

## Manuscript Details

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### Abstract

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

<b>Keywords</b>	Place Branding; city branding; place management, destination management; brand communications
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Dear Editor,

We hereby submit the manuscript entitled “Stereotypical versus experiential destination branding: the case of Milan city” to be considered for publication in *City, Culture and Society*. We confirm that we have removed any identifying content that could compromise a blind review.

This is an original submission that has not been published before and that is not currently under review at any other publication outlet.

The basic findings of the paper and their significance for theory and practice can be summarized as follows: In order to extend the understanding of city branding, this study focuses on the perceived image of Milan and performs a gap analysis by exploring specific factors and specific types of stakeholders. Based on target’s provenance and degree of knowledge of city, stereotypical and experiential perceptions of Milan are measured with respect to nine main city attributes as summarized by literature background and compared to the brand values of some important European cities. The findings highlight a mismatch between the stereotypical and experiential perception at different levels and provide the framework to inspire more effective marketing policies for the improvement of city’s image.

On behalf of the co-authors,  
Luigi Orsi

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## **Stereotypical versus experiential destination branding: the case of Milan city**

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# **Stereotypical versus experiential destination branding: the case of Milan city**

## **Abstract**

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

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## **Introduction**

In recent decades destination management and place marketing have constantly increased their focus on establishing the city as a brand to attract qualified target audiences and to differentiate one place from another (Braun, 2012). Recently, the branding of places (and cities in particular) has gained popularity among policy makers (Kavaratzis, 2009). In order to attract people and differentiate place brands, place marketers have highlighted the need to adopt marketing techniques to identify competitors, analyse the impact of the city brand and the positioning of the city image (Anholt, 2007; Zenker, 2011). Zenker et al. (2013a) argued for a better understanding of the competitive environment of cities and a deeper analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of cities in comparison to their relevant competitors as critical conditions of an effective branding strategy.

The analysis of Milan's destination positioning consists of a benchmarking with some competing European destinations. De Carlo et al. (2009) provided a useful cognitive basis upon which to formulate a strategy of tourist development that linked the significant investments planned for Expo 2015 with the re-launching and sustainable growth of the city attractiveness in the medium-long

term. However, the improvement of city image and brand communication are crucial not only to attract tourists but also potential citizens, qualified target groups of people (such as highly-educated students, skilled workers, immigrant entrepreneurs), and to attract foreign investments (De Noni et al., 2014). From a national perspective, Milan has a successful and attractive image because it is usually considered to be the most dynamic Italian economic centre and an important national hub, capable of offering job and student opportunities, social and health services, and cultural events. Conversely, Milan has not been effective enough to develop and spread the same strong image at an international level.

The main aims of this study are to evaluate the positioning of Milan with respect to its main European competitors and to explore the gap between stereotypical and experiential perceptions of Milan at a national and global level. We used the degree of knowledge of Milan by Italian and foreign people as a discriminant factor to define the stereotypical (low level of knowledge) and experiential (high level of knowledge) perceptions. The analysis is led by the main attributes affecting the urban quality of life, as summarized from the literature. We assume differences in perception are related to the degree of knowledge of a place, and local communication strategies are likely to be more effective on a national than global level. We consider the findings of this study useful in order to give practical implications for local and global place marketing and management. The research study involved a target sample (N= 1600) of European citizens and a local sample (N= 1000) of Italian citizens, in order to evaluate Milan's national and global perception and image. Two sub-sets based on the degree of knowledge of the city of Milan are further investigated respectively for the Italian and European samples in order to compare stereotypical and experiential perceptions. A 10-point Likert scale questionnaire was employed to evaluate a set of city attributes likely to affect urban image and perception.

The findings are particularly relevant because Milan has been expected to enhance its urban planning to exploit international relevance and competitiveness based on Expo 2015. The analysis suggests that, firstly, the degree of knowledge affects the city's image. This means that experiential perception reaches higher scores compared to stereotypical perception and this is valid for both local and global levels. Secondly, the Italian (local) sample has a more positive perception of Milan than the European (global) sample. This trend is valid for both experiential and stereotypical perceptions. Finally, Milan's global perception shows several negative gaps with respect to other European cities, especially in the quality of healthcare, the quality of education, the level of safety and the quality of social services.

The research paper is organized as follows. In the first section a literature review is presented in order to highlight the increasing importance of place marketing and branding to develop city

competitiveness and attractiveness. The second section focuses on cities' attributes influencing city brand attitude. In the third section, research structure and empirical methodology are described. Then, a gap analysis is applied in order to compare and evaluate local and global, stereotypical and experiential perceptions of Milan's brand image. Finally, we discuss results, practical implications for place marketers and areas for future research.

## **Literature background**

Recently a growing body of practice and research around place branding has been developed. These topics involve, such as summarized by Hanna and Rowley (2008), comparisons between branding a product and destinations (Morgan et al., 2002; Anholt, 2007; Boisen et al., 2011), comparisons between corporate brands and city brands (Kavaratzis & Ashworth, 2008; Kavaratzis, 2009), impressions between place branding and (re)positioning, image building and regeneration (Trueman et al., 2008; Avraham & Ketter, 2013; Mikulić et al., 2014), urban renewal or city revitalization (Evans, 2003), town centre management, the importance of unique identity (Morgan & Pritchard, 2004; Anholt, 2006; Herget et al., 2015), problem of multiple identities and conflicting interests among different stakeholders (Merrilees et al., 2009; Cleave & Arku, 2014), the use of branding attributes (Merrilees et al., 2009; Darchen & Tremblay, 2010), the role of emotional links with consumers (Bobovnický, 2011; Barnes et al., 2014) and the issue of cities' creativity (Florida, 2002).

The actual relevance of place marketing and place branding is suggested by the increasing number of journals and articles concerning the topic (Gertner, 2011). The author argues "*a large number of articles are based on specific experiences or case studies*" but they usually fail to make explicit an objective and to advocate practical recommendations. Moreover, he claims "*it is also important to understand differences in the branding of communities, cities, states/provinces, nations and other types of places*" (Gertner, 2011, p.125).

Many authors and researchers (Bobovnický, 2011; Boisen et al., 2011; Herget et al., 2015) have noticed that the increasing interest in branding strategies applied to places and locations stems from the growing competitiveness between them and from the consciousness about the capability of a place to be branded like a product.

Boisen et al. (2011) are keen to clarify that places need a geographical hierarchical order that can provide a better understanding and conceptualization of the current situation followed by an adequate specialization of brand strategies.

Since it is suggested that modern cities have similar features, a city branding strategy requires the creation of unique values to distinguish one city from another, with attention paid to its physical properties and developing the relationship between the individual and a specific location. In this

way, branding processes can really emphasise the uniqueness of a place and define its benchmark position in comparison to other competitors (Zali et al., 2014). An important key to a competitive distinction, which can increase the power of attractiveness, is the perceived quality of the processes of city destination selection (Bobovnický, 2011), which is usually the result of a collection of good experiences.

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

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

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

A relevant difference is often also between stereotypical and experiential perceptions and between local and global images. Studies on city branding typically measure the quality of urban life by investigating the satisfaction level based on the personal and introspective experience, as supported by Bobovnický (2011), who believes that gathering divergence between several experiential feedbacks’ discrepancies gives an orientation about the real quality level, correlated to people’s degree of satisfaction: “*Discrepancy (positive or negative) between expectations and perceived quality leads either to dissatisfaction (negative discrepancy), or neutral position (slightly positive discrepancy) or even to high satisfaction (significant positive discrepancy)*” (p.86). Therefore, studies typically involve resident citizens’ or visitors’ levels of city knowledge in order to collect data on qualitative perceptions of urban image and attributes (Santos et al., 2007; De Carlo et al., 2009; Merrilees et al., 2009; Zenker et al., 2013a). However, brand communication involves both stereotypical and experiential perceptions of cities. Similarly, Braun (2012) refers to them as ‘current’ and ‘potential’ visitors.

The place image through media and word-of-mouth produced over time influences the perception of those who have no personal experience. On this standpoint, Barnes et al. (2014) develop their idea that experiential and stereotypical impressions are strictly connected and influence each other; the



projected identity of a place brand image motivates the selection of destination decision. After this, a combination of sensorial, affective, behavioural and intellectual experiences will condition visitor satisfaction, intention to revisit the location, and even recommendations to other visitors who do not know about the location.

Avraham & Ketter (2013) discuss two opposite media strategies implemented to improve prolonged negative images, which are comprehensive of both experiential and stereotypical impressions of city image: *“Strategies that follow the cosmetic approach focus on restoration of the negative image, without changing the reality that caused the image problem. In contrast, strategies that follow the strategic approach take comprehensive action, basing the new campaign on substantial changes in the destination’s reality, among other factors”* (Avraham & Ketter, 2013, p.146). We can, therefore, deduce that the stereotypical aspect is fulfilled by the conscious construction around the brand image that captures the initial visual image in people’s mind (especially those with no understanding of a place), while the experiential one is fed by practical policies and operations.

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

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

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

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

Therefore, an international investigation involving citizens of 12 European cities is preliminarily applied to measure the gap between stereotypical and experiential global perceptions of Milan’s image. Similarly, an Italian sample is explored to respectively measure stereotypical and experiential local perceptions. Data are used to compare Milan’s national and global brand

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

Even though the literature review suggests a number of factors, directly or indirectly, that are able to influence the quality of life in the urban centre, it is important to note that city branding collects its power and substantiality from several areas that are not strictly related to the urban environment, but can influence the intention to move – for example the degree of satisfaction experienced on international public transport – and are capable of conditioning the decision-making process for a destination (Delaplace et al., 2014). Another aspect which could be explained is the current role of public relations, media and information technology in place branding and, especially, in the reconstruction or enforcement of a city (a topic known as “Smart Cities”).

### **City’s attributes influencing destination branding**

The development of brand identity needs multidimensional constructs, place, purpose and direction, while the destination experience depends on attributes, benefits, values and personality which a place is able to create (Hanna & Rowley, 2008). The most reported aspects can be grouped into three macro-topics: urban design, which highlights the role of social capital, business creativity and job opportunities (economic development area); tourism studies, which focus on the local and international transport connections, cultural activities and quality of the environment; social studies, which investigate safety, education, healthcare and social services.

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

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

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

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

Differently, López-Ruiz et al. (2014) build an index looking at the development of intellectual capital. They underline the importance of knowledge within the growth of a city, investigating aspects such as infrastructures, governance and policies, urban development, human dimension (living, social, economic, business condition) and environmental sustainability.

Focusing on tourism, Beerli & Martin (2004) classified factors influencing image assessments into nine dimensions: (1) natural resources, (2) general infrastructure, (3) tourist infrastructure, (4) touristic leisure and recreation culture, (5) history and art, (6) political and economic factors, (7) natural environment, (8) social environment and (9) atmosphere of the place. Anholt (2006) claims tourism promotion is likely to be the loudest voice in branding cities as well as people's first-hand experience of visiting the country as tourists or business travellers. De Carlo et al. (2009), on the one hand, suggest a city's positioning is strongly influenced by the business and trade fair activities, and on the other hand, stress the role of tourism industry and propose a tourism promotion able to exploit the cultural resources of the city. Herget et al. (2015) add their investigations into the economic impact of city branding, focusing on the tourism side. They state that a relationship between brand value and price of services exists, and in their study they concentrate on average prices of hotels as conditioning factors of a country's brand, comparing two different indices. The result is that the current relationship is bi-directional, so the two variants impact on each other's image. Parahiyanti & Hussein (2015) have deepened the role of tourism power on brand equity as affected by event marketing. According to the authors, *'event is an activity that could support increasing the branding of a location, such as a city, a province or a country'* (p.74). In their case

study, a famous social event is investigated as able to boost destination branding, because of the high reaction of people to healthiness, environmental and public topics.

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

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

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

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

		(2004), Carvalho & Winden (2017)
Level of Internationalization (INT)	Level of international transport connections; Degree of international reputation; Centre for international events	Santos et al. (2007), Zhang & Zhao (2009), Delaplace et al. (2014)

## Research design

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

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

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

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

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

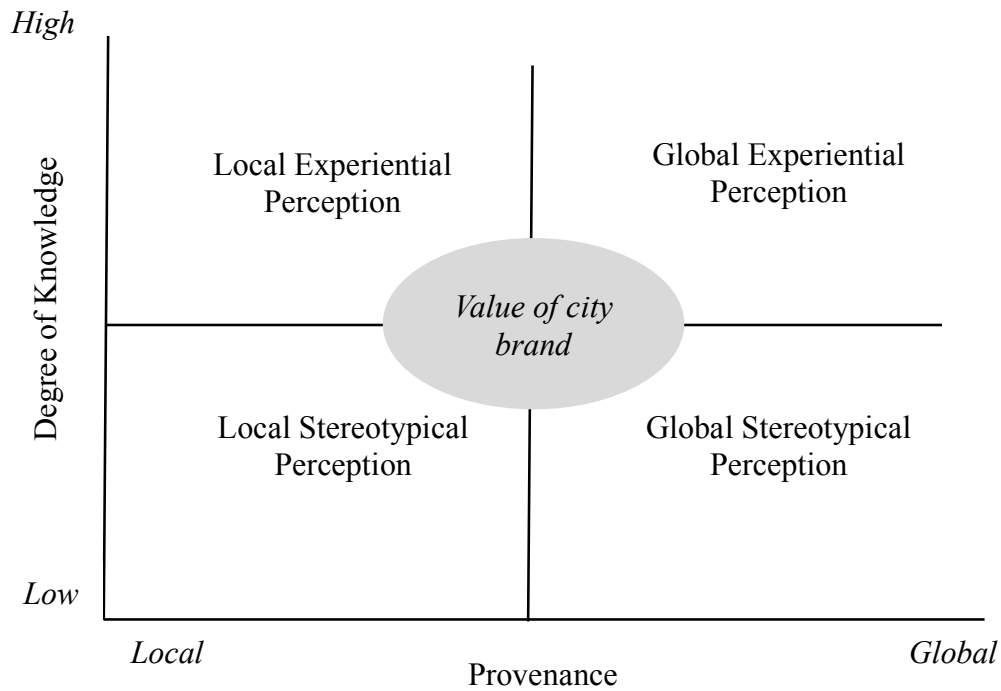


Figure 1: Matrix of the city brand value (source: our elaboration)

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

### Methodology

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

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

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

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

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

French cities (Paris, Lyon and Bordeaux) have an influential political role without losing attractiveness for a large touristic audience thanks to its significant landscapes, traditional towns and villages, and rich history.

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

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

<b>Countries</b>	<b>Cities</b>	<b>Freq.</b>	<b>% Freq.</b>
Spain	Madrid	30	1.9
Tot. 400	Barcelona	238	14.9
	Valencia	132	8.2
France	Paris	107	6.7
Tot. 400	Lyon	155	9.7
	Bordeaux	138	8.6
United Kingdom	London	226	14.1
Tot. 400	Manchester	137	8.6
	Liverpool	37	2.3
Germany	Berlin	254	15.9
Tot. 401	Munich	91	5.7
	Frankfurt	56	3.5

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

Interviewed subjects were asked ‘How important are the following city attributes (see Table 1) for your place satisfaction and your choice of a place to live?’ as suggested in Zenker et al. (2013b). The questionnaire items were defined by a pool of territorial marketing and destination management experts, involving university and local administrative institutions<sup>1</sup>. Moreover, the questionnaire was translated into the five languages involved in the research (Italian, English, French, Spanish and

<sup>1</sup> The project was initiated by the Municipality of Milan and the Chamber of Commerce in 2009 in order to create the Territorial Marketing Observatory of Milan. All Milan universities were involved (Bocconi University, Catholic University of Milan, IULM, University of Milan – Bicocca and University of Milan), with a focus on different issues. The University of Milan was involved in order to analyse city attractiveness to potential citizens.

German) to enhance the accuracy of the results. Even though the items are formulated to be as reasonable and rational as possible, some misunderstandings by interview subjects still might have occurred. Multi-item scales are used and measured by 10-point Likert scales (ranging from 1=strongly disagree to 10=strongly agree). The sample size was fixed at 1107 interviewed subjects for the Italian group and at 1601 for the European group in order to satisfy statistical significance requirements. Similar studies have involved comparable (Zenker et al., 2013) or smaller samples (Merrilees et al., 2009; Zhang & Zhao, 2009, Zenker et al., 2013b).

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

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

The international sample is composed of 1601 European citizens who come from the four principal European countries: Germany, United Kingdom, France and Spain. In Table 3 we present the descriptive statistics of the international sample. The distribution between male and female people into the sample is balanced. The most representative age range is 25-45 years old (more than 80%), and the most common status is unmarried (nearly 50%) with children (39%) or single (30%). Regarding the education level, half of the sample has a bachelor or even higher degree, and the principal professional title is employee (40%), and another 40% is equally divided into executives, students and workers. The degree of knowledge of Milan is very low: only 25.1% of the surveyed citizens express an excellent or plenty of knowledge of the city. The primary motivation for this group to come to Milan is tourism, followed by job opportunities and relatives or friends to visit.



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

Variables	Items	International		National	
		Freq.	% freq.	Freq.	% freq.
Gender	Male	794	49.6	558	50.4
	Female	807	50.4	549	49.6
Age Class	18-24	270	16.9	286	25.8
	25-34	621	38.8	402	36.3
	35-45	710	44.3	419	37.9
Marital Status	Unmarried	713	44.5	589	53.2
	Married	496	31	346	31.3
	Cohabitant	346	21.6	141	12.7
	Other	46	2.9	31	2.8
# of family members	1	338	21.1	87	7.9
	2	446	27.9	236	21.3
	3	373	23.3	318	28.7
	4	302	18.9	352	31.8
	5 or more	142	8.9	114	10.3
Profession	Employee	623	38.9	334	30.2
	Executive	228	14.2	21	1.9
	Student	203	12.7	250	22.6
	Worker	187	11.7	90	8.1
	Freelancer	73	4.6	189	17.1
	Job seeker	71	4.4	162	14.6
	Other	0	0	61	5.5
Education level	No qualification	13	0.8	1	0.1
	Elementary school	32	2	3	0.3
	Middle school	205	12.8	108	9.8
	High school	522	32.6	638	57.6
	Bachelor degree	595	37.2	287	25.9
	Master or PhD degree	141	8.8	70	6.3
	Other	93	5.8	0	0.0
Degree of Knowledge	High	428	38.7	401	25.1
	Low	679	61.3	1200	74.9

## Results and discussion

The first goal of this empirical study is to evaluate the positioning of Milan as a destination place, with respect to its main European competitors, using a benchmark analysis of nine particular attributes. Table 4 shows the results of the benchmark analysis. Starting from the total sample average value of the nine factors, local and global interviewees affirm that the level of internationalization (INT) (especially the international renown of a city), the quality of culture (CUL) and tourism (TOUR) are the most satisfied attributes in the sampled cities, followed by the

quality of healthcare (HEA). The quality of education (EDU), quality of social services (SOC), quality of environment (ENV) and safety are not rated highly. The lowest levels of satisfaction are related to the level of safety (SAFE), especially traffic issues, and the level of economic development (ECON). Another important consideration is derived from the country average value. German cities show the highest average score for the nine items analysed (7.52), English cities are positioned in second place (6.96). Surprisingly, the average score for Milan on the nine items (Italian citizens plus European citizens' evaluation) ranks third (6.67) in line with the average French cities evaluation (6.65). Finally, the Spanish cities evaluation highlights some critical points with a low average score (6.28). Analysing in detail the average score of Milan for the nine attributes proposed and comparing them with the main European cities, we can observe a score higher than the average value of the European cities in terms of level of economic development (6.79), second only to the major German cities of Munich and Frankfurt. This is the result of being the leading centre of one of the most productive regions in Europe (Lombardy). Also the quality of the environment shows a level of satisfaction higher than the average value (6.17), but in this case with a low score. This factor (ENV) seems to be a critical issue for all the major European cities. Moreover, Milan shows good scores, although still below the overall average, related to the quality of the culture (7.31), the level of touristic capacity (7.32) and the level of internationalization (7.15), in this last case the fashion and design industry helps in boosting its positioning. Furthermore, Milan shows several criticalities, compared to its main competitors, related to the level of education (6.51), the quality of healthcare (6.26) and social services (6.47) and, lastly, the level of safety (6.05).

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

<b>Quality of attributes (10-point Likert scale)</b>									
<b>Cities</b>	<b>HEA</b>	<b>SOC</b>	<b>CUL</b>	<b>TOUR</b>	<b>SAFE</b>	<b>ENV</b>	<b>ECON</b>	<b>INT</b>	<b>EDU</b>
Barcelona	7.09	5.58	7.55	7.82	5.54	4.74	5.01	7.84	6.84
Madrid	6.58	6.04	7.41	7.73	5.54	4.69	5.37	8.24	6.55
Valencia	6.67	5.14	6.34	7.36	5.53	5.40	4.54	6.53	5.77
Spain average	6.78	5.59	7.10	7.64	5.54	4.94	4.97	7.54	6.39
Bordeaux	7.42	6.07	6.98	7.45	6.75	6.30	6.09	7.33	7.13
Lyon	7.20	5.99	7.12	7.36	5.96	5.34	5.97	7.34	7.46
Paris	6.88	6.35	7.06	6.97	5.73	5.18	5.97	7.20	6.86
France average	7.17	6.14	7.05	7.26	6.15	5.61	6.01	7.29	7.15
Berlin	7.69	5.95	8.53	8.33	7.24	6.73	6.77	8.49	7.57
Frankfurt	7.51	6.71	7.84	7.36	6.94	6.28	7.08	8.46	7.39
Munich	8.23	6.62	8.63	8.03	7.15	6.65	7.77	8.77	8.42
Germany average	7.81	6.43	8.33	7.91	7.11	6.55	7.21	8.57	7.79

Liverpool	7.81	6.68	8.64	8.25	5.94	6.72	6.30	8.41	7.94
London	6.94	6.64	7.43	7.39	6.04	6.07	6.04	7.92	7.44
Manchester	6.92	6.47	7.23	7.08	5.62	6.06	5.70	7.38	6.86
Great Britain average	7.22	6.60	7.77	7.57	5.87	6.28	6.01	7.90	7.41
Milan average perception	6.26	6.47	7.31	7.32	6.05	6.17	6.79	7.15	6.51
Total sample average	7.17	6.21	7.54	7.57	6.16	5.87	6.11	7.77	7.13

The second goal of this study is to evaluate if there exist differences in terms of perception between Italian and European citizens related to the positioning of Milan. Generally, the Italian sample (local perception) shows more positive scores for Milan than for the international one (global perception). In Table 5, we summarize the comparison between the local and global perception of the nine items analysed. Italian citizens have a very positive perception of the city of Milan; this result is due to the image of Milan as being the most dynamic and productive place in Italy. Especially, there are higher positive differences for the local perception in the quality of education (+1.35), in the level of city internationalization (+1.27) and in the quality of healthcare (+1.13). Regarding these positive results from local perception, Milan certainly has some of the best universities in Italy, the best hospitals and research clinics and a high level of international attractiveness due to events related to fashion, design and Expo 2015. But if we look at Table 4, the quality of healthcare and the quality of education seem to have the worst positioning compared to Milan's main competitors at the European level. More precisely, healthcare and education are critical elements and in need of accurate policies in order to improve the global image and perception of Milan. On the other hand, only the quality of the environment and the level of touristic capacity show higher values in terms of global perception compared with the local perception. Probably, this result is because at a local level there are more competitive places both for tourism capacity, such as Rome, Venice and Florence, and in terms of environmental quality such as the Southern part of Italy and the Alps.

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

Attributes	Milan local perception	Milan global perception	Differences local - global
Quality of Healthcare (HEA)	6.86	5.73	1.13
Quality of Social services (SOC)	6.96	5.90	1.06
Quality of Culture (CUL)	7.63	6.84	0.79
Level of touristic capacity (TOUR)	6.64	6.89	-0.25
Level of Safety (SAFE)	5.93	5.51	0.42
Quality of Environment (ENV)	4.38	5.71	-1.33
Level of Economic development (ECON)	6.50	6.20	0.30
Level of Internationalization (INT)	7.94	6.67	1.27

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

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

<b>Attributes</b>	<b>Local Milan experiential perception</b>	<b>Local Milan sterotypical perception</b>	<b>Global Milan experiential perception</b>	<b>Global Milan sterotypical perception</b>
Quality of Healthcare (HEA)	7.23	6.57	6.26	5.42
Quality of Social services (SOC)	7.35	6.66	6.47	5.58
Quality of Culture (CUL)	7.93	7.43	7.31	6.57
Level of touristic capacity (TOUR)	7.12	6.37	7.32	6.64
Level of Safety (SAFE)	6.40	5.66	6.05	5.21
Quality of Environment (ENV)	4.94	3.84	6.17	5.44
Level of Economic development (ECON)	6.87	6.36	6.79	5.87
Level of Internationalization (INT)	8.10	7.83	7.15	6.39
Quality of Education (EDU)	7.52	7.06	6.51	5.54
Total	7.05	6.42	6.67	5.85

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

First, experiential perceptions reach higher scores than the stereotypical ones; this is valid for both the local and global clusters.

People who actually have a higher degree of knowledge of the city of Milan, having tested personally its atmosphere, lifestyle and dynamics, have a better opinion. Probably, the lower evaluation of the stereotypical perception is due to a wrong or inefficient city brand communication and management. However, positive word of mouth alone, i.e. by people who know Milan well, is not enough to enhance the gap between experiential and stereotypical perceptions.

Looking at the average response, even the experiential perception is not an optimal value: Milan's general image and weaknesses really need to be improved and rebranded in order to enhance the city's reputation and potential capacity for attractiveness.

Moreover, we have shown that the local sample has a more positive image of Milan than the global one and this trend is valid for both perceptions – experiential and stereotypical. This fact is easily explained because Milan is the focal centre for finance, economy, culture and innovation in Italy, so it is easy to understand why it captures such a huge interest in the Italian context. In addition, for

Italian people, it is easier to be directly or indirectly connected with Milan and have a deeper knowledge of the city, which is the fundamental trigger to improve its image and perception. Global citizens currently are not able to reach the same level of knowledge. Even if Milan is one of the most known Italian cities, and even if important international events are periodically hosted (the most recent example being Expo 2015), its real image is not really perceived at a global level. This gap reflects the fact that Milan is not a tourist city by definition, but it attracts people using other contexts and tools.

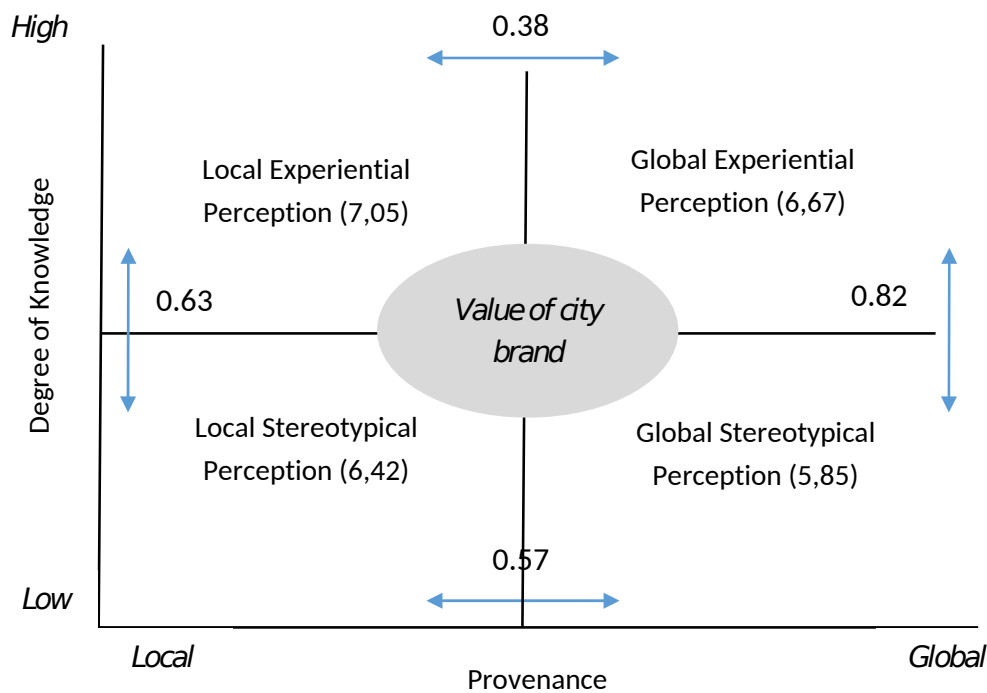


Figure 2: Comparison Matrix between stereotypical vs. experiential perception at global and local levels (source: our elaboration)

A final comparison between the horizontal (local and global perspective) and vertical axes (degree of knowledge) in the city brand value matrix, shows that the greatest gap exists on the vertical axis related to the stereotypical and experiential perception of the city. The average value of the gap between the two types of perception is 0.82 in the global cluster and 0.63 in the local cluster while the average gap between the local and global perspective scores 0.32 in the experiential cluster and 0.57 in the stereotypical cluster.

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

## **Conclusion**

This study mainly focuses on a benchmark analysis between 12 European cities and investigates the strengths and weaknesses of a city's national and international perception and how its brand image is perceived using the degree of knowledge as a discriminant factor.

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

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

Milan has a huge potential appeal and could be more highly valued; this deserves to be transmitted and shared as much as possible, and in a more efficient and in a more targeted personalized way. The city brand communication must be reshaped and transformed to imprint a more positive perception of the city at a global level.

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

Finally, a possible future research could be undertaken by testing the city brand model and the perspectives of different stakeholder groups. In particular, attitudes towards Milan's branding require measuring with respect to the perceptions of non-European citizens in order to assess its real worldwide relevance. Furthermore, it would be interesting to replicate this study post-Expo 2015 to understand the influence of this event on the perception of the city of Milan.

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