Re-imagining rural regions

Applying place branding lessons to the Eemsdelta, Groningen, Netherlands.

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Foreword

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Go raibh mile maith agat

Lewis

Abstract

Stimulating economic activity on a regional level is no easy task, and in order to stay competitive in a globalising world, it helps when places have a dynamic brand. In doing this, an array of techniques and strategies can be used. Small regions like the Eemsdelta in Groningen in the Netherlands can boost its brand by developing a strong and coherent place branding strategy. This research project examines the role that place branding and planning play in not only developing a successful regional place brand but investigates the ways regions can exploit new markets to stimulate economic growth and prosperity. This qualitative thesis identifies and analyses national and international case study examples to form a 'best practice' guide to regional place branding. The lessons learnt can be applied to the Eemsdelta showing how to develop a coherent place brand that promotes inclusivity.

Inclusivity has been regularly conceptualised within the place branding and spatial planning debate however concrete ways, strategies and methods on how to achieve this has been largely neglected. The creation of a joint storyline fostered through the formation of coalitions; a bottom-up multi-stakeholder branding strategy are ways to achieve this. In order to ensure the long-term economic success of regions, it is necessary to focus on empowerment, discussion & involvement to ensure the long-term success of place brand identities. Place branding is a vital component for spatial planning as it uses the power of imagination to visualise ideal futures for communities.

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Abbreviations

SWOT Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats

1. Introduction

1.1 Background

Generally, a brand can be understood as a service or product that can be positioned in a way that distinguishes itself from its competition, where it adds value to the product or service (Knox and Bickerton, 2003) and where it encompasses distinctive symbolic values and functional attributes (Hankinson and Cowking, 1993). A brand must be able to establish a set of social, physical, and psychological beliefs and attributes that can be associated with q product in order for it to stand out and be memorable (Knox and Bickerton, 2003). With this in mind, place branding brings together these factors and is a "conceptualization of a specific place as a brand" (Kavaratzis and Ashworth, 2010, pg. 4).

Place branding aims to differentiate places in order to establish a competitive advantage over another and, in the past, focused largely on advertising (Pedersen, 2004). Various place branding approaches adopt a historical approach in the form of promotion in line with a wider process for economic and social change (Ward, 1998). There is a nexus between Place branding and Spatial Planning which can help develop and improve regions. This can be done by finding appropriate forms of branding and planning which stabilise places and identify new economic opportunities through place value creation, transforming spaces and improving socio-economic conditions of different places (Van Asche, Beunen & Oliveira, 2020). Place Branding as well as cities and towns. Within these scales, consumers create, from the range of services offered by the place, their own unique product (Ashworth and Voogd, 1990).

Globalization and commercialisation have contributed to the heterogeneity of places and the blurring of differences between them (Relph, 1976). As a way of mitigating these effects, the concept of place branding has become more relevant and abundant over the last twenty years. This can be attributed to the forces of globalization and innovation, which has meant that places must now seek to diversify to stay competitive. Cities, regions, and nations need to establish and manage a brand in order to drive economic investment, attract tourists and find (new) markets for imports and exports (Dinnie, 2004). There are recurring themes that can be associated with place-branding. These include the creation of an image and its reconstruction (Hall, 2004; Curtis, 2001), having an identity and being unique (Cai, 2002). Furthermore, the importance of establishing storylines and the image they convey (Ashworth and Kavaratzis, 2010), as well as the importance of stakeholders in building an inner brand (Kavaratzis, 2012), all deserve attention.

The image of a place has become more important through societal, economic and technological advances, which has intensified the competition for governments, municipalities and councils to attract everything from tourism, investment, skilled labour and even foreign students (Papadopoulos, 2004). In spite of this, place branding does not only focus on merely the marketing or the promotion of a place but also on the production of territorial ideas, practices and identifying the feasibility of new markets (Donner et al., 2017).

In order to develop a place brand that is dynamic and unique, there needs to be an understanding of the previous processes which have affected places in the past. Horlings (2012) claims there is evidence of a 'place-less' discourse caused by a disconnection between suppliers/producers and consumers/customers and a decoupling between the unique culture of a place and the goods and services it offers. There is a need for new 'place-based' strategies which develop (positive) images of goods and services in rural areas (Horlings and Marsden, 2012). This can be through the establishment of dynamic and innovative socio-economic opportunities and arranged and organised into coalitions of actors; These coalitions act as a driver for entrepreneurship in small regions and create the space for new markets to be explored (Horlings, 2012).

One of the main challenges of place branding is its ability to connect itself to a strong brand identity that adapts to different sectors and product/service groups (Kotler and Gertner, 2002). Furthermore, place brands need to create a storyline or inner brand in collaboration with local stakeholders to support perspectives that are sustainable for different regions (Horlings, 2012). It is through this inner storyline and branding that positive narratives and experiences can be harnessed to foster an identity. Narratives and storylines enable branding strategies to coordinate assets effectively and create an awareness of quality within a place (Van Asche and Lo, 2011)

1.2 Knowledge Gap and Academic Relevance

As we come out of the Coronavirus Pandemic and lock-down regulations begin to ease, there is more pressure on places to be competitive in order to drive local and foreign investment. The majority of places have seen low economic activity due to restrictions that lasted nearly two years. Recent tourism trends during coronavirus meant that most people only travelled locally, so international tourism numbers plummeted and business turnover decreased. Places were forced to market themselves as destinations to visit for domestic tourists.

Attempts have been made within Place Branding Literature to connect and link Spatial Planning and Place branding (Oliveira & Ashworth, 2017); however, Grenni et al. (2020) argue that a knowledge gap exists between how to engage local actors in more inclusive place branding strategies. Furthermore, the author acknowledges that previous attempts to support a strengthening of place brand capacities through a legitimization of social groups mostly ended in failure, nor did they create an arena for fundamental institutional change. In this regard, there has been an appeal across the academic literature from Lichrou et al. (2017) to explore new methodologies which support inclusive place branding. This thesis will build on the research by Horlings (2012) and establish how an effective & coherent place branding strategy can help exploit new markets to harness economic development. Moreover, empirical research will be conducted, which will offer an inventory and a 'best practice' guide to help regions exploit new markets and improve their own place brand strategy.

1.3 Research Problem and Research Questions

The Eemsdelta region of Groningen has been recently formed through the merger of three urban areas: Appingedam, Delfzijl and Loppersum. Globalization and economic growth have created the need for places to be competitive to be successful. This is more difficult for small, peripheral regions that are shrinking economically, which characterises this area. Success is driven by the way places can draw investment in a range of sectors, including business, sport, leisure and culture. One of the methods in which this can be achieved is through effective place-branding. This can be defined as the deliberate planning of the image and identity of a region, which contributes to its legibility (Ray, 1998). There is an increasing body of literature on how to implement place branding processes; however, there is a lack of knowledge on how this can support economic development (Cleave, Arku & Sadler, 2017). Place branding is more about the promotion of existing assets. Perhaps what is less clear is how new products and markets can be developed which are competitive and can support place branding strategies and spatial planning.

This thesis will address how regions can drive economic growth by adopting a new market approach in the context of place branding. A conceptual framework that integrates place-branding and storylines will be incorporated in wider case-study research to analyse how the Eemsdelta can adopt and/or incorporate these in its positioning strategy.

The concept of place branding has continued to evolve over time and has been described as an avenue for constructing new ways for society to identify itself built on the foundation of constructing new territorial practices, ideas and signs (Pederson, 2004). Broadly speaking, place branding relates to the representation and reinforcement of spatial assets through value creation. With this in mind, the essence of planning is (re)shuffling place identity and (re)defining place-based assets (Hillier, 2002). It is logical to engage with narratives as they provide a framework for understanding the world around us and can be used as a practice to build new knowledge. Narratives are created by sharing knowledge of a place, and they are closely linked with associations of value, which can be operationalised through various cultural factors such as events, icons, and storylines.

The preliminary focus of the research will be to build an inventory of key lessons and examples from the Netherlands and abroad on place branding that stakeholders within the Eemsdelta can use to drive investment. The thesis will attempt to identify economic opportunities in the areas by adopting a new market approach and connect this with the perspective of Place Branding.

Place-branding is discussed throughout scientific literature as a creation of value in place and a narrative of the place itself. Various scholars link place branding with planning and see planning as a form of storytelling (Ameel, 2017). Knowledge on Place-Branding has grown considerably from its origins relating to business and marketing strategies to a much more interdisciplinary research subject relating to economics, multi-stakeholder governance and participatory planning (Lo and Van Asche, 2011). Throughout the many definitions of Place-branding, many distil a

common definition that attempts to construct an image to the benefit of visitors and residents (Boisen et al., 2018).

In order for the Eemsdelta to prosper, it is necessary for the area to develop a strong place brand that connects the 'inside story of the area' (perceived by inhabitants) with the image portrayed to the outside world. To attract investment, local governments seek to attract the creative class and establish innovative areas to boost job creation). Governmental stakeholders increasingly develop policy measures in collaboration with industry and educational institutions). Hypothetically, this could be a strategy the municipality of the Eemsdelta may want to adopt in collaboration with local businesses and the large Eemsdelta secondary school which has recently been constructed.

This research elaborates on the call by Grenni et al. 2019 for more research on the role of local actors in building inclusive place-branding strategies. The aim of this study is to investigate lessons learnt from national and international best practice examples in the fields of culture, recreation, and innovation in order to build an inventory to be used by professionals and practitioners in the area. A case-study approach was used with examples selected on the basis of their ability to promote innovation, culture and recreation. These three areas were highlighted by consultants and entrepreneurs as being the main topics of concern in the area and the key to harnessing an effective place-branding strategy that enables the prospect of new markets.

As a way of bridging this gap, the main question for this research is:

How can the Eemsdelta area develop a place branding strategy that promotes inclusivity amongst stakeholders? What lessons can be learnt from national and international examples in the fields of culture, recreation & innovation?

With the objective of having a thorough understanding of the main research question, the following sub-questions have been devised:

- 1. How can we drive investment in the Eemsdelta by using place branding strategies?
- 2. What is the role of stakeholder engagement in improving regional placebranding in the Eemsdelta?
- 3. What are relevant examples of place branding which might provide inspiration for the Eemsdelta?
- 4. How can we bridge the gap between actors and sectors in the Eemsdelta?

1.4 Outline of the thesis

In the beginning, the research problem, research questions and the research strategy are presented. Furthermore, the primary and secondary research questions are presented. In chapter 2, place branding theory is operationalized using literature on the development of place branding, identity and storylines, place-based strategies, and the adoption of the new market approach as a way to harness economic development. The focus of this is to evaluate arguments to allow an international comparison of regional best practices from the perspective of branding and the potential of exploring new markets. Chapter 3 contains the research design framework, which shows the selected case, the various methods utilised for data collection, evaluation and analysis, as well as research ethics. In chapter 4, a comparison of national and international regional examples will be completed. In chapter 5, there will be a discussion and analysis of the findings followed by a discussion and recommendations for further research in chapter 6. Referenced used, and relevant appendices will be found in chapter 7.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 What is place branding?

Place branding is used as an umbrella term that comprises branding literature relating to destinations, cities and nations. This means that theoretical concepts in these branding areas overlap across various planning scales (Hankinson, 2015). Overlaps occur as place branding is seen as a vital method in which to attract capital, activities and people to a place which enhances the profile and visibility of places that are not global hubs (Nauwelaers et al., 2013). Regions seek to construct brands from networks of small villages and towns to attract entrepreneurial talent and to use resources in a sustainable way.

Place branding can be understood as a reputation, perception or an image of a set of marketing activities (Anholt, 2002); however, its frequently interchangeable terminology can present many inconsistencies. For place-branding to present any heuristic value, it should be presented in a way that is theoretically meaningful. The understanding of place-brand characteristics has been diluted by an over-use of terms which include (but are not limited to) place branding, place promotion and place marketing. Furthermore, the concept has come to incorporate nation and city branding and, more relevantly for this research, regional branding. There is an abundance of heterogeneous terminology throughout the literature which can make an all-encompassing definition of place branding difficult (Anholt 2002). There are many inconsistencies with the name 'place branding', with many arguing that it lacks appropriate structure and consistency (Kavaratzis, 2010). This is also an aggravating factor in composing a comprehensive definition for place branding.

Throughout the literature, various scholars attempt to delineate the areas to which place branding involves itself. Place Branding can be seen as the application of brand strategy and other marketing techniques towards the social, political, economic and cultural development of cities, countries and regions (Kavaratzis, 2010). Other marketing techniques could be the exploitation of new markets in which an effective place branding strategy can enhance and improve. Place branding processes should hold a sense of value and incorporate social and symbolic qualities as well as create a distinctive image. Images and imagery are an important aspect of place branding as they help shape certain spatial connotations, associations and change agents (Pike et al., 2015). This is interesting as images, associations & change agents do not only help shape a place, but they also develop a narrative by which the place can be recognised. The role of narratives in place branding is emphasised heavily throughout the scientific discourse, and this will be discussed later on in this section.

Place-brands are different from other brands in the marketing arena and, in particular, product development for a variety of reasons. Place branding differs from product development as places cannot be modified the same way products can. Unlike communities and regions, new products exist to which new associations and characteristics can be later added. Businesses can alter products in line with consumer demand and can be discontinued, re-launched and replaced by new and

improved stock. Regions and places do not have these choices and can be entrenched by imagery problems which stimulate long-term problems (Kotler & Gertner, 2002; Pryor & Grossbart, 2007). Interestingly, it demonstrates that place branding and product branding are different and should not be treated in the same respect. In that regard, it is inappropriate to characterise place branding as just a sub-sector of branding, and some authors question the use of the term 'branding' altogether (Anholt, 2008; Kavaratzis, 2010). There are suggestions that it is better to call it "competitive identity" as this demands an association with places (and regions) rather than stories that need to be expressed through design interventions as well as narratives and images (Kavaratzis, 2004). This is significant as it demonstrates that place branding helps improve images of a place; however, these improvements are based on interventions that call the brand to mind rather than on promotional activities alone (Kavaratzis, 2010).

In order to appreciate the value of place branding strategies for regional development, it is necessary to understand its sometimes cryptic definition. Whilst place-branding suffers from an ambiguous understanding and a fuzzy line of reasoning (Pryor and Grossbart, 2007), there is a generalised definition agreed across the scientific literature. Moreover, place branding can be (loosely) defined as *"marketing designed to influence target audiences to behave in a positive manner in relation to products or services associated with space"* (Anholt, 2010, pg. 2). Place brands can be seen as metaphors within a mental construct that are either positive or negative (Stern, 2006) and, perhaps more precisely, as mental images held by stakeholders which contribute to its unique identity (Chun & Davies, 2006). Both these notions of stakeholders and identity are interesting to this research and important aspects of place branding.

Across the literature, regional branding has received little attention to research in comparison to city and nation branding, with a dearth of information, analysis and research being highlighted by some authors (Zenker & Jacobson, 2015). This is due to institutional differences between regions and the difficulties in coordinating a unified strategy towards regional branding (Oliveira & Ashworth, 2017). Whilst some regions have governmental control, others can be autonomous or not be fully accountable. This means that place branding strategies must be tailored to each individual place in question. Although common principles (tools) can help develop a place branding strategy, it can be difficult to apply an 'oven-ready' place branding strategy to another place. This is because all places have their own unique institutional frameworks and place-based assets. This is not to say that place branding strategies cannot be applied throughout different scales, including across districts, cities, regions and administrative regional borders. It just creates specific challenges and characteristics for the implementation. Scholars argue that there has not been much attention paid to regional place branding and its implementation, which has presented several challenges within the regional branding process (Zenker & Jacobson, 2015).

The challenges that the implementation of place branding faces include the coordination and communication of key messages in a coherent place branding strategy. This is conveyed across national and regional governments as well as through the private sector. Differing objectives distinguish these entities; however, each has the power to create and design its own brands. Successful collaborative

branding efforts must be managed on a strategic level and in conjunction with other urban planning instruments (Oliveria and Ashworth, 2017). As a remedy to this, market forces and competitiveness between municipalities and regional actors can act as a key driver in the branding process, and these entities should join forces to harness the sharing of resources and communicate to their target audience their potential and uniqueness.

One key challenge for regional branding is being able to engage actors in an inner storyline and to make place branding strategies more inclusive (Oliveira and Ashworth, 2017). Often places develop a negative perception of themselves caused by a variety of socio-economic factors like deprivation and a lack of investment. In order to improve this, an inner storyline can be created using three key processes, which include *awareness* by which pride in unique tangible and intangible assets are measured, core values are identified, stakeholders are mobilised, and there is cooperation and building of coalitions. *Place-based products and services* are facilitated with a focus on innovation, business and investment. Moreover, the *organisation* of these assets is assisted by a strong governance structure, multi-stakeholder engagement, institutional arrangements and financial mechanisms (Horlings, 2012).

European regions historically have tended to focus on agricultural use as their main economic driver; however, this is changing towards uses involving leisure and recreation. The predominant aim of policymaking for regional development is creating economic gain through innovation, productivity and the emergence of the creative class (Bristow, 2010). There is a growing body of research relating to the significance of culture in the creation of successful regional economies (Jensen, 2007). Innovation, creativity and productivity are key cornerstones to economic development and place branding. Regions are more than just isolated economic entities engaged in a 'lock-in' system of surviving in a forever more globalising world. They have an important role to enable economic prosperity and also offer something that is unique and intrinsic and which adds genuine value. An irony exists here because if all places strive to be unique, intrinsic and add value, does that increase the likelihood and tendency for places to become uniform and commercialised? Various authors agree with this and feel that regions and places can even become 'place-less' - a process by which locations become indistinguishable from other locations in terms of character. The place-less discourse is discussed by Horlings (2012), who suggests that place branding and place-based strategies do not offer an all-encompassing solution to social problems – this could be attributed to growing uniformity amongst places due to market, technological and governance modernisation. Place branding and placebased strategies have a duty to create conditions for new markets and challenge existing regimes (Horlings, 2012) in order to promote sustainable development and economic growth.

One notion within the literature asks to what extent place branding can be used as a place development tool or whether the strategies employed account for branding at all; however, there should be a separation between what constitutes place branding and what should be referenced as place-based development (Kavaratzis, 2010). Branding should also be seen as a strategic choice for places to build on rather than a promotional device. Places are dynamic entities which adds complexity to how they

are identified. Adopting and projecting a clear identity and image is difficult, and places and commercial corporations have similar attributes and strategies. This makes sense for them to work together; however, the public interest and political responsibility need to be valued higher than both these things to ensure places to be branded in the same way (Kavaratzis, 2010). This suggests that the core ethically values need to be preprepared and prioritised over profit accumulation.

There is a tension that exists between the enhancement of new markets and innovation, the creation of an inner brand and the promotion of sustainable development (Dominguez Garcia et al. 2013). Difficulties arise in the context of place-branding whenever attempts are made to maintain key cultural norms and traits and conserve the landscape. The case of the River Minho estuary in Portugal is a prime example as there is a conflict of interest between the local fishery techniques and ecology practices against a private hydroelectric firm on the other side. There needs to be a formation of an inner brand and coalitions to foster a "reorganisation of market activity through an ethos of collectiveness" (Dominguez Garcia et al., 2013, p.137). This enables the fostering of partnerships and mutual respect between all parties who have to be utilizing the same resources.

2.2 The Nexus between Place Branding and Spatial Planning

The evolving nature of place branding has meant that the avenues connecting different place-based assets can be more deeply explored. Place branding has been seen to aid spatial planning by anticipating and visualising how local communities can identify themselves through territorial ideas and practices (Pederson, 2004). Whilst there has been an increased interest in place branding strategies across the literature, there is still no exact scientific definition of place branding; this is mainly due to its multidisciplinary nature across the fields of marketing, economic geography and branding (Hankinson, 2010).

Narratives are important for enticing people to engage with location-based initiatives because they provide tools for reshaping place identities as well as envisioning and selling spatial assets. Not only are narratives, particularly place-based narratives, anchored in branding and spatial planning initiatives, but they are also constrained by stakeholder perception and actor collaboration, according to Van Asche and Lo (2011). Narratives are fundamentally cultural, and they rely on the socio-cultural environment in which they are set, as this viewpoint offers the lens through which we view the world (Lichrou et al., 2017). Narratives also have a spatial component by placing events in a geographical context through the use of narratives, which improves comprehension and readability. Through the development of values, narratives and the concept of identity are inextricably intertwined. Our knowledge of the world, to which we attach meaning, is reflected in our values. Stories shape people's perceptions of locations, which is crucial for recognizing narratives and constructing social reality.

Narratives can offer added value to place branding efforts through place-based narratives. Communities and regions are imagined through storytelling and generally

incorporate spatial features. If urban planning at the very essence is storytelling, then the authorisation and legitimacy of these actors must be questioned. This, as well as changing the scales to which they operate, problematizes the relationship between place and narratives. Place branding is underdeveloped, and there is a need for this to be addressed by academics and professionals in order to improve place branding efforts (Jansen, 2008). There is also an element of exclusion when it comes to placing branding in that storytelling and narratives require the boundary set to block out certain community features to which there would be a target audience to cater for.

It is important to recognise that there is a 'plurality of narratives' originating from various scholars (Sandercock, 2003). This notion of plurality highlights the relationship between multiple storylines, reader/author themes and the power relationships which manifest within the "representational logics of the respective narratives" (Jansen 2008, pg. 135). This demonstrates that there need to be multiple approaches to analyse narratives and storylines. Understanding and appreciating the complexities surrounding storylines, place-based assets and narratives are vital in exploring the mechanisms which affect regional place branding. Simonsen (2016) argues that a normative approach should be used to deal with a multiplicity of narratives and the shifting power relations that occur within this framework. This demonstrates that these power networks can exert a significant influence on narratives and storytelling. Jensen agrees that power relationships are fundamental concepts within narratives and place and, perhaps, are what link these two notions together.

2.3 The engagement of stakeholders

The success of an effective place branding strategy depends on its relationship and involvement with different types of stakeholders. Place-brand stakeholders embody an array of government and non-governmental institutions. Stakeholder engagement is regarded as a long-term process by which interests are conveyed through a communication platform. Ineffectiveness within stakeholder engagement can be attributed to insufficient input by different stakeholders, and In order to counteract this, there is a need to is develop a common vision (Stubbs & Warnaby 2015).

A common vision can be realised through a variety of stakeholder engagement strategies which include workshops, developing close relationships and building an internal brand (Stubbs & Warnaby, 2015). Workshops are deliberately structured to foster learning and to develop valuable insights and can be structured to cover placebrand topics such as visions and values, identity and storytelling. The development of close relationships allows for common ground to be established to avoid conflict between and within stakeholder groups. This allows stakeholder groups to work towards goals with a common focus and the building of an internal brand through techniques from the marketing discourse. These techniques encourage those within a particular stakeholder group to support an organisation's goals and strategy.

Stakeholder engagement is a critical stage within branding literature. 'Localization' is a buzzword here, described by Cawley & Gilmore (2008), as using a location's cultural, economic, social, and physical resources, as well as local organization and

networking. Although the local government is usually responsible for a place's overall image, the opinions of local entrepreneurs and small companies are equally important since these groups represent the place's economic engines. Places with a strong volunteer culture are better equipped to make use of local resources and projects (Kavaratzis & Ashworth, 2008).

Public and private sector entities collaborate to design and provide place brands that foster connections that are not owned or controlled by a single entity (Hankinson, 2010). If a government agency is in charge of coordinating the network, it must make sure that its goals align with local requirements and expectations. When community networks are reliant on local governments, existing social relationships and competing interests may be exacerbated, and as a result, private operators may be regarded as (co)leading place branding operators. Private operators and service providers can be viewed as the main entities by which to form an umbrella brand and usually form cooperative regional alliances such as a federation of municipalities or an area trade association. This makes the process of place branding more relatable to the construction of a regional identity rather than the geographical boundary to which it lies.

The effectiveness and implementation of regional place brands are seen in the West Cork Fuchsia brand. The case has been highlighted by several authors, including Donner et al. (2017), as being a successful example of creating a strong place brand through hospitality and tourism. The area made an application for European funding in 1994. The area was deemed to have wealthy assets such as friendly people, tasty cuisine and beautiful landscapes; however, it lacked a coherent marketing strategy. The West Cork Leader Co-operative (WCLC) then promoted the area by developing a joint branding strategy to bring foster better stakeholder engagement. The *Fuchsia Brands Ltd* was created, which then launched commercial food products & tourism services with great success. Many perceived benefits were observed, including increased knowledge of various brand affiliates, a positive place perception, improved market access and consumer awareness. Furthermore, it was seen that the *Fuchsia Brand* increased total value creation & the employment rate in the region (Donner et al., 2020).

The West Cork example is significant as it demonstrates how sectors can be bridged together to provide many synergies for the place brand strategy as well as improve the local economy of the area. The *Fuchsia brand* had also created new markets within food and tourism, which were not there before the initiative was launched.

2.4 The New-Markets Approach

As a way to maintain environmental qualities and place-based values, the New-Markets strategy aims to drive entrepreneurship and investment within a region by connecting economic development to spatial planning (Horlings, 2012). It attempts to engage and stimulate innovation, new networks of private-public actors and the creation of new actors in which to harness prosperity in a particular region (Mommaas and Janssen, 2008). Thus, it can be seen as a combination of a research method and development strategy. In order for regions to remain competitive, it is necessary to diversify and mobilise stakeholders in order to exploit new economic opportunities. The New-markets approach is a concept more often used in practice by consultancies (Telos, ZKA) in collaboration with governments and development agencies rather than by academia; however, it will be a very useful method to position the Eemsdelta because it will help build alliances between culture, recreation and innovation which leads to new economic developments and improvements in spatial quality (Horlings, 2012).

There are a few notable examples of regional place-branding strategies, particularly those concerned with the adoption of the New Markets Strategy. The New Markets Strategy can be defined as the linking of economic activity with spatial networks in order to attract entrepreneurs and investment to a particular region (Horlings, 2012). Heuvelland in the south of the Netherlands is one such example where the New Markets Strategy was implemented. The aim of the project was to examine the potential for creating new alliances between various sectors such as tourism, recreation and food with the hope of driving new economic activity in the area.

The New Market Approach enables the building of coalitions between private actors and through various themes in order to develop new products and new markets. It establishes place-based characteristics, details potential markets and trends (food, I.T, Sport) and develops 'sticky' storylines and reference images (Horlings, 2012). Sticky storylines involve stakeholder mapping to create a network of relationships between different parties. It also allows project teams to create intervention strategies that are precise, effective and in a similar time frame. Identifying new product-market combinations is also a key step in the New Markets approach. An inventorisation of core regional assets & values fosters the development of new economic perspectives which support spatial quality and also create linkages to support the creation of new markets and the exploration of potential themes. The identification of these coalitions bridges the gap between actors, sectors and themes (Horlings, 2012).

The establishment and building of vital coalitions are also key elements for establishing new markets. However, in practice, the realisation of this task can prove difficult due to a misalignment of priorities between agricultural stakeholders and governmental actors, which are required in order to create a shared vision and direction (Horlings 2012; Van der Stoep and Aarts, 2010). Different case studies have proved that there can be differing outcomes. In the Green Forest in the Netherlands, Entrepreneurs operating in the region saw the benefits of boosting tourism in the area; however, Horlings (2012) argues that they were short-sighted in visualising and combining public and private goals. This suggests that there needs to be a connection between the different actors, and this can be enabled through the construction of an inner storyline.

2.5 Conceptual Model

Based on the theories and concepts listed above, the following conceptual model linking place branding, new markets and narratives can be devised (See figure 1). Place Branding can be constructed and formulated in a variety of ways, including through (perceived) place-based features, i.e., characteristics of a certain region, its unique qualities etc. These can be both positive and negative; however, it is important to take both into account when considering a new place branding strategy. Place Branding further takes into account the images (positive & negative) by which people perceive the place. Stakeholder engagement, construction of an inner storyline and stakeholders' motivation for pursuing a new place branding strategy are also important aspects of place branding as a whole.

The relationship of place-branding and how it can inform and establish new markets and narratives is of crucial importance. An effective place branding strategy can exploit new markets through coalitions which trigger improved economic development for the region and bridges sectors to harness synergies. This, in effect, adds value to the region and allows new products to be developed. Narratives also inform both place branding and new markets, outlining who should (and should not) be included. Place branding can lead to new markets being established, and new markets can, in turn, help reinforce a regional place branding campaign. Theoretical principles argue that places may not have one narrative and that it is useful to appreciate this multiplicity of new markets to be exploited or place branding strategies are to be effective. Moreover, perceptions are a critical point for all concepts but more so for narratives and placebranding. They need to be acknowledged and positively encouraged if a place is to foster economic development.

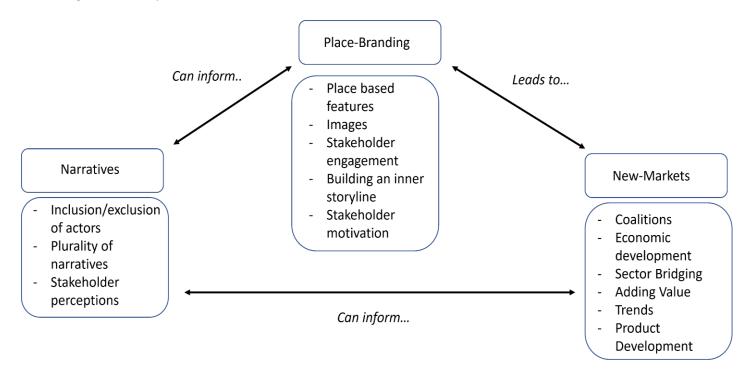


Figure 1: Conceptual Model

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Strategy

The aim of this study is to establish what the Eemsdelta can learn from other regions in terms of boosting culture, innovation, and recreation from the perspective of place branding and new markets. With this in mind, there is a need to conduct empirical research to test the theories described in the literature review. There are three main approaches to conducting research; however, only those suitable were chosen as appropriate methods for conducting research applicable to the Eemsdelta. The main strategies for conducting scientific research are Quantitative research, Qualitative research and Mixed methods.

Quantitative Research is described as the process of collecting data that can be quantified (measured) so that information can be subjected to statistical analysis to support or contradict different knowledge claims (Cresswell, 2003). Quantitative research examines social processes by exploring numerical patterns. It is primarily a deductive process used to test pre-specified constructs and concepts which make up a theory. The aim of quantitative research methods is to analyse questions about a sample population through numerical data. This would be unsuitable to this research design as there was a need to develop more in-depth information which was textbased to analyse issues that were subjective in nature. Quantitative methods are not used to formulate theories as they tend to test hypotheses that are pre-specified.

The 'mixed methods' approach to research extends itself as a possible solution to combine quantitative or qualitative methods. By adopting a mixed-methods research approach, researchers aim to maximise and exploit the strengths of these two approaches and minimise the weaknesses (Cresswell, 2003). Mixed methods offer a pragmatic approach to research by combining qualitative and quantitative research elements. A mixed methods research approach would not be suitable because this exploratory study does not present a need to integrate or combine quantitative data into qualitative data or embed one within the other. For these reasons, a mixed methods research design was not suitable.

Qualitative data research is an umbrella term that encompasses various research methods. It is used to construct an analysis of social phenomena such as people's views, perceptions and attitudes. Staller (2010) argues that qualitative research acknowledges the meaning people attach to certain actions. This is helpful for this study as it can help alleviate complexity around social situations set in a particular time and place. Qualitative research methods such as in-depth interviews are useful when investigating people's opinions and emotions which allows the researcher to evaluate differing viewpoints (Yin, 2003).

This research has undertaken a qualitative approach to contextualise empirical research. This has been done through a case study analysis and through in-depth semi-structured interviews with different organisations based in the area including entrepreneurs, and representatives from companies, cultural associations and music

events. Interviews were sought from stakeholders in the Eemsdelta area as well as from other stakeholders who have engaged and implemented similar strategies elsewhere. Through primary interviews with different organizations and through interviews with various professionals both in the Netherlands and internationally, there was good scope for accessing sufficient data. Furthermore, to effectively establish a best practice guide for the Eemsdelta, it was necessary to analyse national and international place branding case studies to establish lessons that can be applied to the area.

These methods were most suitable for this study because they offer insights into understanding people's perceptions and viewpoints. Empirical research formed the basis of this study, so primary and semi-structured interviews were the most appropriate to answer the respective research questions. Interviews allowed participants to speak for themselves in their own words about the different concepts being discussed, i.e., narratives, place branding and new markets. Interviews also provided access to the interviewees own interpretations which explored their own values; this led to differing critiques and allowed for interesting, engaging responses (Eyles & Smith, 1988). Once the research questions were outlined, then it was possible to disregard other research approaches, as alluded to earlier. This thesis intends to provide exploratory research, so it will not be possible to accurately predict the findings or participants' responses (Eyles & Smith, 1988).

The content of the interviews and thus the interview questions have been informed by the conceptual model and theoretical framework and were guided by the research question. The **theoretical Scope** of the study was defined based on the literature review. Place-branding, storylines, narratives and the 'New Market Approach' were the key theoretical concepts that led this study. It was imperative that there was a realistic timeframe in order to reach out to actors and prepare interviews. The empirical research was conducted between 01/10/2021 until 30/11/2021. The results are based on the perceptions of respondents during that period whilst the data collection defined the **time boundaries** of the case study.

3.2 Geographical scope

The unit of analyses, or the cases, was determined by defining the spatial boundary of the case study areas, the theoretical scope, and the timeframe (Yin,2003). The Eemsdelta region of Groningen is in much need of a coherent place brand strategy, and in order to improve this, it was necessary to identify, analyse and examine best practice examples both nationally and internationally in order to provide an inventory of useful lessons for the area. A case-study focus allowed for an international comparison of different regions with multiple case studies being selected on their ability to drive investment, cultural interaction and innovative practices. The criteria for choosing cases were based on accessibility and availability of data, the ability to compare regional, national and international examples and the chance of developing meaningful research.

3.3 Challenges with the Eemsdelta area

One of the problems with the Eemsdelta is that its three towns -

Appingedam, Delfzijl and Loppersum have diverging qualities and interests. Appingedam has strong architectural qualities with quaint winding streets. This contrasts largely with Delfzijl, which has links to the energy sector, including a large wind farm off the coast.

The Eemsdelta area of Groningen was selected as an ideal location for a variety of reasons. According to data projections, the area is experiencing high shrinkage due to a lack of economic opportunities, including low job prospects and basic amenities. This means young people are leaving the area for larger urban areas such as Groningen city. Historically, the area has experienced oil & gas drilling, which increased the frequency of earthquake tremors. This has raised questions about the safety of the living situation and has also been a driver for people leaving. Appingedam has high architectural qualities with a quaint, laidback atmosphere. The village is wellknown for its hanging kitchens and



cobbled streets by which tourists come to see. With a similar population and area size, Delfzijl is located close to Appingedam to the east. Economically, Delfzijl is a significant stakeholder in the transition towards green energy with plans to construct 123,000 solar panels in the area, which will make it the largest solar park in the Netherlands. Furthermore, the city has three wind farms that provide energy to Groningen province. Delfzijl also has a large chemical industry. There are concrete processes and strategies which can be applied to the Eemsdelta, which can be derived from other cases. The results showed that interviewee responses were In line with Kavaratzis (2010) and Pike et al. (2011) theories that place branding is, in fact, an application of brand strategy through the exploitation of material and non-material place-based features through imagery, storytelling, spatial associations and change agents. Furthermore, the results confirmed that place-branding is an ongoing process, broader than just marketing, however using similar elements: the marketing of experiences as a product were critical components of the place brand process. Investigating ways in which to improve citizen participation was particularly helpful when analysing regions through the lens of an experience product located at the Oosterhorn, which adds to the local economy.

The Eemsdelta was chosen because it lacks a strong place branding strategy and has opportunities to (potentially) exploit new markets . This can be done by bridging

sectors to harness and develop its qualities which make it unique. There was a concrete question in the region about how the overall place branding strategy could be improved and if there was potential for new markets to be created in the area. If this was possible, how would this be achieved? It was expressed during the *Living labs* course and through RIO Projects that developing a 'Best Practice' guide of national and international examples was key to improving the positioning of the area.

3.4 Case selection and description

Case studies can be defined as either a research design, a method, an approach and also an outcome. Case studies provide a detailed analysis of a particular research entity and are able to be used independently or as part of a more extensive study (Gillham, 2000). Case studies can be used on an explorative, descriptive or explanatory basis and can be selected for assessing unusual and unique units. Cases can be determined due to their extreme nature, which is in



need of explanation or to better understand a typical situation. They are beneficial when the aim of the research is to understand different processes because they allow the researcher to access local contexts and contact stakeholders, which helps create awareness of the complexity that can arise, the challenges of implementation and various effects on participants (Gillham, 2000). This research project will look at various case studies by incorporating an explanatory and exploratory lens with the primary focus of completing an inventory of best practice examples for the Eemsdelta area. The aim is to understand what can be learned from other national and international case study examples. It is common to use observations, interviews and documents in combination with case studies to make the study more representative (Gillham, 2000).

Place-branding strategies can be used to improve actor engagement as well as establish lessons from national and international examples in the areas of culture, innovation and recreation. To gain insights into these areas, it was necessary to utilise a case-study approach. Singular case studies focus on providing a holistic understanding of one case, while a multiple case study approach compares a variety of cases. For this thesis, it was decided to use a multiple case study design approach as the primary purpose of this case study was to compare different national and international cases to establish a place branding strategy for the Eemsdelta. The cases have been chosen on the basis of their applicability to the fields of culture, innovation and recreation. It is imperative that best practice examples are an appropriate scale and should be a similar size to the area. One of the strategies for assessing the suitability of examples is by developing a set of place-based principles.

Potential case study areas have been selected on their relationship and linkages to the fields of culture, recreation and innovation, as well as their ability to exploit new markets not yet realised in the Eemsdelta. As this is an empirical study, data has been collected from various policy documents that are available online and as well as through data yielded from primary interviews. In total, there will be eight interviews completed. Two were selected for each of the fields of culture, recreation and innovation, respectively.

Figure 2 highlights the list of possible cases to be used in the research. The cases comprise a gross list of potential respondents, which category they belong and their characteristics. The case studies are diverse in nature; however, they all have similar geographical sizes to the Eemsdelta. They were chosen through desktop research of websites and articles.



Cases	<u>Category</u>	<u>Description</u>	Developed products/markets	Brand
NI Science Festival	Innovation	Largest science festival in the UK. It aims to stimulate innovation and learning through events across the UK	Combines science and technology with a strong focus on education. Has developed strong business links over the years, and last year was included in the regional tourism strategy.	PERMUE.
North Down Food Festival	Culture	Regional food festival in County Down, NI. Localised festival specialising in artisan foods, arts, and crafts, & local music	Grassroots campaign of farming produce and trade. Strong emphasis on community partnership and social cohesion. Very successful model with many large food manufacturing companies originating from this festival.	URBAN FOOD FEST Taste of Northern Ireland
Crankworx Mountain bike Festival	Recreation	World's largest competitive mountain biking festival staged in a small but dynamic ski resort – Whistler. Thousands of spectators come to visit to watch competitions, shows & concerts. There is a large market & conference held also.	Arguably the most successful festival amongst the case studies. Crankworx has managed to couple sport & adventure with tourism, education, hospitality & hospitality to create a world-renowned international festival.	CRANKWORX WHISTLER, CANADA
GLOW Eindhoven	Culture	An international outdoor city light show festival welcoming around 45,000 visitors annually. Various events take place across the city over the course of a week	GLOW Eindhoven has developed a strategic partnership with the city to combine tourism and culture. The event is unique and has grown annually to become one of the biggest festivals in Europe.	GLOW

Zwarte Cross	Recreation	An international motorcycle & music event in Lichtenvoorde, Netherlands. Grown to be the world's largest and integrates theatre performances and stunt shows as well as other events	Zwarte Cross conjoins culture and recreation to create an eclectic festival that welcomes visitors from all over Europe. Beginning solely as a motocross festival, the event later incorporated a music element which has caused visitor numbers to soar.	
Dordrecht Museum	Culture	Dordrecht Museum hosts many exciting art exhibitions every year. Nestled in the beautiful countryside, the museum also hosts an array of hospitality and conference events	Dordrecht Museum has aimed to diversify in recent years to include different cultural events as well as private functions. The museum has partnered with the city of Rotterdam to enhance its tourism offering.	D O R D R E C H T S M U S E U M
West Cork Food festival	Recreation	An annual international artisan food festival showcasing food, drink, music and local culture in the south of Ireland.	West Cork Food Festival has managed to combine food, culture and recreation to not only create a world-class festival but also develop trade-off artisan food brands that have been hugely successful.	A TASTE A OF WEST CORK FOOD FESTIVAL
AVA Festival	Culture & Recreation	AVA is a music festival in Belfast, NI. It promotes a sharing of techno & house culture with international artists coming to the event. It also holds a business conference for entrepreneurs and aspiring artists to play and negotiate	AVA Festival has coupled recreation and business to create a large cultural event and business event. The event has led to several similar events being held in London, Mumbai and Melbourne.	F E S T I V A L
Crossing the Border Festival	Culture	Crossing the Border festival is an arts and literature concert held in Den Haag, Netherlands. It is one of the largest of its kind in Europe and has continued support from the city government in line with their support of the arts sector.	Coming arts and recreation to create a regional festival that appeals to all age groups, crossing the border festival is a family orientated event—it is the only event amongst the case studies which builds on a platform of education through literacy.	CROSSING BORDER EESTIVAL

Vakland Het Hogeland	Entrepreneur ship	Offering a platform for voluntary part-time/full- time work as well as (re)training, Vakland is a start-up business that aims to provide residents within the municipality of Het Hogeland (and further afield) with the concrete, accessible and attractive facilities to develop in their chosen field	Vakland Hoegland is a start-up social enterprise that aims to educate, train and inspire young people and adults to begin vocational careers in construction, maintenance and technology. It is also a third space for people to study and work and regularly welcomes schools and runs workshops	VAKLAND Het Hogeland
Landstra & de Groot Web design	Entrepreneur ship	Landstra & De Groot is a web-design company located in Appingedam. It offers clients a range of services, including corporate reservation and intranet systems. The company is heavily involved with city marketing campaigns, especially those within the city of Appingedam.	Providing architecture and city planning modelling, Landstra & de Groot harness the latest innovative technologies to build dynamic place branding strategies. They aim to combine innovation with culture to enable economic growth.	LANDSTRA B DE GROOT webdesign

Table 1: Potential case-study respondents

NI Science Festival – Belfast, Northern Ireland

The largest festival of its kind in the UK, the NI Science Festival is a two-week-long event that brings together innovation, creativity and tourism. The festival follows a hybrid of virtual talks and in-person workshops. It has grown in significance in the last number of years as it engages with high-profile figures in the fields of astronomy, physics and scientists. It also features an eclectic mix of theatre, comedy, shows & scientific debate whilst also running an educational aspect for local schools, colleges and universities.

North Down Artisan Food Festival - Bangor, Northern Ireland

This traditional regional artisan food festival has been in operation for over a century and represents one of the last remaining traditional food markets in Ireland. The North Down artisan food festival's key focus is to bring people together through the promotion of local produce and entrepreneurs. Many large companies began their roots here, including Lynn's Country Foods and Finnebrogue Meats, who export to many markets across the UK and Ireland. It aims to provide an arena and an audience for local farmers and producers to not only showcase their products but also establish strategic partnerships with each other.

Crankworx Mountain Biking Festival – Whistler, British Columbia, Canada

Beginning in 2004, Crankworx is a multi-dimensional mountain-biking festival in Whistler. One of the defining features of this event is a 'full-scale takeover' of the village. This is completed through promotional stalls from a wide range of international corporate sponsors. Many mini-events occur throughout the week, which includes freestyle and down-hill BMX competitions, bicycle tricks and musical performances. Event organisers say that the focus of the event is to combine the beautiful Whistler and Blackcomb Mountains with cultural shows and events, sporting competitions and a variety of cultural cuisines both from the area and from abroad. Due to its huge success, the festival is now also held in New Zealand and France and has been dubbed the 'Super Bowl' of Downhill Mountain Bike Racing (Olezeski, 2017). The promotion of the Crankworx event is helped by Whistler's strong place brand. The Whistler Tourism Board insists that the role of the Villages Place Branding initiatives is to engage stakeholders, businesses and residents to establish the qualities that make Whistler special and unique. From this perspective then, the behaviours and attitudes of locals and visitors can be understood, which will allow tourism officials to target mountain visitors.

GLOW Eindhoven - Eindhoven, Netherlands

The Eindhoven International light festival is a creative art event in the south of the Netherlands. The festival completely transforms the whole city and attracts light artists from around the globe to showcase their finest art installations such as fluorescent tubes, laser lights and building projections. The festival has grown year by year and is now one of the biggest light shows in Europe. Each year hosts a different theme and includes different artists. Visitors can take advantage of the fantastic transport connections as Eindhoven has its own airport and Amsterdam is close by.

Zwarte Cross Festival – Lichtenvoorde, Netherlands

Being the largest music festival in the Netherlands and the world's largest motor vehicle event. Zwarte Cross combines theatre, music, motocross, and stunt shows together to form one multicultural event. The event began in 1997 and has grown exponentially year by year. Zwarte Cross was selected as an appropriate case study as it is a large cultural event in a small region in the Netherlands - Lichtenvoorde. This region is comparable in terms of geographical scale to that of the Eemsdelta. The area has two churches and a collection of small quaint shops similar to the place-based features found in Appingedam. The motocross event has grown exponentially over the years, with little over one thousand visitors at its inaugural event in 1997. Since then, there are 220, 000 visitors attending Zwarte Cross, which provides a huge economic boost for the area via trade-offs. Visitors travel through Lichtenvoorde and spend money in the form of accommodation & Hospitality. The case is interesting as a similar model could be replicated in the area and boost economic activity via trade-offs as well as improving the area's place-brand model.

AVA Music Festival – Belfast, Northern Ireland

AVA Music festival - Belfast, Northern Ireland - AVA music festival is an interesting case as it combines both innovation and music together. It combines both a music festival and a conference by which young artists can foster collaborations, establish

partnerships & form deals with investors and entrepreneurs. The festival has scaled up year on year with a variety of international showcases that include Amsterdam, London & Dublin. This case study will be interesting, particularly for investigating how the event bridged sectors between culture and innovation, how it feels it adds value to the area and how it engages stakeholders.

Albert Cuysp Art Exhibition – Dordrecht Museum – Dordrecht, Netherlands

Albert Cuyp was an influential painter who was born in Dordrecht and who lived there all his life. The artist was very popular among the British aristocracy and is still very popular among these people who come to the Netherlands to see his work. The Dordrecht Museum, in general, offers a fantastic venue in which to bridge both history and nature. The museum regularly runs workshops, education seminars and events over the year to inform people about his work. Dordrecht has historical significance and is the oldest town in holland.

A taste of West Cork Festival- West Cork, Ireland

West Cork has successfully built a strong regional branding campaign built on features in which, they feel, sets them apart from anywhere else – great people, an amazing landscape and world-class food and hospitality. The branding initiative launched by entrepreneurs in the region has evolved into a world-renowned festival run annually, which showcases and brings together these elements resulting in a weekend that stimulates the local economy and puts the area on the map.

Crossing the Border Festival, Den Haag, Netherlands.

Set in the stunning city of Den Haag, Crossing the Border is a cultural festival that offers a variety of film, music, art & literature events over a four-day period in November. Over the last number of years, the event has become one of the biggest music and literature events in Europe. The event aims to promote up and coming artists introducing the newest faces in music and literature. Acts travel from all over the Netherlands and internationally to play here, and the festival is projected to grow year on year.

3.5 Data Collection via Interviews

Semi-structured interviews with practitioners and entrepreneurs as well as individuals from the Netherlands and internationally were useful for help in establishing a coherent place strategy for the Eemsdelta region of Groningen. The interview was broken up into three sections. The first section of the interview focused on practitioners' perceptions of the Eemsdelta as well as establishing a place-based improvement strategy. The second part of the interview focused on developing a stakeholder engagement and inclusion strategy with the hope of developing a coherent, inner narrative and storylines. This gave insights into how connections and linkages can be established through different stakeholder groups. The third section of the interview will discuss ways in which different sectors, namely culture, recreation and innovation, can be bridged together in order to exploit new markets. This will not only help the Eemsdelta improve its place branding strategy but also offer an array of economic opportunities. The third section offered a forum for policymakers to debate the policies

in place, as well as an opportunity for them to consider and propose new policies and functions for the region. Because of the nature of the first and third sections of the interviews, a less structured interviewing technique was required to allow the respondents to relate their tales and discuss and reflect on new policy approaches. However, structuring questions were included in all three rounds of the interview in order to be effective in data collecting and acquire a degree of analytical clarity. Figure 3 shows all the respondents interviewed in this research project. These ranged from those in the Eemsdelta and others national and internationally.

Respondent Code	Respondent	Occupation	Location	<u>Case</u>	Interview date
A	Chris McCreery	Director - NI Science Festival,	Belfast, Northern Ireland	NI Science Festival	15/10/21
В	Gert de Groot	Director - de Groot and Landstra Web- design	Appingeda m, Eemsdelta, Groningen, Netherland s	N/A	18/11/21
С	Claire McCrea	Marketing and Communications Manager	Newtownar ds, North Down, Ireland	North Down Artisan Food festival	1/12/21
D	Engbert Breuker	Entrepreneur - Vakland Het Hogeland	Warffum, Groningen, Netherland s	N/A	29/10/21
E	Bert-jan Bodewes	Director - RIO Projects	Groningen, Netherland s	N/A	(TBC)
F	Lesley Allen	Marketing & Communications manager	Bangor, North- Down, Ireland	Open-House Festival	3/1/21
G	Gert-Jan Schoten	Head of Public Engagement - Dordrecht Museum	Dordrecht, South Holland, Netherland s	Albert Cuysp Exhibition, Dordrecht, Netherlands	5/11/21
H	Reinier Doornbos	Manager - Hema Supermarket	Appingeda m, Netherland s	N/A	3/1/21

 Table 2. Case-Study respondents

A purposive Sampling strategy was used as the main method of selecting interviewees for the research. Participants were selected in order to explore and identify opportunities for new markets in the Eemsdelta and as a way of establishing meanings rather than identifying facts about the area.

First, I searched for respondents who were willing to participate in the interview. Potential participants were `contacted using email and via the social media app LinkedIn. Five responses from participants came via email, with the other three via LinkedIn. Contact information from participants was publicly available online, and no malicious techniques were used in order to gain contact with interviewees.

Aside from preparing and asking questions, there was a need to investigate ways in which to contact, choose and conduct the interviews, as well as find a location that was suitable for all parties. Most interviews were conducted via online video calling software like Zoom and Google Meets as many interviewees live too far to travel. Three interviews took place physically, with two taking place in the Netherlands and one taking place in Ireland. Like face-to-face interviews, informed consent forms were sent to participants prior to the start of the interviews. For some of the cases, we received no response, which meant that no interview could take place. This means that utilising academic articles, reports, and other pieces of information available online or through a textbook became imperative Interviews were used as the main research method in this study; however, websites and other online data provided useful information and determined which case studies were selected as valid cases (and best practice examples) and which were eft out. Those that were not included were due to a lack of information available. For cases abroad, information was collected online via websites and journal articles and interviews. In the Eemsdelta, information was also collected online via journal articles and websites and through interviews.

Eight interviews were conducted in total. Six were from event organisers from the Netherlands and internationally, whilst two were from entrepreneurs in the Eemsdelta. Respondents were selected on their applicability to the themes of culture, innovation and recreation. They were selected because their case represents an event or an initiative in which the Eemsdelta can re-create in order to boost economic activity and to see the potential for new markets to be established. All events/initiatives have a similar scale and audience to that of the Eemsdelta and had experienced similar problems to that of the Eemsdelta. These included an inability to develop a positive place brand strategy that exploits place-based features and trouble forming a positive narrative in the area.

3.6 Ethical Considerations

Qualitative research methods create personal social interactions either with individuals or with various groups of people; therefore, ethical procedures should be closely followed. Kotus and Rzeszewski (2015) argue that the control the researcher has over interviewees and the sense of privacy they feel they are being awarded can greatly influence the results that are yielded. This means it is imperative that these two key pillars are respected.

All the interviewees were informed of their rights and informed that their answers would be used as part of a thesis project in which their responses would be available on the RUG thesis database. Respondents could also withdraw from the study if they so wished, at any time, without reason. The information and responses they gave will only be used for academic purposes. All participants were required to sign a consent form acknowledging that they agreed to these conditions. The interviewees were also asked whether they permitted some quotes to be used for a short film. Consenting to the storage and sharing of information to third parties, like RIO projects, was a prerequisite for the interview to take place.

4. Results

After the data was collected and analysed, multiple results could be configured. This section is thus divided into three parts: Place branding, narratives and new markets. These relate to the conceptual model that was developed in the theoretical chapter, with each of the sub-headings reflecting back to these concepts. As well as informing the results section, the conceptual model also helped to inform the questions in the interview guide. The data collected is based on information retrieved from the interviews and through information collected online about the cases.

Firstly, the role of place branding and the development of place-based strategies will be discussed. Secondly, the potential to exploit new markets in each case study to evaluate the feasibility of bridging different sectors and establishing ways to promote economic development are examined as well as investigating how initiatives such as events can help add value towards the creation of an improved place-branding strategy for the Eemsdelta. Thirdly, the role of (positive) narratives will be assessed to see how concepts like actor inclusion/exclusion, storylines, coalitions and perceptions/images of an area affect the overall place branding strategy and the ability to establish new markets. The analysis made in the last two parts will inform the process of developing a strong & coherent place branding strategy for the Municipality Eemsdelta (chapter 6).

4.1 How to define and implement place branding strategies?

Include organisational facilitators & collaborate closely with entrepreneurs

Respondents were asked to what extent they knew about place branding and how they would define it. All Respondents had a general idea of what it involved. For example, Engbert Braubant insisted that place branding is about the marketing and commodification of a place to attract consumers to spend capital. The respondent from **Vakland Het Hogeland** wondered whether it was appropriate to brand rural areas as a place to visit where their intrinsic qualities are that of quietness and tranquillity, stating:

"If we brand this place for outside visitors as a place to come live or visit, then we lose the very qualities that we aim to sell."

(Engbert Braubant, Director, Vakland Hogeland, 2021)

Interestingly, the respondent sees place branding as an attraction tool by which to bring people into an area. What this means is that some places' intrinsic qualities can be damaged if place branding is used as a mechanism for attracting visitors. For example, Winsum, a small village in Het Hogeland, is a small and tranquil village where

agriculture is the main economic activity. If place-branding is used as a marketing tool and people start visiting the village, then the heritage and place-based features can begin to be eroded. This erosion can begin to change the landscape of the place and may negatively impact their place-based assets. The authenticity of the place brand may then be affected if visitors believe the branding campaign does not accurately represent these assets.

When asked, some respondents agreed with the loose definition highlighted in the theoretical framework. The **NI Science Festival** is particularly interesting as it offers a different interpretation of place branding, arguing that it is not so much a marketing tool but a way of connecting people to their local environment. By doing this, place-based products can be developed, which can be useful in harnessing economic activity and providing a model for other regions to replicate. Chris McCreery insists that identifying and exploiting an area's key features can be difficult:

"We quickly realised whenever we launched the NI Science Festival that you have to start with place-making to understand your local areas main features; we struggled with that at the start...I think place branding is connecting people with places locally while having a global impact."

(Chris McCreery, NI Science Festival Director, 2021)

The response suggests that the organisation sees place branding as a process rather than a definition. As alluded to in the theoretical framework, it is a multi-disciplinary & multi-agency task on which to not only build coalitions but also produce synergies. Linkages can be made to the NI Science Festival and the overall Northern Ireland Tourism Strategy (NITS) as a whole which is the festivals 'de facto' umbrella brand (Hannkinson, 2015). The NITS recently included the NI Science Festival in their new tourism strategy. This was highlighted by the respondent stating that in approaching science research institutes and businesses linked to science and astronomy, the overall place-brand of the region has been strengthened through multi-sector consultation and inclusion. Northern Ireland as a whole is world-leading in cancer research. Businesses in West Belfast manufacture special photographic equipment which is sent to the International Space Station. These stories are embedded within the overall place brand of Northern Ireland. Whilst generating excitement and awe amongst (potential) visitors, it also provided a platform to advertise these small businesses and spur economic growth. Entrepreneurship & Regional Development is further conceptualised within the branding of the NI Science Festival. The event provides an arena for corporate participation and enables medium and large-scale businesses and investors to come together. The NI Tourism Board is seen as a facilitator for people to come together, establish partnerships and harness innovation. Having an organisational facilitator and engaging in close collaboration with entrepreneurs' aids regions in harnessing a strong place brand.

Experience-based products & local story integration

It was clear from the interviews that respondents not only knew what place-branding was but also saw the added value in directing attention and resources to its correct implementation. Analysis of the empirical research highlighted that interviewees saw the importance of developing a positive mental construct that illustrates a place's unique identity. Through analysis of the cases, it was clear that interviewees generally agreed that place branding is an integrated process by which there is a need to exploit place-based features, engage multiple stakeholders and build an inner brand through memorable, dynamic storylines. The NI Science festival has evolved from humble beginnings in a Belfast conference arena to incorporate the whole of Northern Ireland. Chris McCreery (Respondent A) believes the inclusion of tours and excursions is among the best features they have added to their festival model. Describing the Marble Arch caves in County Fermanagh, visitors actively engage with the archaeological sites:

"They travel along and stop at seven different stops where there is an archaeologist at each to explain the history, geology and its connection to science."

(Chris McCreery, NI Science Festival Director, 2021)

After the success of this pilot scheme, it was decided from there to include field trips as part of the model for the event. Field trips offer an interactive model of engagement different from conference style events which can be mundane and less likely to be unique and memorable. Experiences across different geographies enable mental constructs to be formed of the place to reinforce its unique brand. This is of particular significance because it shows that a place brand represents something far more dynamic than brands described across the marketing discourse. Prior to the inclusion of such experiences, the NI Science festival could not reach the ultimate emotional level due to the uniform, static style in which they branded themselves, one too close to those seen in a business-like marketing campaign. This case shows that memorable experiences need to be organised and connected to the region and can be achieved by integrating and combining local stories and the natural environment.

These two case studies highlight nuances between how different institutions identify and define place branding. The Vakland Het Hogeland case showed how place branding when used as a marketing tool, can be inappropriate to some regions and that caution should be exercised when using this method as they can harm the very intrinsic features which make places unique. The NI Science Festival case was the most significant as it demonstrated that place branding was a process by which to exploit both tangible and non-tangible features through close collaboration between public and private actors such as entrepreneurs and investors. This can be enabled further by having a (quasi)governmental entity to help with (re)organisation.

4.2 The importance of place-based features & images, and it's links to identity

Conducting value-based analysis

As discussed in the literature, developing a coherent place branding strategy starts with identifying and exploiting an area's unique and intrinsic qualities. Being able to establish these features and, more importantly, being able to market them appropriately should be the basis for any marketing team. St. Georges Market encapsulates the need to identify, examine and brand both material and non-material localised features. Material features include around 200 market stalls with merchants coming from all over Ireland and the UK to trade. There is an eclectic mix of live music, arts & crafts and cookery courses whilst non-material features include a fantastic laidback atmosphere, a cosmopolitan clientele and a range of languages. These are not already existing place-based features but demonstrate the place's perceived image, i.e., a place's reputation. The perceived image of St. George's market is one of cultural vibrancy and dynamism, and these evoke emotions such as a desire to visit and/or a feeling of satisfaction after visitation. Interestingly, St. Georges Market is held in one of Belfast's most divided areas. It is situated on an interface area between nationalist and unionist communities who are vehemently opposed to each other both culturally and politically. The market has been a key focal point in bringing people together in times of division. St. Georges market symbolises the power place-based features can bring in bringing people together through a shared space. St. Georges Market underwent major renovations after the signing of the Northern Ireland peace deal in 1998. City planning officials recognised the value the market could bring and launched a citizen participation scheme to ensure that all sectors of society were represented and that the market was an inclusive place for all. With this in mind, it was essential that they developed a brand that promoted a positive narrative and visual identity. This was successfully achieved in St. Georges Market when they conducted a value-match analysis. This is the process of deciding which audience to target through psychological segmentation. Consumer and visitor groups are broken down into categories that relate to their values and beliefs. Profiles can be differentiated based on activities, social status and lifestyle. It prevents a 'one-size fits all' approach to branding, which can be ineffective when trying to persuade a certain type of audience to come to an event. St. George's Market appeals to a young, hipster individual with an interest in artisan food and traditional music. Knowing the profile of their visitor through value-based analysis helps their marketing team direct their branding efforts.

Bottom-up Initiatives & informal communication channels

Images are the visual effects and mental constructs that people have when they think of a particular area. All interviewees agreed that until recent times (within the last five years), all the areas they have been involved in had a less than favourable image. It was interesting to investigate what images residents had of their local area. The case study responses from **Dordrecht Museum** demonstrated that people did not have a positive perception of their local area. In this case, branding helped to improve positive civic emotions in the area which had previously not been seen:

"For some time, Dordrecht did not have a good reputation. Rarely people travelled there unless they were a resident, now, we have spent a lot of time promoting the beautiful nature and quietness, people can take a day trip here from Rotterdam and escape the busyness of the city."

(Gert-Jan Schoten, Dordrecht Museum PR Manager, 2021)

Branding helps instil a sense of pride in these areas by portraying positive images and storylines. The happiness of a place's residents and workers is a powerful image of a place and is an important non-material feature. Increasing the incentives for people to stay, promoting happiness and wellbeing and providing jobs are important factors as to how an area generates a positive image. This can be done through bottom-up initiatives such as running job-hunting fairs and networking events in conjunction with local employers. Launching academic courses in not only areas relating to arts, but in traditional trades such as agriculture & farming and construction & maintenance can help this. Furthermore, grassroots recreational initiatives through sport are beneficial and engaging. Engbert Braubant from Vakland Hogeland, a start-up social enterprise, mentioned that running these types of courses within their municipality has greatly improved the happiness of his students. They have established ties with local employers, offering traineeships to those who complete courses affiliated with the institution. This has encouraged students to stay in the area, contributing to their local economy. In addition, a local football and volleyball team were created by the students participating in these courses. Students play in local leagues where they have befriended each other and also met new people with similar interests. This has solidified social connectivity and boosted mental and physical wellbeing. It demonstrates the power of entrepreneurial investment as well as recreational and social schemes in enriching an area's image from being one of depression, low opportunity and despair to one of inspiration, happiness and creativity.

The importance of resident representation in a place brand strategy was also highlighted. Residents are ambassadors for their place and give the place brand credibility to any messages which are communicated (Braun et al., 2013). This is significant as it demonstrates the importance of happiness and wellbeing in promoting a positive image and strong cultural identity. This was seen in **Open-House Festival** in Bangor, whereby Lesley Allen highlighted the positive role that both the residents and the festival bring:

"The people love it when it's the festival season; I'm from Bangor, and all people can talk about is how much of a buzz the festival brings, everyone is in a good mood, and the town becomes alive."

(Lesley Allen, Open House Festival Marketing Manager, 2021)

The respondent discussed the power of 'word of mouth' communication in encouraging people from outside the town to come to the festival. Most of the visitor demographic for the town is external visitors from around Ireland and the UK. The festival launched a feedback survey asking how guests had heard of the festival, with most saying they had heard from friends, family or work colleagues. This is significant as it demonstrates the important role residents hold in the place branding communication process. Informal communication processes are vital as visitors look for authentic and trustworthy sources of information. The role of residents presents the need for strong involvement and participation from this group as those residents who are more involved in the branding process are more likely to become brand ambassadors.

In conclusion, by creating bottom-up initiatives such as localised traineeships and recreational leisure clubs which aim to educate and train individuals, the overall happiness and wellbeing of communities can be improved. This will help reinforce the authenticity and legitimacy of the brand. In addition, by organising the appeal of a festival and a town to an external audience through communication channels, e.g., word of mouth then it is possible to strengthen community identity.

4.3 Engaging your stakeholders

Know your audience

Stakeholder engagement was identified as one of the most important strands of developing a strong place brand strategy and was imperative for areas to be culturally, socially and economically successful. Claire McCrea from the **Ards and North Down Borough Council** claimed that it is important to divide different stakeholders into stakeholder personality profiles so that various elements of the festival can appeal to different audiences. People can be divided into different categories based on their interests. The organisation stated that they used the *Myers-Briggs Indicator,* which measures psychological differences in how people see the world and make decisions (Kroeger & Thuesen, 1988). Personality profiles included those who were introverted/extroverted, creative, adventurous etc. The respondent noted that the overall place-brand of the area in which the festival was set (Bangor) was of key strategic importance. Claire said digital methodologies to enhance this was used in the past and were fundamental to stakeholder engagement during Coronavirus. She said there were three stages of engaging stakeholders that her team used. Figure 5 outlines the three concepts by which Ards and North Down Borough council used.

These were **Discussion, Compilement & Support.** Firstly, stakeholders were invited to roundtable discussions to discuss the overall place brand goals. Discussions involved topics such as what residents felt was most important to showcase about the area. The North Down Food Festival is set in Bangor, which is a small maritime town, so residents thought that the sea was the biggest asset. Secondly, the compilement stage involved workshops whereby residents attended workshops (both physically and digitally, however, this had moved entirely to digital since the pandemic), here trained assistance helped to articulate and transcribe residents' stories, and analysts helped compile these into a mediated project. Thirdly, the support stage helped place makers to conduct a quantitative and qualitative analysis of the

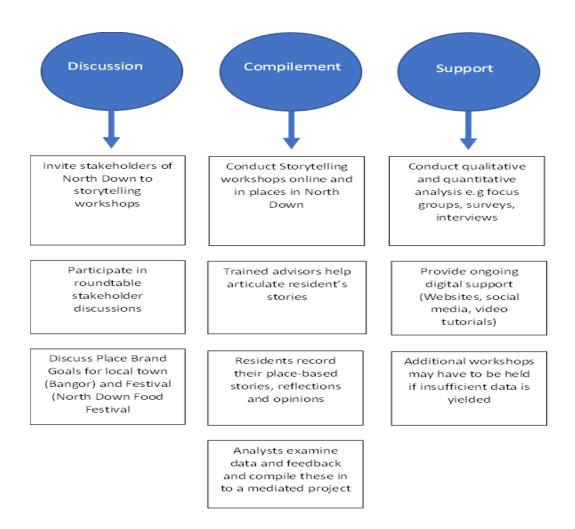


Figure 5: Stakeholder engagement process in North Down & Ards Borough Council

stakeholder's stories through focus groups, surveys and interviews. These platforms appealed to the older generation, who tended not to be well versed on social media platforms. For the younger generation, there was ongoing digital support through websites, social media and video tutorials. This three-fold approach worked very well in previous years and was the catalyst for the beginning of the food festival.

Conduct a place-based assessment & SWOT analysis

The **Open House Festival** aspires to be a local festival that appeals to the UK and Ireland market by including local artists, entrepreneurs, municipalities, traders and residents. Like the Ards and North Down Borough Council, they also used data gathered by the local council to decipher whether there was an appetite for a larger scale festival and also used personality assessments to delineate the type of guest likely to attend various events. This strategy was successful in showcasing what residents and entrepreneurs might expect from the place branding process. The model also ensured these stakeholders had an ongoing role during the decision-making process. Furthermore, the framework helped empower the residents who felt they had a high level of authority in the stakeholder process. This ensured the public took a leadership role in the branding process and will spur discussion between both entrepreneurs and residents. Stakeholders are managed and harmonised by developing a common vision, co-created by the residents and entrepreneurs and, by setting out what their competitive market aspirations are.

Stakeholder perceptions were also crucial to the success of the place brand in **Crankworx Mountain Biking Festival** in Canada. The guests who flock there every year generate millions of dollars in revenue and are possibly the most important stakeholder. With this in mind, it was important that the resort reflected on what their *own* values, beliefs, characteristics & attributes were. In order to create a positive perception of their resort, Tourism Whistler decided that conducting a SWOT analysis of the resort's key material and non-material features was necessary in order to understand the type of guest who visits. This led to the Tourism office devising a 'Best Guest' framework whereby they launched a review of the typical personality type of their regular visitors (Figure 6). The resort characterises a place for adventure seekers and is a prime example of selling the experience as a product.

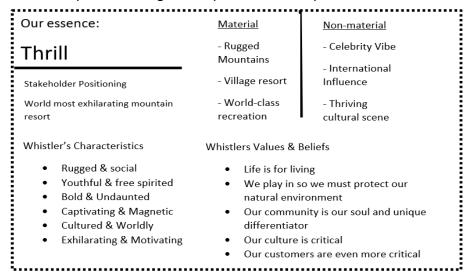


Figure 6: Whistler's ideal guest personality type (Adapted from Place-Brand guide from Tourism Whistler, 2021)

This is key to their overall economic model and has been helped through large scale events being held here, such as the 2010 Winter Olympics and Crankworx Mountain Biking Festival, which is held annually. There is a strong and positive perception of Whistler as a World-Class Winter and summer thrill-seeking destinations harnessed by identifying the characteristics of their stakeholders and developing a framework that analyses their customer's attributes, traits and personalities. Figure 7 showcases the key attributes, characteristics, values and beliefs of the resort. It was created by the resort's place branding team to establish what traits their stakeholders typically displayed. The model is useful in identifying to whom a place brand should be directed toward and what features the place should have in order to satisfy stakeholders and encourage economic expenditure.

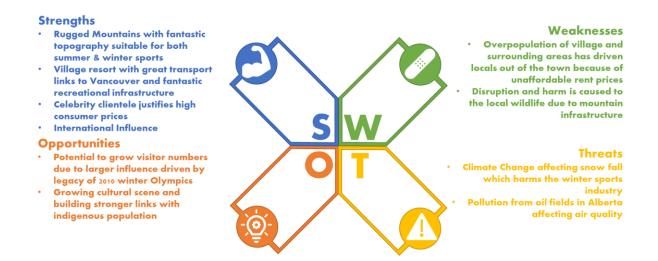


Figure 7: SWOT analysis of Whistler Resort

In conclusion, by integrating communicative efforts with material and non-material features, it is possible to strengthen the credibility of a place brand with visitors and outside stakeholders. The Whistler Place brand analysis is an excellent tool to assess a places features, values, characteristics and beliefs. In order to do this, there needs to be cooperation between a large group of stakeholders across society. This can be completed by creating 'communities of practice' which facilitates knowledge sharing between public and private level institutions. These communities will then share and transfer information across different levels of the organisation. The sense of community which this brings will also boost morale and deepen their connection with the brand.

Use Influencers

All participants confirmed that having a constructive and positive narrative about their place was essential to developing 'sticky' storylines that can be used to develop an inner brand. The development and communication of these storylines is perhaps the

most Important element for the exploitation of new markets and the development of a cohesive place branding strategy. Furthermore, embracing a plurality of narratives creates the conditions for an exciting and dynamic place branding strategy to emerge with the hope of applying this to the Eemsdelta.

In addition, the value of developing new urban to rural relations was clearly seen in one of the interviews. In the **Dordrecht Museum** case, a partnership was established with the city of Rotterdam, which benefited both places in developing an inner and distinctive storyline:

"We are very close to Rotterdam, so it is part of both our marketing campaigns to promote each area's assets... we organised a boat tour that connects Rotterdam to Dordrecht, which operated in collaboration with the museum".

(Gert-Jan Schouten, Dordrecht Museum Marketing Manager, 2021)

It was clear that both Rotterdam and Dordrecht have a strategic partnership in which they can market each other with those from Rotterdam going to Dordrecht for a day trip. It was also noted that both place-branding teams in both these cities had been in contact with each other and that this helped to establish a strategic partnership between the cities. Rotterdam is a large, vibrant, eclectic city. Dordrecht aims to market itself as an idyllic place where you can escape this busyness and indulge in a quiet break, so through the boat tour; they are able to bring people from Rotterdam to Dordrecht (and vice versa) and experience a completely different dynamic. Furthermore, in the Dordrecht Museum, Gert-Jan hired so-called 'Art influencers. An 'Art Influencer' is someone who is seen to be creative, knowledgeable on artistic pieces and has a large social media presence. According to Gert-Jan, Art influencers are very valuable, especially when they engage in content creation on platforms such as Instagram and Pinterest. They offer their followers an insight into the experience of the Museum, interesting parts about the exhibition and practical information about transport, accommodation and points of interest. They have seen their international visitor base grow, and they believe this is due to the hiring of artistic influencers. Social Media Influencers are inextricably linked to Branding as they convey the inner brand through stories. The stories they portray show a 'real time' experience as influencers can live-stream their content as well to create pre-recorded videos and take photos. The hiring of an art influencer in Dordrecht further demonstrates the power of harnessing an effective social media campaign - one that goes further than standard websites and videos.

Popularity Benchmarking & innovative technologies

Places need to improve harness the power that social media influencers can have on boosting places profiles and visitor profiles. The age of information overload is upon us thanks to the rise and prominence of social media platforms. Location-based technology threads such as through headlines, news feeds, status updates, competitions etc. Places need to be able to manage and execute a strong and consistent brand message whilst monitoring and filtering content that may harm their storyline. This could also be combined with AI and augmented reality in a way to manage stakeholders' expectations and experiences. This was seen at AVA Festival, where they created accounts for all the main social media platforms throughout the day. The festival was able to publish information relating to the festival, answer any questions as well as post creative content, i.e., visitors' videos/pictures. In order to build an inner storyline in the age of social media, it is necessary to harness communication through the development of technological platforms. By doing this, AVA Festival was able to forge an innovative digital inner storyline. It was important that they monitored their brand and the loyalty associated with it. This was done through 'popularity benchmarking' where AVA compares its festival brand against other festival brands in the same sector. Popularity benchmarking was the most interesting strategy used in order to establish what visitors' perceptions and experiences were of the festival and what they thought were the symbolic traits or psychological features of the festival which differentiated it from other festivals.

To conclude, a variety of tools and strategies, predominantly from the marketing discourse, can be used to improve the engagement and connectivity between stakeholders. Value-based & SWOT analyses, influencer utilisation, innovative technologies and popularity benchmarking all offer ways in which to manage a diversity of different attitudes and behaviours that stakeholders possess. Using these frameworks is helpful in providing clarity to municipalities and consultancies so that they can best tailor the branding experience to like-minded visitors.

4.4 Building inclusive narratives and managing stakeholder perceptions

Utilise a variety of communication platforms

Fostering amicable arenas for the inclusion of competing actors was identified as one of the main obstacles to creating capacities for cooperation within place development. Effective storytelling allows for inclusive narratives to be built as the telling and listening of stories allows actors to make sense of the past and also prepare for the future. It relates to planning because planning practice is the result of ideas about the future through the imagination of actors (Van Hulst, 2012). The portrayal of a brand also requires much thought to anticipate how narratives come to form a certain identity from the eyes of the visitor/consumer.

The indirect exclusion of actors was detrimental to the place brand of the **North Down Food Festival.** Access to the festival was difficult for some visitors due to the topography of the festival layout, which affected people who have disabilities as well as the elderly. This caused a backlash from many users on social media, which led to many complaints, with some even refusing to enter the festival in protest. In order to alleviate this, the organisers had to ensure that the venue was suitable and accessible and that there was a range of different communication channels by which visitors could retrieve information. A dedicated team was established to deal with complaints professionally. It was seen that traditional formats such as telephone information lines and community information kiosks were invaluable to those who were not technologically engaged. This demonstrates the importance of combining modern and traditional communication platforms.

In order to appeal to the widest audience then diversity across the platforms is vital. Places aim to be diverse rather than homogenous in order to appeal to a wider audience. Most respondents noted that their area had several sectors which helped to co-create an inner storyline, with one of the interviewees noting:

"Under the umbrella narrative of 'embracing the giant spirit' we are able to convey the multiplicity of these narratives to a global audience...we would like to have our own branding campaign; however, we feel it's probably best to go with the regional umbrella brand."

(Chris McCreery, NI Science Festival Director, 2021)

The **NI Science festival's** inner brand is conveyed through the storyline of "unleashing" the giant spirit' – a reference to Northern Irish Mythological Creature Finn McCool – it portrays how memorable mottos can be used as a way to unite heterogeneous narratives. In his response, Chris highlighted that there is a to keep branding activities simple in order to provoke a response. When asked about whether the festival should have multiple brands or mottos or relate to one central umbrella brand, he stated that the use of an endorsement brand strategy by the NI Tourism Board helped the NI science festival receive significant exposure. This involves using different product or service brands (e.g. the NI science festival) and positioning them individually from its parent brand ('unleashing the giant spirit' brand). An endorsement brand strategy can enhance customer awareness, increase branding efficiency through economies of scale and improve quality perceptions (Dooley & Bowie, 2005). American tourists are a target audience, and it was thought that their overbranding of geographical areas that were close in proximity to each other weakened their brand identity. All respondents agreed that multiple narratives exist within a place. And they must be unified under a common theme. To deal with this, the NI Science festival chose to follow one narrative relating to science and education. Although more narratives are stimulated through the NI Tourism Board, the NI Science festival maintained that their story was about science and education. This makes it easy for the storyline to be followed and for stakeholders to then focus on the brands content. In the case of **Dordrecht**, the overall place product has been "damaged" through overconsumption from tourism:

"You only have to look at Giethorn and the tragedy that is unfolding there. You see the beautiful images on the billboards as you walk through Schiphol airport, and when you get there, you realise the place is being damaged by over-tourism."

(Gert-Jan Schoten, Head of PR, Dordrecht Museum, 2021)

It also shows that a negative narrative can be foreshadowed by dark events but also overlooked and possibly forgotten about. It seems that the suffering of those on the titanic has been forgotten with time. While discussing the **North Down & Ards food festival**, Claire McCrea noted the Titanic Visitor Centre in Belfast as an example of managing sensitive narratives. In contrast to the case of Dordrecht and the NI Science Festival, the titanic centre had to appropriately manage sensitive storylines:

"I feel that there is a positive but also quite a sinister narrative here; I mean, we promote the fact that the Titanic was built in Belfast and what a marvel this is; however, we also consciously neglect the fact that many people lost their lives... its seems that we romanticise the building of this huge ship rather than the tragic events which unfolded afterwards."

(Claire Mc Crea, Marketing Director, North Down and Ards Borough Council, 2021)

From her experience, Claire McCrea insisted that the marketers at the Titanic visitor centre in Belfast tried to present a narrative of the fantastic shipbuilding industry in the city. It was to present the Titanic as a product of master craftsmanship, and that was the image and narrative they wanted to portray. The Titanic centre was voted the world's best visitor attraction in 2016. It could be argued that the excellent communication of the storyline forms the foundations of its success. Branding & marketing teams have managed to convey a sensitive story that is both educational to the visitor and one which relates to them on a deeper emotional level. This is significant as it shows that building a successful brand rests on effectively conveying a message whilst empathising with visitors and consumers. The Titanic Centre marketing team realised this and thought to give a balanced perspective of the storyline. This was done through the publishing of authentic documents from the Titanic disaster as well as interviewing historians & family members of those who lost their lives onboard. Despite the events occurring over one hundred years ago, family members still had an emotional attachment. Overall, this demonstrates how place brands can be empathetic whilst also being authentic achieved through public consultation and the presentation and preservation of sentimental documents.

In conclusion, it is imperative that actors are included within the overall place brand strategy, particularly those in relation to events. This can be done by providing appropriate access provisions and by utilising a variety of communication channels. Narratives are complex components of place branding strategies, so it is important to manage them sensitively and ethically through citizen participation and discussion. Narratives which are poorly managed can be highly detrimental to a place brand, so it is important to get this right; however, an endorsement branding strategy can help retain trust in place brands. They are resilient to shocks and are useful whenever there are negative associations with a narrative.

4.5 The 'new markets' strategy, coalitions and stimulating economic growth

The 'new-markets' strategy developed by consultancies such as *Telos and ZKA* provide a framework on which to establish new place-based markets via new products or experiences. All interviewees were briefed on what the 'new-market' strategy consisted of, with some already implementing some elements however were not aware of this approach.

Forming coalitions

Establishing new markets proves more likely whenever stakeholders form into coalitions. It requires citizens within the area to take their own initiative, to self-organize to act on behalf of common interest (Van Ostaaijen et al., 2010). Open House Festival showcases how to organise Public-Private Partnerships by engaging with businesses owners in the festival town in order to establish economic synergies which will benefit both the festival and entrepreneurs economically. During their 2020 Festival, they established a scheme called 'Festival Friends' whereby business owners could sign up to become affiliated with the festival. Through this scheme, the local community's business logos appear on the official festival brochure. Whenever visitors purchase a ticket for the festival, they receive discounts on a range of products and services from these retailers. The hope is that the increased visitor influx for the festival will increase the footfall for the businesses, which will then increase sales. The festival friend scheme also paved the way for other smaller events in the region. Food and Drink events were the most popular trade-off events that the entrepreneurs organised in conjunction with the festival, with creativity being the important aspect. The respondent noted that these events need to have their own brand as well and that it was not enough for them to come under the name of the overall festival.

"It's important that these events have catchy brand names too because if they are not memorable, it is unlikely people will remember they are on."

(Lesley Allen, Marketing Manager, Open-House Festival, 2021)

The new markets approach also allowed different sectors to be linked together to establish new products/markets. In **West Cork, Ireland,** stakeholders combined the sectors of agriculture in the form of artisan food products and recreation through their collaboration with hotel accommodation. The *West Cork Leader Cooperative (WCLC)* conducted a SWOT analysis to identify what areas can be exploited to design and create a dynamic umbrella brand for the region. The brand focused on promoting local tourism providers and food products objectivised the development of a unique brand identity and unite stakeholders into a holistic organisational structure. This resulted in the WCLC launching the *West Cork Fuchsia Brand*. The 'taste of West Cork festival' is now also an annual event that unites people, visitors, the landscape and hospitality. The brand is recognised through international benchmarking agencies and is regulated by the *Fuchsia Brands Ltd*. West Cork is a particularly interesting example showing how cross-sector collaboration through agriculture and recreation can occur through the organisation of a signature event (*A taste of west cork festival*) under the umbrella brand (Fuchsia Brands Ltd.)

In conclusion, the 'new markets' strategy allows regions to generate economic growth through the formation of coalitions between different sectors; this allows synergies to be formed to the benefit of both parties. Furthermore, the strategy builds on the premise that sectors can be combined to form new products or markets. This is clearly seen in the West Cork food festival case where the sectors of hospitality (local food products) were combined with recreation (hotel accommodation) to form a new dynamic international festival. Although stakeholders may not have been explicitly aware they were implementing the strategy, it shows how successful it can be in building a dynamic place brand.

4.7 Bringing it all together

The results of the interviews and the case-study analysis yielded were successful in investigating what other places are doing in terms of place-making, place branding, stakeholder engagement and establishing effective coalitions. The case studies were useful in providing useful tips, strategies, processes which can be applied to the Eemsdelta. They also provided useful lessons in what not to do and what to be aware of when developing a place brand strategy. The following points highlight the key lessons learnt:

- Regional place branding can be bolstered through organisational facilitators and collaboration with entrepreneurs.
- Bottom-up initiatives, for example, job fairs/networking events with local employers and the creation of opportunities through traineeships, support the economy, health and well-being of those within different regions.
- Assessing place brands through SWOT analysis and creating 'communities of practice' through informal networks facilitates knowledge sharing between private/public institutions and promotes a sense of community by instilling a

sense of purpose amongst stakeholders and deepening their emotional connection with the place brand.

- Location-based technology threads and social media platforms are powerful tools in managing stakeholder experiences and expectations and help forge an innovative inner storyline.
- Popularity Benchmarking is a useful tool in evaluating the psychological experiences of visitors and encourages comparison with other events & regions to establish best practices.
- An umbrella branding initiative within the place branding discourse involves the branding of place-based products or experiences under the name of a single, overarching brand. The creation of an umbrella branding initiative can act as a catalyst for the launch of a signature event and various unique artisan food products.
- An endorsement branding strategy can be a useful way to link the umbrella brand and the sub-brands together to enable a transfer of values like quality, authenticity and credibility.
- Place branding helps to build a sense of community by identifying common ideas and avenues for direction for the future of the local community. It helps to forge place-based stories and visions.
- A sense of place is generated through the experiences of local stakeholders through the social constructs of time, history, heritage & community. These constructs have meaning which influences people's perceptions on how favourably they view their environment
- Building public-private coalitions can be completed through the construction of a regional storyline. The development of a joint rural & urban storyline helps to align actors. Forming coalitions can be formed when actors share a sense of urgency to pursue goals and connect these within a shared storyline (Horlings, 2012).
- Actor exclusion can happen by neglecting traditional communication platforms, through an inability to compromise and by a lack of willingness to effectively negotiate. This can also make the formation of coalitions difficult.
- Place branding can be made more inclusive by following a stakeholderorientated approach which sees branding as a collective process by which to translate the meaning of places for relevant stakeholders. Residents should be at the centre of this strategy to act as ambassadors for their places as well as citizens who have political and moral authority and as an integrated part of the place brand who manifest the core values of the place.
- The creation of a joint storyline through public-private coalitions and the adoption of a bottom-up multi-stakeholder approach through discussion and storytelling sessions create linkages between in place brand involvement and citizen participation and collaboration in spatial planning policy-making and practices.

The creation of a joint regional storyline through bottom-up discussions as well as early involvement and empowerment of actors add to the planning theory debate in finding ways to ensure collaboration and citizen participation in the planning process.

Furthermore, the identification of processes and strategies found in the marketing and place branding discourse, as well as the implementation of the consultancy-style 'new markets' strategy, enables planning practitioners to use storytelling as a way of informing place-based and regional development policy-making.

Amongst the interviewees, there was a clear consensus of what place-branding is and how a strong & coherent strategy really adds value to the place they are in. We have seen how branding can unify communities and convey a sense of civic pride in a place, how places can build synergies by building public-private and private to private partnerships that are built on the premise of benefiting stakeholders both culturally and economically. The interview questions sought to provoke responses that would help answer the key research question and subsequent sub-questions established at the beginning of this thesis project. The next section will see how and in what ways the lessons learnt in other regions can be applied to the Eemsdelta

5. Applying lessons learnt in the Eemsdelta

What has been done?

SWOT analysis

The region has engaged already in a place branding campaign; however, more can be done to improve its success. Figure 8 shows a SWOT analysis for the area. The Eemsdelta has strong environmental assets such as the Wadden Sea world heritage site and infrastructure relating to the green energy transition. There is a tranquil atmosphere with many historical artefacts represented in museums. There are many cafes, bars and restaurants in the area as well. Despite this, there are still few activities for visitors to engage in. This can be attributed to a lack of place-based activities such as a boat, fishing and food tours, festivals, fishing excursions, live events etc. The winter months offer very limited opportunities to explore the area due to the bad weather.

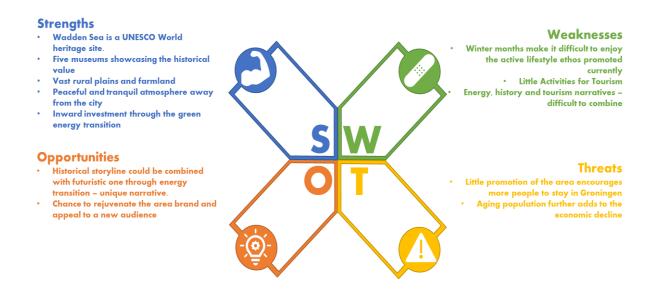


Figure 8: SWOT Analysis for the Eemsdelta

Promotional campaigns

The Eemsdelta has attempted to bolster links between public institutions like *Top Groningen* (Groningen's city marketing department) and entrepreneurs. This was seen in the *Soul Happy in Delfzijl (Broekhuisrijs.nl,2020)* branding campaign, which aimed to further improve the involvement of entrepreneurs by offering them a platform on which to advertise their product/experience through the *Top Groningen* branding strategy (*Merkgroningen.nl, 2022*). The objective was to support and connect those in the leisure economy and contribute to the economic revival of the area. As a way of connecting entrepreneurs in the leisure sector, Delfzijl engaged in a branding campaign to encourage more visitors to come to the area and build a favourable image 50 | Page

of the area. A promotional video was created featuring six entrepreneurs from the region. Various online and offline communication platforms were utilised, including websites, *YouTube* channels for the municipality, Facebook campaigns and advertisements, as well as outdoor billboards, press releases and posters were used to promote and brand the area. The results showed that the Facebook campaign reached over 150,000 people, and the website was visited 5500 times. Location-based technology threads and social media platforms were seen in the results as being an effective way to build an inner storyline.

Appingedam retail loyalty scheme

The introduction of a loyalty scheme in Appingedam has proved to be successful. The card can be used by shoppers, and when they purchase goods, they accumulate points on their card, which is then used to avail of discounts in businesses in the town. The scheme has boosted the profile of businesses and improved the engagement and sense of community amongst local residents in the city. The card is beneficial to local businesses as well as shoppers as it allows them to analyse customer buying habits, shopping trends and patterns, stock levels and other data. Gert de Groot, an entrepreneur from *Groot and Landstra web-design*, highlights the retail loyalty card scheme which is running in Appingedam:

"The retail loyalty card is a great way of engaging and including residents as it allows the build-up of points which can be later redeemed for discounts in stores in Appingedam

(Gert de Groot, Groot and Landstra web-design, 2021)

The loyalty scheme is exclusive to Appingedam, which is disappointing because the model would positively affect other businesses in the Eemsdelta. It would provide a greater level of social cohesion and would offer another platform of exposure for these businesses.

Applying lessons learnt

Utilise an organisational facilitator & create a signature event/brand

In order to contribute to this improvement, it would be useful to integrate an organisational facilitator into the place branding process. This facilitator could be an independent consultant/organisation, which can help the parties work better together, understand each other's common objectives and determine how to achieve these via discussions/meetings. The Appingedam loyalty card scheme should be extended to all areas of the Eemsdelta. Furthermore, a signature event that involves entrepreneurs within all three cities could be developed to promote the launch of the extended loyalty scheme and showcase the businesses with the area. A focus on bottom-up initiatives

relating to job creation and development, skills workshops & networking events could also be added. A signature event in the Eemsdelta would increase the awareness of the place brand and engage local entrepreneurs, residents and traders. It would also encourage inward investment from other entrepreneurs elsewhere in the Netherlands who are seeking expansion which would boost the local economy and create jobs.

Harness innovative digital platforms & create 'communities of practice.'

Despite the region utilising Social Media platforms like Facebook and YouTube, there is a need to engage in newer platforms that have come on the market over the last year. Facebook and YouTube can be seen to be outdated social media platforms amongst the younger generation. *TikTok* is the newest platform and is a fantastic way to combine video, audio and creative content. The app enables short, snappy videos to be taken which appeal to a worldwide audience. Creating a memorable 'hashtag' with which people can identify also helps. Examples include *EmbracetheEems or ExploreEemsdelta*. Creating 'communities of practice' could be a useful way to engage stakeholders and promote knowledge & idea-sharing. The Eemsdelta could use the model composed by North Down and Ards Borough Council to harness the creation of informal networks. Figure 9 offers possible scenarios for

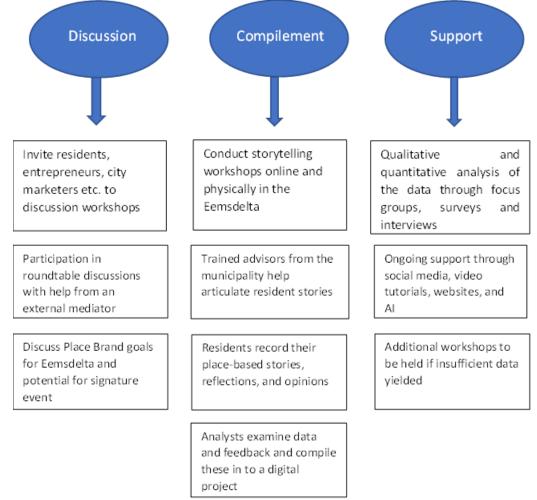


Figure 9: Potential stakeholder engagement process for the Eemsdelta

how stakeholder engagement processes could work in the Eemsdelta. Firstly, their participation through roundtable discussion through the sharing of knowledge from each of their own unique perspectives. The debate about what a signature event may look like, who should be involved and what its focus should be is also triggered. Next, the compilement stage would consist of officials from the municipality being trained to help articulate stakeholder responses. This could be through asking and helping explain different questions, which would help promote authentic responses, recording and transcribing stories or collecting data to be used for quantitative analysis. This stage is all about collecting relevant information to be used for the next stage. Lastly, the support stage deeply analyses the responses and stories through focus groups and surveys to ensure the stories given are representative of the data given at the discussion stage.

Artificial Intelligence would be useful for the municipality of the Eemsdelta because it allows the marketing teams to utilise 'chatbots'. Chatbots, or Virtual assistants, are useful in answering questions and personalising the visitor's online experience. This could be incorporated into the *Visit-Eemsdelta* website and offers a competitive advantage over other tourism sites. Greetings messages play a central role in grasping a visitor's interest and help connect with new and returning online visitors.

Conduct a popularity benchmark analysis, combine sectors and form coalitions

Popularity benchmarking analysis should be used in the Eemsdelta as a way to compare itself to different regions across the Netherlands. This can be done by establishing Key Performance Indicators for the region. For example, a KPI for the Eemsdelta could be 'to increase customer visitor numbers by x amount'. This can be compared with another region of the Netherlands to see how they compare. *Google Trends* is a free software platform that allows website visitor comparison. The Eemsdelta could compare this to other tourism sites to identify the demographic of the people visiting.

To establish new markets, the Eemsdelta could attempt to combine different sectors and create an umbrella brand that is quality assured and runs affiliated training programs such as food hygiene, product quality, marketing and customer care. The umbrella brand helps increase the knowledge of brand members and promotes knowledge sharing. Furthermore, a positive brand image is portrayed as it gives the Eemsdelta authenticity. Figure 9 shows a prototype of a possible umbrella brand that could be used for products in the Eemsdelta. The brand includes icons from the energy transition, agriculture and fishing, which are present in the area. This could be used across businesses to show that the product/experience has a high level of certification and quality, which is seen in the West Cork example through *Fuchsia Brands Ltd.* The brand should be the outcome of a thorough stakeholder engagement process, as described in figure 10. Public-private coalitions should also be formed between the Municipality Eemsdelta and entrepreneurs in order to come up with a joint storyline



Figure 10: A prototype of a possible umbrella brand for 'Eems-quality' assured products

that is representative of the values of local stakeholders. Applying lessons from West Cork could also help the area stimulate further economic growth. This could be through a signature event by which agriculture, fishing and recreation are combined. Local fishermen, the municipality, restaurants, cafes, hotels etc., would come together to begin the initial consultations and to design an event that is inclusive for all. Outside sponsorship could also be sought through EU funding which would also improve market access and brand awareness. The West Cork example has proven that combining sectors to create a signature event under an inclusive umbrella brand creates strong synergies between these sectors and a robust territory-based network (Donner et al., 2017).

In conclusion, the area could take the following steps:

- Extend the retail loyalty scheme operating in Appingedam to the whole of the Eemsdelta
- Utilise an organisational facilitator and create a signature event that brings together local stakeholders with a focus on community building and inclusion.
- Utilise innovative technological platforms to boost exposure and create placebrand teams or 'communities of practice'.
- Conduct popularity benchmarking analysis, combine sectors such as agriculture and recreation to design events and form coalitions between the Municipality Eemsdelta and local entrepreneurs.

6. Discussion

This study was conducted to gain insights into how the Eemsdelta can strengthen its place branding strategy by learning from other regions both nationally and internationally. In this section, the results will be interpreted in the context of the debate within place branding and to assess whether the results can answer the research questions. The implications of the results, as well as their limitations, will also be discussed.

Place branding was seen to forge unique identities which can unite communities through common place-based features. Civic pride, peace and harmony are bestowed on places that have lost their sense of character through symbolism and storytelling. This creates a sense of attachment to places which encourages long-term involvement and participation in place brand processes. Bottom-up social enterprise initiatives and the creation of recreational networks seemed to help generate enthusiasm amongst stakeholders, which was vital in areas with low economic opportunities. These initiatives also helped improve the happiness, health and wellbeing of places – the measurement of which was an important factor in determining a positive place brand identity. The claims of Braun et al. (2013) are justified through the correlation between positive stakeholder happiness levels and the promotion of the place brand through a place's residents. The importance of including this particular stakeholder group could not be overstated as they give the place brand credibility and authenticity through their own experiences.

Narratives were seen to be vital to harness an effective place brand strategy. Actors can be included through the co-creation of a joint storyline between public and private entities. Narratives are powerful constructs at they have the ability to link the past and the future with the present. A multiplicity of narratives can be managed by utilising a brand endorsement strategy that unifies multiple place brands with one parent brand. There needs to be awareness of different social connections and interactions in communities (Lichrou et al., 2017). Narratives have the power to unify communities through a shared identity. Narratives and spatial planning are inextricably linked as they have the ability to challenge place-based practices and structures by visualising different futures and conveying different storylines.

Stakeholder engagement processes also help regions visualise their identity in cocreating a positive narrative. It also demonstrates that regions can boost their economic activity by executing a coherent place brand strategy through processes relating to the building of an inner storyline and the management of stakeholder perceptions. A bottom-up multi-stakeholder process that focuses on building a sense of community, citizen participation, empowerment and collaboration, as well as aligning actors through the creation of a joint storyline, all aim to foster more inclusive spatial planning and place branding processes. The results should be taken into account when regions are improving their place brand strategy because they provide concrete lessons on how to manage stakeholder perceptions, how to develop powerful narratives and how to merge sectors and use events to create new markets. These results build on evidence from Horlings (2012) and Bristow (2010) of the organisation of (place-based) assets through multi-stakeholder engagements and governance structures and the central role creativity, productivity and innovation play in regional development. The new-markets approach is an innovative way to integrate sectors, and the results show those regions are using this strategy -though not explicit- to foster economic growth.

There is indeed a nexus between spatial planning and place branding. Place branding can be used as a useful tool for spatial planning by visualising new futures for communities to identify themselves through the construction of new ideas and practices, as alluded to by Pederson, 2004. A bottom-up multi-stakeholder approach to place branding can be coupled with efforts by planning to use a collaborative approach to guide decision-making. Narratives can be useful to this as they provide powerful storylines which can be translated into dynamic visions for planning practice. Narratives also use the power of imagination to develop new or improved planning practices or policies to improve social cohesion and foster regional development. The inclusion of the 'new markets' strategy allows planning officials to create synergies that not only benefit place-making but boost regional economic growth as regions attempt to venture into new markets, design new experiences or develop new products.

There are concrete processes and strategies which can be applied to the Eemsdelta, which can be derived from other cases. The results showed that interviewee responses were In line with Kavaratzis (2010) and Pike et al. (2011) theories that place branding is, in fact, an application of brand strategy through the exploitation of material and non-material place-based features through imagery, storytelling, spatial associations and change agents. Furthermore, the results confirmed that place-branding is an ongoing process, broader than just marketing, however using similar elements: the marketing of experiences as a product were key components of the place brand process. Investigating ways in which to improve citizen participation was particularly helpful when analysing regions through the lens of an experience product.

There is a wide scope for results to be generalised and applied to different settings. The results may be useful to other regions within the Netherlands that may have difficulties defining and implementing place branding processes and strategies, engaging and involving stakeholders, developing dynamic (joint) storylines, as well as combining sectors and forming coalitions through the 'new-markets strategy'. The variety of international case studies demonstrates that regions across the world face similar problems when attempts are made to improve their place branding strategies. The diversity of the participants and their lines of work shows that place branding and spatial planning require inter-disciplinary collaboration to enable strong regional development. Municipalities and regions considering implementing the findings should be mindful of the demographic and geographic size of their own area to ensure there is a positive impact. With this in mind, the demography and geography, as well as other social and economic factors, will influence the construction of storylines which may impact the generalisability of the results. The Eemsdelta region should constantly review and reflect on its strategy to keep up with ongoing trends and to remain relevant in a fiercely competitive world. Technological and tourism trends are of particular significance as they change rapidly in response to consumer demand. With that being

said, the cases and results yield concrete lessons which can be applied to the Eemsdelta and other regions in the Netherlands and beyond.

7. Conclusion

This research project has demonstrated that there are various ways in which to build a strong and coherent place branding strategy for the Eemsdelta region that is inclusive amongst various stakeholders. In answering the main research question, the Eemsdelta can develop an inclusive place branding strategy through a bottom-up approach multi-stakeholder approach in which actors are aligned through the cocreation of a joint regional storyline and the formation of public-private partnerships and coalitions between Municipality Eemsdelta and entrepreneurs and residents. The construction of these storylines should be developed by empowering stakeholders through discussion and early involvement. Community collaboration and building a sense of community through these discussions will provide the necessary arenas for citizen participation which will inform the basis for developing shared values which can then be used to envisage various futures for the area. National and international examples demonstrate similar problems and solutions faced by other regions, which provide hope and inspiration for the Eemsdelta in improving the strength of its place brand. The processes, frameworks and strategies shown in the results provide lessons for the area in how to improve their weaknesses. The creation of a signature event, smaller events and an umbrella brand, as well as performing a place-based SWOT analysis, popularity benchmarking, harnessing innovative digital communication and storytelling sessions are comprehensive strategies for including these stakeholders. The creation of a joint regional storyline through bottom-up discussions as well as early involvement and empowerment of actors add to the planning theory debate in finding ways to ensure collaboration and citizen participation in the planning process. Furthermore, the identification of processes and strategies found in the marketing and place branding discourse, as well as the implementation of the consultancy-style 'new markets' strategy, enables planning practitioners to use storytelling as a way of informing place-based and regional development policy-making.

7.1 Recommendations

To ensure long-term success in the region, a number of recommendations can be made:

- Form a place-brand team that will review the region's strategy on an ongoing basis. The team should be made up of members from the municipality, entrepreneurs, residents, and farmers. It could be useful to involve those from external marketing institutions and organisations who could offer insights in improving brand strategy and those from project management consultancies who can offer innovative insights in managing stakeholders.
- Follow a bottom-up multi-stakeholder approach with a focus on citizen participation to co-create a joint regional storyline. Hold story-telling and discussion sessions to empower stakeholders. Early involvement promotes ownership amongst stakeholders, which is crucial to the long-term success of the place brand.

- Extend the retail loyalty scheme operating in Appingedam to the whole of the Eemsdelta and utilise an organisational facilitator to create a signature event that brings together local stakeholders with a focus on building a sense of community.
- Utilise innovative technological platforms to boost exposure and conduct a popularity benchmarking and value-based analysis.
- Combine sectors such as agriculture and recreation to design events and form coalitions between the Municipality Eemsdelta and local entrepreneurs.

7.2 Relevance for planning and future research areas

The relationship between place branding and spatial planning shows that both remits are intrinsically connected and can be utilised in a way that creates synergies. Place branding can be used as a spatial planning tool by highlighting place-based assets and managing urban and regional identities, which are crucial to enhance a place's reputation and image. Place branding fosters citizen participation and inclusiveness by facilitating arenas for discussion and involvement, which are central to ensuring regional planning practices and strategies and ensure they are representative of the regional population. The branding techniques used in the marketing discourse offer ways in which to re-imagine places and transform regions into places that harness sustainable economic growth, Spatial planning through place branding forges a deep connectedness between stakeholders and plays a vital role in building coalitions and integrating different sectors. Furthermore, the process of place branding brings together different perspectives into a consistent storyline in which communities can develop their own shared future vision for spatial development. Future research may want to focus further on how regions can implement the new-markets strategy and its effects on regional identity and economic development. This could involve designing standardised strategies to help regions that encounter similar problems and could act as a supplementary 'toolkit' for regions that also face branding problems. An interdisciplinary project involving consultants, municipalities, academics and researchers could support regions across the world with processes to help them combat their own place-based problems. This could lead to the formation of an international forum for regional growth and place brand development which focuses on helping regions exploit place-based assets, form new markets and improve stakeholder engagement.

7.3 Reflection on the research process

Reflecting on the research process as a whole, it is clear that there were many ups and downs. A large part of my time was devoted to the literature review to ensure I had a strong oversight of the state of place branding literature. This was helped by a keen interest in the field and how this could be translated into practice through the adoption of the new-markets strategy. Having a strong foundation of the theoretical context paved the way for a logical methodology which helped form the interview stage. As a non-native student, I found the process of researching the Eemsdelta to

be particularly enjoyable as it allowed me to explore part of the Netherlands I otherwise may have never travelled to. The people who I met from the various organisations entrepreneurs, technicians and academics were all very friendly, which made me feel at ease when I travelled to remote locations to conduct interviews. Their welcoming nature and cultural awareness were evident through their agreement to communicate via English in formal and informal conversations. The research was conducted during the Coronavirus Pandemic, however, at a time when restrictions were eased, which allowed some in-person interviews to take place. This allowed for more engaging interviews, which yielded richer content. There were many difficulties in the process. Identifying and conducting interviews internationally was the biggest constraint as many potential respondents did not reply to email contact. In hindsight, it may have been better to compile a bigger gross list of potential respondents and to make contact with them earlier on in the research project. This would have provided a bigger 'safety net' by which other organisations could be contacted if another fell through. Analysing various policy documents, particularly those in relation to the Eemsdelta, was taxing as most of the documents were in Dutch, to which I had a limited understanding. Overall, I feel the results of this thesis project appear convincing and show an in-depth analysis of lessons learnt in other regions. I believe that the generalisability of the results is helped by the case studies experiencing similar problems in the past and by which they have overcome by using proven branding techniques in the marketing discourse. This hopefully provides the Eemsdelta with a 'best practice' guide on how to do place-branding in the area and overcome any problems they may face by using these case studies as inspiration. I feel that whilst the research project was not perfect and mistakes were made along the way, the overall product is more than convincing and contributes to the academic debate on place branding and displays its relevance to planning practice.

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Appendix A: Consent Form



Study Title: Establishing Lessons for effective F Eemsdelta

We are asking if you would like to take part in a research project aimed at establishing a better marketing strategy for the Eemsdelta region of Groningen, in the Netherlands.

Before you consent to participate in the study, we ask that you read the participant information sheet and mark each box below with your initials if you agree. If you have any questions or queries before signing the consent form, please speak to the principal investigator, Lewis Masson.

- 1. I confirm that I have read the information sheet and fully understand what is expected of me within this study
- 2. I confirm that I have had the opportunity to ask any questions and to have them answered.
- 3. I understand that my interview will be audio/video recorded and then made into an anonymised written transcript.
- 4. I understand that audio/video recordings will be kept until the research project has been examined.
- 5. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without giving any reason, without my medical care or legal rights being affected.
- 6. I understand that once my data have been anonymised and incorporated into themes it might not be possible for it to be withdrawn, though every attempt will be made to extract my data, up to the point of publication.
- 7. I understand that the information from my interview will be pooled with other participants' responses, anonymised and may be published; all reasonable steps will be taken to protect the anonymity of the participants involved in this project.
- 8. I consent to information and quotations from my interview being used in reports, conferences and training events.
- 9. I understand that the researcher will discuss data with their supervisor as needed.
- 10. I understand that any information I give will remain confidential and anonymous unless it is thought that there is a risk of harm to myself or others, in which case the principal investigator may need to share this information with their research supervisor.
- 11. I consent to take part in the above study.

Name of Participant	Signature
Date	

Name of Researcher _____Signature _____Signature

Appendix B: Interview Guide



Introductory Questions:

- How would you describe your position as a stakeholder in Eemsdelta?
- How long have you been involved in the position of your field?

Part 1: Place Branding in the Eemsdelta

- What do you know about place branding in the Eemsdelta?
- What are the main place-based features of the Eemsdelta?
- What, in your opinion, are the areas intrinsic qualities? Why?
- Stakeholder Engagement:
 - How best would you engage stakeholders in the Eemsdelta?
 - What ways can a coherent place branding exploit new markets in the Eemsdelta?
 - What local stories could the Eemsdelta convey to produce an inner storyline?

Part 2: The potential of exploiting new markets in the Eemsdelta:

- Are there any markets in the fields of culture, recreation & Innovation that could be promoted better? How?
- Do you think bridging different sectors i.e. merging tourism with food products would help exploit new markets? Why?
- Are there any events in the area that should be promoted more?
- How would this add value to the area?
- Are there any products/experiences in the area that could be promoted/exploited?
- What other ways can the area promote economic development?

Part 3: Narratives:

- What are your perceptions of the Eemsdelta?
- Is there anything the area can improve on?
- Which actors would you include in a place branding strategy? Why?

- What storyline should the area convey?
- Should the storyline focus on one field i.e. Culture, recreation or innovation? Or all three?
- What sectors could be bridged together to promote a positive storyline?

Closing Questions:

Are there any current/upcoming developments or projects that you are excited to implement?

Is there anything else you would like to add? Or would you like to modify any of your given statements?

Thank-you for your participation.

Appendix C: Code Tree

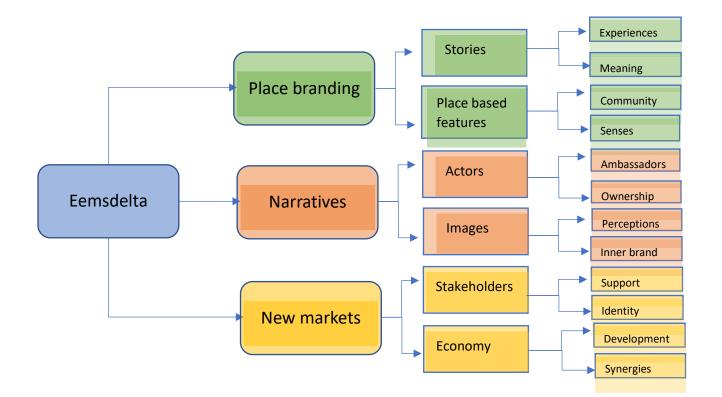


Figure 11: Code Tree

Appendix D: Interview Transcripts

Access to the interview transcript and notes can be obtained by sending an email to I.masson@student.rug.nl