

Shaping a global comparative imagination? Assessing the role of city rankings in the 'global city' discourse.

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Abstract: The last decade has seen 'global' and 'comparative' forms of urbanism flourish, and critiques thereof expand. Whilst in theory the discussion on the value, or shortcomings, of global city thinking has thrived, in practice many cities have expanded their international outlook and

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are collaborating through mounting numbers of partnerships and networks. This has also witnessed a growing sense of competition between peers near and far for investment, talent and tourism. The “comparative gestures” (Robinson 2011) of cities are increasingly common not just in research but in practice with expanding ranks of city benchmarking to testify to the popularity of “actually existing” (Clarke 2012) comparative thinking. While there has been a significant rise in the number of city rankings and indexes, as well as increased scholarly interest in comparative urban analysis, little is still understood about how they are shaping the imagination of those driving urban policymaking or indeed how they shape the global city discourse. This study aimed to identify correlations between an appreciation of city benchmarking and 'global city' thinking, especially in cities that have emerged on the 'map' of global urbanism. It draws on 170 interviews with a variety of key urban development stakeholders in Dubai, Singapore and Sydney, focusing on how city rankings relate to the ways we speak of global cities. It suggests a close correlation between global city thinking and benchmarking in these cities, but also a wider a 'map' of comparative gestures than we may have anticipated.

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1 COMPARATIVE AND GLOBAL: ACTUALLY EXISTING INTERSECTIONS

The previous two decades have brought a renaissance of, if not a ‘turn’ to, comparative urbanism (Ward, 2008). This scholarship has been busy developing approaches which seek to overcome the postmodern and postcolonial critiques of comparative urban methods (Jacobs, 2012; Ward, 2010). It has sought to break from a comparativism that centres on Euro-American points of reference and toward a broader geography and more ‘cosmopolitan’ forms of urbanism (Robinson, 2006; Nijman, 2007). While this literature has offered compelling insights, it has largely concerned the role of the researcher as custodian of the comparative (urban) imagination. Yet ‘comparative gestures’ (Robinson, 2011) are commonplace realities in the practice of planners, decision-makers, private sector actors and indeed community activists too. Arguably, comparison between cities are also a common feature of everyday parlance in much of the media, general public and urban practitioners well beyond urban studies. Clarke (2012) contends that the re-emergence of scholarly interest in comparative urbanism has been matched by a renewed interest among urban policy practitioners. Certainly, through the literature on urban policy mobilities (e.g. McCann & Ward, 2011) we can see the impacts of what Clarke (2012, p.797) has termed ‘actually existing comparative urbanism’ on city planning and urban development. Nonetheless, there remains a much more limited scholarship which seeks to understand the way this comparative imagination takes place within, and indeed is shaped by, practitioners or lay audiences, and in particular what are the factors that influence the propagation of this imagination. Whilst

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scholarship on this actually existing comparative urbanism has to a degree been limited, urbanist practice and everyday talk has witnessed a marked increase in the benchmarking ‘business’ of comparative city studies such as city rankings and indexes, which have progressively captured the attention of urban policymakers across the global North and South (Espeland & Sauder, 2007; Mayer, 2008). As we have reported elsewhere with colleagues, currently available city benchmarking studies now number over 500, incorporating an ever expanding international range of policy issues and urban geographies (Acuto et al., 2021). From this point of view we could argue city rankings have been driving the globalisation of actually existing comparative urbanism – albeit in particular and perhaps problematic ways. At the same time, this process has gone hand in hand with the continuing influence of the idea of the ‘global city’ in policy and practice (Acuto, 2011). Despite extensive scholarly critiques raised to this concept in the early 2000s the term still plays an important role in shaping the direction of urban development worldwide. The global city discourse has become a common ‘genre’ (McNeill 2017) in cities and amongst urban practitioners both working in public, private and civil society settings around the planet and it often does so in a comparative fashion putting, where not pitting, cities and urban imaginations in relation to each other. Just as with comparative urbanism, a debate on whether the study of this discourse is still valuable in theory and practice, and what the geographies of actually existing global city making are has recently resurfaced in a lively manner in urban studies (van Meeteren et al., 2016). At least on the surface, city rankings and the global city genre appear at a minimum closely aligned, and perhaps interdependent. Yet are they? This is where our study comes in. The goal of this paper, then, is to ground the encounter of these two strands of urban research and practice into systematic evidence of what ‘actually existing’ comparative gestures exist, and how they interact with the global city discourse, with an eye at unpacking the relationship between rankings and global city-speak. Key for us, at least for the scope of a first look at this narrative intersection, is the ways in which the global city imagination is intertwined with benchmarking practices such as those of rankings, the kinds of comparisons that are drawn, and the ways in which ‘ideas’ emerging from the global city genre are intertwined more specifically with talk of rankings and indexes. We do so to appreciate in a more evidence-based way whether and how the two are connected, and drive a better understanding of how they might, or not, feed off each other. This is done in our study by relying on an analysis of 170 interviews with key urban development stakeholders in Singapore, Sydney and Dubai, with the goal of decoding the correlation between the global city discourse, comparative gestures and explicit engagement with city

benchmarking. More on the methods underlying this approach is available below in section 3 of this article. Overall, our key aim is to open up a conversation on the relationship between comparative gestures and global city thinking, highlighting how it may differ between sectors, what the geography of cities being compared might be and how the discourse resulting from this type of comparative thinking correlates to some of the major concepts in global city scholarship. As we highlight, there is indeed a clear correlation between the two, but also an emerging geography of comparators that goes beyond some of the usual referent points and that might shape how explicitly the global city discourse emerges in the discussions of major urban development stakeholders in these cities.

2 BETWEEN POPULARITY AND SCEPTICISM

The terms ‘city benchmarking’, ‘index’ and ‘rankings’ are often used interchangeably within academia and the media but have subtly different meanings in practice. In this, and our related work on comparative urban measures we adopt Kitchin et al.’s (2015, p. 9) definition of city benchmarking as the process of ‘comparing urban indicators within and across cities to establish how well an area/city is performing vis-à-vis other locales or against best practice’. Within our typology, city benchmarking is an umbrella category that includes city index and ranking studies. City indexes are studies that rank cities from best to worst on the basis of several interrelated urban dimensions. Examples include the Z-Yen Global Financial Centres Index, the 2thinknow Consulting Innovation Cities Index, and the Sportcal Global Sports Cities Index. City rankings are lists that order city performance in a stand-alone category, such as the Rome2Rio Global Connectivity Ranking (number of direct international flight connections), the Euromonitor Top Destination Cities Ranking (number of international tourist arrivals) and the IQAir Air Quality and City Pollution Ranking (density of suspended particulate matter) (Acuto et al., 2021). Our typology also contains two more minor categories, multi-city analytical reviews and comparative measures, however, for the basis of this study we adopt the umbrella definition of ‘city benchmarking’ in reference to all study types and will use this throughout.

Preliminary evidence from qualitative analyses of the role of city benchmarking in urban development already suggests that this burgeoning reality of comparative assessments are having some impact on the decision making of urban practitioners in the development and creation of policy (Watson, 2015). To date, however, little is understood about the ways in which these studies influence the decision making of urban practitioners.

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Urban studies scholarship has generally been either wary, sceptical or derisive of the rise of city benchmarking (Conger, 2015). By and large, it has critiqued the methodological weakness of many of these studies, whilst often raising serious concerns as to their role in reinforcing globally-uneven urban geographies and power imbalances at the heart of cities the world over (McArthur & Robin, 2019; Taylor, 2011). Bunnell (2015), for example, contends that these global urban hierarchies can promote a paradigmatic form of 'neoliberalism from above', centring 'antecedent' points of reference in cities of the global North. This echoes earlier postcolonial critiques that have argued that the generation of hierarchical relationships between cities separate them into 'exemplars' and 'imitators', effectively generating a path dependent form of urban economic development that implies, normatively, that moving up the 'hierarchy of cities is both possible and a good thing' (Robinson, 2006). Besides, critiques suggest that metric-based forms of comparative urbanism promote a type of 'naïve positivism' that brings into scope the broader debate on the possibility and capacity of an 'urban science', which has often been seen dubiously and cynically by urban geographers (Derudder & van Meeteren, 2019). Whilst the apprehensions on understanding, and indeed comparing, instances of urban development through quantitative methods might be a larger debate than we can give a meaningful account of here, we would agree these raise pertinent questions over the structures of power in the creation and interpretation of urban metrics and seek to contribute to this discussion.

Our call in this initial analysis was to engage in a more proactive way with this landscape and its impact, beyond at-a-distance criticism and wary of academia's involvement in the broader 'industry' of benchmarking (Acuto et al., 2019). While we believe many of the criticisms of city benchmarking studies are founded, they often ignore the not insignificant role of research organisations as producers of city benchmarks (around 20% are produced by research, think tank and academic organisations) and risk discounting the 'actually existing' role these measures are playing in shaping global city thinking. These impacts extend well beyond city governments, as the range of urban themes covered by benchmarking studies make them of interest to citizens across the public, private and civil society sectors. Rather than discounting their effects, we argue instead for a more evidence-based and nuanced consideration of the impact and potential for city benchmarking to influence the comparative imagination of cities and this study begins to address that need.

3 METHODS

This article draws insights from a broader study on the symbolic power politics of the ‘global city’ concept, scholarship and practice (Acuto, 2011). As detailed, we focus here on the specific facet of it that pertains to the interaction between comparative gestures and global city discourse. This involved analysis of 170 interviews conducted in Dubai, Sydney and Singapore between August 2008 and January 2017, predominantly on site in (and exclusively about) these cities and focusing on their development to ‘global city’ status. After an initial identification of a sample of up to fifteen participants whose work had dealt explicitly with the ‘global city’ status of these cities, interviewees were chosen through snowball sampling and represented a variety of urban development stakeholders in academia/research, civil society, government and business/industry, without preconceived attempts to balance the representativeness of these four ‘sectors’ or indeed seek to argue that the conclusions drawn here are representative of these locally or internationally. Rather, the goal is to present a more nuanced, contextualised and scholarly-based discussion of how the global city discourse unfolds and, in this specific paper, how it does so in relation to city rankings. Whilst the selection of the original interviewees is to some degree biased towards our own judgement of key ‘authoritative voices’ on Dubai, Singapore and Sydney, a core determinant of all the people involved in this study has been explicit participation in the key debates on the globalisation of these cities at the time of the interview. This could be through writing, speaking about or against, investing or indeed planning core developments and strategic policies taking place at the time in the Emirate, Singaporean and the Australian metropolises. Informants were selected when their interventions explicitly involved the use of the term ‘global city’, and were identified both through literature, policy and media reviews, as well as through snowball sampling. Of the total, 54 participants were engaged in Dubai, 58 in Singapore and 58 in Sydney. Semi-structured interviews were approximately 30 minutes in length and the participants represented a range of age groups, employment sectors and levels of education, although the majority had at least a university undergraduate qualification. This approach accounted for academics as part of the urban development elite, not shying away from an interview with ‘colleagues’ when these emerged from our snowball sampling and informant identification as ‘key’ voices about the global development of Singapore, Sydney or Dubai. This meant including the voices of 32 academics in the 170 represented in the study. For the broader study underpinning this article, qualitative data from the interview records were coded to identify explicit or implicit mentions of 20 core concepts of the global

city literature and its critics, ranging from the idea of ‘command and control’ (Sassen, 2001) or ‘gateway’ (Hall, 1966) world city functions, to questions of ‘splintering urbanism’ (Graham & Marvin, 2001) and ‘metrocentricity’ (Bunnell & Maringanti, 2010). This allowed us to paint a picture of what kind of ‘global city-speak’ (McNeill, 2017) is at play in between major urban governance stakeholders in these cities. Interviews were designed to highlight whether an interviewee had mentioned (either explicitly or as through synonyms) any one of twenty key notions underpinning the contemporary use of the term ‘global city’ and drawn from the present literature on this idea. Explicit and literal mention was scored 1 (e.g. the interviewee mentioned directly ‘premium connections’ as used by Graham and Marvin in their 2001 work), implicit mention by synonym was scored 0.5 (e.g. the interviewee alluded to a concept such as ‘elites’ by describing it in a synonym way like ‘the richer strata of society’), and no mention was scored 0. Importantly for this article, interviews were also coded for explicit mentions of city rankings, index and benchmarks, as well as for comparative gestures toward cities other than the one in question in the specific interview. This allowed us to paint a preliminary picture of both the incidence of city benchmarking in the overall discourse, but also with an eye to correlations between mentions of benchmarking and incidence of specific global city concepts in the overall discourse.¹ We did so seeking to inject more nuance in the debate over the global city genre and rhetoric (whether we subscribe to it or not) as well as to veer away from a totalising description and ‘straw man’ depiction of what is a complex baggage of theoretical concepts and debates. We present the findings in three sections below: in section 4 we describe the sample characteristics and the prevalence of city benchmarking discussion; in section 5 we analyse the geography of comparative gestures revealed by participants when city benchmarking was mentioned; in section 6 we correlate mentions of city benchmarking in our interviews with explicit reference to global city discourse.

4 PERVASIVE BUT GENERATIONAL?

Our results suggest city benchmarking is a commonplace feature in the global city discourse, although not ever-present. In total, 31% of participants mentioned city benchmarking in their interviews. Dubai had the highest percentage at 39%, with relatively similar results across Singapore and Sydney (29% and 26% respectively). It is perhaps unsurprising that this thinking was more prevalent in Dubai due to its long-term overt strategy to raise its external perception as a ‘global city’ (Acuto, 2010). In many respects, Singapore has been a key

‘antecedent’ for this ‘aspirational’ model of global city development (Bunnell, 2015), particularly in areas of business investment, education and the arts. Yet, whilst routinely placing high in a range of economically focused city benchmarks, less than a third of Singaporean interviewees referenced city benchmarking. While the sample size was limited, of all the interviewees who mentioned city benchmarking, a much higher percentage in Singapore worked in research settings compared with Dubai and Sydney, indicating at least a penetration of this form of comparative urban thinking into the academe and knowledge-intensive industries (e.g. Yeoh & Chang, 2001).

It also appears that generational differences matter. Overall, 36% of interviewees aged between 26 and 40 mentioned city benchmarking in their interviews, making them the most likely age group to do so (see figure 1). In both Dubai and Sydney, participants within this age range were the most likely to mention city benchmarking, however, in Singapore, younger people (18–25) were the group driving benchmarking discussion, perhaps in contrast to the relative silence of older interviewees on this matter. On average, workers over 60 years of age were the least likely to mention city benchmarking, perhaps speaking to the recent proliferation of these forms of comparative urbanism, however, it should be noted that they comprised only 7% of interviewees.

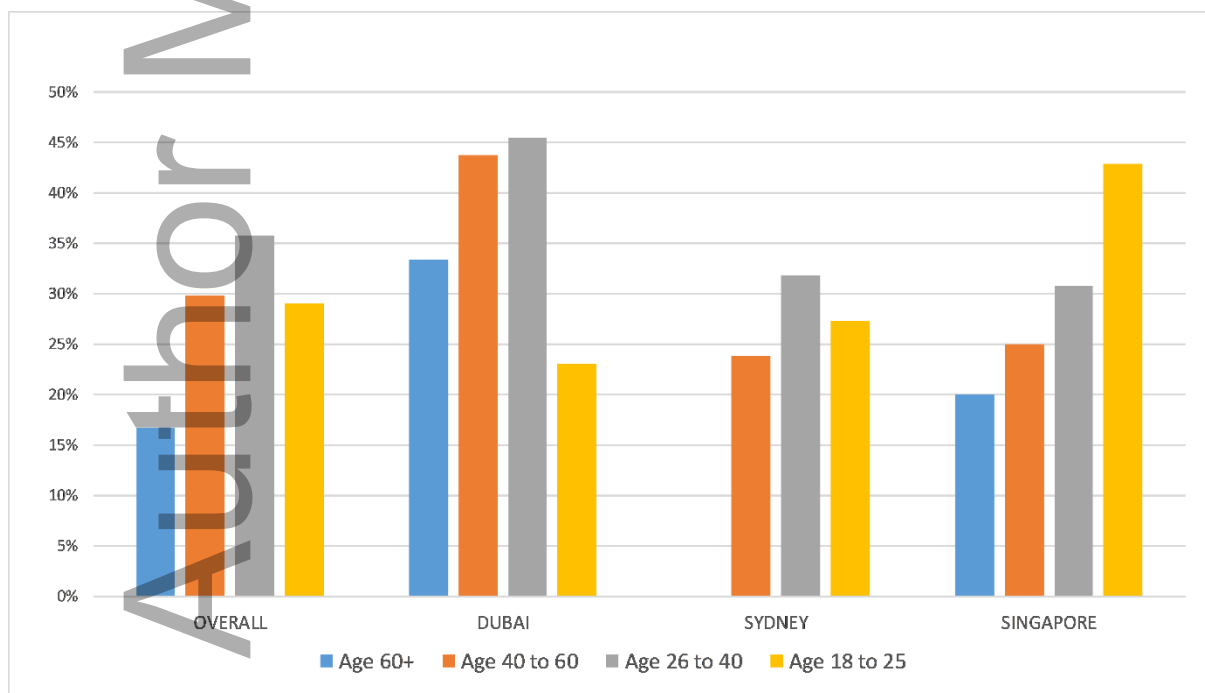


Figure 1: Percentage of respondents who mentioned city benchmarking by age group

The employment sector of interviewees was a significant point of difference in the prevalence of benchmarking in global city discussions. Across the three cities, the greatest proportion of participants who mentioned city benchmarking were employed in the private sector and academia. This correlates with the two sectors that are the major producers of city benchmarks (Acuto et al., 2021). There was, however, substantial variance between the three cities. In Dubai and Sydney, the largest proportion of interviewees mentioning benchmarking were employed in the private sector, whereas in Singapore, 60% were employed in academia/research (see figure 2). If we consider that many Singaporeans intellectuals also engage in some degree of double-hatting with government roles, and more so than in Sydney and certainly Dubai, this percentage is perhaps likely even higher – a clear point of differentiation with Sydney where the private sector takes the lion’s share of this, or Dubai where government and businesses are effectively the most commonly benchmark-engaged type.

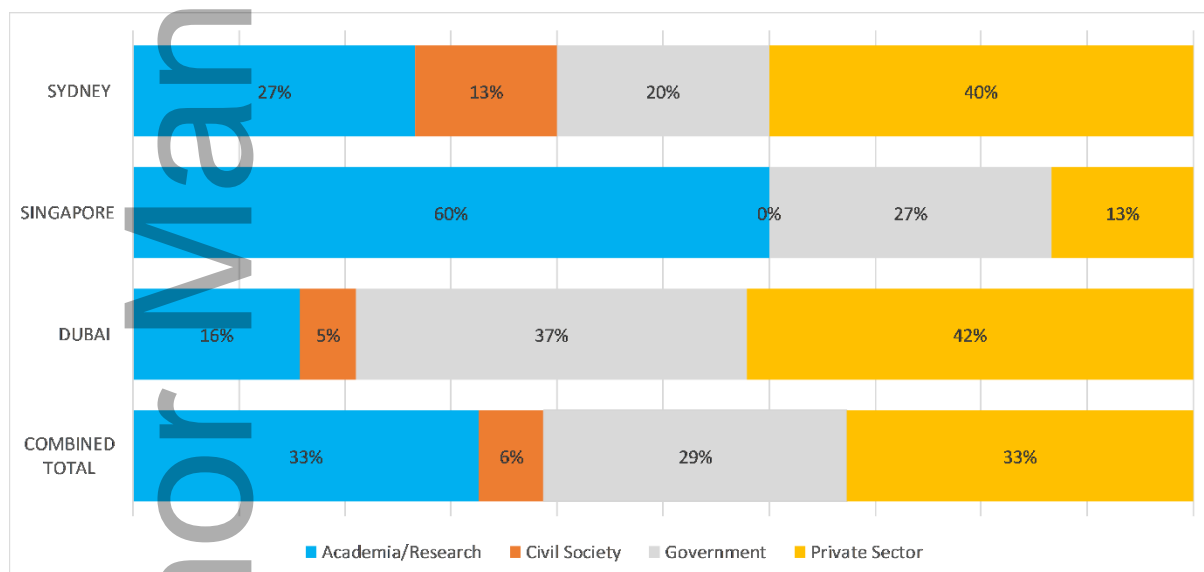


Figure 2: Mention of city benchmarking by employment sector

The results by employment sector indicate some penetration of comparative benchmarking in all areas. Excluding civil society, which had the most limited sample size, there were similar mentions of benchmarking from academia/research, the public and private sectors when averaged across the cities. As indicated above, a notable result is the percentage of benchmarking references that came from Singaporean interviewees working in academic/research settings. This was particularly interesting given that, overall across all cities, interviewees with a business/economics background were more the ones likely to

reference city rankings, whereas the vast majority of Singaporean interviewees who mentioned rankings came from other disciplines. A general interest in city benchmarking among academics with a business/economics background and private-sector workers is to be expected, given the predominance of economically-focused benchmarks. Yet our results also point to the (perhaps growing) clout of benchmarked comparative gestures across a wider variety of key stakeholders in urban development. This is potentially an influence, and global city discourse, set to become even more pervasive when we consider that the overall proportion of benchmarks measuring solely economic factors has been decreased from one third of all rankings available in 2014, to one sixth in 2018 (Acuto et al., 2021). This may in turn may generate new interest in these comparative measures from other areas of society, private sector, policy and indeed academia.

5 A WIDENING COMPARATIVE IMAGINATION?

Our results indicate that the map of (global) cities benchmarked is perhaps wider, and more non-Western, than we may have assumed from the literature on imitative urbanism (Robinson, 2016). Of course, this geography of explicit comparative gestures still demonstrates a relative metrocentrism in reference points and ‘antecedents’ to the global city discourse. Yet, interviewees who referred to indexes and rankings in our study painted a relatively mixed and geographically varied range of urban reference points other than their city, reaching toward a variety of regions across the world (see figure 3). Unsurprisingly perhaps given its status in academic and practitioner literature, as much as the media, London was still the most frequently mentioned comparator with 14 mentions (but surprisingly absent in Sydney). However, this was followed by Singapore with 12 mentions (mentioned by participants in Dubai and Sydney), and Abu Dhabi with five mentions mostly because of a relatively usual neighbourhood referencing in Dubai (but scarce in the other two cities). Interestingly, there was no city that was equally mentioned by interviewees in all three case studies when referring to benchmarking. In Singapore for example, 71% of cities referenced by interviewees who also mentioned rankings were outside of the Asia Pacific region. Similarly, in Dubai, 69% of cities were outside of the Middle East and North Africa. Sydney, however, showed a more regional preoccupation with only 38% of referenced cities outside Asia Pacific. Singapore was the most frequently mentioned city by interviewees in Sydney who also mentioned benchmarking, whereas Melbourne, the most obviously local competitor for city benchmarking accolades, was only mentioned by only one participant. While some

city comparisons demonstrated an obvious regional dynamic, as with the case of Gulf cities (like Doha) for Dubai and Southeast Asian proxies (like Kuala Lumpur) for Singapore, overall the comparative imagination sketched here appears more global than regional when looking at the intersection with global city discourse and city benchmarking.

Overall, many traditional cities of the global North that have dominated global city literature and to some extent, benchmarks, received few mentions. While London remained the overall most referenced city, New York received only one total mention, Tokyo was mentioned twice, and Paris and Chicago were not mentioned at all. While this may be a result of the 'Eastern' geography of the three subject cities, it could also indicate a broader geography of comparative thinking than may be expected, and a subtle shift away from forms of 'imitative' urbanism centred on the global North (Robinson, 2006). The 'map' of comparative urban thinking revealed in this study parallels the broader geography of cities being included in benchmarking studies: our prior study of 500 presently available city benchmarks found a 25% increase in the number of cities appearing in at least one benchmark between 2014 and 2018 (Acuto et al., 2019).

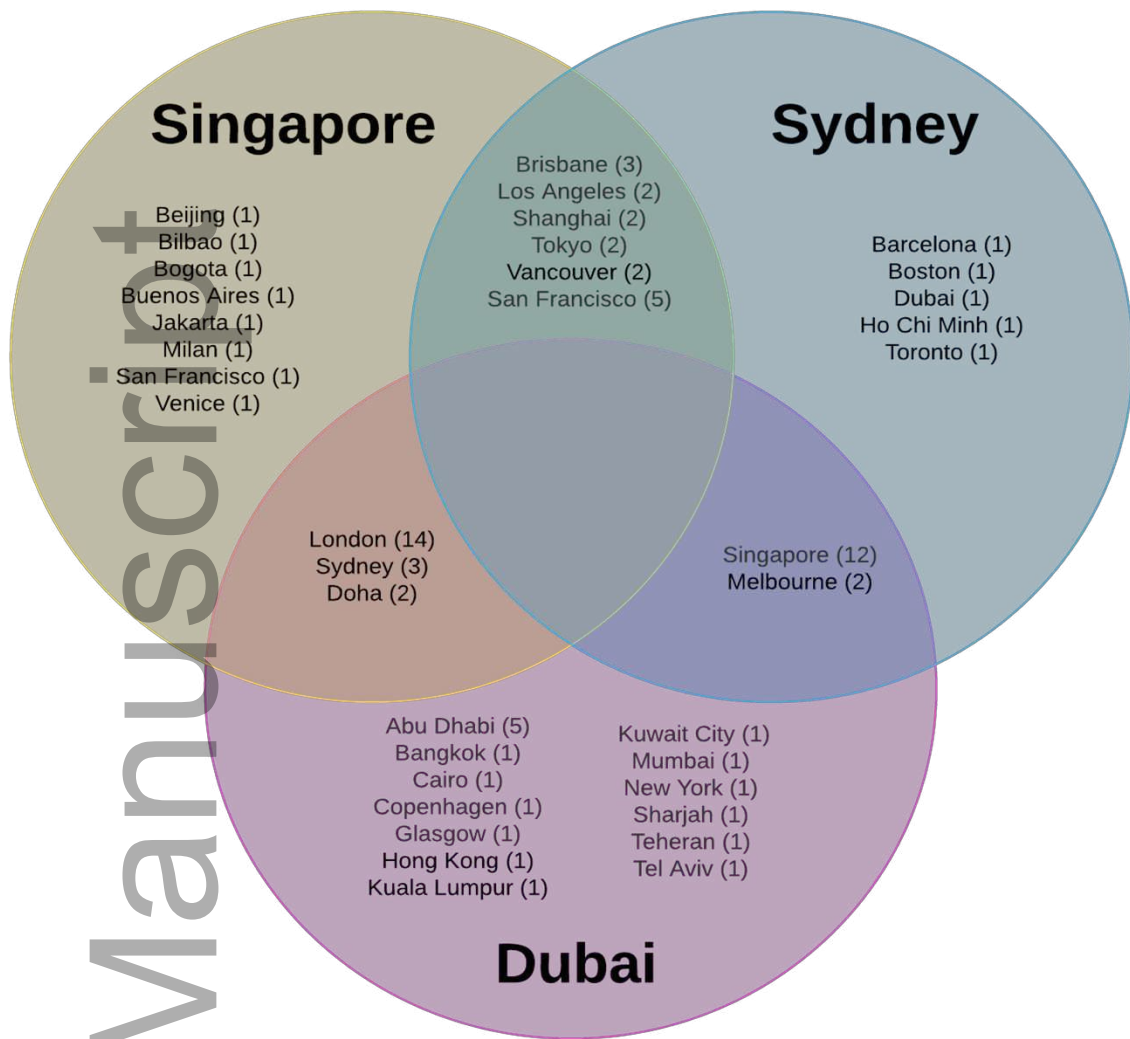


Figure 3: Venn diagram of comparative gestures by interviewees who mentioned city benchmarking

6 SHAPING THE GLOBAL CITY DISCOURSE?

Is there then a correlation between benchmarked comparative thinking and the global city discourse? Including all interviews, it was evident that (figure 4), when considering the ‘salience’ (average mention)² of the 20 global city concepts coded in the interviewee’s responses, most concepts displayed greater salience when city rankings were mentioned than in the overall discourse. The overall global city discourse of those mentioning benchmarks was also slightly more explicit than in those that did not (at an overall average mention of 0.198 versus 0.156), deriving some interesting indication of greater incidence on the global city discourse but perhaps not as blatant as in relation to some specific concepts like entrepreneurship, the idea of gateway functions, global city elites or city leadership, where

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mention of rankings go hand-in-hand with greater salience of these issues in the global city discourse. Whilst the causal direction of this relationship requires further investigation, likely of an ethnographic and more qualitative kind, we believe this to be an initial piece of evidence that essentially flags how reference to global city ideas are more present when rankings and indexes are also discussed, and vice-versa. Equally, it stresses the validity of the critiques to the totalising and often partial incidence of this discourse in the practice by outlining how key themes of the critical scholarship on the global city, like those notions of ‘dual city’, ‘splintering’ or ‘worlding’, are also less common in these cases.

Full dataset	0.159	0.168	0.250	0.103	0.176	0.171	0.088
Rankings	0.194	0.235	0.337	0.112	0.327	0.153	0.143
Concept	History	Etrepreneur	Gateway	Control	Leaders	In place	Metrocentric
Full dataset	0.141	0.138	0.250	0.147	0.088	0.147	0.138
Rankings	0.265	0.092	0.265	0.184	0.153	0.173	0.245
Concept	Hierarchy	Worlding	Premium	Material	Re-scaling	Cosmo	Off the Map
Full dataset	0.180	0.100	0.126	0.265	0.118	0.162	0.156
Rankings	0.173	0.133	0.163	0.347	0.092	0.184	0.198
Concept	Dual City	Relational	Opportunity	Elite	Splinter	Innovation	overall

Figure 4: Comparison between overall salience (average mention) of global city concepts in all interviews (‘Full dataset’) and in those specifically referring to benchmarking (‘Rankings’).

This last empirical note from our study highlights that, while we can only speak of three global cities, results indicate at least some correlation between comparative city benchmarking studies and a more explicit global city discourse, and vice versa.

7 CONCLUSIONS

So what conclusions can we draw from this exercise that can inform our understanding of the relationship between comparative urban metrics and global city discourse? First and notably, the geography of this comparative imagination appears to be dedicatedly global, rather than local or national (and rarely ‘regional’) in nature, and the results suggest a potentially broader geographic frame of reference for urban development than we may have anticipated from critiques of benchmarking and the literature on imitative urbanism. Our study indicates an at least partial shift away from 20th century paradigmatic examples of the global North, however, we must be cautious in making broad generalisations from our sample of three

cities with 'Eastern' geography. Rather, we would argue that our findings suggest that 'comparative gestures' across increasingly diversified geographies appear to be important in shaping the 'global urban' (Parnell & Robinson, 2017) at play in both scholarship and practice.

Yet this is not just a question of more cities, but also of more issues and themes. While traditionally economic in nature, the broad and growing range of urban themes being addressed by city benchmarks raises their interest and utility across the spectrum of urban practitioners. The increasing influence that comparative city benchmarks are having on the decision making of urban development and, as we have sought to show in this study, the development of comparative imaginations underpinning the global city discourse, warrants a more earnest scholarly engagement with their underlying dynamics. This certainly means critiquing their methodologies, utility and presence as evidence in policy and private practice, and the ways they may reinforce urban inequalities and path-dependent modes of urban economic development, but also recognising the potential of this pervasive generator of comparative gestures to inform the ways in which major cities are shaped in a time that, still, is closely affected by the global city discourse. Our aim, and hope for further investigation, here is one of seeing more research and debate on the incidence of both rankings and the global city 'genre' that is at the same time nuanced, solidly evidence-based and yet not simply bought into either blanket acceptance of their popularity or indeed up-front rejection of their relevance. To us, as we have sought to underscore in this brief research note, subtlety in disaggregating the components of the global city discourse and the plethora of benchmarks, and critically the way these are intertwined, is a first scholarly step in the direction of an even more impactful intervention, as 'global' urban academics, into the workings of those who drive urban development in cities like Singapore, Sydney and Dubai.

NOTES

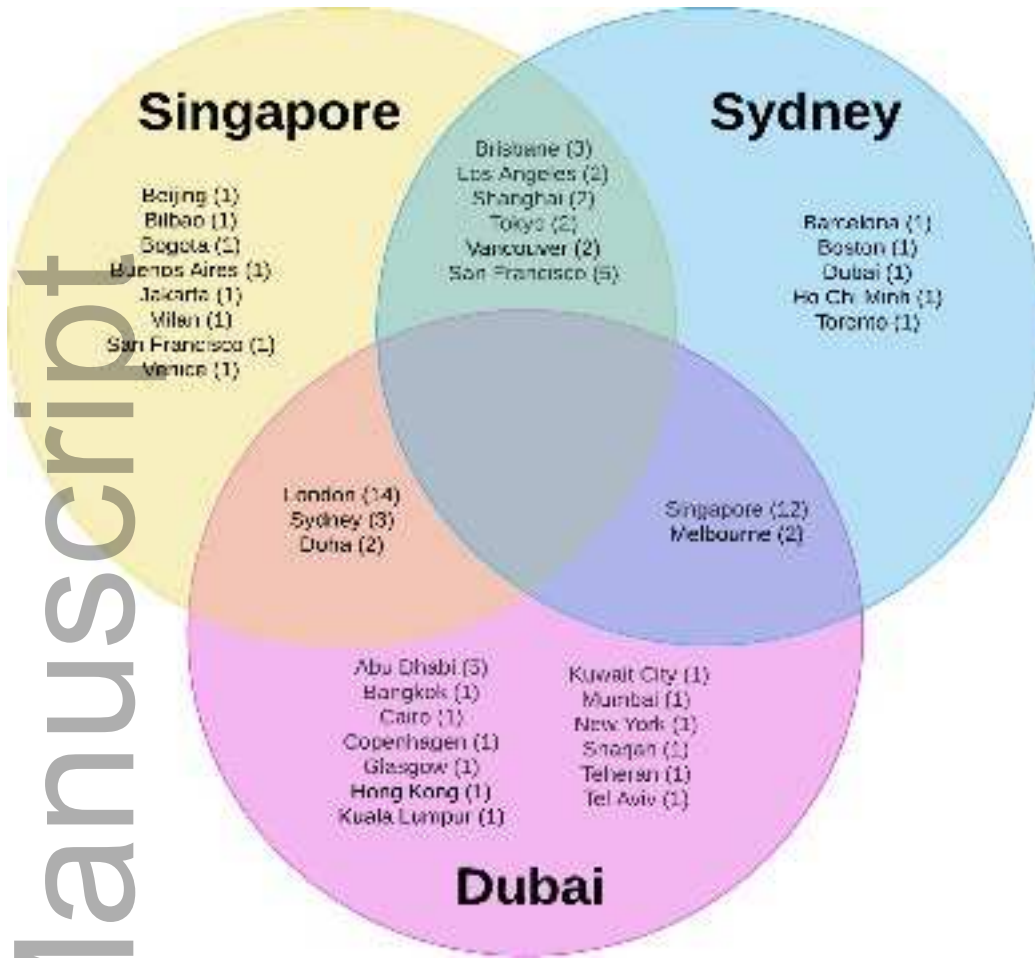
¹ In the broader study we also aimed to do so by drawing on Pearson coefficient correlations, analysed via SPSS, between the 20 concepts outlined here, as well as between concepts and backgrounds of interviewees. This is a promising avenue to dig even deeper into the nuance of correlations between comparative gestures, rankings and the global city discourse, but one that would likely take a whole article in itself. For the sake of brevity and to first and foremost draw attention to the 'big picture' here.

² A salience of 1 means the concept appears in all interviews in question, and 0 if it does not at all, with intermediate values expressed in decimals (to the thousandths), and accounting for both explicit mentions (valued at 1) and implicit ones (at 0.5). So, for instance, a ‘salience’ value of .201 would mean it appears in roughly 20% of the interviews, likely as a combination of explicit and implicit mentions.

REFERENCES



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Full dataset	0.159	0.168	0.250	0.103	0.176	0.171	0.088
Rankings	0.194	0.235	0.337	0.112	0.327	0.153	0.143
Concept	History	Entrepreneur	Gateway	Control	Leaders	In place	Metrocentric
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Rankings	0.173	0.133	0.163	0.347	0.092	0.184	0.198
Concept	Dual City	Relational	Opportunity	Elite	Splinter	Innovation	<i>overall</i>

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