
RESEARCH PAPER

Best Practices of International Branding for NGOs in China

Sara Borkent

Directing branding towards an international landscape allows non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to expand to new scenes and reach larger audiences. This can open doors potentially leading to an increase in growth and impact, through collaboration with international organizations and increased fundraising outreach. Understanding how to effectively direct branding internationally is relevant for the Chinese NGO sector of today, because it brings Chinese NGOs closer to international stakeholders and increases their reach. This has a positive effect on Chinese NGOs in terms of increasing their capacity and accountability. The present article aims to contribute to building the capacities of Chinese NGOs in international branding. Through qualitative interviews with key informants of NGOs in China, quantitative observations of online activity of NGOs on international social media platforms, and desk research on the topic, this article identifies best practices of international branding for NGOs in China in terms of internal brand identity, external brand identity and brand performance.

Keywords: Branding; NGOs; International; China; Best Practices; Online

Introduction

A brand is what potential supporters, donors, or customers think of when hearing an organization's name. Contrary to popular belief, the brand is not the logo or strapline, which are simply the visual parts of the branding process. Branding is the process of targeting and positioning (Garsten & Bruce, 2018) and is a tool to interact and communicate with existing and potential stakeholders (Bamm, Helbling & Joukanen, 2018). It is what an organization does to shape the way they are perceived by their stakeholders and the general public.

A non-governmental organization (NGO) brand fulfils many purposes. Engaging in branding activities brings the NGO closer to—and even provides the opportunity for value co-creation with—the public, stakeholders, and beneficiaries (Nyangwe & Buhalis, 2017). Branding can provide a legitimate reputation to an NGO, be a supporting tool for fundraising, increase media exposure to mobilize societal support (Dai, 2017), and help an NGO stand out in highly dense competitive environments like the international non-profit sector (Garsten & Bruce, 2018).

Directing branding towards an international landscape allows NGOs to expand to new scenes and reach larger audiences. This can open new doors that lead to an increase in sustainable growth and social impact (Garg, Swami & Malhotra, 2018). Firstly, through the possibility of connecting and collaborating with the international

community, an NGO can increase their capacity and outreach. Secondly, by branding internationally, an NGO increases their fundraising outreach (Garsten & Bruce, 2018). According to Hasmath & Hsu (2014) there is also a third benefit of international branding specifically for Chinese NGOs: international NGOs have a significant impact on local Chinese NGOs with regard to capacity building and increasing accountability.

International branding for Chinese NGOs

China's NGO sector is young and started in the early 1980s with the establishment of China's first foundation (Chan, 2018). The sector got off to a slow start—in 2003 there were only 650 NGOs in China—but has experienced rapid growth in the last 15 years after a reform in 2004 that increased the ease of operation for Chinese NGOs (Chan, 2018). The number of NGOs increased significantly, and in 2014, China had around 606,000 NGOs (Lin & Jingwei, 2016). Since 2001, China initiated a “going global” strategy that caused its government and enterprises to have significantly increased operations and investments abroad. However, the NGO sector is far behind in this aspect (Lin & Jingwei, 2016). According to statistics by the Ministry of Civil Affairs, international and foreign-related NGOs only accounted for 0.09% of all 606,000 NGOs in China by the end of 2014. On one hand, this low number of international and foreign-related NGOs in China can be attributed to the fact that Chinese NGOs lack the driving force to “go global” as they focus on domestic issues and are yet to widen their scope overseas. On the other hand, Lin & Jingwei (2016) mention other challenges related

to policies and legal regulations that constrain NGOs in China from international development. Lastly, the study of Ling & Jingwei (2016) also emphasizes the challenge of lack of capacity in Chinese NGOs, which hinders them from expanding overseas.

China has the largest social network market in the world, and social media is considered a critically important branding channel in China (Gao & Tate, 2018). Major leading Western social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube are banned in China (although not completely inaccessible if one uses a Virtual Private Network). Instead, China has its own leading social media platforms with generally similar features like WeChat and Weibo, which are used inside China for branding (Qiaoqiao, 2018). However, on an international scale, platforms like Facebook and Twitter are leading. This gives Chinese NGOs a disadvantage when it comes to international branding as they are familiar with domestic platforms and not international ones. NGOs outside China are already familiar with the internationally used social media platforms and can combine their domestic and international branding efforts on the same platforms. Chinese NGOs would have to spend time and resources to get to know new platforms and manage them next to the domestic ones they already have for international stakeholders and consumers.

Understanding how to effectively direct branding internationally is relevant for the Chinese NGO sector of today, because it brings Chinese NGOs closer to international stakeholders and increases their reach. This has a positive effect on the Chinese NGOs in terms of increasing their capacity and accountability. The present article¹ aims to contribute to building the capacities of Chinese NGOs in international branding by first identifying the best practices amongst NGOs in China when establishing an international brand. Given the critical importance of social media as a branding channel, this study also identifies best practices for the online platforms that are most commonly used to communicate an international brand. In identifying the best practices, this study also aims to understand the main purposes for NGOs in China to engage in international branding. Best practices in this study were identified as practices that have shown to be effective when implemented in a real-life setting and are likely to be replicable in other settings (Ng & de Colombani, 2015).

Branding and the NGO Sector

An organization's brand is its most valuable asset (Nyangwe & Buhalis, 2017), and NGO brands are amongst the strongest brands in the world (Stride & Lee, 2017). Pao, Rodrigues, and Rodrigues (2014) argue that a strong brand is more vital for NGOs than for commercial companies because an NGO's brand is linked to their reputation, identity, and image in the eyes of stakeholders and the public. They state that NGOs are even more dependent on these factors for their existence than commercial companies are and provide several arguments. The first concerns an NGO's dependence on external funds. A strong brand provides potential donors with familiarity and the assurance of an NGO's efficiency and credibility. Pao, Rodrigues, and Rodrigues (2014) show that brand image

influences the degree that people intend to donate to NGOs. Secondly, volunteers often represent the majority of an NGO's staff, thus NGOs are dependent on volunteers to keep their operations going. The reputation of an NGO directly affects the ease with which they can attract volunteers. Thirdly, the extent to which an NGO is focusing on brand-oriented activities has a positive effect on its ability to achieve objectives and attend to stakeholders better than their competition (Pao, Rodrigues & Rodrigues, 2014).

Value co-creation in branding

According to Nyangwe & Buhalis (2018), branding has shifted from telling and selling to communicating and sharing. It is no longer a short-term transaction, instead the aim is to establish long-term relationships. Björner (2013) adds to this that consumers should not be seen as passive recipients of brand information, but rather as co-creators of brand value.

Value co-creation, as defined by Nyangwe and Buhalis (2017), is based on the joint creation of value between an organization and the public. Nyangwe and Buhalis (2017) identify two elements of value co-creation: value-in-use and co-production. The first being that an organization can only offer a brand as a value proposition, but the actual value depends on the participation and evaluation of the consumer. The latter refers to consumers participating in the creation of the brand through shared production. Four best practices identified in Nyangwe and Buhalis' (2017) research about value co-creation in branding are brand communities, influence, brand stories, and presence.

Brand communities consist of interaction between an organization, its stakeholders, and its beneficiaries or consumers. These communities, with a strong sense of stable attachment, are argued to be of more value to a brand than individual consumers that have a more casual and non-committal interaction with the brand. Gao and Tate (2018) even consider relationships between these different parties to be potential resources that, if managed properly, can significantly increase brand value.

The second best practice identified by Nyangwe and Buhalis (2017) was the value of utilizing people with influence on a big personal or professional network, also referred to as influencers, who provide a gateway to a bigger reach for engagement with potential stakeholders and consumers. This can be achieved in two ways: actively inviting influencers to co-create content or by capitalising on already existing influencer content that fit well with your brand.

The third best practice is brand stories and concerns storytelling as an essential tool for communicating brand values and establishing connections with stakeholders and consumers. By aligning the brand with a relevant and entertaining story, an organization can gain more engagement and reach than by only sharing organizational-related information.

The final best practice identified by Nyangwe and Buhalis (2017) considers presence to be a key aspect to building relationships with stakeholders and consumers. Björner (2013) also states that an official presence is

increasingly regarded as a vital branding tool. Being present, visible, and available in real-time allows for greater experience of the service because the value-in-use is being experienced during consumption of the service.

The role of internet and social media in branding

According to Björner (2013), the internet and social media are becoming increasingly more important in branding, because these platforms can enable organizations to reach global audiences with limited resources and higher levels of efficiency than traditional communication tools. Gao and Tate (2018) add that social media users are often willing to engage in information sharing in their networks, allowing for a bigger reach.

The internet and social media are also a big part of what caused the shift in branding from a one-way to a two-way street as previously discussed; consumers have become content producers and brand evaluators through discussions about products or services, reviews, and consumer-created advertising (Nyangwe & Buhalis, 2017). Fouts (2010) agrees with this by pointing out that social media's potential as a branding tool is maximized when it is treated as a conversation rather than a dictation. It also makes co-creation possible, because it provides new ways of communication between organizations and their stakeholders and consumers, and it shifts the power to the collective (Nyangwe & Buhalis, 2017).

Because of this power shift, it has become crucial to establish strong relationships with consumers from all over the world to establish an international brand. According to Gao and Tate (2018), building a relationship with stakeholders and consumers on social media should be done by utilizing existing relationships amongst the users and by offering incentives. They identify functional, monetary, symbolic, and emotional incentives that can be applied both individually and in combination. Functional incentives are associated with the utility of a product or service, monetary incentives include anything that a user can earn money with, symbolic incentives have to do with the user's association of their sense of self and expression of their identity, and emotional incentives provide emotional benefit to users (Gao & Tate, 2018). Four best practices in relation to social media branding are identified by Gao and Tate (2018). They include information seekers, social media influencers, devoted users, and inimitable social media incentives.

The first best practice refers to social media relationships between an organization and users based on the value-in-use of the organization's social media content. Some social media users, referred to by Gao and Tate (2018) as information seekers, follow a brand without having to use the brand's services. They merely subscribe and forward posts to their network because the brand offers interesting and informative content.

The second best practice considers utilizing social media influencers as an easy and fast way to reach a large audience. Gao and Tate (2018) argue that the value of an online celebrity or social media influencer can be evaluated from the size of their fan base or network.

The third best practice identified by Gao and Tate (2018) is the utilization of devoted users that have already

developed a strong emotional tie with the brand and regularly interact with the brand online. These users' creation of brand-related content, as well as their sharing of pre-existing content to their personal connections, is a good way for an international brand to gain popularity in local networks.

Gao and Tate (2018) argue that directing the right incentives at the right users increases social media engagement and outreach and thus contributes to the establishment of an international or global brand.

The difference between for-profit and non-profit branding

The use of social media for branding is common in both the commercial and the NGO sectors. However, according to Björner (2013), branding efforts cannot simply be copied from commercial companies to the NGO sector without an adaptation to their specific context. Stride and Lee (2017) agree, stating this has caused the NGO sector to become over-commercialised. Furthermore, they say it results in NGOs losing their values, which is the very thing giving legitimacy to their existence, as it is the non-profit sector's dependence on values, rather than profit, that makes it different from the for-profit sector.

While for-profit branding is mainly aimed at selling products and services to make a profit, non-profit branding is more complex. NGO branding also addresses other organizational objectives like lobbying, education, and communication of the cause (Stride & Lee, 2017).

The effectivity of branding for NGOs

According to Garg, Swami, and Malhotra (2018), successful NGO branding depends on three elements: the internal brand identity, the external brand image, and the brand performance. **Figure 1** shows the three elements of the model for successful NGO branding and how they interact.

According to this model, an NGO first must establish a strong internal brand identity. This is done through the creation of a shared working culture consisting of a strong vision, leadership, and shared values, as well as visual brand symbols (Garg, Swami & Malhotra, 2018). As Kylander and Stone (2011) point out, when an NGO's employees and volunteers all embrace a common brand identity, it creates organizational cohesion, builds focus, and reinforces shared values.

The second step to successful NGO branding would be to communicate the internal brand identity to outside stakeholders to create a sense of brand familiarity and loyalty, and ultimately a clear external brand image (Garg, Swami & Malhotra, 2018). These efforts increase external trust in the NGO, which attracts new talent and funding, allowing an NGO to progress faster towards achieving its mission (Kylander & Stone, 2011).

Once the brand identity and image are established, it is important to manage the brand performance, which can be done by setting up a communication structure and quality control techniques (Garg, Swami & Malhotra, 2018). The resulting reputation of a well-managed and well-aligned brand increases an NGO's capacity and enhances its social impact (Kylander & Stone, 2011).

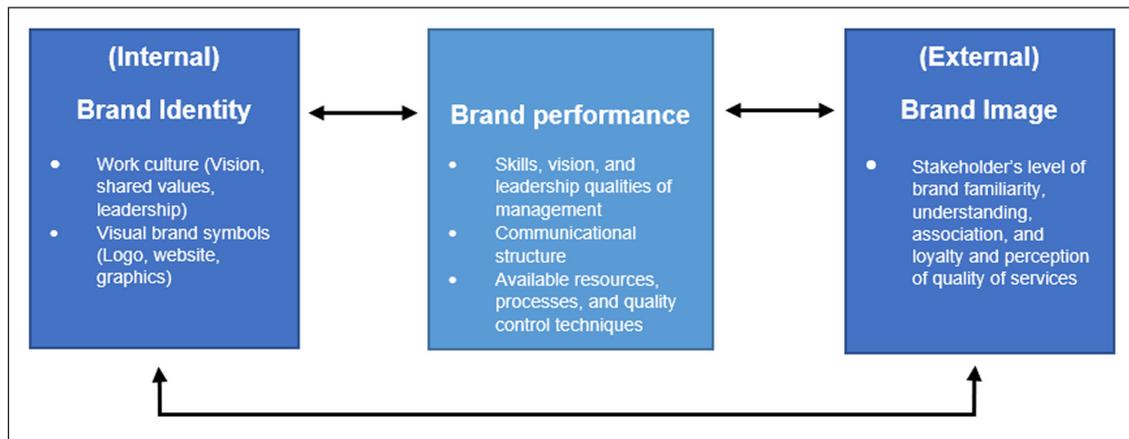


Figure 1: Model for Successful NGO Branding.
Source: Garg, Swami & Malhotra (2018).

Methodology

For this study, NGOs in China that have a successful international brand were interviewed. NGOs were selected based on four specific requirements. First, the NGO needed to be successful in international branding. This requirement is defined by another set of criteria, of which an NGO had to meet at least three to be considered for an interview: the organization had multi-lingual versions of their website, with at least an English version; the organization was active on non-Chinese social media, of which the platforms Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, and YouTube were considered; the organization had multi-lingual versions of a newsletter, with at least an English version; the organization was doing projects outside of China or was collaborating with foreign NGOs on projects inside China; the organization had received funding from foreign sources; or the organization had activities open to, or targeting, foreigners.

The second requirement was that the NGO needed to operate nationwide, rather than operating in one specific local geographical area. Local NGOs in China often focus on issues that are not applicable on an international scale or their mission is to improve the situation of their local area.

The third requirement was that the NGO could operate in any field, and thus did not need to focus on any specific issue.

The fourth requirement was that the NGO informant, or interviewee, needed to be an employee who holds a key or relevant position in the organisation and is knowledgeable and competent to talk about the NGO's branding strategy.

The interview included the following topics: purposes for international branding, internal brand identity, external brand image (including the communication of the brand through online platforms), and brand performance.

Three key informant interviews were conducted for this study.² A coded text analysis of the transcripts was performed to analyse the interviews. The data was colour coded based on the section it related to (purposes for international branding, internal brand identity, external brand image, and brand performance), and the results of all the interviews were grouped per section. This allowed

patterns between answers from different interviews to be identified easily.

The study also conducted quantitative observations of selected NGOs' online branding platforms. The purpose of the quantitative observations was to identify potential patterns of online activity that might reveal best practices that Chinese NGOs can learn from. The following points were observed, amongst others: frequency of posts, number of followers, number of views and engagement on content, lay-out of pages and posts, and use of visual brand symbols. The data was run on SPSS to generate frequency distribution. Correlations and simple linear regressions were done to evaluate relationships between several variables, including content of posts against post engagement, such as views, comments, and shares.

Quantitative observations were conducted on the online branding platforms of 25 NGOs.³ These NGOs were selected because they met four specific requirements. First, the NGO needed to be on at least three major online branding platforms: YouTube, LinkedIn, Facebook, Twitter, and an organization's website. Second, the organization needed to be a Chinese NGO or an NGO that operates internationally. Third, the NGO needed to have at least 100 followers on each of the platforms, excluding their website, which does not have any followers. There was no upper limit included for number of followers. Last, the organization needed to post content in English, which was necessary to make observations about the content.

The final data collection method was desk research of academic literature and non-academic sources about the purposes and best practices for (international) branding in and outside of the NGO sector. The purposes and best practices identified in the desk research were compared to the purposes and best practices that resulted from the qualitative interviews. If they matched, they were integrated into the research results section of this report to complement the primary data. If it contradicted the results of the primary research, a reasonable explanation was found and included in the research results.

Results and Discussion

Table 1 provides an overview of the results in identifying the purposes of international branding for NGOs in China,

Table 1: Overview of research results.

Purposes of international branding	
Purpose 1: International fundraising	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> International branding increases fundraising outreach. Branding provides legitimate reputation to NGOs and creates feeling of trust in stakeholders.
Purpose 2: Create international exchange	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Create international exchange to connect China with the rest of the world and increase international knowledge about China. Create international exchange so people inside and outside of China can learn from each other and understand each other's issues.
Purpose 3: Build international partnerships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Working together with international organizations increases organizational capacity. Partnering with international organizations increases accountability in Chinese NGOs.
Best practices internal brand identity	
Best practice 1: Use the founder's original vision	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> It is common to utilize the organizational vision as was originally written by the founder of the NGO. When updating the vision, all main staff members are included in the decision-making.
Best practice 2: Share the value to strive for real change	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> It is common to have a shared organizational value that fosters commitment to the job and to reaching visible results. Shared commitment fosters innovation inside the organization.
Best practice 3: Be consistent with visuals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Visual brand symbols are important for recognizability, visibility, differentiation, reputation, loyalty, and more. Consistency in visual brand symbols is vital to reach recognizability.
Best practices external brand image	
Best practice 1: Use the right platforms for the right audience	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Targeting the right people with the right channels optimizes time spent on branding activities and increases brand familiarity. Where to find which audience on which channels can be evaluated by considering a channel's purpose and deriving the users, and thus your audience, from that.
Best practice 2: Stay in touch with international stakeholders	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Stakeholders that were more frequently and directly contacted have a more positive overall impression of an NGO. The more personal contact with stakeholders, the more control an NGO has over how the stakeholder sees them.
Best practice 3: Leverage pre-existing connections	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Leveraging pre-existing connections can be critical in the early stages of international expansion because it can help get a foot in the door of the international sector. To know what existing connections to use, evaluate organizational goals, and decide which connections could be leveraged to reach those goals.
Best practices online platforms	
Best practice 1: Post short content	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Short content in text is defined as having 50 words or less, and in video it is 5 minutes or less in length. People generally engage quicker with short content than long content.
Best practice 2: Use images	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Images are used by almost all respondents on all platforms. Visual stimuli are learned faster and remembered longer than verbal stimuli.
Best practice 3: Inform about products and services, and interact and connect with users	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A combination of informing about products and services and interacting and connecting with users is most commonly applied on Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube. On LinkedIn and on organizations' websites, 50% or more of NGOs just informed about products and services.
Best practice 4: No observable structure in post frequency	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A significant number of NGOs did not follow an observable structure in their post frequency. The majority of NGOs still posted frequently or at least once per month.
Best practices brand performance	
Best practice 1: Monitor your online brand	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The performance of the brand depends on what is said about the NGO, thus this needs to be monitored. Monitoring the brand can be done through online tools.
Best practice 2: Evaluate monitoring results	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Evaluating the results of the brand monitoring is important to decide what actions to take to ensure brand performance is kept up to standard. Evaluations can be done structurally or whenever performance was shown to be particularly high or low.

the best practices in establishing an international brand looking at the elements of internal brand identity, external brand image, and brand performance, as well as best practices when communicating their brand on social media platforms.

Purposes for International Branding

Purpose 1: International fundraising

Fundraising was identified as an important purpose for international branding. One of the NGOs interviewed for this study pointed out the importance of international funding sources for their operations. They relied mostly on international donors because, as they explained, Chinese philanthropists were more interested in community work, projects, and other work they could clearly observe. They were less interested in activities that were less tangible in the short term, like policy advocacy, and were therefore less likely to donate money to NGOs involved in those activities. Furthermore, the philanthropists in China were mostly donating to NGOs that were already popular with the public. If an NGO did not fit these descriptions, it was more difficult to gather donations locally. Interviewees mentioned utilizing international branding not only to establish connections with new potential donors, but also to build and maintain relationships with current donors.

It also became clear that international fundraising was a big reason for NGOs expanding their branding to an international audience. In the first place, a brand provides credibility to an NGO and a feeling of assurance to potential donors that an NGO is trustworthy and efficient. Research done by Pao, Rodrigues, and Rodrigues (2014) showed brand image has a positive influence on the intention of people to donate. The more frequent and direct an NGO communicated their brand, the more they controlled how they were perceived by their stakeholders and the general public (Luoma-aho, 2006). Lastly, by expanding branding efforts to the international level, an NGO also increases its fundraising outreach (Garsten & Bruce, 2018). Thus, an NGO that frequently and directly communicates their brand image to the international community has a higher chance of acquiring funding for their work.

Purpose 2: Create international exchange

International branding was used by the NGOs interviewed to attract international participants to engage in projects, programs, or events. The purpose was to create international exchange between China and the rest of the world. Several reasons were mentioned in the qualitative interviews. First, by creating this exchange, Chinese people and international people can learn from each other and increase the understanding of each other's issues. Second, and closely related to the first reason, by creating exchange, international people can learn more about China and China can be more closely connected to the rest of the world.

One interviewee mentioned creating international exchange is relevant because China has been a closed society for a long time, which caused people outside of China to seem not to know much about the country. However, this also holds true the other way around. This argument

was not mentioned in the interviews or read about in the desk research related to the topic of branding, but it is expected that China is such a closed society because they only opened their borders to foreigners in the 1970s. Next to that, Chinese people simply did not have the monetary means or required documents to travel abroad as economic wealth has only just risen in the last decade or two. Because of these reasons, less international exchange has happened between China and the rest of the world. The reasons behind the lack of international exchange between China and the rest of the world are too broad to discuss in depth here.

Purpose 3: Build international partnerships

As mentioned in literature by Kylander and Stone (2011), branding was critical to building operational capacity by increasing support, and strong brands help NGOs acquire that support through establishing key partnerships. In the qualitative interviews, NGOs also mentioned they used international branding to build international partnerships. These include working together on international programs and projects, including partners in existing programs, or to partner up to source international participants for programs.

Best Practices Internal Brand Identity

The sub-section below lists and discusses in no particular order the best practices on establishing a strong internal brand identity.

Best Practice 1: Use the founder's original vision

An organizational vision is an inspiring, motivating, and guiding force that defines the direction for an NGO (Haque, TitiAmayah & Liu, 2016) and defines what the NGO wants to be in the future (Kopaneva & Sias, 2015). According to Haque, TitiAmayah, and Liu (2016), NGOs with effective vision-driven strategies earn and sustain above average profits and competitive advantage. Kopaneva and Sias (2015) added that an effective vision can increase internal brand identity through a decrease of depersonalization at work.

Having an organizational vision that was originally written by the founders of the NGO was a practice that returned in all the interviews. It is expected this is because the founders had a great passion for the problem the NGO is trying to tackle. Therefore, it is assumed the founders generally knew best what they wanted the NGO to strive for when they started it and thus wrote a strong vision.

Two of the NGOs that participated in the qualitative interviews had updated their original founders' vision once to add a new element they considered an important focus of their current work. When updating the vision to fit the current projects the NGO focuses on, all main staff members were included in the decision making. Interviewees felt it was important to get everyone's perspective, as together they know the organization better than individually. This was confirmed by Kopaneva and Sias (2015), who stated employees, as well as leaders, contribute to the shared knowledge about what their organization stands for and where it is heading.

Best Practice 2: Share the value to strive for real change

Organizational values explain what an NGO stands for and believes in; they are accepted and shared by the people within the NGO. Therefore, they guide organizational behaviour and decision-making and are an important factor for running a successful NGO (Malbasic, Rey & Potocan, 2014). Shared values are expected to contribute to a feeling of cohesion amongst employees in the organization. This is because it contributes to a shared culture and thus to internal brand identity.

Two of the interviewees indicated their internal shared values were either “striving for real change” or “taking real action”. One of the NGOs had “ownership”, referring to taking ownership of own job and tasks. All three values were considered important due to being seen as related to a feeling of commitment amongst employees. This particular shared value is a best practice for internal brand identity because interviewees considered highly committed employees to be an asset to the organization, that is also said to foster internal organizational innovation (Hock, Clauss & Schulz, 2015).

Best Practice 3: Be consistent with visuals

It was broadly considered amongst scholars and experts in the field of branding that it is important to have visual brand symbols and that the visual identity of an NGO is an important tangible asset (van den Bosch, de Jong & Elving, 2005). Because visual stimuli are learned faster and remembered longer than verbal stimuli, visual brand symbols support the establishment of a strong brand through differentiation and increasing brand association and loyalty (Henderson, Cote, Leong & Schmitt, 2003). Garsten and Bruce (2018) added that a strong brand can make an NGO stand out in highly competitive environments. Lastly, consistency was seen as important to effectively manage a visual brand (van den Bosch, de Jong & Elving, 2005).

All interviewees indicated currently struggling with consistency in visual brand symbols, but also all indicated being in the process of updating their visual brand symbols and making them consistent amongst all channels and platforms. The reason for the interviewees not having a consistent visual brand symbols connects with their limited working capacity; therefore, visual brand symbols had not been their main focus.

Best Practices External Brand Image

This sub-section covers the best practices for communicating the brand to the outside and creating an external brand image. This sub-section also covers the best practices for online platforms.

Best Practice 1: Use the right platform for the right audience

By utilizing platforms that can most effectively reach the intended international audience, an NGO can optimize the use of time spent on branding efforts. For example, social media channels can reach almost anyone but are generally not very direct. It is assumed that optimizing the alignment of channels with targets positively affects the

efficiency of branding, which increases brand familiarity because an NGO advertises itself in the right place to the right people. This was also mentioned by Fouts (2010), who highlights that it needs to be kept in mind whether channels are being used in a relevant context and reaching the intended audiences. The research did not identify which audience is commonly found on which channel. However, it can be derived from learning more about a specific channel and considering what the purposes of the channel are. For example, LinkedIn is a professional online network where users commonly look for jobs and share information about their work. On this platform, you can expect to find professionals, companies, and organizations working in a variety of fields.

In the case of the interviewees, one mentioned that for international partners or donors they had an English newsletter especially directed at their donors. Another interviewee mentioned an English website as an important aspect for their international branding, as it was usually the first place people go to find out more about an NGO. Yet another interviewee mentioned focusing on LinkedIn as their only international online social media platform because it was accessible by all the countries in the world.

Best Practice 2: Stay in touch with international stakeholders

In research on stakeholder trust, Luoma-aho (2006) identified that frequently contacted stakeholders perceived the trustworthiness, professionalism, and service of an NGO higher than those who were not contacted as frequently. Luoma-aho (2006) also pointed out that an NGO's reputation does not only depend on the frequency of contact efforts, but also on its directness. Personal experiences with an NGO were said to have the most influence on a stakeholder's perception of an NGO's reputation, even more than media coverage (Luoma-aho, 2006). It is assumed this is because more personal contact with a stakeholder ensures the NGO has more control to shape stakeholder opinion; otherwise, stakeholders would be more reliant on outside perspectives to form their opinion.

All interviewees also indicated the importance of frequent contact with international stakeholders. One NGO that participated in the qualitative interviews said they had frequent contact with their international stakeholders through email and videocall. Another NGO mentioned inviting international stakeholders to their events. That same NGO indicated trying to meet with their international stakeholders in person whenever possible, stating it would generally be at least twice a year. Lastly, another interviewee said they did regular site visits to their international program partners.

Best Practice 3: Leverage pre-existing connections

According to Hohenthal, Johanson, and Johanson (2015), relationships can play a critical role in the early stages of international expansion. Leveraging pre-existing connections or relationships is a best practice for communicating the brand, or creating an external brand image, because it

can help to get a foot in the door of the international NGO sector. Entering the international sector and establishing international partnerships and collaborations has many benefits. Johnson (2018) argues that it when it comes to leveraging relationships for business, it is important to first identify organizational goals and then identify current relationships that could be leveraged to reach those goals while maintaining the relationship.

The NGOs interviewed for this study mentioned several of their international business partners were gained through pre-existing personal and professional connections of the founders and other staff members. One NGO mentioned they had a pre-existing relationship with one of their current program partners abroad, and because of that relationship, they were able to expand their program to another continent.

Best Practices Online Platforms

This section is a sub-section to the results on external brand image and includes the results from the quantitative observations. Several trends or patterns emerged from the analysis, applying to all or most platforms.

1. **The majority of NGOs mainly posted short content on their platforms:** A text was considered short when it had 50 words or less, and video content was considered short when it was 5 minutes or less in length. People generally engage quicker with short content than with really long content. **Table 2** highlights the relevant data.
2. **Images are used by almost all NGOs on all platforms, the majority has eight or more images on their homepage:** on Facebook, 100.0% of NGOs used images in their last 10 posts and 70.8% of NGOs did so 8 or more times. On LinkedIn, not considering the NGOs that did not have any posts, 94.4% of NGOs used images in their last 10 posts. On the website, there are no posts, so instead the total number of images on their homepage was counted: 95.8% of NGOs used images on their homepage. None had more than 16 images, but 37.5% of NGOs had between 8 and 11 images on their homepage. As defined in *Best practice 3: Be*

consistent with visuals, visual stimuli are generally learned faster and remembered longer than verbal stimuli (Henderson, Cote, Leong & Schmitt, 2003). **Tables 3, 4, and 5** highlight the relevant data.

3. **The majority of NGOs used a mix of both informing about products and services and interacting and connecting with users as their main content on most of the platforms:** However, on LinkedIn and the website, about 50% (not considering the NGOs that did not have any posts) of NGOs posted products and services as their main content. It is expected this is because LinkedIn is a professional network, where NGOs mainly posted job opportunities and annual reports. The website is a place where people go to learn more about an NGO and its work; therefore, it was more relevant to inform about products and services. **Table 6** highlights the relevant data.
4. **A noticeable number of NGOs did not follow any observable structure in their post frequency:** many NGOs that did have an observable structure in their post frequency posted at least every two to three days (38.8% of organizations on LinkedIn), some posted exactly once every day (25% on Facebook) and up to more than once per day (20.8% on Facebook and 47.4% on Twitter). However, a noticeable number of NGOs did not follow any observable structure on their post frequency over multiple platforms. On Facebook this was 25% of which two of the NGOs posted inconsistently but frequently. This meant they posted at least more than once per month, but most posted multiple times per week. Four NGOs posted inconsistently and infrequently, which means they posted less than once per month inconsistently. On YouTube, 61.9% of NGOs posted inconsistently on their channels. The expected reason that the number on YouTube is so high is because it is a platform for video content only. Video content generally requires more time and resources to create, thus having a consistent structure in this could be more challenging. **Table 7** highlights the relevant data.

Table 2: Length of posts (across all platforms).

		Facebook			LinkedIn			Twitter			YouTube			Website		
		Freq	%	Valid %	Freq	%	Valid %	Freq	%	Valid %	Freq	%	Valid %	Freq	%	Valid %
Valid	Short	18	72.0	75.0	14	56.0	63.6	19	76.0	100.0	21	84.0	100.0	20	80.0	83.3
	Medium	5	20.0	20.8	4	16.0	18.2	0	0	0	0	0.0	0.0	3	12.0	12.5
	Long	1	4.0	4.2	4	16.0	18.2	0	0	0	0	0.0	0.0	1	4.0	4.2
	Total	24	96.0	100.0	22	88.0	100.0	19	76.0	100.0	21	84.0	100.0	24	96.0	100.0
Missing	NOT ON PLATFORM	1	4.0		3	12.0		6	24.0		4	4.0		1	4.0	
Total		25	100.0		25	100.0		25	100.0		25	100.0		25	100.0	

Table 3: Use of images (across all platforms).

		Facebook			LinkedIn			Twitter			Website		
		Freq	%	Valid %	Freq	%	Valid %	Freq	%	Valid %	Freq	%	Valid %
Valid	No	0	0.0	0.0	1	4.0	4.5	3	12.0	15.8	1	4.0	4.2
	Yes	24	96.0	100.0	17	68.0	77.3	16	64.0	84.2	23	92.0	95.8
	No Posts	0	0.0	0.0	4	16.0	18.2	0	0.0	100.0			
	Total	24	96.0	100.0	22	88.0	100.0	19	76.0		24	96.0	100.0
Missing	NOT ON PLATFORM	1	4.0		3	12.0		6	24.0		1	4.0	
Total		25	100.0		25	100.0		25	100.0		25	100.0	

Table 4: Number of images used (across all platforms).

		Facebook			LinkedIn			Twitter		
		Freq	%	Valid %	Freq	%	Valid %	Freq	%	Valid %
Valid	0/10	0	0.0	0.0	1	4.0	4.5	3	12.0	15.8
	1/10	0	0.0	0.0	1	4.0	4.5	0	0.0	0.0
	2/10	0	0.0	0.0	0	0.0	0.0	0	0.0	0.0
	3/10	1	4.0	4.2	1	4.0	4.5	0	0.0	0.0
	4/10	1	4.0	4.2	0	4.0	4.5	0	0.0	0.0
	5/10	1	4.0	4.2	4	16.0	18.2	1	4.0	5.3
	6/10	3	12.0	12.5	1	4.0	4.5	3	12.0	15.8
	7/10	1	4.0	4.2	3	12.0	13.6	0	0.0	0.0
	8/10	5	20.0	20.0	1	4.0	4.5	5	20.0	26.3
	9/10	4	16.0	16.0	2	8.0	9.1	6	24.0	31.6
	10/10	8	32.0	32.0	4	16.0	18.2	1	4.0	5.3
	No posts	0	0.0	0.0	4	16.0	18.2	0	0.0	0.0
Total		24	96.0	100.0	22	88.0	100.0	19	76.0	100.0
Missing	NOT ON PLATFORM	1	4.0		3	12.0		6	24.0	
Total		25	100.0		25	100.0		25	100.0	

Best Practices Brand Performance

This sub-section lists and discusses the best practices for brand performance that came out of the research.

Best Practice 1: Monitor your online brand

Luoma-aho (2006) emphasised good reputation required brand management. Because an NGO's reputation depended on what is said about them and their brand, it could be managed by monitoring what was said about the NGO (also referred to as "mentions" of the NGO) on the internet or in the media. This can be monitored using online tools, like those integrated in social media platforms like Facebook.

The most common and recommended method amongst all interviewees for monitoring online brand performance was using online tools that can monitor factors like click

rates and other online activity. All interviewees used the integrated monitoring systems of online platforms, like Facebook and LinkedIn, and used an external tool for their newsletter. The particular tool used for the newsletter by all NGOs was Mailchimp, an email marketing software that also gives information on click rates and other relevant factors. The interviews indicated that currently NGOs in China are not focused extensively on the element of monitoring brand performance. It is assumed this is because of a lack of capacity to focus on branding in general, as mentioned in the section *Literature Review*.

Best Practice 2: Evaluate monitoring results

As mentioned above, monitoring and evaluating brand performance is not an activity focused on by NGOs in China due to limited capacity. However, it is seen as impor-

tant to ensure brand performance is kept up to standard, for example by avoiding fluctuations in quality of posts or newsletters. That is why NGOs still try to evaluate brand

performance whenever possible and have the goal to work more structurally on managing the brand.

It was common amongst all interviewees to have regular meetings to discuss the data gathered in the online monitoring tools. One NGO met structurally, while two only met when click rates were particularly high or low. However, most NGOs struggled to evaluate brand performance, as one mentioned it was difficult to identify the reasons for good or bad responses to content. Another mentioned just recently hiring a communications officer for the first time that would focus more on monitoring brand performance and increasing the quality of their overall content.

Table 5: Number of images used (on website).

		Website		
		Freq	%	Valid %
Valid	0	1	4.0	4.2
	1	0	0.0	0.0
	2	0	0.0	0.0
	3	0	0.0	0.0
	4	2	8.0	8.3
	5	3	12.0	12.5
	6	4	16.0	16.7
	7	1	4.0	4.2
	8	4	16.0	16.7
	9	2	8.0	8.3
	10	0	0.0	0.0
	11	3	12.0	12.5
	12	0	0.0	0.0
	13	1	4.0	4.2
	14	0	0.0	0.0
	15	1	4.0	4.2
16	2	8.0	8.3	
Total		24	96.0	100.0
Missing	NOT ON PLATFORM	1	4.0	
Total		25	100.0	

Conclusion

The research aimed to identify best practices in international branding amongst NGOs in China. Best practices are divided under categories based on internal brand identity, external brand image, and brand performance. Data was collected through qualitative interviews with key informants from NGOs in China that are already successful in international branding, through quantitative observations on online branding platforms, and through desk research on academic literature and non-academic sources.

The best practices for establishing a strong internal brand identity include having a strong vision, striving for real change, and being consistent with visual brand symbols to optimize recognizability. The research results indicate the best practices for creating a strong external brand image are using the right channels to reach the right audiences and staying in close touch with your international stakeholders. For managing brand performance, results indicate the use of online branding platforms' integrated monitoring tools is the most efficient way to go. By regularly discussing the data provided by these tools, an NGO

Table 6: Type of content (across all platforms).

		Facebook			LinkedIn			Twitter			Website			YouTube		
		Freq	%	Valid %	Freq	%	Valid %	Freq	%	Valid %	Freq	%	Valid %	Freq	%	Valid %
Valid	Informing about products and services	8	32.0	33.3	9	36.0	40.9*	4	16.0	21.1	16	64.0	66.7	4	16.0	19.0
	Interacting and connecting with users	5	20.0	20.8	3	12.0	13.6	5	20.0	26.3	0	0.0	0.0	2	8.0	9.5
	Both	11	44.0	45.8	6	24.0	27.3	10	40.0	52.6	8	32.0	33.3	15	60.0	71.4
	No Posts	0	0.0	100.0	4	16.0	18.2	0	0.0	100.0	0	0.0	0.0	0	0.0	0.0
	Total		24	96.0		22	88.0	100.0	19	76.0		24	96.0	100.0	21	84.0
Missing	NOT ON PLATFORM	1	4.0		3	12.0		6	24.0		1	4.0		4	16.0	
Total		25	100.0		25	100.0		25	100.0		25	100.0		25	100.0	

*This number considers the four organizations that did not have any posts; when not taking those into account the outcome would be exactly 50%.

Table 7: Post frequency across all platforms.

		Facebook			LinkedIn			Twitter			YouTube		
		Freq	%	Valid %	Freq	%	Valid %	Freq	%	Valid %	Freq	%	Valid %
Valid	Inconsistent and infrequent	4	16.0	16.7	4	16.0	18.2	3	12.0	15.8	6	24.0	28.6%
	Once per month	0	0.0	0.0	1	4.0	4.5	0	0.0	0.0	1	4.0	4.8
	Once per 3 weeks	0	0.0	0.0	0	0.0	0.0	0	0.0	0.0	0	0.0	0.0
	Once per 2 weeks	0	0.0	0.0	0	0.0	0.0	0	0.0	0.0	1	4.0	4.8
	Once per week	2	8.0	8.3	1	4.0	4.5	0	0.0	0.0	0	0.0	0.0
	Once per 6 days	0	0.0	0.0	0	0.0	0.0	0	0.0	0.0	0	0.0	0.0
	Once per 5 days	1	4.0	4.2	1	4.0	4.5	0	0.0	0.0	0	0.0	0.0
	Once per 4 days	0	0.0	0.0	0	0.0	0.0	0	0.0	0.0	0	0.0	0.0
	Once per 3 days	1	4.0	4.2	3	12.0	13.6	0	0.0	0.0	1	4.0	4.8
	Once per 2 days	3	12.0	12.5	4	16.0	18.2	2	8.0	10.5	1	4.0	4.8
	Once per day	6	24.0	25.0	0	0.0	0.0	1	4.0	5.3	0	0.0	0.0
	More than once per day	5	20.0	20.8	1	4.0	4.5	9	36.0	47.4	1	4.0	4.8
	Inconsistent but frequent	2	8.0	8.3	3	12.0	13.6	4	16.0	21.1	9	36.0	42.9
	No posts	0	0.0	0.0	4	16.0	18.2	0	0.0	0.0	0	0.0	0.0
	Total	24	96.0	100.0	22	88.0	100.0	19	76.0	100.0	21	84.0	100.0
Missing	NOT ON PLATFORM	1	4.0		3	12.0		6	24.0		1	4.0	
Total		25	100.0		25	100.0		25	100.0		25	100.0	

can ensure their brand performance stays up to standard. The research also aimed to identify the main purposes for NGOs in China to engage in international branding. The research found international fundraising, creating international exchange, and building partnerships are the main purposes for NGOs in China to engage in international branding. Lastly, the research wanted to identify best practices for using online branding platforms. The research results show that by posting more short posts that are supported by video or images an NGO can expect to receive more engagement on their posts, leading to an increase in followers.

Notes

¹ This article summarizes the bachelor internship thesis submitted by the author to Windesheim Honours College in 2019. The internship thesis was complemented by a handbook, *A Guide to International Branding for Non-governmental Organizations in China*. The handbook provides organizations with the knowledge they need to get started with international branding. This takes away the time required to research how to utilize the international online branding platforms. The aim is that this handbook supports NGOs in China with the desire to expand abroad and consequently increases exchange between China and the rest of the world. A copy of the handbook and the internship

thesis, including detailed information on methodology, interview questions and quantitative observations protocol, can be requested from the author.

² Names of interviewees and their organisations were withheld upon their request.

³ NGOs included in the quantitative observations were: ActionAid, Animals Asia Foundation, Charity Water, China Foundation for Poverty Alleviation, China Water Risk, China Youth Climate Action Network, Conservation International, Fauna & Flora International, Friends of the Earth, Global Environmental Institute, Green Peace International, Green Peace China, Habitat for Humanity, Handicap International, Helen Keller International, HOPE International, Mercy Corps International, Operation Smile, Opportunity International, Oxfam International, Philanthropy in Motion, Plan International, ProLiteracy, WWF China, and WWF International.

Additional File

The additional file for this article can be found as follows:

- **Appendix A.** Results of Quantitative Observations.
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5334/glo.15.s1>

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

References

- Bamm, R., Helbling, M., & Joukanen, K.** (2018). *Developing Insights on Branding in the B2B Context*. U.K., Bingley: Emerald. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1108/978-1-78756-275-220181009>
- Björner, E.** (2013). International positioning through online city branding: the case of Chengdu. *Journal of Place Management and Development*, 6(3), 203–226. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1108/JPMD-03-2013-0006>
- Chan, K.** (2018). Foundations in China: From Statist to Corporatist. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 62(13), 1803–1821. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0002764218773444>
- Dai, J.** (2017). Advocacy in an Authoritarian State: How Grassroots Environmental NGOs Influence Local Governments in China. *The China Journal*, 79, 62–83. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1086/693440>
- Fouts, J. S.** (2010). *International Place Branding Yearbook 2010*. Palgrave: Macmillan Publishers Limited.
- Gao, H., & Tate, M.** (2018). Social Media Ties Strategy in International Branding: An Application of Resource-Based Theory. *Journal of International Marketing*, 26(3), 45–69. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1509/jim.17.0014>
- Garg, E., Swami, S., & Malhotra, S. K.** (2018). Branding effectiveness measurement in non-profit environment. *Journal of Advances in Management Research*, 16(1), 4–22. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1108/JAMR-05-2018-0039>
- Garsten, N. & Bruce, I.** (2018). *Communicating Causes, Strategic Public Relations For the Non-profit Sector* (1st ed.). U.K., Oxfordshire: Routledge. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781351022224>
- Haque, M. D., TitiAmayah, A., & Liu, L.** (2016). The role of vision in organizational readiness for change and growth. *Leadership & Organization Development Journal*, 37(7), 102–143. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1108/LODJ-01-2015-0003>
- Hasmath, R., & Hsu, J.** (2014). NGOs in China: Issues of Good Governance and Accountability. *Asia Pacific Journal of Public Administration*, 30(1), 29–39. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/23276665.2008.10779341>
- Henderson, P. W., Cote, J. A., Leong, S. M., & Schmitt, B.** (2003). Building strong brands in Asia: selecting the visual components of image to maximize brand strength. *International Journal of Research in Marketing*, 20, 297–313. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijresmar.2003.03.001>
- Hock, M., Clauss, T., & Schulz, E.** (2015). The impact of organizational culture on a firm's capability to innovate the business model. *R&D Management*, 46(3), 433–450. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1111/radm.12153>
- Johnson, J. W.** (2018). *Two Ways To Leverage Relationships For Your Business Goals*. Retrieved May 12, 2019, from <https://www.forbes.com/sites/forbescoaches-council/2018/11/27/two-ways-to-leverage-relationships-for-your-business-goals/#799e5943aa0c>
- Kopaneva, I., & Sias, P. M.** (2015). Lost in Translation: Employee and Organizational Constructions of Mission and Vision. *Management Communication Quarterly*, 29(3), 1–27. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0893318915581648>
- Kylander, N., & Stone, C.** (2011). *The role of brand in the non-profit sector*. Retrieved April 23, 2019, from https://ssir.org/articles/entry/the_role_of_brand_in_the_nonprofit_sector#
- Lin, J., & Jingwei, Z.** (2016). *Chinese NGOs "Going Global": Current Situation, Challenges and Policy Recommendations*. Retrieved 15 June, 2019, from http://www.geichina.org/_upload/file/report/NGO_Going_Out_EN.pdf
- Luoma-aho, V.** (2006). *From Stakeholders to Faith-holders: Reputational Advantage of Frequent Contact and High Trust*. Retrieved May 7, 2019, from https://www.researchgate.net/publication/251949690_From_Stakeholders_to_Faith-holders_Reputational_Advantage_of_Frequent_Contact_and_High_Trust
- Malbasic, I., Rey, C., & Potocan, V.** (2014). Balanced Organizational Values: From Theory to Practice. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 130(2), 437–446. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10551-014-2238-0>
- Ng, E., & de Colombani, P.** (2015). Framework for Selecting Best Practices in Public Health: A Systematic Literature Review. *Journal of Public Health Research*, 4(3), 577. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4081/jphr.2015.577>
- Nyangwe, S., & Buhalis, D.** (2018, December). Branding Transformation Through Social Media and Co-creation: Lessons from Marriott International. *Information and Communication Technologies in Tourism 2018*. 257–269. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-72923-7_20
- Pao, A., Rodrigues, R. G., & Rodrigues, L.** (2014). Branding in NGOs – its Influence on the Intention to Donate. *Economics and Sociology*, 7(3), 11–21. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.14254/2071-789X.2014/7-3/1>
- Qiaoqiao, X.** (2018). *浙商企业微信公众号品牌传播研究*. Retrieved April 23, 2019, from <http://cdmd.cnki.com.cn/Article/CDMD-10335-1018160080.htm>
- Stride, H., & Lee, S.** (2007). No Logo? No Way. Branding in the Non-Profit Sector. *Journal of Marketing Management*, 23(1–2), 107–122. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1362/026725707X178585>
- Van den Bosch, A. L. M., de Jong, M. D. T., & Elving, W. J. L.** (2005). How corporate visual identity supports reputation. *Corporate Communications: An International Journal*, 10(2), 108–116. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1108/13563280510596925>

How to cite this article: Borkent, S. (2020). Best Practices of International Branding for NGOs in China. *Glocality*, 3(1): 2, 1–13.
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5334/glo.15>

Published: 07 April 2020

Copyright: © 2020 The Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited. See <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.



Glocality is a peer-reviewed open access journal published by Ubiquity Press.

OPEN ACCESS