

Article

Building a Place Brand on Local Assets: The Case of The Pla de l'Estany District and Its Rebranding

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Abstract: The main objective of this article is to analyse whether the positioning of the Pla de l'Estany district, in Catalonia, can be redefined in a context of possible saturation of the sports brand that was structured thanks to the success of the 1992 Olympic Games. Furthermore, this article aims to analyse how to design and implement long-term public policies in place branding. The Pla de l'Estany district is one of the smallest in Catalonia and had its moment of splendour during the Barcelona Olympic Games, which positioned it as a place of natural beauty and sports tourism. However, twenty-five years later, we ask whether this positioning needs to be updated. This research deploys a methodological triangulation that combines in-depth interviews with opinion leaders, discussions in focus groups and an online survey open to citizens. This research presents three conclusions: it places the processes of citizen participation as a key element in the construction of territorial brands; refocuses the narrative of the territory of the Pla de l'Estany based on the concepts of “sustainable nature” and “traditional culture”; and conceptualises place branding not just from the perspective of promoting tourism, but also from that of fomenting sustainable governance.

Keywords: Pla de l'Estany; place brand; sustainable development; territorial identity

1. Introduction

The Pla de l'Estany is one of the smallest districts in Catalonia. Located around the lake of Banyoles, which shapes the identity of the region, it combines rural areas with urban spaces. It gained touristic momentum in 1992, when it became an Olympic venue of the Barcelona Olympic Games for water sports. Thus, both the lake and sport have been the two core elements of positioning of this territory since the 1990s, until the creation of the “Banyoles Turisme i Esport” [Banyoles Tourism and Sport] brand in 2014. However, we ask whether, after twenty-five years, these two positioning axes are reaching a saturation point and thus need to be updated.

Therefore, the aim of this article is to analyse whether this positioning can be adjusted within a context of possible saturation of the sports brand, and if the public administration, in this case the district council, can find already existing values and/or attributes that can improve its reputation and image, at both a national and international level. In this regard, this article evaluates whether the development of a regional branding strategy led by the public administration, linked to the definition of tangible and intangible assets of the territory, can integrate diverse citizen voices in the community construction of a new positioning.

Therefore, the objectives of this article lead us to consider the following research questions:

RQ1: In what assets or drivers should the new place brand of the Pla de l'Estany be sustained?

RQ2: How could the district council be successful with the launch, diffusion and maintenance of the new place brand?

This article follows a case study methodology based on applied research proposed by the Pla de l'Estany district council. We can understand this as a strategy of community building, or as a bottom-up citizen governance action within the framework of a place branding process in order to improve long-term sustainable development. The method used in this article, outlined in Section 3, is not restricted to this particular case study, and could therefore be used to help all those territories that need to reshape their positioning by taking into consideration the voices of local citizens [1].

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. Place Branding in the Public Administration

According to Marland, Lewis and Flanagan [2], we have to understand branding as the proactive act of bringing a brand to life through concerted, concentrated efforts from all key stakeholders. In this vein, Ashworth and Kavaratzis state that disillusionment with the effectiveness of traditional urban planning regulatory instruments from the 1970s onwards, together with changes in fashionable political approaches “have led to an increase in the use of marketing and branding in the public administration and have made marketing and branding a key functional area in public management. Place branding is usually considered to be one of the several applications of marketing approaches on public sector management and one of the many facets of entrepreneurial urban governance” [3] (p. 427).

However, although there is very little research available that tests whether the branding as governance strategy has any impact [4] (p. 486), brands managed by public entities enable the coordination of public policies, the mobilisation of their actors and the creation of tools for communicating and interacting with citizens [5]. Therefore, in the field of place branding, the process of defining the brand ends up comprising an informal *de facto* process of the creation of strategic plans, which are essential for policy-making through social partnership processes with stakeholders [6].

On the one hand, place branding rejects the corporate world in order to address, as positioning axes, the tangible and intangible values of a specific territory and, therefore, its identity [1,7–9]. On the other hand, the public administration has had to adopt strategies that link residents when designing place brands that can guarantee long-term narratives and become effective mechanisms for spatial planning, local development and economic promotion [4,6,10–12]. These two premises are exemplified in the study of Eshuis, Klijn and Braun [12]. The conclusions of their investigation of the positioning of Katendrecht assume two fundamental ideas: “First, [place marketing] provided a way to channel citizens’ feelings and emotions of fear regarding the upcoming developments in their area. [...] Second, the brand facilitated the articulation of citizens’ feelings and emotions regarding the identity of their community” [12] (p. 168).

These same authors, however, explain that both professionals and political leaders involved in a place-branding process face multiple obstacles. They categorise these obstacles in three different dimensions: “(1) The political obstacles related to citizen support, (2) classical marketing obstacles related to the content of marketing campaigns and reaching target audiences, and (3) administrative obstacles with large loadings on difficulties in the municipal organizations” [11] (p. 514). Therefore, the analysis of how a municipal administration (the district council of the Pla de l'Estany, with the representation of all the city councils of the region) leads a process of regional branding in this district—as well as the presentation of its tangible results—allows us to find a new empirical opportunity to examine how municipal entities are integrated in processes of place branding and the challenges they must face.

2.2. The Relationship between Place Branding and Sustainable Development

Eshuis and Klijn [5] understand that the management of territorial brands should enable the public administrations to better plan their policies. Today, public policy planning centred on environmental sustainability and sustainable development has become a central idea for good governance. In fact, the concept of sustainable development goes far beyond that laid out in the Rio Declaration on Environment and Development Agenda 21 in 1992, which was focused basically on a “strategy for

planning professionals, architects or development officials to address human developments effects on the environmental crisis" [13] (p. 1). Currently, sustainable development is considered an "elusive element located at the center of a triangle that has its three axes representing the development, the property and the resources conflicts on conventional planning strategy, around which are the key planning goals such as economic growth, social harmony, employment and financial relief and environmental protection" [14] (p. 201).

Maheshwari, Vandewalle and Bamber [14] (p. 207) point to "a number of concepts that contribute to the sustainable development of a place. These include the capacity to increase tourism, the investment in, and preservation of, the traditional business base, positive media involvement (demonstrating the capability to attract wider audiences globally), responsive and consistent governance, improved lifestyle standards and continuous infrastructural developments via regeneration and improved socio-economic outputs, all of which support increased place brand loyalty".

Therefore, the discipline of place branding transcends the simple touristic promotion of the territories—which several authors have called 'destination branding' [15]—and embraces their integral management from the perspective of the creation of strategic plans for economic promotion or urban planning, as well as the management of new models of bottom-up governance [1,6,16]. In their case study on the Liverpool 2008 European Capital of Culture brand, based on a qualitative methodology, Maheshwari, Vandewalle and Bamber [14] (p. 210) conclude: "This research suggests place branding is a key driver in terms of growth prospects of a place and indicates an urgent need to understand better the place branding concept and its inter-relationships within sustainable development, in order to implement place branding practices more effectively". The fact is, using this statement as an example, the intersection between the two disciplinary areas of place branding and sustainable development is gaining strength among academics.

In fact, place branding has become a discipline that has been growing constantly since the territories have taken advantage of great events, especially great sports events such as the Olympic Games or the FIFA World Cup, to open windows of opportunities for their promotion in international markets of tourists, talent and investment [17]. Unfortunately, it is not easy for these events to become part of a long-term and global strategy of territorial branding beyond immediate touristic promotion. Management of sports legacies and the amortisation of the investments made has been a key point that has captured the attention of certain researchers [14,18]. In this regard, those territories that have held great sporting events, such as the district of the Pla de l'Estany being an official venue of the Barcelona Olympic Games in 1992, need to consider how the investments made contribute to the long-term sustainable development of these areas: so that they are integrated into a balanced urban structure, can be used by the local population after the event, and help to attract new investments in the future. This is, in fact, the conclusion drawn by Moragas and Botella [18] from their analysis of how the legacy of the 1992 Barcelona Olympics was managed, both with respect to Barcelona and its area of influence, to sports, and also from a corporate perspective for the public and private organising bodies.

Therefore, thinking about the local population as a central element when it comes to managing the legacies of these media-events—that is, at the centre of the conception of the place branding and urban planning strategies—is essential for the sustainable development of these communities. Zouganeli et al. [15] (p. 739) state that "the concept of sustainability is based on the premise that the inhabitants of a destination should be involved in the way that destination is managed and promoted". In this way, the most valued strategies are those that base the construction of the territorial brands on a process of bottom-up consultation, including all the people involved in the management of the brand in the search for a shared identity: internal and external. In fact, Zouganli, et al. [15] (p. 742), in their analysis of the sustainability of Crete's tourist model, isolated three basic variables required to establish a sustainable management: holistic management perspective, long-term process and stakeholders' involvement. These are also three essential premises in the process of constructing territorial brands, considering that the management of a community's identity and consequent projected image becomes a complex process and collective project. Zouganli, et al. [15] (p. 743) conclude that "The main argument lies in the idea that only if local people agree with the image projected of their place of

residence should they be expected to live the brand. Otherwise, the gap between reality and induced image can create dissonance when tourists, foreign investors, and so on discover that the projected image of the city does not correspond to reality”.

3. Historical Remarks on the Branding In the Pla de l’Estany and Banyoles

Tourism brands have, for many decades, been the only vehicle that cities, regions and countries have used to promote a territory, internally and externally. In this section, we will analyse the tourist promotion of the Pla de l’Estany until just before the construction of the new brand. Pla de l’Estany is located in the center of the Girona province, as depicted in Figure 1. Figure 1 shows the current district division of Catalonia.

3.1. The Place Identity Projection of the Pla de l’Estany and Its Capital: Current Status and Areas for Improvement

Tourism in the Pla de l’Estany district has gone through several stages, reaching its peak in the 1960s thanks to The Puda Spa [19]. Since then, tourism has always been linked to Banyoles Lake and has witnessed how its tourist sector adapted over time, until it ended up with old accommodation that was in poor condition and also scarce, especially when large events were held. There was also a limited offering of leisure activities for tourists, especially in the low season; a low budget for keeping the main tourist assets such as the Serinyà prehistoric caves and the Darder museum in good condition; limited accessibility for people with reduced mobility to various places of touristic interest; poor signposting for tourists, being scarce and only in Catalan; and the lack of connection in terms of the promotion of tourism between the Banyoles Town Council and the District Council, which has resulted in less effective communication [19]. All of this has led to short stays in the region [20], with the average tourist walking a while by the lake of Banyoles and then moving immediately on to other places such as Castellfollit, Besalú, la Vall d’en Bas and Santa Pau and the volcanos, all of which are in the neighbouring district of La Garrotxa. The Pla de l’Estany is only known in Catalonia. In this regard, Palau Carreira [19] recommended opening up to new markets by taking advantage of the Costa Brava brand (see below), and strengthening other tourist products such as wellness tourism, school tourism, tourism for elderly people, and business tourism, making the most of the lake’s renown.



Figure 1. Map of Catalonia based on districts and capitals. Source: Institut Cartogràfic i Geològic de Catalunya.

Banyoles was an official venue of the 1992 Barcelona Olympics. As a result, today, it competes directly with municipalities that also have an Olympic legacy, such as, for example, the towns of Castelldefels, Calella and la Seu d'Urgell: a total of 15 Catalan towns or cities hosted official venues of the Barcelona Olympic Games. With regard to cultural tourism, the town competes with Girona and Besalú, which have managed to strengthen their Jewish past. With regard to nature tourism, the Pla de l'Estany competes with the Garrotxa region and its Volcanic Zone natural park. In short, the region is surrounded by some dynamic competing destinations, which can be seen as a problem but also as an opportunity, if one considers cooperation among the different destinations.

During the last decade, the actions taken to promote the town of Banyoles as a destination of sports tourism have remained unchanged, as can be seen in the promotion of the municipality, in June 2017, under the brand "Banyoles, Tourism and Sport", in the Sea Otter Europe festival, where above all, the idea of a unique destination for cyclists and triathletes was promoted [21]. The commitment to host great sports events, also called media-events, has also been maintained. In July 2017, Banyoles hosted the Catalan, Spanish and European Triathlon Clubs Championships. With this last competition Banyoles became the venue of an international triathlon competition for the seventh year running. The commitment of the Banyoles local government to convert its municipality into a national and international tourist and sports destination seems to be yielding positive results with respect to the increase in visitors to the town, with 57,000 visitors to the town in 2016, which was 8,500 more than in 2015 [22].

At present, we should highlight the two current campaigns in Banyoles for tourism promotion, each aimed at a different type of public: families and sports. A logo and slogan of these two campaigns are shown in Figure 2. The tourism campaign that targets families was launched in April 2017 and called: "Vine en família i et regalem Banyoles" (Bring the family and we'll give you Banyoles) [23]; and it has a logo with a childlike aesthetic, full of dragons, linked to the legend of the lake. The typography bears no relation to the tourism brands of the town, as we shall see in the next section. Meanwhile, the tourism campaign that targets a sporting public is called "Competir a Banyoles té premi!" (Competing at Banyoles has a prize!); and it also has its own logo. Once again, the typography and colours are very different from those of the different tourism brands that exist in the municipality and region (see the next section). Both campaigns are supported only by sales promotion, offering potential tourists discounts on their stays. They are, therefore, limited campaigns that make use of only one of many marketing techniques.



Figure 2. Logos of the specific tourism campaigns in the town of Banyoles, for a young and sporting public [23].

3.2. Tourism Brands Currently Used in the District

The Government of Catalonia divides the 42 districts into 9 tourism brands: Barcelona, Costa Brava, Costa Daurada, Costa Barcelona, Paisatges Barcelona, Pirineus (Pyrenees), Terres de Lleida,

Terres de l'Ebre and Val d'Aran. The Pla de l'Estany forms part of the "Costa Brava" tourist brand, together with the districts of l'Alt Empordà, el Baix Empordà, el Gironès and la Selva (see Figure 1). As Figure 3 shows, the logo of the "Costa Brava" tourism brand also includes the "Pirineu de Girona" (Girona Pyrenees) and the symbol is "G" with an exclamation mark ("!"), giving full prominence to "Girona", even though the word "Girona" does not appear in the original brand of the Generalitat.



Figure 3. Logo of the tourism brand "Costa Brava Girona Pyrenees" [24].

However, until 2018 the Pla de l'Estany district had a tourism brand with its own logo and slogan, as Figure 4 shows. The slogan combines numbers, symbols and letters, making it difficult to read: "Pla de l'Estany 2 + 2 = 5 És més!" ("Pla de l'Estany 2 + 2 = 5 It's more!").



Figure 4. Logo of the generic tourism brand of the Pla de l'Estany [25].

The tourist portal Turisme Pla de l'Estany [25] is presented as "the result of the combined efforts of private and public tourism agents of the district", whose aim is "to provide a quality service to visitors and tourists that come to the Pla de l'Estany". The website is quite limited and unappealing. It apparently lacks a clear and cohesive strategy.

Finally, from what we have been able to determine from the data extracted from promotional webs active in August 2017, in Banyoles, aside from the specific tourism campaigns, three brands are used simultaneously: 1) Turisme de Banyoles (Banyoles Tourism), 2) Banyoles Turisme i Esport (Banyoles Tourism and Sport), and 3) Destinació de Turisme Esportiu (DTE) (Sports Tourism Destination). Figure 5 shows the logo and the slogan of each brand.

First, the generic tourism brand of Banyoles has its own logo and slogan: "Una volta a l'estany" (A tour of the lake). Second, there is a complementary brand focused only on sport and created in 2014: "Banyoles Turisme i Esport" [26], which also has its own logo, with a typography and colours completely unrelated to the umbrella brand. Third, there is the brand given by the Government of Catalonia: the tourist seal "Destinació de Turisme Esportiu" (DTE), which is only granted to Catalan municipalities that have high quality sport infrastructures and services. In Catalonia there are only 16 municipalities with the DTE seal. In the case of Banyoles, the five sports certified by the DTE are rowing, canoeing and swimming, due to their connection with the lake, and cycling and triathlon.



Figure 5. Town-brands, of Banyoles town [26].

4. Materials and Methods

The autonomous community of Catalonia, located in the north-east of Spain, is divided into 42 districts and counties, each with its own district council, which acts as a supra-municipal administration for the management and maintenance of basic services: school transport, waste management and tourist promotion. These 42 districts are also divided into four provinces: Barcelona, Girona, Lleida and Tarragona. In this study, it is the district council of the Pla de l'Estany which has been declared as a driver of the process of redefining its place brand, by taking advantage of the singularities that emerge beyond a duality capitalised by tourism and sport. This district has eleven municipalities, with 31,738 inhabitants and an area of 262.78 square kilometres in the province of Girona.

This research deploys a methodological triangulation, carried out between January and May 2017, formed by focus groups and semi-structured interviews—from a typological sample—as well as a questionnaire for citizens based on a simple random sample. In this way, the research combines qualitative and quantitative research techniques that enable us to craft a transversal analysis of the results, always starting from the basis that, beforehand, there has been a SWOT analysis: this analysis identifies the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats of the starting point of our object of study [27,28].

After conducting the SWOT analysis, first ten focus groups were organised with social agents from all the area. This was carried out in May 2017. The collectives were: education; culture; business associations and traders; urban planning and environment; tourism and gastronomy; security forces; media; sport, youth and health; children and the elderly; and, finally, political representatives. Eleven semi-structured interviews of opinion leaders in the region were also conducted between June and July 2017, as shown in Table 1 below.

The selection of the opinion leaders that took part in the focus groups, and those that were interviewed, was made by the Pla de l'Estany district council, based on those organisations that have the most influence on its public agenda, as well as those people that can be considered civil ambassadors [29] of the district due to their social significance. In both cases, each session was structured around these general questions: What is a place brand? what do you expect from it? what are the main differences between a commercial brand and a place brand? what do you remember from the previous place brands in your district? how can a place brand be a driver for the territory? what are the main tangible and intangible attributes of this district?; in which type of campaigns would you use a new place brand? Each interview and focus group was videoed in order to transcribe each conversation to find the most important commonalities and differences among the arguments of every participant regarding these general questions.

Table 1. List of opinion leaders interviewed for the project.

Friday 23 June 2017	
Guest	Place
Jaume Fàbrega, gastronomist	Palol de Revardit Castle
Dolors Bramon, historian at the University of Barcelona	
Ramon Folch, ecosociologist	
Thursday 29 June 2017	
Guest	Place
Gonzalo Tabuenca, painter	Serinyà Prehistoric Cave Park
Joan Anton Abellán, historian	
Salvador Oliva, Professor of Philology at the University of Girona and poet	
Joan Nogué, Professor of Human Geography at the University of Girona	
Monday 3 July 2017	
Guest	Place
Pere Feliu, ex-auditor of the Banyoles' Town Council and of the District Council	Serinyà Prehistoric Cave Park
Joan Solana, former Mayor of Banyoles (1991–1999)	
Matthew Tree, journalist	
Esther Guerrero, Olympic sportswoman	

Finally, a participation process was opened via an online survey for all of the residents of the Pla de l'Estany, in order to give all those living there a voice and a vote on the positioning they wished for their territory. The survey was designed following the same questions as the interviews and the focus groups, and it gave citizens the opportunity to choose—using a Likert scale—different items that, in their opinion, might contribute to answering the questions “what is the Pla de l'Estany?” and “what is the main characteristic of its residents?” The survey received 151 responses, not all of which were complete. For this reason, the percentage of replies to each question may vary. It should also be noted that most of the responses came from the town of Banyoles (72.8%), the district capital where 61.8% of the district's population (19,615) are concentrated. Table 2 shows the percentage of replies according to each municipality of the district.

Table 2. Distribution of participants in the survey, in percentage, according to municipality.

Banyoles	72.8%
Camós	2.6%
Cornellà del Terri	4.6%
Crespià	0%
Espionellà	0%
Fontcoberta	3.3%
Palol de Revardit	0%
Porqueres	13.2%
Sant Miquel de Campmajor	0.7%
Serinyà	1.3%
Vilademuls	1.3%

In the following sections of this article, we will not present each and every one of the inputs obtained through these techniques, but rather the storytelling which is created out of the aggregate of the most significant results. In this way, we are able to provide a territorial account that is concretised through a desired positioning and subsequent brand. A similar methodology was used by Eshuis, Klijn and Braun [12] (p. 157), which, based on in-depth interviews, observation and analysis of secondary material, focuses its study on the revitalisation and subsequent positioning campaign of the Katendrecht port peninsula in Rotterdam. Kavartzis and Kalandides [6] also established a similar method to analyse the process of conceptualisation of the Bogotá brand in Colombia, as did Maheshwari, Vandewalle and Bamber [14] (p. 198) to establish “key facets responsible for driving the brand of a place [Liverpool 2008 European Capital of Culture] and examining the relationship between them in terms of achieving sustainability”.

5. Results

5.1. Starting Point and Initial Diagnosis

The presentation of our object of study, the Pla de l’Estany district, can be simplified with the SWOT analysis presented in Table 3, which is based on an extensive bibliographic and documentary review. This SWOT analysis aims to bring together the main characteristics that determine the current positioning of the Pla de l’Estany, before the start of the process of designing and developing the new brand.

Table 3. SWOT analysis of the Pla de l’Estany region carried out in summer 2017.

Weaknesses	Threats
<p>Demography: Small region with unpopulated areas.</p> <p>Local level administration: Strong administrative, socio-political and economic dependence on Girona.</p> <p>Tourist industry: Excessive prominence of the lake; tourists and visitors spend very little time in the region; little knowledge of the diversity of tourist attractions; scarce tourist infrastructures; poor tourist signage; coexistence of many unrelated tourist brands.</p> <p>Transportation and accessibility: No rail connection and poor bus connections with Barcelona; limited access for people with reduced mobility to tourist attractions.</p>	<p>Demography: Risk of further depopulation.</p> <p>Local level administration: A lack of coordination between public and private institutions could impede proper management of the new regional brand; only limited budgets are available to create, disseminate and maintain the brand.</p> <p>Tourist industry: The region is surrounded by competing destinations with a higher tourist offer; sports tourism is a limited market segment that cannot grow endlessly.</p>
Strengths	Opportunities
<p>Tourist industry: Celebration of national and international sports events, fairs and festivals throughout the year; positioned as a destination for sports tourism; family tourism is fairly well established; the region is part of the Costa Brava tourist brand.</p> <p>Economy: Beneficiary of the financial flows generated on the Girona-Olot-Ripoll cities route; little economic dependence on the services sector; a powerful industrial sector.</p> <p>Culture: First level paleontological heritage; settlements of very diverse cultures; unique industrial heritage linked to water; a region rich in legends; high quality gastronomy.</p> <p>Environment: A unique scenic natural landscape</p> <p>Demography: Population with a very high sense of pride and belonging; very willing population in terms of associations and volunteering.</p> <p>Transportation and accessibility: Excellent links with Girona, the provincial capital.</p>	<p>Tourist industry: Promoting the least visited tourist attractions of the region; focus on wellness tourism; paleontological tourism, Jewish tourism and industrial tourism.</p> <p>Economy: Option of involving the municipalities in order to achieve consistent messages and have a higher budget for communication and marketing.</p> <p>Culture: The close historical relationship between the region and water is a powerful and attractive story.</p> <p>Communication: Taking advantage of social networks to interact and maintain a permanent dialogue with the strategic audience.</p>

After the field work, the results presented below are mediated through two key realities: the definition of tangible and intangible differential values of the region. The new brand that is proposed for the region at the end of this research is derived from these and will be discussed in the following sections of the article, beginning with an analysis of the attributes, followed by the relation with the various existing brands and, finally, an explanation of the desired positioning. Figure 6 shows the logo and the slogan of the new brand of Pla de l'Estany district.



Figure 6. Logo and slogan of the Pla de l'Estany new brand: “The Pla de l'Estany, the district that pulsates”. Source: Creative Corner Agency.

Before going on to summarise these attributes, however, it is worth highlighting some aspects that repeatedly appeared during the field work using focus groups and in-depth interviews. Those interviewed all believe that the Pla de l'Estany brand should serve, before anything else, to generate a sense of allegiance and feeling of pride in belonging to the region, since the research carried out indicates that the current bond between citizens and their region is very weak.

Furthermore, in two discussion groups it was agreed that little work had been done by civil society to generate a regional feeling. Among the political representatives, there was some self-criticism: “we have not been able to create a sense of region, to build a cohesive discourse”. Meanwhile, the cultural and educational representatives explain that the brand should “help to create a regional consciousness”. We can therefore conclude, initially, that the creation of this brand should, first of all, involve the creation of a story that is capable of unifying wishes and wills at a regional level, in such a way that with the excuse of the brand a unique and shared regional identity can be created—one that at present does not seem to exist.

5.2. The Tangible Assets of the Region

The geographical reality of the region, according to Joan Nogué, Professor of Human Geography at the University of Girona can be understood from three landscapes: One central, *la conca lacustre* (the basin of the lake) – the lake and all the channels that issue from it; a second one that corresponds with what Josep Pla called the region of *Terrapims d'Empordà*, lying between L'Empordà and la Garrotxa, with a pleasant and even orography; and, finally, the sector of foothills of the Rocacorba and Sant Miquel de Campmajor massif, set among different landscapes.

However, the popular imaginary of the region is clearly identified with the lake of Banyoles, or what Ramon Folch calls the “hydric system of the lake”: 61.76% of those surveyed identify it as the main natural area of the region; and 69.29% say they would take a photo of the lake with them if they had to go to a desert island. This is, without any doubt, the dominant *frame* among those who live in the region.

The image of the lake is extended logically to the whole natural surroundings of the region. In this way, 78.7% of those who answered the survey agree that the main asset of the Pla de l'Estany is its “natural landscape”: the water landscapes, the irrigation channels, the paths, the geological heritage, and so forth. Another of the interviewees, the English journalist and resident of the region Matthew Tree, explains that “I liked the unique walks, and the calm and good humour that it exuded”.

One can detect, however, some concern about the industries that remain situated in the town centre, which break the notion of tranquillity and quality of life that the dominant natural landscape in the resident's imagination imposes. The "overexploitation and industrialisation" of the territory is, for those surveyed, the main concern of the region (78.6%).

In this dominant mental frame of the residents there are three tangible factors that are secondary but that firmly represent the identity of the region: its historical and architectural heritage; its sporting tradition; and its gastronomy.

With regard to history, Folch believes that "this territory registers the whole history of the country". In fact, the focus group in which the political representatives participated agreed that the Pla de l'Estany was "a Catalonia in miniature". In various discussion groups and interviews, it was made clear that the region includes a prehistoric, medieval and even industrial heritage that should be valued. This can be deduced from the diagnosis that was presented earlier.

With respect to the sporting tradition, the abundance of natural areas and, in general, the territorial disposition of the region, enables the practice of open air sports that is complemented extraordinarily well by first-class sports facilities: football pitches, sports pavilions, swimming pools and so forth. Banyoles' vocation for sport was definitively consolidated when it became an official venue of the 1992 Barcelona Olympic Games, which led to Banyoles obtaining one of the first certifications in Catalonia as a sports tourism destination. Nevertheless, the Banyolin athletes themselves recognise that sport is not the only consideration for the image of the capital.

The last tangible factor to highlight, shared by all those interviewed, and linked to the cultural tradition of the region, is its gastronomy. According to the historian and gastronomist Jaume Fàbrega, "the gastronomy of the Pla de l'Estany has some aspects that make it interesting, since there is a synthesis of culinary elements of la Garrotxa and l'Empordà". Fàbrega points to some of the products that can be seen as a "certificate of origin" of the region: la *xicoina* (chicory), beans, angel hair endives, *rabequets* (a popular squash), pear tomatoes, black *salsafins* (tubercles similar to turnips), la tortada (a typical dessert of Banyoles), bacon, garlic, veal, black turnips and liver sausage.

5.3. The intangible Assets of the Region

The main intangible asset identified is "quality of life", which received 70% affirmative replies in the survey. The flight from urban areas, due to the natural beauty of the region, on the one hand, and the possibility of having a capital with all the indispensable services on the other, has led to a high rating of the region by its residents regarding levels of wellbeing and quality of life. Table 4 below shows the three virtues and three shortcomings most agreed upon by those surveyed.

Table 4. Main virtues and shortcomings of the residents of the Pla de l'Estany, according to the survey.

Virtues		Shortcomings	
Welcoming	24.48%	Closed-minded	55.44%
Settled	23.46%	Classist	16.83%
Hard-working	13.26%	Nosy	5.94%

In this table, we can see the clear ambivalence between the main virtue, welcoming, and the main shortcoming, closed-minded citizens. In fact, in one of the interviews for this research, Joan Solana, the Mayor of Banyoles between 1991 and 1999, supported the notion of cultural diversity and intermingling. In the focus group of discussion on culture and education there was also a clear desire to highlight the value of "multiculturalism" as an asset of the region. However, Pere Feliu, the ex-auditor of the Banyoles' Town Council and of the District Council, states that "inland people are closed-minded, we do not open up easily".

Culture is one of the great intangible assets of the region, with a significant network of associations and two performing arts, music and theatre, that are well-established. In fact, some experts we consulted consider that there may be a large number of cultural activities that exceed what is manageable for the

district, which is the same as a cultural “overload”. Nevertheless, there are those who continue to insist on greater cultural leadership in the region.

At the same time, there is a need to highlight the heritage of legends that exist in the region, many of which are linked to the history of the lake. As is apparent from the exhibition “Llegendes i paisatges del Pla de l’Estany” (Legends and landscapes of the Pla de l’Estany), organised by the Darder Museum, these stories are centred around four essential protagonists: dragons, fairies, witches and demons. However, although the in-depth interviews highlighted them, the promotion of the literary tradition of the Pla de l’Estany is one of the aspects that needs to be focused on, given the responses of the survey: 39.86% of those surveyed gave it a 3 out of 5 in importance, and 25% gave it a 2 out of 5.

6. Discussion

In the current regional division of the autonomous community of Catalonia, supra-municipal agents (district councils) have become actors that are complicit with the territorial promotion and revitalisation of their surrounding environment. The strategies of place branding as a driving force for social and economic revitalisation have not been marginalised by the activity of these actors. The Pla de l’Estany is a good example of how, from the district council, there has been a need to rethink the position of the territory in a context of high competitiveness between municipalities and districts.

In relation to the discipline of place branding, while it had historically been linked exclusively to tourism promotion strategies or destination branding, this case study shows how, nowadays, place branding goes much further. It is based on a process of social consensus, an invitation to define who we are and to look for values and attributes that distinguish us and, ultimately, to define the tangible and intangible assets from which to sustain the territory, not only at the positioning level, but also at the growth level. That is to say: economic promotion and local development using sustainable long-term public policies [14,15]. In this regard, this exercise of place branding led by a public administration, as Karens et al. [4] (p. 486) explain, “is a deliberate governance strategy to influence citizens’ perceptions”. Or, what Eshuis, Braun and Klijn [11] (p. 507) assume as a basic evolution of “place marketing”: “Place marketing has evolved from applying particular promotional techniques for purposes such as increasing tourism to marketing as an integral part of urban governance”.

In relation to the concrete brand of the Pla de l’Estany, the new proposal should have three main components. First of all, a sustainable natural landscape. This natural landscape is defined essentially by the lake, but at the same time by other secondary landscapes that need to be highlighted, despite not being connected to water: the Rocacorba Massif and the Empordà *Terraprimis* zone. The fundamental framework underlying this place brand should be rooted in the notion of sustainable nature, which is a genuinely distinguishing feature of this region and, further, denotes a high quality of life perceived by the citizens surveyed. This natural landscape is what has allowed a clearly valued setting for the practice of sports. Secondly, the new brand should be based on local cultural traditions. This region has a rich cultural heritage, linked to three key aspects: performing arts (music, theatre and dance), popular culture (legends) and heritage management (historical legacy). The richness of this last aspect has, as we have seen, led some people to define the region as “Catalonia in miniature”. Finally, there is a need to intensify the relationship between Banyoles, the district capital, and the rest of the municipalities in the region.

Regarding RQ1, we propose that this brand should not have a single, unique driver, like those created from the successful Olympic spirit implemented from 1992 onwards. Although most of the agents with whom we have been able to interact identify water as the most genuine, characteristic and identifying element in the region, we understand that, over time, it may have suffered from wear and tear and therefore our proposal should incorporate water from a renewed perspective, establishing synergies with other elements of regional projection, such as its rich cultural heritage and the revision of its sports tourism industry.

It seems that we are faced with a geographic reality where citizens know the identifying elements, but have difficulties in reconciling them with an identity that is renewed for every historical moment.

In this regard, this lack of commitment of the citizens of the district to the current identity of the Pla de l'Estany is a central aspect to consider, so as to plan the creation of a long-term public policy. As Maheshwari, Vandewalle and Bamber [14] highlight, stakeholders' engagement in a bottom-up process of place brand creation is crucial in order to plan sustainable growth.

Therefore, and in answer to RQ2, we believe that the district council has many opportunities to succeed with the new place brand if it focuses on the residents of all municipalities as main brand ambassadors [6]. The fact that many residents and community leaders actively took part in the rebranding process, together with the fact that the Pla de l'Estany citizens are especially proud to be part of this region and are very active at the associative level, should be taken into consideration for the creation of policies to disseminate and strengthen the brand at the local, regional, national and international levels.

7. Conclusions

The Pla de l'Estany district is experiencing a clear contrast between the youth of the region, as a recognised administrative space as a Catalan district, and an old tradition maintained throughout history, where the lake and the activity around it is the backbone of the region. Therefore, the new brand of the Pla de l'Estany illustrated in Figure 6, conceptualised by a research group at the University of Vic-Central University of Catalonia and designed by Creative Corner Agency, aims to act as the cohesive element of a truly local story based on elements that are already present in the popular imagination of the region.

This research also strengthens the role of public administrations in the definition of a new place brand. In this case, the Pla de l'Estany district council, which is a supra-municipal administration, was the main driver behind the coordination of a global strategy among different municipalities to improve their positioning. This illustrates how political coordination and long-term public policy planning can be essential for successful place branding campaigns. Without political determination, place branding campaigns weaken.

Although the "link between place branding and its relationship with sustainable development has received little attention" [14] (p. 202), this case study also shows how place branding, as a central component of a public administration governance strategy, needs to be associated not only with tourist promotion but also with sustainable governance for long-term positioning. In fact, and according to the physical characteristics of the Pla de l'Estany, it is mandatory to include sustainability aspects as key arguments for the place branding process.

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