

The critical role of stakeholder engagement in a place branding strategy: a case study of the Empordà brand

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Abstract

This article investigates the critical role of local stakeholders in the development and implementation of a place branding strategy in the Catalan northern region of Empordà. As a theoretical background this research uses a stakeholder-orientation and participatory approaches towards both place branding and spatial planning. The research involved an initial SWOT Analysis, fifteen thematic focus groups and nineteen semi-structured interviews with local stakeholders. In addition, a paper-based and on-line questionnaire was employed in order to open the process of the brand's conceptualization to all residents. Following analysis of all obtained data, the study led to a proposal for the graphic image (logo and slogan) of the Empordà brand "Empordà, tocat pels déus" [Empordà, Touched by the Gods]. In this article, we discuss the development of the brand, the revision of the storytelling for the territory, as well as the challenges to participatory planning and governance in place brand management, taking into account changes in the city council when local elections take place and strategic thinking turns into a short-term public policy approach. The case study findings help to demonstrate the value of participatory place branding processes. Specifically, they show that local communities become brand advocates when they are involved throughout the development of a place brand. The article concludes by reinforcing that stakeholder engagement is essential to establish a linkage between place branding and spatial planning, as well as to promote a more participatory governance of the place brand development.

Keywords: Place branding, spatial planning, local governance, Empordà region, social research

1. Introduction

Stakeholder-orientation in place branding and the adoption of a participatory approach is key to understanding contemporary long-term place branding strategies based on community involvement (Kemp, Williams & Bordelon, 2011; Kavartzis, 2012; Eshuis, Klijn & Braun, 2014; Thelander & Säwe, 2015; Kavartzis & Kalandides, 2015). At the same time, “the influence of strategic planning works through multiple processes in which the relevant actors can see an opportunity to use strategic planning to push forward a policy change” (Albrechts, 2017, p. 390). Hence, previous studies underline the advantages of the linkage between place branding initiatives and strategic spatial planning (Van Assche & Djanibekov, 2012; Oliveira, 2015a), as they both “work as processes to address economic, social and structural challenges” of a territory (Oliveira, 2015b, p. 25).

In line with these theoretical perspectives, this article takes the Empordà branding process as case study. Empordà is a region in northern Catalonia, near the French border, divided in two counties: Alt and Baix Empordà (Upper and Lower Empordà). Development of the Empordà brand – the result of a political decision of Figueres Town Council, the capital of Alt Empordà– started out with the main objective of positioning the two counties and their brand as complementary to that of the traditional “Costa Brava” brand, which has a long history and tradition as a tourist destination.

Figure 1. Map of Catalonia. The Empordà region, with its two counties is marked on the northern part of the map. Source: Geologic and Cartographic Institute of Catalonia, 2018.



The Empordà brand –presented in 2015, “Empordà, tocat pels déus” [Empordà, Touched by the Gods] –aims to be a new holistic regional development roadmap for the next decade. On the basis of internationally recognized icons such as painters and chefs alongside other cultural assets such as the Greek and Roman (later in the article as Greco-Roman) ruins of Empúries and the significance of its wine region (the Denomination of Origin Empordà, DO Empordà), the Empordà brand attempts to project territorial assets and values related to culture as an alternative to the typical “beach and sun” image associated to Costa Brava. The current place branding strategy places great focus on the design of participatory processes that involve internal stakeholders in the creation of a strong and shared design brand process. This is especially important if we consider the political connotations inherent in any process of implementing a place brand and the consequences for regional and local identity (Govers & Go, 2009).

The conceptualization of the Empordà brand was developed by a research group of the University of Vic-Central University of Catalonia –located in the north of Barcelona province– with the participation of the first and second author of this article. This case study has three related aims. Firstly, to discuss how the creation of informal brand communities legitimizes and lends credibility to a process of defining a regional brand that initially generated some scepticism among the local communities. Secondly, to propose a concrete qualitative and quantitative methodology in order to integrate different stakeholder voices (residents, social and economic organizations, political parties, etc.) into a wider citizen dialogue around the development of a new place brand. Underpinning these two aims, the third aim is to shed more light on the close links between place branding and spatial planning as both are thought to improve regional governance, place identity and economic value.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1 From the commercial brand to the place brand

In today's globalized world, territories have the growing need to establish their identities not only for attracting talent and monetizing tourism and investments, but also for differentiating themselves and finding their own place in a global and interconnected society. However, we consider that the creation of place brands at all geographical levels, from countries to neighbourhoods, must take into account elements that differentiate them from the path commonly taken in the corporate sphere, for two main reasons: first, the necessary reading of the brand creation process from a territorial and environmental viewpoint, and second, the necessary public interest on which this type of initiatives are based. In this vein, place branding represents an innovative approach to improving the image projected by places with the final aim of providing a competitive advantage for the economic promotion and governance of a

territory (Oliveira, 2015b).

These two restrictions force us to reflect on the process of creating a place brand from a viewpoint rather distant from corporate branding to, instead, associate the process with a long-term strategy of local development. The objective of the brand is not only to achieve economic performance, but also to obtain a good reputation for the territory, which, of course, will also end up impacting on its economic prosperity. According to Anholt (2010), the virtue of the place brand lies in its flexibility, since it can combine market forces with the particular interests of local human capital. Lopez-Lita and Benlloch (2006, p.51) expressed similar views: “The brand should serve as a basis for ‘branding’ territories in benefit of their differentiation, so as to thereby highlight anthropological and cultural differences, transcending, in this way, its initial strictly economic dimension”.

Based on a fundamental effort for differentiation and positioning, place branding pursues the following objectives, highlighted by Fernández-Cavia (2011, p.107): increasing the attractiveness of places as recipients of business investment; improving a places’ competitive positioning in the tourist market; increasing the place attractiveness for capturing and retaining talent; promoting citizens’ identification with their place of residence; and finally, facilitating economic and social development in general. Similarly, the objective of branding is not limited to projecting and communicating a certain image and reputation outside the place, but rather its differential trait is directed towards internal publics such as local communities and stakeholders, as will be seen in the next section, in an attempt to enhance pride of residence in and the feeling of belonging to a certain place (San Eugenio, 2012).

2.1. A tentative approach to the relationship between place branding and spatial planning

Place branding campaigns go beyond tourism goals and can be seen from the point of view of improving governance. Moreover, when place branding processes involve bottom-up

participatory structures or the participation of local communities and residents (internal publics), this contributes to participatory spatial planning, if we accept Van Assche & Verschraegen's (2008) definition of planning as the coordination of policies and practices affecting spatial organization.

Van Assche & Djanibekov (2012, p. 179) also state that "spatial planning can contribute to the integration of policies in comprehensive visions, but a planning system, in the sense of a network of organizations, does not escape from the evolutionary rigidity introduced by interdependence and path-dependence". Focusing on the relationship between spatial planning and governance, Albrechts (2017, p. 393) concludes: "A crucial element in this respect is the way in which people are excluded or included in strategic planning processes and the way the relationship between people, technologies of government, norms of self-rule are organized".

However, despite recent scientific developments on the exploration of the linkage between place branding and spatial planning, there is still a lot to explore. For example, Oliveira & Ashworth (2017, p. 35) have approached the relationship between place branding and strategic spatial planning from the point of view of improving regional governance, understanding place branding "as a strategic process contributing to urban/regional development and urban/regional competitiveness. To this end, place branding can operate effectively through strategic spatial planning". For this reason, "it is necessary to emphasize that the role of place branding in strategic spatial planning is a way that goes far beyond advertising campaigns, place promotion or communication strategies [...]. Place branding integrated with strategic spatial planning would foster economic restructuring, social inclusion and cohesion, political engagement and participation, the reinforcement of place identification and the general long-term well-being of citizens" (Oliveira, 2015a, p. 40). In a previous study, Van Assche & Chien Lo (2011, p. 123) argue that the relationship between spatial planning and place branding can be understood because both initiatives "can contribute to the discovery

and the creation of a place identity that produce economic value”. However, it should be considered that spatial planning or design and conceptualization initiatives for place brands do not define identities for that territory per se, that is, they do not create new narratives, but rather depend on the structure of the citizen participation process. It is essential to approach this process with a bottom-up structure, where citizens have the opportunity not only to participate, but also to decide on public management policies.

The relationship between spatial planning and place branding is further strengthened by the contribution of Van Assche, Duineveld & Beunen (2014, p. 2385), who adopt a poststructuralist perspective to speak of three different types of relationship between the concepts of power and planning. Firstly, they speak of “power of planning”, that is, the impact that spatial planning has on societies. Secondly, they speak of “power in planning”, or the interactions that exist between the various actors involved in a spatial planning process, their different realities, problems, methods and solutions. And finally, these authors speak of “power on planning”, which is materialized in “the influence of broader society on the planning system”.

Using a multi-case study method, Oliveira & Hersperger (2018) deepen on the academic debates on ‘planning versus power’ investigating the roles of governance arrangements and power configurations in current practices of strategic plan implementation in 14 European urban regions. Oliveira & Hersperger demonstrate “that to truly grasp plan implementation praxis it is necessary to go beyond multi-actor involvement and inter-scaler government cooperation. It is necessary to scrutinize the funding sources, investigate who wins and who loses while negotiations are happening, and how plan implementation decisions are actually made” (2018, p. 623).

In our view, the link between spatial planning and place branding should also consider this debate between ‘planning and power’. More specifically, we argue that place branding

initiatives would greatly benefit from a more balanced relationship among power, funding and governance structures. In this article we intend to demonstrate that power configurations not only “must be critically considered in plan implementation” (Oliveira & Hersperger, 2018, p. 631), but also, they influence significantly the effectiveness of place branding initiatives as they are embedded in governance structures. Additionally, the effectiveness of place branding strategies is positively influenced by the involvement of local stakeholders as they can jointly prepare a unique storyline enhancing a places’ image and strengthening the place brand.

2.2. Stakeholder orientation and participatory approaches in place branding: a starting point for a governance strategy

Places have complex identities -which affect the way place brands are perceived by different audiences. Conceptualizing and implementing place brands through a “top-down” approach or focusing solely on promotion is clearly inadequate. As Kavaratzis & Kalandides (2015, p. 1370) argue, “the way in which people create value is unique and might be, to an extent, disconnected from an objective reality”. This is how these authors explain that the process of place brand development through stakeholder participation is unique in each case, and based on the associations of ideas, values and attributes. They state that “Associations are not isolated but are mutually dependent and mutually activated as they operate in a network (rather than in a sum), leading to the experience people have with the brand” (Kavaratzis & Kalandides, 2015, p. 1371). This aspect is linked to the idea that transformation and change are inherent to the place, and therefore “places are never finished but always the result of process and practices” (Cresswell, 2004, p. 37).

In this respect, Kavaratzis & Kalandides (2015) point to the need for a greater geographical awareness when it comes to conceptualizing place brands, assuming that the process of brand construction is a synthesis of the different assets of the place: material elements, collective memory, social interactions, institutions and elements of

representativeness. They conclude that “the place brand formation process starts when people use place-making elements to form mental associations with the place. These associations are not static but evolve and change over time as they interact with each other on several dimensions” (Kavaratzis & Kalandides, 2015, p. 1368). In their theoretical positioning, these researchers use the four constitutive elements of place suggested by Läßle (1991) as a comprehensive classification: materiality, practices, institutions and representations.

These authors base their reflection on the conceptualization process for the Bogotá brand (Colombia), a work that focused on a structured methodological triangulation based on non-participatory observation, the analysis of website content, official documents and press articles identifying the most well-known attributes of the city, and, finally, more than eighty interviews (in-depth and focus groups), with the overall aim of increasing citizen participation in defining the territory’s (tangible and intangible) assets to the maximum. According to these researchers, “what the experience of Bogotá shows is that [...] it is possible to work with the many open-ended trajectories and celebrate their diversity, allowing for their interaction through participation and openness” (Kavaratzis & Kalandides, 2015, p. 1379).

In their case study on the revitalization and subsequent positioning campaign for the port peninsula of Katendrecht (Rotterdam), Eshuis, Klijn and Braun (2014) also based their approach on qualitative methodology (in-depth interviews, observation and analysis of secondary material). Their aim was “to understand how exactly citizen participation in place marketing evolves, and how branding processes can include citizens’ emotions” (2014, p. 157). In the study conclusions, these authors propose two fundamental ideas. “First, it provided a way to channel citizens’ feelings and emotions of fear regarding the upcoming developments in their area. [...] Second, the brand facilitated the articulation of citizens’ feelings and emotions regarding the identity of their community” (Eshuis, Klijn & Braun, 2014, p. 168).

In addition, the same authors completed their study with a survey of 600 Dutch place branding professionals (this survey was carried out in the Netherlands under the name ‘National City Marketing Monitor’), with the aim of determining the views of those in professional practice regarding stakeholders’ and citizens’ level of participation in place marketing. According to the results of this survey, “citizens’ involvement in place marketing is limited, and citizens are less involved than other stakeholders. However, [...] when citizens are involved this has a significant influence on the degree to which place marketing is considered in other policies”. It is clear that the studies we have consulted -also those conducted by Kemp, Williams and Bordelon (2011) and Thelander and Säwe (2015)- point to a need to shift the role of residents in place branding processes from simple consumers and target groups to citizens and meaning co-creators. This is, again, a matter of establishing a governance structure that allows for aligning internal publics with the processes of place brand development, making it possible to create a “civic consciousness that helps to strengthen the destination’s brand management system” (Kemp, Williams and Bordelon, 2011, p. 121). This was a particular focus for the development of the Empordà brand, which is described below.

3. Case study description and methodology

3.1. Empordà as a territory

Empordà is a territory with multiple identities, forged from a history that has turned it into a cross-border space between Catalonia and France (Nogué & Sala, 2010), often regarded as a ‘transit region’ and not a final destination. It is a geographical area that has had multiple representations, expressed through painting, music and writing, and through a strong oral expression of a collective and popular imaginary forged from the mixture of rich gastronomic tradition, the appeal of traditional festivals, architectural wealth and landscape plasticity, thanks to the combination of natural parks on the coast (i.e. Cap de Creus natural park or The

Wetlands) and inland (i.e. L'Albera natural park). However, political decisions –the division of Catalonia into 29 counties during the Second Spanish Republic (1931-1936)– have meant that Empordà is now a territory divided administratively into two counties (Upper and Lower Empordà), which have ended up having a life of their own and, at times, have even turned their back on one another. The urban fabric of Upper Empordà –which has Figueres as its only capital, emerging as a central node in a local network society– has little to do with the dispersion of Lower Empordà and the various towns that have their own claim to be capital, despite the current nucleus of La Bisbal d'Empordà, which serves as the administrative capital following the predominance it enjoyed during Republican times as the main market centre (Catalan Geography Society, 2005). One of the aspects that have linked the two counties is that they belong to “the Costa Brava”, a name devised by journalist Ferran Agulló in his column for the newspaper *La Veu de Catalunya* on 12 September 1908. Since 1976, the Costa Brava brand is managed by Costa Brava-Girona's Pyrenees Tourist Council, founded to serve as the meeting point between the various government bodies and the tourism sector in Girona province, focusing its work on three areas: external marketing, internal marketing and competitiveness. The Costa Brava brand has been appealing for most coastal towns that used sun and beach tourism to base their economic development, before later realizing the need to diversify their supply of leisure services towards new forms of entertainment and other types of tourism (Gutiérrez-Olesti, 2013). Today, the Costa Brava is no longer the sole attraction for the territory's tourist activity, as other activities have offered themselves as an interesting complement: wine tourism, framed within the DO Empordà, is one example and a first justification of the Empordà brand as an umbrella for economic development throughout the territory (Regulatory Council of the DO Empordà, 2014).

3.2. Methodology

This article reports the results of an applied research project based on a knowledge transfer contract between the University of Vic-Central University of Catalonia and the Figueres Town Council. The project lasted for two years (2013-2015) and aimed at developing the Empordà brand by using both qualitative and quantitative research methods. The methodology proposed to develop the Empordà brand had the aim of converting an initial territorial identity into a competitive identity using place branding strategies.

As discussed earlier, traditionally, place marketing used the same techniques to market places in the same way as other products or services. However, contemporary understandings highlight the need to introduce a participatory process to obtain citizen's opinion, taking into account not only opinion leaders but also the rest of civil society. There is, therefore, a need to base strategy development on bottom-up structures where citizens can decide on the (tangible and intangible) values of their places. Furthermore, "both planning and place branding have evolved significantly, making it easier to hybridize them and to reap the benefits of such hybridization" (Van Assche, Beunen & Chien Lo, 2016, p.166), particularly around citizens' participation. The methodology used for the Empordà brand was influenced by previous research on the relationship between the two disciplines (spatial planning and place branding), as in, and for example, San Eugenio (2012), Eshuis, Klijn & Braun (2014), Kavartzis & Kalandides (2015), Oliveira (2015b) or Van Assche, Beunen and Chien Lo (2016).

The first phase started in 2013 and involved carrying out a diagnosis to analyse the current situation of the perceived image at different levels (environmental, economic, political, etc.). These analyses were structured using a SWOT analysis (Strengths, Weaknesses Opportunities, and Threats). To prepare this SWOT, it was necessary to review all documents that had been used to manage the promotion strategies of that place in the previous years: data was extracted from the Catalan Statistics Institute (Idescat) and other qualitative information was based on previous academic research (Macau, 1964; Catalan Geography Society, 2005;

Armangué, 2012; Gutiérrez-Olesti, 2013), as well as using all the regional strategic plans published before 2015 (Gordi & Albertí, 2009; Nogué & Sala, 2010; DALEPH, 2014; DECABA, 2014). Hence, the conceptualization of a new brand and the strategic plan associated to this project could complement the previous regional strategic plans: The *Strategic Plan in the field of local economic development and employment in the Alt Empordà* and the *Sectoral Action Plan in the field of tourism development*, both published in 2014. Although they focus the attention on economic development, tourist promotion and landscape management, none of them highlights the need to create a regional brand as a key element of regional governance. As a result of this phase, we obtained a qualitative picture of the current image and positioning of the region and its brand. Additionally, this stage also entailed the creation of a website with the following objectives: to introduce the specific characteristics of the project, to generate media content according to the progress of the study and to engage stakeholders in the project.

The second stage consisted of a threefold method, carrying out a total of 15 focus groups, 19 in-depth interviews and a web survey with residents. The focus groups were designed according to the stakeholders' structure of the region; as many publics as possible were included in order to provide an overall representation of the place's social characteristics (see Table 1). In-depth interviews were used to ratify and/or contrast qualitative data from the focus groups, and to identify critical approaches to the place according to local opinion leaders (see Table 2). Finally, the web survey, which obtained both quantitative and qualitative data, was used to capture grassroots opinion and allow the whole population to be part of this research process. This survey was available to all of the citizens on the project website at <http://marcaemporda.cat/espai-participatiu/>.

A total of 224 residents took part in the web survey for our project. The survey was structured in eight questions in order to test the perceptions of the residents regarding the region: what do you like the most, what you don't like, the main characteristics of the

Empordà's character, what residents think non-residents believe about the area, favourite icons and places, what do you think the territory would look like in the future or, finally, what colours link better with the landscape.

Table 1. Overview of the focus groups

| Group theme | Date | Place | Invited | Attended |
|--|----------|-------|------------|------------|
| Education | 19/03/14 | UECC | 17 | 11 |
| Sports and youth | 26/03/14 | LECC | 27 | 6 |
| Business associations | 12/04/14 | FTC | 12 | 6 |
| Urban planning and environment | 16/04/14 | UECC | 30 | 10 |
| Popular culture | 30/04/14 | LECC | 45 | 7 |
| Children and the elderly | 30/04/14 | LECC | 52 | 12 |
| Cultural heritage | 07/05/14 | UECC | 30 | 14 |
| Health and social organizations | 14/05/14 | FTC | 21 | 8 |
| Security forces | 21/05/14 | LECC | 31 | 15 |
| Merchants and stallholders | 04/06/14 | FTC | 19 | 4 |
| The media | 11/06/14 | UECC | 20 | 6 |
| Tourist boards | 24/09/14 | LECC | 53 | 9 |
| Tourism agents and businesses | 01/10/14 | LECC | 34 | 10 |
| Gastronomy | 01/10/14 | LECC | 21 | 7 |
| Other political representatives | 08/10/14 | UECC | 26 | 9 |
| Total: | | | 438 | 134 |
| The acronym LECC stands for Lower Empordà County Council; UECC for Upper Empordà County Council and, finally, FTC for Figueres Town Council. | | | | |

Table 2. Overview of opinion leaders consulted and the reason for their being interviewed

| | |
|---------------------|--|
| Joan Armangué | Former mayor of Figueres |
| Jordi Cabezas | Former mayor of La Jonquera and former chair of Alt Empordà County Council |
| Josep Capellà | Tourism expert |
| Josep Maria Dacosta | Biologist and <i>Empordà</i> expert |
| Mohamed El Amrani | Journalist. President of the network Living Together |
| Antonio Escudero | President of the Girona Counties Hotel and Restaurant Federation |
| Miquel Gotanegra | President of the Girona Counties Campsite Association |
| Edward Hugh | Economist |
| Dídac Lee | Technology entrepreneur |
| Jaume Marín | Marketing and Communications Director for the Costa Brava-Girona Tourist Board |
| Lluís Medir | Former mayor of Palafrugell |
| Marian Muro | Director of the Government of Catalonia's Tourism Directorate-General |

| | |
|-----------------|--|
| Pere Padrosa | Director of the Government of Catalonia's Directorate-General for Transport and Mobility |
| Vicenç Pagès | Writer and professor at Ramon Llull University, Blanquerna Faculty of Communication |
| Antoni Puigvert | Writer and journalist |
| Ramon Ramos | Director of the Costa Brava-Girona Tourist Board |
| Lluís Roura | Writer and artist |
| Martí Sabrià | Leader of the Costa Brava Centre Hotel and Restaurant and Tourism Union |
| Patrick Torrent | Executive Director of the Catalan Tourism Agency |

The final stage, as a result of all the previous work, allowed the development of a corporate image (designed by Eumo DC, the graphic design study of the University of Vic-Central University of Catalonia) that represents the identity of the territory by graphic means. This involved creating a logotype, slogan and implementation plan. This stage ended with the communication plan aimed at promoting and positioning the new brand.

This research and analysis process that was followed in Empordà is proposed here as a place branding process that incorporates the views of local stakeholders and its stages might be applicable more generally. In the following section we present the findings and results of these stages in a discussion of how the Empordà brand developed.

4. Results: Creating the “Empordà, Touched by the Gods” brand

By understanding the synergies between municipal districts, but also between regions, public policies can go beyond the short term (Eshuis, Klijn & Braun, 2014). The process of conceptualizing a place brand for Empordà as a whole (promoted by Figueres Town Council and the two county councils), encompassing the realities of Upper and Lower Empordà was an important consideration for this project, due to the interconnectedness evident in the contemporary environment. This entails overcoming artificial divisions between geographical places that have common features, and regarding them as them as one (with their nuances) when it comes to considering their position in a global market of tourists, investors and talent.

In this spirit, the graphic representation (Figure 1) of the brand ‘Empordà: Touched by the Gods’ was finally presented in 2015 in order to project the region beyond these divisions.

Figure 2. Virtual representation of the Empordà brand after the participatory process. Source: Jordi Cano (Eumo DC).



This image therefore becomes the synthesis of an initial diagnosis and the conception of tangible and intangible values of the Empordà region, which are described below.

4.1. Initial diagnosis

A diagnosis of the current situation regarding Empordà revealed a diversity of realities under the Empordà umbrella brand. This could not be otherwise if we consider that it has a surface area of 2,059.2 km², a population of over 270,000 people of different origins, ages, genders and social statuses. According to the Statistical Institute of Catalonia (Idescat) data, in both counties, more than 50% of the population have secondary or University studies (64% in Upper Empordà, and 55,3% in Lower Empordà). Tables 3 and 4 provide a summary of this diversity, which is evidenced in the various official documents analysed (Gordi and Albertí, 2009; Nogué and Sala, 2010; Armangué, 2012; DALEPH, 2014; DECABA, 2014) and in the existing literature (Pla, 1947, 1980; Macau, 1964; Moreno Chacón, 1996).

Table 3. Origin of citizens in Upper and Lower Empordà (Idescat, 2012)

| | Upper Empordà | Lower Empordà |
|--|---------------|---------------|
|--|---------------|---------------|

| Origin | Population | Percentage | Population | Percentage |
|---------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|
| Catalonia | 81,693 | 58 | 83,959 | 62.7 |
| Rest of Spain | 20,143 | 14 | 19,822 | 14.8 |
| Foreign | 39,515 | 28 | 30,006 | 22.4 |

Table 4. Economic variables for Upper and Lower Empordà (Idescat, 2012)

| | Upper Empordà | Lower Empordà |
|-----------------------------------|-----------------|-----------------|
| Employed | 42,725 | 45,298 |
| Unemployed | 4,256 | 5,033 |
| GDP per capita | €24,100 | €23,600 |
| Gross disposable household income | €16,900 | €16,910 |
| Importance of the services sector | 74.5% of GDP | 68.8% of GDP |
| Agricultural land | 47,465 hectares | 20,672 hectares |
| Accommodation | 54,376 beds | 75,411 beds |

The tables above show some interesting data. On the one hand, the economic variables demonstrate that the GDP per capita of Upper and Lower Empordà are below the average of the region (29.000), despite the significance of both counties as Catalan touristic powerhouses. On the other hand, both counties have a significant percentage of foreign citizens, compared with the average of Catalonia (approximately 16%). The significance of the service sector (above all, the tourism industry), the proximity to the border with France, and the wide range of origins of Empordà residents show the diversity of a territory with multiple identities. It is because of this diversity that it seems impossible to design a place brand in the traditional way (without the opinion of the local population and leaving it in the hands of an individual consultant or designer). A voice must be given to the local population to try to find some common elements that configure this place brand and help position it. As a summary of the diagnosis, the SWOT matrix below was developed.

Table 5. SWOT analysis for the Empordà brand

| Strengths | Weaknesses |
|--|----------------------------------|
| Awareness of a common reality (as a county). | Regional and landscape division. |

| | |
|---|---|
| Historical trajectory of the Empordà brand. Cohesive elements (communications, etc.). Sharing various tourism clusters. | Geographical diversity. Social, cultural, etc. heterogeneity Internal competition. |
| Opportunities | Threats |
| Presence in known brands (Costa Brava). High-quality natural areas in the countryside. To explore connections with the wine DO Empordà. | Some territories can be identified with other brands. Overtourism. Dependence on resources located outside the region (for example, Barcelona's airport is one hour and a half away from the main city of Empordà, Figueres). |

The framework that led to the establishment of a new graphic design for the brand, which should include a subsequent plan of action by the local authorities promoting it, is based on two main lines, following the structure of the questionnaire used by the focus group, the interviews and the online survey. From the analysis of the results of our applied research, using the methodological triangulation described previously, we obtain the following overview, making a division between the values and attributes of “Tangible Empordà” and those of “Intangible Empordà”.

4.2. Tangible Empordà

For tangible Empordà, the resource of the natural landscape appears recurrently, both in the coastal landscape (Cadaqués or Cap de Creus) and in the interior, which has received special recognition in recent times (Empordanet or Peratallada). This is especially true when, knowing that many territories on the Empordà coastline have historically been linked with the Costa Brava, the brand now must extend beyond the coastal area and encompass the territorial diversity of inland Empordà. Two quotes from the 224 respondents serve to summarize the admiration that residents have for the Empordà landscape. One of the respondents said: “Empordà is a small paradise that has everything you need to enjoy nature without leaving it”. And another respondent summarized: “We have a great treasure, where we live, full of cultural

elements and wonderful, rich corners, with a great story behind them just waiting to be discovered”.

Table 6. Main characteristics of the territory, ordered from greater (1) to lesser (5) importance by respondents (results in percentages)

| | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
|-----------------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|
| Nature | 44.2 | 39.7 | 8.9 | 2.7 | 2.2 | 1.8 | 0 |
| Quality of life | 28.6 | 26.8 | 27.2 | 6.3 | 4.5 | 5.4 | 0.9 |
| Art | 16.1 | 8.5 | 9.8 | 18.8 | 19.2 | 23.7 | 2.7 |
| Gastronomy | 3.6 | 11.6 | 25.9 | 14.7 | 14.7 | 27.7 | 1.3 |
| Tradition | 0.9 | 6.3 | 16.5 | 32.1 | 23.7 | 18.3 | 1.8 |
| History | 4.0 | 5.8 | 9.8 | 22.8 | 31.7 | 20.5 | 4.9 |
| Other | 2.7 | 1.3 | 1.3 | 2.2 | 3.6 | 1.8 | 87.1 |

Together with citizens’ assessment of the Empordà landscape (Table 8), our fieldwork has shown that Empordà residents also consider it to be a region with a high level of cultural heritage (architectural and artistic). Respondents or interviewees consistently praised the quality of the Greco-Roman ruins in Sant Martí d’Empúries and the positioning that the Dalinian triangle of Figueres, Cadaqués and Pubol has given to the area.

The communications network is also considered a positioning asset. Empordà is perceived as a hub of roads and railway lines, and especially Figueres since the arrival of a high-speed rail link. As businessman and politician Pere Padrosa explains, Figueres “is a central axis between the interior and the coast” (Pere Padrosa, personal interview, March 20, 2013).

The recent recognition awarded to the Denomination of Origin Empordà is also a source of pride for most of Empordà inhabitants. In this respect, the DO Empordà¹ was one of the first organizations to opt to replace the concept “Costa Brava” with “Empordà”, in order to give more scope to the range of wines that identify themselves with the region. The winemaking

industry is one of the main representatives of an agri-food sector considered strategic for the Empordà economy.

The position of Empordà in Catalonia and in the world also gains value from notable local citizens who mainly lived in Empordà such as the painter Salvador Dalí (1904-1989), the writer Josep Pla (1897-1981), or the chef Ferran Adrià (1962-present). In fact, for Costa Brava business owners, having the Bulli Foundation –the innovation and creativity hub lead by chef Ferran Adrià after closing the three stars Michelin restaurant, El Bulli– is one of the clearest assets for their future projection, representing some of the intangible values attributable to Empordà (innovation and entrepreneurship), discussed below.

4.3. Intangible Empordà

Intangible Empordà is manifested in different attributes. First, interviewees and respondents note the possibilities of a high quality of life (Table 8). They emphasize the need to preserve this characteristic in an environment that has often been considered “overcrowded” due to tourism. Therefore, overcrowding is seen as a future threat to this well-being currently enjoyed by a good part of Empordà, while having “sustainable” land is recognized as a challenge for the future and a legacy for generations to come. One of the respondents summarized it as follows: “We must take action to stop the degradation of the landscape and the environment, to prevent the territory from losing its personality”.

Empordà citizens also acknowledge their “lunatic” quality, that is, “touched by the *tramontane* (a strong north wind, famous in the area)”. This expression emerged recurrently in all focus groups. However, a willingness to project themselves as “friendly” and “welcoming” to strangers should be one of the vectors of the brand’s projection, as emphasized by many of the respondents. Descendants of mixed cultures due to the region’s status as borderland, the

inhabitants of this land also define themselves as “hard workers” and “entrepreneurs”, another element that would help to position Empordà as a region that welcomes strangers.

Another important feature worth highlighting is the region’s condition of “border territory”, which endows this geographical area with a range of sights, freedoms, and so on, resulting from a constant mix of cultures, especially with France. As the former mayor of La Jonquera (1999-2011), Jordi Cabezas, explains: “In Upper Empordà in particular we are very close to France and live very much from the French. Not only in La Jonquera, but the whole axis stretching to Figueres, Roses and Castelló d’Empúries [...]. Perhaps we are more open, more European, more open to Europe” (Jordi Cabezas, personal interview, April 4, 2013).

As for colours, the chromatic scale of Empordà is dominated by blues, greens and yellows, depending on the time of year. This palette of colours can be described perfectly after interviewing the Escala painter Lluís Roura, who proposes a palette consisting of three basic shades: “titan” blue, emerald green and the “colours of the earth”, which are derived from the colour brown and its chromatic range (Lluís Roura, personal interview, April 2013).

5. Discussion

According to Oliveira & Ashworth (2017, p. 31), “some regions, particularly in Europe, are seeking to construct regional brands from their vast networks of small and medium-sized cities in order to attract and retain international workers and firms, as well as to use resources more sustainably”. In this vein, acceptance and/or legitimization of a place branding strategy are obtained from the (internal and external) public interested in that brand (Eshuis, Klijn and Braun, 2014). The citizen participation process deployed in the creation of the Empordà brand allows the process of conceptualizing a brand that belongs to them to be opened to the bulk of social, media, political and economic agents in this region in northern Catalonia. Thus, the emphasis is placed on the perspective of residents and civil society (Oliveira & Ashworth,

2017), something not commonly found in place brand creation processes, historically thought of in outward terms or as “top-down”. The residents’ perspective gives us varying levels of identification of the values and attributes present in the Empordà; this is to say, to implement an identity-oriented place branding process beyond the traditional tourism-oriented place promotion.

When it comes to brand conceptualization, the congruence between brand and identity has been taken into account. By this we mean the degree to which the residents, as important holders of place identity, agree that the values the brand attempts to project (internally and externally) coincide with the true identity of Empordà. We are, therefore, discussing a locally rooted, ‘honest’ brand based on the territorial identity and its values. Another key aspect of the public consultation process regarding the values of the Empordà brand is that of perceived usefulness. With this, we refer to the extent to which citizens consider that a brand representing their territory provides benefits for the territory, benefits which could not be achieved without the existence of the brand and the actions deriving from it. In addition, performing a diagnosis prior to the participation process initiated for the purpose of conceptualizing the Empordà brand allowed the local authorities involved in the project (Figueres Town Council, Upper Empordà County Council and Lower Empordà County Council) to avoid initial rejection of the brand, since the diagnosis had the fundamental aim of analysing the image and identity of Empordà before starting the process of citizen participation and, finally, of defining which brand strategy to follow.

Regarding the role of local authorities in conceptualizing and implementing a place brand, it is necessary to make special reference to the relationship between the disciplines of place branding and spatial planning. In this sense, implementing a new place brand must involve, among other factors, the generation of a certain type of governance (understood as territory-orientated administration), while at the same time integrating it as an element of spatial

planning due to its cross-disciplinary nature of public governance. Understanding place branding processes as bottom-up strategies, and therefore circumscribed to the democratizing will of decision-making processes, also entails improving citizen participation in the spatial planning of the territory. Hence, we can consider that, place branding contributes to the transition from “government” to governance”, explained according to Getimis (2010, p. 123), “as a re-orientation away from ‘hierarchies’ towards ‘heterarchies’.

However, power configurations in the administration are neither stable nor long-term. In May 2015, municipal elections in Spain led to changes in the structure of the government teams at Figueres Town Hall and the two county councils involved. Furthermore, Figueres’ councilor in charge of the implementation of the brand abandoned the local government in February 2017, as a result of political differences with the Mayor. After that, on the one hand, the leadership of Figueres Town Council in the implementation of the brand can be questioned; on the other hand, the current leadership of the Empordà brand promotion and implementation is based on the civil society, media and other cultural and corporate initiatives that believe in the storytelling that has been created.

It has been demonstrated that concrete applications of the Empordà’s brand storytelling have been successfully applied basically according to private initiatives. As Oliveira (2015a) states, place branding integrated with spatial planning could improve economic restructuring and place identification. For instance, on the one hand, the Empordà Denomination of Origin, as the regulator of the wine sector of Empordà region (Upper and Lower Empordà), has been the first entity to use the idea of a single region of Empordà as a main place identification. The wine tradition of the region has been a key factor to develop a place narrative directly related to a broader cultural discourse that allows the brand to avoid a strictly tourist-oriented storytelling.

On the other hand, Costa Brava-Girona's Pyrenees Tourist Council have been a key organization to develop a holistic tourist offer including assets in both districts (Upper and Lower Empordà), basically related with this cultural narrative (the paintings of Salvador Dalí, the gastronomy of Ferran Adrià, the wine tradition, among others). A good example is the commercialization of a single offer of wine tourism experiences, with the cooperation of the Empordà Denomination of Origin Regulatory Council. This is to illustrate that, currently, the main application of Empordà's storytelling is based on the cooperation of two corporate initiatives. Hence, without the leadership of the public administration after 2017, the private sector has assumed the brand development as a key element of new regional governances. As Getimis (2010, p. 125) concludes: "In a heterarchy a highly diverse range of actors with different interests, power and histories, pursue their goals through participation in cooperative forms of action, and joint decision-making processes".

Figure 3. Empordà Wine Denomination of Origin borders. Source: Empordà Denomination of Origin Regulatory Council, 2014.



This applied research has also found that a place brand requires the trust of the local media as its main outlet. In fact, certain regional media in Empordà were pioneers in pushing debates on the need to structure a common story between the two counties. For example, the weekly publication *L'Empordà* promoted the conference “L’Empordà. El paisaje como activo económico [Empordà. The landscape as an economic asset]” (November 7, 2015), to present

the results of this research. Some months earlier, local journalists debated the positioning of the territory at the conference “Identitats territorials i desenvolupament econòmic local [Territorial identities and local economic development]” (June 19, 2015) held at Sant Ferran Castle in Figueres. Local media become an essential space for the projection of place brands. Their role in setting the agenda ends up generating the most important public debate of the assets of the brand and how it should be used as a tool for managing public policy.

In short, any investment aimed at improving the quality of life of citizens and also taking into account the opinion of the inhabitants of Empordà represents a fruitful strategy for fostering a positive attitude not only towards the territory, but towards the brand with which the people of Empordà must identify. For this reason, “branding processes may allow aggregation of voices and integrative processes of dialogue through which citizens can express their ideas and feelings regarding the brand or the product (the place)” (Eshuis, Klijn & Braun, 2014, page 156), something that was achieved in the case of Empordà. Likewise, the place branding strategy deployed in this case allows us to go beyond understanding it as a consequence of a commodification process or exclusively aiming at the creation of a brand narrative. Rather, the involvement of the citizens in the process allowed for a strategy of governance and informal planning of the territory to emerge from the community process itself formed by publics interested in the brand.

6. Conclusions

This case study had the threefold aim of discussing how local communities lend credibility to the definition of a regional brand, proposing a concrete methodology that integrates different voices and shedding light on the links between place branding and spatial planning. The extensive citizen participation in the process of developing the “Empordà, tocat pels déus” [Empordà, Touched by the Gods] brand as described above showcases the first of the aims. The specific methodology followed for this is proposed here as a methodology that - with

necessary local adaptations - can be used for the development of locally-rooted place brands. Finally, the links between branding and planning have been demonstrated in the discussion in previous sections.

The process of conceptualizing a place brand becomes a strategic reflection on the present and future of the place. It becomes a guideline for municipal governance or local authorities to deal with the challenges of the global society, whether for economic promotion, or social or urban policies. “When citizens are given influence, the effect of place marketing on spatial plans and other policies increases” (Eshuis, Klijn & Braun, 2014, page 151). In fact, the case study presented in this article shows how joint management of the same brand can become essential to having a strategic vision of a supra-municipal territory and strengthen its management from a spatial planning point of view. It is, ultimately, what Van Assche, Duineveld and Beunen (2014) call “the power of planning”. Relating the Empordà case to the typology suggested by the editors of this special issue (Van Asche et al, 2019), a first inference is that, so far, place branding has been more participatory (therefore, clearly demonstrating the relationship ‘participatory and less so’) and has brought flexibility in governance. Perhaps the right direction forward for the Empordà brand would be to move towards the integrated strategy. Several assets of the region are perceived by the residents as providing a unifying narrative (especially assets and values related to culture, as we have seen above) and, therefore, it is not hard to imagine a closer integration of planning and branding based on those assets.

The Upper and Lower Empordà County Councils and Figueres Town Council have been pioneers in Catalonia in working together to share the same brand that combines the essences of their territory. In this case, the brand allowed the creation of a roadmap to understand this territorial reality in a holistic way, to rethink among all the stakeholders involved (administration, economic, cultural and social agents, the media and civil society) a historically badly divided space between two districts and with historical discrepancies via the

understanding of its governance model. With its logo and slogan, the current brand summarizes the transversal landscape beauty found throughout the territory, the strength of shared history and the quality of life that stems from its municipalities; concepts that are grouped as one in the idea of “divinity”.

Beyond graphic design, the example of the Empordà brand creation process also allows us to highlight two other important aspects. First, the creation of a new place brand does not have to exclude brands in the same territory that have previously been able to promote a specific aspect. The Empordà brand has been created to coexist and collaborate with that of the Costa Brava, which is of great relevance to many tour operators and tourist agents in the area. Secondly, the long-term management of the place brand depends to a large extent on the capacity of the local authorities to give it continuity by ‘superposing’ it over any political changes that may take place. It has been four years since 2015 municipal elections, and two after the political crisis in Figueres Town Council that changed the power configuration in the region. Taking into account the diversity of stakeholders in place brand management and the instability of the public administration because of its own political dynamics, it is important to recommend to administration bodies (i.e. city and town councils, regional administration) the establishment of Brand councils (public-private partnerships with the responsibility to manage the brand) as the bases for the implementation of the storyline and the management of the strategic spatial plans developed as a consequence of the creation of a new place brand.

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¹ The production area of the DO Empordà, located in the far north east of Catalonia, encapsulates 48 municipalities spread across two counties. The production area of Upper Empordà is in the far north east of Catalonia. The Lower Empordà production area borders the Montgrí Massif in the north, the Gavarres Massif in the southwest –that forms a coastal plane with the Begur Massif– and with the Mediterranean to the east (Empordà Denomination of Origin Regulatory Council, 2014).