Towards a Community Inspired Place-Brand

By
Jaylene Lori Ulmer

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Acknowledgements

A brand is a set of expectations, memories, stories and relationships that, taken together, account for a consumer's decision to choose one thing over another."

- Seth Godin

I am fascinated by the concept of brand and am passionate about creating awareness about what it is, why it is important and how to effectively apply it to generate results.

Thank you to my academic advisor Dr. Gordon Gow for the conversations that helped me narrow my focus. Thanks also to my supervisor Dr. Rob McMahon for guiding me through this process, asking great questions and providing valuable insight.

Thank you to my husband, family, friends and colleagues for your support during this fascinating journey. Your belief in me, ability to accommodate my crazy schedule and desire to see me succeed means more than you know.

In a world where not everyone can access education, particularly women, I am so grateful to have been able to continue my learning by spending time developing an in-depth understanding of topics that fascinate me while meeting some incredible people in my cohort.

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Abstract

A brand is not a logo. A brand is not a tagline. And, in the case of place-brand, a brand is the

inherent set of experiences that are understood and lived by the community. Technology has not

only changed the way we communicate; it has in many ways destabilized organizational control

over brands, making organic brand creation not only important, but also essential. This paper

studies how social media can be used as an essential tool in the place-branding process. Using

Twitter content for the basis of gathering data illustrating authentic community dialogue, and

comparing the results to in-person interviews, the commonalities that have emerged from my

analysis support the use of social media as a tool for the place-branding process. While this

process can be a valuable tool for practitioners to capture and articulate many different perceived

characteristics about the place and provide an avenue for reflecting on cultural understanding, the

organic nature of the content analyzed in this study also suggests limitations on the depth of

information that can be gathered in this way, and suggests that a more 'directed' approach to the

place-branding process may produce more robust results.

Introduction

Globalization is creating increased pressure for communities to differentiate themselves to attract new residents and business investment to their region. Since the strategy for developing brands has traditionally been situated within a pragmatic development approach, most community brands are presented as something the community 'has' rather than something the community 'is'. Place branding, at present, is therefore often inadequate and misunderstood, typically revealing itself as something that place branding practitioners "do to a place" rather than something that "emerges" from it in an organic manner (Braun, Kavaratzis & Zenker, 2013).

There continues to be confusion in this area, both among brand practitioners and consumers, that a logo or an identity is all that constitutes a brand. As a result, brand strategy tends to be driven by short-term, narrow-scope thinking through which the primary tool of brand expression becomes the marketing campaign executed through traditional media channels (Allen, 2007).

However, place branding, which is the practice of applying brand strategies to places, should become a practical tool for allowing the community to express cultural features that, for them, already reflect the place identity. Effective place branding should capture and represent many different perceived characteristics about the place and therefore be reflective of the views and experiences of the community. From this perspective, an organically created place-brand is a useful tool by which to understand the cultural identity of a place, as reflected in the everyday lived experiences and conversations of the community. Since recent statistics suggest that 86% of place-brands fail within a year of introduction (www.globalsiteplans.com) there remains opportunity to develop a deeper understanding of place brand as a concept and process that emerges from the perceptions of the community. In this study, I explore this idea by considering

the definition of place-brand through identifying the use and application of common terminology. I will also explore the concept of effective place-brand development, in order to present findings that enhance current thinking around the process of place-branding ultimately enhancing marketing best practices.

Considering society is shaped by technology availability and use, involving the consumer in the social construction of place brand meaning will help define the attributes of a community in an organic manner. Findings from this research will provide insight into effective place-brand development and the opportunity for communities to engage consumers in their innovation and brand-building process. Braun et al suggest "a better understanding of the role of residents calls for a focal change from the communication-dominant approach to a participation-dominant approach," (2013, p. 6). Meaningful participation and consultation can produce effective and sustainable place branding which strengthens the brand communication and avoids the pitfall of developing artificial place brands.

To that end, this study will ultimately examine the research question of how on-line conversations can be used to define a sense of place for communities, and how social dialogue, through the use of these tools, can lead towards the development of an authentic, sustainable place-brand.

Terminology

Throughout the literature review, methodology and analysis, the following key words frequently occur and have, for this purpose, been contextualized with the following definition:

Organic: Occurring naturally. Through this research, this term is typically used in relationship to conversations and dialogues that take place without specific or artificially created influences.

Consumer: Often, we think of consumers from a place of purchasers. In relation to social media and this research, the consumers mentioned are typically the residents and community members who are viewed as consumers and creators of the community.

Place-Brand (as a product): By examining the evolution of brand to place-brand, this paper explores the product of place brand development as definition or concept. At a high-level it is defined as the practice of applying brand strategy. This concept is extrapolated further in the paper, primarily through the literature review.

Place-Branding (as a process): The research question, methodology and analysis focus on the actual process of place-branding and ways in which this process can be effectively administered in communities.

Literature Review Methodology

In order to answer the identified research question, a literature review was conducted in effort to determine (1) How has the concept of brand shifted from product based to place based? (2) What role does brand-equity play in relation to place? (3) What role do members of the community play in brand development and dissemination? (4) How does an organic approach to place-brand development result in the sustainability of both the brand and the community? (5) How does Twitter provide rich content by which to understand the existing identity of a community?

Search Strategy and Selection Criteria

The literature search was designed to identify existing information as it related to concepts of place-brand, socioculturalism, place-brand equity and the role of community in the brand shaping process. The search was conducted to ensure the literature review would include primary research data in the form of peer-reviewed scholarly and professional journals as well as published books. The search was primarily conducted through search databases within the University of Alberta Libraries including EBSCO, eMarketer and Academic Search Complete. Google Scholar was also used as an additional search resource. Inclusion criteria were as follows 1) studies defining and understanding the value of place-brand equity, (2) studies examining the inclusive role of stakeholders and community in brand development and engagement, (3) studies that provided models of place-brand construction and practical application (4) studies that examine place-brand from a theoretical stand point, (5) studies that discuss authenticity in place-brand creation, (6) studies defining the role of social networks and narratives, and (7) studies that discuss the evidence of socioculturalism as it relates to brand development.

Exclusion was based on (1) studies that focus on destination rather than community or place-brand, (2) studies dated prior to 2000 (with the exception of theoretical context) and (3) studies that introduce visual elements of brand.

Information extraction and management

References were manually managed using APA style within an Excel-based database. A standard data collection form was used to extract descriptive information and thematic alignment. For each source, the following information was captured: citation, external/internal validity, theory/methodology, key points/highlights of the article and relevance towards creating new understanding.

From brand to place-brand

Although the concept of brand can be dated back to the second half of the 19th century when branding emerged as a "revolutionary way for companies to market their products to an increasingly literate population" (Olins, 2003), the concept of brand as it relates to places is relatively new in comparison.

Strategic place marketing, a concept developed by Kotler, Haider & Rein (1993), was among the first approaches to take the explicit position that places needed to run themselves like businesses, and market themselves like businesses, if they were to respond adequately to the threats of global competition, technological change and urban decay. Hannah & Rowley (2008) write:

> "With fierce global competition places are facing increased substitutability and competition and must provide an environment that not only effectively competes for new resources, investment, residents, but also provides an environment that sustains and satisfies existing economic, commercial, and residential activity" (p. 458).

It seems that the question facing places today is not whether to brand, but rather how to brand.

Place branding (Kavaratzis, 2009) is a more recent term that emphasizes the need for industrial cities to redefine themselves. Place branding is defined as the practice of applying brand strategy and other marketing techniques to the economic and sociopolitical developments of towns, cities, regions, and countries (Anholt, 2004). Although place branding uses many of the same techniques as more traditional product branding, there are some notable differences. For example, unlike a brand for a product or a company, place brands must be organic and versatile enough to reflect the shared sociocultural values of a community and the businesses and people that the brand represents. Therefore, the more structured and constructed approach of corporate or product branding is not effective in this context. Place branding, in particular, should be understood as a process of generating expectations in actual and potential city users' minds and ensuring that these expectations are met in the way people experience the city (Ashworth & Kavaratzis, 2009). Place branding is also different in that the development and management of the place-brand is decentralized and, if it is going to have longevity, must be constructed through a shared process of action and interaction among members of a community. The idea of participatory branding (Ind & Bjerke, 2007) suggests that it is a process of a dialogue between stakeholders. This highlights the fact that a brand cannot be assigned to a community, rather, it must be co-created by a multitude of people who encounter and define their community through their experience of it. As Govers and Go (2009) describe: "Place identities are constructed through historical, political, religious and cultural discourses; through local knowledge, and influenced by power struggles" (p.17).

Different from product marketing (Kotler & Gertner, 2002) and corporate branding (Ashworth & Kavaratzis, 2009; Hankinson, 2010), place branding is regarded as a process that

enhances place image through the experience of an authentic place identity and the change of mindsets among the residents of the community (Anholt, 2007). In order to effectively undertake research in the field of place-branding, it is important to identify the application of the term 'place' and its associated vocabulary. Since the concept of brand as it relates to places is relatively new in the field of marketing, there is somewhat of a gap in this understanding as observed by Anholt (2002), Hankinson (2009) and Chung-Shin and Marafa (2013). As a result, place branding can incorporate a number of key concepts or elements, including place identity, place image as projected by place marketers, place image and the value perceived by place users or consumers, user experience in the place, marketing and communication channels, and stakeholder relationships (Kavaratzis, 2004; Anholt, 2007; Hanna & Rowley, 2011).

Within the practice of place-brand there remains a need for common terminology and consistent interpretation of meaning. Hannah and Rowley (2008) suggest that the focus of discussion for place branding has shifted from tourism to business and marketing. As such the terminology has also been differentiated in that 'destination' is most commonly associated with tourism marketing and 'place' is most commonly associated with city branding and business. This differentiation creates broader understanding of the relatively generic application of the term 'place' and how this vocabulary now fits within the field of marketing and communication. This consistent vocabulary will help to add meaning to indicators of place-brand as they relate to community viability and sustainability.

The Value of Place-Brand

The establishment of 'place' terminology has also paved the way for the theory of place-equity (Hannah & Rowley, 2008). From a brand perspective there is growing consensus that the branding concept is not only useful, but also a powerful tool in examining and explaining

relationships and value creation linked to a place (Jones, 2005). This corporate shift towards a recognition of both the relationship and the perceived value created by a brand is well aligned with the very notion of effective place-branding since place-brand, although intrinsically different, is an evolution from traditional product brand development.

Place brand equity encompasses "real and/or perceived assets and liabilities that are associated with a place and distinguish it from others" (Papadopoulos, 2004, p. 43). Place-brand equity maintains that meaning is defined and sustained as a result of dynamic communication and negotiation processes (Sevin, 2011). Much like the product-based notion of brand equity, place-brand equity serves to define the value that is attached to a specific set of attributes that define a community. Stakeholders' positive or negative response to their community brand, and therefore its perceived value for them, is captured in the study of place brand equity. The place brand, if understood as the values of the community (cultural, social, environmental, etc.), might serve as guidance for sustainable community development. Place brand equity, as defined by stakeholders, could create opportunity to generate benchmarks in the place-brand development process that serve as indicators of community viability and sustainability (Jacobson, 2012; Anholt, 2007; Insch & Florek, 2008). Despite relative agreement of the definition of place brand, limited research is available on how to define and measure the equity that constitutes the effectiveness of such brands. However, the Investor-Based Place Brand Equity Model (Figure 1, Jacobson, 2012) is one tool that can help explore the effectiveness of place brands and the way on which the behaviour of co-creators can identify and apply suitable place brand attributes and place brand benefits.
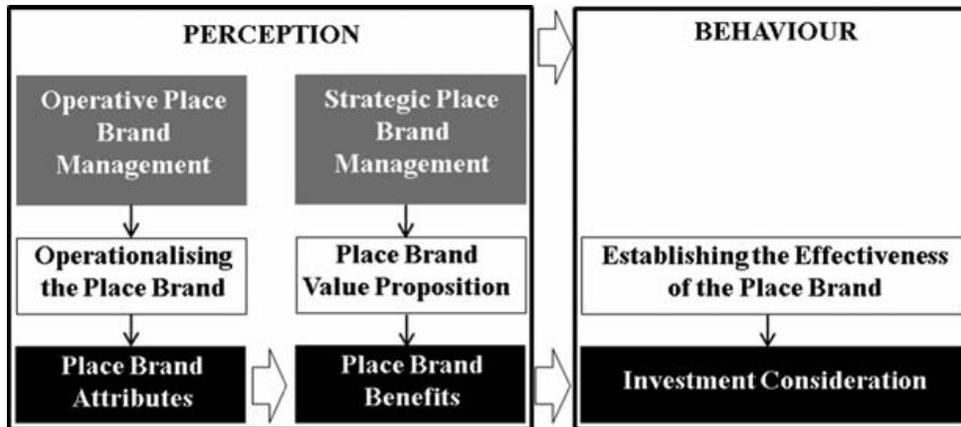
Findings from this quantitative study show that the structures of behaviour-oriented product brand equity models can be successfully applied in the place-branding environment when attention is given to the formulation of attributes and benefits relative to each specific target group (e.g. investors, tourists, residents). It is clear that interactions with stakeholders, identification of culture and attributes, brand buy in, and person-to-person communication all work together to build brand equity (Zavattaro, Daspit, & Adams, 2015).

Place-brand and co-creation

Within marketing and brand literature, stakeholders are often identified as being important but are typically regarded as the target market rather than as actively engaged participants. Gregory (2007) describes the contribution process that stakeholders can make based on the concept of a negotiated brand. Using a values-base that is drawn from the whole stakeholder community provides a realistic and solid starting point for brand development. "However, the notion of ongoing stakeholder involvement recognizes that brands can be evolved by the whole participating stakeholder community as they together seek to create organizations that have symbolic and material value for them now and whose future is of enduring concern" (Gregory, 2007, p. 69). Within the literature reviewed, four key models of place-branding have emerged, all with relevance to highlighting the co-creator role of the consumer. Common to the models

identified below is the desire to build on existing theory to create a more holistic approach that focuses on behaviours and lived experience rather than assumption and pre-conceived image.

The Dynamics of Place Branding Model (Kavaratzis, & Hatch, 2013) is linked to the identity process which takes into consideration expressing, mirroring, impressing and reflecting to explain the interactions between the physical and emotional and the internal and external. The 7A Destination Branding model (Baker, 2007) emphasizes that the brand exercise will only work if it is built by community stakeholders, from the inside out, thus supporting the importance of an authentic approach to place-brand development. The four building blocks of co-creation (Hatch & Schultz, 2010) and the consumer place satisfaction model (Insch & Florek, 2008), describe the phenomenon of branding and the important role of the stakeholder.

The Dynamics of Place Branding Model

Kavartzis and Hatch (2013) provide analysis that contributes to the theoretical development of place branding by discussing the link between place brands and place identity. "Our main argument is that place identity should be thought of as a complex process of identity construction rather than a specific outcome of such a process," (2013, p. 71).
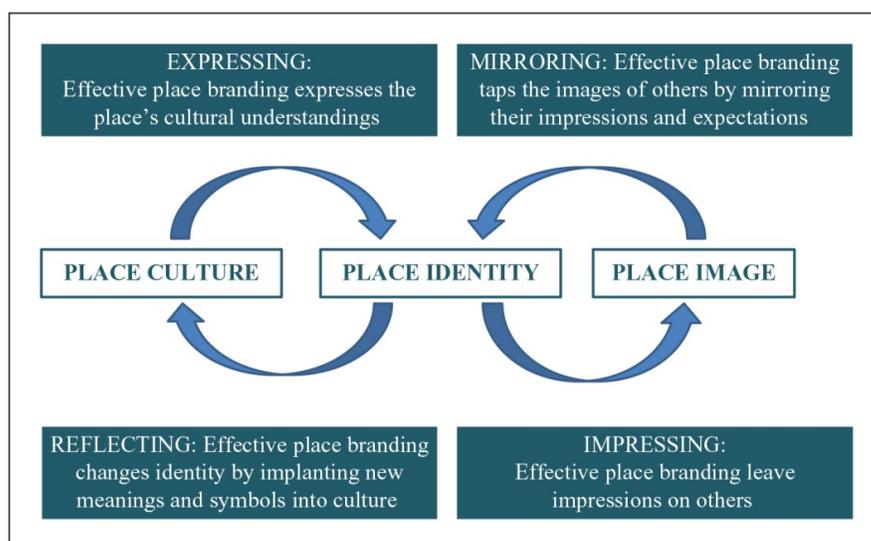

Figure 3. How place branding shadows the identity process.

Using an identity-based approach, they create a foundation by which to frame a proposed

place-brand model. The model begins to explain the evident interactions between the physical

and the emotional and between the internal and the external, which have been touched upon in

the place branding literature but not tied into theory. This information provides insight into the

sociocultural view of place-branding by supporting the idea that place brands might be viewed as

the outcome of a socially constructed and co-created process.

The 7A Destination Branding Model

The path to revealing a community-based brand is only possible through the engagement

of its stakeholders (Baker 2007).

Figure 1: The 7A Destination Branding Process

This is a shift from traditional marketing thinking and is necessary since a community

brand is a composite of many parts. This shift is also necessary since there is no singular

custodian of a successful place-brand; the brand must be owned and lived by the community. In

this paradigm shift it is essential that stakeholders (members of that community) feel connected

to the creation, development and ultimately ownership of place brands. Unlike traditional product brand development, the role of stakeholders goes well beyond that of customers/consumers since they are citizens who legitimize place brands and heavily influence their meaning (Kavartzis, 2012). This participatory approach re-evaluates the role of both stakeholders and place brand managers and implies a significant change in the role of stakeholders and practitioners within the place branding process. "In essence this article makes a call for an inclusive and democratic place branding process" (Kavartzis, 2012, p. 16). Baker suggests that brand planning must be based on open dialogue and collaboration with community leaders serving as catalysts for a cultural shift. "This helps to ensure there is no gap between what the city promises and the actual experiences of what the customer can enjoy" (Baker, 2007, p. 61). As such, we must recognize the important role that that stakeholders, as citizens, play in participatory marketing and branding (Braun, Kavaratzis, Zenker, 2013). Only meaningful participation and consultation can produce effective and sustainable place branding which strengthens the brand communication and avoids the pitfall of developing artificial place brands. Braun et al (2013) suggest "a better understanding of the role of residents calls for a focal change from the communication-dominant approach to a participation-dominant approach" (p. 6).

The Four Building Blocks of Co-Creation

A third model uses the four building blocks of co-creation (dialogue, access, transparency and risk) to describe the phenomenon of branding and brand co-creation (Hatch & Schultz, 2010).

Based on the findings of a longitudinal case study, co-creation is identified as important since stakeholders are given, and take control of, brand meaning and ultimately the value it brings to the organization. The emphasis on stakeholder involvement supports the importance of defining what a community actually is from those who define and make up its personality.

Organizational Self-Disclosure
(Transparency + Risk)

low   high
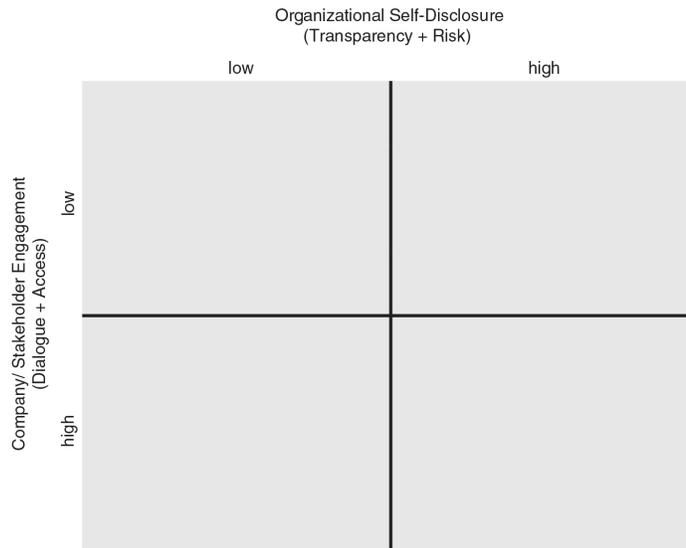
Figure 1:   An integrated framework for brand co-creation based on Prahalad and Ramaswamy's[3] building blocks of dialogue, access, transparency and risk.

Consumer Place Satisfaction

A fourth model of consumer place satisfaction rests on the assumption that residents play an instrumental role in shaping the economic, cultural and social prosperity of a place, especially at the local level (Insch & Florek, 2008).
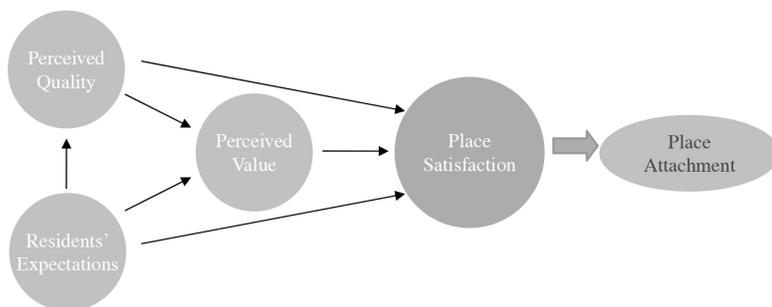
Figure 2.
Working model of resident
place satisfaction

The interactions within and in relation to the community define the character and atmosphere of the place. Thus, satisfied residents with positive perceptions of their city reinforce and may communicate favourable associations with that place.

Authentic Creation and Sustainability

As mentioned earlier, 86% of place-brands fail within a year of introduction. Further understanding around why brands fail is essential to defining best practices. Houghton and Stevens (2011) suggest that the reason many city brands fail is the absence of a program for engaging and energizing the local community. By defining a participatory and iterative approach to city branding there is a better likelihood that citizens will embrace and employ the brand as well as vocalize and share it.

This theory is also supported through a quantitative study which examines the similarity and difference of opinion between two segments of the same target audience (Merrilees, Miller, & Herington, 2012). Research revealed that each stakeholder group applies their own filter to interpret the meaning of the city brand which essentially creates a new interpretation of the existing city brand. While one school of thought would suggest that stakeholder agreement of a city brand may be the ideal state, findings from this study suggest that the breadth of opinion across stakeholder groups may be what is needed to reflect the true nature of the brand. "The brand enables disparate stakeholder groups to interact with the one brand. Thus, a strong brand enables these different groups to understand, communicate and connect" (Merrilees et al., 2012, p. 1035). This suggests that a multi-faceted, multi-stakeholder approach is essential to the formation and sustainability of an authentic brand.

In fact place branding provides complex and subtle understanding of places and their position in a global environment. Gold (2006) offers a unique insight into the idea of intellectual architecture, which by definition encompasses the elements of a place that lead to creativity and innovation as well as community strength. By examining the intellectual assets of a community it is possible to take a more holistic approach to understanding and managing the community's

brand. The intangible assets that define the characteristics often enhance the sense of community. Gold says, "rather than artificially branding a city or country, a place brand strategy requires governments to develop a political and social process that allows constituent actors to identify and then put into practice a (relatively) consistent social, economic and political message that accurately reflects the place in question," (2006, p. 3).

Socioculturalism

Craig & Muller (2007) define socioculturalism as a symbolic process that produces and reproduces shared sociocultural patterns. This action and reaction is the way in which our interpretations reflect our understanding of the world around us and serves to shape our sense of cultural norms and values. Within this context, places might be viewed as socially constructed and co-created products, endlessly re-developed and re-defined via the competing, ongoing and often simultaneous narratives of place consumers. This is a view that aligns with academic viewpoints in the critical place-marketing field (Warnaby & Medway, 2013). The success of persistent place brand construction is dependent on proper consideration of the relations between place, identity and the local population. When examining the connections between place, identity and brand construction there are four meaning dimensions governing the formation of place attachment in the context of brand construction: manageability, continuity, goal support and distinctiveness (Lindstedt, 2015). With respect to these four dimensions the overall importance of a place identity cannot be overlooked. The collective search for a competitive place-brand within can ultimately benefit a society beyond its functional usefulness as a means for remaining relevant in a competitive landscape. "Place-brands give populations an additional incentive for exercising their ambition, imagination, entrepreneurial spirit and hard work" (Anholt, 2009, p. 159). With consideration to the socially constructed brand there is will ultimately be the need to

consider the output of the construction and how the brand is visually represented and articulated in a meaningful way. The visual aspect of a brand campaign not only reinforces the identity and uniqueness of a place but also reassures the people the values, and symbols of their own culture (Campelo, Aitken, & Gnoth, 2011). However, too often practitioners place emphasis on the output without considering the opportunities and importance of stakeholder involvement as a participatory and communicative process.

Just like product brands, place-brands must carefully select, calibrate, and broadcast sentiments to entertain consumers and promote products (Gopaldas, 2014) while taking into account a sociocultural perspective on consumer emotion and how brands can benefit from co-creation. "At a higher level of analysis, a sociocultural perspective illuminates how political, economic, and social forces interactively produce collectively shared emotional dispositions in marketplace cultures" (Gopaldas, 2014, p. 1007). Research continues to emphasize the social construction of sense of place (Stedman, 2003; Warnaby & Medway 2013). Warnaby and Medway (2013) present a case study analysis of a place marketing initiative in the city of Manchester to highlight the fact that place is more complicated than the more typical contexts within which much traditional marketing theory was developed. This reflects the fact that the notion of a place itself is something created and produced by people and their actions, either individually or within the context of organizations. "From this perspective, places emerge as socially constructed products, developed and endlessly redefined and reinterpreted via spoken and written word" (Warnaby & Medway, 2013, p. 362). It also highlights the opportunity to enhance understanding through a sociocultural view of place-brand construction.

Sustainability

There is a vast amount of information available on the development of product brand and an

increasing amount on place-brand, however there is a gap in the understanding on both the longevity and sustainability of place-brands. To investigate successful place-branding characteristics, a conceptual framework has been developed by Florek, Insch, and Gnoth (2006) which is comprised of three tools of place brand identity communications: place brand design, place brand behaviour and place brand communication. This framework is focused on the maintenance and communication of the brand rather than on its development, and is an interesting approach to consider as it looks at brand from the outside in, rather than the inside out. With a focus on web-based communications, this study suggests that digital mediums are useful to deliberately communicate the content of the brand identity form the perspective of pushing the message to the user. Although it was originally approached from an examination of sharing specific messages that drive or reinforce brand meaning, it was quickly acknowledged that "a two-way interactive approach to Communication" (Florek et. al, 2006, p. 292) is not only common, but essential.

Contradicting many previous theories that focus on a co-created development with the intention that this concept in itself, sustains the brand over time. This is well-aligned with research in the areas of on-line communities as they pertain to brand loyalty. Findings of a study by Ning, Zhi-min, Chen-ting, & Nan, Z. (2013) show that building and maintaining online brand communities is an effective means of improving customers' brand attitudes, loyalty, and brand attachment. Thereby creating another avenue of co-creation and sustainability.

The Role of Social Networks and Narrative in Place-Brand Co-Development

Since technology has fundamentally shaped the way in which society acts and interacts, there is value in considering the applicability of brand-related marketing theories to the social media context both from a brand loyalty and a brand development perspective. In a traditional

product brand relationship, research shows that that perceived strength of relationship quality

with an online network brand facilitates continued use and loyalty (Pentina, Gammoh, Zhang, &

Mallin, 2013). In many ways, the brand relationships that are fostered online are equally if not

more powerful than those developed in-person. There is an interconnected existence in the

convergence of the social and the technical to that extent that they are both cause and effect

(Cecez-Kecmanovic, Galliers, Newell, & Vidgren, 2014). The technology itself may be the

reason for the network strength. As a cause and effect paradigm, there is opportunity to use

social media as a unique opportunity for brand analysis. Research has been conducted using

social media as a tool of the brand process in relation to brand meaning formation (Andéhn,

Kazeminia, Lucarelli, & Sevin, 2014; Sevin 2014), meaning as produced as narratives (Lichrou,

O'Malley, & Patterson, 2013), and social construction of meaning in an online environment (Li,

& Li, 2014). In all three of these examples it is important to note that Twitter was the social

media channel analyzed. And, although it is likely that the foundation of the approach could

apply to a range of social networks, each network would come with its own preset logic and use

model

Brand Meaning Formation

Social media provides a unique opportunity for brand analysis. The fact that users create

content and messages through social media platforms makes the detailed monitoring of variation

in brand messages not only possible, but robust. Social media also changes the way through

which the relationships between consumer and brand are configured. Social media allows for an

unprecedented level of user involvement in activities geared toward the formulation of brand

meaning (Kornberger, 2010). This new situation in which brands are more directly co-created by

the users, or consumers, is argued to constitute a unique opportunity for firms to 'employ'

consumers in their innovation and brand-building processes (Arvidsson, 2005; Kornberger,

2010).

   In terms of constructing brand meaning through online methods, consideration to existing

indices can prove to be helpful. One proposed method, Define–Measure–Visualize, suggests that

a robust measurement should start with a definition to ensure construct validity. A place

definition should ultimately be the sum of everyone's perceptions and their interactions within

their information resource network (Sevin, 2014). Measurement can be gathered through social

network analysis by aggregating the themes and concepts related to place brands. And, through

social media, one can identify the influential themes and associations within a place network in a

unique and interactive way as compared to traditional brand techniques or analysis. The findings

of this research show that social networks and social media have potential to be valuable tools in

the co-creation process of understanding and building places and their authentic brands.

Meaning as Narrative

   Brands are formed in many different venues, and the new media technologies such as

social media platforms offer interesting challenges, as they destabilize managerial control over

brands as traditionally conceptualized (Kornberger, 2010). It is now the consumer or the

community narrative that can ultimately shape the meaning of a brand. By analyzing place

narratives to highlight places as culturally significant and discursively produced and consume

multiple meanings are constructed around the diverse and contested experiences of living and

making a living in a place (Lichrou, O'Malley, & Patterson, 2014).

Social Construction of Meaning

   Social media only exists on the basis of the people who consume, produce and share

content. With this in mind it is critical to note the important role that people play as a dimension

of place marketing. Social media provides opportunities for one-to-one conversation and direct

audience management but that brand-consumer communication goes beyond simple interactions.

External factors may influence how users perceive and interpret messages on social media which

may alter the social construction of a brand in this environment (Li, & Li, 2014). By

understanding the way in which consumers are interacting with content, the authors have

provided insight that may influence consumer-produced brand communications (Smith, Fischer,

& Chen, 2012).

Literature Review Analysis

There is widespread agreement among existing literature that although place-brand is an

evolution of product-brand there are many unique characteristics, methods and considerations

that should be included when researching and implementing place-brand development. While

several informative models were highlighted in this review, additional research would add value

to the development of a practical application of place-brand development particularly with

attention given to the role of technology and online participation. There would also be value in

recommending additional research into formulating a more systematic understanding of place-

brand equity as it relates to the return on investment for the development of place-brands from a

practitioner standpoint. Authentic co-creation of a place-brand is a large undertaking for any city

and finding a method to determine the true value of this exercise would be useful from a

practical standpoint. That being said, this literature review has revealed appreciation and support

for the development of authentic place brands that represent the place as a location but also as

the community consisting of the people, culture and lived experiences that form and sustain the

brand itself. Overall, these findings are well aligned with the questions posed in the methodology

of this paper:

1) How has the concept of brand shifted from product based to place based?

2) What role does brand-equity play in relation to place?

3) What role does the community play in brand development and dissemination?

4) How does an organic approach to place-brand development result in the sustainability of both the brand and the community?

5) How does social media provide rich content by which to understand the existing identity of a community?

   The being said, within existing literature there appears to be opportunity to further explore the use of social media as a tool for co-created place branding. My research questions along with methodology, results and analysis are intended to answer the main research of questions of "How can on-line conversations be used to define a sense of place for communities?" and "How will this social dialogue leads towards the development of an authentic, sustainable place-brand?" are well positioned to expand knowledge in the practical development of place-brand theory and application.

Research Method

The methodology focused on a central research question that is supported by a sub-set of related questions in order to understand the complex process of place-brand co-construction through authentic citizen sentiment expressed through social media. First, the authenticity of online sentiment was explored through a data-set of social media dialogue to determine (1) how on-line conversations can be used to define a sense of place for communities, and (2) if this dialogue can contribute towards the development of an authentic, sustainable place-brand. To further test the relevance of online sentiment, interviews were conducted with a sample of community stakeholders to see if there is, in fact, thematic alignment between online and face-to-face conversations about a place-brand. In both cases, the design is based on descriptive research.

The methodology outline that follows is explored within the framework of the main research question and related guiding questions. The research design is outlined and supported with specific parameters around method, sampling, data gathering and analysis. Research tools, including interview process, social analytic software and information coding methods are also described. To conclude, the methodology outline also suggests potential limits to the study.

Research Questions

The following questions are explored in this study:

1. How does technology inform the process of meaningful place-brand development?

2. How does Twitter content help us understand the existing identity of a community?

3. How do the emergent conversations taking place online and in-person reflect the development of place-brand and community?

4. How can this research method help a community move forward with an engagement

exercise towards meaningful brand development and dissemination?

Research Design

My research was conducted using inductive logic to observe and identify common patterns and themes in data drawn from both online and in-person settings that lead towards a theory for successful place-brand development.

Research Method

Discourse analysis was determined to be the most effective method of research for the topic of place-brand creation for three primary reasons. First, it is well aligned with the theoretical context of socioculturalism as it pertains to the ideology that everything we know is created and made real through language (Merrigan, Huston & Johnston, 2012). Second, in line with the information identified through the literature review, the breadth of topics and attributes that contribute to the identity of a place will need to embrace subjectivity and multiple plausible interpretations for textual data (Van Dijk, as cited in Merrigan et. al., 2012). Third, the very nature of discourse is well aligned with the process and systematic way that co-creation may occur in relation to social media and brand development.

Sampling Strategy

This research was conducted using purposeful sampling to capture the ideas and sentiment that ultimately reflect the existing attributes of an authentic place-brand. By purposefully identifying a sample group of social media content associated with a specific place, and of key informant interview participants, there is opportunity to gather rich information to conduct a more robust analysis about the phenomenon of interest.

The sampling strategy incorporated the following procedures:

Adequacy and Appropriateness

With consideration to both the interview sample size and social media content analysis time frame, it is believed that a sufficient amount of data was collected to have "obtained enough data so that the previously collected data are confirmed (saturation) and understood" (Rudestam, 2007, p. 114). Appropriateness was achieved through purposeful sampling both through interview participant criteria as well as hashtag/keyword selection that was believed to be the best way of answering the proposed research questions.

The Audit Trail

Detailed records were kept through audio recording, transcripts, and hard copies of Twitter data to show how implementing the same process, using the same information, would garner the same conclusions. Rudestam (2007) suggests that an audit trail includes not only the raw data but also evidence of how the data were reduced, analyzed, and synthesized, as well as process notes that reflect the ongoing inner thoughts, hunches, and reactions of the researcher.

Triangulation

"Soliciting data from multiple and different sources as a means of crosschecking and corroborating evidence and illuminating a theme or a theory is known as triangulation" (Rudestam, 2007, p. 114). As this is a mixed methods approach using both in-depth interviews and content analysis, both data sets were ultimately compared and contrasted to highlight emergent themes.

Data Gathering Strategies

Interviews.

To capture rich information, interviews with 10 key members of the Lethbridge community took place in the first phase of the data gathering process. These stakeholders were selected from a diverse range of businesses and organizations that have in the past expressed interest in

collectively developing a Lethbridge-based brand. Interview participants were selected through

purposeful sampling to maximize the opportunity to collect rich and meaningful data. The ten

participants selected for this research met the following criteria:

- Lethbridge Resident: Since this research is focused on place-brand rather than a

  destination brand, a lived familiarity with the city will result in a richer conversation.

- Community Leader: This selection criteria is intended to ensure participant understanding

  and dialogue is within the context of the many facets of the community.

- Previous expression of interest in Lethbridge brand development: This common interest

  should create a fairly homogenous participant list with critical similarities related to the

  research question.

- Within my professional network: This will help solidify rapport and create a more

  participatory environment increasing the participation level.

Twitter.

In the second phase of the research, Tweets using #YQL and #Lethbridge were analyzed over

a three-week period in order to identify categories and possibly a theme that reflects the way

Lethbridge is viewed by an internal audience. The tweets were also geographically tagged to

capture only those within a 15 kilometre radius of Lethbridge. Excluding other locations was

intended to capture the thematic sentiment that emerges from primarily from residents as

opposed to visitors.

Data Analysis technique

In both data gathering strategies, I used qualitative content analysis as my data analysis

technique. These two sets of data (interviews and tweets) were compared and contrasted to

validate the outcomes. This technique will also show how technology impacts the outcomes of

gathering the true sentiment of the Lethbridge experience.

Research Tools

Twitter Analysis

For scholars attempting to study brands, social media provides a great opening in that it allows for a detailed dissection of meaning attributed to brands through public conversations that are captured in online platforms. Social media has changed the way basic communication processes are modeled, as the audience is no longer a passive recipient of the messages actively responding, participating and creating content. Within that context, the meaning associated with the existing understanding of the Lethbridge brand was captured through a 3-week Twitter analysis.

Data was collected using Twitter Archiver, a web-based monitoring tool that captured 3,239 tweets related to #YQL and #Lethbridge within the specified time-frame of May 1-22.

Figure 1: Screen Capture of archived Twitter Results.

This information was then exported to an Excel file for further analysis.

Since social media is viewed as two-way communication, it was important to consider how conversation analysis can be included in this research. According to Gubrium & Holstein (2000), three premises guide conversation analysis:

1. Interaction is sequentially organized, and talk can be analyzed in terms of the process of social interaction rather than in terms of motives or social status.

2. Talk, as a process of social interaction, is contextually oriented—it is both shaped by interaction and creates the social context of that interaction.

3. These processes are involved in all social interaction, so no interactive details are irrelevant to understanding it.

With this in mind, data that was viewed as not offering two-way communication was manually removed from the excel file based on the following exclusion criteria:

- Pure weather data auto generated from the weather network

    o It was determined that this numeric data could not effectively be analyzed with respect to contextualizing a theme or conversation.

- Advertising based tweets/Product promotion

    o As this analysis is looking to identify co-created content, it was determined that consumer and product sales would not add value to the results.

- Commentary on cities/places other than Lethbridge

    o While it was possible to set parameters around capturing tweets that originated by users within a 15 k.m. radius, it was determined that also eliminating conversation in relation to cities outside the area would be essential to ensuring the integrity of the results analysis.

- Trolls

  - Wikipedia defines a troll as someone who posts inflammatory, extraneous, or off-topic messages in an online community, such as an online discussion forum, chat room, or blog, with the primary intent of provoking readers into an emotional response or of otherwise disrupting normal on-topic discussion.

This resulted in the use of 3,067 tweets for results analysis.

Based on a similarly structured study by Andehn et al. (2014), content analysis was conducted with consideration to thematic and semantic analysis in effort to capture a well-rounded understanding of brand sentiment. Content analysis studies in the realm of place branding have mainly used thematic content analysis whereby the frequency of the occurrence of words is considered as the basis for further analysis (Hankinson, 2004; Hanna and Rowley, 2008). However, thematic analysis has been suggested to be inadequate without consideration of how the words are located and connected to each other (Roony, 2005).

Research was conducted to identify a qualitative data analysis tool that would be most appropriate to this study. Both Leximancer and NVivo were highlighted as valuable software tools that would add to the research efforts. "It is apparent that both of these software packages [Leximancer and NVivo] can speed up the analysis process markedly, making it easier for researchers to experiment with different codes, test different hypotheses about relationships and draw diagrams of emerging theories," (Sotiriadou, Brouwers & Le, 2014, p. 242).

NVivo is software that supports qualitative and mixed methods research. It's designed to help organize, analyze and find insights in unstructured, or qualitative data interviews, open-ended survey responses, articles, social media and web content. Critically, NVivo requires the

researcher to code the data and to develop themes or categories. "Therefore, one can argue that the data analysis is principally subjective (an underlying philosophy of the constructivist paradigm) and allows the researcher to engage more meaningfully in the analysis process," (Sotiriadou et al., 2014, p. 220). An initial and in-depth trial of NVivo for the Twitter analysis was conducted to evaluate the appropriateness of this tool in relation to the research. While the process and results output had several positive attributes including effective visual output, in-depth organization and strong visual coding cues, there were also concerns. The vast amount of data collected through Twitter was cumbersome to manage. As well, conducting the coding exercise after completing interviews, added a sense of bias to the way I was coding. As I was familiar with the commonalities and differences that resulted from the interview content, I felt there was risk that I was coding in a way that would ensure thematic alignment between the two data sets – Twitter and Interviews. For this reason, an initial in-depth trial of Leximancer followed.

Using word frequency and co-occurrence as a basis for analysis, Leximancer conducts thematic and semantic analyses simultaneously (Roony, 2005). This, in theory, ensures that a comprehensive take of the brand attributes is effectively captured. While the software allows for systematic inclusion or exclusion of data based on researcher criteria, the systematic analysis produced deeper results, without bias, then NVivo. The visual output of data was also stronger and allowed for more robust comparison between the two data sets – Twitter and Interviews. Easier management of the large volume of content captured on Twitter was also perceived as a benefit of this tool.

Therefore, Leximancer software was used to extract thematic content as well as sentiment. The information was displayed by means of a conceptual map that provided an overview of the

material, representing the main concepts contained within the text and how they are related.

Since the study by Andhehn et al. (2014) introduces this software to the place-branding domain,

there was additional rationale to adopt this method of analysis in my research.

Interviews

In order to ask a set of specific, pre-determined questions a semi-structured interview

technique was used. According to DiCicco-Bloom and Crabtree (2006): "semi-structured in-

depth interviews are the most widely used interviewing format for qualitative research and can

occur either with an individual or in groups (p. 315). This research focused on individual

interviews in an effort to discover potential areas of shared brand understanding among

community leaders.

Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed into a two column table within a single

Microsoft Word document and analyzed using the following steps:

1. Review blocks of text to identify overarching ideas and themes and note these in the

   second column

2. Take core ideas and consider how/if they align with research question

3. Identify thematic areas of agreement and note this using the comment tool in order to

   capture a set of themes or codes

Figure 2: Sample of Interview Audit Process

In order to understand the authentic brand statements that already exist in the community, this information is valuable in its own right. However, for the purpose of this research, the greatest value was realized when used as a comparative analysis against the social media based results to prove or disprove the hypotheses that twitter provides rich content by which to understand the existing identity of a community. To best accomplish this, the transcripts were also analyzed using Leximancer in order to output a parallel conceptual map for comparison purposes.

Reliability and Validity

Reliability

Reliability concerns the replication of the study under similar circumstances. It pertains to issues such as systematically recording and transcribing data (Rudestam, 2007). With the system for recording, transcribing and analyzing the data outlined in my research proposal it is reasonable to suggest that reliability was evident in the process.

For social media analysis, a trial data collection process was implemented in order to test the accuracy of Twitter Archiver. This was conducted by gathering tweets identified by my personal username @jayleneu over a 24-hour period so that I could easily compare search results against

my own activity to verify accuracy.

For data analysis and output, the Leximancer tool has been researched, analyzed and identified as a reliable tool in related case studies dealing with the topics of brand and social media.

Internal Validity

Internal validity refers to the validity of an inference. From a social constructivist perspective, validation is the process of evaluating the 'trustworthiness of reported observations, interpretations, and generalizations" (Mishler as cited in Rubestam, 2007). In my research, I compared the results generated through manual coding and thematic extraction to the results generated using Leximancer. Although it is reasonable to expect variance based on differences in analysis structure, the majority of the results produced commonalities thus validating the observations and interpretations.

External Validity

External validity refers to the generalizability of the findings of the study. The qualitative study emphasizes the "thick description" of a relatively small number of participants within the context of a specific setting.

In terms of the information gathered through the interview process, validity was maximized by seeking feedback on the interview questions from my academic supervisor, a marketing professional with a brand development background as well as a survey design expert. The questions were adapted and refined based on this feedback prior to seeking University of Alberta Ethics Board approval.

The interviews were conducted with consistency and neutrality to uphold trustworthiness and credibility of the study. All participants met the selection criteria as identified so as to capture

highly relevant, in-depth knowledge that will contribute to the research topic.

Ethical Considerations

Approval of the University of Alberta's Ethics Board was obtained prior to engaging participants in the interview process. Confidentiality was emphasized before meeting the participants and again at the beginning of each interview. The process was clearly defined and communicated in an informational email. Throughout the research process, procedures to protect individual privacy were implemented for audio transcriptions, file management, and any related discussions. The voluntary interviews were conducted respectfully without enforcing bias perspectives or asking leading questions. Participants had the opportunity to ask for clarification at any time.

Research Limitations

Brands are formed in many different venues, and new media technologies such as social media platforms offer interesting challenges, as they destabilize managerial control over brands as traditionally conceptualized (Kornberger, 2010). These new venues of brand formation all have unique mechanisms and 'personalities' (Smith et al, 2012), therefore it is possible that the results from Twitter may provide a different result than what may be uncovered if other social media platforms were analyzed. Impactful world and local events could potentially skew the results by either dominating conversation or changing overall user sentiment. By selecting twitter content using #YQL and #Lethbridge, any related tweets without that hashtag were eliminated from analysis.

Results

In the following section, the results of content analysis for both on-line and in-person interviews are discussed. Twitter data, aside from the exclusions as noted above, is used in its entirety. Interview data has been grouped into three areas which include positive perceptions, negative perceptions and participant understanding of outside perceptions. Since Twitter data and corresponding results highlight positive or neutral sentiment, the interview data that has been included in this study is in relation to positive perceptions. The remaining categories of negative perceptions and participant understanding of outside perceptions have been considered in relation to brand understanding and included as Appendix C & D but will not be used for comparative purposes.

In each case, the results are discussed in relation to the top 10 themes that have emerged through each data collection method. These themes and the corresponding concepts are then compared and contrasted to show the effectiveness of using social media as an information-gathering tool in relation to understanding the inherent characteristics and brand attributes of a place.

The following definitions provide insight into the analysis terminology:

Concept: A group of related words (terms) that travel together in the text. Evidence words include synonyms and adjectives. The concepts begin with seed words, either automatically discovered by Leximancer or manually specified, for coding.

Concept Seeds: In Leximancer, 'concept seed' words represent the starting point for the definition of concepts, with each concept definition containing one or more such seeds. These seed words can either be provided by the user, or can be automatically extracted from the text. They are called 'seeds' as they represent the starting point of the concept, with more terms being

added to the definition through learning.

Theme: The overall idea that represents the main groupings of concepts within the data.

Conceptual Analysis: In conceptual analysis, documents are measured for the presence and frequency of concepts. Such concepts can be words or phrases, or more complex definitions, such as collections of words representing each concept.

Relational Analysis: Measures how such identified concepts are related to each other within the documents.

Twitter Evaluation

Leximancer was used to analyze twitter content and visually display the extracted information through a two-step process. First, the data was analyzed using the pre-defined settings to gain a baseline understanding of the auto-generated concepts that were mined from the twitter data. This initial step revealed the need for customization to eliminate non-essential or irrelevant concept seed words from the analysis. This included:

- Removing proper names (other than Lethbridge)

- Removing web-based links beginning with https

- Merging similar words (donate vs. donation)

With defined parameters in place, Leximancer proved to be instrumental in producing co-occurrence of concepts and in identifying a thesaurus of words that are closely related to the concept, thereby generating semantic or definitional content around the concept (Roony, 2005).

Twitter Results

In the following section, results of twitter content analysis, both conceptual and relational will be discussed. Conceptual analysis deals with the presence and frequency of concepts such as words or phrases, or collections of words representing each concept. Relational analysis

measures how identified concepts are related to each other. These concepts can be considered as the most prominent brand elements captured through Twitter conversation during the defined 3-week period. The conceptual map is illustrated in Figure 3.
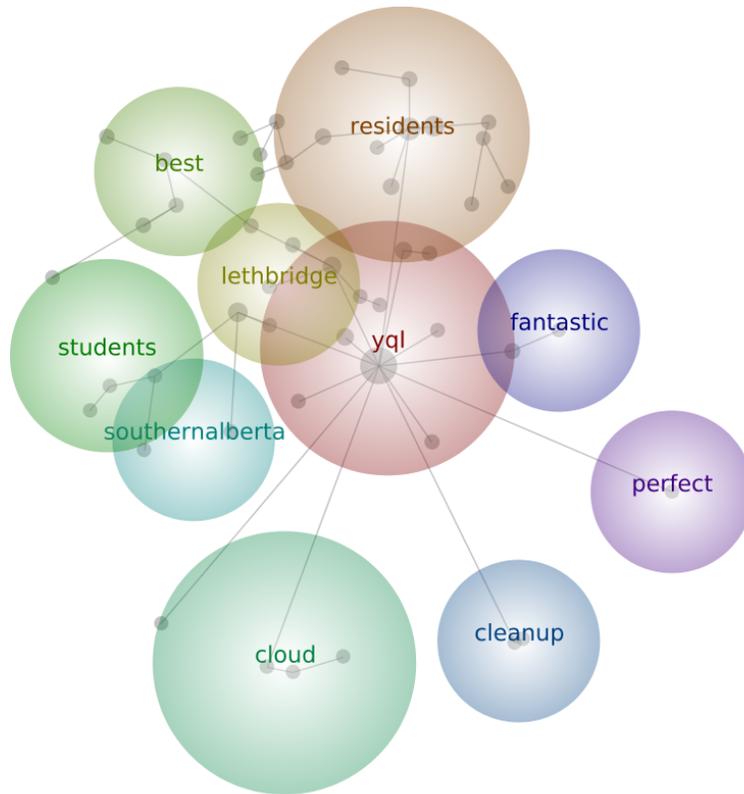
Figure 3: The concept map of #YQL and #Lethbridge Tweets between May 1 – 21, 2016

The ten themes that have been highlighted here provide an insightful overview of the content of the text that has been analyzed. For specific examples related to each theme, see the table that follows.

The first theme, the largest circle on the map involves concepts that relate to **YQL** in a variety of ways. The conversations revolve around supportive actions of community members, beautiful weather, people and locations, as well as pride in community-minded initiatives. This theme also involves concepts such as people, families and events.

The second theme is **residents** and this text refers to Lethbridge residents actively participating in the community. This demonstrated with content referencing donations, helping others, and engaging in community events. There are also concept seeds related to both the lifestyle and the opportunities to have fun and enjoy the city.

Third, we have **Lethbridge**. This theme is anchored in the concept of building a strong sense of community. There is also an emphasis on people and education in this theme.

The fourth theme, **best**, is related to the concept of local, volunteers, home and families. The concept seeds in this theme range in context but generally relates most to accolades in reference to events, businesses, teams and places.

Students is the fifth them as well as the main concept. Experience and place are also part of the concept seeds in this thematic area.

Clouds is the sixth theme with weather and sunshine adding to the concepts.

The seventh theme is **perfect** and is surrounded by commentary on local food, venues and events.

Clean Up is next and references the annual coulee clean up that takes place in the city. Although this concept shows up based on the timing of twitter gathering, I did not determine a need to exclude it from the concept seeds as it is an annual effort and also speaks to volunteerism and commitment to the community.

The ninth theme is **southern Alberta** which is primarily conceptualized through the hashtag #southernalberta. The concepts here is primarily tied to festivals and other events.

The last theme is **fantastic** with content primarily focused around volunteerism.

Table 1. Twitter Theme Examples

Theme	Example
YQL	• Thanks community members for banding together to help • @FamilyCentre & @McCafeLeth @RMHSouthernAB raise more than $29,000 on #mchappyday #yql
Residents	• Get @DowntownLeth for live music and more • Find a partner and go have fun @2016SASG ! #getmovingyql
Lethbridge	• Another Little Lethbridge Library installed, located at @bgclethbridge during their community garden build. • The @lethpolice are giving high school students the chance to learn about their field.
Best	• Thanks to all the organizers, volunteers, and bands for making it the best.
Students	• #yql is lucky to have you. #youth #youthone
Clouds	• Lots of sun with a few clouds. Not a bad way to kick off the week!
Perfect	• Its experimentation time here at the brewery....@**SCREAMINBROS** vanilla with our porter is a perfect pairing!
Clean Up	• The coulee cleanup continues this weekend!
Southern Alberta	• Enjoying Waterton this sunny weekend.
Fantastic	• It was fantastic supporting the #socialmedia efforts for 2016 @LethLobsterfest #yql #rotary #Lobsterfest

These results represent a collection of semantic and content-related concepts driven by organic, or non-directed conversation to capture community topics and sentiment over a set period of time. The analysis identifies high-level concepts and the associated themes as indictors of concept while also identifying concept references. By looking at the themes that have emerged, it is possible to see how the notion of a place is something created and produced by

people and their actions (Warnaby & Medway, 2013). This co-created or sociocultural view is

also well aligned with the idea that political, economic, and social forces interactively produce

collectively shared emotional dispositions (Gopaldas, 2014).

As this content was gathered online, there is also relevance in considering the role that social

networks can place in the place-brand process. The robust results support the thinking that

Lichrou, O'Malley, & Patterson (2014) present around the importance of analyzing place

narratives to understand how they are culturally significant and discursively produced and how

multiple meanings are constructed around the diverse and contested experiences of living and

making a living in a place. While it is not to say that place-brand meaning making can only occur

through social networks, these results suggest social network dialogue is relevant to social

understanding and should be considered as part of the information gathering process.

Interview Evaluation

Interview participants were asked a series of eight questions (see Appendix B) in order to gain

insight into their individual understanding of the key attributes that define Lethbridge as a place.

The questions focused on three areas including positive perceptions, negative perceptions and

participant understanding of outside perceptions.

Interview Results Positive Attributes

First, interview data was manually coded in effort to identity emergent themes using a word

document driven process as outlined in the methods chapter. While this was useful from the

perspective of understanding existing thematic sentiment around Lethbridge attributes, the value

in the interview process for this purpose is the ability to compare results from online

conversation to in person conversation. With this intention highlighted, it was imperative to

explore the data through the Leximancer analysis to identify themes, concepts and visually

display the extracted information. As the Leximancer output was well aligned with the results of manual theme identification, and the data being imported did not contain as many irrelevant symbols and words as twitter, it was determined that customization of concept seed words was not required. The conceptual map of interview data related to positive Lethbridge attributes is illustrated in Figure 4.
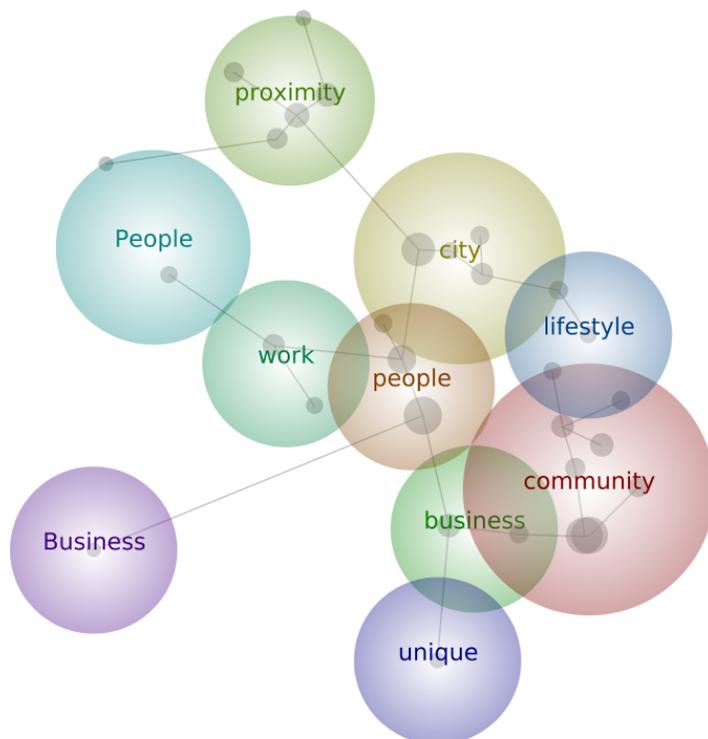
Figure 4: The concept map of interview data related to positive attributes of Lethbridge

The ten themes that have emerged as well as a table of examples are as follows:

Community is the first and most prominent theme. The concepts are linked to living in Lethbridge and the sense of place that comes from being part of a smaller city. Place, business, live, accessible and Lethbridge are the concept words associated with this theme.

The second theme is **people**, with things occurring as the concept word. The reference to things is often presented as a descriptor of identified attributes.

City is the **third** theme supported by the concept of environment. In this theme, environment is referenced from the perspective of the natural environment, the layout of the city as well as the human environment created by the people who live in Lethbridge.

The fourth theme is **proximity**. The concepts that emerge in this theme are identified as mountains and location which is in reference to the actual geographic location of the city.

The fifth theme is related to **work** and primarily centered around working together.

The next theme, **opportunities**, is contextualized around opportunities in the areas of sports, culture, recreation and education.

Unique as a theme, has emerged in relation to examples such as weather, people, business and education.

The eighth and re-occurring theme is **people**, with concepts of support and helping highlighted.

Size, as a positive attribute, and **business friendly** round out the list.

Table 2: Interview Theme Content Examples

Theme	Example
Community	• It's a fabulous place to live. Affordable, accessible, comfortable and it's a pretty caring community. • Friendly business community. It's helpful and collaborative.
People	• There is an interesting mix of people that have a high level of individual from all walks of life, backgrounds and across the country. • I would say I am happy to live here because of the balanced lifestyle, location, and natural environment. Those are all things that make it enjoyable to live here.
City	• I enjoy the Natural environment. As well as city development of the environment with pathways, parks, etc.

	• We have a Collaborative environment. The small size makes this possible and essential.
Proximity	• We have Access to a large city and international airport, but we also have proximity to mountains, to anywhere that you want to go. And also within the city, everything is 15 minutes from everywhere.
Work	• People are hard working and always have things on the go. • There seems to be really strong work ethic here, at all levels.
Opportunities	• Education opportunities help us attract intellectual people. This creates a certain culture in the community.
Unique	• We have a unique blend of industry, intelligence and business.
People	• People help each other.
Size	• Very accessible city based on the size and ease of getting around. • The size of our community means we can have impact.
Business Friendly	• Business people are very reciprocal.

This analysis shows the commonalities that have occurred while also showing the breadth of

opinions that can exist within a small, but rich sample group which is well aligned with the

sociocultural elements of brand construction as highlighted with a multi-faceted, multi-

stakeholder approach (Merrilee et al., 2012).

Comparison

While both sets of data have revealed insight into the positive/neutral perceptions of

Lethbridge as a place from the perspective of residents, the primary purpose of this research is to

present findings as they relate to articulating the validity of information gathering process

through organic social media dialogue as a way to understand place. Triangulation, or the

gathering and comparing of data from different sources, provides a means by which to cross-

check and corroborate evidence. In this case, the sources included different participants as well

as content style noting that with qualitative studies it is often likely that different kinds of data

will yield different interpretations (Rudestam, 2007). Using the concept maps from both the

Twitter and Interview analysis, the following diagram shows the thought relationship that exists

between the data sets.

Figure 5: Twitter/Interview Results Comparison

Twitter Results   Interview Results
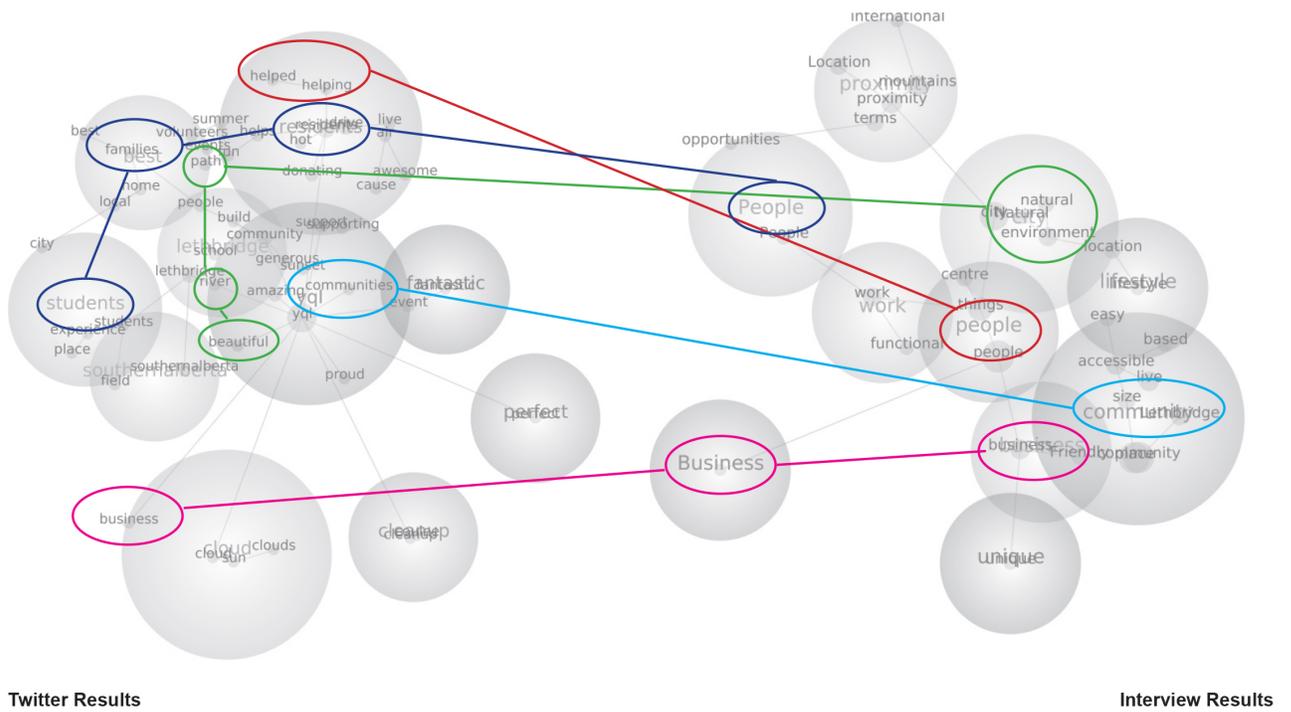
Based on the above diagram, the following common concepts have been identified:

Twitter	Interviews
Communities	Communities
Business	Business
Beautiful, River, Path	Natural Environment
Students, Residents, Families	People
Helping, Helpful	People (Supportive)

Table 3: Common Concepts

When comparing the relatively new method of social media content analysis with the more traditional method of interview content analysis, the commonalities demonstrate the value and perhaps validity of Twitter conversation as it relates to conceptualizing a place-brand foundation. The similarities and variances that exist between them also speak to the complexities associated with developing a shared understanding of place.

For example, within the combined definition of communities there exists an additional 21 key words that are at least 20% likely to occur with the concept of community. These results also show that on-line conversations, and in this case Twitter content, does provide value in terms of gathering a broad understanding of brand attribute concepts from user-generated content. However, there remains a need to delve deeper into uncovering the meaning behind each concept.

Twitter is one of many social media channels and does have its own set of rules, users and information style. The aggregate of information from the Twitter content analysis should be considered a manifestation of place-brand attributes specific to this user group. Similar to a study conducted by Andehn et al (2014), it can be suggested that Twitter is highly relevant in the context of understanding place brands due in part to the high temporal resolution in which user-generated content can be tracked and analyzed.

Analysis

The results of this analysis also provide insight into the four questions that guided the exploration of this research:

1) How has the concept of brand shifted from product based to place based?

2) What role does brand-equity play in relation to place?

3) What role does the community play in brand development and dissemination?

4) How does an organic approach to place-brand development result in the sustainability of both the brand and the community?

5) How does social media provide rich content by which to understand the existing identity of a community?

Q1. Technology and meaningful place-brand development

Technology has changed the way we communicate. Social media has changed the nature of control over brands. The quality and quantity of available data has changed the process by which meaningful brands can and should be developed. When comparing the concept maps, it is clear that the broad range of concepts that emerged is likely reflective of the diversity of those engaged in social conversation. The availability and ease of access to large data sets, in a real-time environment supports the premise that a technology based approach adds value to place-brand development.

Through this study, technology as an analysis tool, also adds value to creating a cursory understanding of the place-brand meaning of Lethbridge. While there are several software tools that can help with content analysis, for the purpose of this study, Leximancer was used because of its ability to analyze the main concepts contained within the text and their relative importance; the strengths of links between concepts (how often they co-occur); and the similarities in the

context in which they occur.

While there is a certain level of ease attached to the automation of the process, it also allows for necessary customization which was essential to successfully removing non-relevant words that were part of the Twitter data set simply by the nature of Twitter semiotics.

Q2. Twitter content and community identity

A community brand is a composite of many parts so it is reasonable to extend this thinking towards gathering information in a co-created way from multiple stakeholders. Looking at Baker's 7A Destination Branding Model as highlighted through the literature review, place-brand development is only possible when stakeholder sentiment is represented. The large and broad representation of stakeholder opinion that can be gathered on Twitter can be considered helpful in Step 1 (Assessment and Audit) and Step 2 (Analysis and Advantage) of the brand development process. Baker (2007) suggests that it is the conflicting voices of different stakeholder groups that contribute to the place brand, arguably adopting a brand-as-dialogue approach.

This poses an interesting juxtaposition when considering the organic and iterative nature of social media content. In this case, Tweets were gathered based on user location and a specified timeframe, resulting in unsolicited commentary on a broad range of topics. Considering the news and events orientation/focus of this social media platform, it is probable that much of the dialogue is generated based on real-time events, situations and state of the community. While this does not necessarily create a specific concern in relation to validity, it also does not illicit specific engagement on defining community brand. With the lens of socioculturalism in mind, there could be benefit in seeking specific feedback on Twitter in relation to brand development so that the co-creation of brand identification could be more purposeful and less driven by time

and circumstance.

Q3. Online vs. in-person conversation

The interaction between brands and stakeholders involves two-way dialogue, environmental influences and culture. This interaction brings multiple perspectives and participants to the process of creating, replicating, and re-creating brand meanings. This way of interacting with a variety of stakeholders and cultural influences has been referred to as a 'multilogue' by Berthon, Holbrook, Hulbert, & Pitt (2007, as cited in Aitken and Campelo (2011). Difference in perceptions of the attributes and culture of a place impact resident perceptions of brand and the way in which they choose to co-create it. "The influence of culture is not a dualistic process but one that is open-ended and comprises manifold and multiple interactions," (Berthon et al., as cited in Aitken and Cameplo, 2011, p. 914).

The comparative results show the importance of taking a multilogue approach to brand development by engaging multiple stakeholders through multiple mediums. While commonalities emerged through the comparative, the unique attributes that exist may be in part due to the nature of the information-gathering tool. Specific questions, as in the case of interviews, elicited specific responses which help to define the brand-meaning of Lethbridge through deep, rich answers that extend beyond the positive and neutral space. The interview results as a conceptual diagram for negative attributes (Appendix C) and desired future attributes (Appendix D), are also relevant to understanding and building the meaning of a place-brand. However, the nature of twitter content and parameters around inclusion (Lethbridge residents) did not lend itself to further comparison in relation to this information. Therefore a combination of social or Twitter content combined with traditional or face-to-face conversation is important to obtaining a more robust and inclusive brand story.

The conversational approach also ensures that the brand story is being created from the inside out rather than being applied to the community for the purpose of marketing.

Q4. Community application

When a country or a place is named, several associated concepts are invoked in individuals' minds (Anholt, 2007). A place brand is the sum of everyone's perceptions and their interactions within their information resource network. With a range of information networks and mediums accessible, it is reasonable to suggest that a multi-medium method to information gathering is perhaps the only way to understand the multifaceted meaning of a place.

In terms of access to information, the results of this Twitter analysis have shown social media to be valuable source to obtaining a cursory understanding of the values and perceptions residents have of their place. The real-time nature of social dialogues lends itself well to the constant flux of cultural perceptions and interactions. A social medium analysis proved to be a cost and time effective way for a community to initiate brand understanding, building and perhaps sustainability within a co-created lens of brand understanding.

With increased understanding on the role of stakeholders in the co-creation process, communities should look at social media data acquisition as a unique opportunity to employ residents in the innovation and brand-building processes.

Conclusion

This study set out to examine the authenticity of online sentiment as explored through social media dialogue to determine: (1) how on-line conversations can be used to define a sense of place for communities; and (2) if this dialogue contributes towards the development of an authentic, sustainable place-brand.

The methodology focused on answering the central research question by providing analysis on a sub-set of four related questions in order to understand the complex process of place-identity construction through authentic citizen sentiment. It is apparent that using a values-base that is drawn from the whole stakeholder community is the way to provide a realistic and solid starting point for brand development. Based on the emergent concepts of themes from Twitter content as well as the comparative to in-person interviews, it can be suggested that social media dialogue is effective at building an authentic understanding for place-brand development. It can be a valuable tool for practitioners to capture and articulate many different perceived characteristics about the place and provide an avenue for reflecting on cultural understanding.

Captured organically, the information serves to provide a snapshot over time which is helpful, but also holds limitations in terms of gaining a deep understanding. The organic approach used through Twitter did so in a way as to not impose any definition or structure on the conversation. This research studies how the use of social media, in this case Twitter, provided data from which to identify an organic definition of the place-brand by the community. The use of online tools for the purpose of place-branding development might also benefit from employing directed dialogue techniques through social media to ask specific questions in order to gather direct attributes about a place. I would suggest that a second stage of place-branding development, which involves setting the conditions of dialogue but is based in the organic definitions identified

through first-stage analysis, could guide thematic conversation that is still authentic in nature. This shift in focus may result in a deeper body of content by which to analyze and understand a community's definition of its brand.

While the research question and methodology was focused on the process of effective place-brand development, the information gathered can serve as the foundation for a baseline understanding of the place-brand attributes of Lethbridge, as defined through the co-creation process. As a marketing professional, and within the context of deep familiarity with the content of both the Twitter analysis and interview conversations, the high-level themes that emerge seem well aligned with actual attributes intrinsic to the community of Lethbridge.

1. The idea of **community** as it pertains to living in Lethbridge and the connectedness that stems from its smaller size is prevalent in conversation, and perhaps something that is embraced, but overlooked as an important attribute since its woven into the fabric of daily life.

2. **Business** from the perspective of diversity and entrepreneurialism is often cited as a strength of Lethbridge, so seeing it emerge as a common concept validated some preconceived understanding of the city. Opportunities for success, a business-friendly environment and collaboration opportunities were also highlighted.

3. The **natural environment** is one of the things that is often unknown to people outside of the community but certainly a valued characteristic as identified. Beautiful landscapes, coulees, river bottom, trails, recreation opportunities and open skies were all descriptors used in this category.

4. **People**, although a rather generic statement, is important to consider since the very concept of place-brand development is directly linked to the community identity created by the

people who live and reflect the experience. With students representing more than 1 in 10 people it can be argued that this composition uniquely shapes the population. Often described as a 'family-friendly' community or a great place to raise a family, this is a significant influencer on the people who are drawn to Lethbridge and the attributes that perhaps make people attach to the place.

5. **Helpful and supportive** is again linked to people. It is also loosely linked to attributes that people identify with. As a high-level concept it is vague, however, further exploration to unpack this concept would likely result in more robust understanding.

While this research focused on understanding the process of place-brand using positive or neutral content as the basis of comparison, additional research into how this can be used to identity negative attributes as well as aspirational attributes would be valuable. A true-community place-brand should be capable of embracing the current state, both positive and negative, as well as the iterative nature of the consumer experience and the role that plays in shaping a vision for the future.

Moving forward, the results from this research including the balance of the interview results which identified negative attributes (Appendix C) and desired future attributes (Appendix D), will inform a place-branding process in Lethbridge that will engage the community as co-creators of its own brand to further define the attributes that reflect the lived experience and the future vision for the city. This will be conducted through a range of tactics, including digital media, in an effort to understand the brand as the outcome of a socially constructed and co-created process thereby using best practices drawn from this study to increase the probability of a sustainable brand and positive outcome.

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Appendix A - University of Alberta Participant Consent Form

Project Title: Place-Branding in Lethbridge

Investigator/researcher:
Jaylene Ulmer
403-393-4454
julmer@ualberta.ca

Supervisor:
Dr. Rob McMahon
Assistant Professor, Masters of Arts in Communication and Technology, University of Alberta
780-248-1110
rdmcmaho@ualberta.ca

Researcher will comply with the University of Alberta Standards for the Protection of Human Research Participants http://www.uofaweb.ualberta.ca/gfcpolicymanual/policymanualsection66.cfm

Purpose of the Study
This study is intended to provide insight into effective place-brand development and the opportunity for municipalities to employ consumers in their innovation and brand-building process. Through interview-based research, this study should reveal common themes that represent the way in which Lethbridge is authentically understood as a place. The interview data that is gathered will be anonymized and compared against social media sentiment to determine if social conversations reflect a similar understanding of place.

The research will be used to complete the requirements for the Masters of Arts in Communication and Technology degree at the University of Alberta for Jaylene Ulmer.

Methods
To capture rich information, interviews with 10 key members of the Lethbridge community will take place as part of the data gathering process. Each interview will take approximately 30 minutes and will be conducted at the tecconnect centre for entrepreneurship and innovation. Interviews will be scheduled at a mutually agreed upon time between May 23 and June 27, 2016. Jaylene Ulmer will be conducting these one-on-one interviews and capturing answers via audio recording and notes. Interview participants will be asked questions related to individual understanding of the experience of living in Lethbridge and the attributes that are unique to the city.

Stakeholders will be selected from a diverse range of businesses and organizations that have in the past, expressed interest in collectively developing a Lethbridge-based brand. Interview participants will be selected through purposeful sampling to maximize the opportunity to collect rich and meaningful data.

Confidentiality
All information collected and included in the written paper will appear as aggregated results and will not be in any way attributed to an individual. Data will be kept in a secure place for a minimum of five years following the completion of the research project, and when appropriate, will be destroyed in a way that ensures privacy and confidentiality. No information will be released until after all course grades have been issued.

Other Uses
Aside from myself, the project will be viewed by my supervisor, the ethics committee, and will be published on the Education and Research Archive on The University of Alberta Libraries Website. This

will also be viewed by the Economic Development Lethbridge CEO and has potential to be published in related academic journals and used as the basis for industry-related presentations.

Withdrawal From Study
You have the right to not participate. You are free to withdraw from the research study at any time without any adverse consequences simply by contacting Jaylene Ulmer and expressing this decision in written form (julmer@ualberta.ca). You also have the right to opt out without penalty and to have any collected data withdrawn and not included in the study (prior to the start of data analysis on June 4, 2016).

Benefits/Risks
Based on the selection criteria for interview candidates, participants will already have interest in taking part in discussion around the attributes that are inherently the brand of Lethbridge. Perceived benefits may come from knowing you have been part of a research project that may ultimately inform the foundation for an actual brand development project in Lethbridge. It has been identified that this study is without risk to participants since confidentiality will be emphasized and upheld in this research process.

Questions?
If you have questions, concerns, or complaints please contact:
Researcher: Jaylene Ulmer, julmer@ualberta.ca or 403-393-4454
Supervisor: Dr. Rob McMahon, rdmcmaho@ualberta.ca or 780-248-1110

Ethics Approval Statement
The plan for this study has been reviewed for its adherence to ethical guidelines by a Research Ethics Board at the University of Alberta. For questions regarding participant rights and ethical conduct of research, contact the Research Ethics Office at (780) 492-2615.

Participant Informed Consent
I acknowledge that the research procedures have been explained to me, and that any questions I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction. I understand that audio of the interview will be recorded. In addition, I know that I may contact the person designated on his form, if I have further questions, either now, or in the future. I have been assured that the personal records relating to this study will be kept anonymous. I understand that I am free to withdraw from this study at any time and I will not be asked to provide a reason.

_____
DATE

_____
PRINTED NAME OF PARTICIPANT   PRINTED NAME OF INVESTIGATOR

_____
SIGNATURE OF PARTICIPANT   SIGNATURE OF INVESTIGATOR

Please indicate if you would like a copy of the research report after final grades have been assigned:
 □YES   NO

Please indicate your consent to the collection of your name, telephone number and email address to ensure contact information is accurate for any required follow-up. This information will be destroyed upon researcher completion of this project (August 2016).
   YES   NO

Appendix B – Interview Questions

1. Thinking of the positives, what are the first three words that you would use to define Lethbridge?

    a. Can you elaborate a bit more on each of those themes by providing an example or rationale for this choice?

2. Thinking of the negatives what are the first three words that you would use to define Lethbridge?

    a. Can you elaborate a bit more on each of those themes by providing an example or rationale for this choice?

3. What would you say are the top attributes that make Lethbridge unique?

4. What would you say others say about Lethbridge?

5. What would you say are the biggest 'myths' that we as a community hold on to?

6. If you look to the future (2025), would you define Lethbridge differently?

    a. If yes, what does that look like?

7. What makes you proud to live in Lethbridge?

Appendix C – Interview Results based on Negative Attributes
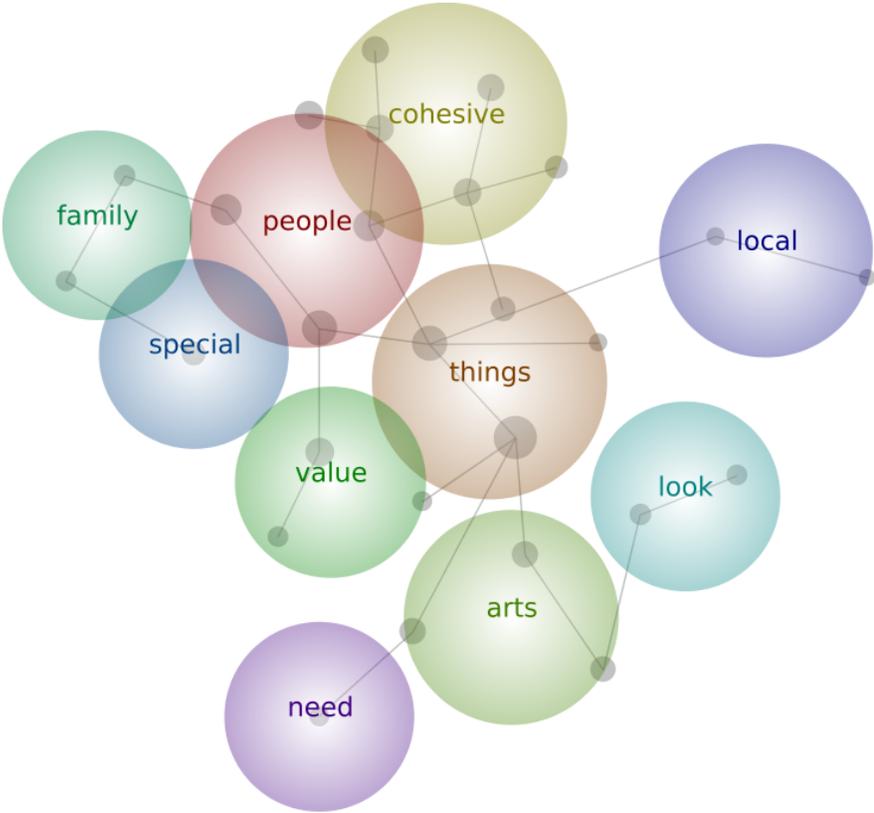
Appendix D – Interview Results based on Future Attributes

Figures

Tables