Stereotypical versus experiential destination branding: the case of Milan city

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Abstract

In the last decades several contributes have tried to provide theoretical solutions and models for measuring the value of a place, a destination, a city. Specifically, some of them have explored the role of different factors and different stakeholders play in the place branding evaluation and perception process. However, no conclusive findings are documented and several aspects have needed to be investigated. In order to extend the understanding of city branding, this study focuses on the perceived image of Milan and performs a gap analysis by exploring specific factors and specific types of stakeholders. Based on target's provenance and degree of knowledge of city, stereotypical and experiential perceptions of Milan are measured with respect to nine main city attributes as summarized by literature background and compared to the brand values of some important European cities. The findings highlight a mismatch between the stereotypical and experiential perception at different levels and provide the framework to inspire more effective marketing policies for the improvement of city's image.

Keywords Place and city branding, destination management, stereotypical and experiential perception, gap analysis

Introduction

In the last decades, destination management and place marketing have constantly increased focus on establishing the city as a brand to attract qualified target audience and to differentiate one place from another (Braun, 2012). Recently, the branding of places (and cities in particular) has gained popularity among policy makers (Kavaratzis, 2008). In order to achieve such goals, place marketers have highlighted the need to adopt marketing techniques in order to identify competitors, analyse the impact of the city brand and the positioning of city image (Anholt, 2007; Zenker, 2011a). Zenker et al. (2013) argued a better understanding of the competitive environment of cities and a

deeper analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of cities in comparison to the relevant competitors as critical conditions of an effective branding strategy.

The analysis of Milan's destination positioning consists of a benchmarking with some competing European destinations. De Carlo et al. (2009) provided a useful cognitive basis upon which to formulate a strategy of tourist development that links the significant investments planned for Expo 2015 with the re-launching and sustainable growth of the city attractiveness in the medium-long term. However, the improvement of city image and brand communication are crucial not only in order to attract tourists but also potential citizens, qualified target groups of people (such as high-educated students, skilled workers, immigrant entrepreneurs), and to attract foreign investments (De Noni et al., 2014). In a national perspective, Milan has a successful and attractive image because it is usually considered the most dynamic Italian economic centre and an important national hub, capable to offer job and student opportunities, social and health services and cultural events. Conversely, Milan has not been enough effective to develop and spread the same strong image at international level.

The main aims of this study are to evaluate the positioning of Milan respect to its main European competitors and to explore the gap between stereotypical and experiential perception of Milan at a national and global level. We used the degree of Milan's knowledge by Italian and foreign people as discriminant factor to define the stereotypical (low level of knowledge) and experiential (high level of knowledge) perception. The analysis is led on the main attributes affecting the urban quality of life as summarized from literature background. We suppose differences in perception are related to the degree of knowledge of a place, and local communication strategies are likely more effective to national than global level. We consider the findings of this study useful in order to give practical implications for local and global place marketing and management.

The research study involved a target sample (N= 1600) of European citizens and a local sample (N= 1000) of Italian citizens, in order to evaluate Milan's national and global perception and image. Two sub-sets based on the knowledge degree of the city of Milan are further investigated respectively for the Italian and European samples in order to compare stereotypical and experiential perception. A 10-points Likert scale questionnaire was employed to evaluate a set of city attributes likely to affecting urban image and perception.

The findings are particularly relevant because Milan has been expected to enhance its urban planning to exploit international relevance and competitiveness based on Expo 2015. The analysis suggests that, firstly, the degree of knowledge affects the city's image. It means that experiential perception reaches higher scores respect to the stereotypical one and this is valid for both local and global levels. Secondly, the Italian (local) sample has a more positive perception of Milan rather

than the European (global) sample. This trend is valid for both experiential and stereotypical perceptions. Finally, Milan's global perception shows several negative gaps with respect to other European cities, especially in the the quality of healthcare, the quality of education, the level of safety and the quality of social services.

The research paper is organized as follows. In the first section a literature review is presented in order to highlight the increasing importance of place marketing and branding to develop city competitiveness and attractiveness. The second section focuses on city's attributes influencing city brand attitude. In the third section, research structure and empirical methodology are described. Then, a gap analysis is applied in order to compare and evaluate local and global, stereotypical and experiential perception of Milan's brand image. Finally, we discuss results, practical implications for place marketers and future researches.

Literature background

The relevance of place marketing and place branding is stressed by the growing body of practice and research around the topic which has been developed in the last decades (Hanna and Rowley, 2010; Gertner, 2011). Several authors and researchers have remarked the increasing interest for branding strategies applied on places and locations as related to the growing competitiveness between places (Kavaratzis and Ashwort, 2005; Kavatatzis, 2009; Anholt, 2007) and the consciousness about the capability of a place to promote a unique identity and be branded like a product (Morgan and Pritchard, 2004; Boisen et al., 2011; Herget et al., 2015). Others perspectives have focused on the issue of multiple identities perception as related to different targeting and the conflicting interests of stakeholders (Merrilees et al., 2009; Cleave and Arku, 2014) that point out to differently evaluate place features and attributes (Merrilees et al., 2009; Darchen and Tremblay, 2010). Finally, some studies have explored the perception and satisfaction of as based on personal and introspective experience and the role of emotional links the place is able to create with consumers (Bobovnický, 2011; Barnes et al., 2014).

This study integrates

Since the modern cities are inclined to develop similar features, city branding strategy requires to emphasize the uniqueness of a place and enhance the experience of individuals in order to distinguish one place from each other and improve the brand positioning in comparison to other competitors (Morgan et al., 2002; Zali et al., 2014).

An important key to a competitive distinction, which can increase the power of attractiveness, is the perceived quality into the processes of city destination selection (Bobovnický, 2011), that is usually the result of a collection of good experiences.

City authorities and place markers play a crucial role for an effective and successful implementation of city branding. Following the opinion of Barnes et al. (2014), who repute the sensorial side of the experiential destination branding as a strong influencer of the final outcome, marketers have to pay particular attention on this experiential aspect. They also conceive the destinations as unique entities with recognisable characteristics which can be developed by branding policies.

Although this point is definitely current and rich of hints that have to be taken in consideration, our research must explore multidimensional factors that touch several core values and criteria: *"[…] the common use of simple survey-based city ranking provide only limited information for an effective place brand management"* (Zenker et al., 2013, p. 133).

Continuous analysis of the city's identity and core values in order to verify congruence with what can be experienced by city residents and visitors is essential control procedure in branding development processes.

A relevant difference is often also between stereotypical and experiential perception and between local and global image. Studies on city branding typically measure the quality of urban life by investigating the satisfaction level based on the personal and introspective experience, as supported by Bobovnický (2011), who believes that gathering the divergence between several experiential feedbacks discrepancy gives an orientation about the real quality level, correlated to people's degree of satisfaction: *"Discrepancy (positive or negative) between expectations and perceived quality leads either to dissatisfaction (negative discrepancy), or neutral position (slightly positive discrepancy) or even to high satisfaction (significant positive discrepancy)"* (Bobovnický, 2011, p. 86). Therefore, they typically involve resident citizens or visitors level of city knowledge in order to collect data on qualitative perception of urban image and attributes (Merillees et al., 2009; Zenker et al., 2013; Santos et al., 2007; De Carlo et al., 2009). However, brand communication involves both, stereotypical and experiential perceptions of city. Similarly, Braun et al. (2003) refer them as 'current' and 'potential' visitors.

The place image media and word-of-mouth produce in the time influences the perception of those who has not personal experience. About this standpoint, Barnes et al. (2014) develop their idea that experiential and stereotypical impressions are strictly connected and influence each other: the projected identity of a place brand image motivates the selection into destination decision. After this, a combination of sensorial, affective, behavioural and intellectual experience will condition the

visitor satisfaction, intention to revisit the location, and even recommendation about it to other visitors who don't know that location.

Avraham & Ketter (2013) discuss about two opposite media strategies implemented to improve prolonged negative images, which are comprehensive of both experiential and stereotypical impressions about city image: *"Strategies that follow the cosmetic approach focus on restoration of the negative image, without changing the reality that caused the image problem. In contrast, strategies that follow the strategic approach take comprehensive action, basing the new campaign on substantial changes in the destination's reality, among other factors"* (Avraham & Ketter, 2013, pag.146). We can obtain as a deduction that the stereotypical aspect is fulfilled by the conscious construction around the brand image that captures the first scenery into people's mind (especially the non-understanding of a place), while the experiential one is fed by the practical policies and operations.

In this study we distinguish between stereotypical and experiential perception of urban brand and image at national and international level in order to assess the differences among different degrees of knowledge of cities.

Since stereotypical image perception might affect the choice to visit a place, collecting good experiential perception could be misleading for place marketers and policy makers.

The destination attitude to attract visitors, tourists more than workers or entrepreneurs (who are often forced to move for job), preliminary depends on global stereotypical perception of the city.

Again, Avraham & Ketter (2013) define stereotypes as labels which are able to transform a location in a representative symbol of the simplified attitude or belief. The main point is that these labels, becoming the iconic feature of a place, are very hard to change: the core image which is transmitted conserves the attributes primarily given. They call this place image "closed", because of its inelastic enrichment of new values.

Different people can attribute diverse associations to the same place, but the specific relations can be so shared and known that they become 'collective' perceptions, which are enforced over time (Boisen et al. 2011). Stereotypes, whether they are positive or negative, true or untrue, influence our behaviour towards places, people and products; the negative ones are strongly capable to preclude or shape physical experiences and make difficult to measure real perceptions and potential incongruences.

Therefore, international investigation involving citizens of twelve European cities is preliminary applied to measure the gap between stereotypical and experiential global perception of Milan image. Similarly, an Italian sample, is explored to respectively measure stereotypical and experiential local perception. Data are used to compare national and global Milan's brand

reputation in order to identify urban strengths and weaknesses of brand communication strategy. Both investigations are led on the main attributes affecting the urban quality of life as summarized from literature background in the following section.

Even though literature review suggests a number of factors, directly or indirectly, able to influence the quality of life in the urban centre, it's important to remark that city branding collects its power and its substantiality from several shades that can be not strictly related to the urban environment, but that can influence the intentions to move, like for example the degree of satisfaction experienced on international public transports, which are capable to condition the decision-making process of a destination (Delaplace et al. 2014). Another aspect which could be explained is the current role of public relations, media and ITC into place branding and, especially, into the reconstruction or enforcement of a city (topic known as "Smart Cities").

City's attributes influencing destination branding

Based on the stakeholder perspective (XXX), the development of a place brand identity needs to support a destination experience which depends on attributes, benefits, values and personality which place is able to create (Hanna & Rowley, 2008). According the same perspective, literature review suggests a number of economic, touristic and social studies which differently explore the attributes influencing the place image perception of people.

One of the most used classification comes from Anholt's City Brand Index (CBI), which prevents six major tangible and intangible factors (presence, place, potential, pulse, people and prerequisites) and indicates how a city is perceived and how city branding can be evaluated (Anholt, 2006). In their study, Merrilees et al. (2009) provide a multidimensional definition of city's image value based on nature, business, shopping, brand reputation, transport, cultural activities, social bonding and combine health care, educational facilities, public transport, health needs of older, energy supplies, trust local government and residential services within government services. Garcia et al. (2012) focus on socio-economic infrastructures, environment and safety, natural and cultural resources, pleasant atmosphere and overall image. More recently, Zenker et al. (2013) define the Citizen Satisfaction Index (CSI) which measures city perception by combining factors in four macro-areas as urbanity and diversity, nature and recreation, job opportunities, and cost-efficiency.

A perspective more oriented to the quality of life is reflected in several policies implementing the Healthy Urban Planning. This strategy typically embraces different aspects related to city's development: urban design (human habitations, promotion of good quality housing), health education, environmental policies (healthy local food and good quality water, management of noise

and air pollution, protect landscapes and mineral resources), safety and security policies and social services (improvement of equity and social capital, facilitations to job opportunities).

In this perspective, Santos et al. (2007) explore the quality of life by measuring health quality (public and private hospitals, health centres, nursing stations), education quality (educational facilities, kindergartens, schools, higher education facilities), social work services (day nurseries, homes for the elderly, recreational centres, day centres, domiciliary service), urban safety (crime, urban insecurity), urbanism (occupation density, urban and architectonic quality), housing (purchase and leasing, housing quality and condition), environment (green spaces, urban cleanliness, level of pollution), mobility (traffic, public transportation), culture (cultural facilities, cultural recreation), sport and leisure (recreational and leisure spaces, sports facilities), trade and services to the population, poverty and exclusion, social and civic behaviour. Similarly, Darchen and Tremblay (2010), focusing on city attractiveness of talents, explore quality of the urban and natural environment, the variety of restaurants, quality of work, quality of life, level of salary and level of tolerance.

Differently, Lopez, Navarro & Peña (2014) build an index looking at development of the intellectual capital. They underline the importance of knowledge into the growth of a city, investigating aspects like infrastructures, governance and policies, urban development, human dimension (living, social, economic, business condition) and environmental sustainability.

Focused on tourism, Beerli & Martin (2004) classified factors influencing the image assessments into nine dimensions such as natural resources, general infrastructure, tourist infrastructure, touristic leisure and recreation culture, history and art political and economic factors, natural environment, social environment and atmosphere of the place. Anholt (2006) claims tourism promotion is likely the loudest voice in branding the cities as well as people's first-hand experience of visiting the country as tourists or business travellers. De Carlo et al. (2009), on the one hand, suggest city's positioning is strongly influenced by the business and trade fair activities, and on the other hand, stress the role of tourism industry and propose a tourism promotion able to exploit cultural resources of the city. Herget et al. (2015) add their investigations about the economic impact on city branding, focusing on the touristic side. They support that a relationship between brand value and price of services is existing, and in their study they concentrate on average prices of hotels as conditioning factors of a country brand, comparing two different indices. The result is that the current relationship is bi-directional, so the two variants impact on each other's image. Parahiyanti & Hussein (2015) have deepened the role of tourism power into the brand equity as affected by event marketing. According the authors, *'event is an activity that could support increasing the branding of a location, such as a city, a province or a country'* (pag. 74). In their case study, a

famous social event is investigated as able to boost up destination branding, because of high reactiveness of people to healthiness, environmental and public topics.

Specifically, Carrera & Lunt (2010) highlight the emergence of medical tourism in the European context. They suggest the excellence of the health care system, the ability and reputation of medical staff, the opportunity of specialized surgeries are playing an increasing crucial role in explaining city brand attractiveness. Barton & Grant (2013), focusing on the European context, strongly believe that healthcare is the first value to pay attention on, even because it's strictly implicated with a wide range of other influencing factors.

Finally, since the marketing literature does not show consensus relative to the importance of city attributes, Table 1 represents our attempt to summarize the factors to be investigated in this study.

Factors	Items' definition	Reference
Quality of Healthcare (HEA)	Excellence of healthcare facilities; Specialist surgical procedures; Urban distribution	Carrera & Lunt (2010), Merrilees et al. (2009), Santos et al. (2007), Zhang & Zhao (2009), Barton & Grant (2011)
Quality of Social services (SOC)	Youth unemployment policies; Equal opportunities for men and women; Access to social services and facilities for children, elderly, handicapped, poor families	Zenker et al (2013), Merrilees et al. (2009), Santos et al. (2007), Parahiyanti & Hussein (2015)
Quality of Education (EDU)	Training centres and courses for young people; Higher education facilities; Specialized human capital	Santos et al. (2007), Zhang & Zhao (2009), Darchen & Tremblay (2010), Anholt (2006), Trueman et al. (2008), Lopez et al. (2014)
Level of Safety (SAFE)	Safety of urban cycling routes; Safety of overnight public transport; Presence of policemen	Santos et al. (2007), Zhang & Zhao (2009), Darchen & Tremblay (2010), Trueman et al. (2008), Beerlin & Martin (2004)
Quality of Environment (ENV)	Number and size of green areas; Effective and ecological management of municipal waste; Policies to reduce noise and air pollution	Merrilees et al. (2009), Santos et al. (2007), Zhang & Zhao (2009), Darchen & Tremblay (2010), Beerlin & Martin (2004)
Quality of Culture (CUL)	Multiple events promoting cultural spreading; Adequate cultural facilities (theatres, museums, monuments, etc.); Urban ethnic events supporting multiculturalism	Merrilees et al. (2009), Santos et al. (2007), Zenker et al (2013), Zhang & Zhao (2009), Anholt (2006), Parahiyanti & Hussein (2015), Kladou & Kehagias (2011)
Level of touristic capacity (TOUR)	Number and relevance of urban attractions; Strategic position to reach points of interest; Value for money of hotels	De Carlo et al. (2009), Anholt (2006), Beerlin & Martin (2004), Parahiyanti & Hussein (2015), Herget et al. (2015), Tanguay et al. (2013)
Level of Economic development (ECON)	Labour mobility and job opportunities; Incentives for start-up; Upgrading of dismissed urban areas	Merrilees et al. (2009), Santos et al. (2007), Zenker et al (2013), Darchen & Tremblay (2010), Beerlin & Martin (2004)

Level of Internationalization (INT)	Level of international transport connections; Degree of international reputation; Centre of international events	Santos et al. (2007), Zhang & Zhao (2009), Delaplace et al. (2014)

Table 1: Attributes influencing place branding (source: our elaboration)

Research design

Destination experience is defined by some influencing city attributes which create its value. These quantifiable features try to give an objective and analytical shape to the branding process, in order to construct reference tools easy to measure, compare and discuss.

Brand experience and reputation include emotional, cognitive, sensorial and behavioural components into the decision-making process of touristic visitors and people who have intention to move definitely in another city (Barnes et al. 2014). We're clearly talking about a more subjective and personal profile of the same practice: values, perceptions and, in a special way, reactions come from a non-quantifiable source, which is extremely relevant, but complex to prevent and to handle.

Since destination branding depends also on the selected reference audience, establishing which sample composition and which point of view could help getting a reliable outcome.

According to the aim of this study to explore the whole view about Milan's brand image perception under the stereotypical and experiential frame, two different criteria have been chosen: the first regards people's provenance, classified in national and international; the second focuses on the degree of knowledge of Milan, which determines the kind of city image's perception: stereotypical (low degree of knowledge) and experiential (high degree of knowledge). Particularly, this last criterion gives a stimulating hint about how to get the real efficiency of Milan's destination branding strategies and how to measure urban's strengths and weaknesses: as well as being an original point of view to observe the background dynamics. It helps to gain an analytic evaluation obtained by comparison of tangible and intangible elements. This confrontation embodies the originality of this research, because it holds new solutions about the insight of a brand destination, thanks to the detected diversities.

Starting from this background, we can obtain a matrix composed by four main categories, as showed in the following illustration:
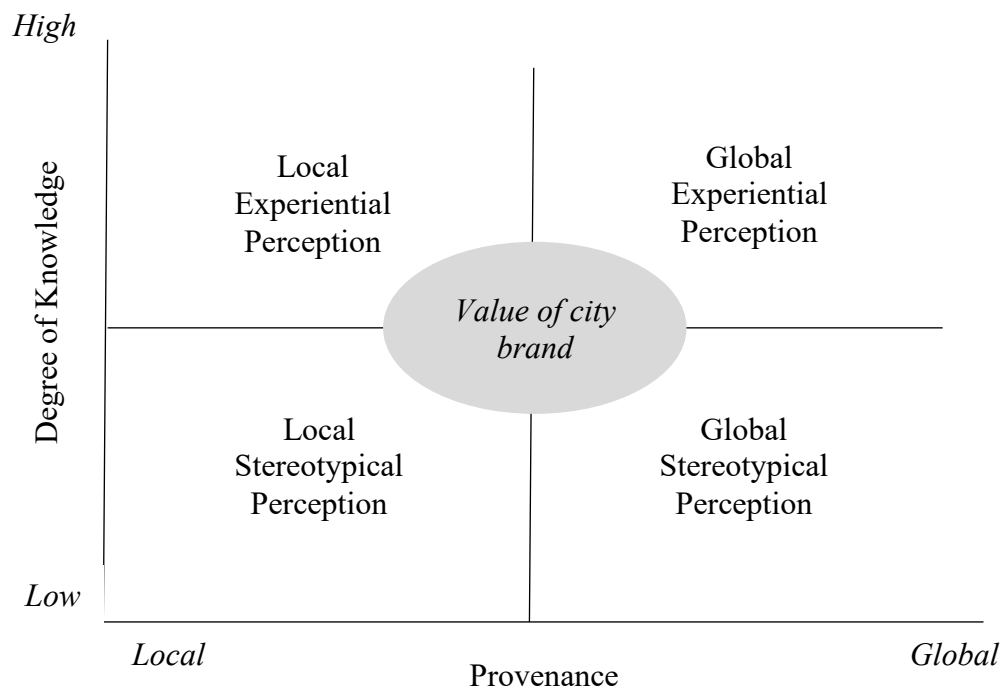
High

Degree of Knowledge

Local
Experiential
Perception

Global
Experiential
Perception

Value of city brand

Local
Stereotypical
Perception

Global
Stereotypical
Perception

Low

Local

Global

Provenance

Figure 1: Matrix of the study sample (source: our elaboration)

The sample target is differentiated firstly between national citizens (Italians) and foreign citizens (in particular, we refer to some European countries).

These two clusters are further subdivided under the common filter of the degree of city knowledge.

Methodology

This research study is centred on the destination branding's perception using a comparison between stereotypes and experiences from a local and a, international level. It is focused on Milan, the most active and vibrant metropolitan city of Italy. Milan counts more than one million of inhabitants, as it results the second most populated Italian city, and it continuously attracts new people. It is the focal centre of Italian economy, finance and social, cultural, educational and innovative context. Fashion and design find their highest expression in this urban location, portraying its essence at a largely recognizable level.

The recent Universal Exposition (Milan Expo 2015) has been accommodated for six months in a depressed zone into the northern boundary of Milan, which has been retrained and especially planned for this occurrence: not only the lands have been transformed, but all the connections and the referring strategic places have changed. Italian and, especially, Milan's inhabitants greeted it with large expectations for the increasing of the city's brand image. Expo 2015 has obviously influenced a lot of other plans to restructure and better introduce the city image.

The other cities involved into this comparison have been chosen among the most relevant European countries into the destination branding landscape (see Table 2).

German cities (Berlin, Munich and Frankfurt) have been selected as a recognized icon of high efficiency, excellence, strong economic health and transparency.

English cities (London, Manchester and Liverpool) represent a focal destination for development and innovation: people can find numerous job opportunities and an acknowledged prestige in the university system.

French cities (Paris, Lyon and Bordeaux) conserve an influencing political role and exemplar policies acting, without losing attractiveness for a large touristic audience thanks to its suggesting landscapes, traditional towns and villages and its rich history.

Finally, Spanish cities (Madrid, Barcelona and Valencia) have strong traditions, a characteristic culture, an attractive lifestyle and beautiful sceneries which catches the global attention.

Countries	Cities	Freq.	% Freq.
Spain	Madrid	30	1,9
Tot. 400	Barcelona	238	14,9
	Valencia	132	8,2
France	Paris	107	6,7
Tot. 400	Lyon	155	9,7
	Bordeaux	138	8,6
United Kingdom	London	226	14,1
Tot. 400	Manchester	137	8,6
	Liverpool	37	2,3
Germany	Berlin	254	15,9
Tot. 401	Munich	91	5,7
	Frankfurt	56	3,5

Table 2: Composition of European sample's provenance (source: our elaboration)

The data collection was operationalized through the CATI method in 2012 (Computer Assisted Telephone Interviewing) using an external company specialized in market research at European level.

Interviewed subjects were asked 'how important are the following city attributes (see Table 1) for your place satisfaction and your choice of a place to live?' as suggested in Zenker et al. (2013b). The questionnaire items were defined by a pool of territorial marketing and destination management experts, involving university and local administrative institutions. Moreover, the questionnaire was translated in the five languages involved in the research (Italian, English, French, Spanish and German) to enhance the accuracy of the results. Even though the items are formulated to be as reasonable and rational as possible, some misunderstandings by interview subjects still might have

occurred. Multi-item scales are used and measured by 10-point Likert scales (ranging from 1=strongly disagree to 10=strongly agree). The sample size was fixed at 1107 interviewed subjects for the Italian group and at 1601for the European group in order to satisfy statistical significance requirements. Similar studies have involved similar (Zenker et al., 2013) or smaller samples (Merrilles et al., 2009; Zhang & Zhao, 2009, Zenker et al., 2013b).

In line with the purposes of the research, a specific sample has been designated: first of all, the people involved in the survey must be within the age range between 18 and 45 years old. This limit is relevant because it implies the intention from the people concerned to start an academic study, find a job, plan an important life experience or construct a family, and into this context it's interesting to value how a city like Milan can attract new citizens.

The Italian sample is composed by 1107 people (see Table 3), homogeneously divided between males and females. The citizens called to answer to the survey must come from a different region than Lombardy (where Milan is the core city): the biggest percentage can be referred to the Southern area, together with the main Islands (40%). The most representative sample is aged 25-45 years old (nearly 70%), unmarried (53%) and, when they have a family, the amount of members is superior of 3, supposedly couple and a child/children (60%). The average education level is high (nearly 60% has a high school diploma and almost 30% has a superior degree), and the principal professional title is employee (30%) and student (22%). About the degree of knowledge of Milan, 38,7% of the surveyed citizens can express an excellent or plenty knowledge of the city: this indicates that more than a half of them don't really know the metropolis, even if the percentage of the presence in the city is relevant (65%). The 40% of them return almost one time every year and 15% quite frequently, but the remaining 35% rarely or even one time only.

The international sample is composed by 1601 European citizens who comes from the four principal European countries: Germany, United Kingdom, France and Spain. In Table 3 we present the descriptive statistics of the international sample. The distribution between male and female people into the sample is balanced. The most representative age range is 25-45 years old (more than 80%), and the most common status is unmarried (nearly 50%) with children (39%) or single (30%). About the education level, half of the sample has a university or even higher degree, and the principal professional title is employee (40%), and another 40% is equally occupied by executives, students and workers. The degree of knowledge of Milan is very low: only 25,1% of the surveyed citizens can express an excellent or plenty knowledge of the city. The primary motivation for this group to come to Milan is tourism, followed by job opportunities and relatives or friends to visit.

		International		National	
Variables	Items	Freq.	% freq.	Freq.	% freq.
Gender	Male	794	49,6	558	50,4

	Female	807	50,4	549	49,6
Age Class	18-24	270	16,9	286	25,8
	25-34	621	38,8	402	36,3
	35-45	710	44,3	419	37,9
Marital Status	Unmarried	713	44,5	589	53,2
	Married	496	31	346	31,3
	Cohabitant	346	21,6	141	12,7
	Other	46	2,9	31	2,8
# of family members	1	338	21,1	87	7,9
	2	446	27,9	236	21,3
	3	373	23,3	318	28,7
	4	302	18,9	352	31,8
	5 or more	142	8,9	114	10,3
Profession	Employee	623	38,9	334	30,2
	Executive	228	14,2	21	1,9
	Student	203	12,7	250	22,6
	Worker	187	11,7	90	8,1
	Freelancer	73	4,6	189	17,1
	Job seeker	71	4,4	162	14,6
	Other	0	0	61	5,5
Education level	No qualification	13	0,8	1	0,1
	Elementary school	32	2	3	0,3
	Middle school	205	12,8	108	9,8
	High school	522	32,6	638	57,6
	University degree	595	37,2	287	25,9
	Higher degree	141	8,8	70	6,3
	Other	93	5,8	0	0,0
Degree of Knowledge	High	428	38,7	401	25,1
	Low	679	61,3	1200	74,9

Table 3: Descriptive statistics of International and National sample (source: our elaboration)

Results and discussion

The first goal of this empirical study is to evaluate the positioning of Milan respect to its main European competitors as a destination place using a benchmark analysis on nine peculiar attributes. Table 4 shows the results of the benchmark analysis. Starting from the total sample average value on the nine factors, local and global interviewees affirm that the level of internationalization (INT) (especially the international renown of a city), the quality of culture (CUL) and tourism (TOUR) are the most satisfied attributes in the sampled cities, followed by the quality of healthcare (HEA). The quality of education (EDU), quality of social services (SOC), quality of environment (ENV) and safety don't give high gratification. The lowest levels of satisfaction are related to the level of safety (SAFE), especially traffic issues, and the level of economic development (ECON). Another

important consideration is derived from the country average value. German cities show the highest average score on the nine items analysed (7,52), English cities are positioned in the second place (6,96). Surprisingly, the average score of Milan on the nine items (Italian citizens plus European citizens' evaluation) ranks third (6,67) abundantly over the sufficiency and in line with the average French cities evaluation (6,65). Finally, the Spanish cities evaluation highlights some critical points with an average just above the sufficiency (6,28). Analysing in detail the average score of Milan on the nine attributes proposed and compared them with the main European cities, we can observe a score higher than the average value of the European cities in terms of level of economic development (6,799), second only to the major German cities Munich and Frankfurt. This is the result being the leading centre of one of the most productive regions in Europe (the Lombardy). Also the quality of the environment shows a level of satisfaction higher than the average value (6,17), but in this case slightly above the sufficiency. This factor (ENV) seems to be a critical issue for all the major European cities. Moreover, Milan shows good scores, but still below the overall average, related to the quality of the culture (7,31), the level of touristic capacity (7,32) and the level of internationalization (7,15), in this last case the fashion and design industry helps in boosting its positioning. Furthermore, Milan shows several criticalities, compared to its main competitors, related to the level of education (6,51), the quality of healthcare (6,26) and social services (6,47) and, lastly, the level of safety (6,05).

	Quality of attributes (10-point Likert scale)								
Cities	**HEA**	**SOC**	**CUL**	**TOUR**	**SAFE**	**ENV**	**ECON**	**INT**	**EDU**
Barcelona	7,09	5,58	7,55	7,82	5,54	4,74	5,01	7,84	6,84
Madrid	6,58	6,04	7,41	7,73	5,54	4,69	5,37	8,24	6,55
Valencia	6,67	5,14	6,34	7,36	5,53	5,40	4,54	6,53	5,77
Spain average	6,78	5,59	7,10	7,64	5,54	4,94	4,97	7,54	6,39
Bordeaux	7,42	6,07	6,98	7,45	6,75	6,30	6,09	7,33	7,13
Lyon	7,20	5,99	7,12	7,36	5,96	5,34	5,97	7,34	7,46
Paris	6,88	6,35	7,06	6,97	5,73	5,18	5,97	7,20	6,86
France average	7,17	6,14	7,05	7,26	6,15	5,61	6,01	7,29	7,15
Berlin	7,69	5,95	8,53	8,33	7,24	6,73	6,77	8,49	7,57
Frankfurt	7,51	6,71	7,84	7,36	6,94	6,28	7,08	8,46	7,39
Munich	8,23	6,62	8,63	8,03	7,15	6,65	7,77	8,77	8,42
Germany average	7,81	6,43	8,33	7,91	7,11	6,55	7,21	8,57	7,79
Liverpool	7,81	6,68	8,64	8,25	5,94	6,72	6,30	8,41	7,94
London	6,94	6,64	7,43	7,39	6,04	6,07	6,04	7,92	7,44
Manchester	6,92	6,47	7,23	7,08	5,62	6,06	5,70	7,38	6,86
Great Britain average	7,22	6,60	7,77	7,57	5,87	6,28	6,01	7,90	7,41
Milan average perception	6,26	6,47	7,31	7,32	6,05	6,17	6,79	7,15	6,51

Total sample average	7,17	6,21	7,54	7,57	6,16	5,87	6,11	7,77	7,13

Table 4: Comparison between Milan and European cities' positioning on nine attributes (source: our elaboration)

The second goal of this study is to evaluate if there exist differences in terms of perception between Italian and European citizens related to the positioning of Milan. Generally, the Italian sample (local perception) shows more positive scores on Milan rather than the international one (global perception). In Table 5, we summarize the comparison between the local and global perception on the nine items analysed. Italian citizens have a very positive perception of the city of Milan. This result is due to the image of Milan as the most dynamic and productive place in Italy. Especially, there are higher positive differences for the local perception in the quality of education (+1,35), in the level of city internationalization (+1,27) and in the quality of healthcare (+1,13). About these positive results of the local perception, Milan certainly has some of the best universities in Italy, the best hospitals and research clinics and a high level of international attractiveness due to events related to fashion, design and Expo 2015. But if we look at Table 4, the quality of healthcare and the quality of education seem to have the worst positioning compared to its main competitors at European level. Exactly, healthcare and education are critical elements and they are in need of accurate policies to improve the global image and perception of Milan. On the contrary, only the quality of the environment and the level of touristic capacity show higher values in terms of global perception respect to the local one. Probably, this result is due because at a local level there are more competitive places both for tourism capacity such as Rome, Venice and Florence and in terms of environmental quality such as the Southern part of Italy and the Alps.

Attributes	Milan local perception	Milan global perception	Differences local - global
Quality of Healthcare (HEA)	6,86	5,73	1,13
Quality of Social services (SOC)	6,96	5,90	1,06
Quality of Culture (CUL)	7,63	6,84	0,79
Level of touristic capacity (TOUR)	6,64	6,89	-0,25
Level of Safety (SAFE)	5,93	5,51	0,42
Quality of Environment (ENV)	4,38	5,71	-1,33
Level of Economic development (ECON)	6,50	6,20	0,30
Level of Internationalization (INT)	7,94	6,67	1,27
Quality of Education (EDU)	7,24	5,89	1,35

Table 5: Comparison between local and global perception on nine attributes (source: our elaboration)

Finally, the third and the main goal of this research is to explore the differences between the stereotypical and experiential perception at Italian and European level. In Table 6, we reported the estimations of Milan's perception, both experiential and stereotypical at local and global level.

Attributes	Local Milan experiential perception	Local Milan sterotypical perception	Global Milan experiential perception	Global Milan sterotypical perception
Quality of Healthcare (HEA)	7,23	6,57	6,26	5,42
Quality of Social services (SOC)	7,35	6,66	6,47	5,58
Quality of Culture (CUL)	7,93	7,43	7,31	6,57
Level of touristic capacity (TOUR)	7,12	6,37	7,32	6,64
Level of Safety (SAFE)	6,40	5,66	6,05	5,21
Quality of Environment (ENV)	4,94	3,84	6,17	5,44
Level of Economic development (ECON)	6,87	6,36	6,79	5,87
Level of Internationalization (INT)	8,10	7,83	7,15	6,39
Quality of Education (EDU)	7,52	7,06	6,51	5,54

Table 6: Comparison between stereotypical vs. experiential perception at global and local level (source: our elaboration)

To confirm our expectations on stereotypical and experiential perception, we have calculated the values of the gaps existing for each of the four clusters (see Figure 1) (local experiential, local stereotypical, foreign experiential and foreign stereotypical). The values have been calculated directly from the Table 6 and summarized in Figure 2.

First of all, experiential perceptions reach higher score than the stereotypical ones. This is valid for both the clusters local and global.

People who actually has a higher degree of knowledge of the city of Milan, tasted personally its atmosphere, lifestyle and dynamics has a better opinion. Probably, the lower evaluation of the stereotypical perception is due to a wrong or inefficient city brand communication and management. Only the positive word of mouth by people who deeply knows Milan is not enough to enhance the gap between the experiential and stereotypical perception.

Looking at the average response, even the experiential perception is not an optimal value: the general Milan's image really needs to be improved in its weaknesses and rebranded to enhance its reputation and potential capacity of attractiveness.
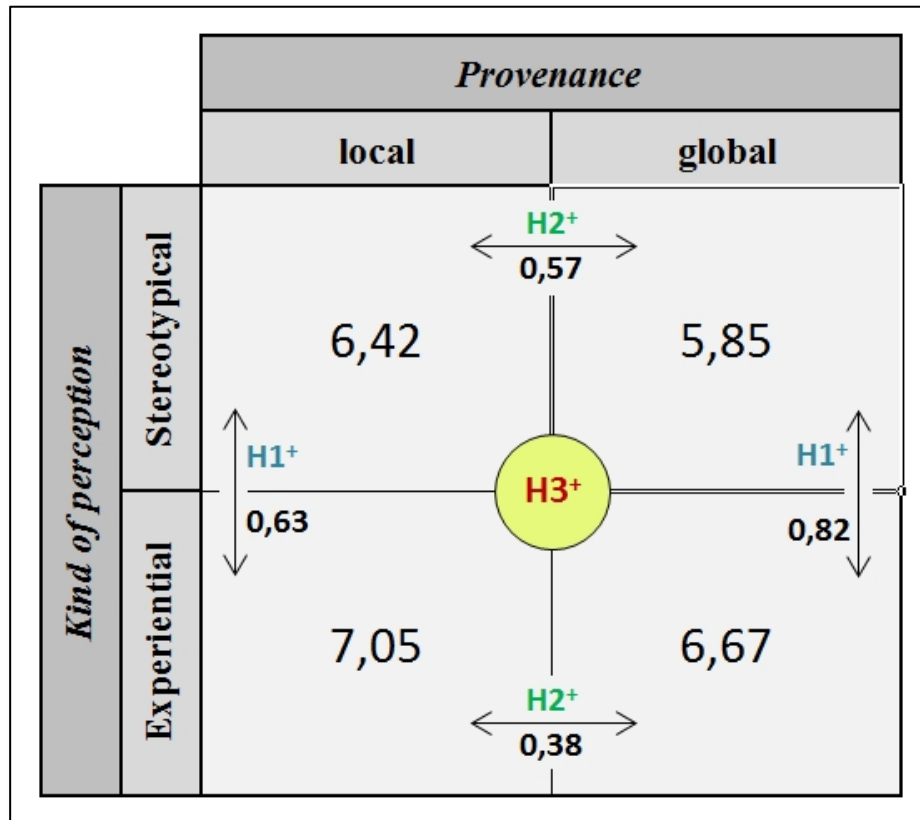
Figure 2: Comparison Matrix between stereotypical vs. experiential perception at global and local level (source: our elaboration)

Moreover, we showed that the local sample has a more positive image of Milan rather than the global one and this trend is valid for both perceptions, experiential and stereotypical. This fact is easily explained because Milan is the focal centre for finance, economy, culture and innovation in Italy. It's easy to understand the reason why it captures a huge interest into the Italian context. In addition, for Italian people is easier to be directly or indirectly connected with Milan and have a deepest knowledge of the city that is the fundamental trigger to improve its image and perception.

Global citizens currently are not able to reach the same level of knowledge. Even if Milan is one of the most known Italian cities, and even if important international events are periodically hosted (the most recent example is the Expo 2015), thus its real image isn't really perceived at a global level. This gap reflects the fact that Milan is not a touristic city by definition, but it must attract people using other contexts and tools.

A final comparison between the horizontal (local and global perspective) and the vertical axis (degree of knowledge) in the city brand value matrix shows that the greatest gap exists on the vertical axis related to the stereotypical and experiential perception of the city. The average value of the gap between the two types of perception is 0,82 in the global cluster and 0,63 in the local cluster while the average gap between the local and global perspective scores 0,32 in the experiential cluster and 0,57 in the stereotypical cluster.

Stereotypical and experiential perceptions don't run parallel in representing Milan's city brand image positioning into people's mind; the problem is that this mismatch lead to different behaviours and, consequently, different reactions about destination branding processes. This discrepancy means a huge intervention through complex city branding communication policies to cope this gap and to bring the stereotyped perception at the level of experiential one.

Conclusion

This study mainly focuses on a benchmark analysis between twelve European cities and investigates strengths and weaknesses of city's national and international perception and how its brand image is perceived using the degree of knowledge as a discriminant factors.

According to the assumption that stereotypical perception and global context are the main issues to obtain a good brand positioning of Milan, it's important for Milan to revisit its place brand policies along the vertical axes and with a special attention to the cluster of global stereotypical perception. This cluster requires targeted and precise policies aimed to increase the general perception of the city image and reputation.

To enhance the degree of knowledge of Milan at the global level, special events like Expo 2015, the fashion week or more alternative tool such as technology and social media could be very useful and proficient to cope the gap with the experiential perception scores. Smart Cities as urban places well-organized to combine infrastructures and human capital thanks to ICT are becoming relevant to develop and enforce a city quality of life and, consequently, reputation. For the purpose to establish a closer and skilful network with the global context, ICT could really make a difference and boost Milan's benchmarking and positioning with its main European competitors.

Milan holds a high value. It only deserves to be transmitted and shared as much as possible, and in a more efficient and target-personalized way. The city brand communication must be reshaped and transformed to imprint a more positive perception of the city at a global level.

In understanding the empirical support, several limitations need to be taken into consideration. Firstly, qualitative research raises questions about the quality of the questionnaire responses. Moreover, assessing the perception of cities with standardised questionnaire is strongly influenced by which factors are selected and important attributes might be left out (Zenker, Petersen et al., 2013). In addition, it has already been highlighted that errors about the definition of the attributes by respondents might occur.

Finally, a possible future research could be testing the city brand model and the perspectives of different stakeholder groups. In particular, attitudes towards Milan's branding require measuring with respect to the perceptions of non-European citizens in order to assess its real global relevance.

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