



RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Impact of Citizens' Involvement on Perceived City Brand Image: the Mediating Role of Satisfaction and Sense of Belonging to the Place

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
<p>Received: Jul 29, 2024</p> <p>Accepted: Sep 28, 2024</p> <p><i>Keywords</i></p> <p>City branding</p> <p>Sense of belonging</p> <p>Satisfaction</p> <p>Impact</p> <p>Brand image</p> <p>*Corresponding Author: abderrahmane.mousstain -etu@etu.univh2c.ma</p>	<p>Recent literature emphasizes the importance of inclusive and participatory approaches to place branding, particularly the empowerment of residents in the branding process. Despite this, current research lacks a comprehensive understanding of the specific factors that shape residents' perceptions of the city brand, often neglecting to examine the core components that constitute a city's perceived brand image. This study addresses this gap by exploring the determinants of perceived city brand image, specifically investigating the influence of resident involvement and the mediating roles of place satisfaction and sense of belonging. Utilizing a quantitative methodology, we surveyed 200 residents of Casablanca to gather empirical data. The findings reveal a positive correlation between increased citizen involvement and favorable evaluations of the city's brand image, with place satisfaction and sense of belonging acting as significant mediators in this relationship. This research underscores the importance of recognizing residents as both recipients and co-creators of a city's brand, advocating for strategies that align with authentic local roots to enhance the effectiveness of city branding efforts.</p>

INTRODUCTION

The early literature on place marketing and branding identifies residents, businesses, and visitors as the primary target audience for a place brand (Ashworth & Voogd, 1990; van den Berg & Braun, 1999; Kotler et al., 1993). However, such categorization inadequately captures the intricate web of stakeholders. Recent research in marketing, focusing on the consumer as a co-creator of value, has gained prominence, leading to the emergence of participatory city branding, emphasizing co-creation and stakeholder involvement (Meetiyaogoda et al., 2024). According to Kavaratzis & Kalandides (2015), recognising the importance of stakeholders and adopting a participatory approach is essential to understanding modern, community-involved long-term branding strategies (Hay et al. 2022). Despite this shift, several authors have reported that residents are commonly overlooked in place branding initiatives (Strandberg, 2023; Belabas, 2023) even though they play essential roles in the city branding process (Kavaratzis et al., 2017; Hakala, 2021; Belabas, 2023). Furthermore, residents are not mere participants; they are integral partners and co-producers (Meetiyaogoda et al., 2024; Hospers, 2010).

Recent developments have highlighted the critical importance of active resident involvement in any place's branding strategy. The absence of such involvement often results in residents viewing initiatives unfavourably. While some scholars dispute the central role of consumer involvement in branding (Louro & Cunha, 2001), the prevailing trend emphasizes its importance. As posited by Styv'en et al. (2020), effective place branding requires accurately capturing and reflecting residents' perceptions of a place in brand communication. Residents' positive perceptions of a place play a pivotal role in shaping various behaviours towards it (Uchinaka et al., 2019; Tournois & Rollero, 2020; Schlesinger, Cervera-Taulet & Crespi-Vallbona, 2023).

In order to understand resident involvement and its impact on perceived place brand image, it is necessary to draw on two complementary theoretical lenses: Social Identity Theory (SIT) and Place Attachment Theory (PAT). SIT posits that individuals derive a sense of self from the groups with which they identify (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Within the domain of place branding, a city perceived as possessing a strong and positive brand identity can reflect favorably on the self-image of its residents (Kavaratzis & Kalandides, 2015). This shared sense of positive identity fosters a sense of community and shared purpose, encouraging residents to actively participate in shaping and advocating for the city's positive attributes (Meetiayagoda et al., 2024).

Conversely, Place Attachment Theory (PAT) focuses on the development of emotional bonds between individuals and specific locations (Williams & Vaske, 2003). These bonds, cultivated through positive experiences and a sense of belonging, can motivate residents to actively engage in the protection and promotion of their city's image (Molinillo et al., 2022). Furthermore, research suggests a positive correlation between the strength of place attachment and residents' perceptions of their city's brand image (Uchinaka et al., 2019).

Despite recognizing brand image's influence on resident behaviors (Magnoni et al., 2021; Shen et al., 2019; Stylidis, 2018; Strandberg, 2023), a crucial knowledge gap exists. Current research lacks understanding of the specific factors shaping resident perceptions of the city brand (Casais & Monteiro, 2019; Belabas, 2023). This gap is critical because resident perceptions directly influence their behaviors and can hinder brand development.

A weak brand image can lead to quantifiable negative impacts like decreased tourism revenue, investment, resident satisfaction, and civic pride. Cities without strong brands struggle to attract visitors, businesses and new residents, stunting economic and community growth.

While extant research has extensively explored destination-related factors influencing resident support towards tourism development (Molinillo et al., 2022), it often neglects to delve into the core components that constitute a city's perceived brand image. These core components encompass aspects such as community engagement and the quality of resident-place relationships. This oversight limits the development of a comprehensive understanding of how to effectively cultivate a strong city brand.

The absence of knowledge about these determinants limits city planners' ability to develop targeted brand-building strategies. Without this information, efforts to improve the city's image may be misdirected or inefficient.

This research strives to bridge a critical knowledge gap in city branding literature by investigating the antecedents (underlying factors) that influence residents' perceptions of their city's brand image. Specifically, it explores the relationships between resident involvement, resident place satisfaction, and resident sense of belonging with perceived city brand image. By elucidating these relationships, the research aims to generate valuable insights for city planners. These insights can be instrumental

in developing targeted strategies to cultivate a robust and positive city brand image. These strategies are expected to encourage positive resident behaviors, foster community support for development initiatives, and ultimately contribute to the city's prosperity and attractiveness.

This study aims to explore the determinants of perceived city brand image by investigating the influence of resident's involvement on perceived city brand image and the mediating role played by place satisfaction and sense of belonging. Specifically, we examine whether residents' feelings of satisfaction and sense of belonging act as intermediaries, strengthening the link between involvement and their perception of the city's brand image. By answering these questions, we aim to provide a more nuanced understanding of the mechanisms at play and contribute to the development of effective place-branding strategies and contribute to the advancement of place image theory. To achieve our research objectives, we developed, tested, and validated a conceptual model using empirical data collected from an online survey of 200 residents of Casablanca. Through this approach, we aim to provide valuable insights into the factors that influence residents' attitudes and perceptions towards their city, ultimately informing effective place-branding strategies and enhancing the development of city brands.

The study contributes to research in several ways: (1) to the best of the author's knowledge, as the first study investigating quantitatively the influence of involvement on perceived city brand image; (2) as one of the first studies in city branding to identify involvement as a determinants of place brand image; and (3) by incorporating satisfaction and a sense of belonging as mediating factors in this relationship, helping to understand the complex interrelationships involved. This deeper knowledge will contribute significantly to the advancement of place image theory. By doing so, drivers and their influence on city brand image can be identified and encouraged, thereby answering calls for future research outlined above (e.g., Casais and Monteiro, 2019; Belabas, 2023), and enabling practitioners to design more effective resident retention strategies.

This paper unfolds across four parts. The first part meticulously presents the conceptual framework and our research hypotheses. The second part outlines the methodology employed for this study. The subsequent section meticulously unveils the results. The final section intricately discusses the findings, delving into managerial implications, offering insights for future research in this domain, and acknowledging inherent limitations.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In this study, the theoretical framework incorporates social identity theory (SIT) and place attachment theory in order to clarify the connection between citizens' involvement and their perception of the city brand image.

Social Identity Theory (SIT), as proposed by Turner, Brown, and Tajfel, (1979), posits that individuals derive a significant portion of their self-concept from membership in social groups. This theory is highly relevant to understanding the relationship between citizens' involvement in city branding activities and their perception of the city brand image. Citizens' active engagement in shaping the city's brand image can be viewed as a manifestation of their social identity as members of the local community.

Social Identity Theory suggests that shared identity within a group is an important factor (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). In the realm of city branding, resident involvement could potentially foster a sense of community and shared purpose. By actively participating in shaping the city's brand image, residents may feel they are contributing to a collective narrative about the city, strengthening a sense of ownership and responsibility. This collective effort has the potential to reinforce positive

perceptions of the brand image, as it represents the collective identity and aspirations of the local community.

The concept of Attachment Theory, which is based in environmental psychology, examines the emotional connections that individuals form with specific places (Williams & Vaske, 2003). It suggests that people develop a sense of attachment, belonging, and identity with places where they have meaningful experiences or contribute to shaping. In this study, citizens' participation in city branding activities can be viewed as a way for them to actively engage with their urban environment, leading to the cultivation of stronger place attachments. As citizens play a role in defining the city brand, their sense of belonging and attachment to the city grows, ultimately affecting how they perceive the city's brand image. Additionally, according to Place Attachment Theory, an individual's satisfaction and sense of belonging to a place are closely tied to their overall perception of the place, including its brand image.

This study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the relationship between citizens' involvement and their perception of the city brand image by integrating social identity theory and place Attachment theory. The integration of these theoretical frameworks guides the formulation of research hypotheses and provides a solid foundation for data analysis and interpretation.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK AND RESEARCH HYPOTHESES

City brand image

City branding has emerged as a crucial strategy for urban development, aiming to cultivate a distinct and positive image (Kavaratzis, 2004). This focus on image reflects a broader shift in marketing, moving beyond tangible product attributes to emphasize intangible associations and emotional connections (Hankinson, 2015). However, a critical review of the literature on city brand image reveals several limitations and areas for further exploration.

Traditionally, brand image research centered on products, with scholars like Park *et al.* (1986) and Keller (1998) identifying functional, symbolic, and experiential dimensions of brand image (cited in Hankinson, 2014, p. 16). While these frameworks provide a foundation for understanding city brand image, they require careful adaptation to the unique context of places. Cities are multifaceted entities, defined by history, culture, economy, and urban design (Stylidis *et al.*, 2016). These elements interact to create a complex and dynamic image, potentially exceeding the scope of existing product-based frameworks.

The literature asserts that city image is a multidimensional construct providing a nuanced perception of cities (Cassia *et al.*, 2018). City image is understood as the collective perceptions, beliefs, and thoughts held by individuals regarding a particular city (Kavaratzis, 2004). According to Motamed & Farahani (2018), city image forms through a set of associations developed over time by residents or visitors. It is a mental image that people hold of the city, relying on both objective knowledge and emotional aspects (Manyiwa *et al.*, 2018). This image significantly influences the attitudes and actions of individuals towards that city. Therefore, many cities are taking steps to improve their public image to raise awareness and attract more visitors. From a marketing perspective, creating a positive and distinctive city image is a crucial step in successful branding (Merrilees, Miller, & Herington, 2012).

A significant limitation in the literature concerns the focus on tourists' perceptions of city image (Cassia *et al.*, 2018; Taecharunroj, 2016). While tourism plays a vital role, residents are critical stakeholders who co-create and embody the city brand (Kavaratzis, 2004; Braun *et al.*, 2013). Their

image of the city shapes their own behavior and influences how they act as city ambassadors (Braun et al., 2013; Zenker et al., 2017). A more comprehensive understanding of city brand image necessitates a deeper exploration of residents' perspectives and how they interact with, and contribute to, the city's image.

While scholars emphasize the importance of resident participation in city branding efforts (Uchinaka et al., 2019), the literature lacks a clear understanding of the mechanisms linking participation to perceived city image. Existing research suggests a positive correlation (Motamed & Farahani, 2018), but the causal processes remain largely unexplored.

As the core principles of traditional branding and place branding align, most research in the place branding field is based on previous works on corporate branding (Hankinson, 2015). Brand image is widely discussed in both corporate branding and place branding as an antecedent (Duman et al., 2018; Manyiwa et al., 2018; Jawahar et al., 2020) or as a consequence (Woisetschläger et al., 2008). Consequently, the current study conceptualizes brand image as a dependent variable, influenced by resident involvement and other factors.

Antecedents of City brand image

Involvement

Involvement, originating from the persuasive communication literature within social psychology, constitutes a significant determinant influencing consumer decision-making processes and communication behaviors within the realm of marketing (Michaelidou & Dibb, 2008). This construct has been intricately linked to various marketing concepts such as perceived risk, brand loyalty, and advertising strategies, signifying its pivotal role in understanding consumer behavior. The seminal work of Krugman in 1965, wherein involvement with advertising was first systematically measured, marked a crucial milestone in the integration of involvement into marketing research. Subsequent studies have extensively examined involvement across diverse contexts encompassing different product categories, purchasing decisions, tasks, services, and the processing of advertising stimuli (Michaelidou & Dibb, 2008). However, despite the substantial body of research dedicated to elucidating involvement, the field remains characterized by discordant findings and a conspicuous lack of consensus regarding its definition and constituent dimensions, thereby necessitating further investigation.

Within the sphere of social psychology, involvement is elucidated through the lens of social judgment theory, which elucidates individuals' perceptions and evaluations of messages based on three distinct attitude scales: acceptance, rejection, and non-commitment. This theoretical framework underscores the central tenets of involvement, namely the extent of individuals' centrality and commitment towards specific issues (Sherif, et al., 1965). In the context of consumer behavior, involvement manifests itself through diverse forms such as product involvement, brand involvement, task involvement, and advertising involvement. Nevertheless, the intricate nature of involvement, coupled with its multifaceted manifestations, has engendered conceptual ambiguity and methodological inconsistencies within the extant literature, resulting in conceptual overlap with related constructs such as commitment, importance, and cognitive effort (Zaichkowsky, 1985).

This conceptual complexity surrounding involvement has transcended disciplinary boundaries, permeating into the domain of place branding studies. Within the discourse of destination branding (Molinillo et al., 2022), for instance, involvement is predominantly conceptualized in alignment with Zaichkowsky's definition, which posits involvement as "a person's perceived relevance of the object based on inherent needs, values, and interests". Conversely, some scholars in city branding regard

involvement as the active engagement of an actor within the branding process itself (Casais & Monteiro, 2019). Against this backdrop, our investigation delineates involvement as a construct that captures the extent to which residents contribute, share information, offer suggestions, and actively participate in the city branding process.

Residents' involvement in the creation of a city's brand is a collaborative process that goes beyond superficial engagement. It involves incorporating their perspectives, opposition, and desires into the city's identity (Hakala, 2021). Research underscores the importance of resident involvement in this process, as greater engagement leads to a city brand that better reflects residents' needs and aspirations, consequently enhancing the overall quality of life (Kavaratzis and Kalandides, 2015; Insch and Walters, 2018; Belabas, 2023). Scholars highlight the significance of stakeholder involvement in city branding, emphasizing the growing role of residents in shaping a city's image within the realm of public diplomacy (Casais and Monteiro, 2019). The active involvement of local residents is vital in driving key elements of place branding, such as fostering a profound connection with the local environment and enhancing their attachment and sense of belonging to their communities. Through genuine involvement, collaborative creation of a thriving place brand can be realized (Ram et al., 2016). Case studies, such as those of Porto and Rotterdam, emphasized the importance of developing city brands that correspond to residents' experiences and capture the multi-dimensionality and complexity of the city. In this context, residents assume an active role in shaping the city's branding strategy and reinforcing their commitment to the new brand identity (Casais and Monteiro, 2019; Hakala, 2021; Belabas, 2023).

Consequently, it remains uncertain whether the level of involvement significantly impacts residents' perceptions of the city brand image. This gap in empirical research underscores the need for further investigation to comprehensively understand the effects of resident involvement on their perceptions of city brand image.

Studies in destination branding and brand communities highlight the significance of tourist and community member involvement in shaping perceptions of brand image (Molinillo et al., 2022; Woisetschläger et al., 2008). However, the resident-city relationship presents a unique context compared to tourists or brand communities. Residents have a deeper, more vested interest in their city's brand, suggesting a potentially more complex relationship between involvement and image perception.

Despite theoretical discussions emphasizing the importance of resident engagement in city branding (Kavaratzis & Kalandides, 2015), a conspicuous gap exists in the empirical research. Quantitative studies rigorously examining the relationship between resident involvement and city brand image perception remain scarce. This critical lacuna necessitates further investigation.

Drawing upon the potential parallels between tourist and resident involvement, we propose the following hypothesis:

H1: Citizens' involvement has a direct and positive effect on citizens' perception of the city brand image.

Satisfaction

There has been considerable discourse within marketing literature concerning the complexity of customer satisfaction. Various definitions have been proposed, with none gaining universal acceptance. Many scholars have defined it within the disconfirmation paradigm, where satisfaction is determined by assessing how well a service or product aligns with or exceeds customers'

anticipated outcomes (Oliver, 1980).

In the realm of tourism studies, visitor satisfaction has been identified as a predictor of visitors' intention to revisit (Hussien, 2020). Additionally, Govindarajo and Khen (2020) demonstrated that visitor satisfaction positively influences loyalty towards the destination. Moreover, the authenticity and uniqueness of a destination have been recognized as crucial elements in satisfying visitors (Gao et al. 2020).

In the context of place branding, Zenker et al. (2013) asserted that citizen satisfaction is a crucial outcome of place branding efforts, developing an index to measure citizen satisfaction based on various attributes. This underscores that the primary goal of place marketing and branding is to meet the needs of consumers, including residents. Satisfaction, as described by Emami et Sadeghlou (2021), is fundamental in understanding the relationship between people and places. Chen et al. (2018) further highlight that satisfaction is the most fundamental place-related construct. Recent research reveals that consumers often derive satisfaction from creating value for themselves, emphasizing the evolving nature of the relationship (Lam et al., 2020).

While research by Jiang et al. (2019) and Chan et al. (2010) suggests a positive association between increased customer involvement and improved service efficiency alongside higher satisfaction, a more critical lens is necessary. These studies imply a direct causal effect, where greater involvement automatically translates into greater satisfaction. However, this perspective might be overly simplistic.

However, Souza et al. (2023) introduce a critical distinction by underlining the significance of the quality of customer participation, particularly highlighting customers' capacity to articulate their authentic needs, as a crucial moderator in the involvement-satisfaction relationship. This underscores that mere customer involvement is insufficient to ensure satisfaction. The manner of their involvement, specifically the degree to which they feel empowered to express their genuine needs, and the organization's responsiveness to such input, are equally vital.

In our study, we conceptualize involvement as residents' active engagement in the creation of a city's brand, fostering a sense of empowerment among residents. Therefore, we propose the following hypothesis:

H2: Citizens' involvement has a positive effect on citizens' satisfaction towards the city brand.

Additionally, customer satisfaction and brand image exhibit a multifaceted relationship, demonstrably varying across contexts. While extant research within customer behavior and marketing management (Cuong, 2020; Ali et al., 2021) suggests a predominantly positive correlation between these constructs, a more nuanced perspective emerges from additional studies. For instance, Alwi et al. (2020) investigate how UK-based Malaysian students' satisfaction contributes to the projection of a university's brand image. Similarly, within the tourism sector, research by Huete Alcocer and López Ruiz (2020), Jeong and Kim (2020), and Travar et al. (2022) explores the interplay between destination image, tourist satisfaction, and brand perception. Collectively, these studies suggest that while satisfaction generally enhances brand image in consumer-centric contexts, the relationship may not be linear. Özkan et al. (2020) further demonstrate the impact of satisfaction on corporate image at the organizational level, with intervening variables such as service quality, perceived value, and corporate reputation influencing the dynamic. This highlights the complexity of the satisfaction-brand image relationship, underscoring its dependence on industry-specific factors and the interplay of various constructs. Moreover, Shehzadi et al. (2021) posited that student satisfaction significantly enhances the university's brand image. Hence, we propose the hypothesis:

H3: Citizens' satisfaction has a positive influence on citizens' perception of the city brand image.

Sense of belonging to a place

The concept of belonging in human psychology relates to the emotional need for individuals to be recognized as part of a group, fostering close relationships and a sense of safety and affection. Every person naturally desires to be a crucial part of something more powerful than themselves (Escalera-Reyes, 2020). This idea has been studied extensively in environmental psychology, place studies, and environmental management literature over the past 30 years.

In place studies, the sense of belonging has become a fundamental aspect of place development. Defined by Frisou (2012), it involves an individual's level of identification, attachment, and solidarity with a particular location, closely linked to concepts like place attachment, place identity, place dependence, and sense of place (Inalhan and Finch, 2004). Some authors even use "place attachment" interchangeably with "sense of belonging" (Gorgul et al., 2017), highlighting its importance. Authors consider belonging as a dimension of Place attachment (Lewicka, 2011). This concept has also gained attention in place branding literature, aiming to develop a sense of belonging among stakeholders, including residents. Their involvement in branding strategies creates a sense of community, enhancing the quality of life as stakeholders feel a sense of ownership and commitment to the place. In the present study, we interchangeably utilize the concept of "sense of belonging" as synonymous with the two constructs "place attachment" and "sense of place".

Casais and Monteiro (2019) showcase resident participation in city brand co-creation as a reflection of their sense of place. Similarly, Slingerland et al. (2020) and Deng (2021) highlight participatory design and social activities as potential pathways to stronger place attachment. However, it's important to consider the nature and quality of involvement (Eshuis et al., 2014).

Moving beyond co-creation, Zhang et al. (2019) and Ellery & Ellery (2019) showcase the diverse ways resident involvement in place-making and branding can enhance place attachment. Their research emphasizes the importance of community involvement, strong partnerships, and self-directed participation (Cicognani et al., 2015) in fostering deeper connections. Casais and Poço (2023) further emphasize the role of emotional connection in fostering resident and tourist acceptance of a city brand.

In this context, involvement emerges as a potential tool (Eshuis et al., 2014) to strengthen emotional connections and ultimately enhance attachment to place. This aligns with Zenker & Erfgen (2014), who suggest increased stakeholder involvement leads to greater commitment and loyalty to a place brand. Cicognani et al. (2015) further emphasize the importance of active and continuous involvement in fostering a sense of community, with participation in local activities predicting feelings of belonging.

Therefore, involvement likely plays a multifaceted role. It fosters emotional connections, strengthens place attachment, and cultivates a sense of belonging. These insights highlight the role of involvement not only in enhancing emotional connections, but also in cultivating a deeper sense of belonging and attachment to a place. Therefore, this study hypothesizes that residents' involvement in place branding activities significantly impacts their sense of belonging to the place.

H4: Citizens' involvement significantly impacts their sense of belonging.

Shen et al. (2019) note that few researchers have explored the relationship between place image and

the sense of belonging. Chen and Dwyer (2018) found a positive relationship between place attachment (including the sense of belonging) and behaviors like word-of-mouth and ambassador behavior. Berrada (2019) measured the impact of the sense of belonging to Casablanca on the image of the Wecasablanca brand and its awareness, suggesting that individuals claiming belonging contribute to the place's development. The study conducted by Ghasempour Ganji et al. (2020) found a positive correlation between residents' perception of a place's image and their level of attachment to that place. This means that when individuals have a favorable view of a place, they tend to form a deeper emotional connection with it. Specifically, the research showed that when residents had a heightened perception of a place's image, their level of place attachment also increased. Furthermore, Strandberg, Styvén, and Hultman (2020) emphasized the importance of positive perceptions of a place in fostering stronger emotional bonds with that destination.

While the aforementioned studies establish a positive influence of place image on sense of belonging (Ghasempour Ganji et al., 2020; Strandberg et al., 2020), Stylidis et al. (2020) introduce a crucial counterpoint. Their research suggests a **reciprocal relationship**, where residents' place attachment, encompassing feelings of familiarity and belonging, can also shape their perception of the place's image. This perspective aligns with the present study, which investigates the reverse causality: how a resident's sense of belonging to the city influences their perception of the city brand image. Therefore, this study hypothesizes that residents' sense of belonging significantly impacts their perceptions of the place brand image.

H5: Citizens' sense of belonging to the place affects their perception of the city brand image.

The mediating effect of "citizens' satisfaction" and "the sense of belonging"

In this study we propose that citizens' involvement, influences their perception of the city brand image through the mediating factors of citizen satisfaction and a sense of belonging. Consequently, the research presents the following hypotheses:

H1.a: Citizens' involvement's impact on their perception of the city brand image is mediated by the sense of belonging to a place.

H1.b: The effect of citizens' involvement on their perception of the city's brand image is mediated by citizens' satisfaction towards the city brand.

In summary, the following figure represents our comprehensive conceptual model, illustrating the hypothesized relationships and connections between key variables, thus providing a visual representation of our hypotheses:

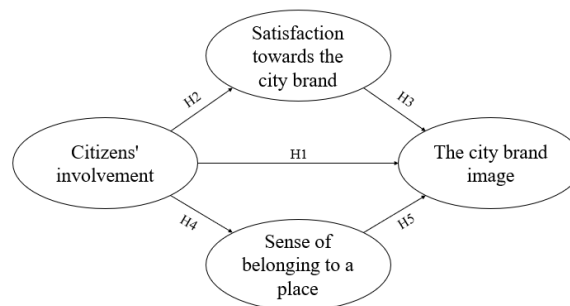


Figure 1. The Conceptual Model

METHOD

Our research employs a hypothetico-deductive approach utilizing quantitative methods. This methodology aligns with the need to collect data directly from the field, a characteristic feature of this approach. The quantitative data gathered will be instrumental in confirming or refuting the hypotheses we have formulated.

Our research focuses on the city of Casablanca, Morocco. This selection is not arbitrary, but rather strategically motivated by several key factors. Firstly, Casablanca holds a unique position as the only institutional city brand in Morocco, and arguably Africa, initiated by a local development company, Casablanca Events and Animations, launched on October 24th, 2016. This pioneering status allows us to examine a novel city branding initiative within the African context. Secondly, as the largest and most populated city in Morocco, Casablanca boasts a vibrant cultural tapestry, drawing residents from all corners of the country. This diverse demographic composition presents a valuable opportunity to explore the impact of city branding on a multicultural population.

Research Instrument

In our study, we conducted a survey to examine the relationships between various variables. To ensure accuracy, we utilised multi-item scales, employing a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 ('strongly disagree') to 5 ('strongly agree') for all items. These items were predominantly drawn from existing research, with minor modifications to suit the context of our study.

The assessment of the sense of belonging utilised nine items developed by Frisou (2012), aiming to gauge the sense of belonging and the level of attachment to the city of Poitiers. This scale provided a reliable and validated instrument to assess residents' feelings of connection to Casablanca. To evaluate Casablanca's brand image, we adapted the scale employed by Jacobsen (2012) in his study of the place brand image of Lübeck, Germany. This established scale provided a solid foundation for our investigation. To further enrich the measurement, we incorporated six additional items. Three items were drawn from Scott and English (1989) to capture the functional aspects of the city brand image, focusing on factors such as the city's perceived usefulness and efficiency. The remaining three items drawn from Verhoef *et al.* (2007) aimed to assess the hedonic brand image, tapping into residents' emotional connection and sense of enjoyment associated with the city. This amalgamation resulted in a comprehensive nine-item scale to capture the multifaceted nature of Casablanca's brand image. Citizen involvement was measured using a four-item scale constructed by drawing upon established research by Chan *et al.* (2010), Auh *et al.* (2007), Claycomb *et al.* (2001), and Bettencourt (1997). These items aimed to capture residents' perceptions of their opportunities and experiences with participating in decision-making processes. Citizen satisfaction towards the city brand was assessed with a four-item scale. This scale incorporated validated items from Oliver (1980) and Zenker *et al.* (2017) to measure residents' overall satisfaction with the city brand.

To ensure the clarity, relevance, and appropriateness of the research instrument, a pilot test was conducted with a sample of 30 Casablanca residents. This pilot study allowed us to refine the wording of the items and ensure the instrument effectively captured the intended constructs.

Sampling and Data Collection

Our research employed a non-probability sampling technique, specifically convenience sampling. This method involves selecting participants who are readily available and accessible to the

researcher (Moser & Kalton, 1971). In our study, convenience sampling was implemented by inviting those within the target population who were willing and available to complete our online questionnaire. While this approach ensures a readily accessible sample, it is important to acknowledge that it may not be representative of the entire target population due to the potential for self-selection bias (Sekaran & Bougie, 2016).

To collect our data, we conducted a self-administered online survey during the lockdown period, spanning from May to June 2020, employing a convenience sampling method. The survey participants were individuals aged 18 or older, familiar with the city brand, and residing in Casablanca. We obtained a total of 200 questionnaires that adhered to the validity criteria.

All respondents provided verbal consent to participate in the interviews for the purpose of this research. They were thoroughly briefed on the research objectives, the utilization, and storage of their responses. All interviewees have been anonymized.

To assess the statistical power of the sample, we utilised the G*Power 3.1.9.4 program, following the recommendations of Hair *et al.* (2014) and Faul *et al.* (2007). The analysis demonstrated a statistical power exceeding 0.95, surpassing the desired minimum of 0.8. This was based on a sample size of 200 cases and a 28-item data scale, with a standard error of 0.05 and an effect size of 0.15.

Data Analysis

This research aims to explore the potential causal effects of underlying, unobservable variables (latent variables) within our theoretical model. In order to achieve this, we have employed Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) techniques (Hair *et al.*, 2017). Among the various SEM approaches, we have opted for Partial Least Squares Path Modeling (PLS-SEM), implemented through the SmartPLS 3 software.

PLS-SEM presents a particularly advantageous choice for our study due to its inherent strengths. Unlike Covariance-Based SEM (CB-SEM) methods, PLS-SEM prioritises the model's ability to predict future outcomes over a stringent focus on confirmatory hypothesis testing (Hair *et al.*, 2017). This aligns perfectly with our objective of unveiling the causal connections between the latent variables in our model. After all, the ability to predict future states is a core principle of causality. Furthermore, PLS-SEM demonstrates exceptional robustness in handling complex research scenarios. Our model likely involves intricate relationships and potentially non-normal data, which is common in social science research. PLS-SEM effectively models these complexities without requiring strict assumptions about the normality of data distribution (Hair *et al.*, 2017). This is particularly advantageous as social science data often deviates from perfect normality. Additionally, compared to CB-SEM, PLS-SEM exhibits greater flexibility in terms of sample size requirements and model specification (Hair *et al.*, 2017). This characteristic is particularly relevant for our study, as we may have a relatively smaller sample size.

We used SmartPLS 3.0 software in a two-step process to evaluate the reliability and validity of the outer model (measurement model) and then the robustness of the internal model (structural model) following the recommendations of Hair *et al.* (2014). Furthermore, according to Hair *et al.* (2017), our model is reflective, where the causal action flows from the construct to the indicators.

RESULTS

Sample Characteristics

In the sample of 200 participants, as shown in Table 1, the male distribution was 56.2% (n = 112). Residents aged between 25 and 40 constituted the largest group (49.8%, n = 101), residents under the age of 25 accounted for 31.5% (n = 64), those aged between 40 and 60 were 17.2% (n = 35). The oldest age group among the participants in the survey comprised those who were 60 or older, making up only a small percentage of 1% (n = 3) of the total respondents.

Table 1. Characteristics of the participants (N = 200).

Demographic traits		%
Gender	Male	56.2
	Female	43.8
Respondent's age	Between 18 and 25 years old	31,5
	Between 25 and 40 years old	49,8
	Between 40 and 60 years old	17,2
	61 years or older	1,5
Occupation	Student	25,6
	Own business	7,4
	Employee	26,6
	Unemployed	7,4
	Other	33

Measurement model

The study assesses the measurement and structural models by examining convergent and discriminant validity. Convergent validity is gauged through factor loadings, composite reliability, and average variance extracted (AVE), with established thresholds of 0.70 and 0.50, respectively (Hair et al., 2014). According to Table 2, after removing specific items that fall below the thresholds (as outlined in Table 2), all factor loadings exceed the recommended value (0.7), indicating their suitability. Additionally, all AVE values surpass 0.5 (Hair et al., 2014). Table 3 demonstrates that all composite reliability values and Cronbach's alphas exceed the threshold of 0.70, establishing ample internal reliability (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). Thus, convergent validity is confirmed.

Secondly, discriminant validity of the reflective partial least squares model was assessed by comparing the square root of the average variance extracted of the factors to the intercorrelations. Table 4 illustrates that the square roots of the average variance extracted surpass the correlations between the factors, providing evidence for the model's discriminant validity. Moreover, the cross-

loadings, representing correlations between the items of each variable and the construct they measure, are significantly higher than correlations with other variables. They exhibit strong correlations with the variables they measure (See Table 5).

Table 2. Factor loadings

Items	Loadings (>.70)
The city brand image	
Wecasablanca arouses positive feelings in me.	0.851
Wecasablanca represents positive values.	0.896
I have favourable associations with Wecasablanca.	0.894
In your opinion, the Wecasablanca brand is reliable.	0.852
In your opinion, the Wecasablanca brand is credible.	0.930
In your opinion, the Wecasablanca brand is trustworthy.	0.936
In your opinion, the Wecasablanca brand is attractive.	0.877
In your opinion, the Wecasablanca brand is strong in character.	0.910
In your opinion, the Wecasablanca brand is strong in personality.	0.906
Citizens' involvement	
I put a lot of effort into expressing my personal needs to the authorities during the city brand creation process.	0.948
I always provide suggestions for improving the city brand outcome.	0.890
I have a high level of participation in the city brand creation process.	0.918
I am very much involved in deciding how the city should be branded.	0.938
Satisfaction towards the city brand	
I am satisfied with Casablanca.	0.770
In general, I like living in Casablanca.	0.710
I am satisfied with the brand Wecasablanca.	0.935
I am happy with this brand.	0.938
Sense of belonging to the place	
I really feel at home in Casablanca.	0.826
I identify a little with Casablanca	0.725
I feel Casablanca as a part of myself.	0.888
I am very attached to Casablanca	0.898
I would feel uprooted if I had to leave Casablanca.	0.828
When I am away from Casablanca, I am happy to return.	0.869
I feel very supportive of Casablanca	0.856
In my choices, I give priority to the interests of Casablanca.	0.864
It is important for me to help Casablanca develop.	0.816

Note. Deleted items: Satisfaction towards the city brand: (a) In general, I did not like Casablanca; (b) I am disappointed by this brand

Table 3. Convergent validity

Construct	AVE	CR	Cronbach's alphas
The city brand image	0.801	0.959	0.961
Citizens' involvement	0.854	0.959	0.945
Satisfaction towards the city brand	0.715	0.908	0.875
Sense of belonging to the place	0.710	0.956	0.951

Table 4. Latent variable correlations

	Citizens' involvement	Satisfaction towards the city brand	Sense of belonging to the place	The city brand image
Citizens' involvement	0.924			
Satisfaction towards the city brand	0.642	0.845		
Sense of belonging to the place	0.466	0.718	0.843	
The city brand image	0.695	0.845	0.690	0.895

Table 5. PLS factor loadings (Bolded) and cross-loadings.

Construct	Item	CBI	CI	SAT	SB
City brand image	CBI1	0.851	0.6	0.729	0.674
	CBI2	0.896	0.584	0.741	0.633
	CBI3	0.894	0.715	0.788	0.674
	CBI4	0.852	0.595	0.694	0.642
	CBI5	0.930	0.634	0.781	0.679
	CBI6	0.936	0.586	0.775	0.674
	CBI7	0.877	0.649	0.766	0.582
	CBI8	0.910	0.621	0.771	0.623
	CBI9	0.906	0.561	0.732	0.612
Citizens' involvement	CI1	0.627	0.948	0.571	0.439
	CI2	0.68	0.890	0.62	0.427
	CI3	0.683	0.918	0.623	0.44
	CI4	0.571	0.938	0.484	0.426
Satisfaction towards the city brand	SAT1	0.549	0.437	0.770	0.518
	SAT2	0.608	0.387	0.710	0.653
	SAT3	0.828	0.637	0.935	0.633
	SAT4	0.836	0.641	0.938	0.624

Table 5. (continued)

Construct	Item	CBI	CI	SAT	SB
Sense of belonging to the place	SB1	0.554	0.282	0.598	0.826
	SB2	0.491	0.35	0.535	0.725
	SB3	0.609	0.348	0.631	0.888
	SB4	0.641	0.339	0.617	0.898
	SB5	0.602	0.51	0.649	0.828
	SB6	0.693	0.412	0.667	0.869
	SB7	0.608	0.411	0.67	0.856
	SB8	0.682	0.556	0.726	0.864
	SB9	0.617	0.32	0.553	0.816

Note. CI= citizens' involvement; SB= sense of belonging to place; CBI= city brand image; SAT= satisfaction towards the city brand

Structural model (inner model)

After establishing the acceptability of the comprehensive measurement model, we subjected the structural model to a five-step assessment based on the guidelines of Hair et al. (2014):

(a) Test the significance of path coefficients: The significance of beta and path coefficients was examined using t values. As shown in Table 6, all path coefficients are significant. City brand image, satisfaction towards the city brand, and the sense of belonging to the place are significantly influenced by citizens' involvement (H1: $\beta = .180$, $t = 3.558$; $p < .01$; H2: $\beta = .678$, $t = 15.991$, $p < .01$; H4: $\beta = .466$, $t = 7.287$, $p < .01$). These results suggest that increased citizen participation in the brand creation process positively correlates with their perception of the city brand image. Additionally, citizens' involvement fosters a sense of belonging to the city and enhances their satisfaction levels.

(b) Examine the R2 values for all endogenous variables: Satisfaction towards the city brand has the strongest influence on the city brand image (H3: $\beta = .649$, $t = 9.936$, $p < .01$), while the sense of belonging exhibits a lower impact (H5: $\beta = .160$, $t = 2.812$, $p < .01$). These findings imply that a citizen with a strong connection to the city is more likely to have a favourable perception of the city's brand. In summary, all five hypotheses are confirmed.

(c) Review f2 effect size: Evaluating the effect sizes (f^2) reveals large effects between satisfaction towards the brand and city brand image (0.38), moderate effects between citizens' involvement and city brand image (0.20), and small effects between the sense of belonging to the place and city brand image (0.104), as indicated in Table 7.

(d) Evaluation of the goodness-of-fit: The goodness-of-fit index is sufficiently large ($Goff = 0.66$), indicating that the structural model fits the data well, following the guidelines given by Wetzels, Odekerken-Schroder, and van Oppen (2009).

(e) Check predictive relevance Q2: Q2 values above zero (Table 7) suggest that the model is well-reconstructed and possesses predictive relevance, affirming the highly predictive power of exogenous constructs on endogenous constructs, as stated by Hair et al. (2014).

Table 6. Hypotheses testing

Hypotheses	Relationships	β	T-value	P-value	Decision
H1	Citizens' involvement -> City brand image	0.180	3.558	0.000	Supported
H2	Citizens' involvement -> Satisfaction towards the city brand	0.678	15.991	0.000	Supported
H3	Citizens' involvement -> Sense of belonging to place	0.466	7.287	0.000	Supported
H4	Satisfaction towards the city brand -> City brand image	0.649	9.936	0.000	Supported
H5	Sense of belonging to place -> City brand image	0.160	2.812	0.005	Supported

Table 7. R², f² and Stone-Geisser index (Q²).

Constructs	R ²	f ²	Q ²
Citizens' involvement		0.203	
City brand image	0.77		0.476
Satisfaction towards the city brand	0.38	0.388	0.449
Sense of belonging to place	0.54	0.104	0.203

Mediation Analysis

We conducted a mediation analysis to examine the mediating role of satisfaction towards the city brand and the sense of belonging to the place in the connection between citizens' involvement and the perceived city brand image. Firstly, the results (as indicated in Table 8) revealed a significant indirect effect of citizens' involvement on the perceived city brand image through the sense of belonging to the place (H1.a: $\beta = .074$, $t = 2.53$, $p < .01$). Secondly, a significant indirect effect was found of citizens' involvement on the perceived city brand image through satisfaction towards the city brand (H1.b: $\beta = .440$, $t = 8.23$, $p < .01$). The total effect of citizens' involvement on the perceived city brand image was significant ($\beta = .694$, $t = 17.60$, $p < .01$), and with the inclusion of the mediators, the effect of citizens' involvement on the perceived city brand image remained significant ($\beta = .180$, $t = 3.55$, $p < .01$). This indicates a complementary partial mediating role of 'sense of belonging to place' and 'satisfaction towards the city brand' in the relationship between citizens' involvement and the perceived city brand image. Therefore, H1.a and H1.b were supported.

Table 8. Mediation Analysis Results

Indirect effects of CI on BI						
Hypothesis	β	SE	T-value	p-value	95% Confidence interval	
					Lower	Upper
H1a: CI -> SB -> CBI	0.074	0.029	2.53	0.006	0.031	0.126
H1b: CI -> SAT -> CBI	0.440	0.053	8.23	8.238	0.354	0.532

Note. SE= standard error; CI= citizens' involvement; SB= sense of belonging to place; CBI= city brand image; SAT= satisfaction towards the city brand

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The objective of this study was to elucidate the impact of citizen involvement in the creation of a city brand on their perceptions of the city brand image. The findings highlight the significance of the relationship between citizen involvement and the city brand image. Furthermore, satisfaction towards the city brand and a sense of belonging to the place act as mediators for this effect. This section delves deeper into the implications of our research on the current understanding and explores how our results compare and differ from those of related studies.

Firstly, our research establishes a **significant positive relationship** between citizen involvement in city brand creation and residents' perceived image of the city brand. This finding aligns with prior studies highlighting the **crucial role** citizens play in shaping a city's brand success (Casais & Monteiro, 2019; Vallaster & von Wallpach, 2013; Braun et al., 2013; Freire, 2009; Woisetschlager et al., 2008). Residents who participate in brand development are more likely to hold a **positive perception** of the brand.

Our study advances the understanding of **determinants of place image** by offering **quantitative evidence** for the link between citizen involvement and brand image. While existing literature often explores various factors influencing place image through qualitative methods (e.g., Casais & Monteiro, 2019), our research employs quantitative analysis to establish a **robust understanding** of the specific association between involvement and brand perceptions. This quantitative approach strengthens the generalizability of the findings and allows for more **rigorous** testing of hypotheses concerning this determinant of place image.

Furthermore, our results challenge arguments suggesting an inherent conflict between branding and democratic principles (Riezebos, 2007). The positive relationship between citizen involvement and brand image suggests that citizen participation can actually enhance democratic values in place branding. By including residents in the branding process, cities can foster a sense of ownership and co-creation, leading to a brand that more authentically reflects the community it represents. This insight contributes to a more nuanced understanding of the interplay between branding strategies and democratic processes within a city context.

Secondly, our research also reveals a positive association between citizen involvement in city brand creation and resident satisfaction with the brand. This finding aligns with prior studies in place branding (Eshuis et al., 2014; Hereźniak, 2017). Citizen participation allows for a more comprehensive understanding of residents' needs and desires (Eshuis et al., 2014). When residents are actively involved in the branding process, they have a greater opportunity to voice their opinions and influence the direction of the brand. This sense of agency can lead to a feeling of ownership and satisfaction with the final product (Bhattacharya et al., 2008). Conversely, the absence of citizen participation can hinder the identification of residents' needs, potentially leading to dissatisfaction with a brand that fails to resonate with them (Insch and Walters, 2018).

Thirdly, our results suggest that citizen satisfaction acts as a potential mediator in the relationship between involvement and perceived city brand image. This aligns with the work of Insch and Florek (2008), who posit that citizen satisfaction is a key performance indicator of successful place branding. Satisfied residents are more likely to become brand advocates, positively communicating the city's attractiveness to others (Insch, 2010). Conversely, low levels of citizen satisfaction can create negative perceptions of the brand, not only among residents but also among potential visitors and business partners who may be influenced by resident well-being (Insch and Florek, 2008).

Our research further reveals a positive association between a citizen's sense of belonging to the city and their perception of the city brand image. This finding aligns with Hunt and Stronza (2014) who suggest that citizens with a strong sense of belonging are more likely to positively communicate the city's brand values. Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) can be utilized to explain this link. The theory posits that individuals derive part of their self-concept from the groups they belong to. When residents are involved in city branding and feel a strong connection to the city, they may view the city's brand as an extension of their own identity. A positive brand image, in turn, can reinforce a resident's sense of belonging by associating themselves with the city's positive attributes.

Our research findings on the positive association between citizen involvement and a sense of belonging to the city, alongside the influence on brand image, can be further explained by drawing on two key psychological theories: Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) and Attachment Theory (Bowlby, 1969).

Social Identity Theory posits that individuals derive a significant portion of their self-concept from the groups they identify with. In the context of our study, when citizens are actively involved in city branding decisions, they are more likely to identify with the city itself as part of their social identity. This strong connection to the city can lead to a situation where residents' perceptions of the city's brand become **intertwined** with their social identity. Positive perceptions of the brand, in turn, can **enhance** individuals' self-esteem and sense of belonging. Residents begin to associate themselves with the positive attributes embodied by the city brand, creating a reinforcing cycle.

Attachment Theory suggests that individuals can form emotional bonds with places or entities, similar to the bonds formed in interpersonal relationships. In our research, citizens who are highly involved in the city branding process can develop an emotional attachment to the city and its brand. This attachment, in turn, influences their perception of the city's brand image. Positive experiences during the branding process are likely to lead to a positive brand image, while negative experiences could result in a negative one (Priporas et al., 2019). Citizen involvement, therefore, provides an opportunity to cultivate positive experiences, potentially leading to higher levels of satisfaction with the city brand (Priporas et al., 2019). As individuals' satisfaction with the city brand increases, so does their overall positive perception of the city's brand image. This underscores the importance of positive experiences and satisfaction in shaping perceptions of city brand image.

Furthermore, a strong sense of belonging, as indicated by our findings, can be understood through the lens of Attachment Theory. A strong sense of belonging suggests a deep emotional connection to the city, which can further enhance positive perceptions of the brand image. This aligns with research by Ram et al. (2016) who highlight the role of social identity in shaping brand perceptions.

Perceived city brand image influences individuals' attitudes and behaviors towards the city. Positive perceptions of the city's brand image may lead to increased advocacy, support, and positive word-of-mouth, while negative perceptions may have the opposite effect (Eugenio-Vela et al., 2019; Strandberg et al., 2020; Strandberg, 2023). Understanding the factors that contribute to perceived

city brand image, such as involvement, satisfaction, and sense of belonging, can help policymakers, marketers, and city planners develop strategies to enhance the city's brand image and foster positive relationships with residents and visitors.

A positive city brand image not only benefits the city economically but also contributes to community development and residents' overall well-being (Hakala, 2021). When residents have positive perceptions of their city's brand image, they are more likely to feel proud of their city, actively participate in community activities, and contribute to its growth and development. This creates a virtuous cycle where positive perceptions lead to increased involvement, satisfaction, and sense of belonging, further enhancing the city's brand image.

Having a positive city brand image not only helps the city economically but also plays a crucial role in community development and the well-being of residents (Hakala, 2021). When residents view their city's brand image positively, they tend to feel proud of their city, engage in community activities, and support its progress and advancement. This sets off a positive cycle where favorable perceptions result in greater involvement, satisfaction, and a stronger sense of belonging, ultimately boosting the city's brand image even further.

Theoretical and practical implications

Theoretical implications

Our research offers several significant contributions to the field of place branding theory. First, we propose a holistic framework that integrates key constructs: citizen involvement, satisfaction with the city brand, and sense of belonging. By examining these factors together, our study provides a more comprehensive understanding of the determinants shaping residents' perceptions of their city's brand image. This approach advances place image theory by moving beyond a singular focus on specific factors and highlighting the interconnected nature of these concepts.

Second, our study employs quantitative analysis to assess the relationship between citizen involvement and perceived city brand image. This approach adds valuable empirical evidence to the existing literature, which often relies on qualitative methods (e.g., Casais & Monteiro, 2019). Quantitative analysis strengthens the rigor of our research and allows for a more nuanced understanding of the association between involvement and brand perceptions. This quantitative approach contributes to a more generalizable understanding of the phenomenon across different city contexts.

Third, we identify citizen satisfaction with the city brand and sense of belonging as mediating variables in the relationship between involvement and brand image. The application of a mediation framework sheds light on the underlying mechanisms by which citizen involvement influences brand perception. This not only deepens our theoretical understanding of the causal processes at play but also reinforces the notion, as highlighted by Kavaratzis (2017), that residents are not passive consumers but rather active co-creators of the city brand. By incorporating their voices and experiences, citizen involvement ensures that the city brand more authentically reflects the community it represents. This insight further enhances our understanding of the complex interplay between individual experiences, emotions, and perceptions in shaping place brands.

Practical implications

The significance of citizen involvement in shaping perceptions of a city's brand image is a focal point of our research findings. Place branding practitioners stand to benefit from this insight by actively

engaging residents in the branding process, soliciting their input, and integrating their perspectives into branding strategies. This inclusive approach not only serves to augment residents' satisfaction with the city brand but also fosters a sense of ownership and attachment, ultimately contributing to a more favorable city brand image. Drawing inspiration from the Casablanca case, community engagement initiatives can be promoted, and the city's positive attributes can be spotlighted through diverse media channels and internal ambassadors, primarily comprising residents.

Furthermore, our study underscores the pivotal role of citizen satisfaction as a determinant of perceived city brand image. Place branding practitioners are thus advised to regularly assess citizen satisfaction with the city brand and pinpoint areas for enhancement. Addressing issues that may compromise satisfaction levels can effectively enhance the overall perception of the city's brand image and forestall potential adverse repercussions. Additionally, our research indicates that cultivating a sense of belonging among residents positively influences the city's perception. Place branding practitioners can facilitate this by orchestrating community-building endeavors, cultural festivities, and civic engagement opportunities. By nurturing a profound sense of belonging, residents not only deepen their connection to the city but also bolster the overall perception of its brand image.

A positive city brand image plays a pivotal role in community development and resident well-being. Practitioners of place branding can leverage this understanding to stimulate economic advancement, allure investments, and enhance residents' quality of life. By nurturing a favorable brand image, cities can instigate a virtuous cycle of prosperity, wherein residents' satisfaction, engagement, and sense of belonging further fortify the city's allure and competitiveness. Furthermore, city management organizations, community leaders, and policymakers are encouraged to actively promote resident participation within their communities. This inclusive approach facilitates a deeper comprehension of residents' needs and viewpoints on critical matters, thereby fostering a sense of ownership and empowerment among residents.

To further amplify the internal perception of the city brand, practitioners should concentrate on nurturing a sense of belonging among residents. Strategies to achieve this objective may encompass organizing open forums, social gatherings, and virtual platforms for citizen engagement. Acknowledging residents as a diverse and dynamic cohort, rather than a monolithic entity, is imperative. Segmentation of residents can facilitate targeted participation, promote local collaboration, and bolster the implementation of participatory budgeting initiatives, thereby nurturing a stronger sense of community cohesion and collective ownership of the city's brand identity (Zenker & Braun, 2017).

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

This study, like any other, acknowledges certain limitations that pave the way for future studies to build upon. First, city branding is a dynamic field with an evolving theoretical framework that still contains theoretical gaps that require attention (Kavaratzis, 2017). Addressing these gaps has the potential to move the field forward and deepen our understanding of city branding practices.

Second, the data collection process used non-random sampling methods, which may have resulted in different opportunities for residents to participate (Zenker *et al.*, 2014). This approach may introduce bias and limit the generalisability of the findings beyond the specific context studied. Future researchers are encouraged to explore the model in different contexts to increase its applicability and robustness. In addition, the scale used in this study to measure involvement was borrowed from the management discipline. Future research efforts could focus on proposing and validating a

specialised involvement scale tailored to the place branding context, thereby enriching the literature.

In addition, this study focused exclusively on the perspectives of residents, overlooking insights from other relevant stakeholder groups. Future research should consider exploring the perceptions of different stakeholders to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the dynamics of city branding.

Furthermore, the model used in this study excluded crucial factors such as citizen commitment, identity, word of mouth, and intention to leave as potential predictors. In addition, moderator variables such as place of birth, length of residence, ability to participate, and socio-demographic information were not considered. Future studies could extend the existing model by including these factors, thereby increasing its explanatory power and ability to capture more variance in perceived city brand image.

In summary, this study lays the groundwork for future research efforts by highlighting areas for further exploration and refinement in the field of city branding. Addressing the identified limitations and incorporating additional factors and perspectives can contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the complex dynamics underlying city branding processes.

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Data availability statement

The study's findings are based on accessible data that can be requested from the corresponding author at abderrahmane.mousstain-etu@etu.univh2c.ma. The authors are committed to transparency and will provide data compliant with ethical and legal guidelines while maintaining privacy and confidentiality. In addition, any supplementary materials are also available upon request.

Ethical approval

This research was conducted at Hassan II University in Morocco. At the time of the study, the university did not possess a formally constituted Institutional Review Board (IRB) or ethics committee. However, the research protocol adhered to the ethical guidelines outlined in the editorial

policies of the target journal for publication. As per these guidelines, the specific research design employed in this study fell under the category of studies exempt from formal ethical approval.

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