

URBAN BRANDING: AN ANALYSIS OF CITY HOMEPAGE IMAGERY

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This paper examines a practically ubiquitous, yet largely overlooked, source of city marketing, the official city homepage. The extent to which local governments use the Web as a marketing tool is explored through a comparative analysis of the images featured on the city, convention, and visitors bureau homepages in large and medium-sized U.S. cities. The article goes on to analyze the ways in which the city homepages reflect the population, geography, and built environment of a city and, through a typology of marketing themes found on the city homepages, to suggest the range of ways they may package images of city spaces to communicate a brand identity. The research contributes to an understanding of the ways in which municipalities may attempt to represent the city and suggests that most city homepage imagery is oriented toward marketing goals of tourism and attracting and retaining residents and businesses.

INTRODUCTION

Cities are no longer just built; they are imaged.
(Vale and Warner, 2001:23)

The marketing and branding of cities has become an all-pervasive and well-organized governmental activity that contributes to the economic and physical restructuring of localities for consumption in a global economy. Central to the marketing process is the “construction, communication, and management of the city’s image” (Kavaratzis, 2004:58). City images can be key indicators of how a local government wants visitors to experience their city and a means to create a shared vision among constituents (Kearns and Philo, 1993). Governments may create city images in the hope of erasing perceptions of industrial decline (Ward, 1998), to downplay racial tension and social polarization (Neill, *et al.*, 1995), or to symbolize a city’s presence on the national or international stage (Gomez, 1998). Although place promotion is in itself not new, it has become a more widespread and systematic activity as cities engage in fierce competition for a finite number of tourists, residents, and businesses. Municipalities routinely attempt to knit together a range of images into a singular, coherent message — or brand — with the goal of enhancing the symbolic and economic value of their urban spaces and economies (Mommaas, 2002). Consider the pre-Katrina marketing of Mardi Gras and French culture to boost the tourist economy of New Orleans (Gotham, 2002) or the use of architecture and ethnicity in crafting Santa Fe’s image as the preeminent tourist destination of the Southwest U.S. (Wilson, 1997).

Promotional images appear in a variety of print media such as tourism and business magazines, the travel and real estate sections of newspapers, in-flight magazines, travel brochures, and urban lifestyle magazines. The physical environment may reinforce a specific brand identity of the city as well: major cultural facilities and entertainment complexes, public art installations, renovated historic areas, ethnic neighborhoods, and city-wide billboards and banners announcing a city’s special events can all function as mechanisms for area revitalization and to revitalize the image of the entire city. However, perhaps the most ubiquitous, yet overlooked, source of city marketing today is the Internet. Cities of all sizes can maintain a website with relatively little investment and potentially reach a global audience, who can easily log on to the site at no cost, provided they have Internet access (Holcomb, 2001). Although governmental websites are ostensibly created to enhance public access to information about a city, they rarely disclose the city’s problems with the same zeal that they tout its advantages. Indeed, most official city homepages have been designed to overwhelmingly emphasize a positive, and therefore highly selective, image of the city. Not only can people and places be manipulated to fit the marketing image but also those that do not fit the desired narrative may in turn be rendered invisible. Understanding the various city imaging strategies that municipal governments employ is important because these strategies can play a significant role in our perception of urban places and influence how we think about cities. We benefit from research into city marketing processes because it draws our attention toward how the city is depicted and, by extension, for whom the city is imaged.

While a substantial amount of literature analyzes place promotion and marketing efforts, little research documents how local governments use the Internet to promote and brand their cities. This work sets out to provide an initial look at this topic. Through comparative analysis of the images found on the official city homepages and on the homepages of the convention and visitors bureaus of large and medium-sized U.S. cities, the study examines the ways in which the city homepages reflect the population, geography, and built environment of a city. In an attempt to capture the variety of ways that the homepages may provide a coherent and constructed representation of the city, the article goes on to propose a typology of marketing themes. The analysis indicates that in most cases the collective images found on the official city homepages display a coherent brand identity. Most city homepages attempt to portray an attractive urban quality of life, particularly through images that emphasize a city’s entertainment and recreational activities and settings, while images of work, education, and civic life are largely absent. At the same time, unlike the visitors bureau homepage, which is geared mainly toward tourists and conventioners, city homepages seem to assume a wider set of marketing roles that may appeal to and be representative of a wider audience.

CITY MARKETING AND IMAGING STRATEGIES

The search by urban governments for an identifiable brand identity is indicative of what Pine and Gilmore (1999) define as the “experience economy.” They argue that the leading economic actors have primarily gone from the production of material goods and services to the staging of experiences. While this scenario does not apply to entire urban economies, by promulgating dramatic and exciting images of their skylines, cultural complexes, and natural amenities, municipalities follow the lead of profit-driven entities like Nike and Apple, which strive to create an experience around their brand to differentiate themselves in a competitive marketplace.

Many scholars argue that city marketing has become commonplace due to larger-scale economic and political changes (Harvey, 1989a). Through increasingly intricate and instantaneous modes of communication, transportation, and innovations in manufacturing techniques, a more global and flexible economy has emerged. Heightened global competition between places has increased as the costs of doing business around the world have diminished and as federal governments have scaled back funding for urban programs. In the process, a new form of entrepreneurial governance has emerged in which municipalities seem to be less concerned with the regulation of the private sector than with clearing obstacles for their investments. They appear less concerned with the provision of public services and facilities and more attuned to projects that will produce economic growth (Hall and Hubbard, 1998; Harvey, 1989b). City marketing and branding are wrapped up in this process because the presentation of a positive city image can attract the attention of potential investors, tourists, and residents. However, not only do these ventures often fail to bring in the expected benefits, but they also potentially divert resources from other local needs.

In this regard, imaging or branding strategies are illustrative of what Sharon Zukin (1995) has labeled the “symbolic economy.” Through the artful manipulation of images associated with places, the symbolic economy attracts new land investments, jobs, and businesses. As Zukin (1995:7-8) explains:

Building a city depends on how people combine the traditional economic factors of land, labor, and capital. But it also depends on how they manipulate symbolic languages of exclusion and entitlement. The look and feel of cities reflect decisions about what — and who — should be visible and what should not What is new about the symbolic economy since the 1970s is its symbiosis of image and product, the scope and scale of selling images on a national and even global level, and the role of the symbolic economy in speaking for, or representing, the city.

Here, Zukin emphasizes an additional problem associated with city marketing: the tendency to selectively depict or misrepresent the city and its citizens for promotional purposes. Furthermore, she ties together the promotion of city images with the ways in which they may contribute to substantial changes in the built environment, often at the expense of disadvantaged communities. Similarly, Vale and Warner (2001:15) describe “city imaging” as “the process of constructing visually based narratives about the potential of places.” For example, think of how various interests have portrayed inner-city areas slated for urban renewal. Whereas redevelopment agencies around the country have often argued that they are turning underutilized and blighted areas into more productive uses, housing advocates and residents declare that these are affordable, and often multicultural, *neighborhoods*. Of the many cases of urban redevelopment and renewal that chronicle such conflicting visions, one of the best is Chester Hartman’s 2002 *City for Sale: The Transformation of San Francisco*.

Moreover, particularly since the 1970s and 1980s, as redevelopment activities have focused less on the production of office space and more on photogenic architecture and entertaining public spaces, urban design and planning have become even more intertwined with branding and imaging (Vale and Warner, 2001). Just as many people associate San Francisco with the Golden Gate Bridge and Paris with the Eiffel Tower or the Louvre, the number of post-industrial cities that have worked to overcome perceptions of urban decline through their own urban icons has increased exponentially. For example, Cleveland has the Rock ‘n’ Roll Hall of Fame, and Milwaukee has its new Santiago Calatrava-designed Museum of Art.

Other cities seek to expand their brand identity. The gambling haven of Reno, Nevada, recently established the downtown Truckee River White Water Park and Arts District, while Anaheim, California, the home of Disneyland, actively promotes its carefully manicured suburban neighborhoods.

Municipal governments pursue media-based city imaging strategies as well. As Watson (1991) shows, promotional texts play a key role in “gilding the smokestacks” of former industrial cities. Her analysis of imaging strategies in Australia reveals how cities employ a diverse set of images — from high-tech facilities to recreational opportunities — to put their industrial past behind them. Similarly, Short and Kim (1998) and Holcomb (1993) analyze magazine advertisements in U.S. cities and report a remarkable similarity between place advertisements that portray “a vibrant, growing place with accessible locations, reconstructed city center, and sunny business climate” (Short and Kim, 1998:60). Greenberg (2000) traces the changing representations of the city in urban lifestyle magazines and demonstrates how these publications facilitate the branding of cities and the associated social restructuring of urban areas for niche markets of urban professionals.

However, while recent scholarship has analyzed the promotional efforts of U.S. cities in such diverse sources, virtually no research focuses on the use of the Internet as a marketing tool. As Holcomb (2001) points out, the Internet is probably the most widely employed form of city marketing. The Internet makes it possible for municipal governments to “combine elements of a town hall, a tourist information bureau, a chamber of commerce, a business directory, a shopping mall and a local news magazine” for a global audience (Urban, 2002:49). Virtually every city in the U.S. maintains a website to show off their city and disseminate information on a variety of topics to citizens, businesses, visitors, and new residents. Unlike the physical city, websites are a space in which the local government has total control of how the municipality appears — public officials can selectively decide which buildings, people, and places will symbolize the city.

Given their ubiquity and potentially wide variety of uses, official city homepages are a good place to examine the marketing images of municipalities in the U.S. What images do municipalities draw on to construct an overall city image or brand identity? How do the homepages reflect the local population, geography, and built environment of the city? What are the dominant themes of city imaging on the official city homepages?

CITY MARKETING ON THE INTERNET

This study will explore these questions through an analysis of the images found on the official city homepages and convention and visitors bureaus of all 67 U.S. cities with a 2000 U.S. census population of 250,000 or more. The study focuses on the homepage because, as the introductory page of the entire website, it is intended as the central point of access for visitors. Therefore, it is the logical place that a city would attempt to present an overall image or identity. The analysis consists of two parts. First, the study compares the frequency of each type of image found on the city homepages to those found on the homepages of the visitors bureaus. The mission of the visitors bureau is to market the city as a destination for potential visitors, while the city homepage is ostensibly provided for residents and others to access information about municipal services and departments. Comparing the images featured on the two types of homepages helps to illustrate the extent to which municipal governments use their homepage to market the city. Second, the study offers a typology of marketing themes to suggest the range of ways that the city homepages may communicate a brand identity.

The websites were accessed in July 2004 to gather the data. During this period, all municipal governments and 64 visitors bureaus in the survey maintained a website. While the sophistication of the websites varies, the vast majority of homepages include images that are clearly visible on multiple types of Web browsers. Each homepage typically contains a clearly visible series of banner images at the top of the page and/or a single, larger image in the center of the page. A number of sites include a fixed number of images that rotate each time the user accesses the site, and others include a set of images that continually revolve while the site is on display.

To conduct the analysis, an inventory was created of all images in the banner and central portion of the page, including all rotating images, which resulted in 30 categories. The categories include elements of the built environment and architecture such as downtown skylines, cityscapes, public art, infrastructure, his-

toric buildings, and flagship buildings; urban entertainment activities such as arts and cultural events, heritage places and symbols, ethnic places and symbols,¹ shopping, amusement parks, and spectator sports; natural environments and outdoor activities in both urban and non-urban settings; governmental symbols such as the city seal or images of elected officials; symbols of national and local pride such as flags or logos unique to a locale; and images of municipal and private sector employees.² The components of each image were coded separately. For example, an image of a downtown skyline with a park prominently displayed in the foreground would appear in the categories “downtown skyline” and “park.”³ While every effort was made to make each category non-overlapping and as exhaustive as possible, in a few instances, image components fit into more than one category and were tallied as such. For example, a historic city hall building would be marked as both a historic building and a civic building. This process is unavoidable given that such images carry multiple meanings and may be featured for this very reason.

The analysis is also based on the demographic characteristics of the images on each homepage, which were classified according to race or ethnicity, age, gender, and the activities of the individuals when clearly visible. The racial/ethnic categories used are white, African American, Asian, American Indian, and Latino. To compare age, individuals were grouped into categories of children and teens, young adult, middle age, and senior. Totals do not include elected officials or those individuals whose race/ethnicity could not be determined to fall into one of these general categories.

Once the categories had been defined and the image components counted, they were used to build the typology of marketing themes. The themes are based on an analysis of the frequency of the various types of images in each category and a qualitative assessment of the role of the images within the context of the overall theme on each page. Qualitative analysis is necessary, given that an image may take on a different signification depending on the context in which it is situated. For example, in itself, an image of a downtown skyline with a verdant landscape extending to the horizon could send the message that the city has many natural amenities or that the local government cares about a clean environment. However, in combination with images representative of business or government, the image could signify endless possibilities for land development or commercial success.

One drawback to the analysis is that it does not account for the level of input from local officials in the Web design. Although the city agency responsible for Web services typically maintains the site and homepage, site design is frequently, although not exclusively, contracted out to a private firm. However, in most instances, the city does have final approval over all content before it is posted to a site and typically specifies criteria in advance as to the type of information, graphics, and images that will appear on the site. Another shortcoming of the analysis is that it is impossible to measure how those who visit the website actually interpret the images they view or gauge the impact of the images on their perception of a city. City websites may not be a primary influence on the location and travel decisions made by residents, visitors, or businesses. Nonetheless, because the analysis focuses on images included on officially sanctioned city homepages, the results are indicative of how a municipal government desires the world to identify its city and provides a window into one component in the overall imaging process. Given the subjective nature of this analysis, readers are cautioned to view the findings as one interpretation of the complex imagery. As discussed below, this is particularly the case with the demographic analysis, which by definition is highly subjective and potentially open to multiple interpretations. Nonetheless, this study represents a first step toward understanding an under-researched form of city marketing and a basis for future research that may validate these findings through a more objective record of homepage representations.

City Images

Both city and visitors bureau homepages contain virtually the same number of images.⁴ Images of the built environment and architecture are most frequently found on both sites, appearing on 91% of city sites and 86% of visitors bureau sites (Table 1). Of these, the most common are downtown skylines and cityscapes, which were observed on 73% and 66% of city and visitors bureau sites respectively. Although other images of the built environment are represented at a much lower rate, city homepages contained nearly five times as many images of parks and almost twice as many images of infrastructure (typically picturesque images of bridges along a downtown skyline) than visitors bureau sites. The apparent emphasis on picturesque built environments on city sites potentially reflects local governments' concerns with marketing an attractive

TABLE 1. Homepages containing images of the built environment and architecture.

	City Homepage		Visitors Bureau Homepage	
	# of homepages	%	# of homepages	%
All types	61	91	55	86
Downtown skyline and cityscape	49	73	42	66
Public art	6	9	5	8
Infrastructure and industry	14	21	3	8
Infrastructure (historic/decorative)	3	5	0	0
Parks and landscaping	13	19	7	11
Flagship buildings and places (historic)	4	6	14	22
Flagship buildings and places (nonhistoric)	14	21	11	17
Historic buildings (regional nonspecific)	11	16	10	16
Historic buildings (nonspecific)	10	15	7	11
Civic buildings (historic)	5	8	5	8
Civic buildings (nonhistoric)	3	5	0	0
Convention facilities	2	3	5	8

TABLE 2. Homepages containing images of urban entertainment, places, and activities.

	City Homepage		Visitors Bureau Homepage	
	# of homepages	%	# of homepages	%
All types	26	39	47	73
Arts and culture	9	13	21	33
Signature events	2	3	8	13
Heritage places, events, and symbols	5	8	13	20
Ethnic places, events, and symbols	8	12	9	14
Shopping and entertainment activities	5	8	15	24
Gastronomy	1	2	8	13
Themed environments/amusement parks	2	3	14	22
Spectator sports and facilities	8	12	10	16

quality of life to new and existing residents, whereas the visitors bureaus target tourists and conventioners and likely consider this type of local scenery less attractive to their target audiences.

We found 34% of city sites and 41% of visitors bureau sites include images of some type of historic architecture, making this the most common type of building displayed on both types of sites overall. Another common architectural feature on city pages is contemporary flagship buildings and places. Sites as varied as the Seattle Space Needle and the New Jersey Performing Arts Center appeared on 21% of city homepages. The highest single type of architecture counted for visitors bureaus was historic flagship buildings or places, such as the Alamo or Golden Gate Bridge, at 22%. In total, 22% of the city pages and 38% of visitors bureaus featured one or both forms of these iconic places. This difference again may be attributed to the touristic focus of visitors bureaus. Cities look to historic buildings and flagship sites not only to create the image of a tourist destination but also to help create images of local uniqueness or a dynamic, cosmopolitan feel. As we will see below, city sites seem to market to a wider audience and, therefore, use a wider variety of marketing images.

Comparing the type and number of urban entertainment places and activities on each of the sites reinforces the broader marketing role for city homepages. As expected, a large proportion of visitors bureaus (73%) include urban entertainment images, such as shopping, sports, and cultural facilities, or heritage and ethnic districts on their homepages. Significantly fewer city homepages (39%) displayed these images (Table 2). Although city sites do not participate in tourism and entertainment marketing on the scale of the visitors bureaus, this is clearly one of the marketing roles of the city sites. Images of the arts and culture such as museums and arts festivals topped the list of entertainment images for cities, found on 13% of the sites, followed by those of ethnic places, events, and symbols, such as costumed ethnic performers and ethnic decorations, found on 12% of the sites. One likely reason that these types of images are most prominently featured on city homepages is that they can represent the city as a vibrant entertainment destination while showing off its diverse, albeit often aestheticized, cosmopolitan community and generic representations of ethnicity.

TABLE 3. Homepages containing images of natural environments and the outdoors.

	City Homepage		Visitors Bureau Homepage	
	# of homepages	%	# of homepages	%
All types	27	40	28	44
Natural environment (urban)	26	39	15	23
Natural environment (nonurban)	4	6	11	17
Outdoor activities (urban)	2	3	2	3
Outdoor activities (nonurban)	3	5	12	19

TABLE 4. Homepages containing governmental and other images.

	City Homepage		Visitors Bureau Homepage	
	# of homepages	%	# of homepages	%
City symbols	21	31	0	0
Local elected officials	21	31	0	0
Symbols of local pride	5	7	7	11
Municipal employees	5	8	0	0
Other employees	3	5	3	5

Both the city and visitors bureau sites, at roughly equal rates, use images of the natural environment and outdoor activities to craft a city image. Images of mountains and deserts, flora and fauna, and boating and bicycling appear on 40% of city homepages and 44% of visitors bureau pages (Table 3). Some cities seem to imply that theirs is a natural or recreational paradise by editing out all urban references, while others try to demonstrate that their city is filled with opportunities to experience the outdoors. When compared in this way, city sites emphasize natural environments in an urban setting (39%) more frequently than do visitors bureaus (23%), lending support to the assertion that local governments are concerned with marketing an attractive urban quality of life.

Associated with the emphasis on cities as places to play or to engage in unique experiences is the tendency to downplay cities as sites of work. Few cities displayed municipal or private sector employees such as police officers, firefighters, construction workers, or computer technicians on their homepages (Table 4). When this was the case, however, most framed work as the primary focus of the homepage. In addition, city homepages contain comparatively few governmental or civic references. The city seal and images of local elected officials such as the mayor each appeared on only 31% of city sites. Moreover, although city websites represent local government, only 13% displayed images of civic buildings such as city hall. In fact, visitors bureaus actually feature historic civic buildings at the same rate as city homepages (8%). Additionally, city symbols and references to local pride such as a Texas Longhorn or Sacramento Beehive are slightly more common on visitors bureau sites.

It is also important to note which images the websites do not include. While it appears that many city homepages try to emphasize a high quality of life, few actually show images of residential neighborhoods, single-family homes, parks, or community events. Only the City of Anaheim's homepage featured such images. In fact, the site appears to be an attempt to attract prospective residents through images of suburban enclaves composed of wide streets, large houses, and buried utility lines. The Baltimore Visitors Bureau, not the city homepage, highlights various neighborhood events and landmarks around the city such as local produce markets and an outdoor film event in Little Italy. When cities claim to portray everyday life, they focus on iconic images such as San Francisco's homepage, which features pristine Victorian houses, cable cars, and the Golden Gate Bridge under the heading "images of life in San Francisco."

Homepage Demographics

An analysis of the demographic characteristics of people featured in images on each type of homepage also provides a window into how the municipal governments may wish to portray their cities. In total, we found only 18 city (27%) and 36 visitors bureau (56%) homepages that displayed individuals with identifiable characteristics out of an overall 25 (37%) and 41 (64%) homepages, respectively, that featured people.

TABLE 5. Typology of city homepage marketing themes.

Theme	Primary References
Cosmopolitan cities	Skyline and cityscape, flagship buildings, arts and culture, multiculturalism
Collage cities	Historic built environments, ethnic festivals, local entertainment events, and regional cuisine
Non-cities	Recreational activities in natural settings, lack of urban images
Outdoor urbanism	Natural environments and recreational activities in urban settings
City works	City employees and governmental officials at work, children playing, families, racial diversity, landscape scenes symbolic of urban revitalization
Informational	No images or images of poor quality, informational links dominate visual focus

On both types of homepages, males and females are represented almost equally (city: 53% male and 47% female; visitors bureau: 48% male and 52% female). City homepages were found to feature individuals in relatively similar proportions by age. Seniors were the exception, appearing on only one homepage (40% children and teens, 24% young adult, and 33% middle age). Visitors bureau sites seemed to portray a more youthful population that included 52% young adults, 29% children and teens, 16% middle age, and 3% seniors.

Considering race and ethnicity, white and African American individuals appear with the greatest frequency. Of the 37% of city homepages that display people, nearly half (48%) include African Americans and 40% contain whites. This ratio contrasts strongly with those found on the visitors bureau sites. Although, of those that featured people, 44% displayed African Americans, over four-fifths (83%) included whites on the homepage. Other groups are found less frequently. On city homepages, Latinos comprise 28% of the total population, and no Asians or American Indians were found on any homepage. Likewise, on visitors bureau sites, Latinos make up just 7% of the total population, and only two Asians and one American Indian appear.

The ratios become more unbalanced when race and ethnicity are grouped by activity. Activities were categorized according to work, leisure, performance, and other. Nine of the 11 Latinos that appear on city sites and eight of the 10 on visitors bureau sites are engaged in performance activities. Latinos make up 82% of all performers found on city homepages. These are typically women or girls dressed in colorful dresses dancing at ethnic festivals. In contrast, of the white individuals whose activities were discernable on city homepages, 67% were engaged in leisure activities and none were performing. Although at a significantly lower rate than whites, leisure activities were most common for African Americans on city homepages at 37%, followed by work and other activities at 26% each. In fact, the most frequent activity on city sites overall was leisure at over double the rate of the next activity, work. On visitors bureau sites, whites were overwhelmingly engaged in leisure activities (76%), as were nearly half of African Americans (41%).

The emphasis on leisure and the racialized distinctions of the various activities may, on the one hand, be due to the ease with which such images are recognizable as “ethnic” and, in some instances, may reflect this author’s own presumptions of ethnic identity. Additionally, such images of ethnicity may stand out, given that just 27% of the city homepages featured identifiable subjects — potentially an attempt by many cities to create a marketing image with which a wide range of viewers can identify.⁵ On the other hand, this finding may reflect the ways in which images on the city homepages are purposefully used to frame a particular representation of reality. In this case, the presence of stereotypical references to ethnicity might reflect a city’s misplaced attempt to show its openness to diversity or to present a safe and familiar option for consumption. The attempt to frame a particular image of the city is further reinforced through the typology

FIGURE 1. Sample central images from San Francisco city homepage (left) and visitors bureau homepage (right).

of marketing themes, which suggests the various ways the homepages package images of city spaces and people into a coherent brand identity.

A Typology of Internet Marketing Themes

As displayed in Table 5, the city homepages are classified into six overarching themes: (1) Cosmopolitan Cities, (2) Collage Cities, (3) Non-cities, (4) Outdoor Urbanism, (5) City Works, and (6) Informational. Each theme represents a combination of images that relates an identifiable message about the city.

Sixteen of the cities exhibit characteristics of “Cosmopolitan Cities.”⁶ Cities in this group attempt to create an overall image of the city as a diverse and lively destination point for business and tourist activities. Cosmopolitan cities focus on dramatic views of the downtown skyline and cityscape, flagship buildings, cultural facilities (particularly museums and sports arenas), and images that portray an ethnically diverse or multicultural city. In addition, these cities include few place-specific (other than flagships) or historic references. For instance, Cleveland’s homepage focuses on images of the city’s downtown and iconic cultural facilities such as I.M. Pei’s Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and the Browns and Indians Stadiums, while Milwaukee includes its new Calatrava-designed museum, Newark highlights its Center for the Performing Arts, and Seattle shows off the Space Needle. Other cities, such as Chicago, attempt to create a brand of civic cosmopolitanism by highlighting not only their skylines, prominent cultural facilities, and towering buildings but also images of the city’s parks, civic monuments, and children of different racial backgrounds at play together. The standout destination city is San Francisco. With its exaggerated claim to display “images of life” in the city through its most iconic places, there is little distinction between the city and visitors bureau homepages (Figure 1).

The 17 “Collage Cities” draw on anything and everything that signifies urban and local to emphasize the uniqueness of their city as both a tourist destination and one worthy of local pride.⁷ Rather than concentrating on iconic images of flagship buildings and downtown cityscapes, the majority of sites in this group highlight a broad range of image types including heritage, ethnicity, spectator sports, the arts, and local cuisine. While the primary emphasis is on symbols of local heritage and historic architecture, only three cities — Boston, Buffalo, and New Orleans — feature historic references exclusively. Southwestern cities such as Tucson, Albuquerque, and El Paso emphasize Native American and Hispanic or Latino culture

FIGURE 2. Banner images of “Collage Cities” (El Paso, Memphis, and Tucson).

through images of mariachi musicians, costumed dancers, and petroglyphs in conjunction with other locally representative images of cowboys, saguaro cacti, and the facades of mission-style buildings. Most cities include a potpourri of local references from baseball players and crowded stadium bleachers (Mesa, Memphis, and Dallas) to costumed Native American and Hispanic dancers (El Paso, Mesa, and San Jose) to giant cowboy statues, images of Elvis Presley, and astronauts on the moon (Dallas, Memphis, and Houston) (Figure 2).

“Non-cities” share the common goal of attempting to appear as if they are not a city at all. These five cities tend to edit out or obscure any reference to the urban environment. Instead, Honolulu appears as an oceanfront resort, while Aurora, Colorado, creates a small-town feel through images of little league, graduation day, and a picturesque mountain backdrop. Anaheim defies traditional representations of the city through images of its suburban cityscapes that feature wide streets and buried utility lines or parks surrounded by ranch-style homes (Figure 3). The homepage for Oakland, California, depicts the city through a very prominent and fantastic image of a gondola under a big, blue sky slowly making its way across pristine Lake Merritt while large trees obscure the view of buildings in the background, belying the city image as a gritty urban center, as is frequently portrayed in the popular press.

Rather than editing out urban images, 10 cities take on a brand of “Outdoor Urbanism.” Here, the homepage images fuse the natural with the urban while largely eschewing historical or cultural references.⁸ One of the primary techniques is to portray the downtown skyline or cityscape against a prominent natural feature such as a mountain, ocean, river, lake, or some combination of these. For instance, Denver portrays the gigantic, snow-capped Rocky Mountains cradling the downtown skyline (Figure 4), while Lexington, Kentucky, and Omaha, Nebraska, seem to float in a forest. Additionally, cities in this group stress that they possess multiple outdoor recreational opportunities and/or pristine natural escapes within or nearby the city. Cities such as Corpus Christi, Texas, and San Diego emphasize their proximity to water through images of sailboats and docks against the downtown skyline and secluded beaches. Austin displays images of wildlife — deer, an owl, and a butterfly — close-up images of flowers, multiple images of rivers, and a mountain climber alongside both contemporary and archival urban images.

In contrast to the other marketing themes that seem to focus largely on images of tourist and convention destinations or entertainment amenities, the 16 cities in “City Works” concentrate on images that reflect civic pride, governmental action, or a revitalized urban core (Figures 5 and 6).⁹ These cities accomplish this in three ways. First, cities such as Los Angeles, Charlotte, and Tampa display local workers and city employees (particularly fire and police) of different racial backgrounds, as if to emphasize that the city relies on its citizens working together for a greater good, while cities such as Washington, D.C. concentrate on images of happy families and multiracial children at play. Second, many of these cities use natural settings

FIGURE 3. Anaheim city homepage (revolving image still).

FIGURE 4. Denver city homepage.

FIGURE 5. Snapshot of Los Angeles city homepage's ticker-style banner image.

to create the impression of an urban renaissance through graphic images of the sun rising behind the city (Baltimore and Los Angeles) or manifest destiny through the city core in the foreground of a landscape that extends infinitely into the distance (Detroit, Las Vegas, and Riverside). Finally, cities such as New York and Saint Louis focus on images of the government working for its citizens through images of elected officials in city neighborhoods or at press conferences, or symbols of the Internet as a tool for citizen communication.

Finally, six cities' homepages function primarily as "Informational Websites."¹⁰ These concentrate on providing information without the use of images or with those of poor graphic quality.

FIGURE 6. Baltimore city homepage.

CONCLUSION

A detailed inventory and comparison of the images displayed on the official city and visitors bureau homepages suggests that city homepages are a means for local governments to market and brand their cities. Both types of sites draw on virtually the same pool of images — particularly iconic elements of the local built environment, entertainment places and activities, and other urban scenes — to emphasize a unique and stimulating locale. Similar to a visitors bureau homepage, many city sites display images of leisure activities more frequently than those that signify work, education, and civic life, and they rarely feature images of residential neighborhoods and low-density, suburban environments.

City homepages appear to diverge from visitors bureau sites in a number of ways in that they take on a wider marketing role and target a wider audience than tourists and conventioners. While city sites do employ the standard references to culture, sports, flagship buildings, historic architecture, and natural environments, they do not display a uniform or homogenous city image. City homepages not only brand the city as a place to play but are also, as the typology of city marketing themes proposes, crafted around multiple themes, from those that emphasize the city as a cosmopolitan destination point to those that attempt to obscure any urban references at all. Further, the marketing themes do not coincide with any particular region. For example, the "rustbelt" cities of the upper Midwest and East Coast display multiple imaging strategies to demonstrate that there are no more smokestacks (Short, 1999). Whereas Cleveland and Milwaukee portray cities as destinations for fun and leisure, Baltimore and Detroit depict an urban renaissance and infer limitless opportunities.

In addition, the images can transmit multiple meanings. For instance, numerous sites refer to local heritage or ethnicity in the form of ethnic performances such as Latino women or children dancing in colorful outfits to crowded audiences before the backdrop of historic architecture. This type of image may not only be intended to promote tourism, but also to signify that a city embraces its diversity and supports community activities. More importantly, this example aptly illustrates that despite their variation, city homepages may package the population and built environment of a city in service to the production of a coherent brand identity and at the expense of objectifying and generalizing cultural meanings.

Taken together, the multiple combinations of images that appear on the city homepages (with the exception of informational websites) signal an attempt to depict a positive quality of life. Thus, it appears many local governments heed the advice of Clark (2004), Florida (2002), and others, who argue that cities need to recognize that quality of life issues are increasingly critical in the location decisions of prospective residents and businesses. However, city imaging on the Internet largely focuses on a particular set of quality of life images. Those that refer to entertainment activities, local heritage, the arts, and the outdoors — amenities that are considered attractive to Florida's creative class and, more generally, to tourists — are most prominent, while images that refer to work, schools, and public safety — factors that are important to many residents — are largely absent. In this way, the official city homepage seems to have become an integral component of a larger project in which local governments rearrange and represent the city to appeal to tourists and middle- and upper-class tastes (Eisinger, 2000; Harvey, 1989a).

Ultimately, this study provides a means of examining how local governments want people to think about their city. The purpose of the city homepage is to transmit information about a municipality to existing and prospective residents, businesses, and visitors. However, as the typology of marketing themes illustrates, most local governments do not passively provide information but instead actively attempt to shape how the viewer interprets it. The use of the Internet in this way signifies an expansion of the city marketing apparatus, yet unlike the physical environment or even promotional material, a homepage can be easily and frequently altered to fabricate a narrative around a city even when it is lacking iconic structures, unique histories, or other identifiable features. As such, the strong marketing role has implications for the ways in which municipalities approach the Web as a resource to deliver information. Although not directly explored here, the preponderance of marketing images and the lack of focus on public services and civic engagement imply that the imaging role overshadows other potential uses of the city homepage, such as providing information about public meetings or improving access to municipal services and departments. Future research could tackle this issue by examining how city websites are actually used.

As the aesthetic dimensions of places and quality of life amenities are increasingly on the agendas of municipal governments, marketing and branding will likely remain a critical strategy to distinguish a city and to boost its economic development potential. Thus, an understanding of the various ways that local governments brand cities is a significant concern for urban planners and designers. Examining the images featured on official city homepages — and the types of images that are not featured — provides an opportunity to reflect not only on how cities are depicted on the Internet but also on how the contemporary climate of inter-urban competition shapes representations of the city at large.

APPENDIX: DESCRIPTION OF IMAGE CATEGORIES

- **Downtown skyline:** image of downtown that shows prominent contemporary and/or historic buildings against the sky.
- **Cityscape:** image that focuses on a particular view or scene within a city that includes nondescript features such as buildings, roadways, and street lighting and does not include any of these elements as the primary subject of the image.
- **Public art:** image of any officially sanctioned object located in public space for aesthetic or commemorative purposes such as a statue, sculpture, or monument.
- **Infrastructure and industry:** images of contemporary transportation and communications infrastructure such as buildings, tunnels, or telephone poles. With the exception of the Houston city homepage, which features a shipping yard, all images in this category are of bridges.

- Infrastructure (historic/decorative): image of infrastructure that is primarily decorative in purpose such as faux gas lamp lighting.
- Parks and landscaping features: images of parks, landscaping plants, features such as water fountains, and any other human constructions using natural elements in an urban context.
- Flagship buildings and places (historic): images of prominent and recognizable non-governmental buildings, public places, and landmarks constructed prior to 1960 that are frequently associated with a city. Examples include Sears Tower in Chicago and Coit Tower in San Francisco.
- Flagship buildings and places (non-historic): images of prominent and recognizable non-governmental buildings, public places, and landmarks constructed after 1960 that are frequently associated with a city. Examples range from those designed by renowned architects such as the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in Cleveland to restoration projects such as Faneuil Hall in Boston and other well-known landmarks such as the Space Needle in Seattle.
- Historic building (regional nonspecific): images of buildings constructed prior to the 1950s in a style widely identified with a particular region, such as Antebellum (Southern U.S.), adobe or mission-style architecture (Southwestern U.S.), or Colonial revival (New England), and that are not clearly identifiable as “flagship” buildings.
- Historic building (nonspecific): images of neoclassical or modernist building facades or portions of facades such as columns that do not reflect a particular regional style and that are not clearly identifiable as “flagship” buildings.
- Civic buildings (historic): images of governmental buildings, such as a city hall or courthouse, constructed prior to 1960.
- Civic buildings (non-historic): images of governmental buildings built since 1960.
- Convention facilities: images of convention centers and facilities.
- Arts and culture: interior and exterior images of museums, performing arts facilities, art galleries, and any item symbolic of these such as musical instruments or sculpture, excluding public art.
- Signature events: images of high-profile events widely associated with a particular city such as the Indianapolis 500 or the Kentucky Derby in Louisville.
- Heritage places, events, and symbols: images of historical places, events, and symbols widely associated with a city such as the moon landing with Houston or cowboys with the Southwest U.S., but excluding architecture, sporting events, and references to ethnic heritage.
- Ethnic places, events, and symbols: images of places, events, and symbols associated with racial or ethnic groups such as Latino and Native American dancers, festivals, or traditional clothing.
- Shopping and entertainment districts and activities: images of urban areas dominated by retail and nightlife establishments and people participating in these activities.
- Gastronomy: images of cuisine or references to cooking that are typical of the region or locality.
- Themed environments and amusement parks: images of entertainment areas designed around a particular concept such as amusement parks, aquariums, and science museums.
- Spectator sports and facilities: images of sporting events and facilities.
- Natural environments (urban): images of environmental scenes not principally constructed by human intervention but that are part of an urban setting. Examples include water (lakes, rivers, bays, and oceans), landscapes (mountains, beaches, and deserts), and flora and fauna not found in parks.
- Natural environment (non-urban): images of environmental scenes as described above that appear exclusive of any urban reference.
- Outdoor activities (urban): images of recreational activities such as golfing, boating, or mountain climbing that appear in an urban context.
- Outdoor activities (non-urban): images of recreational activities such as golfing, boating, or bicycling exclusive of any urban reference.
- City symbols: images of official city symbols including a city seal, logo, or flag.
- Local elected officials: images of a city’s mayor and city council members.
- Pride: Images of symbols of national and local pride unique to a locale not including official symbols of local government. Examples include the U.S. flag or Texas Longhorn cattle.

- Municipal employees: images of municipal employees other than elected officials.
- Private-sector employees: images of employees other than municipal employees and elected officials.

NOTES

1. Ethnic places and symbols are included as “urban entertainment,” because in virtually every case, these images depict a festival or celebration such as Latino women or children dancing in colorful costumes or decorations in a Chinatown district.
2. A detailed description of each category is available in the Appendix.
3. This analysis did not take the size of each image into account. This potential shortcoming is mitigated, however, given that each website contains relatively the same available space to display information.
4. A total of 356 images, or an average of 5.31 images per page, were counted for city homepages, and 354 images, or an average of 5.53 images per page, were counted for visitors bureau homepages. The total image count reflects the total components of each image, not the total number of images on each page.
5. I thank an anonymous reviewer for this point.
6. Nine of these cities — Atlanta, Chicago, Cincinnati, Cleveland, Milwaukee, Newark, Philadelphia, Phoenix, and San Francisco — display larger, more numerous, or more prominent images than the other cities. The remaining seven cities — Kansas City, Miami, Minneapolis, Nashville, Seattle, Toledo, and Tulsa — display more modest images, but still primarily feature images suggestive of this category.
7. The cities in this category include Albuquerque, Boston, Buffalo, Colorado Springs, Dallas, El Paso, Fresno, Houston, Louisville, Memphis, Mesa, New Orleans, San Antonio, San Jose, Santa Ana, Tucson, and Virginia Beach.
8. In eight of the cities in this category — Austin, Corpus Christi, Denver, Indianapolis, Jacksonville, Lexington, Omaha, and San Diego — images take a prominent role on the homepage. The images on the homepages of Portland and Pittsburgh are not as strong but still place the homepages in this category.
9. The cities in this category with prominent images include Baltimore, Charlotte, Cincinnati, Detroit, Las Vegas, Los Angeles, Memphis, Newark, New York, Riverside, Tampa, Washington D.C., and Wichita. Columbus, St. Louis, and St. Paul fit this category despite less prominent images on their homepages.
10. These cities are Arlington, Fort Worth, Long Beach, Oklahoma City, Raleigh, and Sacramento.

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