of global economic importance (Yang & Lim, 2010).

Scholars, however, argue that in the modern, knowledge-based economy, competitiveness is intimately connected with innovation (Jansson & Powers, 2006). Cities of today are no longer only competing for a share of foreign direct investments; they also compete to attract growing innovative companies, international students, business schools, research centers, and highly skilled knowledge workers (Clark, 2006). While Shanghai, in comparative studies (Grant & Chuang, 2012), scores relatively high on the “global

city dimension”<sup>2</sup> (71.2/100), it scores quite low on the “knowledge dimension”<sup>3</sup> (65.83/100). Consequently, scholars argue that one of the factors constituting a challenge for Shanghai's international competitiveness is a lack of human capital and expertise within the realm of research and education (Clark & Moonen, 2011), as well as a general lack of English proficiency (Yang & Lim, 2010). Scholars have subsequently identified a need to attract entrepreneurs and skilled professionals through migration (Yusuf & Wu, 2002).

These challenges are also recognized in the 11th five-year plan (Deutsche Gesellschaft für Technische Zusammenarbeit, 2009). Consequently, Wang Yu<sup>4</sup> has announced a new campaign to attract foreign talent to Shanghai (Zhen, 2011) with the goal of increasing the number of foreign specialist working within the strategic economic areas (Xiaoyi & Fieshang, 2010).

Research by the Human Capital Institute has documented that while economic development may be a necessary criterion for attracting talent; the intangible aspects of a city are the qualifying criteria in the relocation decisions of knowledge workers (Eggert & Schwyer, 2007). A grounded theoretical study of corporate decision-making has further documented that personal preferences, priorities, and perceptions strongly influence where and how relocation takes place, and that the impressions, image, and market perceptions of the location are among the key factors considered (Greenhalgh, 2008). In this connection, researchers

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<sup>1</sup> A destination for strategic corporate functions, headquarters of multinational companies, transport and information hubs, as well as internationally noteworthy cultural activities.

<sup>2</sup> The global city dimension pertains to a city's influence on international commerce and finance.

<sup>3</sup> The knowledge city dimension relates to the degree that economic specialization promotes the development of knowledge-intensive activities.

<sup>4</sup> Deputy Director of the Organizational Department of the Communist Party's Shanghai Committee.

argue that while Shanghai objectively has achieved a position of global economic importance, this is not yet reflected in the public perception of the city's image and brand (Jing & Rong, 2010). Thus, the Anholt-GfK Roper City Brands Index indicates that Shanghai remains outside the top 30 city brands (Zhao, 2011).

With the purpose of improving China's international image and status, its government has invested considerable sums in what some scholars consider a decade long brand building campaign in the form of mega events,<sup>5</sup> inclusive of the 2008 Olympic Games in Beijing and the 2010 World Expo in Shanghai (Shin, 2012). Kavaratzis (2004) posits that destination branding can be conceptualized as forms of communication. Primary image communication includes officially sanctioned use of myths, slogans, and logos, and secondary image communication manifests in prestigious buildings, urban redevelopment, and the hosting of major international events. Kavaratzis further posits that the purpose of primary and secondary image communication is to impact tertiary image communication, which is accomplished through "word-of-mouth." In this connection, researchers argue that word of mouth has become the most important medium for city branding (Public Affairs Asia & Ogilvy Public Relations, 2012) and that social media is fast becoming the most important channel for word-of-mouth communication (Conroy & Narula, 2009).

This study aims to examine the word-of-mouth communication about life in Shanghai through analyzing social media interactions on websites specific to expatriates and visitors to Shanghai. These findings will then be contrasted with the official city brand values, identified in connection with the 2010 World Expo with the purpose of formulating recommendations for the ongoing city branding of Shanghai.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Cities and branding

In recent years, city branding has become an important tool applied by governments to enhance their cities' global competitiveness toward facilitating the inflow of investments, knowledge workers, tourists, and new businesses (Clark, 2006). Research has identified three general components of city branding efforts (Jing & Rong, 2010): (1) the development of products intimately connected with the city; (2) efforts to develop an attractive image; and (3) targeted marketing activities. Kavaratzis (2004), however, argued that there is a consensus that image development is the primary focus of city branding and it is utilized to facilitate word-of-mouth endorsements.

The purpose of branding is to facilitate a positive attitude towards a company's products and services by meeting consumers' "physical and psychological needs through functional and symbolic values" (Kavaratzis, 2004, p. 65). A brand is thus a cognitive-emotional construct, where the individual prescribes a specific meaning or a personality to the brand (Stigel & Friman, 2006). Theorists therefore argued that successful branding must ensure a high degree of correspondence between the communicated brand values and the actual lived experiences with the product (Copeland, 2001).

Research has also documented that consumers tend to choose brands with personality traits similar to their own self-perception (Seimienne, 2012). Toward facilitating this connection, Aaker (1997, p. 351) proposed a model for describing and expressing brand personality that consisted of five dimensions: "Sincerity, excitement, competence, sophistication, and ruggedness." Similarly,

other scholars have proposed brand personality models for cities, for example, Simon Anholt's six dimensional model that included "Presence, place, pre-requisites, people, pulse, and potential" (as cited in Zeinalpour, Shahbazi, & Ezzatirad, 2013, p. 319); and the model attributed to Trueman and Cornelius: "Symbolic presence, sense of purpose, pace of life, personality, and power" (as cited in Kavaratzis, 2009, p. 32).

To what degree it is possible to transfer branding paradigms from the realm of corporations and products to those of cities remains an important question. Some scholars argued that people primarily encounter places through perception and images, which are beyond the control of any brand strategy (Kavaratzis & Ashworth, 2006). The heterogeneous nature of a city's population and the consumers of city brands presents marketers with a complex challenge: conceptualizing a brand, which is reasonably aligned with the realities of the city and articulating a brand personality most stakeholders can identify with (Jansson & Powers, 2006). In other words, a city branding campaign cannot hope to copy the choreography and control on display in, for example, Disney Land, where management can exert control over all the touch points between The Magic Kingdom and the consumers (Van Maanen, 1991). In contrast, real cities are dependent on the quality of services and goods produced by a heterogeneous amalgamation of stakeholders and local residents' positive attitude towards visitors, which research has demonstrated is contingent on perceived personal economic benefits rather than the ambitions of any given city branding campaign (Kwon & Vogt, 2010).

### 2.2. City branding through mega events

Scholars posited that the prestige associated with mega events is transferrable to the host destination (Chen, 2012) and that hosting such events therefore creates the potential to transform a city or country's international brand (Whitson & Macintosh, 1996). The International Olympic Committee considered this to be the case for the 1988 Games in Seoul and argued that the Olympic Games facilitated South Korea's re-integration into the world community and a reappraisal of Korean culture (International Olympic Committee, 2012). Accordingly, similar motivations underpin Tokyo's successful bid for the Olympic Games, which is seen as a response to the perceived assertiveness of China and an attempt to reassert Tokyo's status as a global city relative to Beijing (Kelly, 2010).

The earlier stated differences between the realities of a corporation and a city, create a challenge to utilize mega events for the purpose of destination branding, because such symbolic orchestrations may not meet the majority of the city's stakeholders' physical and psychological needs, such as improving the quality of life and self-identification. Further, the organizers run the risk of symbolic overreach, which may lead both residents and visitors to focus on the contrast between the brand communication and their actual lived experience in the city. The complexity of this challenge was illustrated during the 2008 Beijing Olympics, where the brand vision was articulated in the "One World, One Dream" slogan (Bu, 2009), which Liu Qi<sup>6</sup> interpreted in the following way:

One World, One Dream, is an embodiment of the wisdom of hundreds of thousands of people. It is a slogan that conveys the lofty ideal of people in Beijing as well as in China to share the global community and civilization and to create a bright future hand in hand with people from the rest of the world. It expresses the firm belief of a great nation, with a long history

<sup>5</sup> Large-scale events, such as the Olympic Games or World Expo.

<sup>6</sup> President of the Beijing Organizing Committee for the Games of the XXIX Olympiad.

of 5,000 years and on its way towards modernization, that is committed to peaceful development, a harmonious society and people's happiness (China Daily, 2008).

There is no doubt that the 2008 Olympics raised the international profile of Beijing; however, research conducted post-Olympic games documented that respondents experienced a dissonance between the officially sanctioned image communication and the real encounters with poor environmental conditions, insufficient amenities, bad service, social disparity, and human rights abuses (Lee, 2010; Zhang & Zhao, 2009). In this connection, scholars argued that the primary image communications were not solely an effort to brand Beijing, but also an attempt to enhance the legitimacy of the Communist Party (Dynon, 2011). The emphasis on building a harmonious society was considered a manifest example of an official embrace of Confucian philosophy with the purpose of reintroducing a national ideology more aligned with the actual circumstances of modern China than Marxism (Bell, 2010, p. 11), and thus to rebrand the party from an agent of revolution to a facilitator of harmony. The strong emphasis on Confucian values and Chinese heritage may, on a symbolic level, have met the psychological needs of the local population and the physical needs of the Communist Party. However, research indicated that the elements of nationalism might actually have contributed to an increased polarization between the Chinese and Westerners, by facilitating positive in-group attitudes, as well as negative out-group perceptions (Cheng et al., 2011). Thus, Manzenreiter (2010) concluded that the Beijing Olympics has failed as an international destination-branding vehicle, because of the focus on an inward oriented nationalistic message.

### 2.3. City branding – 2010 World Expo Shanghai

"Better city, better life" was chosen as the main slogan for the Shanghai World Expo. Some scholars argued that the slogan reflected this city's own ambitions to improve the quality of life of its residents, relative to the environmental, housing, and infrastructure conditions (Gilmore, 2004), in addition to communicating Shanghai's attractiveness as a destination (Jing & Rong, 2010) by projecting an image of a "globally connected, comfortable and modern city" (Leon, 2010). Officially, Yu Zhengsheng<sup>7</sup> defined the meaning of this slogan and the associated brand identity in terms of improving "the quality of life of local residents" and "building a harmonious, international and modern society with traditional Chinese values" (Shanghai Expo, 2008).

The World Expo Communication and Promotion Plan outlined a multiyear effort to consistently communicate the meaning of this mega-event to both the domestic and international audiences by emphasizing the following brand identity components (Bureau of Shanghai World Expo Coordination, 2007): "Building a better future together, traditional Chinese values, the harmonious society, modernity and quality of life". Finally, Han Zheng<sup>8</sup> utilized the World Expo's official website to articulate the concrete meaning of the "harmonious society" brand component, which is stated to encompass social equity and justice, improvements to public services, strengthening of governance, improvements of moral standards and prevention of corruption (World Expo Shanghai 2010 Official Website, 2006).

Scholars posit that the prestige from the successful execution of a mega event is transferrable by cognitive and affective association to both the local and international communities' positive perceptions of a destination (Meenaghan, 2001), and that the World Expo had the potential to facilitate the transformation of Shanghai into one of the world's leading centers of commerce and finance (Cull, 2012; Jing & Rong, 2010). The literature reviewed, identified a survey study (Yu, Wang, & Seo, 2012) of 600 tourists who visited Shanghai during the World Expo; the results indicated that this event had a positive impact on Shanghai's image and validated its strategic fit with the realities of Shanghai for city branding. This study is limited by the fact that only mainland Chinese tourists were surveyed. However, a perceptual study of international visitors indicated that this mega-event positively influenced foreign tourists' perception of Shanghai as being an exciting city with a unique culture and history (Kim, Ao, Lee, & Pan, 2012).

In contrast, research (Wang et al., 2012) conducted prior to, during, and after the World Expo, concluded that respondents did not feel that the intangible values and the unique mix of Western and Chinese cultural influences characterizing post-colonial Shanghai, were well articulated in the branding effort. Respondents specifically expressed negative views on Shanghai's ecological situation, levels of social justice, economic disparities, sub-standard housing, congested roads, and the lack of transparency and accountability by local government. Congruent with these findings a study of overseas newspapers' coverage of Shanghai prior to, during, and after the 2010 World Expo (Xue, Chen, & Yu, 2012), concluded that the event increased the number of newspaper articles on Shanghai and that the content of the articles changed from mainly negative to positive during the Expo.

Coverage related to the environment and living conditions turned more negative during the Expo in addition to the emergence of articles on human rights. After the World Expo this study found that the media coverage reverted back to what it was before the World Expo, leading the researchers to conclude that the impact of World Expo on Shanghai's image was at best, temporary. As a result, scholars posited that the "Better city better life" slogan and its components represented an expression of the emerging Confucian parties ideology and therefore more a vision of the communist party's role as the undisputed arbiter of the social order as opposed to a vision for Shanghai (Dynon, 2011). Additionally, it was considered an attempt to divert people's attention from the current environmental, social and political problems of modern Shanghai and China (Shin, 2012).

### 2.4. The power of word-of-mouth

Research has documented that word-of-mouth derived from consumers' personal experiences with a product or service accounts for 50–80% of word-of-mouth activity across all product categories (Bughin, Doogan, & Vetvik, 2010) and that experiential word-of-mouth reviews strongly influenced consumer expectations (East, Hammond, & Lomax, 2008) as well as posterior evaluation of experiences (Huang, Cheng, Shen, Zhou, & Jin, 2012). Experiential word-of-mouth is often viewed as complaint oriented and research has documented that negative word-of-mouth is trusted more than positive, irrespective of the communication channel (Lee & Youn, 2009). This notion has additionally been documented in the study of knowledge workers' relocation decisions (Eggert & Schweyer, 2007).

Branding importance related to the influence of word-of-mouth is further illustrated by the recent Nielsen Global Trust in Advertising Survey. This survey polled more than 28,000 consumers in 56 countries and concluded that 92% of consumers trusted word-of-mouth from family and friends above any other form of advertising followed by 70% who trusted online consumer opinions (The Nielsen

<sup>7</sup> Member of the Political Bureau of the CPC Central Committee, Secretary of Shanghai Municipal Party Committee, the First Vice Chairperson of Shanghai 2010 World Exposition National Organizing Committee, and Director of Shanghai 2010 World Exposition Executive Committee.

<sup>8</sup> Acting Party Secretary and Mayor of Shanghai.



Company, 2012). Additionally, a recent survey of 300 senior corporate communications and public affairs practitioners operating in Asia Pacific (Public Affairs Asia & Ogilvy Public Relations, 2012) documented that word-of-mouth is seen as the most important city brand medium (59%) followed by public relations (51%), social media (40%), and advertising (30%).

The relevance of distinguishing between word-of-mouth and social media is worth considering as research has indicated that social media interaction is fast becoming the most important word-of-mouth advocacy channel (Conroy & Narula, 2009). Giles (2010) argued that until the end of the 1990s social media had only limited impact in the broader collective context, but with the increased speed of the Internet and the evolution of user interfaces, online communities have, in the past 10 years, become a significant force for social connectivity. Currently, it is estimated that anywhere from 100 million to over a billion people are engaged in online communities (Kozinets, 2010, p. 2). Scholars argued that user-generated content is transforming destination marketing as control over the brand communication is shifting from marketers to consumers (Buncle, 2009). Subsequent research has documented that electronic word of mouth positively impacts a destination's image and desire to visit (Jalilvand, Samiei, Dini, & Manzari, 2012), and a study by Deloitte concluded, "77% of travelers are influenced by online reviews when purchasing a trip" (as cited in Zuberance Report, 2011). Further empirical examination, conducted between 2007 and 2008, concluded that overseas tourists mainly base their decision of coming to Shanghai on the recommendation of family and friends in addition to online networks (Xiaoxin, 2008).

Research, however, indicated that it is a small minority of netizens who generate the bulk of reviews and opinions. For example, a 2009 media survey concluded that about 16% of the online population in the United States is responsible for approximately 80% of the influence (Zuberance Report, 2011) and a 2009 study by Deloitte indicated that only "5–12% of consumers can be defined as brand advocates" (Conroy & Narula, 2009). It is hypothesized that these "influentials" are motivated by the acquisition of social power and possess an enhanced self-esteem that drives them to define the social rules of the various online communities (Chen & Gaines, 1996). Research has also documented how a small minority of influentials can assume the role of normative gatekeepers and define what opinions and behaviors are acceptable within the context of a wider online community (Golder & Donath, 2004).

## 2.5. Hypotheses

The above literature review leads to the formulation of following research questions hypotheses:

**H1.** International visitors to Shanghai appreciate this city for its excitement and rapid development as well as the unique blend of Western and Chinese cultures.

**H2.** The "Better city, better life"<sup>9</sup> brand identity is not congruent with the lived experiences of international visitors.

**H3.** The brand component "harmonious society"<sup>10</sup> is contradicted by international visitors' experiences and perceptions of pollution, congestion, and economic disparity, corruption, and human rights abuses.

<sup>9</sup> As defined by Yu Zhengsheng – Member of the Political Bureau of the CPC Central Committee, Secretary of Shanghai Municipal Party Committee, the First Vice Chairperson of Shanghai 2010 World Exposition National Organizing Committee, and Director of Shanghai 2010 World Exposition Executive Committee.

<sup>10</sup> As defined by Han Zheng – Acting Party Secretary and Mayor of Shanghai.

Researching "What attitudes do international online community members express on social media about their lived experiences in Shanghai?" will assist in assessing the validity of these hypotheses and thus the primary aim of this study.

## 3. Methodology

### 3.1. Heuristic strategy

Contemporary social-psychology research has documented a causal relationship between experience and attitude formation (Glasman & Albarracín, 2006). It is further proposed that attitudes based in actual experiences are stronger, more enduring, more accessible and, therefore, more likely to influence behaviors and preferences (Aiken, 2002, p. 19). Scholars propose that attitudes can be inferred by the empirical observations of cognitive, affective or behavioral manifestations (Zanna & Rempel, 1988). Eagly and Chaiken (1993, p. 10) proposed an empirically observable tripartite attitude construct consisting of (1) evaluations, (2) attitude objects, and (3) evaluative tendencies. It is thus the tendency, which is considered the empirical measure of the actual attitude (Eagly & Chaiken, 2007). Consequently, it is deemed possible to quantify attitudes by the frequency of expressed opinions (Fazio & Pettey, 2008). This study will utilize the three-component model as a heuristic strategy for gathering and analyzing qualitative data from selected social media discussion forums.

### 3.2. Data gathering

Data was collected from two major online communities for expatriates and foreign visitors to Shanghai: (1) [www.shanghaistuff.com](http://www.shanghaistuff.com)<sup>11</sup> and (2) <http://www.shanghaiexpat.com>.<sup>12</sup> Shanghaiexpat.com has an extensive online community and encourages debate and exchange of ideas and information with the purpose of sharing peer-to-peer knowledge about Shanghai and thereby helping foreign community members cope with life in the city. Shanghaistuff.com is a competing website with similar purpose.

The 2010 World Expo in Shanghai was a multiyear branding effort and, consequently, this study, similar to the studies by Wang et al. (2012) and Xue et al. (2012), sampled threads from the periods before, during, and after the formal opening and closing of the event (2007–2011). This study is not an attempt to measure any before or after effects of the World Expo, but to provide an insight into the attitudes and perceptions of life in Shanghai, as they are expressed in tandem with brand communication associated with this event.

The participants of this study are not the individual community members, but rather their discussion threads. From the two online communities four discussion forums,<sup>13</sup> two from each community were selected due to their thematic relevance to this research. In total, 1453 discussion threads were sampled for analysis.

### 3.3. Data analysis

The analysis consisted of two phases. In the first phase, the 1453 discussion threads were thematically categorized within the four

<sup>11</sup> Shanghaistuff.com has more than 21,000 members and over 3000 discussion topics.

<sup>12</sup> Shanghaiexpat.com has more than 85,000 members, over 53,000 discussion topics and more than 800,000 postings.

<sup>13</sup> (1) Shanghaiexpat.com question and answer (Q&A) forum, (2) Shanghai/China Q&A forum at Shanghaistuff.com, (3) the Shanghaiexpat.com community forum, and (4) the Shanghaistuff.com general forum.

selected forums. The cumulative number of community member replies, associated with each of these categories, was utilized to determine the relative importance of each of the thematic categories. A ranking analysis of categories across the four forums assisted in identifying what might be the most important categories of discussion for the online community members.

In the second phase, the highest-ranking category was selected for further analysis. Twenty-six salient discussion threads, defined by high traffic, a large number of unique posters, rich in detail and relevance (Kozinets, 2002), were sampled and a content analysis conducted. This process identified 423 evaluative statements generated by 122 unique community members. These evaluative statements were counted and categorized as either (1) positive or (2) negative attitudinal tendencies. Finally, the narrative content of the two categories was thematically categorized.

### 3.4. Validity

Unobtrusive ethnographic studies of online communities (netnography) are characterized by the researcher only having control over the content selected for further analysis and no other variables. In order to ensure that the outcome of this study is trustworthy, the following guidelines for netnographic validity were observed: (1) selection of relevant segments; (2) focus on high traffic segments; (3) selection of sources with a large number of unique posters; (4) focus on detail-rich data; and (5) focus on relevance for community members (Kozinets, 2002).

The initial choice of the four discussion forums was based on the thematic relevance to the scope of the study. The ranking analysis in phase one ensured that this study focused on content relevant to the community members. Finally, sampling of high traffic threads with a large number of unique posters was achieved by applying the “most replied to” filter.

The literature review indicated that a small minority of influentials controls the attitudes and culture on discussion forums (Conroy & Narula, 2009; Golder & Donath, 2004). This study cannot prove this hypothesis, but if it can be documented that the attitudinal tendencies of the sampled threads are aligned with the attitudes of the “influentials,” it would support the validity of this study. This approach is similar to “member checking,” which is a frequently applied approach to ensure validity in qualitative research (Creswell & Clark, 2011, p. 211). In this connection, [Shanghaiexpat.com](http://Shanghaiexpat.com) identifies how influential the users are by assigning them a board rank. There is no official list, but from the board discussions on this particular topic it appears that the rankings are based on the number of postings<sup>14</sup> (TIC, 2012). Only [Shanghaiexpat.com](http://Shanghaiexpat.com) provided such board rankings and consequently only data from this community will be considered.

### 3.5. Limitations

There are several issues limiting the validity of this study. The researcher has no control of the stimuli, which are exposure to life in Shanghai and the brand communication associated with the 2010 World Expo. Consequently, some community members may have lived in this city for a long time while others are just visitors. Some may have followed the Expo closely while others may have had little interest. Further, the study samples statements by several unique community members made at different times, but is unable to account for how these individuals' attitudes may have

evolved. It is consequently important to be mindful that the subject of this study is not the individuals, but rather, their online posting that ultimately forms a collective narrative of experiences and attitudes.

The unobtrusive netnographic approach prevents the researcher from further exploration by pre-empting the ability to ask follow up questions. It could, therefore, be argued that attitude deception may be a risk, as “meaning making” and identity formation in virtual reality is far from fully understood. Netnographic research findings have indicated that individuals may construct specific personalities for different online forums (Kozinets, 1998). For example, *trolls* are individuals who pose as genuine members engaging in seemingly legitimate discussion, but with the purpose of manipulating the discussion through misrepresentation of their true opinions and identities (Golder & Donath, 2004). However, recent theories hypothesize that seemingly constructed online personalities are not necessarily deceptive as these are used for “acting out unresolved conflicts; replaying character difficulties and working through unresolved difficulties” (Turkle, 1999). Researchers have proposed terms such as “the collective self” and “the society of mind” to describe the concept that the totality of an individual's identity in an online world can be distributed among several different online personalities (Turkle). Furthermore, the impact of trolling on netnographic research outcome is mainly considered a risk in studies of very small communities where a single troll may have an excessive impact (Donath, 1999). Finally, this author posits that the issue of misrepresentation in online communities is not different from the risk of misrepresentation in other forms of qualitative research (Goodwin, 2010, p. 474).

In terms of representation, the 2010 census estimates the number of foreigners residing in Shanghai at 208,602 (National Bureau of Statistics of the People's Republic of China, 2011) and considering the combined amount of online community members (> 100,000) it would be reasonable to assume that at least the expatriate community in Shanghai is sufficiently represented. It is possible for others than foreigners to engage in these online communities; however, a careful examination of the content of the sampled threads makes it possible to eliminate posts that could have been made by local Chinese residents. Further, due to governmental oversight, there are no publicly available databases of foreigners in Shanghai, which would make sampling a representative group of respondents by traditional means of data collection challenging.

Finally, conducting social research in China presents with a unique range of problems regarding government restrictions related to sensitive subject matter (Hubbard, Adams & Whitten, 2008) as well as securing full confidentiality and anonymity of respondents relative to the local authorities (Yang & Le, 2008). Thus, there are practical and ethical advantages of engaging in netnographic research.

## 4. Netnographic analysis

### 4.1. Phase 1: thematic categories of discussion threads

Table 1 illustrates that 1453 discussion threads were analyzed, which represented 4.7–100% of the total threads from each of the four forums. Samples 1, 3 and 4 were consisted of numerous threads and in order to focus on this research on the most popular, the “most replied to” filters were engaged. Sample 2 consisted of 294 threads making it possible to include all of them in the analysis. Thus the thematic categorization of the discussion threads from the 4 samples yielded between 38 and 60 unique themes. Refer to Table 1.

In order to identify the most significant thematic categories of discussion threads, the top 10, once again measured by the cumulative

<sup>14</sup> “Newbie, Squeaker, Lurker, Seeker, Talker, Barker, Reacher, Raver, Ranter, Rocker, LoopKicker, PopStar, SuperStar, FooJay, Veejay, StreetBeater, Fire-eater, Low Seater, Wonder Wit, FooSlinger, Post Roaster, Post Boaster, Board Lord, Board Royalty, Shanghai Royalty, Board Legend, Board Buddha, Board Viking, Board Biatch, Board Deity, and Board Silly.” Source: [Shanghaiexpat.com](http://Shanghaiexpat.com).

number of replies, were selected from each of the four sampled forums. Through the application of a ranking system, where the highest ranked categories were assigned 10 points and the lowest 1, it was possible to synthesize the results and identify the most important categories across the four forums. Refer to Table 2.

The thematic categorization of discussion topics identified both unique and repetitive categories among the top 10 from the four forums. Consequently, those categories manifesting the highest frequency in the top 10 across the four sampled discussion forums accumulated more points and thus a higher ranking. The category *Shanghai best and worst* was identified as the most salient category of discussion threads for the members of the two online communities. Most threads in this category discuss the perceived advantages and disadvantages of Shanghai as compared to other major cities, such as Hong Kong, Singapore, Taipei, Paris, the positive and negative traits of the city, and why some foreigners choose to stay on while others choose to leave. Refer to Table 3.

#### 4.2. Phase 2: attitudinal analysis

Attitudinal analysis attempts to provide a more detailed and nuanced understanding of the specific aspects of the online communities' perceptions of Shanghai. A total of 26 salient discussion threads were sampled from the *Shanghai best and worst* including threads from each of the four forums. The sampled threads yielded a total of 423 relevant evaluative statements, generated by 122 unique community members. The statements were then coded as either negative or positive, thereby making the sentiment of these threads quantifiable. The analysis identified 63% of the statements as negative, and 37% as positive, thus documenting a clear negative attitudinal tendency in communications among online community members thus supporting H1 and H2.

The literature review indicated that small groups of influentials act as normative gatekeepers and socialize other, less dominant community members on social media platforms (Golder & Donath, 2004). By analyzing the threads originating from *Shanghaiexpat.com*, it was possible to conclude that at least 12 of the 122 unique

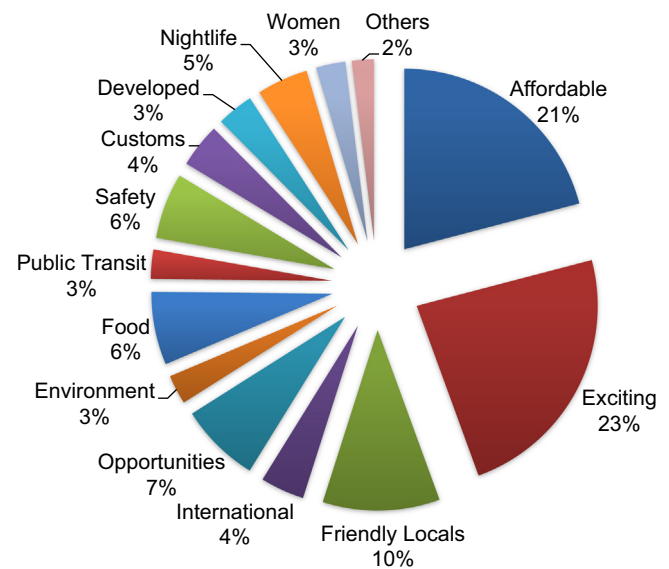
community members in this study could be categorized as influentials due to their high board rankings. Regarding the 423 evaluative statements sampled in this study, these influentials were responsible for 76 (18%) and 74% of these statements were negative. This finding thus indicates that the negative attitudinal tendency of the general sample is aligned with the attitudes of the influentials, which supports the validity of the outcome of this research.

A more detailed understanding of the content of these positive and negative attitudinal tendencies emerges through further coding of the categories of positive and negative evaluative statements. In terms of positive attitudes, this analysis indicates

**Table 3**

Top 10 categories of discussion threads across four sampled discussion forums.

Category	Accumulated points	Rank
Shanghai best and worst	20	1
Connecting with nationality	18	2
Relationships and dating	18	2
Customs and behaviors	16	3
Goods and services	15	4
Party, clubbing and nightlife	10	5
	10	5
Traffic and transportation	9	6
Jobs and career	9	6
Banking	9	6
Sex	9	6



**Fig. 1.** Coding of positive evaluative statements.

**Table 1**

Open coding of discussion threads and the number of thematic categories.

Sample	Source	Threads analyzed	Share of threads (%)	Replies	Thematic categories
1	Shanghaiexpat.com Q&A Forum	499	4.70	49,559	60
2	Shanghaistuff.com Q&A Forum	294	100	3475	38
3	Shanghaiexpat.com Community Forum	321	70.50	13,353	44
4	Shanghaistuff.com General Forum	339	9.80	23,623	50

**Table 2**

Ranking of identified categories across selected forums.

Rank points	Sample 1 categories	Sample 2 categories	Sample 3 categories	Sample 4 categories
10	Customs and behaviors	Party clubbing and night life	Connecting with own nationality	Relationships and dating
9	Job and career	Goods and services	Banking	Sex
8	Connecting with own nationality	Shanghai best and worst	Relationships and dating	Beliefs and dreams
7	Shanghai best and worst	Eateries	Traffic and transportation	Chinese women
6	Goods and services	Sports	Relocation	Social media
5	Local laws and regulations	Health and body	Racism	Customs and behaviors
4	Scams	Pets	Business	Women
3	Cost of living	Games and gambling	Connecting by district	Shanghai best and worst
2	Fake products	Traveling and sightseeing	Shanghai best and worst	Job and career
1	Traffic and transportation	Traffic and transportation	Customs and behaviors	Identity issues



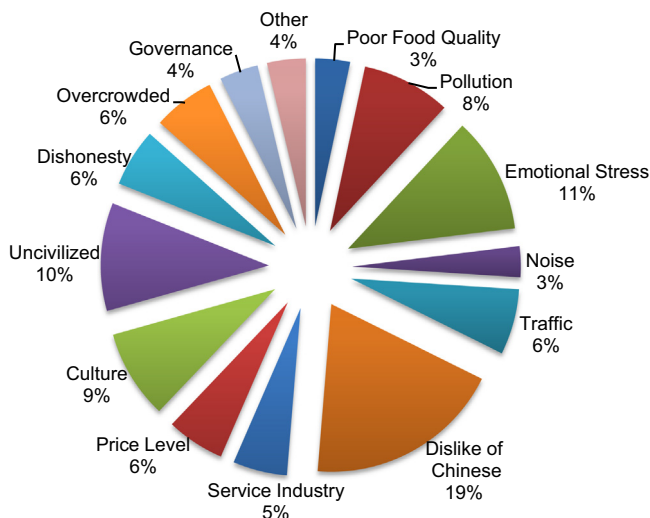


Fig. 2. Coding of negative evaluative statements.

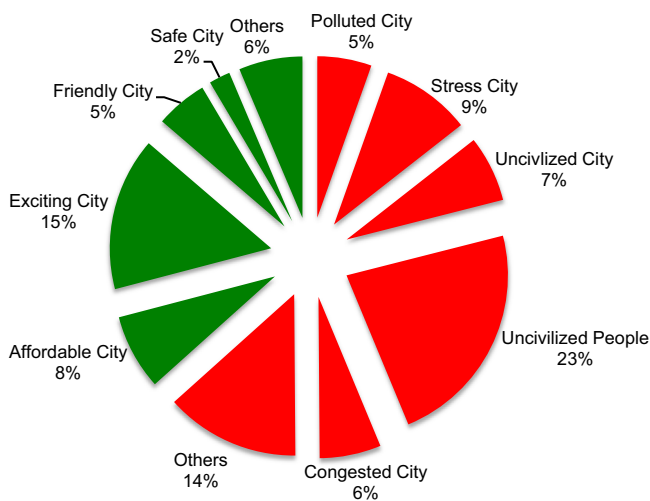


Fig. 3. Dimensions of Shanghai's image perception.

that Shanghai is perceived as both exciting and affordable. Refer to Fig. 1.

This positive sentiment is illustrated by following quotes: "Exciting city, something is always happening" (Blogger 1<sup>15</sup>); "In Shanghai, with the same amount of salary you can live in a much higher life" (Blogger 2). Complementary to the excitement factor are themes such as development and opportunities, which may be summed up in following quotes: "There is no place more exciting than Shanghai in China! It's growing faster than any other city in the entire world" (Blogger 3). Thus the findings of this study, in part, support H1 through the documentation of the online community members' appreciation for the excitement and rapid economic growth they experience in Shanghai.

Irrespective of these positive sentiments, the dominant attitude is that living in Shanghai is emotionally distressing due to overcrowding, pollution, and traffic problems. Further, Shanghai and its population are perceived as uncivilized due to lack of amenities,

poor hygiene, spitting, rudeness, and a propensity for dishonesty. Refer to Fig. 2.

These negative attitudes may be illustrated by following quotes: "So happy to be leaving this hell soon, back to civilization" (Blogger 4); "Living in Shanghai is stress to its purest. Traffic, pollution, prices, jobs are one of the worst on this world and become worse by the day" (Blogger 5); "This place make us crazy and impatient and downright blunt" (Blogger 6); "Remove the local population and Shanghai will be such a better place!" (Blogger 7); "In any interaction with Chinese you are in the process of being cheated" (Blogger 8) and "They push and shove because that is how they were brought up" (Blogger 8). Consequently, these findings provide support to H1 and H2.

By further coding and aggregating the thematic categories illustrated in Figs. 1 and 2, it is possible to propose the following dimensional construct of the image perception of Shanghai as expressed by the online community members. The image of Shanghai is thus predominantly negative driven by the impression of a lack of civility, honesty, and manners, as well as pollution and congestion, but at the same time recognized as an exciting, affordable, and safe city with plenty of opportunities. Refer to Fig. 3.

## 5. Discussion

### 5.1. External validity

This study has identified a strong negative attitudinal tendency towards life in Shanghai, which indicates a dissonance between the city brand's personality traits communicated during the 2010 World Expo and the lived experiences of online community members. Refer to Table 4.

Notably absent from the overview provided in Table 4 are negative perceptions of the human rights situation, which was included in H3. During the analysis, this issue did not manifest as a salient attitude object and, considering the straightforward tone of the two websites, it is not reasonable to assume that the community members are self-censuring. There can be two possible explanations: either the sampling failed to identify the human rights topic or the human rights problems in China, as reported by the Western media, are simply not experienced by most expatriates and foreign visitors to Shanghai.

The attitude object with the largest share of negative evaluative statements is the local population of Shanghai, which is perceived as generally uncivilized, with emphasis on a perceived lack of honesty. Due to the limitations of this study, it is not clear to what degree these findings are valid for the general population of foreigners inside and outside China, or just for the attitudes of a few dominant online community members. These findings are, however, congruent with the findings of a similar analysis of American blogs about life in China (Tang, 2008) and the Anholt-GfK Roper City Brands Index, where respondents from Western countries in general rank the local population of Shanghai in the lower end compared with the populations of 50 other major cities. For example, respondents in the United Kingdom and the United States rank the population of Shanghai 40 and 41 out of 50 (Simonanholt.com), when asked the following survey question:

Think about how people in general would behave towards you – about whether, for example, they might be warm and friendly, cold, or show prejudice towards you. How welcome do you think people in general would make you feel in the city? (Papp-Váry, 2011, p. 3).

Finally, a recent study by the Pew Center identified that 68% of the U.S. public believes that China cannot be trusted and that Chinese are less honest than Americans are (Pew Research Center,

<sup>15</sup> The National Science Foundation recommends that data gathered from secondary sources should be de-identified. The user names of the quoted community members are known the author. Source: <http://www.nsf.gov/bfa/dias/policy/hsfaqs.jsp#secondary>.

**Table 4**

Contrast between primary and tertiary city brand communication.

Primary city brand communication	Tertiary city brand communication	Brand personality trait
Harmonious society <i>Strengthening governance</i> <i>Improve moral standards</i> <i>Preventing corruption</i> <i>Traditional Chinese values</i>	Uncivilized people (23%) <i>Dishonesty (corruption)</i> <i>Poor manners</i>	Anholt: people Trueman and Cornelius: personality Aaker: sincerity
Modern and International	Uncivilized city (7%) <i>Lack of amenities</i> <i>Unwelcoming to foreigners</i>	Aaker: sophistication Anholt: presence Trueman and Cornelius: symbolic presence
Quality of life	Pollution (5%) Congestion (6%) Stress City (9%)	Anholt: prerequisite

2012). It can therefore be argued that similar findings from independent research support the validity of this study's outcome.

In this study, the perceptions of pollution and congestion are closely associated stress expressed by the online community members. This finding is congruent with the studies, referenced in the literature review (Wang et al., 2012; Xue et al., 2012), indicating that the environmental and traffic situations are indeed challenging. The notion of pollution is a fact constantly reminded by the hour-by-hour reporting of the air quality in Shanghai by the local government and the U.S. consulate. Thus, the negative sentiments relating to aspects of quality of life, as identified in this study, seem to be supported by other sources.

## 5.2. Limitations and impact

Although Section 5.1 has demonstrated a certain degree of external validity of the research findings, the limitations, discussed in Section 3.4, prevent this study from generalizing these to the entire population of foreigners and expatriates in Shanghai. It is possible that the silent majority may be quite satisfied with their lives and experiences in Shanghai and are, therefore, not motivated to engage in the types of social media exchanges sampled by this netnographic study. However, from a branding perspective, it may matter less to what degree the expressed views are representative of foreigners in Shanghai as long as these views are consistently transmitted in the form of word-of-mouth on social media platforms by influentials acting as cultural gatekeepers.

The scope of this study does not allow for testing the impact of the identified word-of-mouth communication on the general population of city brand consumers, but a web traffic analysis can assess the exposure. The website Mysitecost.com estimates that [Shanghaiexpat.com](http://Shanghaiexpat.com) currently has around 42,000 unique visitors and more than 125,000 page views per day. [Shanghaistuff.com](http://Shanghaistuff.com) has around 5000 unique visitors and around 15,000 page views per day. Combined, these numbers indicate a relatively strong impact compared with, for example, the Shanghai Municipal Government's travel website, [www.meet-in-shanghai.net](http://www.meet-in-shanghai.net), which only has about 3000 page views and 1000 unique visitors per day (Larsen, 2012, p. 177). It is therefore plausible that individuals who are considering job opportunities in Shanghai, or just visiting the city, may consult the discussion forums of [Shanghaiexpat.com](http://Shanghaiexpat.com) and [Shanghaistuff.com](http://Shanghaistuff.com), and that the negative attitudinal tendency may influence their travel or relocation decisions.

Consequently, the negative attitudinal tendencies may undermine the official efforts to attract foreign knowledge-workers and limit the ability of Shanghai to progress from a regional hub to a truly global city.

## 5.3. Recommendations

The findings of this study indicate that inter-group perceptions and relationships may be a significant factor influencing the city brand as well as a determining factor for the image outcome of international mega-events. This is consistent with the findings of a study by Florek, Breitbarth, and Conejo (2007, p. 84), which concluded that the positive effect on Germany's image from the 2006 FIFA World Cup was almost exclusively related to "soft" aspects, such as "encounters with friendly and hospitable people and a multi-cultural atmosphere." It is not within the scope of this study to probe the intercultural contacts between Chinese locals and foreigners, or to judge whether the identified attitudes are bigoted. However, these findings do lead this author to recommend that city branding campaigns should consider real and perceived inter-group relations when articulating the city brand personality for Shanghai and any other city.

This study, as well as the literature review, indicates that the Chinese Communist Party confounded its aspiration to reposition itself and strengthen its authoritarian legitimacy with the goal of branding Shanghai, and attract international knowledge-workers. In this connection, marketers caution corporations to be aware of the consumers' frame of reference and to deliver on the brands' promises, and note that too many branding campaigns fail because executives focus on the aspirational rather than the achievable in their communication (Copeland, 2001). Congruent with this, Wang et al. (2012, p. 3) argued in their case study of the 2010 World Expo's impact on Shanghai's city brand that:

Consensus on the city's identity is one of the key steps in city branding, which concerns with how culture and history, economic growth and social development, infrastructure and architecture, landscape and environment, among other things, can be combined into a saleable identity that is acceptable to the public.

Based on the findings of this study, it would appear that the "Better city, better life" identity is not sellable to the international city brand consumers. This, however, does not mean that Shanghai is unsellable. Air pollution may have a detrimental impact on the quality of life, but not necessarily on a city brand. Los Angeles has notoriously bad air, but still ranks within some of the world's top city brands (Papp-Váry, 2011). Similarly, perceived rudeness and uncivilized behaviors may not be a problem by themselves. New York is one of the top city brands (Papp-Váry, 2011), but is not exactly famous for the politeness of its population and is, together with Los Angeles, is frequently voted as the rudest city in America (Hunt, 2011). However, neither New York nor Los Angeles communicates anything about quality of life or traditional American hospitality in their branding. These cities embrace other aspects of



**Table 5**  
Proposed city brand traits for Shanghai.

Tertiary city brand communication	Brand personality trait
Excitement (15%)	Aaker: excitement Anholt: pulse Trueman and Cornelius: pace of life
Affordability (8%)	Anholt: prerequisite
Safety (2%)	Anholt: people

their realities, such as “pulse” illustrated by the famous catch phrase for New York: “The city that never sleeps.” Los Angeles has promoted itself as the entertainment capital of the world by piggybacking on the tangible and intangible presence of Hollywood.

It could, therefore, be argued that Shanghai’s brand personality might be more effective internationally if the branding embraced some of the perceived positive aspects identified by this study, for example excitement, safety, and possibly affordability. Refer to Table 5.

Further, by selecting and hosting events matching these dimensions (refer to Table 5), the Shanghai authorities could ensure a better alignment between image communication and the actual lived experience by visitors. Research (Wang et al., 2012) has documented that the main reason for visiting Shanghai is not the massive urban redevelopment and modernization, but the unique blend of Western and oriental culture in this former colonial city.

## 6. Conclusion

Research has documented that perception and image play an important role in attracting investment, knowledge workers, and businesses to destinations that offer similar structural and economic advantages. Contemporary cities have therefore attempted to gain a competitive advantage by leveraging their uniqueness in place branding efforts. City branding builds on existing experience with corporate branding. However, the heterogeneous nature of city stakeholders and the relative limited control authorities can exert over the touch points between cities and consumers present city branding efforts with the challenge of distilling a brand personality and a message that corresponds with the actual experience of the city and, at the same time, is forward looking and appealing to the consumers of city brands.

The Chinese authorities have a clearly articulated a goal of developing Shanghai into one of the world’s preeminent cities. The review of the literature seems to indicate that the Chinese authorities simultaneously are pursuing two strategic and possible confounding goals. The first and most obvious is the goal of transforming Shanghai into a global economic juggernaut, and the other is to rebrand the party by introducing a new national Confucian ideology to the public. Consequently, Confucian values have become embedded in the primary image communication and the brand personality associated with the World Expo. Research conducted in connection with the 2010 World Expo in Shanghai indicates that the contrast between reality and brand communication may have prevented the prestige of this event from translating into a greater appreciation for Shanghai among the international consumers of city brands.

The outcome of this study seems to support this conclusion. It is possible that the negative attitudes communicated on social media for foreigners in and visitors to, Shanghai may have a negative effect on the attitudes of the many thousands of people visiting these websites every month, and potentially undermine Shanghai’s ambitions of attracting foreign knowledge-workers and becoming one of the world’s leading global cities. This study thus

proposes that Shanghai’s officials try to focus more on excitement and less on harmony in the primary brand communication, and confirms the importance of personal encounters as a facilitator of city brand building. This study contributes to the research of the perception of destination brands by demonstrating how the netnographic approach makes it possible to conduct research into the word-of-mouth communication on social media, which today may be considered the primary brand advocacy channel. In this manner, the netnography departs from the traditional survey and interview methods and relies on a quantitative, as well as a qualitative, analysis of the naturally occurring commentary of online community members.

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