

Vidar Stevens
Mulier Institute

Erik Hans Klijn
Rianne Warsen
Erasmus University Rotterdam

Symposium Article

Branding as a Public Governance Strategy: A Q Methodological Analysis of How Companies React to Place Branding Strategies

Abstract: *Public branding is a new governance strategy in the public sector. Local governments, for instance, use brands to attract target groups to the city, such companies, tourists, or citizens. But how do target groups actually value this governance strategy? This article zooms in on the purpose of branding, as perceived by companies as a target group in a branding campaign. Q methodology is used to study the subjective viewpoints of 33 company owners in a neighborhood in Rotterdam, the Netherlands, that was branded as the Rotterdam Makers District. The analysis reveals that company owners prefer a transparent branding process in which they are recognized as coproducers of the brand and can add their story to the brand message that is conveyed to target audiences. These findings add to the resonating call in the literature to make more use of governance theories in the field of branding.*

Evidence for Practice

- Companies prefer branding as a public governance strategy as long as the brand manager is transparent about the aims and setup of the branding campaign.
- Given the preferences of companies in this study, the legitimacy of a local government’s branding campaign very likely increases if companies are recognized as brand coproducers.
- Public branding can be used as a vehicle to mobilize a community of companies as brand ambassadors.
- Companies will contribute to a branding campaign if doing so provides them with an added value (i.e., brand equity), instead of being only a public stakeholder.

Branding has rapidly emerged as an important governance strategy in the public sector. Politicians use branding, including brand elements such as slogans, wordmarks, and logos, to construct an identity that is attractive to voters. Branding is also frequently used to promote public organizations, policies, or services (Eshuis and Klijn 2012). Moreover, one of the most utilized forms of public branding, “place branding,” is used by local governments to boost certain areas for revenue (Stevens 2019). The branding of places has gained quite some popularity among scholars. Lucarelli and Berg’s (2011) meta-analysis identified 217 journal articles dealing with place branding in the period 1988–2009. In recent years, new studies have been conducted on the use and value of place branding as public governance strategy (Braun, Eshuis, and Klijn 2014; Eshuis and Klijn 2012; Zavattaro 2018, 2020).

A general observation from the growing body of literature is that very little empirical research has been conducted so far on how the target groups of a place branding campaign, as key stakeholders, value a local government’s effort to brand a place

area (Stevens 2019). This is striking as it means that we have limited knowledge about the most effective way for local governments to reach a certain target audience and the way target audiences want to be involved in a place branding campaign. Target audiences can, for example, be a part of a branding campaign by acting as passive brand receivers, as brand ambassadors, or even as brand coproducers (Ind and Schmidt 2019; Zenker and Braun 2017). Hence, this article zooms in on the value of place branding as a public governance strategy, as perceived by stakeholders of a place branding campaign. In doing so, this article aims to contribute both empirically and theoretically to the public administration literature by combining insights from the branding and governance literatures.

Place Branding as Public Governance Strategy

Place branding refers to the development of brands for geographic locations with the aim of triggering positive associations about the area and distinguishing a place from other places (Kavaratzis and Kalandides 2015; Stevens 2019). For example, the city of Amsterdam used the place brand “I Amsterdam” to imbue the city with meanings such as “inclusion” and

Vidar Stevens is a mediator researcher at the Mulier Institute in Utrecht, the Netherlands. His research focuses on collaborations, network governance, public branding, and violence and integrity in sports.

Email: v.stevens@mulierinstituut.nl

Erik Hans Klijn is professor of public administration in the Department of Public Administration and Sociology, Erasmus University Rotterdam, the Netherlands. His research focuses on complex decision-making in networks, network management, public-private partnerships, branding, and media influence on governance.

Email: klijn@essb.eur.nl

Rianne Warsen is assistant professor in the Department of Public Administration and Sociology, Erasmus University Rotterdam, the Netherlands. Her research focuses on public-private partnerships, performance, collaborative governance, and the dynamics between contractual and relational aspects in collaboration.

Email: warsen@essb.eur.nl

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“exciting.” The strategy of place branding influences people’s ideas by forging particular emotional and psychological associations with a place. When done properly, these emotional and psychological associations can stimulate tourists to visit the area or companies and end users to purchase their goods and services from manufactures of a particular area—which, in turn, contributes to the revitalization of that area (Boisen et al. 2018; Zenker and Braun 2017).

However, target audiences or brand receivers can interpret a place brand message very differently (Boisen et al. 2018; Kavatzis and Kalandides 2015; Zavattaro 2020; Zenker and Braun 2017). Authors emphasize that brands are complex and created in coproduction with stakeholders such as companies or citizens (see Ind and Schmidt 2019; Kavatzis and Kalandides 2015). This makes place branding a delicate governance strategy (Zenker and Braun 2017). A brand initiator will be able to control the direct communication of the brand to target audiences, but not the way in which brand receivers interpret, assess, and, eventually, communicate about the brand (so-called word of mouth). Therefore, the dynamics of place branding as a governance strategy are possibly very similar to what the public administration literature writes about network governance and collaborative governance dynamics: managers are dependent on stakeholders, there are diverging perceptions, and within the network of stakeholders complex interactions emerge that will leave their mark on the governance process (Emerson and Nabatchi 2020; Klijn and Koppenjan 2016).

This Article: How Do Companies Value Place Branding?

Given the lack of empirical studies on the governance dynamics of place branding campaigns, this article explores how target groups perceive the use of local government’s place branding campaigns. More particularly, we examine the perceptions of companies concerning the goals, organizational setup, stakeholder involvement, and target audience of Rotterdam’s efforts to rebrand the neighborhoods of Merwede-Vierhavens and the Rotterdam Droogdokken Maatschappij area as the Rotterdam Makers District.

For this, we use Q methodology, a method designed to study the subjective viewpoints of individuals (Lee 2017; McKeown and Thomas 2013). By using Q methodology and applying it to the governance dynamics of a specific place branding campaign, we are able to provide an answer to the following research question: How do companies involved in the branding process of the Rotterdam Makers District perceive the governance of the place branding campaign and which patterns can be observed in their perceptions?

First, we discuss three governance perspectives on place branding and their relation to governance views. Based on the three governance perspectives on place branding, we develop statements for Q methodology. Next, we introduce the Rotterdam Makers District case and reflect on Q methodology. Then, we present the results of the analysis, and finally we discuss our findings.

Three Perspectives on How Place Branding Works: A Theoretical Framework for Analysis

A brand is “a symbolic construct that consists of a name, term, sign, symbol, or design or a combination of these, created deliberately to identify a phenomenon and differentiate it from a similar phenomenon by adding particular meaning to it” (Eshuis and

Klijn 2012, 19). If we look at the literature on place branding and place marketing, which extends across academic domains (such as urban planning, tourism, and vacation marketing, but also public management), we see different perspectives on the process of place branding (Lucarelli and Berg 2011). Classical (place) branding perspectives emphasize a sales approach in which brands are conceptualized as favorite images of a place created by a single brand initiator (see Ind and Schmidt 2019; Kotler et al. 1999; Zenker and Braun 2017). Against this sales approach, many authors have positioned a stakeholder approach, which emphasizes stakeholder involvement, community building, and constant managing of the brand in an interactive process (Ind and Schmidt 2019; Kavatzis and Kalandides 2015; Zenker and Braun 2017). But several authors also have presented perspectives positioned between these two. Hankinson (2004) offers an interesting perspective that emphasizes the value for existing stakeholders in an area (mostly called brand equity), which he calls brands as value enhancers. Table 1 provides an overview of the three perspectives, here called place branding as a *selling mechanism*, a *value enhancer*, and a *community builder*. Each of the perspectives is elaborated briefly in the following sections. Of course, this distinction is a theoretical one that helps us organize the literature and develop statements for the Q sort. In practice, however, it is much more likely that these perspectives are a bit more interrelated. In the next sections, we discuss the peculiarities of the three perspectives of place branding.

Place Branding as a Selling Mechanism

First, place brands and branding campaigns are conceptualized as *selling mechanisms* (Ward and Gold 1994). In this perspective, a brand mainly represents an image of a place that presents a highly selective identity of the area as a means of selling the place (Kotler et al. 1999; Hankinson 2004, 116). Often the brand message that is sent out to target audiences is simple and “shows the place through rose-tinted spectacles” (Hankinson 2004, 116). The simple brand message has to appeal as much as possible to the external place consumers’ senses, reasons, and emotions (Hankinson 2004, 110) to “persuade target audiences with favorable images about the city” (Eshuis, Braun, and Klijn 2013, 508).

A selling approach resembles a fairly top-down classical governance approach (Klijn and Koppenjan 2016; see also Aitken and Campelo 2011). It is both top down and rational in the sense that it is based on rational analysis (analyzing the problem, weighting possible solutions and picking the best one) and “rolling out” measurements (see Klijn and Koppenjan 2016). Existing companies, residents, and local communities are mainly *left aside* in the branding process; they do not have a coordinating, or decision-making, role in a *selling* branding approach. Otherwise, with too many decision-making voices, the chances increase that a simple brand message about the place will go off message (Therkelsen, Halkier, and Jensen 2010, 139). To this end, Burmann and Zeplin (2005, 279) believe that brand management mainly requires conducting market research, taking top-down decisions about a brand positioning, and managing advertising and media agencies. In similar vein, Moilanen and Rainisto (2009) suggest that a *selling* place branding process consists of five stages: establishing a coordinating organization, conducting research, forming a simple and unique brand identity, making and enforcing a plan, and, finally, strict implementation and follow-up of the branding strategy.

Table 1 Overview of the Three Branding Perspectives

	Branding as Selling Mechanism	Branding as Value Enhancer	Branding as Community Builder
Goal of branding process	Persuade external parties to settle in a place by promoting the area as an attractive location for work and manufacturing.	Increase the place brand equity for existing companies in the area.	Building a sense of community around a brand, and thereby foster relationships between stakeholders active in the area.
Organizational setup and governance of branding process	Conduct market research to discover the unique selling point of a place before a top-down coordinated marketing campaign for a place is designed/ developed by a local government.	Establish a vanguard group of willing companies that see the added value of the branding campaign, to pioneer the brand values that characterize companies' activities in the place area.	The development and implementation of the place branding campaign follows from a continuous (collaborative) dialogue between all stakeholders about values, brand messages, and marketing strategies.
Role of individual companies	A passive role for individual companies as governmental departments, such as economic agencies of local municipalities, coordinate the branding activities.	Existing companies only join the place branding campaign if they see the added value of the marketing activities.	Individual stakeholders (including companies) actively work together with public actors to advance the place branding campaign.
Target audiences of campaign	Attract "external" companies, start-ups, capital-rich creatives, and other new companies to settle in the area.	Ensure that existing investors and users of the area maintain (or increase) their continual consumption of products of companies in the place area, and provide a "podium" for existing companies to promote their activities.	Foster stronger internal ties between existing companies, local communities, and governmental parties in the place area, as a means to show a stronger exterior image.

Place Branding as a Value Enhancer

Place branding activities of local governments may also affect their "internal audiences"—that is, the companies, residents, and local communities that are already active in an area (Zavattaro 2020). For example, by branding an area, it can become easier for individual companies to sell their products, hire skilled labor, or advertise their products. Branding, in this sense, is used as a means of achieving a competitive advantage, or create an added value, for existing stakeholders of an area (Hankinson 2004, 111). The place brand enhances the value of individual stakeholders and creates more place brand equity for the internal audiences of a place; in other words, being a part of a place-branded area can increase the revenues of individual stakeholders active in that area (Jacobsen 2012). The value-enhancing perspective on branding has gained traction among marketers as a consequence of the growing economic competitiveness among international areas (see Kotler et al. 1999).

Christopher, Payne, and Ballantyne (2002) suggest a management approach to commit internal stakeholders to a place branding campaign: a vanguard group, consisting of local government officials and enthusiastic existing companies, should pioneer the (new) brand values until all other stakeholders are persuaded, by creating ferment and momentum. Instead of focusing on the top-down packaging of a brand identity, as would be done in the *selling* approach, more effort should be expended on developing brand relation content with internal stakeholders (Pasquinelli 2011). However, internal stakeholders will only contribute if they experience the added value of a place branding campaign (Therkelsen, Halkier, and Jensen 2010: 139). So, the willingness of internal stakeholders to join a place branding campaign depends on their own cost-benefit assessment of the value of the branding campaign.

Place Branding as a Community Builder

Lastly, brands can be conceptualized as community builders. This perspective is not so much about "selling" a place or creating more brand equity for existing companies, but mostly focuses on strengthening relationships between stakeholders active in a

place area (Pasquinelli 2011, 244). In fact, in this perspective, the brand is conceptualized as having a personality that encourages individual stakeholders to form more direct relationships with one another. These relationships can be the result of congruity between the stakeholders' self-images and the brand or the development of a connection during the coproduction of a place brand (Hankinson 2004, 111). In consequence, the goal of a place branding campaign can be regarded as creating a sense of community around a brand (Muniz and O'Guinn 2001). This perspective is a critique of the sales perspective, as the community builder perspective realizes that place brand attributes can not only be created (top-down) by brand managers but often are the product of efforts, activities, and stories of communal stakeholder networks and other partnerships in the neighborhood (Eshuis and Klijin 2012; Ind and Schmidt 2019; Zavattaro 2020). This third perspective is very much a relational approach to branding (Hankinson 2004; Kavaratzis and Kalandides 2015) and acknowledges that place brands are complex and perceived differently by various stakeholders, and thus collaborative effort is needed to build both the brand and the community around it (Eshuis and Klijin 2012; Zenker and Braun 2017). It strongly connects to a more collaborative governance approach (Ansel and Gash 2008; Klijin and Koppenjan 2016) than, for instance, the selling approach.

Collaboration between a wide array of stakeholders however is not something common, as each stakeholder has its own narrative about the symbolic nature of the place. A branding campaign therefore has to appeal to different audiences (Merrilees, Miller, and Herington 2009). In consequence, the scope of the branding campaign should according to Pasquinelli (2011, 232) not merely focus on the "branded object"—that is, the place area—but rather on the set of relationships built with and around it. This means that branding becomes a participatory process in which stakeholders engage in a dialogue about values, images, and stories to represent the place area (Kavaratzis and Kalandides 2015). Stakeholders, like companies, become co-branders that actively contribute to the development, implementation, and advancement of the brand

identity (Stevens 2019). Within the community builder perspective, the target audience of the branding campaign is thus mostly the individual stakeholders active in the area. That being said, a stronger sense of community around, or fostered by, a place brand is also more appealing for new external parties to become a part of.

A Comparative Analysis of the Value of the Three Perspectives

Although the three perspectives are well known by both scholars and practitioners, until now, they have not been used in a comparative way to examine how place users (such as individual companies) perceive the purpose and value of place branding campaigns. Hence, following the theoretical discussion, we developed a Q sort heuristic to examine, based on the three perspectives, how place users perceive the value of a city governments' place branding campaign. Before, we discuss the value of Q methodology, we introduce the peculiarities of the Rotterdam Makers District campaign.

Methodology: Q Sort Analysis as Way to Structure Perceptions of Respondents

To identify perspectives of company owners on the value of the Rotterdam Makers District's branding campaign, we used Q methodology. Q methodology is designed to study the subjective viewpoints of individuals, such as feelings, opinions, or beliefs (Lee 2017; McKeown and Thomas 2013). To capture these viewpoints, respondents (called the P set) are asked to rank a set of statements (called the Q set) to determine what they find most important (Watts and Stenner 2012). After sorting the statements, a factor analysis is used to distinguish factors: clusters of participants that rank the statements in a more or less similar fashion. Before we explain Q methodology, information about the case and the respondents is provided.

Case: Rotterdam Makers District

In 2017, the place branding campaign took off. The individual neighborhoods in the Merwede-Vierhavens area and the Rotterdam Droogdokken Maatschappij area were "marketing-wise" merged into the Rotterdam Makers District. In general, many start-ups and relatively small companies are based in this old harbor area. One of the reasons for this is the availability of accommodations that are relatively cheap compared with other areas in the city. But, of course, the presence of other more or less similar companies is also a motivation to come to this area. The Rotterdam Makers District, in the view of the marketing campaign, would become an area for creative and innovative entrepreneurs, where extra emphasis was put on the "makers" concept. Makers are mostly regarded as innovative manufacturing industries that focus on new technologies, such as additive manufacturing (including 3D printing), robotization, and material science. The makers became the target audience of the district, because of their willingness to embrace the New Economy, work and live in raw, urban areas (which fit the image of the Merwede-Vierhavens area quite well), and their fit with the overall branding campaign of the City of Rotterdam: "Rotterdam. Make It Happen" (Deloitte 2015; Stadshavens Rotterdam 2015). According to the program office, businesses in the district receive special treatment, including easy access to innovation networks, knowledge institutions, and shared facilities. In doing so, the Rotterdam Makers District brand attempts to attract start-ups through cost-reducing instruments and facilitates innovation by initiating networking activities, thus presenting a strategic advantage over other business

locations.

The Q Set: The Statements

The first stage in the process is to collect statements and select a sample of statements to present to the respondents. These statements can be derived from various sources (Jeffares and Skelcher 2011). Here, we used an academic starting point for the development of our statements by using the three perspectives described earlier as a starting point (examples of this approach include Jeffares and Skelcher 2011; Warsen et al. 2020). To check whether the statements connect with the experience of practitioners, the statements were presented to three practitioners in the area, involved in the branding campaign central in this research, who provided comments in two two-hour sessions. After each session, we refined the statements to ensure that all relevant issues in the debate were included and that the statements were understandable and meaningful for the respondents.

During the development of the statements, a 4 x 2 grid was used, including four types of statements on the horizontal axis that are relevant for the debate on place branding campaigns: goal of the branding campaign, type of branding process, nature of the involvement of individual companies, and target audience. On the vertical axis, we used the distinction between a descriptive and prescriptive approach (Jeffares and Skelcher 2011). Each cell then contains three statements that match three perspectives discussed earlier. The 24 statements resulting from this grid (see table 2) were not presented to the respondents. They were presented with the individual statements in random order.

The P Set: The Respondents

The second stage is to select individuals to participate in our study. Our respondents are owners of companies involved in the Rotterdam Makers District branding campaign. Thus, we are fairly confident that the views of the respondents also represent the views of the companies. They were selected from a list, provided by the program office, of companies that are active in the area and aware of the place branding campaign, since each of them participated in one of the stakeholder meetings on the branding campaign. Most of the companies are start-ups and relatively small (50 percent have fewer than 10 employees). We approached 51 companies, by sending them an email invitation to join the research project. Thirty-three CEOs positively responded to our call. The data were collected between January and April 2019.

The Sorting of the Statements

The sorting of the statements was done face-to-face to provide the opportunity for respondents to reflect on the statements and for the authors to gain additional information on the respondents' train of thought during the sorting process. Therefore, the sorting of the statements was followed by a short interview. In total, these meetings typically lasted 1.5 hours. To guarantee the respondents and their companies' anonymity, reference to respondents is done using numbers, rather than names.

The sorting of the statements happened as follows: In a first round, respondents were asked to sort the statements into three piles that represented their degree of agreement (disagree, neutral, agree). In a second round, the respondents went over the same

Table 2 Q Statements Based on the Three Branding Perspectives

	Goal of the Branding Campaign	Type of Branding Process	Nature of Involvement of Individual Companies	What Target Audience?
<i>Descriptive</i>	1. Sell the area by means of favorable images of the business climate	7. Highlight that without good market research, there is no good place promotion campaign	13. Give the ownership and promotion tasks of the branding campaign to a public organization.	19. Mark that the place branding campaign only has to focus on attracting new "makers."
		8. Connect the place promotion to the economic aims of the existing companies.	14. Realize that only when it delivers economic advantage, existing companies will support the place branding campaign.	20. Focus on existing customers of companies
	2. Highlight the added value for existing companies. 3. Stimulate the emergence of a lively business community.	9. Enhance the place promotion by a continuous dialogue between companies about marketing initiatives.	15. Highlight that existing companies are together responsible for the development, financing and implementation of the place branding campaign.	21. Stimulate the emergence of new collaborations between companies, the harbor of Rotterdam, and the municipality.
In the Rotterdam Makers District campaign, it is important to. <i>Prescriptive</i> The branding of the Rotterdam Makers District should predominantly.	4. Distinguish the area from other business areas as ideal Makers Living Lab for companies.	10. Communicate simple and consistent images about the area.	16. Not be governed and managed by the existing companies.	22. Use a special treatment for new companies that fit in the makers industry profile
	5. Lead to more economic advantage for her companies.	11. Support start-ups with the most potential.	17. Companies will only participate actively if the branding campaign increases their brand equity.	23. Align with the wishes and demands of existing investors and clients of companies.
	6. Stimulate that companies support each other more.	12. Fit an area vision that is supported by all companies.	18. Companies should take decisions together about the place promotion of the Makers District	24. Be used as a vehicle to enhance synergies between companies in the place area.

statements again, but they were forced to make more restricted choices by placing statements in a pyramid shape, where the sides of the pyramid represent the statements they agree with most (+3) and least (-3) (see figure 1). This means that even though respondents could agree with multiple statements, they had to select the statement they found most important, thus choosing what mattered most to them. In a third round, the respondents saw their Q sort, were offered the opportunity to make alterations to their sorting, and were asked to reflect on the statements they agreed with most (+3) and least (-3).

Results: Four Profiles on Branding the Rotterdam Makers District

After collecting all 33 Q sorts, we performed a factor analysis to identify groups of respondents sharing similar perceptions. We used Ken-Q Analysis, an online software program designed to analyze data resulting from Q methodological research (Banasick 2019). The factor analysis resulted in the extraction of four factors. More factors would result in the inclusion of factors with too low an eigenvalue (< 1), while fewer than four factors resulted in too much overlap between the factors (with correlations > 0.53). Eighteen out of the 33 respondents are significantly associated with one of the four factors ($p < .01$). In total, the explained variance is 54 percent,

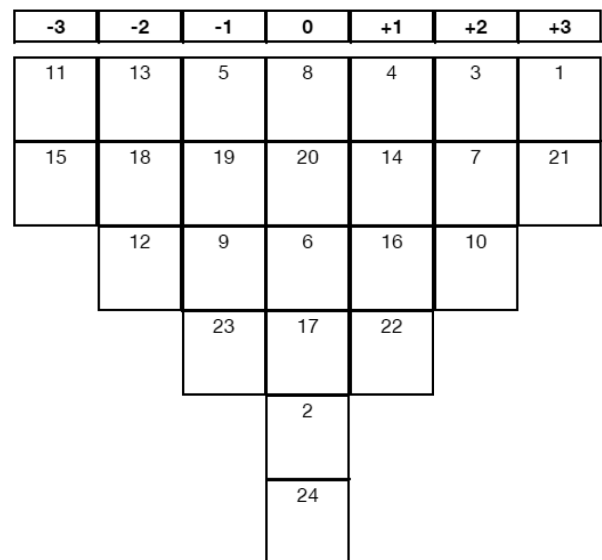


Figure 1 Example of Completely Sorted Q Sort

which fulfills the criteria of a well-executed Q analysis (Jeffares and Skelcher 2011: 199). Since each factor represents a different group of respondents with shared perceptions, the factors are called

profiles. In the following sections, the four profiles are described and analyzed.

Profile 1: Branding as Community Creation

Profile 1 has an eigenvalue of 10.82 and explains 17 percent of the study variance after rotation. Six respondents are significantly associated with this factor ($p < .01$). Respondents loading on this profile find it of utmost importance that the Rotterdam Makers District branding campaign aim to stimulate the emergence of a “lively” business community and that the place branding campaign be used as a vehicle to enhance synergies between companies in the neighborhood (3: +3; 24: +3¹). Both statements scored significantly higher compared with other profiles. Respondents associated with this profile thus see place branding, compared with other profiles, as the right public governance strategy to build a community of companies to revitalize the area. The place branding campaign must, according to respondents, not target existing customers of companies (20: -3), align with the wishes and demands of existing clients and investors of companies in the area (23: -2), or solely support the start-ups with the highest potential in the Rotterdam Makers District area (11: -3).

Instead, the Rotterdam Makers District must distinguish itself from other business areas as the ideal Makers Living Lab for companies by, on the one hand, using a red carpet treatment for new companies that clearly fit the makers industry profile (22: +2) and, on the other hand, continuing to invest in the relationship building between existing companies in the area, the harbor of Rotterdam, and the municipality (21: +2). This implies that respondents of profile 1 prefer a “selective” external orientation of the place branding campaign to attract companies similar to the makers profile and a dominant orientation to foster collaborations between internal stakeholders of the area (whether companies, policy makers, or harbor officials). Profile 1 is most of all a goal- and target-audience-oriented perspective in which “the main focus is on stimulating the emergence of a neighborhood where companies know to find one another, and where through collaboration between companies, the harbor, and the municipality a favorable image is created that invites ‘new parties’ to settle in the area” (interview respondent 7).

Profile 2: Branding as Equity Builder

Profile 2 has an eigenvalue of 2.30 and explains 11 percent of the study variance after rotation. Three respondents are significantly associated with this factor ($p < .01$). Respondents loading on this profile highlight that only when it delivers economic advantage will existing companies participate in the place branding campaign (14: +3). Companies simply seek place brand equity—that is, they will only contribute to the place branding campaign if it delivers them added value for their business activities (17: +3). These statements scored significantly higher than in all the other profiles. One way to organize the place branding campaign is to connect the place promotion to the economic aims and activities of the companies in the neighborhood (8: +2).

The respondents associated with profile 2 highlight that within the Rotterdam Makers District branding campaign, it is not the task of existing companies to develop, finance, or implement the place branding campaign (15: -3; 18: -2); rather, they leave these tasks

and expenditures up to a public authority (13: 0; 16:0). According to respondent 23, “Companies are driven by profit and gains; if we do join a public branding campaign it must generate more revenues for our company, I already spent enough time in running, marketing and promoting my own company—I do not have time for a task of the municipality.” To this end, branding must be value enhancing for individual companies, otherwise a branding campaign will not sort any effect.

Profile 3: Branding as a Place-Building Dialogue

Profile 3 has an eigenvalue of 2.43 and explains 14 percent of the study variance after rotation. Five respondents are significantly associated with this profile ($p < .01$). Respondents loading on this factor highlight that without good market research, there will be no good place branding campaign (7: +3). Moreover, the respondents indicate that within the Rotterdam Makers District campaign, it is important to enhance the place promotion by a continuous dialogue between existing companies about marketing initiatives (9: +3). Both statements are positive distinguishing statements at $p < .01$, implying that the z -score for statements 7 and 9 in this factor are significantly higher than in all the other factors. Statements 7 and 9 are process-oriented statements that point out that the campaign should start with a good analysis of the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats surrounding the place branding campaign, and from there to deliberate through dialogue with companies about the best way to distinguish the Merwede-Vierhavens and Rotterdam Droogdokken Maatschappij areas from other business areas. The overall aim of the campaign is multifaceted. There should be a focus on both attracting new companies that fit the maker’s identity (22: +2) and enhance synergies between companies in the area (24: +1). In addition, branding must stimulate the emergence of new collaborations between companies, the harbor and the municipality (21: +2). The respondents associated with profile 3 attach little importance to the need to focus on companies’ customers (20: -2) and the idea that companies only participate if the branding campaign increases their brand equity (17: -3). This certainly distinguishes this profile from for instance profile 2 which tends to emphasize the value for individual companies much more. Respondents in profile 3 emphasize that the whole Rotterdam Makers District area profits from the branding effort by focusing on relevant new companies and using the brand to forge an image that generates new synergies. “Together we build the place,” according to respondent 25.

Profile 4: Branding as a Nonprivate Selling Approach

Profile 4 has an eigenvalue of 2.05 and explains 12 percent of the study variance after rotation. Four respondents are significantly associated with this factor ($p < .01$). Respondents loading on this profile highlight that the main goal of the branding campaign is to distinguish the area from other business areas as an ideal Makers Living Lab for companies (4: +3). This must be done by using a red carpet treatment for new companies that want to settle in the Rotterdam Makers District area (22: +2), persuade external audiences with a simple and consistent image of the area (10: +2), and align the external branding approach with the wishes and demands of investors who are already active in the Merwede-Vierhavens and Rotterdam Droogdokken Maatschappij district (23: +1). The profile is thus really about selling the area to external parties and attracting new financial investments by means of

favorable images about the business climate. As a consequence, respondents associated with profile four expect that this selling approach will also allow the emergence of new collaborations between companies, the harbor of Rotterdam, and the municipality (21: +3) and automatically lead to more economic advantage of companies in the area (5: +2).

Respondents do not see an active role for companies in the place brand promotion, neither in decision-making (18:-3) nor in the development, financing, and implementation of the place branding campaign (15: -1). They also attach little importance to the idea that the branding campaign should align with an area vision that is supported by all existing companies (12: -2). Statement 12 is within factor 4 even a negative distinguishing statement at $p < .01$, implying that the z -score for this statement in this factor is significantly lower than in all the other factors. The respondents are not very outspoken about the role that public authorities have to take on in the branding campaign. However, given the fact that statement 13 (+1) is a positive distinguishing statement at $p < .05$, we assume that respondents belonging to profile 4 prefer public ownership of the place branding campaign over private ownership. Hence, profile four can be understood as branding as a nonprivate selling approach.

Comparing the Four Profiles

Table 3 summarizes the main similarities and differences between the profiles. Respondents associated with the profiles of community creation, place-building dialogue, and nonprivate selling approach, although they have different aims, focus in their goal orientation on how the place branding campaign can foster possibilities for the area as a whole, instead of putting individual companies first, as is done in the equity builder profile. In terms of the type of branding process—that is, how to organize the branding campaign—there are more differences between the four profiles. Profile 1 has no explicit idea of how the branding process must be organized, although, given the focus on community building, collaboration seems the way to go. Profile 2 attaches a lot of value to aligning the branding

campaign with the economic goals and activities of existing companies in the area. Respondents in profile 2 do not distinguish phases for design or coordination, although they do agree that the coordination of the branding campaign must be in hands of a public authority. Profile 3 is very explicit about organizing the branding process: a “good” branding process starts with market research and an open dialogue between involved companies on the focus and setup of the campaign. Respondents associated with profile 4 mostly emphasize what a branding process must adhere to and consist of: special treatment for new “makers,” the design of a simple and consistent image of the area to sell the place, and alignment of the focus of the branding campaign with the wishes and demands of investors active in the area.

The idea of active involvement of existing companies in the area is mostly embraced by respondents associated with profiles 1 and 3. Profile 1 even foresees equal roles for companies, the harbor, and the municipality in the branding process. In none of the profiles, except profile 4, is there an explicit distinction between a focus on internal or external target audiences. For different purposes, the respondents of the profiles 1, 2, and 3 recognize that both attracting new energy to the Rotterdam Makers District and investing in the synergies between active companies in the place area are necessary for revitalization of the Merwede-Vierhavens and Droogdokken areas. Profile 4, in contrast, perceives branding for the Rotterdam Makers Districts mostly as an instrument to sell the area to external parties in the hope of attracting new financial investments.

Comparing the Four Profiles to the Theoretical Perspectives

How do we see our theoretical perspectives reflected in our empirical findings? Clearly, two of the three theoretical perspectives on branding, community builder and value enhancer, are represented in our Q analyses of the perspectives of community creation (profile 1) and equity builders (profile 2). The theoretical perspective on community building, however, is more explicit than profile 1 on how to organize the place branding process. Profile 1 is also less strict than its theoretical counterpart about

Table 3 Similarities and Differences in the Four Profiles

	Profile 1: Community Creation	Profile 2: Equity Builder	Profile 3: Place-Building Dialogue	Profile 4: Nonprivate Selling Approach
Goal	Create a lively business climate with synergies between existing companies.	Create place brand equity for individual companies.	Let the whole area profit from a branding effort.	Distinguish the area from other business areas as an ideal Makers Living Lab.
Type of process	No explicit ideas.	Align campaign's focus with the economic goals and activities of existing companies. Coordination must be done by a public authority.	Good market research and an open dialogue between involved companies on the focus and campaign setup.	Special treatment for new “makers,” use a simple and consistent image of the area. Align the brand values of the campaign with the wishes of investors present in the area.
Involvement companies	Companies, harbor, and municipality must have an equal role.	Companies only participate in return for economic advantages.	Active involvement of companies.	No active role for companies. Coordinating role for public authority.
Target audience	Special treatment for new “makers.” Investment in relationship building between existing companies.	Outward (external) focus to increase the revenues for existing companies in the area.	Focus on relevant new companies and new synergies between existing companies.	Selling the area to external parties to attract new financial investments/returns.
Resemblance to theoretical perspectives mentioned in this article	Strong resemblance to <i>community builder</i> perspective (but less strict on external target audience).	Strong resemblance to <i>value enhancer</i> perspective.	Combines <i>selling perspective</i> (emphasis on market research) with <i>community builder</i> perspective (emphasis on dialogue).	Strong resemblance to <i>selling perspective</i> but also deviation from that (less emphasizing market research and more added value for stakeholders).

including an external target audience in the branding campaign; respondents associated with profile 1 seriously prefer a special treatment for new “makers” if their involvement adds to the sense of community surrounding the Rotterdam Makers District brand. These differences suggest that in reality, community creators are not hesitant to look for “outsiders” to strengthen their internal community, yet they have no clear road map of how to use branding to build a greater sense of community.

Between the theoretical value-enhancing perspective and its empirical counterpart, equity builders, few differences exist. Both perspectives perceive branding as a way to increase place brand equity for individual companies, and both foresee an instrumental role for individual companies. The only difference is that in reality respondents associated with profile 2 are less outspoken about the organizational setup of the branding process, as long as a public authority ensures that the branding process aligns with the economic goals and activities of existing companies.

The theoretical “selling” perspective has no exact empirical counterpart. From our analyses, two profiles emerged that include elements of the theoretical branding as selling mechanism approach: branding as a place-building dialogue (profile 3) and branding as a nonprivate selling approach (profile 4). Profile 3 highlights the importance of good market research to design and structure a place branding campaign. However, the market research is not used as a rational decision-making instrument. Instead, the findings of the market research are seen as fuel for dialogue between individual companies, the harbor, and the municipality about the best approach for the Rotterdam Makers District. As such, profile 3 is a mixture of a collaborative perspective on place branding with “process elements” of the rational selling perspective.

Profile 4 comes closest to the ideal-type perspective of branding as selling mechanism. The goal of the branding campaign, the need to use a simple and consistent image of the place in the communication, the passive role of individual companies, the external target audience, and the coordinating role of a public authority are similar. Nevertheless, respondents associated with profile 4 do not recognize market research as a necessary process element for designing the branding campaign. In addition, these respondents prefer that the brand values of the campaign align with the wishes and demands of the investors in the area, which suggests a call for more added value in the place branding campaign for individual stakeholders of the Rotterdam Makers District. As such, profile 4 slightly differs from the ideal-typical perspective of branding as a selling mechanism.

Conclusion: Emphasize Branding as Governance Process

In this article, we looked at how company owners involved in a specific place branding campaign perceive branding. Using three theoretical perspectives on branding, we explored company owners’ views on branding using Q methodology. This is both theoretically and empirically interesting. So far, very few empirical studies examined how companies experience public branding and the systematically constructed Q sort approach provided us with interesting empirical material about this. In addition, it enables us to see which approach to branding seems to be most important for companies. Based on these insights, we are able to refine our theories.

Branding as Governance Process Is Emphasized

From the Q sort analysis, four profiles—that is, groups of respondents who more or less share the same perceptions of the value of branding as governance strategy—emerged, which we labeled community creation, value enhancer, place-building dialogue, and nonprivate selling approach. If we look at the profiles, we find that various elements of each of the theoretical perspectives are present in the empirical profiles. On the whole, however, two important aspects stand out in all four profiles: the idea of collaboration and the necessity for attention to and transparency of the organization of the branding process. For example, profile 1 has strong feelings about collaboration and cooperation since the aim is to build a strong community. Moreover, in profile 3 respondents have a strong process orientation on how to organize the branding process, and they highlight the need for a shared dialogue. Even in profile 4, although a sales approach, respondents indicate that attracting new financial investments, by promoting the area to external parties, allows to strengthen collaborations between companies, the harbor of Rotterdam and the municipality in the Makers District. While the literature on branding recently emphasizes the importance of involving stakeholders and organizing the branding process in an open and transparent manner, traditionally branding has focused more on getting the brand message right and selling it to a selected target audience.

This emphasis on more horizontal forms of governance and collaboration is in line with more recent calls in branding for stakeholder involvement and co-branding (see Ind and Schmidt 2019; Kavaratzis and Kalandides 2015; Stevens 2019; Zavattaro 2018, 2020; Zenker and Braun 2017) and the strong focus in public administration for horizontal forms of governance (Emerson and Nabatchi 2020; Klijin and Koppenjan 2016). Our research specifically shows that companies emphasize that branding is also about including relevant stakeholders, organizing opportunities for deliberation, taking the time for structuring a transparent process, and thinking of ways to allow multiple stakeholders to leave their mark on the branding process both in its design and implementation.

A Path toward Brand Communities

These findings also have consequences for further theoretical development of branding. This should probably focus more on the creation of brand communities and the governance dimension of branding (e.g., combining brand theory with governance theory). Collaborative processes of branding allow companies to contribute to the image of a place, develop a shared brand identity, and add or upload their own contributions to the brand (videos, short impressions of the area, events in the neighborhood, etc.). In this way, brand communities can be created (Muniz and O’Guinn 2001; Zavattaro 2020). If we stretch the original idea of brand community a bit further than Muniz and O’Guinn (2001) did, brand communities could be groups of stakeholders who foster and promote a shared identity for a place. Of course, this requires intensive network management (see Klijin and Koppenjan 2016), as the various stakeholders in an area have different perceptions of the brand. Thus, our findings confirm the interactive turn that the branding and governance literature has taken.

Brand communities can ideally, if built successfully, be used to mobilize stakeholders, sustain participation, and promote collective

action to tackle social problems. Future studies could address research questions such as, How to build a brand community? Under what circumstances do individual stakeholders feel like they are a part of a brand community? And how can a brand community be used as a vehicle to give account to directly affected stakeholders about a government's effort to revitalize a place area? Especially governance literature in public administration already has a long history on this and thus is attractive to combine with the insights from branding.

Limitations of the Research

This research also has limitations. One of the limitations of the study is that we looked at a branding campaign in one Dutch city. The advantage of such a research design is of course that we looked at companies who experience the same well-defined branding campaign. Nevertheless, this research design brings along issues of generalizability. Warsen et al. (2020) showed, for instance, that respondents from different countries, with different administrative traditions, will have different opinions on notions of collaboration and cooperation. Therefore, it is hard to tell whether the respondent's emphasis on collaboration will also be the same in other cities and countries. A second limitation is that we looked at perceptions of respondents and not their actions. This means that it is still open to question if companies will act in a collaborative manner toward other stakeholders in the branding campaign when the city of Rotterdam would make the process more open and inclusive. That being said, we believe that our empirical contribution, showing how company owners perceive branding activities of public actors and its plea for focusing more on the governance side of branding, is valuable for the maturation of the research field.

Note

- 1 The numbers between the brackets refer to the statement and the position of the statement in the sorting scheme ranging from -3 to +3.

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Appendix

First, table A1 provides the factor loadings of each respondent all four factors (or profiles, as we call them in the results of our study). Next, table A2 provides the factor arrays for the four factors (i.e., profiles), indicating how the statements are scored in the different profiles.

Table A1 Factor Loadings on all Four Factors

		Factor matrix (X indicates a defining sort)			
		Loadings			
Q Sort		Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3	Factor 4
1	01001	0.496	0.0849	0.4234	-0.0038
2	01002	0.0543	0.0587	0.2899	-0.0097
3	01003	0.1366	0.1924	0.5754 X	0.1082
4	01004	0.7899 X	0.2425	0.0418	0.3529
5	01005	0.1272	0.2269	-0.0506	0.1055
6	01006	0.6871 X	0.2536	0.32	0.1975
7	01007	0.6321 X	0.4111	-0.1947	-0.2112
8	01008	0.178	0.3919	0.0148	0.1778
9	01009	0.3483	0.5963 X	-0.1958	0.4772
10	01010	0.4439	0.1002	0.3945	0.5579 X
11	01011	0.4114	-0.1297	0.3839	0.2874
12	01012	0.0621	0.6293 X	0.1247	-0.2036
13	01013	0.5199	0.2997	0.124	0.4877
14	01014	-0.0048	-0.0115	0.6693 X	0.3109
15	01015	0.3398	0.4807	0.2605	0.3128
16	01016	0.174	0.6799	0.6652	0.1557
17	01017	0.7388 X	-0.0037	0.3851	0.154
18	01018	0.071	0.1233	0.1924	0.6576 X
19	01019	0.3748	-0.0182	0.2641	0.5917 X
20	01020	0.8644 X	0.087	0.2381	-0.1527
21	01021	0.2253	0.3411	0.2446	0.7184 X
22	01022	0.0331	0.357	0.3337	0.1155
23	01023	0.0114	0.7203 X	0.1253	0.1801
24	01024	0.2423	0.3956	0.4743	0.4947
25	01025	0.08	-0.1977	0.6639 X	0.1639
26	01026	0.2859	0.1651	0.6417 X	0.01
27	01027	0.4878	-0.0271	0.3457	0.4619
28	01028	0.2239	-0.0288	0.6905 X	0.0753
29	01029	-0.3689	0.5115	-0.1547	-0.1758
30	01030	-0.0954	0.0122	-0.0425	0.457
31	01031	0.4565	0.1076	0.5093	0.1791
32	01032	0.6503 X	0.163	0.2115	0.2863
33	01033	0.3055	0.4817	0.2757	0.4229
Explained variance		17%	11%	14%	12%
Respondents associated with this profile		6	3	5	4

Table A2 Factor Arrays for Our Four Study Factors

Statement	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3	Factor 4
1	-1	-1	0	0
2	0	2	0	-1
3	3	-1	-1	0
4	2	0	1	3
5	0	1	0	2
6	1	-2	-1	1
7	0	1	3	1
8	-1	2	0	0
9	0	1	3	0
10	1	2	1	2
11	-3	-3	-2	-3
12	1	-1	0	-2
13	-1	0	-1	1
14	0	3	-2	-2
15	-2	-3	-1	-1
16	-1	0	2	0
17	1	3	-3	-1
18	0	-2	0	-3
19	-2	0	-3	-1
20	-3	-2	-2	-2
21	2	0	2	3
22	2	1	2	2
23	-2	0	1	1
24	3	-1	1	0