



GRAANREPUBLIC

OLDAMBT

The use of regional identities in regional branding for tourism

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Groningen, June

Abstract

The use of regional branding in regional areas and the identities that inhabitants ascribe to their region have been much researched in the field of regionalism. However, the use of these regional identities for the purpose of regional branding is much less researched. This master thesis has focused on this topic using a qualitative research in the Dutch municipality of Oldambt using the tourism campaign Graanrepubliek. Within this thesis, it is looked at why it is important to include regional identities in regional branding campaigns, which regional identities are important, which stakeholders are involved during the process, and whether the stakeholders agree with Graanrepubliek. The results show that creating a support base, but also keeping in mind what the visitor wants, are the main reasons for including regional identities in regional branding campaigns for tourism. Furthermore, the elements that the agriculture represents and social cohesion through events are main elements that came forward which should be promoted in the Graanrepubliek. By including all stakeholders, it is possible to combine all regional identities for a tourism campaign. Overall, the name of the Graanrepubliek and what it represents does tell the story of the region.

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1. Introduction

'The Graanrepubliek according to...' (Stichting Marketing Oldambt, 2019)

Stichting Marketing Oldambt (SMO), the foundation for branding the municipality of Oldambt, has adopted this slogan to promote the area for tourism. It is designed for inhabitants to assign their name on the dots and have their own explanation of why the Graanrepubliek is part of their story. The Graanrepubliek means the republic of grain. It refers to the amount of grain produced and the perfect soil in the region to produce grain compared to the rest of the Netherlands, in the past and still. This slogan already suggests that the Graanrepubliek is about a region which has an affiliation with grain. This affiliation with grain is the identity that the foundation wants to put forward. To brand regional identities, it is important that the citizens of the area that is being marketed are involved (Hereźniak, 2017) meaning that they have to agree and feel connected with the identity which is marketed (Pike, 2005). People who live and/or work in the area on a daily basis have an understanding of the region and its identities. Therefore, these stakeholders need to be included in the processes of decision-making to decide on which identity is being put forward to attract visitors (Waligo & Clarke & Hawkins, 2013). It is important for stakeholders to express their opinion on a new branding campaign as this will create unity in the identity which is being put forward. However, the creation of the branding campaign is decided by the foundation in the end and this is done by selecting certain elements from the regional identities (Messely & Dessein & Rogge, 2015).

Within one area, people can have different interests and different affiliations with a region. Therefore, there is not one single regional identity in an area (Haartsen, Groote & Huigen, 2000). The people ascribe their own regional identities to the region which can differ per individual. In turn, it could mean that some of the identities across the region are not being represented in a marketing campaign. For example, the campaign about the Graanrepubliek is suggesting that everyone associates the region with grain. However, this might not be the case for everyone, since there is also a town with about 18.000 inhabitants in the area who might not have a relation with the countryside. Nevertheless, for a branding campaign to be successful it is important that one regional identity is formulated with which all stakeholders can identify. Therefore, the inhabitants and stakeholders are important in the process of formulating a regional identity for marketing purposes. This regional identity for marketing purposes is often called brand identity. It is the element of a brand that attracts tourists and is different than other brands in the same sector (Wheeler, 2017). In the case study for this research, a regional identity chosen for marketing purposes is the brand identity. Thus, the regional identities will be the identities ascribed to a region by inhabitants and the brand identity is the identity which was chosen for the branding campaign.

According to Andersson (2007), branding a region, city or country has gained much attention from academics in the last four centuries. This is because there is an increased recognition of the potential for

a destination to increase the number of tourists when using a brand. However, the branding of a region has changed due to globalization (Simon, 2004) since it has become easier to market the region to a broader audience. It makes it more difficult to compose an attractive brand identity to market to the world (Taylor, 1999). Consequently, new ways of coming to a locally embedded brand identity have to be found. One of these ways is to let the people in the region speak up about the place where they live and explain why a tourist should visit the area. By doing this, different regional identities are being put together instead of choosing one regional identity as brand identity.

1.1 The research objective

Not including stakeholders in the process of designing a brand identity could have an unfavourable effect on the region. Especially because the regional identities are something close to the people that live there and should be approached in a sensitive way (Paasi, 2003). There is a rich amount of knowledge in the academic field of regionalism about the marketing of a regional area, this is mostly referred to as regional branding (e.g. Oliveira & Ashworth, 2017; Bruwer & Johnson, 2010). Also, there is much information in this same academic field about the identities people associate with their region, called regional identities (e.g. Paasi, 2013; Raagmaa, 2002). However, using regional identities in regional branding and how this can be done appears to be under-researched. Research into the use of regional identities in regional branding, expresses the importance of the involvement of stakeholders and the willingness to promote this brand to the outside (Messely & Dessein & Lauwers, 2010). When regional identities are not correctly included in the regional branding campaign, stakeholders will not support the campaign which can do harm to tourism in the region (Lynch, 2017). This can harm a future perspective of tourism (Saarinen, 2003). Therefore, the focus of this research is to explore how regional identities ascribed to a region can be included in regional branding campaigns. Based on this research focus, the following research question has been created:

“How can regional identities ascribed to a region be included in regional branding campaigns for tourism: the case of the Graanrepubliek in Oldambt?”

This research will offer an insight into the regional identities and the branding campaign of the municipality of Oldambt and consists of four sub questions:

- 1) Why is it important to include regional identities in regional branding campaigns?
- 2) Which regional identities are important to attract tourists?
- 3) Who are important stakeholders during the process of creating a brand identity?
- 4) To what extent can the stakeholders of Oldambt agree with the identity that is being communicated?

In order to answer the main research question, a qualitative approach has been chosen to conduct this research using semi-structured interviews.

1.2 The case of the Graanrepubliek

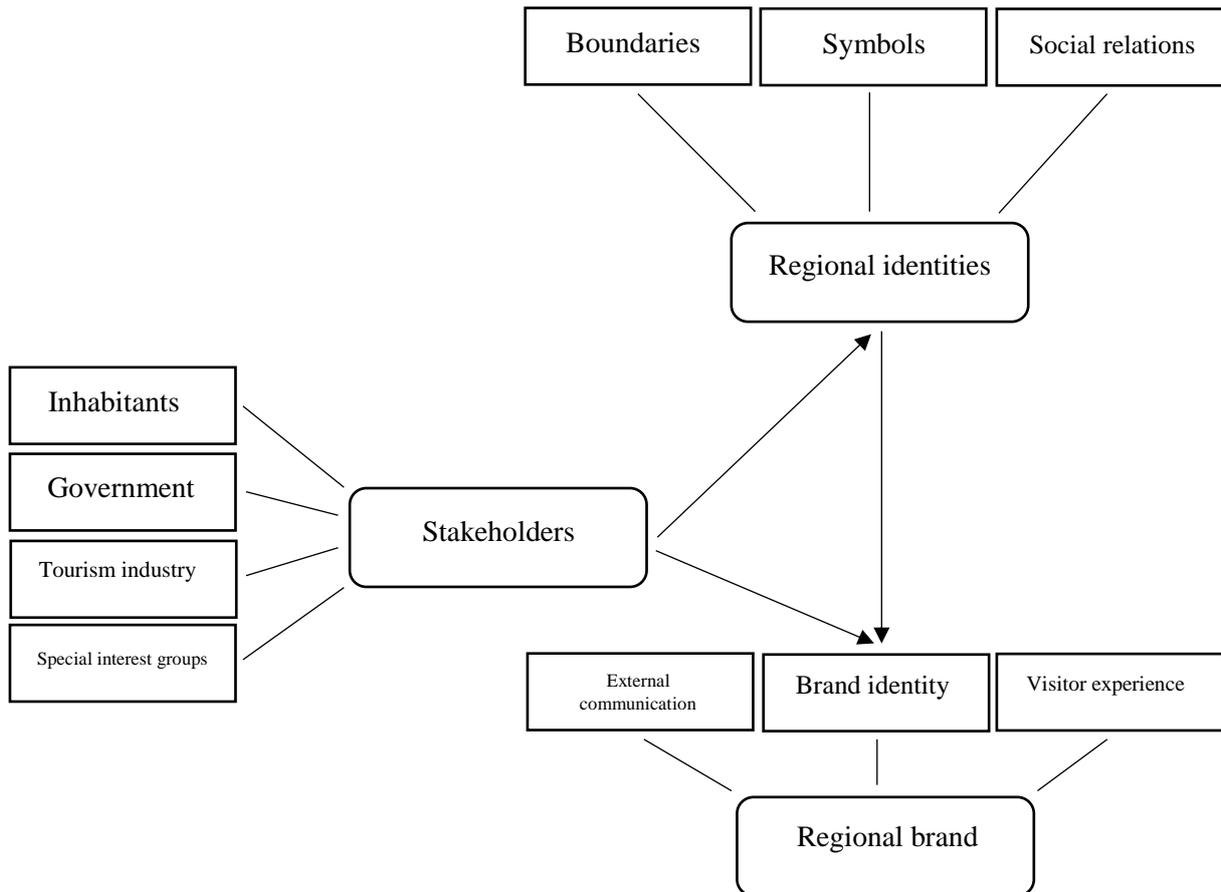
The municipality of Oldambt is mostly characterised as an agricultural area, polder landscape with dykes, and as a Wadden Sea region. People are attracted to the rural area due to the agricultural characteristics of the area, such as the fields and the history. The brand identity that was chosen to promote the area came from a book written by Frank Westerman. The book is a description of the history of the region which was dominated by agriculture. Due to this research, he assigned the name Graanrepubliek to the area. Oldambt makes for an interesting case study as the name for the brand identity is based on history and the name of the book. However, no information is known about the affiliation with the area currently. The area has a bigger town and a newly built area which attracts inhabitants from other parts of the country as well. These new developments can result in new affiliations with the region. Therefore, it is important to understand how all the different identities present in the region can be formulated into a brand identity.

In order to find out how the identities can be combined in a branding campaign for tourism, a qualitative research approach will be used. Within this approach, semi-structured interviews will be conducted among different stakeholders connected to the area. The stakeholder groups which are meaningful for Oldambt are inhabitants, government, the tourism industry, and special interest groups. Within these groups, different individuals and organisations will be interviewed to formulate an answer to the research question. Doing semi-structured interviews will give an understanding of social structures important for creating regional identities and the process of decision-making when formulating a brand identity.

This research paper will provide an answer to the question how regional identities can be used in a regional branding campaign and is based on the case study of the Graanrepubliek. In the next chapter, literature on branding and identities, as well as different stakeholders will be presented. Then, the method for data collection and ethical considerations will be explained. Furthermore, the analysis of the research will be discussed followed by a conclusion which will give an answer to the research question.

2. Stakeholders, identities and branding

This chapter provides an overview of the concepts of regional branding, regional identities and stakeholder involvement. It is the starting point of exploring the scientific literature to get a better understanding of the problem. In the theoretical framework below, the different elements which will be discussed in the upcoming chapters is shown.



The theoretical framework shows what the components of regional identities and regional brands are. The stakeholders influence the regional identities and the brand identity. The regional identities also influence the brand identity, and thus the regional brand. This will be explained in more detail below. First, the different stakeholders who ascribe regional identities to the region and have an influence on the brand identity are being discussed. Furthermore, the regional identities itself will be explained and how these are created. Lastly, the brand identity which can form the regional brand will be reviewed.

2.1 Stakeholder involvement

Stakeholders are very important when it comes to developing an organisation (Neville, Bell, & Menguc, 2005) or providing a service or experience in a region (Vasudevan, 2008). When not taking this group into account, it could lead to an unsuccessful approach in establishing your goal (Freeman, 1984). In this paper, stakeholders will be “those groups or individuals who are associated with tourism development initiatives and therefore can affect or are affected by the decisions and activities concerning those initiatives” (Waligo et al., 2013, p. 343). Waligo et al. (2013) have captured six different types of stakeholders who can influence tourism development in the area; tourists, tourism industry, government, educational institutions, local community and special interest groups. The collaboration of these stakeholders is crucial for the planning of tourism in a region (Murphy, 1988). Because of the impact of tourism on the region, the stakeholders need to be considered (Dodds, 2007).

2.1.1 Internal stakeholders

When promoting a destination or a region, the internal stakeholders are the ‘first customers’ (Sartori & Mottironi & Corigliano, 2012). Thus, it is important to make these stakeholders committed to the brand over time (Sheehan & Ritchie, 2005). According to Pike (2005), destination managers need to analyse the cognitive and emotional value of the stakeholders with the brand. From the six stakeholders identified by Waligo et al. (2013), four groups of internal stakeholders influence the regional identities and the brand identity. These are the tourism industry, government, local community and special interest groups. Below, there is a short description of every group.

Tourism industry. The tourism industry is a sector which provides services and activities for people that can be regarded as tourists (UNWTO, n.d.). Examples of this are accommodation or tourism related activities. Many people visiting the region are day-tourists (SMO, 2020). Therefore, the businesses and organisation providing for these visitors will also be considered.

Government. The government includes the local government who is responsible for regional tourism campaigns. They consist of different parties who might have different views on the way the brand identity is being created.

Local community. The local community is regarded as the people who live within the geographical area of the region being studied. They interact with the area on a daily basis and have established institutions within this region.

Special interest groups. The interest groups are association or individuals who have shared concerns and try to influence government decisions to benefit their causes (Britannica, n.d.). In tourism and branding, this means that these groups are trying to influence the brand identity in a way that it can benefit their causes.

2.2 Regional identities

There are several aspects of what can be regarded as regional identities (Haartsen, Groote & Huigen, 2000). First, regional identities are something which is assigned to an area by people, making them not intrinsic. Second, the elements of what is regarded as regional identities are based on the characteristics and qualities of the area. Third, these elements are always based on the past. Fourth, there may be different interests in the area which can lead to different regional identities based on the interest. Therefore, it is important to understand that there may be different regional identities in tourism development than the ones that are assigned to the region by other stakeholders. Fifth, it is important to understand what the power balance is in proclaiming the regional identities. Sixth, regional identities are a concept which is dynamic. Meaning that it can change over time based on power balances, new stakeholders or new characteristics or functions. Paasi (2013) describes that the use of regional identities in the promotion of the region can lead to socio-economic benefits. One of the things that is important in this respect is how these identities are being represented in the brand and the stakeholder involvement (Dixon & Durrheim, 2000). Therefore, it is advised to include stakeholders in the process of decision-making to realise a brand identity in tourism.

2.2.1 Social context of regional identities

To get a better understanding of regional identities, it is essential to have an idea of where this concept comes from. Maslow (1989) put together a diagram consisting of all the needs a human has. The pyramid he created is divided in two, with basic and higher needs. For a person to proceed to a higher need, the levels before that need to be realised. When looking at regional identities, it is a form of belonging. People want to belong to a community and not be excluded. This has been the case in all times and places. However, with the new technological society, there is more demand for a community which might mean that there is more need for regional identities (Raagmaa, 2002). Based on belonging, people can identify with high inclusive groups which are groups to belong to on a bigger scale such as states instead of neighbourhoods. However, people may feel more connected to the country they are from or the region they live in. These are seen as the less inclusive groups.

In general, people identify more strongly with these less inclusive groups (Simon, 1992). The reason for this is that the amount of people is clear, and the geographical area is easier to grasp. For example, Catalonians identify themselves more with the region they live in than with a higher inclusive group such as the country of Spain. The reason for this, is the history of the region where the region has a collective memory which is dissimilar from the country (Simon & Kulla & Zobel, 1995). Breakwell (1986) described four principles of identity which are the reasons for people to ascribe an identity to the region they live in and may therefore feel as they belong in that region. First, there is the need to differentiate from “others” or other groups. These other groups can be other regions or a group of people who do not feel connected to the area and might not want to ascribe an identity to the region. This

distinction is often formed by physical characteristics that might be special for that region. Second, being part of a group or geographical area can provide continuity. Because of this continuity, people feel connected with the area and ascribe an identity to this area. Third, individuals need a sense of self-esteem which they can build by creating an identity to the region. This can be alone or as part of a group. Self-esteem can make people feel better about themselves and the region. Fourth, there is self-efficacy which people can gain from a group to which they belong. This is gained when having achieved a goal or when people recognise what has been done by an individual. This group of people, an individual can belong to, is often from the region as well. These four principles of identity can be seen as higher needs on the pyramid of Maslow (1989). People have an urge to feel that they belong to an area and have reasons to feel as they have to ascribe an identity to the region.

2.2.2 Formation of regional identities

Now that the reason for people to feel the need to belong to a community and ascribe identities to a region is clear, it is important to understand what regional identities consist of. Regional identities come forth out of the need to belong to a certain group. However, there is a way of how these regional identities are created. A model, created by Paasi (1986), takes four elements which need to be present in order to establish regional identities. It includes the territorial shape, conceptual (symbolic) shape, institutional shape, and established role. Territorial shape is concerned with the need of clear territorial boundaries of a region. The area in which one lives can be perceived different for every person. Where one person looks at their town when ascribing an identity, other people may look at a bigger region to do this. Furthermore, symbols are important in the region such as language, landmarks or the name of the region to create the conceptual shape. Third, there needs to be clear institutions in the regions, which could be schools, clubs, the municipality, or informal institutions like friendships. When a reformation of municipalities takes place, the institutions can change through a reorganisation of clubs, school and municipalities. However, these institutions are all regional and are there, mostly, to provide regional awareness (Zimmerbauer, 2011). The last stage in the formation of regional identities is the establishment of the identity itself. This is where the inhabitants have ascribed regional identities to the region. When these aspects are present, the formation of regional identities is completed (Paasi, 1986). These four elements can be perceived different for every person. Therefore, there can be multiple regional identities in one area which is why not one regional identity can be assigned to a region.

There have been some critical notes to Paasi's model of the formation of regional identities. Raagmaa (2002) has explained that a region is always changing and that, after the institutionalization, regional identities have the ability to change. It is possible for a region to go through the cycle of formation again and have a different outcome. Therefore, the last phase, the establishment phase, is not always stable, as it is able to change.

2.3 Regional branding

2.3.1 An introduction to regional branding

Kavaratzis (2005) describes that place branding can be defined as the utilization of product branding based on places. According to Van Ham (2008), it is a strategy of promotion to increase the attractiveness of a place for the purpose of leisure, working, and living. Place branding is comprised of different elements to reach a brand. Berry (2000) describes how the process of place branding can lead to a strong brand. He defines, using a model, how a brand presented by a destination can lead to an increase in tourists, and how different aspects need to be taken into consideration, and how a brand can go through different stages. First, there is the presented brand by the destination. This is what the destination creates to attract more visitors. By presenting this brand, the destination creates brand awareness where more people become aware of the existence of the destination. Taking this a step further, in some cases a place brand can create brand meaning where the brand or the destination can become meaningful to a visitor. Second, there are the external brand communications which can be important to retrieve a strong brand (Berry, 2000). These communications are all communications about the brand which happen outside of the destination. Since these are external, the destination has limited influence on this. These communications can be seen as word-of-mouth advertisement outside the region and can be of importance for the destination. This could also lead to brand awareness and brand meaning. Third, there is the experience of the visitor during the stay (Berry, 2000). The experience gives the destination meaning which can result in a return of the visitor. This experience is produced in collaboration with the different stakeholders in the region.

The model of Berry (2000) suggests that all that is needed for a successful brand is an experience for the visitor to create meaning, strong external communication and a brand. However, there are many essential elements to create a strong brand, as Messely, Dessein and Rogge (2015) point out. These authors describe how place branding is more than only creating meaning and awareness of a destination, rather there is a representation of a geographical area involved. This requires selecting the right symbols and regional attributes which add value to a certain location which is where regional identities can be used to create a brand identity. A place brand is the link between the characteristics of a destination and the potential visitors (Messely & Dessein & Rogge, 2015). Hospers (2011) identifies three types of people who might be intrigued by branding campaigns. First, there are the inhabitants who look for a place to live and work. Second, firms who need a place to locate can be interested by a certain region. And finally, the tourist who looks for recreation and leisure. The latter is the most common target group for branding campaigns.

It has become a challenge for rural regions to promote their destination towards the outside world (Boyne & Hall, 2004). Often, visitors are drawn to the destination because of the activities that take place in the area (Butler, 1998). However, this is not always possible due to budget or human capital. Therefore, a

place which is in need of promoting a brand needs to provide activities to make tourists known with the destination. Sotarauta (2016) explains that even though activities are important, the activities should represent the local culture.

2.3.2 Brand identity

Since the brand is connected with regional identities in this study and aimed at attracting tourism, the type of branding used for a regional brand is brand identity. Campelo et al. (2013) write that the attributes which attract the local inhabitants to a place could be used for the attraction of tourists. These are closely related to the aspects which form the regional identities of the inhabitants. Also, history and landscape are important aspects for this. These are attributes which are part of the attraction to the area and can, therefore, be used as brand identity in a branding campaign. By taking a look at the attributes from the perspective of the inhabitants, it can help to create a brand. It will help to understand what are important features in the area and which stories need to be told to make the destination interesting.

Creation of a brand identity already starts when all stakeholders are being involved in the process of branding (Vallaster & von Wallpack, 2013) and can be seen as internally constructed. There is no agreed definition of brand identity, but there is an agreement among scholars that the brand identity is the core of the brand (Barnett & Jermier & Lafferty, 2006). A brand identity includes the symbolic, visual and physical representation of a region. Together with the brand identity and the brand meaning, which is created out of visitor experience and brand creation itself (Berry, 2000), a strong brand can be created which is able to attract tourists. Da Silveira et al. (2013) also explain that the collective and individual identities are what shape the brand identity. Therefore, the brand identity can differ when including different stakeholders in the process. Also, the section on regional identities said that regional identities have the ability to change. Therefore, including these identities in a brand identity can cause a continuous change for the brand identity as well. Through interaction between all stakeholders during the process of brand identity creation, all regional identities have the possibility to be included in the brand identity.

3. Methodology

3.1 Case study: Municipality of Oldambt

Baxter (2016) explains that a case study is an in-depth research of a certain phenomenon taking place. The specific case for this research, which is being explored is how regional identities can be included in a branding campaign for tourism focussing on the Graanrepubliek in Oldambt. Quantitative research methods are not sufficient to understand the complexity of decision-making and social structures (Clifford et al., 2010). Therefore, a qualitative approach has been chosen for conducting this research. This way, an in-depth understanding of the feelings and experience of the internal stakeholders about the projected regional identities can be explored. For the method of this research, semi-structured interviews are chosen. An introduction to the area of data collection and the method of data collection are described in this chapter.

3.1.1 Context

The use of regional identities in regional branding started when the region, which was called Oldambt, was reorganized from three smaller municipalities to one large one. The area is mostly characterised as an agricultural area, polder landscape with dykes, and as a Wadden Sea region. What attracts most visitors to the area are the monumental farmhouses and the open landscapes where wheat is a common crop. A completely new town, Blauwestad, has been created to foster recreation and liveability in the area. Some areas in the municipality also have forests and a couple of small settlements. In general, people from outside the region, think that the area is poor and has little opportunities. However, the area describes itself as an area which might be underestimated, but the people living in the area should not be (Gemeente Oldambt, 2012). For the area of this study, the name of the municipality came forth out of the name that was given to the region a long time ago. People already called the area Oldambt which is why people can identify with this name. A map of the municipality can be found below.



Figure 2: Map of Oldambt (source: maps.google.nl)

The brand identity that was chosen for the marketing of the area came from a book written by Frank Westerman as he had delved into the region to discover what makes this group of people different from other Dutch citizens. Subsequently, he gave the region a name which he thought would cover the population and the area. This name, as is being used for the promotion of the region currently, is called the Graanrepubliek. According to Frank Westerman (1999) this name should be easily identifiable for the residents and should cover the whole region. This specific name was chosen because of the long history with farmers and workers where the cultivation of grain was a very important aspect. However, the division of the farmers and workers is still present and can cause a difference in regional identities.

Oldambt makes for an interesting case study as the residents of the municipality currently might not feel connected to the word Graanrepubliek as the name of the campaign was chosen because of the book and has no further research in the actual regional identities of the municipality.

3.1.2 In-depth semi structured interviews

The municipality of Oldambt has a small population of a little bit over 39.000 in 2019 which shows decrease since 2012 (CBS, 2019). Nowadays, people from outside the region do not have a positive image of the region and underestimate it or see better opportunities elsewhere (Gemeente Oldambt, 2012) resulting in people moving away and less people moving in. Since the former area is now a municipality, the boundaries of this municipality were chosen to conduct the research in. Longhurst (2010) explains that the ideal situation to conduct an interview is a neutral environment where both the participant and the researcher feel comfortable. At the time of the interviews (April/May 2020), the situation in The Netherlands due to COVID-19 does not allow for face-to-face interviews. Therefore, it has been chosen to do Skype interviews where possible. Otherwise, the interviews were conducted through telephone.

For the interviews, it was important that the participants are residing in the municipality at the moment of the interview or that a stakeholder had a connection with the region. Semi-structured interviews can be understood as an interview which has some degree of order in the questioning, but still has a flexible way in addressing issues by the respondent (Hay, 2016). The stakeholders who are participating in this research will not receive information about the marketing of the region beforehand since it might be changing their opinion on the regional identity they ascribe to the region. Instead, these stakeholders will be interviewed on their own ascribed regional identities which will be connected with the marketing strategy in the analysis. The advantage of semi-structured interviews is that there is a possibility to go in-depth on a certain topic that the researcher wishes to know more about (Hay, 2016). However, Bryman (2012) also argues that semi structured interviews can address issues which would not have come up naturally or with an unstructured interview.

The interview has been designed based on the aim of the research. Dunn (2016) proposed two types of ways to make the researcher remind what the intended issues were to discuss. On the one hand, there is the interview guide which is a list with topics a researcher wishes to discuss during the interview. This makes the interview flexible, but is also difficult inexperienced researchers. On the other hand, there is the interview schedule which is a list of questions which need to be asked. These can have primary questions which are more general and secondary questions which are more specific (Dunn, 2016). For this research, interview questions instead of topics will be used.

3.1.3 Participant selection

Due to Covid-19, the situation in The Netherlands obstructed physical contact with other individuals. This meant that all contact with potential participant was through telephone or email. Initially, the participants would have been contacted through email and no changes were needed. Furthermore, participants understood that the interview had to go via Skype or telephone. In later interviews when the measures had decreased it was possible to meet in person while keeping the necessary restrictions in mind.

All inhabitants, tourism industry, government, and special interest groups of the municipality of Oldambt are included in this study. The first step in participant selection among these stakeholders finding potential respondents to reach out to. The municipality exists of multiple small towns and one bigger town. For the local community this means that the aim was to have the participants geographically dispersed. This means that the participants needed to be coming from different towns. In order to reach the inhabitants, there is a step in between that needed to be taken. Every town has a town interest group, which is a group of people that is familiar with the inhabitants and knows about the varying identities in the region as well. Therefore, these groups were contacted in every village. It was possible to schedule an interview with these people as well. When looking at the tourism industry, different small businesses were contacted. During the selection of these businesses, the geographical location was kept in mind, in order to cover the possible difference in opinion between locations. Different businesses were contacted through email or phone. For the government, people from different parties within the local government were asked. This will also be done through email. Difference in governmental function was able to shed a light on how identities should be included in the regional branding. Lastly, there are the special interest groups. Because the region is characterised with landscape and history, the groups which focus on this were contacted. These include cultural heritage groups, state forestry, and the nature education group (IVN). These were able to look at other aspects of what regional identities should be chosen to promote to the outside.

During April and May, 18 interviews were conducted with the four stakeholder groups mentioned above. All respondents were approached via e-mail. When no response was given after one week, a phone call was made to ask potential participants to cooperate. This resulted on almost all potential candidates to

respond. In general, people were very happy to talk about their region and thought it was positive that someone paid attention to their region. Due to the situation in the Netherlands with COVID-19, all interviews were telephone or Skype interviews. Table 1 gives more information on the participants. Please note that there was no focus on gender in this research, but there were many male respondents who replied on the request for an interview.

Stakeholder group	Village/organisation/function	Gender
Local community	Nieuw Scheemda	Female
	Scheemda	Male
	Midwolda	Male
	Heiligerlee	Male
	Westerlee	Male
	Finsterwolde	Male
	Beerta	Female
	Bad Nieuweschans	Male
Special interest groups	Stichting Landschap Oldambt	Male
	IVN Oldambt	Male
	Staatsbosbeheer	Female
Government	Stichting Marketing Oldambt	Male
	Policy Officer Municipality	Male
	Alderman Municipality	Male
Tourism Industry	Entrepreneur Nieuwolda	Male
	Entrepreneur Scheemda	Male
	Entrepreneur Blauwestad	Male
	Secretary Museum Winschoten	Male

Table 1: Participant characteristics

3.1.4 Interview guide

The interview questions for the semi structured interviews are included in Appendix A. Interview schedules were used while conducting interviews. These interview schedules are a list of questions which consist of primary and secondary questions (Dunn, 2016). The schedule is structured with a hybrid structure and contains two themes that should be discussed at the end of the interview which are in the same set up as the sub questions formulated for this research. This means that the easy-to-answer questions are at the beginning and the questions become more personal or difficult as the interview goes along. For this research, the questions start with information about the background of the participant and will progress to more personal questions about the feelings towards the area. However, since the interview is semi structured, the exact structure of the schedule might not be followed since later

questions might come up earlier in the conversation (Dunn, 2016). This can result in being able to ask more in-depth questions about the topics that are being addressed.

The design of the content of the interview guide is based on the conceptual model and the theory derived in regards to this model. The conceptual model contains three big categories: regional identities, stakeholders and regional brand. Hence, the interview guide was built upon these three categories. Within these groups, the questions for the interviews were based on what the literature had communicated. For example, asking about regional identities to find out what is important to include in a campaign is based on Paasi (1986) who discusses the four elements. Based on what the four elements entail, the questions were designed to ask about this.

3.2 Data analysis

The semi structured interviews generated interview data. All the interviews were audio recorded using a smartphone. These audio recordings were used to write out the transcripts of the interview in order to analyse them. During the interviews, no notes were made since it increases the chance of being distracted from the conversation (Dunn, 2016). The findings of the interviews will be presented in the next chapter including quotes from the participants.

3.2.1 Analysis of interview data

Transcribing an interview can take up a lot of time. Therefore, transcribing the interview data was already start after the first interviews were conducted. A transcript is a written-out version of the conversation in the interview that includes the conversation as well as other relevant information which might be important for the interpretation of the data (Dunn, 2016). The transcript will be an exact written-out version of the conversation including pauses, capturing the in-depth part of the research (Dunn, 2016). Transcribing the interviews was difficult sometimes since all interviews were through telephone and the connection was not always optimal. In some cases, a full transcription was not given, as certain interviews went off topic, which are therefore not included. However, the rest of the interviews were completely written out due to the quotes that were useful for the analysis and explaining. Also, because it was clearer to understand why a participant gave a certain answer and to make a better analysis. After transcribing, the transcripts needed to be coded. Cope (2010) describes coding as a process of generating themes and meanings for the researcher to be able to make representations which make the data more valid and able to make the connection to the literature. With coding, labels will be attached to parts of the text. However, it is more than that, it also means connecting these labels to the literature.

The analysis of the collected data was structured based on the conceptual model. Since this was connected to the literature and the literature was connected to the codes attached to the transcripts, it

was straightforward to make a connection between the codes and the questions. Therefore, a clear link between the analysis of the interviews and the literature was found.

3.3 Ethics

3.3.1 Ethical considerations

It is important that the researcher behaves in an ethical manner throughout the research process (Hay, 2010). This means that the researcher has to take responsibility for their actions. Also, it should not be underestimated how much trust the participants as well as the readers of the study can have in the research. If this is not taken into account, it could decrease the consent to participate in another research. Dowling (2016) has explained three considerations which a researcher can consider for ethical behaviour. First, there is the informed consent. The aim of the study and the expectations of the researcher should be known by the participant. In this study, an informed consent form was distributed before the interviews amongst the participants. This informed consent included the aim of the research and the rights for the participant during the research. This was signed or agreed to on record by the participants to receive permission to use the collected interview data for the research. This form is included in Appendix B. Next to the informed consent, the participants received an information letter a few days before the interview with information about the study and what the interview will be about. This letter can be found in Appendix C.

Second, there is the consideration of confidentiality. The privacy of all participants needs to be protected, except when the participant chooses differently. For this study, the information letter will explain that the data is used anonymously and by signing the consent form, they agree with this. In the case of an organisation or institution, the information letter will explain that the name of the organisation will be used. The participants who do not speak for an organisation are not given pseudonyms, but are called respondent, inhabitant or entrepreneur.

Third, there is the consideration of protection. This means protecting the research and the participant from any psychological and physical harm. There are unpredictable factors for the researcher when entering the physical environment of the participant. This is also the case for the participant when entering an interview which they might not be familiar with. Because the research topic is about regional identities and how this is being projected in combination with the history of differences between groups in this area, it was taken into account that the topic can bring feelings of anger or sadness. Therefore, the participants were not pressured to answer questions if they choose not to.

3.3.2 Positionality

Characteristics of the researcher and the personal background can have an influence on the research process. This can be through the interpretation of the findings that can be subjective (Longhurst, 2016).

The characteristics of the municipality of Oldambt are similar to the characteristics of the municipality that I grew up in. Therefore, the situation in the area is something I can relate to. Also, the division between farmers and workers is a topic which I can closely relate to. Therefore, critical reflexivity was needed to stay objective. Because of my background, this is necessary to prevent misleading conclusions or have my own experience caught up in the research.

According to Dowling (2016), a person is never an outsider or insider since everyone has different characteristics one can relate to. For this research, I am an insider and an outsider. An insider because I already have some familiarity with the different groups in the area and the characteristics of the region. And an outsider because the area that this research is a different municipality than I grew up in. Therefore, I am an insider and outsider which makes it easier to look at the case objectively.

4. Analysis

This chapter will contain the results of the data collection and the analysis based on the literature of regional identities and regional branding. Firstly, the importance of including regional identities in regional branding campaigns for tourism will be discussed. Secondly, the different elements that came forward concerning the regional identities which should be included in the campaign will be explained. Thirdly, the different stakeholders involved in the process of including regional identities in regional branding campaigns are given. Finally, the view of the participants will be given on the current regional branding campaign of Oldambt.

4.1 Importance of including regional identities

In order to understand why it is important to include regional identities in a regional branding campaign, different views on the importance of this were expressed. This resulted in two main opinions from the stakeholders. These opinions will be discussed in detail below.

4.1.1 Creating a support base

Many stakeholders have expressed that the inhabitants and the tourism sector are the most important stakeholders when it comes to being in direct contact with the visitor. The inhabitant or the tourism entrepreneur are there to welcome the visitors and tell them about the area, the history and cultural landscape. This is also what Berry (2000) explained in this model about regional branding where the experience of the visitor is what gives the area meaning and this experience is produced by the stakeholders.

'For the experience of the tourist we are to a great extent dependent on the entrepreneurs. This is where they stay the night, they go to another entrepreneur for an attraction, experience the area.' – (Policy Officer Tourism Local Government)

'Sometimes I tell them something about the dikes, the polders and the Dollard. Those are nice stories.' – (Tourism Entrepreneur Nieuwolda)

These quotes express that both the governmental body of the area and the entrepreneur themselves agree on the entrepreneur being the binding factor of the tourist and the area. The government explains that it is the entrepreneur who makes the experience and the entrepreneur says that he is actually telling stories about the region so the visitors are able to get to know the area. However, for the experience of the visitors, the inhabitants and other stakeholders are also needed. This is what one of the entrepreneurs explains:

'When you come here from the West en you cross a farmer from Beerta, And he says, I don't identify with it [Graanrepubliek]. That has a negative effect.' – (Tourism Entrepreneur Winschoten)

He explains the message projected towards the visitors should be carried collectively and that stakeholders are able to tell their own story about this subject. It also indicates that they find it important that the story of the people is similar to the story that is being propagated. Also, stakeholders in the region are mostly proud of their area and would like to express this to the tourist. Therefore, when there is a support base for the branding campaign, stakeholders can tell their own stories related to the theme of the campaign. This is related to what Campelo et al. (2013) write about attracting visitors with the same elements that internal stakeholders also find important. A respondent of State Forestry describes how she feels about this:

'A campaign must be carried by inhabitants or a delegation thereof. You have to take care of that because you have to do it together.' – (State Forestry)

This quote suggests that creating a support base is not only an option, but something that should always be present. This idea of creating a support base is something which was a common thought among the respondents. They explained that visitors should be able to address someone on the street and this person should be able to support the image and explain it towards the visitor. However, there are also arguments why regional identities should not be included in a regional branding campaign for tourism.

4.1.2 Attracting visitors

As many stakeholders have expressed a need for a support base for the brand of the area, there are also stakeholders who find that branding a region is about the visitor instead of the stakeholders. That is, tourism is created for tourists and is not about internal stakeholders. One special interest organisation explained the reason behind this:

'Tourists are not being drawn to the area with what inhabitants find important, but what the visitors hope and think to find here.' – (Stichting Landschap Oldambt)

This quote explains that it is important that the main focus of regional branding is the visitor and that this should be the prior focus of creating a regional brand. However, these stakeholders also agree that, most of the time, elements in the region are of similar interest to both the inhabitants and the visitor. Therefore, there is rarely a conflict about this. Messely, Dessen and Rogge (2015) explain that the characteristics of the area and the visitors that come to the destination are what creates a place brand. Therefore, these authors also stress the importance of finding this link.

'So, we will work with professionals about what could be two or three themes, maximum, which we should be using for the area for a national campaign.' – (Aldermen Municipality Oldambt)

This respondent expresses that the inhabitants are not primarily considered when designing a brand. However, some entrepreneurs have been asked about what they find right to include in a regional brand,

which means that there are some stakeholders included in the process of creating a regional brand. When asking about including what the inhabitants find important, this was one of the responses:

'Primary, of course, we do what is good to draw tourists. Through drawing tourists, you want to support the regional economy.' – (Policy Officer Oldambt)

From this quote, it becomes clear that the underlying reason for promoting what the tourists want is because it can strengthen the regional economy. The reason for a focus on tourists is that this can benefit the whole area for the long term.

Notable in this research, is that the characteristics of the area that are used to draw the visitor to the area, are characteristics that are mentioned by almost all respondents as how they see their area. These are *variation, large farms, open, large scale, emptiness, spacious, polder landscape, honest, flat, vastness.*

'What you see is what you get.' – (Tourism Entrepreneur Winschoten)

These characteristics can also be found when telling the story of the Graanrepubliek. Many respondents, when thinking about the Graanrepubliek, also mention many of the same characteristics as when thinking about the area. This suggests that the story of the Graanrepubliek touches upon aspects that stakeholders find important in the region. Respondents also explain that everything in the area is connected with each other through one story about the history of the region.

In conclusion, there are two sides as to why regional identities should be included in regional branding. On the one hand, it creates a support base with one story to tell. On the other hand, a regional brand needs to attract tourists and not satisfy the inhabitants. However, the case of the Graanrepubliek shows that some elements of the inhabitants are already in line with what is being projected to the outside. The next paragraph will discuss the elements of regional identities more in detail.

4.2 Elements of regional identities

As this research wants to indicate how regional identities can be used in regional branding for tourism, it is important to understand which elements of the regional identities should be included in the branding campaign. Therefore, the second question of this research will focus on this aspect. This paragraph will discuss the three aspects of Paasi (1986) which can create regional identities: boundaries, symbols, and social relations. It will be reviewed which elements in these three aspects stakeholders find most important to include.

4.2.1 Boundaries

The name of the municipality, Oldambt, has already been the name of the region for a long time. Before, the region of Oldambt did not have clear boundaries. However, this has changed with the municipal

boundaries. Therefore, the stakeholders were asked how they feel about the overlap between the border of the municipality and how they see the area of Oldambt.

'Also a part of Germany belongs to it [...] The boundaries of the municipality do not cover the whole area. Bellingwolde also belongs to it [Oldambt].' – (Inhabitant of Finsterwolde)

'I think the municipal boundaries are fine. [...] The German border is a clear demarcation.' – (Inhabitant of Heiligerlee)

As these quotes point out, there is still a difference as to what is perceived as Oldambt despite the borders of the municipality. Paasi (1986) also stated that the area one lives in, is perceived different by every person, which is also the case in Oldambt where some people think the area is bigger than what the municipal borders are. For example, one of the respondents also referred to the Eastern part of Groningen when talking about the region, while Oldambt only forms a small part of this area. However, most respondents within the local community experience the municipal borders as a clear indication of what Oldambt is. On the contrary, special interest groups have a different view at the region:

'You also look over the borders, so you are not specifically limited [to borders].' – (Institute for Nature Education and Sustainability)

The respondents of the special interest groups also experience different borders than only the border of the municipality of Oldambt. Their work goes beyond the municipal borders. However, they do refer to Oldambt as an area with the borders of the municipality which suggests that they recognise the municipal borders as the borders for the region.

Primarily, the municipality of Oldambt is promoting the area that lies within their municipal borders. They do this by being their own brand through the Graanrepubliek and promote this by a regional branding campaign. However, they are also part of a bigger branding campaign through Marketing Groningen, the marketing organisation for the province of Groningen. With this, they also identify themselves as being part of the province of Groningen. Additionally, Oldambt is part of the Wadden Sea area, where they work together with Visit Wadden to be part of the Wadden Sea campaign. Therefore, the municipality stays within the municipal boundaries, but also reaches outside of those boundaries within the Netherlands.

All in all, many respondents have indicated their boundaries of how they perceive the area of Oldambt. In the case of the regional branding campaign of Oldambt, the region has been given clear municipal boundaries of what is considered Oldambt. Therefore, the focus is on the municipality and those are the boundaries that is being promoted.

4.2.2 Symbols

The first aspect of symbols that is being looked at in this research are places or characteristics that stakeholders perceive as landmarks. In the paragraph before, about the importance of regional identities, some characteristics of what stakeholders perceive as landmarks of the area are already mentioned..

'Nature, space, and peace. At least for me. I love nature, that plays a role.' – (Inhabitant of Beerta)

'It (Elsevier) said that the area is characterised by peace and space. I think that Oldambt is characterised by peace, space, and the vastness. If you drive out of a village and you enter the polders, you think you are standing at the end of the world. I think that is very recognisable for Oldambt, the vastness.' – (Alderman Municipality of Oldambt)

These quotes suggest that some respondents think about landmarks as characteristics of nature indicating that Oldambt can be recognised by physical characteristics. Additionally, respondents have named places as landmarks for the area:

'Winschoten and Oldambtmeer with the beach and the small harbours. People know Oldambt for that.' – (Inhabitant of Midwolda)

'In the area of Scheemda, you have museums. Battle of Heiligerlee, also the statue. That is a landmark. In Scheemda itself, there is the old tower. Further, the old cities such as Winschoten.' – (Tourism Entrepreneur Scheemda)

This quote indicates that places, such as towns, and places of history that can be visited are also important when looking at landmarks and that these are aspects people recognize as being part of Oldambt. As a result, there are many different landmarks in the area and many respondents have an overlap in what they see as important landmarks.

Another symbol that the respondents were asked about is the dialect that they speak in Oldambt: Gronings. When the respondents were asked about the importance of the dialect in the area, different answers came across.

'For me it is awesome. I speak it on a daily basis. I think that it is an important element. That is just the feeling of this region.' – (Inhabitant of Bad Nieuweschans)

'It is something I had to get used to, but I understand it. In the beginning, I always had to get used to it, that never happens immediately. It goes fine and I also think it has its charm that it still remains.' – (Tourism Entrepreneur Blauwestad)

Most of the respondents gave a similar answer to what the first quote touches upon. The language they have is very important to the inhabitants. The second quote is from someone who moved to the region

from the western part of the country. The quotes suggest that the dialect is an important element in the area and is an element that every stakeholder has come across when working or living in the area.

The last symbol that many respondents have mentioned and was also a part of the interview, is the agriculture in the area. Many of the landmarks and characteristics of the area are a result of the history of agriculture.

'Traditionally, Oldambt was the Graanrepubliek. You still see that today, but it has been organised differently now. But it does determine the image of Oldambt.' – (Inhabitant of Heiligerlee)

'That [agriculture] is of course key to the area. Agriculture has, of course, also created landscapes that would otherwise not exist.' – (Tourism Entrepreneur Nieuwolda)

These two quotes suggest that agriculture is an important element in the region and has shaped the region as it is today. As a result, agriculture is the driver of many elements and characteristics that can be found within the region. Notable when asking about agriculture was that, despite the importance in the past, many respondents disagree with the way agriculture is being practised today as it has transformed the landscape to extensive fields and big machinery. However, many respondents also agree that agriculture is important to include in a branding campaign as it is what shaped the region. The parts that the respondents thought would be most important to promote are the *farms, farmers and workers, dikes, rapeseed, and wheat*. To them, it is important that people from outside the region know it because of agriculture. If people do know Oldambt about agriculture, they are also not aware of its history.

4.2.3 Social relations

The third aspect of creating regional identities are institutions, or social relations. The respondents were asked about their relations with the area and with people in the area. Raagmaa (2002) describes a geographical connection as a form of belonging. The stakeholders feel connected to the area due to different reasons. Many inhabitants have a feeling of connection to the area because they have lived there for a long time or it feels like home. Other stakeholders might have a connection to the area because of their work.

'This is my place, my roots. And again, I would be able to live everywhere, but don't quite get that feeling [being an Oldambster] out of it.' – (Inhabitant of Nieuw Scheemda)

'I am fortunate to have been in the travel industry in a previous life before becoming an alderman. I have seen pretty much the whole world. But I always love to come back to Oldambt. It really is my home.' – (Alderman Municipality Oldambt)

According to Breakwell (1986), being able to feel a sense of belonging to a region is the first step into ascribing a regional identity to a region. The respondents feel something with Oldambt that they are not able to discover somewhere else, and can differentiate from other regions and groups of people. For

example, people living in Oldambt are able to differentiate from people living in the rest of the province. Instead of being a Groninger, they are Oldambster. However, some respondents also mentioned to feel more connected with the village they live in than Oldambt as a region. Likewise, there are respondents who mentioned they are connected to the area, but do not feel Oldambster. Even though many respondents feel connected to the area, the intensity differs among respondents.

Paasi (1986) describes that it is also important to form institutions in order to be able to ascribe a regional identity to a region. Therefore, respondents were asked if they feel connectedness among residents or other stakeholders in the area. A striking aspect in this research is that most respondents who live in the area belong to some sort of organisation and created social relations from that.

'There is great solidarity in the village. Together we have fun events and a lot can be arranged.' – (Inhabitant of Heiligerlee)

'With Dickens Day the cohesion is so beautiful and everyone works together with everyone. People roll up their sleeves.' – (Inhabitant of Beerta)

Events and activities are often mentioned by the respondents as reasons for social cohesion and solidarity. Zimmerbauer (2011) states that regional institutions are important to create regional awareness. The activities organised by the villages makes them realise how important such events are to create social cohesion which is also makes them proud of their living environment.

However, social relations are intangible and are less easy to include into a regional branding campaign. The activities and events coming out of this solidarity from working together can be promoted. A respondent mentioned the amount of events to be enough, but it could be promoted more. Therefore, this could be a way to show social cohesion in the area.

'Last year we had Krasnapolsky. Thousands of people came there. [...] They organized it, bands came to perform in the evenings. During the day people could go to tourist attractions by bus or boat. That was a great initiative.' – (Tourism entrepreneur Scheemda)

4.3 Stakeholders in the process

Waligo et al. (2013) has mentioned six groups of stakeholders important for the development of tourism in a region. From these six groups, four groups have been identified for this research. This paragraph will discuss which organisations, individuals, and institutions are important to take into consideration during the creation of the brand identity of Oldambt.

Carrying out the regional branding campaign is done by the municipality of Oldambt. This governmental body has, together with Stichting (foundation) Marketing Oldambt, created a campaign to attract more tourists to the area, Graanrepubliek.

'We commissioned [Stichting] Marketing Oldambt to create a project plan for this and to develop products, theme routes and arrangements together with entrepreneurs.' – (Policy Officer Oldambt)

The elaboration of the campaign is in hands of the foundation. They will decide on the eventual plan and have the space to decide on ideas. These ideas are generated from a platform called Tourism Café Entrepreneurs where they keep tourism entrepreneurs up to date and to inform businesses on where to meet one another. According to Dodds (2007), it is important to have contact with these stakeholders because a tourism campaign or planning can have a direct effect on them. In this setting, the entrepreneurs have the opportunity to share ideas and the marketing organisation is aware of the needs and wants of the businesses. This indicates that the tourism sector is being taken along the process of deciding on a regional branding campaign together with the government. Yet, only one respondent in the tourism sector has mentioned to be part of this group that is being included in the tourism café. This means that there are still some entrepreneurs who did not collaborate on this.

A stakeholder group that is less involved, but can have an indirect impact on or could benefit from a regional branding campaign are special interest groups. The respondents in this group have indicated that they do not have a direct link with tourism in the area.

'In an indirect way [we work with tourism]. The courses we have given are for entrepreneurs to inform about their own environment. So, we gave courses. We are actively involved. We are also in contact with Stichting Marketing Oldambt. So, we are dealing with it and we also have an opinion on Oldambt and how you could make it more attractive.' – (Institute for Nature Education)

'The Stichting Landschap Oldambt cannot contribute much with its limited resources. We try to make a contribution there with an experience app "Living landscape" and with walking and cycling routes. Good hospitality is something that you can only achieve together with others. We, as Stichting Landschap Oldambt, are actively working on this and are trying to arrive at a good marketing plan together with the municipality and other stakeholders.' – (Stichting Landschap Oldambt)

'[Giving the experience is] especially through the hiking trails and their management. Also cooperating to promote it. Mowing the hiking trails is also a way to encourage people to enter the area.' – (State Forestry)

The special interest groups are not directly involved into the creation of the regional branding campaign. However, these stakeholders have a contribution in the tourism sector about the experience of the visitor in the area. The respondents try to have an impactful contribution to the region by doing their part. Vasudevan (2008) stated that stakeholders are important when providing an experience in an area. The respondents all have their own contribution, either by engaging in the background, or by actively trying to work with the government to try and achieve their goals.

The last group that is of importance when promoting regional identities in a regional branding campaign is the local community. These stakeholders have as much value in creating a brand identity as other stakeholders since their emotional value with the brand is important (Pike, 2005). However, some respondents have mentioned that they are not aware of the current branding campaign. This suggests that they have not been included in the creation of it.

4.4 Graanrepubliek as united regional identity

The Graanrepubliek has been used as name to attract more visitors to the municipality of Oldambt. This name has been ascribed to the region, and explains how the people of Oldambt see the region, while also explaining the history. As mentioned in paragraph 4.3, mostly the government and tourism entrepreneurs have been in contact about the brand identity. Therefore, in this research, all respondents were asked what they think about the name and whether this would be a good name to attract more tourists, in their opinion.

Firstly, the respondents were asked to mention what comes to mind when hearing the Graanrepubliek. The respondents mostly mentioned *Frank Westerman, grain fields, farmers, ploughed fields, communism, wide fields, Oldambster farms, rebellion*. These key words are generally and most often about the Graanrepubliek in Oldambt. However, some respondents also mentioned some elements closer to home, or on a smaller scale.

'Locomotive depot [in Bad Nieuweschans]. This is also called the Graanrepubliek. That was created by the book. Now that the depot is developing, this has been chosen as the title.' – (Inhabitant of Bad Nieuweschans)

'Test farm in Nieuw Beerta. Growing old crops, local producers.' – (Inhabitant of Nieuw Beerta)

The Graanrepubliek comes a little closer to home for some respondents. This suggests that these inhabitants ascribe a different regional identity than other respondents (Paasi, 1986). Nonetheless, all stakeholders mentioned keywords or explanations which are directly or indirectly related to the agricultural history of the area. For example, the locomotive depot was used to store locomotives and grain.

Secondly, the respondents were asked if they thought whether the name Graanrepubliek is still relevant to attract tourists to the region, which is important to know in order to create a support base by the stakeholders (Waligo et al., 2013).

'The Graanrepubliek has a certain kind of feeling. I think it intrigues people. I think the Graanrepubliek covers everything. It's just such a strong historical area.' – (Tourism Entrepreneur Nieuwolda)

'You should not deny your origin. You can think of anything, but the origin is surely the farmland. Despite all the annoying things that were there (farmers and workers). The Graanrepubliek, if you see

that, and what it is like now, without thinking about the negative sides, it's fine. You should not push away where you are from.' – (Inhabitant of Midwolda)

These quotes indicate that the Graanrepubliek is a name which fits the area and explains the story as it is. As the keywords mentioned before suggest, all respondents can say something about the Graanrepubliek and have some sort of relation with it, negative or positive. Consequently, some of these respondents agree with Graanrepubliek as brand identity for the municipality of Oldambt. However, the stakeholders also mentioned a different side to the use of Graanrepubliek.

'It [Graanrepubliek] is certainly a part, but it is also hard to imagine what else it is, but it is definitely not just Graanrepubliek. For example, I would much more like the dikes and the polder... More of expansiveness, where you can still enjoy nature and birds. I would sit much more on nature and vastness and tranquillity. But that may also be possible under the Graanrepubliek, but I would not stop there alone. I would make something more of it.' – (Inhabitant of Nieuw Scheemda)

This inhabitant suggests that the Graanrepubliek is not enough to include everything that the area has to offer. However, the quote also indicates some uncertainty about what would fit under Graanrepubliek. It seems as if the Graanrepubliek in itself says too less, but when thought about it, many things can be included within the name. That is also what a tourism entrepreneur says:

'Not that that [Graanrepubliek] is the central theme, but it is an interaction between side issues. I try to paint a picture. If Winschoten was not the trading place that it was, then the farmer would not have been able to develop as... The internet was not there, bol.com was not there. So, I mean, you have to get closer to home. It is that interaction, the one makes the other grow, and so back and forth.' – (Tourism Entrepreneur Winschoten)

This respondent indicates that Winschoten would not have been there as a trading city if the grain would not have existed in the area and the other way around. With this, the entrepreneur tries to explain that almost everything that is in Oldambt at the moment is related to the history of grain. Therefore, the Graanrepubliek would be fitting to the history of the area. However, some respondents have expressed some concern about the name Graanrepubliek as still be a fitting name for Oldambt today.

'It [Graanrepubliek] refers to the small-scale agriculture of the past that we no longer have. As soon as you dive into what it means, you only look back in history. I'm afraid it no longer applies.' – (Institute for Nature Education)

'I think it is a bit old-fashioned. I am thinking, for example, of energy transition. I would update it to a more modern definition. I think the Graanrepubliek falls short on all the initiatives that are happening now.' – (Inhabitant of Nieuw Scheemda)

Some stakeholders indicate that the Graanrepubliek is something of the past and that, even though it is still visible in the landscape, there are also new initiatives in the area that should also get some attention. For example, there are big events happening in a straw board factory in Scheemda. However, the Graanrepubliek relates to the factory in the past and current activities might be neglected. According to Sotarauta (2016), these activities are of great importance to promote a region.

Notable while exploring the Graanrepubliek and how stakeholders look at their region is that the characteristics of what they describe as Oldambt are the characteristics that created the Graanrepubliek. Even though the name Graanrepubliek is an issue of discussion with some stakeholders, the story of their history and of how they look at their region is comparable.

5. Conclusions and recommendations

The last chapter of this master thesis will discuss the conclusion including the answers to the research questions. Moreover, recommendations for further research will be given.

The importance of including regional identities in a regional branding campaign has shown to create a support base among the stakeholders that are directly and indirectly involved in tourism in the area. The respondents think that including regional identities in a regional branding campaign can help to involve more individuals in carrying out the brand identity. This corresponds with research that creating a support base is an important element in a regional branding campaign (Berry, 2000; Murphy, 1988; Dodds, 2007). However, satisfying the stakeholders is not always the approach to attract visitors to the area. According to some respondents, when creating a branding campaign, the first focus should be on the visitor. It should be about how the visitor wants to see and experience the area, which can deviate from how stakeholders see their own area. Creating the campaign is, however, done with all stakeholders in mind to create a support system for the regional economy. Therefore, to create this support system, elements of how stakeholders see the area can be used to attract visitors to the area.

For this reason, it is essential to know which regional identities can be used to attract visitors to the area of Oldambt. The first element to look at, was the boundaries of the area. Among the respondents, their personal boundaries of what they define Oldambt varied, but respondents also find that the municipal boundaries roughly cover the area of Oldambt. For the campaign, the area has been given a clear boundary, when the new municipality of Oldambt was created. Hence, a clear territory for visitors and internal stakeholders is marked. The symbols in the area are another important aspect within regional identities which could be important to include in a campaign. Here, the respondents had the same idea of what characterises the area. Agriculture as overarching concept was used as characteristic for the area. By agriculture, the respondents refer to the typical landscape of the area, as well as the history of the region. Social relations and belonging to the area is more difficult to include in a branding campaign. However, respondents indicated that events are an ideal way to show the social cohesion in the area and to display characteristics and the uniqueness of the area.

During this research, there were four groups taken into account. Firstly, the government designed the campaign which they asked Stichting Marketing Oldambt to do. In the development of the campaign, they have taken tourism entrepreneurs into account by considering and discussing with them what the campaign should entail. One of the groups that is indirectly involved within this campaign, are the special interest groups. Some of these respondents consult or advise the government on the campaign. Other respondents work in the background to ensure that the visitors have a good experience. The last group is the local community. Some respondents mentioned not to be aware of the current campaign indicating that they are not involved in the creation of this. Other respondents mentioned to be aware of the campaign, but only when it was ready to be promoted. Therefore, by designing the branding

campaign some stakeholders have been taken into account while other stakeholders were not included. This is an important aspect in creating a support base for the campaign and let the stakeholders be part of the promotion as well. If the focus of the municipalities is on the visitor instead of creating a support base among all stakeholders, the lack of involvement of the stakeholders is a consequence of this focus.

The last part of this research was a focus on the regional branding campaign of Oldambt, the Graanrepubliek. Among the respondents, they all had the same understanding of what the Graanrepubliek represents. Notable is that some respondents relate the Graanrepubliek to an area smaller than Oldambt. For example, to their own town. This is related to the territory that people ascribe a regional identity to (Paasi, 1986). Most respondents find the Graanrepubliek applicable to the area, however few think that it still applies today. Some respondents also mention that the Oldambt that was described in the book the Graanrepubliek was a different Oldambt than what the region stands for now. Therefore, the focus could shift to new initiatives or attach more events to the campaign of the Graanrepubliek. In the end, all respondents agree on the elements that the Graanrepubliek represent, but the name still needs some getting used to with some respondents.

The main research question of this research was: *“How can regional identities ascribed to a region be included in regional branding campaigns for tourism: the case of the Graanrepubliek in Oldambt?”* This can be done by including all stakeholders into the process of creating the campaign in order to build of the support base among stakeholders. By doing this, the regional identities ascribed to the region are being represented and the most important elements can be selected. In the case of the Graanrepubliek in Oldambt, not all stakeholders were included in the process of branding. As a consequence, some stakeholders have suggested other elements to be included in the branding campaign, such as events. Also, the name was questioned, but no alternative could be thought of. All in all, the Graanrepubliek does represent a story of the area on which all respondents have a similar view.

5.1 Recommendations for further research

This research has looked into how regional identities can be included and has slightly touched upon the input of different stakeholders. Some respondents have expressed their ideas about supporting the Graanrepubliek as a tourism campaign which is only a small number of stakeholders. Therefore, further research could be done with quantitative research on the total local support of this brand. This research could be complemented by doing research on whether tourists are attracted to visit the region, by the regional identities presented in the area. With promoting the brand identity, inhabitants can play an important role in word-of-mouth communication of their region and its brand. It is suggested to do further research on this role for the inhabitants and possibly other stakeholders in the area.

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Appendices

Appendix A – Interview guide

Local community

- 1) Can you tell me something about yourself?
 - a. How long do you live here?
 - b. Why do you live here?**
- 2) How would you describe the region Oldambt to a visitor?
 - a. Physical characteristics
 - b. The people
 - c. Why these aspects?
- 3) Do you feel connected with the area?
 - a. Do you feel like an “Oldambster”
- 4) Could you point out where for you the boundaries lie of Oldambt?
 - a. Why there?
 - b. Are the boundaries of the municipality similar to this?
- 5) What are important landmarks in the region?
 - a. Why these?
- 6) Could you explain to me what the dialect means to you?
- 7) Do you think agriculture is important in the region?
 - a. Why? Why not?
- 8) Could you explain how important social cohesion is in the area?
 - a. Why or why not?
- 9) Do you think that all of what you just mentioned should be part of a campaign to attract tourists?
 - a. Why or why not?
 - b. Which parts are more important to tell tourists?
- 10) What do you think is important to tell people about Oldambt that want to visit this area?
 - a. Physical aspects
 - b. Symbolic aspects (language)
 - c. Heritage aspects/History
- 11) Are you in contact with tourists visiting the area?
 - a. If yes, how do you make them feel welcome?
 - b. How do you let them experience the area?
- 12) What is a must-do/see when visiting the area?
 - a. Why this?
 - b. Is this something which is typical for the area?
- 13) What do you think about when hearing the Graanrepubliek?
- 14) Do you think this is a good name to attract visitors to the area?
 - a. Why or why not?

Special Interest Groups

- 1) Can you tell me something about your organisation?
 - a. How long have you been working in the area?
 - b. Do you live here? For how long? Why?

- 2) How would you describe the region Oldambt to a visitor?
 - a. Physical characteristics
 - b. The people
- 3) Do you feel connected with the area you work in?
 - a. How does that come?
- 4) What are the boundaries of the area that you work in?
 - a. Are these similar to the boundaries of the municipality?
- 5) What are important landmarks in the region for your organisation?
 - a. Why these?
 - b. Also for tourism purposes?
- 6) How important is agriculture in the area?
 - a. Why? Why not?
 - b. For the tourism sector?
- 7) What do you think should be mentioned in a campaign to attract tourists?
 - a. Do you think that all of what you just mentioned should be part of this campaign?
 - i. Why or why not?
 - b. Which parts are more important to tell tourists?
- 8) What is the most mentioned reason for tourists to visit Oldambt?
- 9) What do you say to visitor when you tell them about the region?
 - a. Physical aspects
 - b. Symbolic aspects (language)
 - c. History
- 10) Is your organisation affected by tourists visiting the area?
- 11) How do you let visitors feel welcome in the area?
 - a. How do you let them experience the area?
- 12) What is a must-do/see when visiting the area?
 - a. Why this?
 - b. Is this something which is typical for the area?
- 13) What do you think about when hearing the word Graanrepubliek?
- 14) Do you think this is a good name to attract visitors to the area?
 - a. Why or why not?
- 15) Do you think that a branding campaign should include elements that inhabitants find important in the area?
 - a. Does the Graanrepubliek cover this?
 - b. Should it be a different name?

Government

- 1) Can you tell me something about your function?
 - a. How long have you been working for Oldambt?
- 2) How would you describe the region Oldambt to a visitor?
 - a. Physical characteristics
 - b. The people
- 3) Do you feel connected with the area?
 - a. How does that come?
- 4) Are the boundaries of the municipality similar to the boundaries of the area of Oldambt?
- 5) What are important landmarks in the region?
 - a. Why these?
- 6) What does the dialect mean in the area?

- 7) How important is agriculture in the area?
 - a. Why? Why not?
- 8) Could you explain how important social cohesion is in the area?
 - a. Why or why not?
- 9) Do you think that all of what you just mentioned should be part of a campaign to attract tourists?
 - a. Why or why not?
 - b. Which parts are more important to tell tourists?
- 10) What do you think is important to tell people about Oldambt that want to visit this area?
 - a. Physical aspects
 - b. Symbolic aspects (language)
 - c. Heritage aspects/History
- 11) How do you let visitors feel welcome in the area?
 - a. How do you let them experience the area?
- 12) What is a must-do/see when visiting the area?
 - a. Why this?
 - b. Is this something which is typical for the area?
- 13) What do you think about when hearing the word Graanrepubliek?
- 14) Do you think this is a good name to attract visitors to the area?
 - a. Why or why not?
- 15) Do you think that a branding campaign should include elements that inhabitants find important in the area?
 - a. Does the Graanrepubliek cover this?
 - b. Should it be a different name?

Tourism industry

- 1) Can you tell me something about your company?
 - a. How long have you been working in the area?
 - b. Do you live here? For how long? Why?
- 2) How would you describe the region Oldambt to a visitor?
 - a. Physical characteristics
 - b. The people
- 3) Do you feel connected with the area?
 - a. How does that come?
- 4) Are the boundaries of the municipality similar to the boundaries of the area of Oldambt?
- 5) What are important landmarks in the region?
 - a. Why these?
 - b. Also for tourism purposes?
- 6) How important is agriculture in the area?
 - a. Why? Why not?
 - b. For the tourism sector?
- 7) What do you think should be mentioned in a campaign to attract tourists?
 - a. Do you think that all of what you just mentioned should be part of this campaign?
 - i. Why or why not?
 - b. Which parts are more important to tell tourists?
- 8) What is the most mentioned reason for tourists to visit Oldambt?
- 9) What do you say to visitor when you tell them about the region?
 - a. Physical aspects

- b. Symbolic aspects (language)
 - c. History?
- 10) How do you let visitors feel welcome in the area?
- a. How do you let them experience the area?
- 11) What is a must-do/see when visiting the area?
- a. Why this?
 - b. Is this something which is typical for the area?
- 12) What do you think about when hearing the word Graanrepubliek?
- 13) Do you think this is a good name to attract visitors to the area?
- a. Why or why not?
- 14) Do you think that a branding campaign should include elements that inhabitants find important in the area?
- a. Does the Graanrepubliek cover this?
 - b. Should it be a different name?

Appendix B – Informed consent

Toestemmingsformulier voor het onderzoek ‘regionale identiteit gemeente Oldambt’

Ik heb de informatiebrief over het onderzoek ‘regionale identiteit gemeente Oldambt’ gelezen. Ik heb aanvullende vragen kunnen stellen. Mijn vragen zijn goed beantwoord. Ik had genoeg tijd om te beslissen of ik meedoe.

Ik weet dat meedoen helemaal vrijwillig is. Ik weet dat ik op ieder moment kan beslissen om toch niet mee te doen. Daarvoor hoef ik geen reden te geven.

Ik weet dat de mensen die genoemd zijn bij de informatiebrief mijn gegevens kunnen zien.

Ik geef toestemming om mijn gegevens te gebruiken voor de doelen die in de informatiebrief staan.

Ik vind het goed om aan dit onderzoek mee te doen.

Ik geef toestemming om mijn antwoorden te laten opnemen op een audiorecorder voor de verwerking van dit onderzoek. Deze informatie zal niet worden gedeeld met derden.

Naam deelnemer:

Handtekening:

Datum:

Ik verklaar hierbij dat ik deze deelnemer volledig heb geïnformeerd over het genoemde onderzoek.

Als er tijdens het onderzoek informatie bekend wordt die de toestemming van deelnemer zou kunnen beïnvloeden, dan breng ik hem/haar daarvan tijdig op de hoogte.

Naam onderzoeker: Marieke de Winter

Handtekening:

Datum:

Appendix C – Information letter

Informatiebrief voor het onderzoek ‘regionale identiteit gemeente Oldambt’

Datum en tijd van onze afspraak: [datum, tijd]

Beste meneer/mevrouw [naam],

Leuk dat u wilt meedoen aan mijn onderzoek ‘regionale identiteit gemeente Oldambt’. In deze brief wordt beschreven wat er komt kijken bij uw deelname aan mijn onderzoek. Als u nog vragen heeft na het lezen van de brief kunt u altijd contact met mij opnemen. Mijn telefoonnummer en e-mail adres staan onder aan de brief.

Onderwerpen die in het gesprek aan bod zullen komen:

- Algemene informatie over u/de organisatie
- Regionale identiteit van Oldambt
- Regionale identiteit naar de buitenwereld

Hoe lang duurt het gesprek?

U hoeft zich niet voor te bereiden op het gesprek, het gaat immers om uw eigen verhaal. Het gesprek zal +/- 30 minuten duren, langer kan ook als u meer te vertellen heeft. U kunt tijdens het gesprek altijd aangeven dat u wilt stoppen of even een pauze wilt nemen. Ook kunt u het aangeven wanneer u een vraag niet wilt beantwoorden. Hier hoeft u geen rede voor te geven.

Wat gebeurt er met uw gegevens?

Het gesprek zal worden opgenomen met een audio-recorder. Ik kan mijn aandacht dan goed bij het gesprek houden en naderhand kan ik me geen dingen verkeerd herinneren. Er wordt vertrouwelijk met uw gegevens omgegaan: ik verwijder al uw persoonlijke informatie, zoals uw naam. Mijn begeleider, prof. dr. Tialda Haartsen en een tweede examiner hebben ook toegang tot uw gegevens. Ik zal het gesprek gebruiken voor mijn scriptie en presentatie.

Toestemmingsformulier

Voor ons gesprek zal ik u vragen of u een toestemmingsformulier wilt tekenen. U gaat hiermee **géén** verplichting aan. Het formulier is er alleen voor om te bevestigen dat u vrijwillig deelneemt aan mijn onderzoek.

Hartelijke groeten, Marieke de Winter

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