

## **Exploring Stakeholder Collaboration in Place Branding Strategies: The Case of Northamptonshire**

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**Abstract:** A distinguishing feature of ‘place branding’ in comparison to the mainstream product or corporate branding is the complexity of managing diverse stakeholders of the place. While participatory place branding is being advocated as a preferred model for implementation and development, few normative model and guidelines are available. In accordance with participatory place branding, this research asserts that all stakeholders must at least have the opportunity to be involved in place branding. However, it appears that institutional stakeholders predominantly decide the extent and level of participation of community stakeholders. For their part, community stakeholders have their own motivations and also encounter barriers to participation. Thus, this study seeks to understand how stakeholders’ perceptions relate to collaboration in ‘region branding’. It focuses on region branding since regions are the least explicated scale in place branding even though regions are important for their development and governance context. A single case study strategy has been applied in this study by examining the county-region of Northamptonshire. Stakeholders from public sector agencies, private businesses and the local community of Northamptonshire will be engaged via semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions to investigate stakeholders’ perceptions towards collaboration in creating a regional place brand.

## **Introduction:**

Place branding refers to the development of brands for geographical locations such as cities, regions and nations with the aim to trigger positive associations and distinguishing a territory or location from others (Anholt, 2010; Kavartzis, 2004). Since ‘place branding’ has been practised around the world as an instrument for places to gain a competitive advantage and has entered the theoretical domain, there remains little scepticism whether places can be branded. The key question now is - how to brand different types of places? Differentiated place branding based on geographical scales such as city, region and nation is regarded as an integral part of theory building in the field (Gertner, 2011). However, ‘regions’ are the least explored scale in place branding, in comparison with city and nation, even though regions are important in the context of development (Herstein, 2012). In the age of city-centric-development, the mesoscale can enable towns, villages and hinterlands to gain a competitive advantage by pooling resources for the betterment of the whole region (Turok, 2004). The existing literature on region branding suggests that – management of local place brands and stakeholders in the region – are the two key aspects of ‘region brand management’ (Hanna & Rowley, 2015; Ikuta, Yukawa, & Hamasaki, 2007). This study focuses on the aspect of ‘stakeholder management’ in region branding since this has received little attention in the literature.

A distinguishing feature of place brand management, in comparison to the mainstream product or corporate branding, is the complexity inherent in managing multiple stakeholders of the place (Hanna & Rowley, 2011). In regards to ‘stakeholder management’, a new participatory approach to place branding has become widely recognised in the field (Braun, Kavartzis, & Zenker, 2013; Kavartzis & Kalandides, 2015; Zenker & Erfgen, 2014). The notion of ‘participatory place branding’ suggests that place brands cannot be strictly controlled by managers or governments, they can only be managed through collaboration with stakeholders. All stakeholders who affect or are affected by the branding of the place should be viewed as co-producers in brand strategy, creation, implementation and governance (Henninger, 2016; Kavartzis, 2012). In this study, stakeholders in place branding are considered to be of two types: ‘institutional stakeholders’ and ‘community stakeholders’. Institutional stakeholders are those who occupy managerial or executive position in institutions of place governance and have a high influence on resource allocation and decision making. Community stakeholders are those who are active in the civic/social/voluntary aspect of community life and have a high sense of pride and belonging to the place. To explore the aspect of ‘stakeholder collaboration’ in region branding, perceptions of both stakeholder groups are deemed crucial.

## **Research Aims and Objectives:**

The research aims are: (i) to explore how stakeholders perceive collaboration in region branding, (ii) to highlight the differences between stakeholder collaboration at the local and regional level and (iii) to develop a conceptual model of region brand management.

To fulfil the research aims, the following research objectives have been conceived:

- To review the current state of stakeholder collaboration in branding Northamptonshire.
- To clarify how institutional stakeholders of brand Northamptonshire perceive collaboration at the local and regional level.

- To investigate institutional stakeholders' views about the role and participation of community stakeholders in branding Northamptonshire.
- To examine community stakeholders' perceptions of collaborating with institutional stakeholders at the local and regional level in Northamptonshire.
- To understand community stakeholders' feelings, drivers and perceptions towards participation in building a brand for Northamptonshire.

### **Highlights from the Literature Review:**

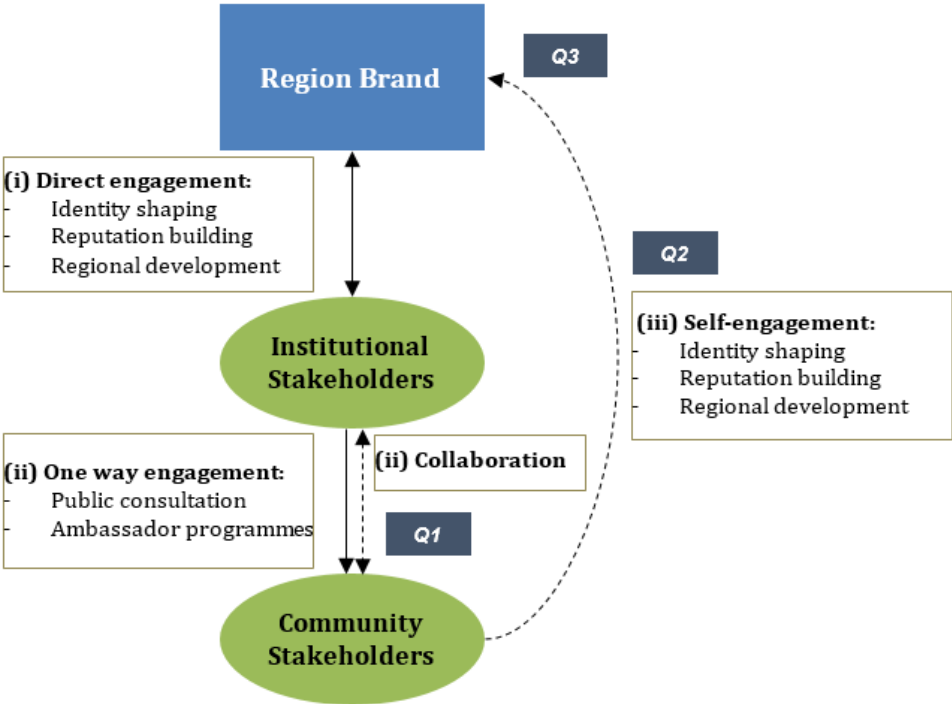
Based on Freeman's (1984) definition of 'stakeholders', in this study, stakeholders are viewed to be *all groups of people, organisations and industries that affect or are affected by the branding of the place*. In accordance with 'participatory place branding', this study views that all stakeholders must at least have the opportunity to participate in place branding. However, place branding is frequently considered to be the responsibility of the government authorities, and increasingly, the public and private sector agencies (Eshuis & Edwards, 2013; Yüksel, Bramwell, & Yüksel, 2005). All the while, citizens are considered consumers of the 'place brand' and not as stakeholders who should be involved in its production (Kavaratzis, 2012). This contrasting conceptualisation of stakeholders in place branding led to the development of two stakeholder categories: institutional and community stakeholders. A review of existing 'typologies of stakeholders' led to the following key inferences:

- (i) Institutional stakeholders can directly shape the identity, reputation and development of the place and they decide the extent and level of participation of 'community stakeholders' (Henninger, 2016). Community stakeholders may shape the identity, reputation and development of the place through their activism, however, they are often left out of the decision making processes and treated as a target audience of place brand communication (Ward, 2000). The existing typologies provide evidence of the vertical hierarchy of place branding, where different stakeholders have different levels of power and access to express their opinions. Thus, there is a need to redefine the characteristics, roles and relationships of stakeholders in accordance with the 'participatory place branding' approach.
- (ii) The characteristics, role and relationships of institutional stakeholders in place branding have been explicated, whereas a detailed description of community stakeholders is not readily available in the literature. Further, community stakeholders are considered to be an incoherent, heterogeneous group of individuals, which makes their engagement in place branding a challenging task (Kalandides, 2011). Thus, there is a need to expand the typology of community stakeholders by identifying their 'characteristic features', so that strategies and tools can be developed to include them in place branding.
- (iii) Further, the motivations of institutional stakeholder for engaging community stakeholders are well researched whereas the views of community stakeholders on such engagement are underexplored. Literature indicates that community stakeholders are capable of engaging with the place brand without the intervention of institutional stakeholders, commonly in the form of citizen activism and counter-campaigns, was revealed (Ward, 2000). This ability of stakeholder to form 'self-brand connections' has implications for their 'role' in place branding and on their 'relationship' with other stakeholders. Thus, this aspect of 'self-engagement' needs to be understood.

Based on the gaps identified in the place branding literature, this study will be focused on ‘stakeholder collaboration’ especially in regards to community stakeholder participation in region branding.

**Theoretical Framework:**

The proposed model of region brand management focuses on ‘stakeholder management and collaboration’ (illustrated in Figure 1). This model adopts a modified version of the ‘place brand web’ (Hanna & Rowley, 2015). The Place Brand Web model adopts Brand Architecture strategy in which the place brand represents the master brand, and the stakeholders are considered to be the sub-brands. Central to their model is the concept of ‘Brand Relationships’ which are extended between the place brand and the stakeholders in the form of a network. However, the network ‘relationship’ between stakeholders is only acknowledged and not clearly illustrated and explained. Further, the Web model does not reflect the hierarchical nature of place branding since all stakeholders are considered to be ‘institutional’; and community stakeholders are not directly represented. Thus, in the proposed model, ‘stakeholder relationship’ is indicated as arrows between three components – Region brand, Institutional Stakeholders and Community Stakeholders.



*Figure 1: Model of Region Brand Management with a focus on ‘stakeholder management’, along with markings of research questions.*

Three types of relationships have been identified:

- (i) **Direct engagement** between institutional stakeholders and the region brand. This is indicated in the form of two-headed-arrow. This is because this stakeholder group has high perceived benefits of engaging in place branding. Further, they are in a position of impacting place brand governance owing to their high influence over resource allocation and decision making (Hankinson, 2004; Henninger, 2016).

- (ii) **One-way engagement/Collaboration** between Institutional stakeholders and Community stakeholders. The former is widely noted in the literature since institutional stakeholders act as the ‘gatekeepers’ of the place brand and engage community stakeholders through - public consultation and ambassador programmes (Eshuis & Edwards, 2013; Rehmet & Dinnie, 2013). This is visualised in the form of single-headed-arrow. The lesser explicated aspect of this relationship is the possibility of forming a collaborative relationship where community stakeholders are not just engaged by institutional stakeholders but also actively engage with institutional stakeholders to contribute to the place brand. Two-headed-arrows signify that such a relationship would require stakeholders to be open to being engaged and impacted by one another. This aspect of collaboration will be explored in this study by investigating the enablers and barriers to community stakeholder participation from the perspective of both stakeholder groups in *Research Question 1*.
- (iii) **Self-engagement** by community stakeholders with the region brand. This is represented in the form of a single-headed arrow and dotted line to signify one-way engagement and underexplored relationship. This is because the literature indicates that while this group is capable of shaping the identity, reputation and development of the place, they may not be systematically and consciously organised to contribute to the ‘brand’ of the place (Insch & Stuart, 2015). Thus, it is argued that the impact on place branding is likely to be indirect. This aspect of self-engagement by community stakeholders will be explored further in *Research Question 2*. Overall, the aspect of stakeholder collaboration will be explored by drawing parallels between stakeholder collaboration at the local and regional level in *Research Question 3*.

### **Methodology:**

Based on the gaps in the literature review, the following research questions have been conceived:

- Q1.** What are the enablers and barriers to community stakeholder participation in region branding (from multi-stakeholder perspective)?
- Q2.** How and why do community stakeholders self-engage in region branding?
- Q3.** How do stakeholders perceive collaboration at the local and regional level?

To fill the research gap in line with the aims of the study, a single case study strategy will be applied. While Yin's (2002) case study guidelines are most commonly used in Business and Management Studies, this research uses Stake's (1995) *The Art of Case Study* as the prime guide. This is because the latter author views case study from a non-positivist philosophy where research is conducted through the researcher-researched interaction. Further, he offers guidance to answer the ‘how’ and ‘why’ questions by “understanding the feelings and motivations” of the research participants. Thus, Stake's (1995) guidelines for conducting a qualitative single case study will be followed and multiple methods and data sources will be used.

The county of Northamptonshire is chosen to explore in-depth the phenomena of ‘stakeholder collaboration in region branding’ for two main reasons. (i) The county is surrounded by well-known cities and counties, namely, Oxfordshire, Cambridgeshire and Buckinghamshire and the cities of London, Birmingham, Leicester and Coventry. This geographical position means that Northamptonshire is faced with competition from its neighbours for attracting the same pool of visitors, residents, investors, businesses and workforce. However, Northamptonshire does not

have a city around which development can be centred. The main settlements in the county are in the towns, surrounded by semi-rural and rural hinterlands. It can be argued that the local place brands in Northamptonshire can benefit from a county-level strategy by pooling their resources to create a common brand and fend off the competition from the neighbours. (ii) Northamptonshire is currently undergoing a restructuring of its Local Government Authority owing to its weak governance and mismanagement of finances (Gov.uk, 2018). This has triggered a dialogue between government, businesses and the residents of the county and brought the issues of 'local vs regional', 'urban vs rural', 'identity' and 'governance' to the fore of the people's minds in Northamptonshire. Thus, the transitional period serves as a fertile ground to investigate stakeholders' perceptions about collaboration with other stakeholder groups in the county.

The research data will be obtained from both primary and secondary sources pertaining to stakeholders in Northamptonshire. Secondary data will provide background information about Northamptonshire and the current state of stakeholder collaboration in branding the county. Information is being collected from stakeholders' websites, public-access strategy documents, press releases and newspaper and magazine articles. Additionally, the UK government's national statistics by county and local government reports will be used to compare and locate Northamptonshire in comparison with its neighbouring counties and cities. For the collection of the primary data, flexible research design is adopted where the investigation unfolds as the problem areas become progressively clarified and redefined (Stake, 1995). This allows for undertaking the research in two phases and using a mix of the inductive and deductive approach.

Phase (I) involves semi-structured interviews with institutional stakeholders in Northamptonshire. Some 12 to 18 institutional stakeholders in Northamptonshire will be recruited using purposive, heterogeneous sampling. The aim is to understand their perceptions about place branding and collaboration at the local and regional level. Interviewees are considered to be active participants in the research who are co-creating knowledge about their place by interacting with the researcher. The interview guide consists of discussion themes such as – identity, reputation and development of the county, own role and participation in place branding and collaboration with other stakeholders. This phase of the study has already begun and is expected to last between January – June 2019. A contact list of potential research participants has been created, based on the selection criteria from the literature. So far, stakeholders have been identified through their mention in the media and their active campaigning to position Northamptonshire as 'Britain's Best Surprise'. To include a diverse range of stakeholders in the county, further connections will be sought through university staff networks and through snowball sampling.

Phase (II) involves engaging community stakeholders in Northamptonshire through focus group discussions. Some 4 to 6 community stakeholders in Northamptonshire will be recruited to take part in each focus group. Totally 3 to 4 focus groups will be conducted or until 'theoretical saturation' is reached. The aim is to understand community stakeholders' feelings and motivations towards participation in place branding and collaboration at the local and regional level. It is expected that the data collection and analysis for Phase (II) will be carried out between July – December 2019. The focus group discussions will be based on the themes of – identity, reputation and development of the county, own role and participation in place branding and collaboration with other stakeholders. These themes will be further refined based on the data derived in Phase (I) and the discussion guide for Phase (II) will be finalised. Participants will be recruited through purposive sampling and snowballing. The list of potential participants includes stakeholders who are mentioned in the media in relation to their

project/campaign/group shaping the county's identity, reputation or development. Additional networks with the stakeholders are currently being established by attending community events (markets, fairs and forums). In both the phases, data will be thematically analysed to establish trustworthiness in qualitative studies (Nowell, Norris, White, & Moules, 2017).

### **Expected Outcomes and Impact:**

This study will contribute to the development of theory in the domain of 'region branding' and 'participatory place branding' by proposing a *Model of Region Brand Management* to explicate stakeholder collaboration and a *Typology of Stakeholders*. Themes relating to 'local vs region branding' in relation to stakeholder collaboration will be derived from the study. These themes can be used in scale-based comparative studies in the field which are limited at this time. This can aid practitioners in understanding the nuances between branding the local and regional scale and thereby designing appropriate scale-based strategies. Additionally, this study can aid practitioners in understanding the perceptions of both institutional and community stakeholders when designing and implementing participatory measures in place branding. In the context of Northamptonshire, this study can provide insights into the perceptions of a wide range of stakeholders about collaboration. This can be used by stakeholders of the county to identify like-minded organisations, learn from existing case studies of collaboration and create partnerships to promote their sector and the county. Based on these insights, academics and practitioners can suggest subsequent, appropriate action to be taken for place branding Northamptonshire. Other county-regions can use the proposed typology and region brand management model to identify and manage stakeholders in their own context.

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