

The Power of Metaphors in Place Marketing

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Abstract: - This paper examines the still underutilized potential of metaphors in the context of place marketing, a field that includes place branding and placemaking. It aims to explore how metaphors can enhance the understanding and communication of place-related concepts, ultimately creating more meaningful connections between places and their inhabitants or visitors. The paper starts with a brief conceptual overview that inter alia brings out some enrapturing linkages to organizational sensemaking and improvisation. The research employs a systematic review of literature, yielding a sample of 32 relevant peer-reviewed articles retrieved from the Web of Science. Using a qualitative grounded theory approach, often referred to as the 'Gioia methodology', the study identifies key first-level constructs through open coding and then aggregates these into second- and third-order dimensions. The results reveal that metaphors are currently underutilized in place marketing, although they have been widely applied in related fields such as organizational theory. Metaphors hold significant potential for fostering meaningful placemaking and brand communication. The study proposes that metaphors could facilitate behavior change, promote resident engagement, and strengthen collaboration in creating quality places. These insights provide a foundation for further exploration of metaphors in place marketing, highlighting the need for more empirical and conceptual research in the field.

Key-Words: - metaphor, metaphoring, place, place marketing, placemaking, space, meaning-making.

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1 Introduction

Place marketing, a discipline that usually inherently encompasses place branding, management, and development, tends to concentrate on narratives, images, and meanings of place-making, [1]. Placemaking could be defined as the “practice of designing, creating, and programming public spaces around the needs and desires of the community of users” or, in other words, “the enhancement of places with the goal of turning them into useful and meaningful spaces”, [2]. A more prominent role in place marketing belongs to branding, where a crucial aspect is meaningfulness, since “a place is ... the location plus everything else that occupies that location seen as an integrated and meaningful phenomenon”, [2]. The discipline of placemaking (or place-making) emerged in the 1960s due to shifting from commerce or transportation systems to a human-centered approach in the designing of public spaces, [3]. A seminal (1961) book is a landmark in urban studies to the present, [4]. In defiance of the proliferation of human or community-centered design that involves different stakeholders, commercial development and placemaking are still detached, [3]. All places may

function as the “first” (for living), the “second” (for working), and the “third” (for socialization). The last category is particularly important because of balancing the increased privatization of home life, [5]. The role of “third places” in current societies is even increasing, because of promoting the well-being of individuals and communities, along with civic engagement, informal social control, grassroots democracy, social cohesion, and a sense of community, [6].

During the past half-century, placemaking as an academic discipline, as well as a practice field, has significantly evolved. A widely quoted paper, [7] identified four types of placemaking (Figure 1). The goal is designing quality places – places with a strong sense of place that people care about and want to be in. Overlaps with the components of ‘standard’ placemaking constitute the main characteristics of a good place: proper physical form, mix of land uses and functions, and mix of social opportunity, [7]. The most novel and interesting component is **creative placemaking**, where “partners from public, private, non-profit, and community sectors strategically shape the physical and social character of a neighborhood, town, city,

or region around arts and cultural activities" (emphasis with underlining retained), [7].

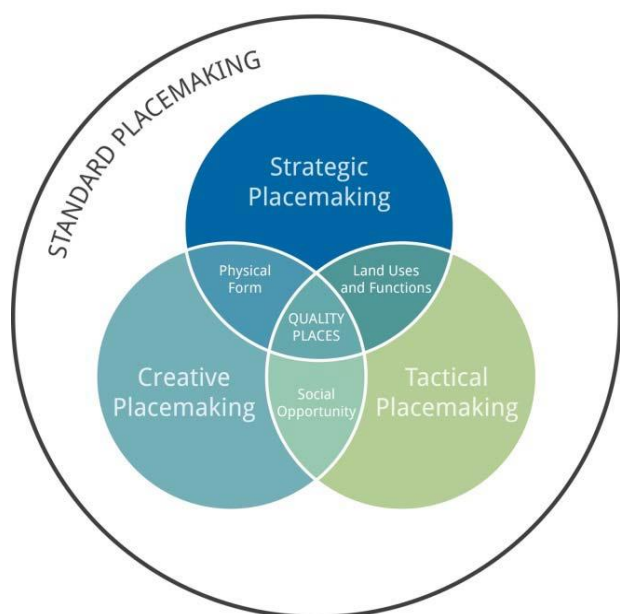


Fig. 1: Four Types of Placemaking
Source: [7]

Recent developments in placemaking allude to embracing ideas to support arts and culture, as well as tourism, economic regeneration, and temporary placemaking interventions, [8]. Another type, **labelled transformative placemaking**, encompasses three key themes: (1) attachment or connection between the community member and the place, (2) “sense of place” of an individual (positive or negative), and environmental change – in a continuum from ‘imposed upon individuals’ to ‘created by individuals’, [9]. Propounding environmental issues are related to another topical issue of sustainable placemaking, [10]. Sustainability and environmental issues in placemaking are not novel; these were discussed already in the 1960s [11], yet the importance of these issues is obviously increasing. A noteworthy observation is that dealing with sustainability issues – a kind of *super wicked problem* – may enrich placemaking via introducing novel approaches like design thinking and ‘jamming’. The last involves improvisation, adapted from jazz music, [12].

A prominent role in current placemaking belongs to **events** that are increasingly important in cultural and tourism, and social policies, [13]. This links placemaking to event management and, as events are essentially projects, to project management. This aspect is (albeit inexplicitly) shifts from single events to series – programs and/or portfolios – of events, [13].

The aforesaid indicates that placemaking is linked with more general (sub)disciplines. For one, a novel approach, labelled behavior-based placemaking, enables to promote sustainable urban design, [14]. This follows the “behavioural turn” in economics, organization theory, and other disciplines, [15]. Alongside, it is good to point to a tenor in organization theory, called the ‘spatial turn’ or spacing. The idea is to bring space (back) into (critical) organizational theory, [16], [17]. Recently, the conceptualization of place in organization studies was appreciably extended, paving the way to convergence with placemaking, [18].

In organization studies, a popular topic is **meaning-making**, where a focal notion is the **metaphor**. This is because symbols, myths, stories, legends, etc., are essential in meaning creation, shaping our imagination and helping to represent and explicate the realities and our experiences, [19]. This direction originated in the 1980s as from an idea to “... teach organization theory through metaphor, illustrating a range of different theories by presenting them as metaphors ...”, [20]. His eight generative metaphors viewed organizations as machines, organisms, brains, cultures, political systems, psychic prisons, processes of change and transformation, and instruments of domination. The intention was to illustrate their scope of application for organizational theorizing, [20]. His later commentary [21] fixed the mind on the interaction of metaphor and metonymy. This is important because to obtain specific meaning, metaphorical images must be tied and articulated via metonymical processes, focusing on the naming of detailed elements. It is worth noting that this commentary appeared in a special issue of the Human Relations journal, marking 30 years since the publication of a seminal book. As the guest editors [22] note, it tends to contribute to future conceptualizing of organizations. This thematic issue contained several remarkable articles. One of these [23] emanated from the ‘*flux and transformation*’ metaphor and, elaborating the metaphor–metonymy relations, proposed three offsprings: organization as *becoming*, as *practice*, and as *communication*. Another notable contribution [24] proposed a novel metaphor, ‘*organization as Icehotel*’ that depicts a paradoxical organization that is both temporary and permanent. Disserted case is also a good illustration of the application of the existing dichotomic types of metaphors, [24].

Another initiator of organizational improvisation advocated ‘disciplined imagination’ in theorizing, seeing the ‘discipline’ as consistency and the ‘imagination’ as deliberate diversity in the

problem statements, thought trials, etc. Considering the complexity of organizations, the role of metaphors was characterized as inevitable, [25]. A notable contribution [26] proposed a novel transformational view of metaphors, giving heed to both metaphorical and literal languages. A significant work [27] elaborated further the idea of ‘disciplined imagination’ and elucidated how metaphors may work and partake in theory construction. An example was *Organizational Improvisation as Jazz*. Alongside jazz and music, other fine arts can be fruitful metaphorical sources of inspiration. Another example metaphorically accentuated differences between realists and interpretivists, in painting or doing research, [28]. As metaphors enable seeing the familiar differently, they can be useful in developing methodologies [28], even if combined with agility and improvisation in research, [29]. Also, metaphors might help to overcome existing barriers and gaps between different fields, [29], [30].

During nearly four decades, organization scholars have exploited metaphors rather widely; these have even been ascribed to be a foundation of organizational studies, [31]. This was claimed more than 10 years ago, but it is even more valid nowadays. This is because novel approaches are steadily accruing, and older ones are enhanced. As already mentioned, a highly metaphorical notion is organizational improvisation, but this is a stream in a wider trend, seeing most performing arts – all music, theatre, dance- as a prodigious context for studying organizational phenomena, [32]. In addition to crossing the phenomena and contexts, organization researchers could adapt methodical approaches like immersive participant-observer research to get genuine insights into fundamental structures and processes that exist both in performing arts and management, [32]. Close researcher-participant interaction occurs in action research [33], using a novel approach, *Imaginative Metaphor Elicitation* for sensemaking. Empirically, it studied the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, and so did, [34]. The last theorized the co-orienting potential of metaphors and detected two novel key properties: *vividness* and *responsible actionability*. A recent complement is seeing organizations as algorithms, reflecting the immersion of automation, big data, artificial intelligence, etc., [35]. Furthermore, the thematic collection “The Oxford Handbook of Metaphor in Organization Studies” was published in February 2024. Introduction of this book called it timely, as it “... calls attention to the ways we construct the world”, [36]. Considering

the prior brief overview, such a book could have appeared even earlier.

The proliferation of metaphors in various subfields of organization and management is apparent and reflected in the literature. Somewhat surprisingly, in marketing, metaphors are not that popular [37], excluding visual metaphors, but chiefly in advertising, [38]. Spatiality in marketing, relying on place-oriented and space-oriented thinking, is vital. Place is still a core element of marketing mixes, and in the early 1950s, the novel notion ‘marketing geography’ emerged. It covers a global perspective (concerning overseas demands, etc.), and a local perspective (retail distribution in specific locations, etc.). Space is rather about different flows (products, tourists, capitals, talents, etc.), which circulate across a variety of locations in relation to one another, [37].

Our initial screening indicated that in place marketing, including place branding, metaphors are not popular. On the other hand, the overview exhibited a rich and fruitful experience in using metaphors in related (sub)fields. So, there is a research gap that leads to the rationale of this paper. This conceptual work intends to explore the underutilized possibilities for the application of metaphors in place marketing, including branding and other related subfields, and to propose avenues for further development. Following the goal, we carried out a systematic review of relevant literature in Web of Science. The second section presents the methodology and exemplifies the literature sample. In the following section (3), we present the results of open coding that serve as the first-level constructs, and aggregated themes and dimensions – respectively the second- and third-level constructs. The last section (4) discusses the results of analysis and synthesis, and in conclusion, points out existing gaps and suggests directions for further research.

2 Methodology and Literature Sample

We started with searching relevant literature in the Web of Science (WoS) with the keywords “place marketing” AND “metaphor” in topics, limited to articles in peer-reviewed journals in English. This search provided 86 results, but the initial screening revealed that nine articles did not match the inclusion criteria (in peer-reviewed journals in English). Thus, the sample for initial content examination was 77, but rather unexpectedly, more than half of the articles did not say anything substantial about our topic. The only criterion was an outspoken focus on metaphors in place-making; we did not apply any additional criteria, such as

period, etc. Hence, our veritable sample included just 32 articles. Our research process is depicted in Figure 2 (Appendix).

Our analysis and synthesis are based on the qualitative grounded theory approach known as the ‘Gioia methodology’, [39]. This methodology was designed for developing theories from empirical material, but can and has also been used for systematic work with literature (a recent example is Mayer and Schwemmler), [40].

The sample (32 articles) is rather heterogeneous in terms of topics, authors, and publication outlets. Only one title appears twice among publication outlets: *Social Science & Medicine*. Most journals are marketing-related (the *Journal of Macromarketing*, *Journal of Social Marketing*, *Marketing Theory*, and *Industrial Marketing Management*); several journals are place-related (*Tourism Geographies* and *Urban Studies*). There are also a few psychology- and health-related journals (like *Health & Place*, *Journal of Consumer Psychology*), and only one journal is dedicated to metaphors – *Metaphor and Symbol*. Some journals are surprisingly “out of the box” and challenging to classify (like *Appetite* and *Feminist Review*).

The trend of publication is scattered. The earliest publication in the final sample appeared in 1987, the next nearly a decade later, in 1996. There are more breaks in the time series – for one, a pause in 2005-2009. Nevertheless, the trend during the past four decades (1985-2024) is obviously increasing (Figure 3).

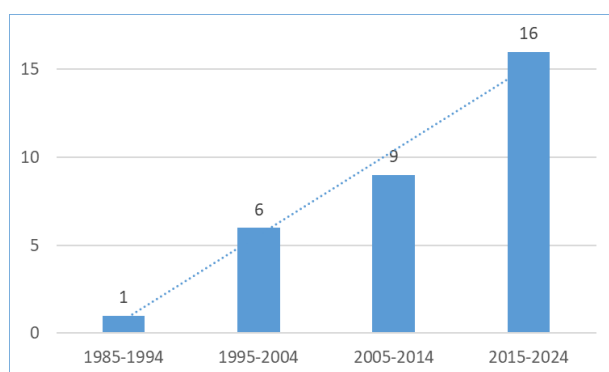


Fig. 3: Publication trend in 1985-2024

As indicated in Table 1 (Appendix), the most cited articles are [41] and [42], the latter also has the best ratio of citations per year (C/Y). The newest paper [43] about social media theory for public relations seems relevant based on the ratio of citations within a year.

3 Content Analysis and Synthesis

Following the idea of the ‘Gioia methodology’, the contents of all 32 articles in the sample were manually analysed and coded, using an inductive and iterative approach. The result of the content analysis and the following synthesis of second- and third-order constructs is presented in Figure 4 (Appendix).

Open coding is tricky; thus, the formation of the codes was discussed between the two authors several times. To avoid too many codes, some were combined, like “transformation”, “transformative”, etc., under the label “transformat_”, as well as “consumer/customer” that have a similar meaning. This process had several iterations until saturation, when we did not perceive any additional substantial (key)words. In the final round, all articles were examined again, and some numbers of occurrences increased due to this.

Although our research approach was qualitative, we counted the number of occurrences of the first-order constructs and, when aggregating the second- and third-level constructs, summed the occurrences on lower levels. The numbers of occurrences should be taken as illustrative, just indicating the popularity of constructs. This is because our sample was rather minimal, and more importantly, because we treated equally all occurrences, starting from just mentioning to substantial development of a particular notion.

Using inductive open coding, we formed 44 first-order constructs. We did not eliminate rare (appeared only 1-3 times) codes because all these were quite significant. The average number of occurrences was 11, and the maximum was 42, which is bigger than the sample size (32), but this happened because of combining the similar keywords “consumer” and “customer” into one code.

The ‘Gioia methodology’ intends to combine the coded first-order constructs into second-order themes and form themes into third-order aggregated dimensions. The third level is not obligatory, as it “... would connote omniscience and only God has that kind of understanding”, [39]. However, we believe that in our case, the third-level constructs are reasonable. So, we aggregated the 44 first-order constructs into seven second-order themes and two third-level dimensions (Figure 4, Appendix).

The first (upper) themes assemble constructs that directly relate to metaphors. The first includes crucial properties of metaphors; the second is about *metaphoring* – constructing and using metaphors. (The term *metaphoring* is not yet widely used, but sounds befitting.) The third theme consolidates

constructs related to marketing – objects (such as cities) and processes (like storytelling, etc.). It should be noted that the code “marketing (...)” comprises several different aspects – thinking, management, strategy, etc. The pertinent dimension (as the third-order construct) embraces these three themes and is labelled “metaphors in place marketing”.

The next four themes form the second dimension, labelled “making quality places”. Included themes involve residents, behavior change, cooperation or collaboration, and space or places. We did not discern place (locations) and space (various flows), [37].

Formed constructs, especially the second-order themes, are logical and relevant, as we try to persuade with some examples. Our examination revealed that an important theme is the properties of metaphors. Good metaphors simplify complex information and make it easier to understand. For instance, numerical data can be replaced with more relatable comparisons. Hence, describing the destruction of rainforests by the area that is lost every minute, saying a “football pitch” is much better to imagine than “10,000 acres”. This will enhance the impact of the message. [44] a gripping virtue of metaphors is the personification of places and abstract ideas, [45], [46]. In personification, the process of metaphor involves attributing human traits (like “broad shoulders,” needing a “haircut”) to inanimate objects. This helps to create more vivid and relatable images, especially for branding purposes. [45] these examples assert the close interrelatedness of metaphors (the entities or results) and the metaphoring process. Some examples confirm that using specific methods (like the Zaltman Metaphor Elicitation Technique) in metaphoring helps to uncover emotional and sensory mental structures. Metaphors may function as tools for eliciting hidden knowledge and understanding, extra in researching consumer perceptions, [47], [48].

The ultimate goal – making quality places – often requires changes in behaviour of residents, as well as visitors. Importantly, using metaphors can influence behavior, sustainable consumption, waste disposal, etc. The use of metaphorical information will help people to quantify the consequences of unsustainable consumption and waste disposal. This suggests that behavior change towards more sustainable practices is influenced by how easily relevant information can be understood and processed, [44].

Placemaking involves numerous distinct business relationships and stakeholders, especially

residents; the most important relationships are cooperation and collaboration. [49] notably, business relationships can be conceptualised with animal metaphors. In that instance, the metaphoring process involves mapping characteristics of animals (such as “milking the cow,” “horse racing”) onto abstract business activities like financing, acquisitions, and mergers. This helps to frame complex information within familiar patterns of interaction between humans and nature, [50].

Several scrutinised articles noted peculiar powers of metaphors, such as structuring of knowledge and thought [47], and sense-making [51]. Metaphorical modelling may allow creating a system of coherent metaphors that represent a system of concepts [52]. This is also because metaphors can be used to create unique associations [53] that may be extra persuasive and influential [50], [52], [53].

4 Discussion and Conclusion

Our analysis and synthesis revealed two dimensions. The first (upper in Figure 4, Appendix) dimension comprises three themes: the first utters desirable properties of place-related metaphors, and the second theme proposes advisable methods for metaphoring. The third theme provides suggestions for the application of place-related metaphors in marketing. So, the second-order themes feature a continuum or spectrum, as the third theme is already a linkage to the second dimension (making quality places) that represents the general goal.

Provided examples (in section 3) can endorse the relevance of discerned themes. Besides the noted cognitive functions, metaphors boost persuasion and influence [50], [52], [53]. This is our first implication for all people involved in placemaking. The whole power of metaphors is not depleted; thus, we encourage the place-makers not to hesitate and use more metaphors. Metaphor connotes creativity – this used to be a personal trait, but it can be developed. Increasingly important is personification, which helps the residents identify with their places.

Concerning metaphoring (the process), the most important are design-related aspects. it is a bit surprising that design thinking did not appear. Yet, it was noted that placemaking could be enriched via introducing design thinking, especially if combined with other novel approaches, like improvisation [11]. Also, the keyword ‘reinvent/reimage’ deserves sustained attention because places change and consequently, their images need to be adjusted as well, [54].

Among the characteristics of marketing is the characteristic that the ‘default’ is cities or urban places, yet rural and suburban places are considered. Among the processes that dominate brand(ing), communication, storytelling, and dialogue. Meaning creating quality places, most people primarily think of a specific geographical point or area, then about the urban environment, and thereafter the economy and everything that comes along, like education (chiefly institutions), culture, events, etc. Among space and place-related initial codes, those concerned with economy and investment are predominant, also competitive(ness) and advantage, not to mention events that attract both residents and visitors.

Themes in the second (lower) dimension are about how (where, for what, etc.) to use metaphors. A well-represented and important theme in this dimension is residents – the people who live, work, invest, rest, and socialize. They are the main consumers or customers and form communities. Residents are multifarious and behave differently. An important theme where metaphors have a vital role is behavior change (often named “nudging” – influencing toward a desirable behavior), [44].

Residents are the most important stakeholders that all place-makers must consider; good initiatives will not work if not accepted by most residents, [55]. The next theme – behavior change – is closely related to the previous, chiefly because it must start from the local people. The visitors tend to follow the residents and imitate their behavior.

Networking (cooperation, collaboration, etc.) is increasingly popular and an important theme, but here is underexposed, probably because it is not metaphor-friendly. Among the properties of metaphors in place marketing (as well as placemaking), meaning is clearly protruding. This is not surprising, as meaningfulness is considered a crucial aspect in place marketing, as stated in existing literature [2].

Finally, a substantial theme is the place or space. Places must be interactive and competitive – i.e., have some advantages. Most places are also destinations for tourists. Several places are strongly dependent on tourism, and pertinent public policies shape the places profoundly. Expectations and perceptions of tourists and residents are often quite different; thus, preferring tourism makes the residents displeased, [56]. Popular keywords are also events and investments, made by investors. These are predominantly economic but not entirely – some investors become local citizens, and events activate local social life.

In conclusion, we note that the examined diverse literature sample included just a few articles that explicitly focused on the application of metaphors in place marketing. Most articles in our sample were about marketing in different contexts, often vaguely related to place marketing. Thus, metaphors in place marketing call for further research, in both an empirical and a conceptual sense. Our conceptual work brought out some enrapturing linkages to related topics, such as sense-making (or sense-giving) and improvisation. We believe that delving into these topics can open interesting and promising research avenues. Further research may enrich the literature on metaphors and metaphoring, as well as on related topics – for one, on organisational improvisation what is metaphorical by its nature and roots. Another interesting topic can be design – incorporating the ideas of design thinking.

A limitation of this work is a rather small sample of literature, found by using one academic database (WoS). We did not include other databases (Scopus, etc.) as our initial sample contained 77 articles, yet more than half did not include relevant information and dropped out. Thus, further work with literature is still necessary, yet more needed is further empirical research and development of methods and tools that can be used by practitioners in placemaking.

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APPENDIX

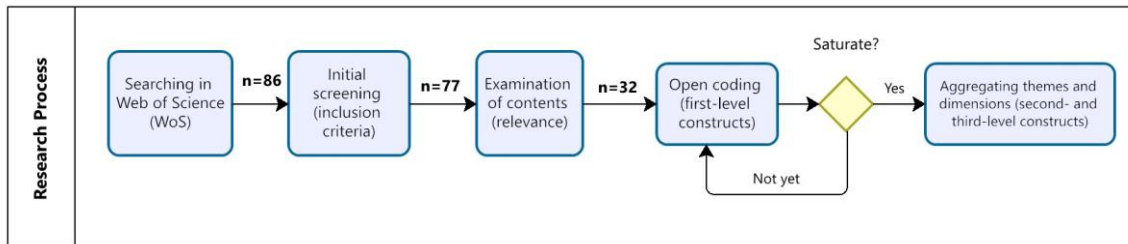


Fig. 2: Research process

First-order constructs (codes)	n.	Secon-order themes	n.	Third-order dimensions	n.
living things	2	properties of metaphors	40	metaphors in place marketing	126
magic(al)	6				
meaning	25				
personification	4				
gendered	3	metaphoring (process)	30		
reinvent/reimage	5				
improvisation	2				
creativity	1				
ZMET/metaphorical modeling	3	marketing objects and processes	56		
design_	19				
city marketing	2				
marketing (...)	10				
brand(ing)	18	residents	111		
storytelling	5				
communication	17				
dialogue	4				
resident_	13	behavior change	60		
behaviour	13				
consumer/customer	42				
consumption	14				
community	20	cooperation / collaboration	37		
sustainable	7				
human experience	2				
behavior change	2				
influence	25	space (places)	149		
intervention	9				
transformat_	19				
mindset	3				
push marketing	2				
partnership	8				
network	18				
orchestrat_	6				
globalization	5				
interactive	8				
competitive(ness)	15				
advantage	14				
destination	10				
geograph_	24				
urban space	5				
event(s)	13				
citizenship	3				
investment/investor/invest	15				
economic	26				
education (institutions)	16				

Fig. 4: First-, second- and third-order constructs

Table 1. Most cited articles in the sample

Author(s)/Year	Article Title	Source Title	Cit.	Cit/Y
Wu, F., 2003	The (post-) socialist entrepreneurial city as a state project: Shanghai's reglobalisation in question	Urban Studies	244	11.6
Edelman, D. 2010	Branding in The Digital Age: You're Spending Your Money In All the Wrong Places	Harvard Business Review	213	15.2
Barnes, M. 1999	Users as citizens: Collective action and the local governance of welfare	Social Policy & Administration	129	5.2
Kent, M. L., Li, C. 2020	Toward a normative social media theory for public relations	Public Relations Review	59	14.8

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The authors equally contributed in the present research, at all stages from the formulation of the problem to the final findings and solution.

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The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.

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