

## CO-CREATING PLACE IDENTITY: PARTICIPATORY WORKSHOPS FOR PLACE BRANDING ALIGNED WITH LOCAL VALUES

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### **Abstract**

*Place branding has emerged as a powerful tool for enhancing local identity and fostering sustainable urban and regional development. However, effective place branding should transcend promotional campaigns, engaging deeply with the cultural, historical, and social values of the community of the place. This research investigates a participatory approach to place branding that integrates local voices, ensuring the alignment of a place's identity with its inhabitants' perceptions and aspirations.*

*Our study focuses on two medium-sized cities in Greece, characterized by rich cultural heritage and a vibrant local community. The methodology combines desk research on the cities' historical and cultural assets with participatory focus group workshops involving residents, local stakeholders, and institutional representatives. Through structured dialogues, participants reflected on their emotional connection to the place and identified key elements that shape its identity. For drafting the final proposal, a strategic visioning workshop was held with local participants, showing both the prospects but also the difficulties of creating a common vision/brand for the city.*

*Findings reveal that integrating participatory methods in place branding not only fosters inclusivity but also strengthens the authenticity of the brand. Key outcomes include:*

- 1. A shared understanding of the place's core identity.*
- 2. Consensus on branding elements that resonate with cultural and historical narratives.*
- 3. Recommendations for communication strategies that reflect community values.*

*This project underscores the importance of a bottom-up approach to place branding, advocating for practices that prioritize cultural sustainability and community engagement.*

**Key words:** *Place Branding, Community Engagement, Participatory Workshops, Cultural Identity, Sustainable Development, Local Values*

## **Introduction**

In recent years, place branding has emerged as an essential tool for cities and regions aiming to define and promote their unique identities. Traditionally linked to marketing strategies designed to attract investment and tourism and stimulate economic growth, place branding has evolved to encompass a more comprehensive approach. This approach recognises that a place's identity is closely connected to its cultural heritage, historical narratives, and residents' lived experiences. This evolution has resulted in a growing interest in participatory place branding, a methodology that actively engages local communities in shaping the identity and strategic vision of their areas.

Researchers emphasise the significance of incorporating local voices and lived experiences into place branding processes to ensure authenticity, inclusivity, and long-term sustainability (Kavaratzis & Kalandides, 2015). A branding strategy that emerges from within the community not only reinforces a place's cultural identity but also strengthens social cohesion and civic pride. When branding initiatives align with residents' perceptions, historical narratives, and collective aspirations, they foster a sense of co-ownership, encouraging active participation in shaping and promoting the city's image. This bottom-up approach contrasts sharply with top-down branding strategies, often presenting an oversimplified or market-driven version of place identity, neglecting the complexities of a city's social and cultural landscape. Such externally imposed narratives risk creating a disconnect between official representations and local realities, leading to branding efforts that feel inauthentic, exclusionary, or even contested by the very people they aim to represent (Zenker & Beckmann, 2013). As a result, successful place branding must move beyond mere promotional tactics and embrace participatory, adaptive, and context-sensitive methods that allow cities to develop identities that are rooted in their histories yet responsive to contemporary challenges and opportunities.

This research investigates a participatory approach to place branding by focusing on two historically and culturally rich medium-sized cities in Northern Greece, Xanthi and Komotini. Both cities are characterised by a diverse social fabric, shaped by centuries of multicultural interaction, with Greek, Muslim, and other communities coexisting and contributing to their distinctive identities. Their vibrant cultural landscapes, which include traditional architecture, long-standing festivals, and dynamic creative industries, provide fertile ground for examining how place branding can be co-developed with local communities rather than imposed by external actors. By exploring the role of participatory workshops in these cities, this study seeks to understand how collective engagement can shape authentic, community-driven branding strategies that reflect the lived experiences, cultural values, and aspirations of residents. Additionally, given the cities' geographical and socio-economic interconnections, the research provides insights into how participatory place branding can function in regions with shared histories yet distinct local identities, contributing to broader discussions on regional identity and governance.

The study aims to address the following key questions:

- ✓ How can participatory workshops enhance the inclusivity and authenticity of the place branding process?
- ✓ What challenges and opportunities arise from integrating community perspectives into place branding strategies?
- ✓ In what ways do cultural heritage and local narratives influence the branding of medium-sized cities in Greece?

To investigate these questions, this study employs a mixed-method approach that integrates desk research, interviews, focus groups, and participatory workshops. The research began with an extensive review of the cultural, historical, and socio-economic contexts of

Xanthi and Komotini, followed by on-site visits and interviews with key stakeholders, including municipal representatives, cultural organisations, and residents. A SWOT analysis was conducted to assess strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats related to place identity and branding strategies. However, the core of the research methodology centered on focus groups and participatory workshops, which played a crucial role in capturing community perspectives and fostering collective place-making strategies. These interactive sessions encouraged participants to articulate their perceptions of place identity, discuss challenges, and co-develop branding proposals. Through structured dialogues and collaborative activities, residents, cultural actors, and policymakers engaged in a co-creative process, identifying key branding elements rooted in local narratives and shared experiences. The participatory workshops, in particular, served as a platform for bottom-up governance, ensuring that place branding strategies were not imposed externally but instead emerged organically from within the community. This methodology underscores the significance of inclusive, community-driven approaches in shaping urban identity and branding strategies by prioritizing active involvement and co-creation.

The findings of this study will contribute to broader discussions on place branding, participatory urban governance, and the right to the city, emphasising the need for inclusive, community-driven approaches in urban development. By integrating local voices and co-creation into the place branding process, this research highlights the importance of aligning branding strategies with residents' lived experiences, cultural narratives, and collective aspirations. Rather than viewing place branding solely as a tool for economic promotion and tourism attraction, this study underscores its role as a mechanism for strengthening local identity, fostering civic engagement, and reinforcing a sense of belonging. Furthermore, the research supports the argument that sustainable place branding extends beyond visual aesthetics and marketing campaigns—it requires long-term community participation, institutional support, and policy integration to be truly impactful. In this context, the study advocates for branding strategies that prioritise cultural sustainability, social inclusivity, and democratic participation, ensuring that urban identity is shaped not by external market forces but by the people who inhabit and experience the city daily.

### **Literature Review: Towards a Participatory Approach to Place Branding and Co-Creation of Urban Identity**

Over the past two decades, place branding has developed from a practice driven by marketing objectives into a multidimensional, strategic tool used by cities and regions to define, communicate, and develop their unique identities. Traditional place branding strategies were focused on enhancing the competitiveness of a place through economic growth, investment attraction, and tourism development (Metaxas, 2009), often based on top-down approaches, promoting idealised representations of place that often distorted the complexity of everyday experiences and social dynamics of local communities (Anholt, 2007; Kavartzis & Ashworth, 2005 ). It is worth mentioning that a successful place brand needs to be anchored in the identity and authenticity (staged or real) of the place (Ageeva & Foroudi, 2019 ). In other words, the starting point for developing the place brand is the place's identity (Pedeliento & Kavartzis, 2019). However, place identity is not a static or an externally imposed construct, but it is created through a complex system of interactions between the individual and the collective, the physical and the non-physical, the functional and the emotional, the internal and the external, and the organised and the random (Jacobs, 1961; Kavartzis and Hatch, 2013).

### ***From Image to Identity: Evolving Approaches to Place Branding***

The evolution of place branding has marked a shift from viewing cities as products to attract tourists and investors into a more holistic, multidimensional process that extends beyond mere visual representation (Kavaratzis & Hatch, 2013; Boisen et al., 2018). Traditional approaches focused on constructing appealing images, often inspired by commercial branding practices (Anholt, 2007). These strategies, frequently designed by top-down approaches, produce generic or even misleading portrayals of cities that overlook the lived experiences, cultural narratives, and values of the local community.

However, an effective place brand should be anchored in the identity and authenticity of the place it represents, due to the fact that place is a complex phenomenon that represents a large entity consisting of a variety of tangible and intangible components. This means acknowledging not only the visible and tangible elements of a place (including heritage sites, infrastructure, and architecture), but also its intangible components, which include culture, history, mythology, religion, people, environment, politics, food, and hospitality. Furthermore, authentic place branding emerges when it reflects the true character of a place—its distinctiveness, values, and narratives—and when local people are empowered to define and express what their place means to them (Cohen, 1988; Houghton & Stevens, 2010 ). In line with this view, if place brand is not deeply rooted in place identity, then it can have negative results, especially for the internal stakeholders (Houghton & Stevens, 2010; Kavaratzis & Hatch, 2013).

Thus, effective place branding requires inclusive and participatory processes. Marketing and branding models such as the “4Rs” (rights, roles, relationships, responsibilities) (Aitken & Campelo, 2011) refer to the social dimension of the branding process, which highlights the role of residents not as passive recipients but as active co-creators of the city’s narrative (Deffner et al., 2019). Through bottom-up processes and co-creation, place branding becomes a democratic and culturally embedded practice in which local identity and everyday life (with their distinctive characteristics) are represented (Kavaratzis & Hatch, 2013).

### ***The Rise of Participatory Place Branding and Community Engagement***

In response to the limitations of traditional branding approaches, scholars and practitioners have increasingly turned to participatory and more inclusive models that promote an active role of local communities in the creation of a place’s identity. Participatory place branding engages a broad range of local stakeholders—residents, cultural institutions, community organisations, businesses, and public authorities—in the co-creation of a place’s identity (Aitken & Campelo, 2011; Zenker & Braun, 2010). It is worth mentioning that participatory urban planning methods, such as co-creation workshops and citizen assemblies, have been increasingly used to engage residents in shaping urban spaces (Healey, 1997). These methods align with Lefebvre’s (1996 ) concept of the Right to the City, which argues for democratic participation in urban decision-making and especially in shaping urban space and identity. The integration of participatory practices in place branding allows for a more inclusive and representative narrative of urban identity (Kavaratzis & Kalandides, 2015).

As Kalandides (2011) notes, participatory methods foster a sense of ownership, authenticity, and community pride, ensuring that branding initiatives reflect the lived experiences and aspirations of local communities. Through focus groups, workshops, and collaborative storytelling, residents articulate what their place means to them, what narratives they wish to preserve or transform, and how they envision their city’s future (Kavaratzis & Kalandides, 2015; Zenker & Beckmann, 2013). The concept of place attachment, which refers

to the emotional bond between individuals and their environment, has been identified as a crucial factor in shaping place identity (Scannell & Gifford, 2010).

The emphasis on inclusion also enables the representation of marginalised voices, ensuring that place branding does not reinforce existing inequalities or cultural hierarchies. In multicultural or historically layered cities such as Xanthi and Komotini, participatory branding allows for the negotiation of multiple narratives and the expression of complex identities that reflect lived diversity.

### ***Challenges and Benefits of Participatory Branding***

Despite its advantages, participatory branding is confronted with a range of challenges. One of the major concerns is the complexity of balancing the multiple stakeholder perspectives (Hankinson, 2015). Different groups—residents, businesses, cultural organisations, and municipal authorities—may have conflicting visions for the city’s identity, making difficult to create a unified branding strategy.

Another challenge lies in the lack of institutional support required for participatory processes. Effective community engagement demands time, resources, facilitation skills, and long-term commitment. In many cases, local authorities lack the capacity or political will to sustain inclusive branding strategies over time (Boisen et al., 2018).

Nevertheless, when participatory place branding is properly implemented, brings significant benefits. It enhances social cohesion by strengthening community bonds, encouraging active citizenship, and cultivating a sense of belonging and pride. Moreover, co-created branding tends to resonate more strongly with local and regional audiences, offering an image of place that is both authentic and meaningful. Finally, a key outcome of participatory branding is the recognition that place identity is never complete. It is an ongoing, collective process that evolves with the community. Embracing this dynamic nature allows cities to remain adaptive, reflective, and responsive to social change while preserving their unique character and authenticity.

This literature review provides the basis for understanding the role of participatory methods in place branding. The following sections explore how these theoretical insights were applied in the case studies of Xanthi and Komotini.

### **Case study cities: Xanthi and Komotini**

Xanthi and Komotini are two medium-sized cities in Northern Greece, each distinguished by its unique yet interconnected cultural identity, shaped by historical influences and contemporary urban dynamics. These cities serve as significant cultural and administrative hubs within the region, reflecting the multicultural character of Thrace and the interplay between diverse ethnic and social groups.

Xanthi is a city built at the foothills of the Rhodope Mountains, combining both natural and architectural elements. Its rich history has left visible marks on the city's appearance. For this reason, it is often referred to as the "city of a thousand colors". Xanthi is renowned for its well-preserved old town, featuring traditional mansions and Ottoman-era, neoclassical, and eclectic buildings that stand as a testament to its rich architectural heritage. Historically, the city has been a melting pot of cultural influences, shaped by the coexistence of Greek Orthodox, Muslim, and Pomak communities, each contributing to its distinctive urban and social fabric. Today, Xanthi remains a cultural focal point, hosting major events such as the Xanthi Carnival, one of Greece's largest and most vibrant festivals, and the Old Town Festival, which celebrates local traditions, folklore, and artistic expression. These cultural events,

alongside the city’s dynamic creative sector, reinforce Xanthi’s reputation as a center for cultural production, artistic innovation, and heritage preservation.

Komotini, the administrative capital of the Eastern Macedonia and Thrace region, embodies a different yet equally significant urban identity. Unlike Xanthi, Komotini has a political, academic, and multicultural character, serving as a key regional center for governance and education. The city is home to the Democritus University of Thrace, which attracts a large student population and fosters a lively intellectual and cultural environment. Komotini’s demographic composition is notably diverse, with a Greek Orthodox majority, a significant Muslim minority, and Pomak communities, reflecting the region’s complex historical legacy. The city's cultural identity is deeply tied to its historical evolution, shaped by Byzantine, Ottoman, and Greek influences, as well as its contemporary role as a hub for regional policy-making and cross-cultural interaction.

The selection of Xanthi and Komotini as case studies provides a comprehensive framework for analysing participatory place branding in cities that balance heritage preservation, cultural diversity, and economic development. Their shared and unique characteristics facilitate a comprehensive examination of how participatory branding strategies can effectively link historical narratives, engage local communities, and influence sustainable urban development policies. By examining how residents, stakeholders, and institutions perceive and contribute to place identity, this study sheds light on the potential of participatory branding as a tool for fostering social cohesion, reinforcing cultural authenticity, and enhancing the cities’ appeal on a regional and national scale.

***Xanthi vs. Komotini***

Xanthi and Komotini, as mentioned before, present both shared and distinct characteristics that influence their place branding potential. While both cities have rich cultural heritages and diverse populations, their urban identities and strategic branding challenges differ in meaningful ways.

**Table 1: Xanthi vs. Komotini**

<b>Aspect</b>	<b>Xanthi</b>	<b>Komotini</b>
<b>Cultural Identity</b>	Strong focus on <b>festivals, traditions, and artistic expression</b> . A city known for its <b>vivid cultural scene</b> , deeply influenced by Greek, Muslim, Pomak and Jewish communities.	Defined by <b>administrative, academic, and cross-cultural interactions</b> . A city where cultural identity is shaped by a mix of <b>regional governance, education, and diverse ethnic communities</b> .
<b>Architectural &amp; Historical Landscape</b>	<b>Well-preserved Old Town</b> , Ottoman-era, eclecticism and neoclassical buildings, historical mansions, and former tobacco warehouses.	A city with <b>Byzantine, Ottoman, and Greek influences</b> , but with a more contemporary urban structure and less preserved historical architecture.
<b>Key Cultural Events</b>	<b>Xanthi Carnival</b> , one of Greece’s most well-known festivals, and the <b>Old Town Festival</b> , celebrating local traditions.	Fewer internationally recognized cultural events but a <b>strong emphasis on regional and minority cultural expressions</b> .
<b>Demographic Composition</b>	Predominantly <b>Greek Orthodox</b> , with a strong presence of <b>Muslim and Pomak communities</b> ,	One of Greece’s most <b>ethnically diverse cities</b> , with significant <b>Greek Orthodox, Muslim, and</b>

Aspect	Xanthi	Komotini
	historically creating a multicultural atmosphere.	<b>Pomak populations, fostering multicultural interactions and cohabitation.</b>
<b>Economic &amp; Development Focus</b>	Cultural tourism, creative industries, and small-scale entrepreneurship.	Administrative functions, academic sector, and regional policymaking.
<b>Challenges in Place Branding</b>	Managing <b>seasonal tourism demand</b> , maintaining <b>authenticity</b> while expanding cultural attractions.	Balancing <b>multicultural representation in branding</b> while integrating the city's <b>academic and administrative identity</b> .
<b>Potential for Participatory Place Branding</b>	High potential due to <b>existing cultural engagement</b> , community-driven events, and strong local narratives.	Participatory branding could help <b>bridge cultural divides</b> , strengthen local identity, and enhance regional positioning.

Xanthi and Komotini, despite their shared regional context, exhibit distinct urban identities that shape their place branding strategies. Xanthi is widely recognised as a cultural hub, celebrated for its vibrant artistic scene, historical architecture, and annual festivals that attract both locals and visitors. In contrast, Komotini functions primarily as an academic and administrative center, housing key regional institutions and serving as a melting pot of diverse communities. These differences create unique branding opportunities for each city. Xanthi can capitalise on its rich cultural heritage and dynamic creative sector, reinforcing its image as a destination for cultural tourism and artistic expression. Komotini, on the other hand, can highlight its multicultural character and academic presence, positioning itself as a center for knowledge exchange, regional governance, and cross-cultural dialogue. However, both cities face distinct challenges in implementing participatory place branding. Xanthi must navigate the fine line between cultural preservation and tourism-driven commercialisation, ensuring that branding efforts do not dilute its authentic identity. Meanwhile, Komotini’s challenge lies in fostering an inclusive representation of its diverse communities, balancing the different cultural narratives that coexist within the city.

Despite these differences, both cities share common ground in their deep-rooted traditions and historical significance, providing a strong foundation for participatory branding approaches. By actively involving local stakeholders in shaping their urban identity, both Xanthi and Komotini can develop branding strategies that enhance community engagement, strengthen cultural sustainability, and create long-term value for their residents and visitors alike. By examining these two cities side by side, the study reveals how participatory branding strategies need to be tailored to each city's unique socio-cultural and economic landscape. This comparison provides valuable insights into how cities with shared regional characteristics but different urban functions can adopt branding approaches that are both authentic and effective, aligning with local values and aspirations.

## Methodology

This chapter outlines the methodology employed in this study, which is divided into three main sections: first visit, online meetings, and participatory workshops. The combination of direct engagement through field visits and participatory workshops, along with virtual interactions, aims to provide a comprehensive and nuanced perspective on the cultural dynamics at play. Prior to these activities, a secondary literature review is conducted to

identify both qualitative and quantitative elements—material and immaterial—of culture in the two cities.

### ***Primary Research and Data Collection***

The initial phase of this study focused on a comprehensive search and categorization of all relevant cultural, social, and urban infrastructure data. This process was crucial for establishing a solid understanding of the cultural landscape in Xanthi and Komotini. The first step involved the compilation of existing data, including reports, archival records, and academic literature related to the cultural identity and infrastructure of both cities. Next, stakeholders and infrastructure were categorised, identifying cultural institutions, creative industries, municipal authorities, and grassroots organisations. This mapping helped to clarify the various entities contributing to the cultural scene in each city. Information was then organised into thematic databases, facilitating comparative analysis of available resources. This process also highlighted gaps in the cultural infrastructure that require further attention. Additionally, spatial mapping of cultural assets was undertaken to visualise areas of cultural density and identify underutilised spaces. This cartographic representation helps to visualise the data collected; the two maps can be compared in terms of the number and concentrations of points of interest.

Finally, a comprehensive list of key actors in the cultural sector was developed to ensure a thorough and representative approach to stakeholder engagement. The identification of these stakeholders is crucial for the next phases of the research. These steps provided an initial basis for understanding the existing context and laid the groundwork for more in-depth qualitative research through interviews and participatory workshops.

### **Phase 1: First Meeting and Interviews**

The initial phase of the research included a field visit and interviews to collect first-hand information on the cultural, social, and urban dynamics of Xanthi and Komotini. This phase was organised into two main activities: field observation and semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders.

#### ***A. Field observation:***

The research team conducted a structured tour of the city to document existing cultural infrastructure and public spaces. This was done to confirm the information collected in the secondary survey and data collection remotely. Beyond the most popular venues, and infrastructure with a distinct online presence, the team identified unused or underused cultural and public spaces, focusing on potential opportunities for regeneration and integration into a comprehensive place branding strategy. During the city tour stage, detailed notes and photographic documentation were collected to analyse spatial characteristics and urban dynamics. Particular attention was paid to historic districts, community hubs, and creative spaces, examining their roles in shaping the city's identity. In addition, the team identified neglected or abandoned public spaces that could be reused for cultural initiatives.



**Images 1 & 2: Exploring and mapping cultural infrastructures**

### ***B. Semi-structured Interviews:***

Prior to the site visit, as mentioned above, a list of key individuals and organisations involved in cultural administration, urban planning, and community development was compiled. The study team was then contacted by phone or email to ensure a diverse range of stakeholders were involved. Participants included city officials, representatives of cultural institutions, members of the creative industries, and residents actively involved in community initiatives. The interview framework explored issues such as the current cultural landscape and the strengths and weaknesses of existing policies, and aspirations for the city's cultural future. Interviewees provided insights into community engagement practices and identified challenges they face in promoting participatory decision-making in cultural planning. The research team encouraged interviewees to highlight both tangible and intangible aspects of the city's identity, including traditions, historical narratives, and artistic expressions. The interviews were recorded, transcribed, and analysed to extract recurring themes and key perspectives to inform subsequent phases of the research.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted at the same time as the field observation. This allowed the interviewees to visit the sites and point out places not identified by the team, or other places whose current use is not cultural but could potentially be. By systematically integrating direct observations with stakeholder input, this phase established a fundamental understanding of the cultural and social ecosystem of each city. The insights gained will inform the design of the next stages, particularly the SWOT analysis and participatory workshops, ensuring that the final place branding proposals are rooted in local knowledge and perspectives.

### **Phase 2: Discussion of Progress and SWOT Analysis**

After the initial data collection phase, a virtual stakeholder meeting was organised to engage participants in a discussion of the preliminary findings. This meeting was crucial to improve

research knowledge and to ensure that various perspectives were taken into account before moving forward to participatory workshops. All stakeholders from the initial list were invited, but also other experts disclosed during the city visit. The online meeting enabled almost all invitees to participate, encouraging dialogue and discussion on everyone's suggestions.

### ***1. Presentation of preliminary findings:***

Initially, the conference began with an introduction of the participants to the project and the purpose of the meeting. This was followed by a presentation by the research team. The basic knowledge gained from fieldwork, interviews, and initial observations was collected and presented. The data was organised into thematic categories, focusing on cultural identity, urban development, and place branding strategies. Visual aids, including maps and diagrams, were presented and used to demonstrate spatial patterns and stakeholder networks.

### ***2. SWOT analysis and Collaborative Assessment:***

In the following, a structured SWOT analysis was presented divided into the main parts of the analysis (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats) and the four main themes (actions and institutions, infrastructure and resources, creative economy and entrepreneurship, and identity and branding).

Strengths and opportunities related to existing cultural assets, cultural associations, community engagement, and historical narratives were identified. On the other hand, weaknesses and threats revealed challenges such as underutilization/abandonment of cultural sites, or sometimes the absence of major infrastructure. Perhaps the main challenge proved to be the lack of cooperation and coordination between stakeholders and policy constraints.

### ***3. Integrating feedback and improving findings:***

Participants engaged in guided discussions to propose actionable solutions to address weaknesses and seize opportunities. But also, to comment on and confirm findings.

Participants offered direct feedback on the analysis, which helped clarify ambiguities and provided valuable contextual information. Some of the additional comments that emerged related to social inclusion, accessibility of cultural initiatives, and cross-sectoral cooperation. The final SWOT assessment laid the foundations for structuring the participatory.

By incorporating iterative feedback from stakeholders, this phase enhanced the credibility and relevance of the survey findings. The collective analysis ensured that subsequent workshops would focus on the real concerns and aspirations expressed by the community, thus improving the effectiveness of the place branding strategy.

## **Phase 3: Participatory Workshops**

The third and most critical phase of the research centered on the implementation of participatory workshops, which served as the primary mechanism for co-creating the place branding strategy. These workshops were designed as interactive spaces where local stakeholders, including residents, business owners, cultural actors, and municipal representatives, could engage in meaningful dialogue and collective decision-making. The goal was to move beyond traditional top-down branding approaches and instead develop a strategy deeply rooted in local narratives, cultural heritage, and the aspirations of the community. Through a structured yet flexible methodology, participants were encouraged to reflect on their city's identity, articulate key branding elements, and collaborate in shaping a

shared vision for the future. By integrating diverse perspectives and fostering a sense of ownership, the workshops aimed to ensure that the resulting branding proposals were authentic, inclusive, and sustainable.



**Images 3 & 4: The information posters for the participatory workshops**

### *A. Structure and Process of the Workshops*

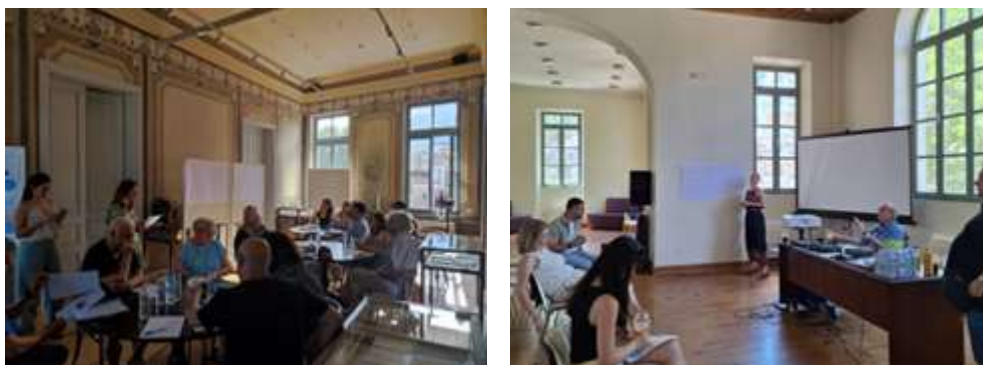
The participatory workshops followed a structured yet adaptable framework, ensuring that discussions were informed, inclusive, and conducive to meaningful collaboration. The process unfolded through a series of carefully designed steps, each aimed at fostering engagement, stimulating critical reflection, and guiding participants toward the co-creation of a shared place branding strategy.

#### *Presentation of Prior Research*

The workshops commenced with a comprehensive presentation of key findings derived from the preceding phases of the research, including insights from fieldwork, interviews, and the SWOT analysis. This step was essential in setting a common foundation for discussion, ensuring that all participants were familiar with the research outcomes, and providing an empirical basis for the branding process. By grounding the discussion in real data and lived experiences, the presentation aimed to bridge different perspectives and encourage participants to engage with the material critically.

#### *Introduction to the Workshop Goals*

Following the research presentation, the researchers introduced the core objectives of the workshop, emphasising the significance of collaborative place identity formation and the co-creation of branding strategies. This phase aimed to clarify the participatory nature of the process, highlighting the role of each stakeholder in shaping the branding approach. Participants were encouraged to reflect on their city's identity, consider how it is currently perceived, and envision how they would like it to evolve. The emphasis was placed on authenticity, inclusivity, and sustainability, ensuring that the branding process aligned with local values and long-term aspirations.



**Images 5 & 6: Archive images from the participatory workshops in the two cities**

### ***Group Formation***

To facilitate dynamic discussions and encourage diverse contributions, participants were organised into small, multidisciplinary working groups. Each group was carefully composed to reflect a mix of backgrounds, expertise, and affiliations, incorporating local government officials, cultural stakeholders, community representatives, and youth groups. This structure ensured that a broad spectrum of voices and experiences was represented, fostering an environment where different perspectives could converge and complement one another. The group format encouraged collaborative problem-solving, creative brainstorming, and cross-sectoral dialogue, essential components of a participatory place branding approach.

### ***Interactive Group Activities and Proposal Development***

To guide discussions and encourage forward-thinking strategies, each group received a structured worksheet featuring the following central question:

*"What would constitute an improvement or success in your city's cultural landscape over the next decade—by 2034?"*

This open-ended prompt allowed participants to reflect on long-term aspirations, identify key challenges, and propose actionable solutions. Working collectively, group members engaged in in-depth discussions, drawing from their lived experiences and expertise. Their responses captured a range of priorities, illustrating both common concerns and diverse perspectives. Notable responses included:

- ✓ "Showcasing historic buildings as pillars of activities that bring the city's history to life."
- ✓ "Discarding outdated, centralized cultural production mindsets that exclude participation and interaction."
- ✓ "I consider the participation of the Muslim youth community essential."
- ✓ "Training of a volunteer network and potential cultural leaders."
- ✓ "Redefining direction and engaging new stakeholders."
- ✓ "Connection with the local community."

The structure of the workshop was designed to ensure that ideas evolved through collective deliberation. Following the brainstorming phase, each group selected one proposal to present in detail to the larger assembly. The presenting group elaborated on the rationale behind their proposal, its expected impact, and potential implementation strategies. Researchers recorded each proposal, ensuring that every idea was documented for further discussion.

### ***Iterative Refinement through Group Exchange***

After all groups completed their first round of presentations, a second round followed, during which each group formulated and presented a second proposal. This iterative approach encouraged participants to refine their ideas based on earlier discussions, integrate new insights, and consider complementary or alternative approaches.

Each proposal was carefully documented, allowing a comprehensive collection of ideas to emerge by the end of the workshop. This process ensured that a broad spectrum of cultural branding strategies was explored, incorporating different perspectives and stakeholder priorities.

### ***Collective Decision-Making and Strategic Prioritisation***

To transition from idea generation to strategic decision-making, the final phase of the workshop involved a structured voting process. Each group reviewed the full list of documented proposals and selected the two ideas they found most compelling and impactful. This voting mechanism served multiple purposes:

1. It facilitated consensus-building, ensuring that the most resonant ideas received broader support.
2. It highlighted priorities shared across different stakeholder groups, revealing areas of alignment between community needs and institutional perspectives.
3. It helped refine the direction of the branding strategy, guiding future efforts toward the most widely endorsed initiatives

Through this participatory and iterative methodology, the workshops not only generated concrete branding proposals but also fostered a collective sense of ownership over the city's cultural development. The emphasis on open dialogue, structured collaboration, and consensus-driven decision-making positioned participatory place branding as an inclusive and sustainable process, deeply rooted in the local community's aspirations.

### **Data Analysis and Results**

The primary research conducted in Xanthi and Komotini yielded substantial insights into the complex framework of place identity, cultural heritage, and urban development. Through a mixed-method approach that included semi-structured interviews, SWOT analysis, and participatory workshops, a series of interconnected insights and findings emerged.

### ***Key Findings from Interviews and SWOT Analysis***

Semi-structured interviews with local stakeholders—including municipal authorities, cultural practitioners, business owners, and educators—revealed recurring concerns and aspirations regarding the cities' cultural and branding practices. A dominant aspect was the presence of strong cultural narratives: Xanthi is characterized by its vibrant festival culture and creative communities, while Komotini's identity is deeply shaped by its multicultural population and rich historical background. These narratives serve as vital assets for the creation of distinctive place identities.

However, interviewees consistently pointed to the absence of cohesive branding strategies, emphasizing the uncoordinated character of existing initiatives and the lack of a long-term vision. Many highlighted the challenges in stakeholder collaboration and particularly the limited interaction between local authorities, organizations, and residents. Despite these obstacles, highlighted the benefits of participatory processes, suggesting that

community-led branding could bridge institutional gaps and reflect local values more authentically.

These observations were further reinforced by the SWOT analysis, which highlighted a series of internal and external factors affecting how place branding strategies can be developed in both cities. Among the identified strengths were the richness of cultural heritage, the presence of active artistic communities, and a strong sense of local pride. These assets provide a strong basis for the development of authentic branding strategies. On the other hand, several weaknesses were evident, including the absence of integrated marketing and branding efforts, limited collaboration across sectors, and a generally underdeveloped digital presence. Despite these challenges, notable opportunities emerged, such as the growing interest in sustainable tourism, the potential of digital storytelling to enhance visibility and engagement, and the increasing involvement of youth in cultural initiatives. Nonetheless, the analysis also pointed to significant threats that could undermine progress, including persistent bureaucratic inefficiencies, the danger of over-commercializing cultural assets, and the potential loss of distinct cultural identity as a result of diminishing local uniqueness.

### ***Participatory Workshop Results***

The participatory workshops conducted in both Xanthi and Komotini enabled a bottom-up exploration of place branding strategies, encouraging collaboration among a diverse range of participants, including cultural professionals, urban planners, students, and community members. Through guided ideation sessions, participants collectively articulated key priorities and developed proposals focused on enhancing cultural visibility, revitalizing public spaces, and strengthening community involvement. One recurring theme was the importance of using digital platforms—such as interactive websites and targeted social media campaigns—to highlight local narratives and cultural heritage, and increase the visibility of creative initiatives. Another central idea revolved around the transformation of underused urban spaces into dynamic cultural venues. Participants envisioned initiatives such as open-air museums, artistic interventions, and community-led events as means to regenerate abandoned areas and foster public engagement. Additionally, the workshops brought attention to the necessity of inclusive governance models that promote participatory decision-making and ensure that a wide range of local actors are actively involved in shaping the identity and future of their city.

To transform ideas into actionable priorities, each workshop concluded with a voting session in which participants ranked the most impactful proposals. The top strategies that emerged included the creation of a cultural identity festival that would weave together elements of storytelling, visual and performing arts, and historical exhibitions. Another widely supported proposal was the development of heritage and cultural walking routes that would connect key architectural and historical landmarks while offering interpretative content to enrich the experience. Finally, participants strongly endorsed the establishment of a youth ambassador program, aimed at fostering intergenerational engagement by encouraging young people to take an active role in cultural promotion and the co-creation of place identity.

### ***Interpretation of Findings and Implications***

The research findings highlight the critical role of participatory approaches in fostering authentic and resilient place branding. Rather than relying on externally imposed narratives or top-down strategies, effective place branding must be grounded in the cultural narratives and lived experiences of the local community. When place identity initiatives resonate with local values and traditions, they not only gain legitimacy but also promote a deeper sense of

belonging among residents. Co-creation emerges as a sustainable and inclusive model, that depends on continuous dialogue and collaboration between institutions and the residents. An approach like this could ensure adaptability, foster mutual trust, and strengthen community ownership over branding outcomes.

Moreover, the integration of branding strategies into broader urban development policies is essential for achieving long-term impact. Without alignment with existing governance frameworks and planning mechanisms, branding efforts risk remaining isolated or unsustainable. By embedding them within the wider context of urban transformation, cities can ensure coherence across cultural, economic, and spatial development agendas.

Ultimately, this study demonstrates how participatory place branding can transform community-driven insights into actionable strategies. In doing so, it contributes to cultural sustainability, supports inclusive governance, and fosters a multidimensional urban identity that is both rooted in tradition and adaptable to future challenges.

## **Discussion**

The findings of this study highlight the significance of local narratives in shaping authentic and compelling place branding strategies. Both Xanthi and Komotini are strongly related to a deep historical background and multicultural traditions, which emerged as powerful tools for defining their identity. Rather than relying on externally imposed symbols or promotional campaigns, participants emphasized the importance of storytelling, emotional connection, and community-led initiatives. The participatory workshops revealed a strong desire to preserve and reimagine these local narratives through inclusive and creative strategies that reflect the lived experiences of residents.

In line with existing literature, this study confirms that place branding based on authentic local narratives is more likely to encourage a sense of belonging and local pride, enhance community engagement, and result in more sustainable outcomes (Kavaratzis & Kalandides, 2015). Furthermore, it supports the notion that identity is not static, but rather a dynamic construct shaped by continuous interaction between people, space, and culture (Kavaratzis & Hatch, 2013).

### ***Insights from Community Responses***

The community feedback provided rich insights into residents' aspirations, particularly around youth participation and intercultural dialogue. Young participants expressed a strong desire to modernise the cultural landscape while respecting the historical context. Their suggestions - ranging from volunteer networks to cultural ambassador programmes - highlighted the role of youth as agents of change and cultural continuity.

The importance of cross-cultural cooperation was also consistently emphasised, especially in Komotini, where different ethnic groups coexist. Participants envisioned branding strategies that celebrate diversity, promote inclusion and foster mutual understanding. These insights are consistent with participatory branding models that value pluralism and diversity in identity construction (Zenker & Beckmann, 2013).

Notably, many participants proposed concrete actions, such as transforming unused public spaces into creative hubs, expanding local festivals, and establishing platforms for digital storytelling. These ideas demonstrate the community's capacity for strategic thinking and willingness to engage in co-creation processes.

### ***Strategic Planning Considerations for Cultural and Economic Enhancement***

The study suggests that cultural identity and economic development are not mutually exclusive; rather, they can be strategically aligned. The participatory proposals emphasized the potential of cultural festivals, adaptive reuse of heritage buildings, and creative industries as drivers of both social and economic value.

For instance, in Xanthi, expanding the internationally recognized carnival and integrating it with year-round cultural programming could strengthen its reputation as a cultural destination. In Komotini, transforming underutilized spaces into intercultural centers or co-creation venues could attract new visitors while fostering internal cohesion.

To maximize impact, these initiatives should be embedded in broader urban and regional development frameworks. Aligning place branding with tourism strategies, education policies, and local entrepreneurship programs would ensure coherence and sustainability.

### ***Comparison with Existing Literature***

The findings strongly resonate with contemporary academic perspectives on participatory branding. Scholars such as Kavatzis and Kalandides (2015) and Aitken and Campelo (2011) argue that effective place branding must be strongly connected with participatory processes and authentic local narratives, emphasizing that active community engagement is essential for creating identities that reflect the lived experiences and cultural values of residents. The findings reinforce these arguments by highlighting how co-creative practices can bridge the gap between top-down planning and community values, resulting in branding strategies that are inclusive, meaningful, and anchored to cultural identity.

Furthermore, a significant contribution of this study is how participatory methods not only gather feedback, but also shape strategic visions. The participatory process used in the workshops can be seen as a form of deliberative democracy in action—what Healey (1997) terms “collaborative planning.” It also reflects Lefebvre’s (1996) notion of the Right to the City, by asserting that the creation of a place’s identity is a civic right, not merely a branding practice.

### ***Challenges and Limitations***

Despite the success of the participatory process, the study encountered several limitations. Firstly, one of the most persistent issues identified was the inflexibility of institutional frameworks. While community members demonstrated a strong engagement, the integration of their proposals into formal policy frameworks remains uncertain. Without institutional commitment and structural support, even the most compelling ideas may struggle to materialize.

Second, balancing diverse stakeholder interests proved complex. Conflicting visions, particularly between administrative authorities and grassroots actors, underscored the need for facilitation skills and long-term dialogue mechanisms.

Third, the lack of follow-up mechanisms raised concerns about the sustainability of the process. Participants expressed interest in continued engagement, but without dedicated funding or formal structures, there is a risk of losing momentum.

### ***Policy and Planning Implications***

To address these challenges and increase the impact of participatory branding, the study suggests the following policy recommendations. In terms of institutionalising participatory

methods, local governments should establish permanent mechanisms - such as advisory boards or citizens' assemblies - to ensure ongoing community involvement in branding decisions. Branding strategies should be developed jointly by cultural institutions, urban planners, educational institutions and private actors to enhance both cultural relevance and economic sustainability. Continuous monitoring and evaluation should be used to consolidate strategies. Establishing metrics to assess the social and cultural impact of branding initiatives will allow for iterative improvement and long-term learning. In addition, the use of digital platforms can increase accessibility, especially for younger and more remote participants, and sustain interaction beyond physical workshops.

Finally, further research is needed to assess the long-term impact of participatory branding on urban development, particularly in medium-sized cities. Comparative studies in different geographical and cultural contexts could also help to improve best practice. In addition, exploring the role of emerging technologies - such as digital storytelling, gamification or augmented reality - may offer innovative ways to engage wider audiences in place identity processes.

## **Conclusions**

This research methodologically creates a toolkit for exploring the role of participatory methodologies in shaping authentic and sustainable place branding strategies. It focuses on the study of two cities and, by placing local voices at the center of the branding process, demonstrates how co-creation can enhance the cultural appeal, inclusion, and long-term impact of urban identity initiatives.

The participatory workshops revealed that residents possess deep knowledge and emotional attachment to their cities, which can serve as a foundation for strategic place branding. Local narratives, particularly those rooted in multicultural heritage and lived experiences, were consistently highlighted as essential elements of urban identity. Moreover, the workshops uncovered a strong desire for inclusive governance models, youth engagement, and the activation of underused public spaces for cultural purposes. Despite the enthusiasm and innovative proposals generated, several challenges were identified, including fragmented stakeholder collaboration, limited institutional support, and the lack of mechanisms for continuity.

In conclusion, this research reinforces the potential of participatory place branding to foster more inclusive, resilient, and culturally grounded cities. By empowering communities to shape their own urban narratives, place branding becomes not merely a promotional tool but a vehicle for democratic engagement and cultural sustainability.

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