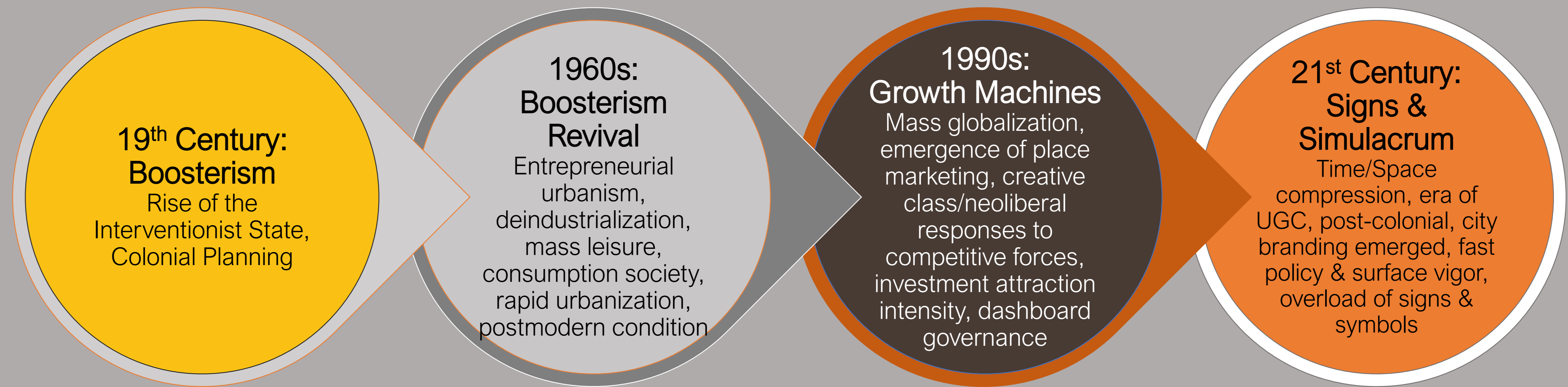


Place branding has changed (transmuted) *again* with the rapid acceleration of place-brand making through **user-generated content** (UGC).

"During the past thirty years, media images of cities and neighbourhoods have forged an increasingly important connection between capital, state, and the new urban middle class." (Zukin, 2011, p. 229). As we move from a more top-down Master builder 'modern city' approach¹ into a city of 'desired authenticity' where allegedly *all* our voices are part of the city's identity, media is undoubtedly informing our social imagery of place and is continually showing us how quickly it can reinvent our imagery through language and images. Digital media platforms are becoming branding platforms for cities and neighbourhoods, creating enduring topophilia. (Tuan, 1990).

The simulacrum of Paris, which highlights affluence, romance, and culture, versus the extremes of both violence and poverty present throughout the city, is a poignant example of what little we know about cities around the globe in general—and how our perceptions and the realities are misaligned (Nayak & Jeffrey, 2013).



PLACE BRANDING revisited in a user-generated era: the role of new digital platforms in shaping place identity.

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RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- What is a neighbourhood brand?
 - What attributes are notable in neighbourhood brands, and have they changed over time?
 - What actors, and through what platforms, contribute to the neighbourhood brand?
 - How aligned are the attributes of neighbourhood brands and the city brand now?
- How has place branding evolved at the neighbourhood level?
 - Does place branding evolve differently from place to place?
 - Have the list of actors and their platforms contributing to the brand changed over time?
 - What brand attributes have surfaced, changed or disappeared?
- Has UGC influenced neighbourhood brands?
 - Do coalition-led brands differ from user-generated brands?
 - What platforms have demonstrated a change in brand sentiment and overall brand perception?
 - At what rate are neighbourhood brands changing?
- How does place branding contribute to the growing, changing, or declining neighbourhood economies?
 - How are coalitions informing, being informed by, and using place branding, and in particular neighbourhood brands?
 - In an era of social disintegration⁵ and austerity, who has a dominant voice in forming a neighbourhood brand?
 - What possible influences will place branding have in future neighbourhood economies?

My hypothesis is that place branding has transmuted once again with the rapid acceleration of place-brand making through user-generated content (UGC) makers. This is all achieved through a plethora of digital media platforms. The questions arising include: do these new actors and platforms in place branding create and/or influence new growth agendas for cities? What role do they play in directing resources to certain infrastructure? And not others? Whose voices are included and whose may be excluded in these new place-branding moments? And, lastly, in the "cutthroat competition for the scarcest of scarce resource is the attention of would-be consumers" (Bauman, 2013), is the future of place-branding becoming and likely to become less about advertising and promotion and more about policy-making?

Measuring digitally-driven urban change and place branding are areas lacking in-depth empirical research and are currently under-theorized (Anholt, 2006; Avraham, 2020; Vanolo, 2015). Questions remain as to the extent to which these place-branders are influencing a growth-mindset or other forms of development such as a sustainability or social justice approach. Is paying attention to user-generated content in place-branding a new way to build an economy?

As media turns neighbourhoods into brands (Zukin, 2011), and digital actors participate in a new mixing culture (mixing offices and homes, coffee shops and bars), the economic survival of our urban system depends on places that not only offer jobs but that are 'fun', 'safe', or other trendy and transient terms often used to entice investment (McWilliams, 2015). This emergent form of urbanity brings new modes of economic integration, such as exchange and forms of redistribution at the hyper-local, neighbourhood level, that are now contributing to our sense of place (Scott, 2017) – perhaps this is the 'kijijization' of neighbourhood economies, and it needs unpacking. This context of the current platform economy in North American cities and neighbourhoods is the backdrop to my proposed research. Specifically, I am interested in how new users through new digital platforms are facilitating a reimagining of place-branding at the neighbourhood level and the extent to which these new reimagining's are influencing local decision-makers in their allocation of resources for economic development. To do this, I am using a case-study approach of three neighbourhoods in a small Ontario city.

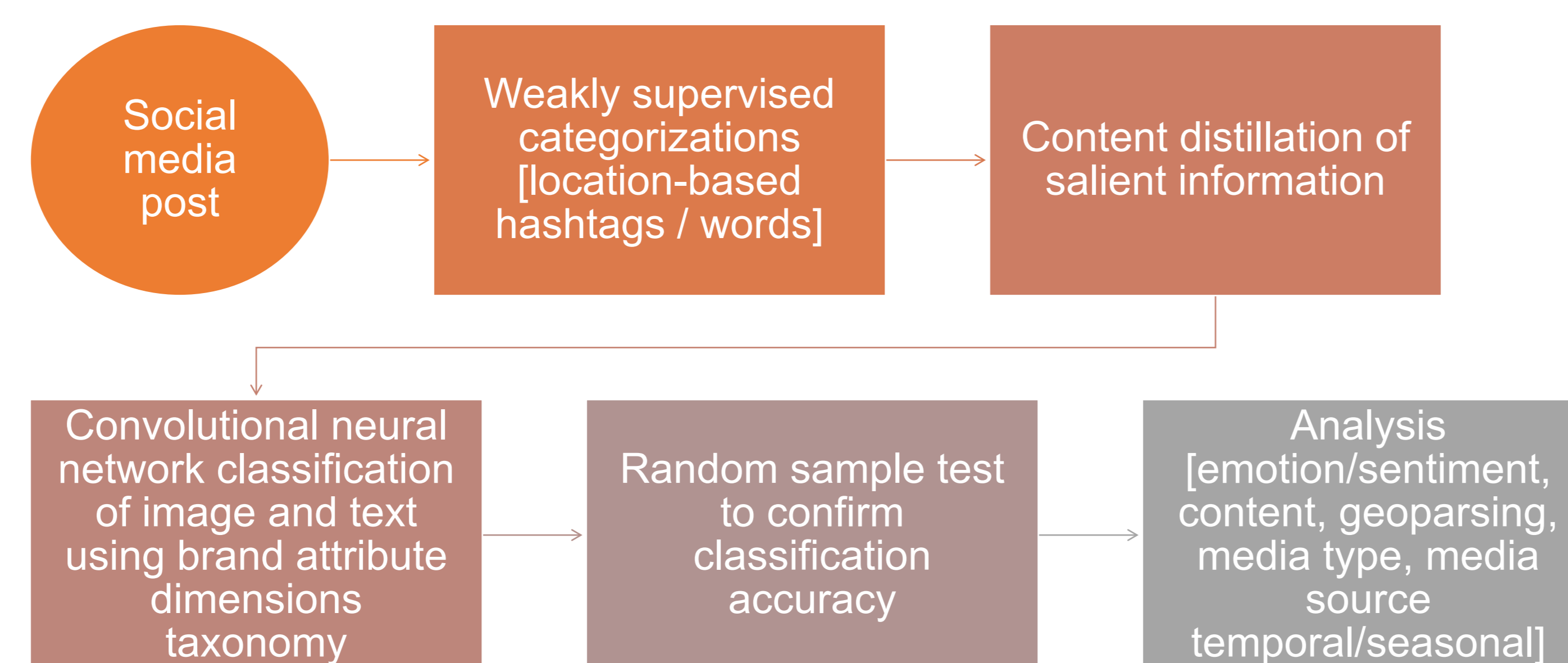
METHODOLOGY

Following similar approaches by Liu et al., (2015), Lansley et al., (2016) and Barreneche (2012), this study will use a mixed-method exploratory approach, combining qualitative and quantitative data, using an inductive comparative case study technique. The combination of social sensing, data mining and machine learning of user-generated content on digital platforms, semi-structured interviews, and archival data modelling will provide a holistic and tri-angulated examination of place branding at the neighbourhood level.

The studying will include three collection periods (spring, summer, and fall 2021) across multiple platforms (Google Images, Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, YouTube, Reddit). These three collection periods will provide 'snapshots' in time for each neighbourhood brand, allowing for temporal analysis.

The neighbourhoods within Kingston that have been chosen are based on their contrasting characteristics, longevity within the city, differing stages of growth, applicability to similar neighbourhoods beyond Kingston, and demographic similarities.

LBA^t: Localized Brand Analysis Tool



SOME EARLY FINDINGS

Kingston, Ontario, Canada's first capital, is currently struggling with its' colonial past while trying to remain current and even appealing in an era of social disintegration made evident through its neighbourhood brands. This contested neoliberal, colonial history of Kingston is only exasperated by the complexities of the current pandemic and the city's reliance on the tourism sector as an economic driver of growth and preventing decline. The City of Kingston is currently at a brand turning point in identity politics and a simple Google Image search for "Kingston Ontario" brings this to light with 44% of photos showing limestone buildings, artifacts associated with Sir John A, and/or military fortifications.

Similar image search findings at the neighbourhood level in Kingston show only 3% of the images highlighting those same historical and colonial themes. Instead, the neighbourhood scale shows a story much richer in tapestry, acts of daily living, and often with little regard to commercial motivations supporting alternative modes of consumption - perhaps even a form of people's right to the city (Masuda & Bookman, 2018). This creates a juxtaposition with how the city is perceived globally and locally and points out how little 'we' know about the places we visit, live, and study (Derrida, 1991).

RELEVANCE

This research has the potential to be beneficial to city coalitions, residents and investors by shedding light on quality of life, user-appeal, and use-cases for all that seek to understand how our cities are evolving and lived, on the street, everyday.

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ABSTRACT