

Measuring City Brand Authenticity Based on Evidence from Social Networks: Case of Almaty

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Abstract

The research paper has several objectives including conducting a thorough literature review to outline the existing models for measuring brand authenticity with particular focus on destination branding; selecting a suitable model(s) to be applied to the assessment of city brand authenticity; and performing a case study analysis of the brand of Almaty, Kazakhstan, based on a content analysis of social network(s) dedicated to the city brand. The majority of extant studies on brand authenticity focus on exploring authenticity within particular industries or in relation to products with less attention being devoted to the authenticity of destination brands. This study is unique in its attempt to apply brand authenticity measurement models to the specific context of Almaty as an emerging destination brand. A content analysis was conducted on data from ten Instagram pages dedicated to Almaty, following established theories on brand authenticity. One hundred posts were analyzed from each reviewed account. Each post was studied for the presence of specific cues derived from the selected theoretical models. The analysis showed that the direction on which to build the brand identity of Almaty has not been determined yet. Still, based on the presence of specific cues derived from the selected theoretical models including the four dimensions of brand authenticity proposed by Bruhn et al. and Anholt's City Brand Hexagon model, analysis performed on selected Instagram accounts dedicated to Almaty city shows that Almaty has a potential of building an authentic brand.

Keywords: city brand authenticity, content analysis, emerging destination brand, Almaty, innovation, Instagram.

Introduction

In today's highly commercialized and vastly globalized markets, consumers have started to show more interest in brands which are genuine. Brand authenticity is believed to significantly enhance overall brand experience and tends to generate increased customer satisfaction with the brand (Hernandez-Fernandez & Lewis, 2019; Kim & Bonn, 2016; Tran & Keng, 2018). Indeed, according to the survey conducted by Stackla among almost 1600 consumers from the UK, Australia and the U.S in 2019 (DeGruttola, 2019), 90 % of respondents stated that authenticity is important in decisions which brands support; the rate went up from the previous 2017 result of 86 % (ibid.). Companies are responding by emphasizing authenticity in their brand offerings: organizations are ready to devote effort and resources to ensure they position their brands as authentic in the perception of consumers aiming to strengthen the trust in their brand. The research on brand authenticity remained scarce in the 2010s but increased from 2018. Most recent studies (post 2020) largely investigated the brand authenticity concept in relation to other constructs like brand equity, brand loyalty, brand credibility, and customer satisfaction. However, the majority of extant studies on brand authenticity focus on exploring authenticity within particular industries or in relation to products with less attention being devoted to the authenticity of destination brands. A few recent studies on authenticity of destination connected the authenticity construct with the revisit intention (Shi et al., 2022), explored heritage destination brand's authenticity (Chen et al., 2021) and addressed the notion of brand legitimacy shaping brand authenticity and destination loyalty (Chen & Lee, 2021).

This authors' contribution to the study of destination brand authenticity is in the provision of a comprehensive overview of the existing literature on brand authenticity, identification of the brand authenticity measurement model(s) and the development of an application of the model(s) to the context of the emerging destination brand using the example of Almaty. Thus, the current work is among the first studies on testing the developed brand authenticity measurement model on an emerging destination.

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The following section “literature review” presents a more detailed review of the extant studies on the concept of brand authenticity; next, research questions of this study are defined, and then, the brief context of the Almaty city brand is presented.

Literature review

The definition of authenticity varies across different sources. The concept of authenticity is believed to take its roots from the Greek philosophy (Hernandez-Fernandez & Lewis, 2019), while later the concept had developed into denoting an object which is genuine and not an imitation (*ibid.*). A number of other academic texts support the characteristic of genuineness associated with authenticity. Thus, according to Grayson and Martinec (cited in Tran & Keng, 2018), authenticity can be related to the qualities of genuineness, truth and reality. Other studies by Boyle and Munoz et al. (cited in Tran & Keng, 2018) define authenticity as something sincere, original, real and natural.

Brand has a standard definition of any distinctive feature which may appear as a name, design, or symbol that aims to identify a good or a service (American Marketing Association). Thus, when applied to a brand, authenticity signifies that consumers perceive it as genuine and trustworthy in fulfilling its promises. Indeed, brand authenticity is closely linked to brand trust: if customers do not find the brand to be authentic, the trust in that brand could be lost. Various studies reflect on the attempts to conceptualize brand authenticity. A study by Morhart et al. discussed the concept of perceived brand authenticity and defined four elements of the concept (Morhart et al., 2015; Fig. 1). According to the model proposed by Morhart et al., the four elements of perceived brand authenticity focus on brand being “timeless” and capable to survive trends (“continuity” element), willing to deliver on its promises (“credibility” element), adhering to loyalty and care about customers (“integrity” element), and reflecting values that customers deem important (“symbolism” element; Morhart et al., 2015).

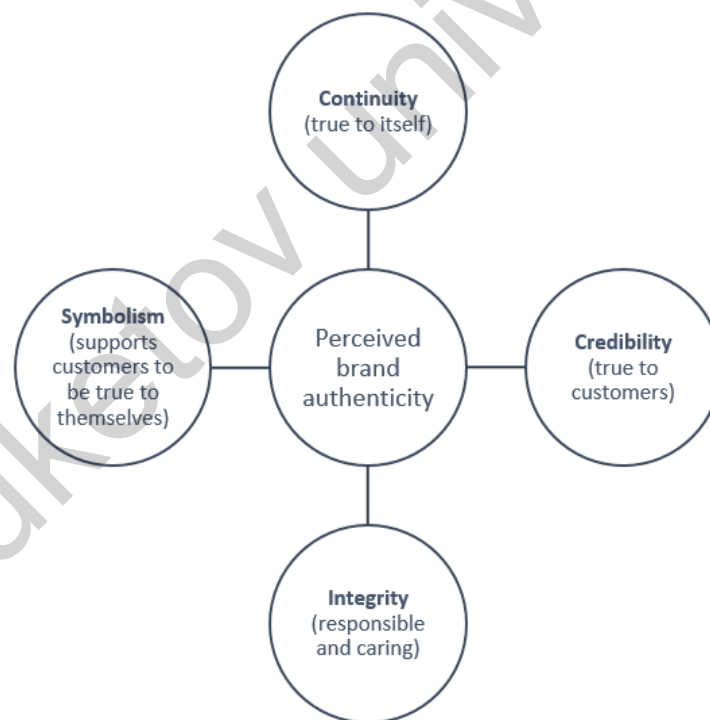


Figure 1. Perceived brand authenticity elements

Note — compiled by the authors based on the source (Morhart et al., 2015)

Another study (cited in Tran & Keng, 2018) led to the identification of six characteristics of brand authenticity, which include originality, commitment to quality, credibility, scarceness, heritage and style persistence, purity, and sacredness. A study by Bruhn et al. (2012) resulted in the creation of a psychometric scale for measuring consumers’ perceptions of brand authenticity, wherein brand authenticity was composed of four dimensions depicted in Figure 2.

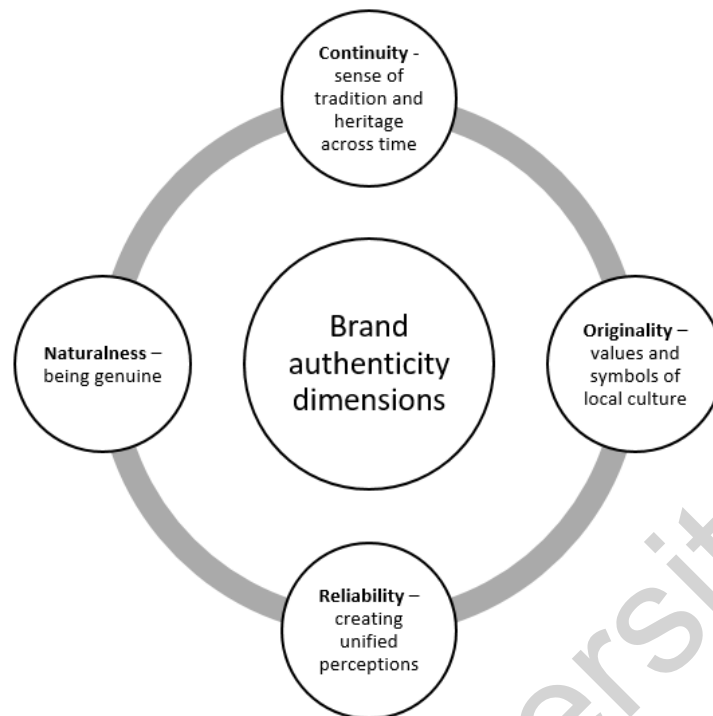


Figure 2. Brand authenticity dimensions

Note — compiled by the authors based on the source (Bruhn et al., 2012)

Hernandez-Fernandez and Lewis (2019) presented an overview of various previous research that aimed to define antecedents of brand authenticity concept starting from 1993 and till 2016. It can be observed that the concept has undergone evolution from being associated with workmanship, cultural and historic integrity (Tiberghien & Garkavenko, 2013; Tiberghien, 2020) in earlier years of its development to gradually shifting towards being associated with brand consistency, brand individuality and brand continuity in later years (starting 2010s; Hernandez-Fernandez and Lewis, 2019). A study by Girardin et al. (2023) built on Entity-Referent Correspondence Framework of Authenticity infers that authenticity implies being true to either an ideal, a fact, or a self. Other studies examined brand authenticity through various dimensions and factors and connected authenticity with different constructs such as brand trust, perceived value, brand individuality, brand consistency, brand equity, brand continuity and customer satisfaction (Hernandez-Fernandez and Lewis, 2019; Tran & Nguyen, 2022). In general, it can be concluded that the concept of brand authenticity is lacking a one defined measuring scale as there are various factors, characteristics and dimensions used in literature to define and measure brand authenticity. Nevertheless, the results of the majority of studies (Hernandez-Fernandez and Lewis, 2019) on brand authenticity prove that the customers' positive perception of brand authenticity leads to increased brand trust and improved perceived value of the brand. Brand authenticity is important as it helps the brand to distinguish itself among other available offerings and helps establish stronger emotional connections with customers (ibid.).

Meanwhile, companies have to stay true on keeping the brand authentic: in the era of social media dominance, customers can easily identify if the brands live up to their promises. A few of the recent studies address the power of social networks in building an image of a tourist destination. A study by Arefieva et al. (2021) discussed how the analysis of symbols through the prism of Instagram photos could be useful for better branding and marketing of a destination. Another study by Tamaki (2021) argues that posting images in social networks tend to affect the tourists' psychological well-being and ultimately influence the branding of tourist destinations. In support of the findings presented in (Arefieva et al., 2021; Gon, 2021), an article by Gon (2021) discusses the user-generated content in social media as a resource for the designing the experience which would in turn enhance the destination marketing and management strategies. Furthermore, McCreary et al. (2020) utilized data from social media to explore tourist destination image of a particular tourist-oriented region. Garay (2019) went further by analyzing a sample of tweets with a hashtag #visitspain to examine the functioning of the image formation process. Villamediana-Pedrosa et al. (2019) also performed a big data analysis of Facebook publications in order to identify message design strategies aimed at generating either a positive or negative engagement with customers.

Destination branding differs from traditional product/service branding in a sense that it takes the concept further than simply embodying brand name, symbol or logo which is used to identify a brand. Additionally, the destination brand must ensure a memorable experience and serve as an umbrella for all the memories, perceptions, and images that will later be associated with the destination in the visitor's mind. (Hashim et al., 2018). Destination brand image has a long history of development starting from the early 1940s (Pike, 2009). Today destination branding is more important than ever as an attractive destination brand leads to the inflow of tourists, which in turn has a positive effect on the destination's economy and development (Shi et al., 2022). At the same time, a destination brand which fails to offer the promised experience may lead to an immediate reaction on tourist numbers and the increase of the expenses to be incurred for reviving the destination's image.

Branding a city has similar challenges to branding a destination: a city's history, culture, people, infrastructure and visual characteristics — all have to be embedded in a successful brand. Measuring city brand is a complicated task: foremost, the decision regarding which criteria to include in the measurement is crucial. In 2006, Anholt developed the City Brand Hexagon model comprised of six distinct elements which aims to determine the city brand equity (Anholt, 2006; Fig. 3).

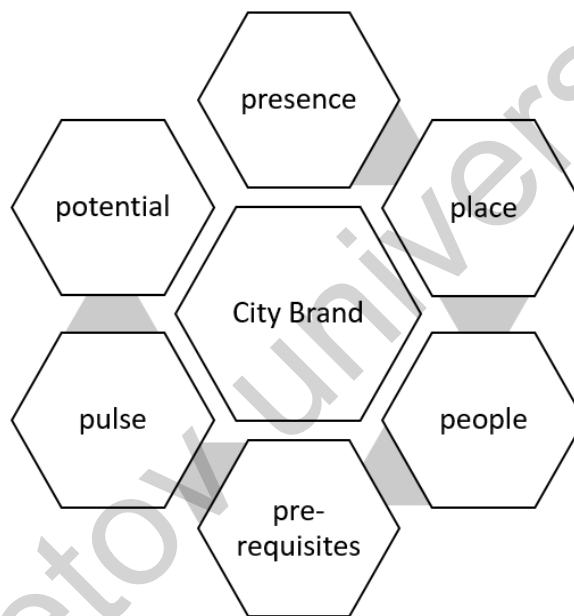


Figure 3. Anholt's City Brand Hexagon model

Note — compiled by the authors based on the source (Anholt, 2006)

The elements refer to the different characteristics of a city brand: thus, “presence” denotes the city's status, both within the region and internationally; “place” embraces the physical image of the city; “people” reflects the inhabitants and their opinion towards the city; “pre-requisites” in essence cover the city services including public transport, hospitals, education institutions, sports facilities and other essential city services; “pulse” reflects whether the city life is considered to be vibrant and interesting; “potential” includes all the possibilities offered by the city both to the locals and to visitors such as education, employment, investments, and so on (Benedek, 2017).

Philip Kotler devoted substantial research to place marketing (Kotler, 2000). According to Kotler, prior to developing a brand of a city, it is important to understand the need behind the branding effort. He stated that the cities nowadays are increasingly under risk due to the heightened competition among cities, urban revolution and decay, rapid changes in global environment, and the limited resources of the cities. Kotler identified the main stages for the successful creation of a marketing strategy for a city brand: initiating place audit, developing vision and goals, formulating strategy, outlining action plan, implementing and controlling the process (ibid.).

When it comes to brand authenticity of a city, it is more often believed to include all the characteristics which make the image of the city stand out. Such features may include city logo or emblem, effective slogan, peculiar associations and accents — all of which intend to make the city memorable in the perception of lo-

cals and tourists alike (Galeyeva, 2022). Some of the best examples of effective city brands are New York with its I LOVE NY signature and the Big Apple symbol; Paris where the Eiffel Tower is used on many promotional materials including the logo of Paris tourist office; Amsterdam which played with its name creating the “I am sterdam” slogan symbolizing the combined heritage of the city and openness to new things; Copenhagen which turned the “open” part of its name into the brand of being open to opportunities, investments, events, etc.; Stockholm which successfully branded itself as the capital of Scandinavia earning the status for being one of the best cities for foreign direct investments and attracting the largest inflow of tourist in the Northern Europe area (Galeyeva, 2022; Vokrugsveta, 2019).

Research questions

The overall aim of this study is to measure the brand authenticity and the brand strength of the city of Almaty. The research objectives of the study are to conduct a thorough literature review aimed at outlining the existing models for measuring brand authenticity with particular focus on destination branding; then, to select a suitable model(s) to be applied to the assessment of city brand authenticity; and to perform a case study analysis of the brand of Almaty, Kazakhstan, based on a content analysis of social networks dedicated to the city brand.

The research questions for the study are:

1. Based on existing literature related to brand authenticity and its measurement, what would be the appropriate measurement model for the city brand authenticity?
2. What is the current brand positioning of Almaty city in the social network(s) dedicated to the city?
3. Is there a potential to build the brand of Almaty city based on authenticity?

Context of the study

Almaty (before — Alma-Ata, Vernyi) is the city of the republican significance of the Republic of Kazakhstan. The city used to be the capital of the Kazakh Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic till 1936, then became the capital of the Kazakh Soviet Socialist Republic as part of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics till 1991, and remained the capital of the independent Kazakhstan till 1997. Almaty can be translated from Kazakh as “full of apples”. Almaty is the largest city of Kazakhstan by population: as of September 2023, more than 2.2 million people resided in the city (Official statistics of the city of Almaty). Aside from population size, Almaty today remains the most culturally and ethnically diverse city in the Republic, along with maintaining the status of regional financial and business center. The city boasts the significant number of research and education institutions, museums, theaters, parks and gardens, sports arenas, trade areas and industrial enterprises (Guide to Almaty). Almaty and its surrounding area are also attractive for their natural attractions, being home to lakes, canyons, parks and mountains.

Resulting from all the attractions offered by the city, Almaty has traditionally welcomed a notable inflow of tourists. As indicated by the official informational source of the Prime Minister of the country, starting 2021, the tourism industry in the country has started showing signs of recovery from the COVID crisis. During the first months of 2022, Almaty was visited by more than 320 thousand tourists, 55 thousand representing visitors from abroad (Official informational source of the Prime Minister of the Republic of Kazakhstan). Ten destinations of Almaty and its surrounding area, including destinations of the Almaty mountain cluster, were prioritized for development. The efforts to promote the Almaty region as an attractive tourist destination included active advertising work carried out both in the domestic and international markets. Information about tourist sites in the region was updated in Google street, Wikipedia and Yandex services (ibid.). According to the city tourism department, during the first half of 2023, the number of foreign tourists visiting Almaty rose to 261.6 thousand people (Profi Travel). The city Akimat (city council) expects that by the end of 2023, up to 500 thousand foreign tourists will visit Almaty (ibid.). During the latest meeting of the Council of Heads of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization which took place in July 2023, the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan Kassym-Jomart Tokayev proposed to declare the city of Almaty the tourist and cultural capital of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) for the period of Kazakhstan’s chairmanship in the SCO (Official website of the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan).

Even though the city has the potential to grow and develop its tourism sphere, the branding of Almaty remains to be developed. Throughout the history of independent Kazakhstan, contests were conducted on the branding of some cities in the country. As to Almaty, a logo oriented towards attracting tourists was introduced in 2016 and instantaneously became the object of heated discussions (Galeyeva, 2022; see Figure 4).



Figure 4. Logo of the city of Almaty

Source: Kapital (2016)

According to the Development Center of the city of Almaty, the developer of the logo, the apple in the center of the logo represents the core symbol of the city, while the seven circles around the apple are seven orbits of energy. Number seven has a sacred meaning in Kazakh culture, and symbolizes tribute to the past, traditions, and aspiration towards bright future (Kapital). The color coding stands for the colors of the sky, the flag of Kazakhstan, the sun, freedom, vitality and energy, harmony with nature, inspiration and purity of the creative path (ibid.). Thus, the logo was supposed to represent the sacredness of Almaty heritage, however, some commenters thought that the image failed to live up to its promise. For instance, according to the General Director of the International Foundation “Eurasian Media Forum”, the authors failed to convey the main idea in the image of Almaty — that it is “the city of apples” and “the city located at the foothills of the mountains”. Zoya Falkova, contemporary artist, adds that the sacredness feature from the explanation is clearly far-fetched (KTK). Other Almaty citizens (Galeyeva, 2022) also stated their concerns about the new logo: when being presented with the logo, some saw a triangle of radioactive/biological/nuclear danger, while the apple in the center was associated with the disappearance of apple orchards in the city (ibid.). Perhaps, as a response to the dissatisfaction with the symbol of Almaty expressed by the residents (Galeyeva, 2022; KTK), in 2022 the city administration announced the plan to develop a new city brand — “Discover Almaty” which would aim to promote Almaty as a tourist destination and accompany the improvement in the quality of tourism services. The administration believed the new brand would support the planned increase in the flow of foreign tourists to 1 million people by 2030 (TengriNews).

Methods

Qualitative research approach was selected for this study as it serves to contribute to achieving research aim and objectives by capturing information which cannot be conveyed in quantitative data and exploring the application of theoretical models to a practical case (Creswell, 2014). In addition, qualitative research approach was better suited for the current study as it allows extracting sufficient volume of data from a relatively small sample size (Bachelor Print). Exploratory research approach was adopted as the addressed research questions have not previously been studied in depth (Creswell, 2014). Methodology of the study employed the content analysis. Content analysis is a research data analysis method which intends to review and assess the communication messages extracted from data sources (Krippendorff, 2019). Content analysis was chosen for the reason that it allows capturing a more insightful sense of researched concepts within the dataset (Vitouladiti, 2014). Content analysis was conducted based on established theories of brand authenticity using data collected from social network pages dedicated to the city of Almaty. For this study, the authors decided to focus on Instagram for the foremost reason that today it is one of the most widely used social media worldwide: according to Statista, in 2021, Instagram boasted 1.21 billion monthly active users which made up 28 percent of the world’s internet users while as per Statista’s forecast, by 2025, the number of Instagram active users would reach 1.44 billion which would account for over 31 percent of global internet users (Acuti et al., 2018; Statista).

The ten reviewed Instagram accounts dedicated to the city of Almaty were chosen using purposeful sampling method (Palinkas et al., 2015). Thus, the Instagram accounts of official city administration departments were selected first, including “akimat_almaty” account managed by Almaty city Akimat, “openalmaty” account, which is the official public reception service of Almaty city administration,

“almatytourism” account which is managed by Almaty city tourism department, and “almatydc.kz” account, which represents Almaty city development center. The remaining six accounts were selected from a list of accounts dedicated to Almaty on Instagram based on the number of followers and the account dedication to type of activities detailed in the city. The latest one hundred posts from ten selected Instagram accounts dedicated to Almaty city as of November 1, 2023, were reviewed.

Out of the considered models, the following two models were selected for the analysis: the model proposed by Bruhn et al. (2012) and Anholt’s City Brand Hexagon model (Anholt, 2006). The reason for choosing the model proposed by Bruhn et al. was that the model offers four distinct dimensions of brand authenticity each detailed in the model (Bruhn et al., 2012). Anholt’s City Brand Hexagon model does not explore the brand authenticity; however, it was chosen to be applied in the study for its relevance to evaluate city brand with the assumption that if the city brand shows strong performance under the six elements of the City Brand Hexagon model, it has a distinct potential to build on its authenticity as authenticity has a direct positive link to brand equity (Tran & Nguyen, 2022). The dimensions/elements of each of the two selected models are now presented in detail.

1) Bruhn et al. (2012) model, Figure 2: four dimensions of brand authenticity — continuity, originality, reliability and naturalness. As mentioned above, the model was selected as it reflects distinct dimensions of brand authenticity, and the proposed dimensions are suited to be applied to the measurement of the city brand authenticity. The dimensions are as follows:

- *Continuity* — the brand fosters a sense of tradition and heritage over time. In the content analysis, cues searched for included visual or textual depictions of images related to the city’s traditions, history, and heritage.

- *Originality* — the brand stimulates presentation of symbols and values that represent local culture. Cues included visual or textual reflections of symbols associated with local culture;

- *Reliability* — the brand is able to keep its promises and is reliable. Cues included characteristics of unified perception of the brand, such as consistent use of image and communication styles and fonts within posts, and consistent display of logo of Almaty within posts;

- *Naturalness* — the brand is in general genuine and natural. Cues contained associations of brand showing care and genuine motivation to serve the customers/citizens.

2) Anholt’s City Brand Hexagon model (Anholt, 2006), Figure 3: six elements of city brand equity — presence, place, people, pre-requisites, pulse and potential. As stated earlier, even though the model does not directly explore the brand authenticity, it was chosen to be applied in the study for its relevance to evaluate city brand and the elements comprising the city brand equity. The assumption undertaken for selecting this model is that if the city brand shows strong performance under the six elements of the Hexagon model, it has a distinct potential to build on its authenticity as authenticity has a direct positive link to brand equity (Tran & Nguyen, 2022). These six elements relate to the different characteristics of the city brand:

- *Presence* denotes the city’s status, both regionally and internationally. For the purpose of this study, the cues which were searched for the content analysis included the city’s relations with other cities within the region and the city’s prominence in international arena, if applicable;

- *Place* embraces the physical image of the city. Cues included visual and textual information about the city, its architecture, infrastructure, sights and locations;

- *People* reflects the inhabitants and their opinion towards the city. Cues included visual and textual information about the city dwellers;

- *Pre-requisites* in essence cover the city services including public transport, hospitals, education institutions, sports facilities and other city services. Cues depicted visual and textual associations with the city services;

- *Pulse* reflects whether the city life is considered to be vibrant and interesting. Cues included referrals to the city life, visual and textual representations of vibrant city events and people;

- *Potential* includes all the possibilities offered by the city both to the locals and to visitors such as education, employment, investments. Cues included information about the possibilities for employment and education offered by the city.

Table 1 presents an overview of Instagram accounts dedicated to Almaty city used for the content analysis of this study (Table 1).

Table 1. Instagram accounts dedicated to the city of Almaty by the number of followers

No.	Account	Organization (if applicable)	Number of followers	Number of posts	Main language(s)	Orientation
1	almaty.today		836 000	864	Russian	News, short interviews/overviews
2	almaty_city		411 000	22 600	Russian	News, photos/videos, user generated content, ads
3	akimat_almaty	Almaty city akimat (city government body)	333 000	4 554	Kazakh and Russian	Informative (news, events, celebrations)
4	almaty.memories		142 000	2 018	Russian	Historical photos of the city, user generated content, ads
5	almaty_novosti		100 000	6 918	Russian	News, events, ads
6	visitalmaty kz		59 200	693	English, Kazakh and Russian	Overview of events, locations, sights
7	openalmaty	Public reception service of the Almaty city akimat	54 200	2 781	Kazakh and Russian	News, responses to citizens' requests/complaints (before/after photos, etc.), ads
8	almatytourism	Almaty city tourism department	14 200	450	Kazakh and Russian	Tourism related activities and events
9	inalmaty kz		13 700	8 736	Russian	News, weather forecasts, ads, events
10	almatydc.kz	Almaty city development center	1 401	720	Kazakh and Russian	News, events, plans for development

Note — compiled by the authors based on content analysis (November 1, 2023)

Results

Out of the ten reviewed Instagram accounts dedicated to the city of Almaty, four are supported by official organizations — Almaty city administration (“akimat_almaty” account), public reception service of the Almaty city administration (“openalmaty” account), Almaty city tourism department (“almatytourism” account), and Almaty city development center (“almatydc.kz” account). In terms of the number of followers, the three leading accounts are “almaty.today” with over 836 thousand followers, followed by “almaty_city” with over 411 thousand followers, and “akimat_almaty” followed by more than 333 thousand users. “almaty_city” is the most active account displaying over 22 600 posts in total. The majority of the accounts duplicate the presented information in Kazakh and Russian languages, with the only exception of “visitalmaty kz” account, where the posts are mainly written in English with occasional additions in Kazakh and Russian. Most of the accounts are oriented towards delivering news. In addition, half of the accounts have a more specific purpose: “visitalmaty kz” and “almatytourism” are targeting tourists, “almaty.memories” is largely devoted to displaying the retro-style photographs of the city, “openalmaty” occasionally deals with complaints/concerns of the city dwellers, and “almatydc.kz” at times posts plans on developing the city. Out of all accounts, only “almaty_novosti” uses the logo of the city of Almaty (Kapital) in its posts, while “almatydc.kz”, “akimat_almaty”, “openalmaty”, and “almatytourism” use the official city coat of arms. Next, analysis is presented of all ten Instagram accounts through the models of perceived brand authenticity dimensions developed by Bruhn et al. and City Brand Hexagon model created by Anholt.

Bruhn et al. developed a psychometric scale for measuring consumers' perceptions of brand authenticity (Bruhn et al., 2012). According to their model, brand authenticity is composed of four distinct dimensions, which were assessed through the content analysis of hundred posts from each of the ten selected Instagram accounts dedicated to Almaty city.

The following table reflects the assessment of city brand authenticity within the posts from the selected Instagram accounts using the measurement model proposed by Bruhn et al. (Table 2).

Table 2. Assessment of 100 posts in Instagram accounts dedicated to the city of Almaty according to the dimensions developed by Bruhn et al.

No.	Account	Continuity	Originality	Reliability	Naturalness
1	almaty.today	7	15	97	31
2	almaty_city	12	12	44	8
3	akimat_almaty	15	12	47	40
4	almaty.memories	32	18	70	9
5	almaty_novosti	2	3	72	19
6	visitalmaty kz	16	24	57	13
7	openalmaty	7	9	74	50
8	almatytourism	14	21	30	20
9	inalmaty kz	2	4	26	22
10	almatydc.kz	6	8	85	24

Note — compiled by the authors based on content analysis (2012)

- *Continuity* — out of the ten considered Instagram accounts dedicated to Almaty city, the account with the largest number of continuity cues was “almaty.memories”, the account which is largely oriented towards reliving history of the city through retro-style photographs. Indeed, the content displayed in the account s reflects the city heritage which in turn appears to attract followers, as the account has the fourth largest number of followers out of the ten reviewed pages. The accounts “visitalmaty kz” and “almatytourism” boasting notable number of posts with ‘continuity’ cues are more often oriented towards attracting tourists which can be explained by the notion of tourists being drawn to the history and heritage of the destination. While the accounts devoted to covering local news and events showed fewer posts with “continuity” cues (“almaty_novosti”, “inalmaty kz”);

- *Originality* — both accounts oriented towards promoting tourism in the city are more often associated with the “originality” cue (“visitalmaty kz”, “almatytourism”). The posts reflect the connection to local culture intended to inspire tourists to visit Almaty. Once again, the Instagram pages dedicated to covering news are less concerned with displaying “originality” cues (“almaty_novosti”, “inalmaty kz”);

- *Reliability* — most of the reviewed Instagram accounts showed consistency in their posts: the style was similar with the continuous usage of the same fonts, elements and designs. “almaty.today” and “almatydc.kz” displayed the largest number of posts with the consistent use of design and style. Overall, the communication style of posts within all ten accounts was also consistent: the majority of accounts used both Kazakh and Russian languages for covering the information in their posts, and had done it on a consistent basis;

- *Naturalness* — a number of posts reflected the care and the genuine motivation to support and help the readers. Accounts “openalmaty” and “akimat_almaty” displayed the largest number of posts with “naturalness” cues which can be explained by the orientation of these account towards responding to concerns of Almaty citizens and providing overall support and care.

Next, the same posts from Instagram accounts were reviewed using Anholt’s City Brand Hexagon model (Anholt, 2006; Benedek, 2017). The following table reflects the assessment of posts within the selected Instagram accounts in terms of City Brand Hexagon model (Table 3). One hundred posts (as of November 1, 2023) were reviewed for each account.

Table 3. Assessment of 100 posts in Instagram accounts dedicated to the city of Almaty according to Anholt’s City Brand Hexagon model (compiled by authors based on content analysis)

No.	Account	Presence	Place	People	Pre-requisites	Pulse	Potential
1	almaty.today	5	44	50	42	13	5
2	almaty_city	2	48	33	12	10	3
3	akimat_almaty	3	59	72	32	16	1
4	almaty.memories	-	84	19	14	2	-
5	almaty_novosti	-	35	59	22	2	-
6	visitalmaty kz	8	96	50	6	21	-
7	openalmaty	7	67	50	20	8	1
8	almatytourism	11	48	58	14	10	1
9	inalmaty kz	9	48	52	24	3	1
10	almatydc.kz	12	78	41	24	3	7

Note — compiled by the authors based on content analysis

- *Presence* — as it was mentioned earlier, the cues for the “presence” element cover the city’s relations with other cities within the region and the city’s prominence in the international arena. A few cues related to the city presence were identified within the posts of the Instagram accounts of Almaty city. “Almatydc.kz” and “almatytourism” had more posts with “presence” cues as they promoted the status of Almaty city internationally.

- *Place* element involved cues with visual and textual information about the city, its architecture, infrastructure, sights and locations. All the accounts displayed considerable number of “place” element cues reflected in posts depicting Almaty architecture and infrastructure with “visitalmaty kz” leading with place cues appearing in 96 posts out of the reviewed 100;

- *People* — again, all of the accounts dedicated to the city of Almaty displayed cues associated with people with “akimat_almaty” showing the largest number of posts about Almaty citizens. Notably, “almaty.memories” had the smallest number of “people” element cues, as the account is mostly displaying retro photos of Almaty architecture and landscape;

- *Pre-requisites* — most of the accounts expressed concern with the state of city services. In particular, a notable number of posts associated with public transport issues and news was displayed in majority of accounts; the largest number of “pre-requisites” element cues reflected in posts depicting, among others, issues associated with Almaty traffic, state of public transport and city safety conditions was noticed in “almaty.today” and “akimat_almaty” accounts while “visitalmaty kz” had the fewest number of posts with “pre-requisites” element cues which can be explained by the account orientation to attract tourists rather than to cover information on public city services.

- *Pulse* — all ten reviewed accounts had some posts reflecting the vibrant life of Almaty city. The account “visitalmaty kz” showed the largest number of posts which could be associated with the “pulse” element due to, assumably, the account mainly targeting tourists and, therefore, displaying the attractions of the city life including but not limited to announcements about city festivals and celebrations, concerts and exhibitions, and sports events. Other accounts showed less activity within this element as they more often focused on the routine city news;

- *Potential* — surprisingly, the potential element was the most neglected out of all six elements of the model: only some Instagram accounts had posts reflecting the city potential, and even if present, those posts were quite scarce. “almaty.today” and “almatydc.kz” had 5 and 7 of the posts covering the potential of the city respectively: the focus of the posts often mentioned employment and education opportunities offered by the city.

Discussions

Findings show that the reviewed Instagram accounts fared well in terms of brand authenticity as all four dimensions of continuity, originality, reliability and naturalness proposed by Bruhn et al. were covered to some extent by each of the accounts. However, the distribution of the presence of all four dimensions is uneven with some accounts presenting more cues of some dimensions while no single account embodied consistent number of cues of all four dimensions. This inconsistency in coverage may lead to a fragmented image of the city of Almaty for the citizens and visitors alike as they would need to follow several accounts of the city to get a complete picture and understanding of the city brand. Still, based on the results of this study, the reviewed Instagram accounts displayed posts containing cues reflecting all four dimensions of brand authenticity (continuity, originality, reliability and naturalness). In particular, “continuity” and “originality” were notably displayed in Instagram accounts dedicated to attracting tourists, while cues associated with “reliability” were present in most of the reviewed accounts and “naturalness” was largely presented within accounts run by the city council. Therefore, it could be derived from the performed analysis that Almaty has the potential of building an authentic brand.

Following the analysis based on Anholt’s City Brand Hexagon model, all ten Instagram accounts devoted to Almaty city performed strongly within “place”, “people” and “pre-requisites” elements. Elements of “presence” and “pulse” received less attention, while “potential” was neglected which conveys an incomplete picture of the overall brand perception of the city of Almaty, especially in the perception of potential visitors and tourists as all six elements of the City Brand Hexagon model are essential to build a successful brand. A similar issue can be observed with the brand authenticity dimensions’ model: the elements are covered inconsistently throughout different Instagram accounts with no single account displaying all elements required for an effective account of a city brand. Thus, the citizens and visitors would need to follow several accounts of the city to get a full picture of the city brand.

To summarize, the analysis showed that the efforts to display all dimensions and all elements of the city brand of Almaty are in place. The official organizations such as Almaty city administration, Almaty city tourism department and Almaty city development center attempt to build on Almaty brand by regularly posting and updating their social network accounts. However, it can be observed that there is no unified effort to promote the brand of the city. The adopted logo of Almaty is being used only by only one Instagram account. There are numerous occasions of the same news being displayed within several accounts. Moreover, as the information is fragmented across the reviewed Instagram accounts, and the accounts seem to target different aims, a visitor will have to follow several accounts of the city to get a complete picture of the Almaty brand. Therefore, the main recommendation would be to unify the efforts to promote the brand of Almaty by offering a single main Instagram account for the city which would serve as an umbrella account for supplementary pages; with each page displaying information devoted to one type of activity, whether it is tourism in general, wherein posts could reflect cues from continuity and originality dimensions of brand authenticity measurement model developed by Bruhn et al. along with cues relating to presence, place and people elements which compose Anholt's City Brand Hexagon model; vibrant city life, for which posts could reflect cues from originality dimension and pulse element; retro-style photos with posts depicting cues from continuity dimension along with presence and place elements); complaints/suggestions with posts containing cues from reliability and naturalness dimensions and pre-requisites element); news, where posts may reflect cues from originality and reliability dimensions and all six elements of Anholt's City Brand Hexagon model), etc. The main account could serve as the main source of general city news and events with the list of supplementary accounts displayed in the main information section of the account.

Conclusions

This paper presented an overview of the extant literature about the definition and models for measuring brand authenticity. Several models for measuring brand authenticity were discussed, including the model of perceived brand authenticity elements developed by Morhart et al. (2015) and the model of brand authenticity dimensions proposed by Bruhn et al. (2012). It can be observed, that even though various approaches to measuring brand authenticity had been developed (Hernandez-Fernandez & Lewis, 2019; Morghart et al., 2015; Bruhn et al., 2012), the existing research on the topic does not offer a unified technique for measuring brand authenticity, in particular, relating to the city brands. Two models were selected for measuring brand authenticity of Almaty, Kazakhstan: perceived brand authenticity dimensions developed by Bruhn et al. and City Brand Hexagon model created by Anholt. The model proposed by Bruhn et al. was chosen because it defines four distinct dimensions of brand authenticity, each covered in detail. (Bruhn et al., 2012). Anholt's City Brand Hexagon model does not explore the brand authenticity, however, it was chosen to be applied in the study for its relevance to evaluate city brand with the assumption that if the city brand shows strong performance under the six elements of the City Brand Hexagon model, it has a distinct potential to build on its authenticity as authenticity has a direct positive link to brand equity (Tran & Nguyen, 2022). Content analysis of posts from ten Instagram social network pages dedicated to Almaty city was performed to assess brand authenticity from data collected from the Instagram social network pages dedicated to Almaty city. The analysis showed that for the city of Almaty, the efforts to display the brand authenticity dimensions proposed by Bruhn et al. and City Brand Hexagon model elements created by Anholt are in place. However, the dimensions/elements are covered inconsistently throughout the reviewed Instagram accounts with no single account displaying all dimensions/elements required for effective city brand presentation. Thus, the citizens and visitors alike would need to follow several accounts of the city to get a full picture of the city brand. The main recommendation would be to unify the efforts to promote the brand of Almaty by offering a single main Instagram account for the city which would serve as an umbrella account for supplementary pages each of which would display information within its orientation.

Theoretical implications

This paper presents an analysis of city brand authenticity based on social network analysis for an emerging brand of the city of Almaty. The theoretical models used in this study were adapted to assess both the authenticity of the city brand and the overall city brand strength and could be adopted to assess other city brands in the country. Such analysis could serve as a basis for identifying which brand authenticity dimensions an emerging destination should focus on to develop its brand.

Managerial implications

The analysis of city brand authenticity based on social network analysis performed in this study displays an effective overview of the main existing social network accounts dedicated to the city of Almaty and their authenticity dimensions displayed about the city of Almaty. This study could be useful for the Almaty city destination management organizations and the city tourism department for adapting the strategy of building a successful city brand in the south of Kazakhstan which would enable to attract more tourists into the city. The study could also serve as a guidance for creating a better communication strategy from the Almaty city council, which would particularly address the ways of developing the image of the city and communicating that image for wider tourism development.

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