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Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version
Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Ginesta, X., Cristòfol, F. J., de San Eugenio, J., & Martínez-Navarro, J. (2024). The Role of Future Generations in Place Branding: The Case of Huelva City. *Politics and Governance*, 12. <https://doi.org/10.17645/pag.7730>

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The Role of Future Generations in Place Branding: The Case of Huelva City

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Submitted: 27 October 2023 **Accepted:** 16 January 2024 **Published:** 28 February 2024

Issue: This article is part of the issue “Considering Future Generations in Democratic Governance” edited by Yasuko Kameyama (University of Tokyo) and Tomohiro Tasaki (National Institute for Environmental Studies), fully open access at <https://doi.org/10.17645/pag.i379>

Abstract

The process of creating place brands must position the citizen at the center of the debate. The City Council of Huelva, a city in Southern Spain with a population of 142,538 inhabitants, promoted a territorial brand in 2022 in order to seek a new positioning for the city in tourism markets, investment, and talent attraction. Its development was based on a qualitative and quantitative methodology, previously tested out in other cities and locations in Spain, which is shaped by research groups, semi-structured interviews, and surveys of the citizens. This method aims to place the citizen, who ultimately is the user of the brand, at the center of the social research process that determines the tangible and intangible values associated with the brand narrative. The main objective of this article is to highlight, based on the case study of the brand Huelva Original, the importance of two groups in the construction and deployment of a place brand (Millennials and Generation Z and the political class). Firstly, out of the 1,194 people who participated in the fieldwork, 47.92% were under 40 years old. These two generations are crucial for creating a brand narrative that has long-term viability and presence in the digital environment. Secondly, the development of the brand narrative facilitated a cooperative process among the different political groups in the City Council, especially the two most represented (conservatives and social democrats), which enables the search for collaborative workspaces among political groups to ensure that the implementation of the brand transcends the term of a mandate and goes beyond short-termism political actions. The results indicate that the new brand uniquely differentiates Huelva, emphasizing internal pride and co-creation. Open innovation facilitates cooperation among stakeholders, improving governance. Both Millennials and Generation Z citizens, as well as politicians, are key to the long-term sustainability and reach of the brand.

Keywords

citizen participation; city marketing; democratic governance; Generation Z; Millennials; place branding; Spain

1. Introduction

The creation of territorial brands should prioritize citizen participation (Jernsand, 2016; Kavartzis, 2012). In 2022, the City Council of Huelva, a city in Southern Spain with 142,538 inhabitants (Instituto Nacional de Estadística, 2021), launched the territorial brand Huelva Original to redefine its position in the tourism, investment, and talent markets. This place branding strategy aimed to change the perception of Huelva and attract new target audiences. To achieve this goal, the Huelva City Council recognized the significance of future generations in crafting a robust and enduring brand strategy. It is essential to engage the youth and the upcoming generations in the process of defining the city's identity and values. Their active participation not only ensures an appropriate representation of their interests and aspirations but also offers them the opportunity to be part of the development and growth of their city.

Future generations (Generation Z and Millennials) possess a unique and fresh perspective about cities and regions (Ebrahimi et al., 2019) that can enrich Huelva's place branding strategy as well. By including them in the decision-making process, the brand can be ensured to reflect the needs and desires of these generations, enhancing their emotional connection to the city (Mamula-Nikolić et al., 2022; Nagaynay & Lee, 2020). Furthermore, the involvement of future generations also implies a long-term vision. This vision is crucial to guarantee the long-term sustainability of the branding strategy and that the City of Huelva remains attractive and relevant in the following years (Alshuwaikhat et al., 2022).

1.1. Context of the City of Huelva

Huelva, a city enriched by its diverse heritage, cultural vibrancy, and socio-economic significance, seeks to strategically position itself in an increasingly competitive global landscape. As urban centers around the world strive to lure in visitors, investments, and talent, the goal is not just about boosting the economy but also about enhancing the living standards of their residents.

In an identity-focused economy, regions endeavor to spotlight their unique attributes, aiming for differentiation in a crowded global market (Anholt, 2006). This is often achieved through the establishment of a recognizable brand identity, a representation that influences perceptions and fosters a sense of belonging among inhabitants. The journey of place branding is markedly different from corporate branding (de San Eugenio Vela, 2012). For cities like Huelva, it entails a convergence of historical, geopolitical, and public perspectives. The primary objective is social upliftment, which requires a nuanced approach that understands and caters to diverse stakeholders.

Huelva's brand seeks to coalesce the city's vast offerings, drawing inspiration from its *Plan Turístico de Grandes Ciudades* (Major Cities Tourist Plan). The city's strategic location has seen the tapestry of history weave through it—from ancient civilizations to the British era—leaving a rich archaeological and architectural legacy. Besides the historical allure, Huelva boasts lush landscapes, a commitment to quality living, a deep

connection with nature, and a cultural scene teeming with festivals, traditions, and events. The envisioned brand for Huelva is not merely about tourism. It seeks to celebrate the city's distinctive characteristics, aiming for a cohesive identity forged by its residents and stakeholders. Therefore, it is essential to differentiate between the tourist brand—or destination branding—and the territorial brand—or place branding (de San Eugenio Vela, 2012). The tourist brand pertains to the identity created for a specific tourist destination with the goal of attracting tourists. This brand is based on the tourist attractions of the destination, which may encompass its natural and cultural heritage, events, festivals, and tourist facilities, among other aspects (Aires Barroso & Nicolau Mota, 2010). However, the territorial brand refers to the identity established for a specific territory, such as a country, region, or city, to promote its development and differentiation. This brand is grounded in the unique and distinctive features of the territory (de San Eugenio Vela, 2012).

In 2022, the Huelva City Council, the public entity responsible for managing the city's brand, proposed the creation of a tourist brand. In May of that year, the Council's Finance and Heritage Department published the technical and administrative specifications for the design and promotional development of Huelva's tourist brand. This process, through a public competition, resulted in the hiring of the Andalusian company Lugadero, which was tasked with developing the work, beginning with a redefinition of the concept from a tourist brand to a territorial brand. It is from this starting point that the research is grounded.

The new Huelva brand should foster connections between local stakeholders while accentuating its unique attributes. Effective integration into management strategies at multiple governance levels will be essential for the brand's longevity and impact. However, the journey is underscored by the changing political dynamics in both Huelva and the larger Andalusian region. The Spanish Socialist Workers' Party (PSOE), which once championed the Huelva Original territorial brand initiative, witnessed a shift in power. The municipal reins transitioned to the Popular Party (PP), with support from the political party Vox, whereas in Andalusia, after a 37-year reign by the PSOE, the PP took the helm. This political pivot raised questions about the continuity of the Huelva Original brand. But, in a testament to the brand's significance, the PP government has chosen to preserve it and push forward.

1.2. Objectives and Research Questions

This article aims to analyze the significance of two groups—Millennials and Generation Z, as well as political parties—in shaping and implementing a place brand using the case study of Huelva Original. This objective can be transformed into three research questions:

RQ1: To what extent do Millennials and Generation Z contribute to developing and implementing the place brand strategy in Huelva?

RQ2: What role do political parties play in the shaping and implementation of the place brand strategy in Huelva?

RQ3: What are the potential benefits and challenges of involving future generations and political parties in the place branding strategy in Huelva, Spain?

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. Place Branding as a New Research Field

Place branding conceptualization is an intricate process that involves developing the marketing image of a city or region through various communication strategies (Achmad et al., 2020). This process aims to shape the perception and associations that target audiences have with the place, thereby increasing its competitiveness and attracting investment, tourism, and talent. Place branding is not just about creating an appealing visual image; it is a comprehensive and long-term strategy that aligns with the overall development and economic goals of the city (Cruz-Ruiz et al., 2022).

Kavaratzis (2012) suggests that a territorial brand is not only about promoting a place but also about the strategic management of its identity and reputation. According to Kavaratzis (2012), the territorial brand should be a participatory process involving all local stakeholders, including residents, businesses, and public institutions. This approach recognizes that all these actors play a role in creating and managing the territorial brand and their actions and behaviors can influence the brand's perception. Kavaratzis et al. (2017), who developed the "stakeholders' approach" perspective in place branding to "inclusive place branding," call for more democratic approaches to stakeholders' engagement and thus contribute to further advancing the field. Therefore, De-San-Eugenio and Ginesta (2020) argue that the territorial brand should be considered a strategic asset that can be used to drive the economic and social development of a territory. According to these authors, the territorial brand can help differentiate a place from others, attract investments and tourism, and enhance the quality of life for residents. However, they also caution that the territorial brand must be managed responsibly and sustainably to avoid the overexploitation of the natural and cultural resources of the territory.

According to Compte Pujol et al. (2016), place branding goes beyond traditional marketing practices and encompasses a wide range of factors, including economic, political, and cultural aspects. A successful city brand is built on a combination of tangible and intangible elements (Ortega-Morán et al., 2021). These elements cover not only the physical aspects of the city such as its architecture, infrastructure, and attractions, but also the emotions, experiences, and perceptions associated with it. Satisfied citizens play a crucial role in establishing a stable identity for the city and actively contribute to the promotion and defense of the city brand. Following the concept of place branding, various strategies and activities are employed to create a positive brand image. These can include developing visual and verbal expressions such as logos, slogans, and promotional materials, as well as implementing behavioral expressions like urban design, public events and initiatives, and stakeholder engagement (Glińska & Rudolf, 2019; Manfredi, 2019; Mihardja et al., 2019).

Additionally, place branding involves engaging both internal and external audiences. Internally, it aims to foster a sense of pride and belonging among the city's residents, encouraging them to become brand ambassadors and actively participate in shaping the brand identity of their city. Externally, place branding targets potential investors, tourists, businesses, and talent who are seeking opportunities in a particular city or region. Through effective place branding, cities and regions can differentiate themselves from their competitors and establish a unique identity that resonates with their target audiences (Rajput & Riaz, 2019).

Consequently, place branding requires a strategic approach that considers the specific goals and values of the city or region. It is essential to create a cohesive and authentic brand story that reflects the unique identity and characteristics of the place. This story should be communicated consistently across various channels and platforms to ensure a unified brand experience for both residents and external audiences. To develop a successful place brand, it is crucial to involve multiple stakeholders, including government agencies, local businesses, community groups, and residents. An inclusive stakeholders' approach to place branding is essential to align the branding efforts and safeguard a shared vision for the place's development (Jernsand, 2016; Kavaratzis et al., 2017; Risanto & Yulianti, 2016; Skinner, 2021).

In addition to visual and verbal expressions, place branding also encompasses the behavior and actions of a place and its stakeholders. This includes how the city interacts with its residents and visitors, the quality of services and infrastructure provided, and the overall experience offered. These elements collectively contribute to the complete perception and reputation of a place, influencing the decision-making process of individuals and organizations. In conclusion, place branding is a multifaceted process that involves creating a network of associations in the minds of the target audience through visual, verbal, and behavioral expressions (Juliansyah et al., 2021).

Furthermore, and according to Bonazzi (2021), place branding is a practice aimed at promoting the identity of a city or a location. It relies on the construction of a positive perceived image, which can generate civic pride and a sense of belonging in residents while also attracting investors and tourists. The branding process involves a shared narrative and self-reflection on tangible and intangible identity features of the city.

Finally, territorial branding can be considered a strategic asset that can be used to drive the economic and social development of a territory (Eskiev, 2021).

2.2. Co-Creation and Inclusive Place Branding

Co-creation and inclusive place branding are emerging concepts in place branding literature. On the one hand, co-creation in branding "is considered a process of interaction and influencing among various participating parties" (Sarasvuo et al., 2022, p. 543). In the concrete field of place branding, this appeals to the stakeholders' involvement in the creation of a place's brand, which aids in building a sense of community inclusion (Camatti & Wallington, 2022). This process can occur at various stages and adopt different forms, not limited to the beginning of the process. Zenker and Erfgen (2014) suggest that co-creation can be divided into three stages: Stage 1 involves establishing a collective vision for the location, encompassing fundamental aspects of the place. Stage 2 entails the creation of a framework to facilitate involvement. Stage 3 focuses on aiding inhabitants in executing their unique place branding initiatives.

Inclusive place branding, on the other hand, focuses on place representation and discourse, exposing the political nature of place branding, its power dynamics, and particular interests (Jernsand, 2016; Kavaratzis et al., 2017). Critical perspectives on place branding argue for more responsible and socially oriented approaches with greater stakeholders' engagement, as well as a multi-level participation perspective which acknowledges the collective ownership of place identity as a form of activism, in favor of the residents' right to participate in the decision-making affecting their places (Kavaratzis et al., 2017). Implementing place branding is a process that requires the development of events, infrastructures, symbolic actions, and

supportive policies on a multi-level scale (Jernsand, 2016, p. 62). Place branding cannot be based solely on communication; it also requires product development (Stoica et al., 2021).

Following Chilvers and Kearnes (2020), the relational co-productionist approach challenges “residual realist” assumptions and promotes a dynamic, contextual understanding of participation and audiences. This framework can provide the basis for a necessary shift from effective practices to reflexive and responsible practices in participation in science and democracy. In the context of open innovation, co-creation, and “inclusive place branding,” this approach allows for greater inclusion and diversity, fostering co-creation and democratic innovation, and recognizing participation as an emerging and relational process, not as a fixed category.

2.3. Open Innovation and Place Branding

Open innovation, according to Chesbrough (2003), is a paradigm which assumes that firms can and should use external and internal ideas, and internal and external paths to the market, to advance their technology. In the context of place branding, this can be interpreted as the incorporation of ideas and strategies from both within and outside a community or region to develop an effective place brand.

Cervi et al. (2023) discuss how cities have used their websites as central communication tools during the pandemic, focusing on aspects such as usability, interactivity, and the readiness of information. This aligns with the concept of open innovation, as it suggests that cities are looking beyond traditional methods and are open to new ways of engaging with stakeholders and disseminating information.

However, while governance is traditionally seen to control and regulate innovation (Eggers et al., 2023), recent research suggests (Chan, 2013; Filatotchev et al., 2020; Mergel, 2015) that innovation can also improve governance. For example, innovation can help firms develop new governance mechanisms that are better suited to the changing business environment, in addition to offering public administrations the capacity to search for better tools, in order to engage citizens in a place branding strategy, which must follow a bottom-up model to be successful (de San Eugenio Vela, 2012).

In another sense, Ebrahimi et al. (2019) explore how social media impacts the branding of a tourist destination and how it can encourage potential tourists to visit. Although open innovation and future generations are not explicitly mentioned, it can be inferred that open innovation could be a strategy to enhance a place’s brand through community collaboration and participation. Future generations, being digital natives and highly familiar with social media, could play a crucial role in this process. However, the study concludes that merely sharing photos and videos of a place is not enough to create a distinctive image in the minds of potential visitors. Social media should be used as a supplement to local administration activities to promote the place’s image and attractions.

In terms of open innovation, Matos et al. (2019) point out that technology can be used to encourage active discussion and engage communities around the topics that affect them. These authors introduced the “manifesto machine,” a collaborative environment for drafting and designing manifestos, as a way of opening a “discursive space” where participants can reflect on what they stand for and why, and how their beliefs intersect with the beliefs of others. The study found that there is scope for using such a tool to encourage active discussion and engage communities around the topics that affect them.

3. Methods

3.1. Methodological Note

The methodology proposed to create a brand narrative for the City of Huelva combines qualitative and quantitative elements and is based on a methodological triangulation (non-probabilistic surveys, discussion groups, and in-depth interviews) that generates a process of citizen participation to build an integrative brand narrative (de San Eugenio-Vela et al., 2020; Ginesta & de San Eugenio, 2020).

First, 13 focus groups were designed and distributed by activity sectors. These groups' dynamics were analyzed and a brand value as well as an idea for the definition of a regional narrative were forged. These working groups were proposed by Lugadero, the company in charge of developing the new territorial brand. Likewise, these groups were agreed upon with the officials of the Huelva City Council, as the ultimate client of this initiative. The selection process was based on a discussion between branding experts and officials from the City Council to tailor the profiles and groups to the requirements of creating the new brand. These working groups were held in different public spaces and even online from October 6, 2022, to November 2, 2022, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Workgroups deployed in the field research.

Workgroup	Date	Place	No. of participants
Tourism industry and professionals	October 6, 2022	City Council venues	10
Tourism influencers	October 6, 2022	City Council venues	3
Tourism students	October 18, 2022	City Council venues	14
Culture representatives	October 18, 2022	City Council venues	7
Local government	October 18, 2022	City Council venues	20
Local tourism administration	October 19, 2022	City Council venues	5
Local talent	October 29, 2022	City Council venues	5
Local opposition party	October 21, 2022	City Council venues	6
Public opinion leaders	October 25, 2022	City Council venues	9
Economic dynamization organizations and professionals	October 26, 2022	City Council venues	7
Urban planning organizations and professionals	October 26, 2022	City Council venues	5
Sports organizations	November 2, 2022	Online	6
Traditions and brotherhoods	November 2, 2022	City Council venues	4

Second, as a complement to the focus groups, 10 in-depth interviews were scheduled with people from the region who, due to their value, trajectory, knowledge, reputation, and/or prestige, warranted a solo interview to obtain their suggestions and/or impressions (Table 2). The aim of these interviews was to contrast information with the focus groups' results, as well as to obtain new ideas and frames that could help the development of the brand.

Table 2. List of people interviewed for this research.

Code	Professional profile	Justification of the profile
Interviewee 1	Former president of the Port of Huelva and mayor of the city since May 2023	This individual provided a comprehensive vision of the city. Their experience offered valuable insights into how the city brand should link to the thriving port activities, always highlighting the economic potential the brand development could hold. Since May 2023, the interviewee has been the mayor of Huelva, playing a central role in local decision-making and city representation. Interviewing the mayor allowed for first-hand information on the municipal priorities and goals, essential for aligning the new brand with the city's strategic vision.
Interviewee 2	Director of the Huelva Iberoamerican Film Festival	The film festival is the city's most significant cultural event in terms of impact and international reach. Interviewing the festival director provided extensive information on how the city brand could incorporate and promote key cultural events to enhance Huelva's image as a destination.
Interviewee 3	Chef and president of Prenauta Foundation	Cuisine is one of the city's most unique aspects; thus, this interview offered numerous ideas on how the brand should highlight local culinary richness while supporting significant social causes for the community.
Interviewee 4	Urban Planning councilor	The councilor for Urban Planning presented a comprehensive view of the city's development. Their perspective was crucial to ensure the new brand accurately and positively reflected Huelva's urban development and city model, with specific emphasis on its archaeological aspect.
Interviewee 5	Habitat and Infrastructure councilor	The councilor for Habitat and Infrastructure's involvement in interviews provided a holistic view of urban development, quality of life, and sustainability in Huelva. Their specialized knowledge contributed to ensuring that the new city brand reflected precisely and positively the city's evolution and future in terms of infrastructure, sustainability, and urban habitat.
Interviewee 6	Responsible for the Provincial Council of Huelva–Culture	Culture is one of the city's driving forces also in the province, as outlined in the initial assessment. The interview with the responsible for the cultural area in the province provided insights into how the brand should be tied to and support local cultural expressions.
Interviewee 7	Foodservice industry public figure	Interviewing such a public figure offered a diverse and representative perspective of the city's social, gastronomic, and cultural community.
Interviewee 8	Delegate of Tourism for the Regional Government of Andalusia in Huelva and secretary of the University of Huelva	Given their role, the delegate presented an open view of the necessary strategic relationship between the city, the province, and the autonomous community, proposing the establishment of alliances at various scales.
Interviewee 9	Culture councilor	Culture is one of the city's driving forces, as outlined in the initial assessment. The interview with the councilor for Culture of the city provided insights on how the brand should be tied to and support local cultural expressions.
Interviewee 10	Tourism technician	The tourism technician, with over 20 years of experience and specialized knowledge of Huelva's tourism industry, was crucial in ensuring the new city brand was attractive to potential visitors and aligned with local tourism strategies.

Thirdly, and finally, to monitor citizens' opinions, a survey created through Google Forms open to all inhabitants was launched on the town councils' websites. The following 34 items, in Table 3, were monitored using a non-probabilistic survey. The subsequent result is a categorization of the 34 inquiries, partitioned into six distinct sections. Each section is designated in correlation to its respective ensemble of questions.

Table 3. Questions and categories on the survey.

Group of questions	Specific questions
Statements about perceptions of Huelva (true/false)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Huelva is a welcoming city. 2. Huelva is a green city. 3. Huelva stands out for its quality of life. 4. Huelva is a city with history. 5. Huelva is a city without heritage. 6. Huelva is ugly. 7. The people of Huelva are very closed off. 8. Huelva is a boring city. 9. Huelva is a city without cultural offerings. 10. Huelva is a forward-thinking city. 11. The food in Huelva is very good. 12. Huelva is an industrial city. 13. Huelva is an attractive city. 14. Huelva is a city with great potential. 15. Huelva is a very safe city. 16. Huelva is an affordable city. 17. Huelva is a dirty city. 18. Huelva does not love itself.
Creative associations with Huelva	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 19. If Huelva were a color, it would be... 20. If Huelva were a sound, it would be...
Open description and representation of Huelva	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 21. Define the City of Huelva in a single word. 22. Personally, when you think of the image of Huelva, which values do you identify it with? 23. What do non-residents think are the characteristics that identify Huelva as a municipality? 24. Who or what represents the City of Huelva for you? Who could be its ambassadors?
Evaluations of objectives for the new city brand (rate 1 to 5)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 25. Promote an image of the city that is both local and global. 26. Generate a sense of belonging among the people of Huelva. 27. Highlight the extensive relationship between the city and nature. 28. Emphasize the hidden heritage, both tangible and intangible. 29. Promote Huelva as a destination. 30. Boost the economy of the City of Huelva. 31. Expand the image of Huelva to the digital ecosystem.
Multiple-choice question about Huelva	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 32. Would you say that the City of Huelva stands out for...?
Open-ended questions about Huelva's uniqueness and narrative	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 33. What values, stories, and experiences do you think the City of Huelva has that are not being told or highlighted in the city? 34. Finally, in your opinion, what does Huelva have that no other city in the world has?

The survey, open to all residents of the City of Huelva, was available between October 10, 2022, and November 10, 2022. During this month, 1,083 responses were collected into a non-probabilistic sample, 421 of which were men (38.87%), 641 women (59.19%), and 21 preferred not to specify their gender (1.94%).

With regards to age group, the age distribution of respondents was as follows: Those under 18 years of age constituted a small fraction, with 19 respondents, or 1.75% of the total. The 18-to-29 age group had more representation, with 233 respondents, accounting for 21.51% of the total. The 30-to-40 age group had slightly more representation, with 267 respondents, or 24.65% of the total. These three groups combined represented 47.92% of the total respondents. The group aged 41 and above had the highest representation, with 465 responses, accounting for 42.94% of the total. However, a notable number of respondents, 99 in total, chose not to disclose their age, making up 9.15% of the total. In total, 519 respondents out of 1,083 were under the age of 40, within the Millennials and Generation Z generations. Therefore, Millennials and Generation Z had the widest representation in the sample, which is the central focus of this article.

With regards to the relationship with the city, the majority of respondents (716, representing 66.11%) claimed to have been born and/or live in Huelva. However, a significant proportion (188, or 17.36%) indicated that they do not live in the City of Huelva. Regarding work presence, 80 respondents (7.39%) stated they are in Huelva for work reasons. A smaller number, 17 (1.57%), indicated that they study and/or train in Huelva. Finally, 82 respondents (7.57%) provided other answers that did not fit into the previous categories.

On the one hand, these three methods (focus groups, interviews, and the survey) were developed in parallel, including all the information collected in the final work of the branding approach. The analysis of the qualitative data from the interviews and the focus groups was done identifying the mainframes (positive and negative) of each topic discussed. On the other hand, the City Council conducted awareness campaigns in order to encourage the participation of all the citizens of Huelva. Considering that the Silent Generation (mid-1920s to mid-1940s) and Baby Boomers (1946–1964) are not as digitally literate as to respond to an online survey, researchers considered including them in the focus groups and interviews to incorporate their opinions and views about the city.

3.2. The Starting Point: Huelva Before the New Brand

To undertake this project, Lugadero (the company responsible for developing the territorial brand, hired by the Huelva City Council following the public tender) conducted a SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats) analysis of the City of Huelva. This analysis identified a range of weaknesses and threats impacting not only the city but also the province's image (Figure 1), as well as several strengths and opportunities that could be leveraged to enhance its image.

On the one hand, among the identified weaknesses are the lack of a clear and defined image of the province, insufficient tourism promotion, and an undiversified tourism offering. Moreover, there was an acknowledged absence of an effective marketing and communication strategy to promote the province's capital. The threats identified include competition from other provinces and tourist destinations, a lack of adequate tourist infrastructure and services, and an absence of tourist offerings tailored to the needs and preferences of various market segments.

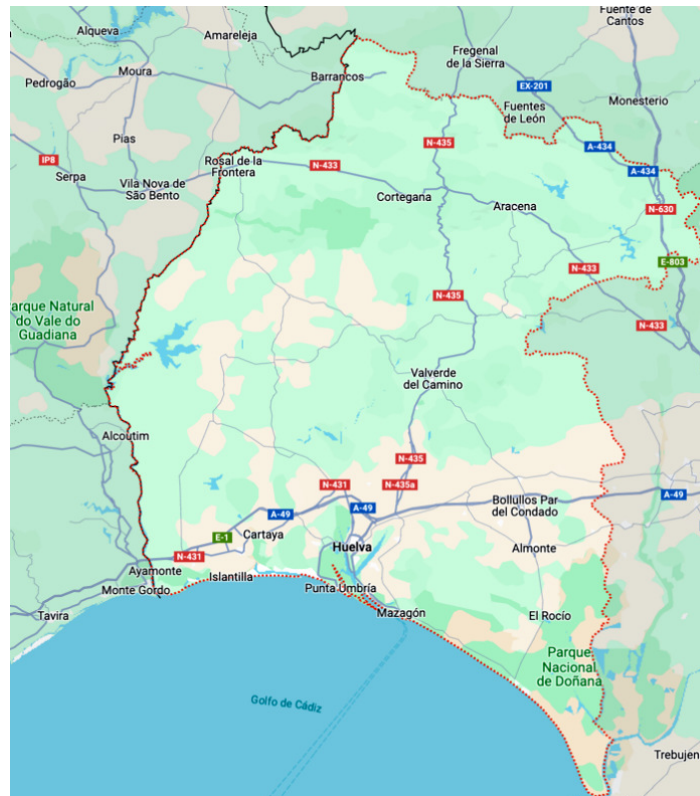


Figure 1. Map of Huelva province: Huelva City between Mazagón and Punta Umbría.

On the other hand, several strengths identified can be harnessed to improve the city's image. Among these are the wealth and diversity of its cultural and natural heritage, the quality of its gastronomic products, and the hospitality and friendliness of its residents. Furthermore, several opportunities were pinpointed that could be utilized to enhance the image of Huelva's capital. These include the growing demand for rural and nature tourism, the rising significance of gastronomic tourism, and the increasing demand for cultural and heritage tourism.

4. Results: The Study Case of the New Huelva Brand

4.1. The Tangible and Intangible City of Huelva

From this study, several insights emerged. First, the brand awareness of Huelva was low, especially among Generation Z. Second, Huelva's brand was marred by negative stereotypes, portraying it as dirty, industrial, and lacking cultural allure. Third, opinions varied on brand attributes: While some emphasized its industrial legacy, others advocated for its cultural and natural attributes. Fourth, despite the negative brand perception, residents felt a deep-seated pride and connection to the city. Fifth, there was an evident desire among respondents to be involved in the rebranding process. This sentiment was particularly strong among participants under 40 years of age. Sixth, Google Forms was effective in engaging the under-40 participants (mainly Millennials and Generation Z), emphasizing the necessity of adapting research methodologies to suit target demographics. Seventh, the increasing interest in focus groups highlighted the significance of publicizing research and genuinely involving the community. Finally, while the Huelva brand faced

recognition challenges and negative connotations, residents had a profound connection to the city and showed eagerness to be part of its branding evolution. This underscores the need for an inclusive rebranding strategy that resonates with Huelva’s diverse population.

Figure 2 shows the results of the questions via Google Forms related to the perceptions of the citizens about the City of Huelva. These 18 questions reveal the participants’ tendencies in the territorial brand-building process and their considerations. Out of the sample of 1,083 respondents, the results of the 519 respondents under 40 years old are presented. None of the questions were mandatory, hence the true/false aggregate does not always add up to 519, in the overall number of Millennials and Generation Z respondents in the open-ended survey.

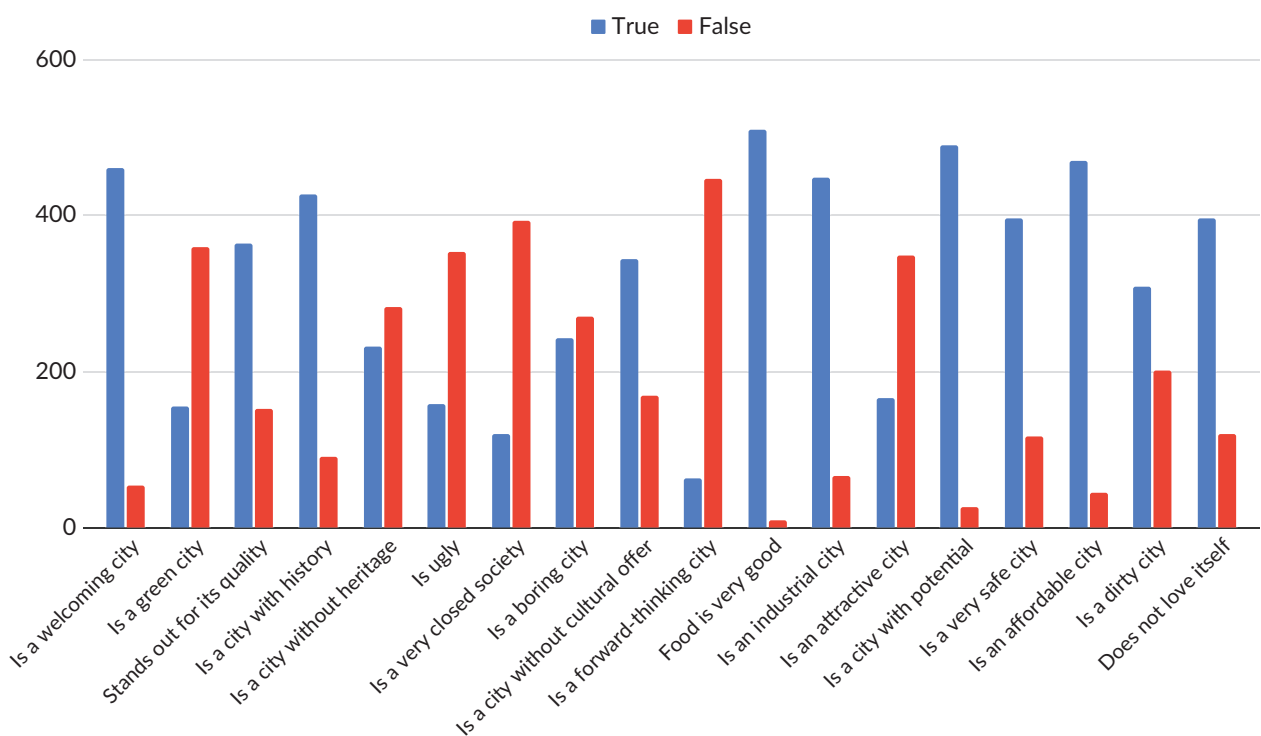


Figure 2. Results of statements about perceptions of Huelva.

As for the results of the “creative associations” with Huelva, 782 out of 1,083 respondents named blue as the representative color of the city (72.21% of the total); in the case of those under 40, blue was cited in 402 of the 519 responses (77.4%). The rest of the answers, being an open and creative question, vary between different colors, highlighting gray (64), white (31), or brown and orange (21 each). As for a sound, 479 respondents agreed that the sound of the sea was the most representative of the city (44.2%), including other related associations such as waves or the squawking of seagulls. 168 respondents selected flamenco (15.5%), including other mentions of the guitar or, specifically, the fandango. In the case of those under 40 years of age, 299 out of 497 responses mentioned the sea, representing 60.1%.

The question of how to define Huelva in one word shows a great variety. The most repeated word is “light,” with 163 mentions (15% of the total). In this sense, it should be noted that 293 different answers were given, where only light exceeded 10% of the repetitions. In the case of those under 40 years of age, 71 out of

510 responses mentioned light, representing 13.92% and being the only word with more than a 10% repetition rate. Something similar occurs with the values with which Huelva would be identified, where the most repeated value is “welcoming,” with 89 responses (8.2%). Millennial and Generation Z respondents mention Huelva as a welcoming city in 45 of the 447 responses (10.07%). On how they consider non-residents to see the City of Huelva, two concepts stand out: the beaches (291 responses, 26.87% of the total) and gastronomy (247, 22.81%). Beaches were also mentioned by those under 40 in 157 of the 485 responses (32.37%). Finally, on who could be the ambassador, only the badminton player Carolina Marín and the singer Manuel Carrasco exceed 10% of the mentions: Both appear 166 times (15.3% of the total).

For the category “evaluations of objectives for the new city brand,” the statistical results were very similar. In this regard, the statistical rating was up to 5 in all the questions. The average rating was:

- 4.07 out of 5 for the category “promote an image of the city that is both local and global.” In the case of the Millennials and Generation Z, the average is 4.16.
- 4.12 out of 5 for the category “generate a sense of belonging among the people of Huelva.” In the case of the Millennials and Generation Z, the average is 4.19.
- 4.07 out of 5 for the category “highlight the extensive relationship between the city and nature.” In the case of the Millennials and Generation Z, the average is 4.13.
- 4.32 out of 5 for the category “emphasize the hidden heritage, both tangible and intangible.” In the case of the Millennials and Generation Z, the average is 4.44.
- 4.21 out of 5 for the category “promote Huelva as a destination.” In the case of the Millennials and Generation Z, the average is 4.25.
- 4.24 out of 5 for the category “boost the economy of the City of Huelva.” In the case of the Millennials and Generation Z, the average is 4.28.
- 4.19 out of 5 for the category “expand the image of Huelva to the digital ecosystem.” In the case of the Millennials and Generation Z, the average is 4.26.

All these data, combined with those from the in-depth interviews and focus groups, were essential for making decisions on the next steps in the development of the brand. Regarding the qualitative analysis, the responses from the consultation display a diversity of perceptions and opinions about the City of Huelva. Participants emphasized aspects such as culture, history, gastronomy, nature, and hospitality as distinctive elements of Huelva. These elements became the cornerstones of the Huelva Original project, mirroring the identity and values of the region. The mayor of the city, until May 2023, referred to the brand in this way: “This new brand had to be capable of projecting and making known all that history and heritage, and at the same time make us aware of everything it can contribute to the city today” (“Huelva Original, la ciudad donde todo comienza,” 2023)

The Millennial and Generation Z cohorts, who engaged in the consultation process, possess specific characteristics in terms of consumption and information perception. These generations tend to appreciate authenticity, transparency, and active involvement in decision-making processes. Consequently, their participation in the consultation shaped the design and implementation of the “Huelva Original” project, focusing on inclusive community engagement and the promotion of local identity. Furthermore, the Huelva Original project may be regarded as a territorial development strategy predicated on differentiation by origin-linked quality.

4.2. The Final Outcome: The Brand Huelva Original

The Huelva Original brand, reflecting the city's distinctive character, was collaboratively crafted with input from 1,194 diverse citizens. Designed to represent the city's unique essence and experiences, this brand goes beyond tourism appeal to encapsulate Huelva's intrinsic attributes. The brand's primary design elements include:

1. City of "firsts": Huelva's pioneering nature and historic innovations form the core of its identity. The brand emphasizes its rich history, cultural landmarks, and innovations.
2. Huelva Original: Focusing on the city's "originality," this brand component celebrates Huelva's unique individuals, places, and moments. The slogan "Huelva Original" stands as the central verbal motif.
3. Flag of Huelva: An evolved symbol of the city's iconic flag, it is integrated into a versatile visual system named Original of Huelva, used for varied applications.
4. Onuba type: An exclusive typography for the brand, inspired by the city's flag, offers elegance and flexibility for diverse media.
5. Colors of the city: Derived from citizens' descriptions of Huelva's sunsets, the color palette combines predominant blues with verdant hues, reflecting the city's multifaceted nature.
6. Sound identity: Crafted by artist Pirámida, this auditory element fuses traditional and contemporary sounds, representing Huelva's cultural blend.

The Huelva Original brand is a result of a collaborative process that involved citizens from various backgrounds, making it a brand that reflects the city's unique identity and values. The brand's design elements, including the flag, typography, colors, and sound identity, are all inspired by the city's history, heritage, and achievements. The Huelva Original brand is a celebration of the city's originality, authenticity, and pioneering spirit, and it aims to project and showcase the city's unique identity to the world.

5. Discussion

Huelva is not a unique case in Spain of a city seeking a brand that allows it to have a better competitive advantage in the tourism, investment, and talent markets. However, the case of the City of Huelva demonstrates that its place branding not only seeks to strengthen the city's positioning in external markets (both national and international), but the branding for Huelva also serves as a tool for managing its distinct identity from the point of view of promoting specific territorial values compared to other brands in the surrounding area (de San Eugenio Vela, 2012; Rajput & Riaz, 2019).

In this sense, we can clearly see that the Huelva Original brand markedly differentiates itself from the destination branding strategies pursued by other cities. The brand for the City of Huelva emerges as a primarily internal consumption asset (Kavaratzis, 2012) after a citizens' participation process. Answering RQ1, Millennials and Generation Z audiences which mostly participated in the survey of this study have played a pivotal role in the brand's creation. Their opinions contributed to shape the design and implementation of the Huelva Original project, focusing on inclusive community engagement, the promotion of local identity and heritage, as well as the definition of the city as "original." This means a city that is unique and the starting point of great adventures. Statistical results of the group of questions in the survey called "evaluations of objectives for the new city brand" (see Section 4.1) can illustrate these ideas. Thus, with

citizens accepting the “why” behind a new brand for their city, it has been much easier to deploy a participatory and inclusive methodology, following de San Eugenio Vela (2012), Jernsand (2016), and Kavartzis (2012), which involves all relevant stakeholders and enables the well-known process of co-creation among them (Sarasvuo et al., 2022).

In this co-creation process of the new brand, emphasizing open innovation is not a minor point. If we understand open innovation as an organization’s ability to combine internal with external knowledge to develop processes and products that enhance competitiveness (Chesbrough, 2003), it is evident that building a place brand requires it. Building a place brand cannot be understood without interaction and cooperation among organizations, political institutions, citizens, and external professionals involved (in this case, the Lugadero agency). Therefore, as Sarasvuo et al. (2022, p. 557) conclude regarding how the co-creation process is done, “interaction may occur between or among the marketer and stakeholder (B2C/C2B/B2B), internally within organizations (employee-to-employee), or among various stakeholders (C2C).” In fact, complementing previous observations by Compte Pujol et al. (2016), Risanto and Yulianti (2016), Sarasvuo et al. (2022), or Skinner (2021), the co-creation process of territorial branding leads to a continuous innovation process, both in terms of incorporating stakeholders into its design and conceptualization and in defining a new narrative (storytelling) that allows the territory to improve its external positioning and internal identity.

Furthermore, constructing a new territorial brand, also viewed from the perspective of a process embracing open innovation, can result in a new tool that enhances governance (Chan, 2013; Filatotchev et al., 2020; Mergel, 2015). We refer to the brand as an asset in territorial governance because it is through the social study undertaken to conceptualize it that both public administration and external professionals working on it have been able to hear the demands of the territory, generate active discussions among stakeholders, and cause complicity between them and the administration’s objectives (Matos et al., 2019). Answering RQ2, a place branding strategy becomes a playbook for politicians to coordinate public policies. In the case of the Huelva Original project, the high participation and cooperation of all the political parties of the city during the co-creation process (see Table 1) has been crucial to finally passing the new roadmap to implement the brand, in the plenary session of December 20, 2023 (“El Ayuntamiento desbloquea el proyecto de la Plaza Mayor,” 2023).

Answering RQ3, in Huelva’s study case, the role of Millennials and Generation Z throughout the process can be highly valued, both in terms of their participation in the fieldwork of analysis and narrative definition and in the rollout of the new Huelva Original brand (Mamula-Nikolić et al., 2022; Nagaynay & Lee, 2020). Both active on social media and aware of the power of e-democracy (Ebrahimi et al., 2019), these generations have been key players in disseminating the new narrative, adapting it to their needs, and using it to reinforce their sense of belonging. Another group that has been especially adept at using the brand is the political body. Ensuring the brand’s acceptance by all political forces in the council has allowed it to survive the crises that commonly occur in public institutions, stemming from daily political dynamics or electoral periods. The fact that both the ruling party in the city and its political opposition have used the brand for their institutional and electoral communication indicates that the narrative proposed in this co-creation and open innovation process works regardless of ideology.

Regarding the ultimate objective of this research, both Millennials and Generation Z, as well as politicians, are crucial for shaping and the survival of a place brand. The former because they represent generations

that will use the brand for many years to come and have the most accessible tools for its dissemination, thanks to being digital natives and frequent social media users, especially Generation Z. The latter, because they are responsible for thinking strategically and long-term about territorial governance, always in line with their ideology. However, they are all aware that it is ideology and electoral strategy that provoke short- or medium-term decisions instead of genuinely focusing on the city's distant future. The challenge for the brand, given the fieldwork results, is twofold: how to keep the younger audiences engaged so that they continue being the City of Huelva's best ambassadors and how to survive future political crises and electoral periods so that the Huelva Original brand can serve as a governance tool for the city in the very long term.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, the role of Millennials and Generation Z in crafting a brand narrative with long-term viability and relevance in the digital realm cannot be underestimated. The development of the brand narrative has also fostered cooperation and interaction among various political groups in the City Council, which is a positive step towards exploring cooperative workspaces among political factions. This ensures that the brand's implementation extends beyond a single term and transcends short-sighted political actions. The collaboration among political groups is a testament to the power of branding in bringing people together towards a common goal.

The citizen participatory process holds particular significance in the development of a new territorial brand. This brand, which aims to represent the identity and values of a region or locality, cannot be designed in isolation or merely from a technical standpoint. It is imperative that the inhabitants of the region play a central role in its creation, as they are the ones who best understand and embody the essence of the territory. Citizen involvement ensures that the territorial brand is not only a genuine reflection of the place but also has the support and identification of its population.

However, while the public procurement for the brand did not originally include the proposition of key performance indicators (KPI), for the future it is necessary that a project of this magnitude should incorporate KPIs to guide the application, monitoring, and evolution of the brand narrative. KPIs are essential in measuring the success of the brand and ensuring that it is meeting its objectives. In this regard, it is concluded that alongside the development of a territorial brand for a city like Huelva, there should also be the establishment of a continuous observatory. This observatory will monitor the brand's performance and provide feedback on how to improve it.

The development of a territorial brand for a city like Huelva is a complex process that requires the involvement of various stakeholders. Consequently, it follows the recommendations of what Jernsand (2016) and Kavartzis et al. (2017) define as "inclusive place branding." The collaboration among political groups is a positive step towards ensuring the brand's long-term viability and relevance. However, future steps must be taken to incorporate KPIs as they are essential in measuring the success of the brand and ensuring that it is meeting its objectives. Furthermore, the establishment of a continuous observatory will provide feedback on how to improve the brand and ensure that it remains relevant in the ever-changing digital realm. These are also two recommendations that will help marketers to improve place branding strategies.

Finally, this research has had some limitations, above all incorporating the Silent Generation and Baby Boomers to the online survey because their digital literacy is lesser than under-40 citizens. Although researchers tried to solve this limitation by incorporating more representation of these two older generations in the qualitative sample, more work should be done in order to find better tools to monitor quantitatively the opinion of citizens older than 40 years old.

Acknowledgments

The authors would like to thank Paloma Díaz Espejo for her proofreading and the Huelva City Council for helping Lugadero Agency to display the fieldwork of this research.

Funding

Lugadero was the winning company in the public tender for the development of the new Huelva Original brand.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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