

## Article

# The Process of Implementing a Place Brand Based on a Multilevel Approach: The Case of the Municipality of Masquefa

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**Abstract:** Place branding is a discipline at the intersection of geography and communications, devoted to the process by which places become brands, understood as devices for managing a desired identity presented to the outside world, and also for internal consumption by the residents of the place. This paper intends to explain the conceptualization process of a place brand, and to present the methodological framework for building a brand that takes into account all audiences and stakeholders, thus strengthening the identity of the place. The case presented here is Masquefa, a municipality in the Barcelona province. The methodology has been structured in three phases: first, an initial diagnosis and data gathering; next, fieldwork and public participation (interviews, surveys, and discussion in focus groups); and third, construction of the story. The conclusions of this article show how a municipality without any significant tangible and intangible assets to truly identify it can build a brand story accepted by all agents, both public and private, which will help it grow sustainably in the future.

**Keywords:** co-creation; co-participation; Masquefa; multilevel approach; place branding



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## 1. Introduction

Place brands are defined based on their influence on individuals' perception. Achieving a unique identity expressed through a brand offers certain places recognition and differentiation, and the positioning it affords them can be a determining factor in the choices made by users. In this context, territories allow themselves to be presented in the form of a newly emerged symbolic identity, managed in part through the transformation of places into brands. These days, the identity of places is not to be taken lightly and may even be a matter of survival, both economically and due to the vital need to promote their identity in an era of globalization.

In the contemporary context, places have a growing need to establish their identities, not only for immediately practical/commercial purposes (tourism, marketing strategies, etc.) but to meet a new demand for stronger identities in a society that sees itself as global. Some research [1–3] shows that in most cases, the logic of introducing place brands has followed processes practically identical to the creation of commercial brands, making full use of the associated marketing and communication techniques: “In general, the dynamic of introducing place brands is essentially operational (do this) and not reflective (why do this?)” [3] (p. 732).

However, we see that the creation of place brands at every geographical scale (country, city, nation, region, town, destination, and so on) must include elements differentiating it

from the normal corporate methods in two important ways: the need to read the brand creation processes from a local and environmental perspective, and the public interest that lies beneath this type of initiative.

The main objectives of this article are: (a) to analyze the process of conceptualizing the place brand of Masquefa, a municipality in the Anoia district of inland Catalonia; and (b) to establish the importance of local stakeholders in building the brand story. This is the result of a research project led by the TRACTE Research Group of the University of Vic-Central University of Catalonia and Masquefa Town Council. Masquefa's local government wanted to define a strategy to strengthen citizens' local identity and link the positioning of the town with the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the Local Urban Agenda. Hence, the project of Masquefa's new brand is part of a global strategy of the Town Council to reinforce its local identity in a *glocal* (global and local) context [2].

## 2. Theoretical Framework

### 2.1. The Basic Principles of Place Branding

In the specific sphere of place branding, the goal of the brand—according to Anholt [1]—is to earn not only a financial return, but also a good reputation for the place, which of course will also improve its economy. According to Anholt, the virtue of this perspective is that it can align market forces with the particular interests of human capital. In similar terms, López-Lita and Benlloch [4] (p. 51) point out: “Brands must act as a foundation for differentiating places and highlighting their anthropological and cultural differences, thus transcending their initial strictly economic dimension.”

Meanwhile, Hankinson [5] proposes a conceptual model for place brands, starting with four concepts inherent to the brand, and the place branding concept, based on its relationship with the stakeholders, focusing on behavior rather than communications, and on reality rather than image. Hankinson [5] goes on to highlight the purposes of the brand as a device for communicating identity, and thus differentiation; the function of the brand as an entity of perception relating to consumers' feelings, reasoning and emotions; the brand as an enhancer of value linked to brand management; and finally, the brand's inherent relational value, interpreting the brand and its personality in terms of the relationship with the consumer.

Based on a fundamental model of differentiation and positioning typical of corporate branding, place branding seeks the following goals [6] (p. 107): making places more attractive to business investment; improving their competitive position in the tourism market; increasing their attractiveness for capturing and retaining talent; encouraging citizens to identify with the place where they live; and finally, generally facilitating economic and social development.

At the same time, the goal of this branding is not merely to present and communicate a given image and reputation to the outside world; its differentiating feature is that it works specifically with the local population to increase their pride in their home and the feeling of belonging to a certain place.

### 2.2. Place Branding as a Strategic Activity to Improve Governance

Unlike the promotion of places, place branding is not an intuitive, random activity, but is much more integrated and strategic in its field of action. It is directly linked to a new urban lifestyle in which the visual imagery and mythology associated with the place become highly important. In this context, promoting an image is a priority for planners and politicians. Therefore, applying marketing and branding to places becomes a natural consequence of a new territorial governance strongly oriented to meeting the desires and wishes of its potential audience [7].

Thus, the definitions of the terms *place promotion*, *place selling* (or place marketing) and *place branding* can be untangled by establishing that a place has a large potential audience and many attributes and values to offer, so that promotional strategies are no longer viable when set against the place's new action protocols. In the context applicable to places,

branding supposes the use of advanced marketing techniques, to some degree jettisoning the commercial and utilitarian focus typical of place promotion and moving towards managing places' reputations with the intention of optimizing their assets. The ultimate goal of this practice is favorable positioning in the global market of places through the projection of an image that corresponds to the reality of the depicted place, very different to the distorted view presented through stereotypes and clichés.

Consequently, the current discipline of place branding clearly needs updating in line with its degree of impact on society. Taking into account the government's leadership role in the deployment of these processes, there are two concepts defining its impact on global place management: (a) adaptations of corporate branding to the branding of public assets [8,9] and (b) the importance of place branding processes conceived as processes for improving governance, and even more so, space planning and the sustainable growth of the place [10–14].

### 3. The Context: The Municipality of Masquefa

The name Masquefa (Figure 1) is said to come from the pan-Arabic *qef*, meaning “living joyfully” [15], or perhaps the Berber “fertile land” [16–18]. Today, the municipal area of Masquefa (in Barcelona province) covers 17.06 square km in the easternmost end of the district of Anoia, abutting the districts of Baix Llobregat and Alt Penedès. The main settlement is at an altitude of 257 m on the southern slopes of the Montserrat massif. The municipality is bounded on the Anoia side by the municipalities of Piera (to the west) and Els Hostalets de Pierola (north and northeast), Sant Esteve Sesrovires (Baix Llobregat, to the east) and Sant Llorenç d'Hortons (Alt Penedès, to the south and east).



**Figure 1.** Municipal crest of Masquefa. Source: Masquefa Town Council.

The population of the municipality is 9623 [19] distributed among the towns of Masquefa and La Beguda Alta, the residential developments of Can Valls, Can Quiseró, Can Parellada, and El Maset, and a scattering of around twenty country houses. Despite its rural characteristics, the municipality is located in an industrial hinterland. Its proximity to the intermediary cities of Baix Llobregat (Martorell, Esparreguera, Abrera, and Sant Andreu de la Barca) and thriving local industries (with large companies including ALDI Supermercados, Transsesrovires SL, and Carreras Grupo Logístico) mean that the municipality is socially and economically focused on the nearby industrial areas and even the Barcelona metropolitan area (Àrea Metropolitana de Barcelona or AMB). See Table 1.

**Table 1.** Basic socio-economic information on Masquefa.

Variable	Value
Foreign population	484
GDP (in millions of euros)	129.6
GDP per inhabitant (in thousands of euros)	14.5
Disposable household income per inhabitant (in thousands of euros)	15.4
Employed population	3764
Unemployed population	893

Source: Idescat-Institut d'Estadística de Catalunya [19].

Thus, we can define the society of Masquefa as mainly middle-class and working-class. The local economy is dominated by the service sector, although it also has characteristics typical of industrial areas: there are several industrial estates, two of which are dominated by major logistics companies. There are cardboard processors and manufacturers of plastic packaging, bottles and caps, car accessories and metal fittings. Industrial activity is fairly diverse, but the metalworking sector is the largest, providing 9.84% of local jobs [19].

Masquefa also retains some residual primary sector activity with vineyards, and to a lesser degree, cereal and other farming [20]. The local wine industry produces wines and sparkling wines with the Penedès designation of origin. A good example is the French firm Moët & Chandon, which bought an estate in the municipal area in 1989 where it grows grapes for its sparkling wines. Much of the area is non-productive, with pine and holm oak woods and Mediterranean scrub. The tourism industry has traditionally been important, with establishments such as Hostal Montserrat and Can Parellada.

Since 1965, due to its proximity to Barcelona, numerous residential developments have sprung up in the municipality, at first with second or holiday homes, which then became primary residences thanks to easy access to the industrial centers of the AMB. This, together with the growth of industry, has raised the municipal census from 1605 in 1970 to the current 9623 inhabitants [19]. Its demographic growth appears unstoppable year after year, thanks also to the immigrant population. The main country of origin of the foreign population is Morocco (197 people), followed by Pakistan (38), Belarus (29), China (21), Italy (21), Colombia (16), and Romania (12) [21].

The municipality has several associations, including Masquefa Comerç [22], the local association of businesses and services, made up of over a hundred companies in a variety of sectors. However, Masquefa is not noted for its tourist attractions. In 2022, the main attractions were the Centre de Recuperació d'Amfibis i Rèptils de Catalunya (CRARC), a reptile and amphibian rehabilitation center, which attracts a very specific visitor profile: schools and families with children [23,24]; and the 5-star hotel and spa Can Bonastre Wine Resort, with exceptional views of the Montserrat massif. It does not have any significant heritage sites, unlike many other municipalities in Anoia, known as the Land of Castles, because for centuries, it was the frontier between Christians and Muslim kingdoms [25]. Most of the municipalities on the map (Figure 2) are marked with a red symbol showing the presence of a castle, but Masquefa, at the bottom right, is one of the few lacking one.

However, the municipality does have other attractions in common with the rest of the district: wine tourism, stunning landscapes and rural settings, fine cuisine, and peace and quiet. More specifically, its main tangible and intangible heritage elements are the Romanesque chapel of Sant Pere; the Rojelio Rojo factory; the festival of Sant Eloi, commemorating the industrial past; the grape harvest festival; and at the culinary level the *torta de guirnalda*, a traditional cake, originally eaten on Palm Sunday but now enjoyed year round [16,26,27].



**Figure 2.** Main tourist attractions in the Anoia district, Barcelona province, Catalonia. Source: Anoia Turisme [25]. Reproduced with permission from Anoia Turisme, *Tops Turístics de l'Anoia*, published by Consell Comarcal de l'Anoia 2018.

Therefore, the complex nature of the municipality led the Town Council, in its previous mandate (2020–2023), to plan various strategic documents, which would guide the municipality towards sustainable growth in the future, in line with the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Established in the Council's Action Plan [28], these are a revision of local spatial planning (POUM), the local Urban Agenda (it is the first Catalan municipality to adopt it), and the conceptualization of a new local brand: the case study in this paper.

#### 4. Method

The proposed methodology for this case study consists of three stages or phases. Its starting point is the methodological model described in the doctoral thesis *La transformació de territoris en marques: el reconeixement i diferenciació de identitats espacials en temps posmoderns. Un estado de la cuestión* ("Places transformed into brands: recognition and differentiation of spatial identities in post-modern times. The state of the art") [3]. The first phase is gathering information on the subject, drafting the SWOT, and the initial diagnosis. The second is fieldwork and applied social research. At this stage, triangulation methods (surveys, discussion groups, and in-depth interviews) are used to structure a public participation process and generate a cross-disciplinary brand story.

The proposed triangulation is intended to capture the opinions of agents of the place before laying the foundations of a brand story. Without the help of the place's agents, which become "change agents", it is impossible to find a long-lasting brand story or create shared and accepted storytelling [13,14]. The third and final stage is co-designing the visual identity of the new place brand, created collaboratively thanks to the participation of the

stakeholders who took part in the fieldwork. The following sections (Sections 4.1–4.3) explain our methodology in detail.

#### 4.1. First Phase: Definition of the Project and Initial Diagnosis

This phase will frame the process of diagnosis and data collection for social research. Here, the proposed work must be planned according to the identification of the main actors and analysis of the tangible and intangible assets of the place (in this article, the municipality of Masquefa), after analyzing all the previously published documentation.

The published information and data on the place gathered during the collection phase [15–28] are used for SWOT analysis with a clearly territorial reading and interpretation, to which the brand creation process must be adapted. The place must never become subordinate to the brand's positioning and projection needs. The resulting SWOT analysis is shown in Table 2.

**Table 2.** SWOT analysis.

Weaknesses	Threats
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Relatively small municipality (under 10,000 inhabitants).</li> <li>• Not well-known at the regional and state level.</li> <li>• Little media presence.</li> <li>• A media image is often linked to negative events, which do not represent the reality of the municipality.</li> <li>• Physical cultural assets are not significant or greatly differentiated.</li> <li>• Lack of well-known residents to act as ambassadors.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The Montserrat massif is not the exclusive heritage of Masquefa and can be (and is) exploited by other municipalities.</li> <li>• The district of Anoia is rich in castles and industrial heritage, which may overshadow local built and natural heritage.</li> <li>• Other places with tourist attractions near the municipality make overnight stays less likely.</li> <li>• There is the risk of large companies such as ALDI choosing to relocate.</li> </ul>
Strengths	Opportunities
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Thriving industrial fabric.</li> <li>• The landscape of vineyards with Montserrat in the background.</li> <li>• Masquefa wine bears the Penedès Designation of Origin.</li> <li>• The metalworking past has become an asset through the Rogelio Rojo factory.</li> <li>• Unique traditional festivals (Sant Eloi, Grape Festival, etc.).</li> <li>• CRARC.</li> <li>• A luxury spa-hotel.</li> <li>• Good transport links by road and the FGC railway station.</li> <li>• Close to cities such as Martorell and Igualada.</li> <li>• Good basic social and cultural services.</li> <li>• A strong culture of associations.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Enhance the balance between the rural and industrial.</li> <li>• Enhance the attractiveness of CRARC throughout Catalonia.</li> <li>• 2022 marks the 25th anniversary of the new CRARC facilities.</li> <li>• Enhance the traditional professions of the municipalities, as in other municipalities of the Anoia district.</li> <li>• Rejuvenate the commercial profile of the municipality and increase the digitization of businesses.</li> <li>• Realign the attractiveness of Masquefa to reflect its presence in the DO Penedès.</li> </ul>

#### 4.2. Second Phase: Public Participation

To maximize public participation in the place brand conceptualization process, it is very important that transparency and communication form part of the modus operandi of the research team. Therefore, they must seek the participation of members of the public, but first, the local government or other interested body must structure a communication plan that helps generate a climate of interest and provides participants with simple and direct information on the project and what is expected of them. Those stakeholders that

participate in this field work can become “change agents” in the implementation process of the place brand.

#### 4.2.1. Defining Change Agents for Place Branding and Sustainable Development Strategies

When the United Nations approved its Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in 2015, public institutions found themselves obliged to conduct ongoing analyses of their contributions to the development of their community of reference. This also meant that these institutions’ place brand construction processes (whether at local, regional, or supra-regional levels) began to include the idea of sustainability as a foundation for their story.

Many discourses appeared that, from the point of view of professional practice or policy, promised environmentally sustainable growth for municipalities, favoring their economic development and the inclusion of their citizens in decision-making processes [11]. However, this positivization of the idea of sustainability can lead to a naïve discourse, which becomes a mere PR façade for government action [11], also known as “greenwashing”. Thus, the idea of “sustainable development” can become an abstract concept, which is then difficult to put into practice.

To bridge the gap between this theoretical “sustainable development” and the public putting it into practice, Rinaldi et al. [11] advocate looking for “change agents” or “boundary spanners”. The following must be noted: “Active boundary work is therefore required to construct and manage effectively the interfaces among various stakeholders engaged in harnessing knowledge to promote action” [12] (p. 4615).

Briefly, these change agents can be identified as the experts, entrepreneurs, consultants, or business or social associations “that are capable to ‘translate’ the recommendations of academic consultants into intelligible administrative procedures” [11] (p. 2); these change agents must create a global discourse on sustainable development that enables the globalization process to emerge. By appropriating the global discourse and filling it with shared meanings at the local level, they seem to transpose a global space to a local place, acting as mediators in global–local relationships in terms of the transformation of knowledge (principles) into action (practices) [11] (pp. 2–3).

San Eugenio et al. [13], as well as San Eugenio, Ginesta, and Kavartzis [14], study how the public (public and private actors) of a region can help make territorial stories tangible where there is a political will to grow the place sustainably. The conclusions of their research, focusing on the districts of Pla de l’Estany, Alt Empordà, and Baix Empordà (all three in Catalonia), assume that the processes of co-creation of the place brand, with bottom-up conceptualization and design, are the only ones that can ensure that local public and private agents work together to implement a brand and become change agents for a given community. Moreover, these previous works [13,14] indicate that the collaboration of local media is vital for the population to accept the project and want to take part. Once stakeholders have been identified, the public participates in the place brand conceptualization and design process through three applied research techniques: focus groups, surveys and in-depth interviews.

#### 4.2.2. Creation of Focus Groups

First, focus groups (6–12 people) are designed using convenience sampling, distributed by sectors of activity, based on which group dynamics are defined in order to build a brand value and an ethos for a place story. Specific user groups are selected with certain characteristics that are relevant for the research. These focus groups are moderated by a questionnaire set by the research team and drawn from the main agent groups of the place: socio-economic agents, technical officials or agents, and consumers. These focus groups, established in the existing literature as one of the most-recommended techniques for collaboration with the public to create a brand story [29], present a high qualitative value thanks to the involvement of all the people of a place. In the case of Masquefa, they were designed as follows (Table 3):

**Table 3.** Composition of focus groups and number of participants.

Composition of Focus Group	Number
Masquefa Town Council technical team	10
Politicians	12
Retailers and tourism agents	8
Industrial sector	6
Social and educational bodies	6
Sports bodies	6
Cultural bodies	6
Total number of participants	54

The questionnaires for these groups presented the following points for discussion: (a) what the citizens understand place branding to be; (b) differences between a commercial brand and a place brand; (c) what a place brand is for; (d) what goals the created place brand should have; (e) the municipality's tangible and intangible assets; (f) a reminder of previous brands in the municipality; (g) how a place brand can help make the municipality more dynamic; (h) how the place brand can help strengthen local identity; (i) elements differentiating the municipality from others.

#### 4.2.3. Questionnaire Design

Next, a survey is created and distributed to capture the public's opinions on the values and/or differential attributes of the area. This questionnaire is published online to facilitate its distribution among the residents. The sample is not stratified, so that all citizens have the option of responding. Therefore, for the Masquefa brand, in March–April 2022, an online survey was made available to everybody in the municipality on the Town Council website [16]. Finally, 407 people answered the survey, distributed as follows: 65.6% men, 33.9% women, and 0.5% non-binary people. Age and population center were distributed as shown in Tables 4 and 5.

**Table 4.** Distribution of survey participants by age.

Age Range	Percentage
Under 18	2.7
18 to 29	13.3
30 to 39	17.7
40 to 49	39.3
50 to 59	17.4
60 to 69	7.6
70 to 79	2
Over 80	0

**Table 5.** Distribution of survey participants by population center.

Center	Percentage
Masquefa	66.5
La Beguda Alta	5.7
Can Parellada	14.5
Can Quiseró	1.5
Can Valls	1.5
El Maset	10.3

The survey questionnaire asked citizens to respond to the following questions: (a) personal data and place of residence, (b) what they value most and least about the municipality, (c) what icon they feel best represents the municipality, (d) virtues and flaws of people in the municipality, (f) colors associated with the municipality and its brand, and (g) what will define the municipality in ten years' time.



This research explores residents' perceptions of Masquefa; the aim of the Town Council was not to create a destination branding campaign for tourism, but rather to analyze the perception of residents in more depth, because they are the people who have a real sense and identity of the place [3,29,30].

#### 4.2.4. In-Depth Interviews

The focus groups and the survey are supplemented by in-depth interviews with a selection of local people whose stature, expertise, reputation and/or prestige make their individual suggestions and/or impressions worth capturing. These interviews complement the contributions of the focus groups and enable us to fine-tune the quantitative information gathered from the public surveys. In this case, 11 in-depth interviews were conducted in February and March 2022, as shown in the following table (Table 6):

**Table 6.** In-depth interviews conducted.

Interviewee No.	Position or Reason for the Interview
Interviewee 1	Representative of the collective of pensioners of Masquefa
Interviewee 2	President of the <i>Colla Gegantera</i> of Masquefa
Interviewee 3	Former mayor (1996–2007)
Interviewee 4	Business owner
Interviewee 5	Former neighborhood mayor and current public ombudsman
Interviewee 6	General Manager of Masquelack
Interviewee 7	Industrial property developer
Interviewee 8	Business owner
Interviewee 9	Local activist (and town councilor)
Interviewee 10	Linguist and lecturer at Barcelona University
Interviewee 11	Mayor (since 2007)

They form a kind of “council of elders” of the municipality, recognized by and representing its people. In order to triangulate with the results of the earlier research, the interview questionnaire was semi-structured and based on the same script as the focus groups, adapted to the particularities of each interviewee.

#### 4.3. Third Phase: Creating the Brand Story, Design and Implementation

This phase organizes and systematizes the information gathered in fieldwork, applying various social research techniques. Sharing all the information obtained will enable us to create a brand story and conceptualize the basis for its future use. After drafting an executive brief, this brand story must be transformed into a graphic image, and finally, all of this material must be combined in a document in the form of a set of rules for the use of the brand and how the graphics, logo and slogan must be deployed in all possible media and actions. For the purposes of this article, the main findings of this phase are shown in Section 5 below.

### 5. Results

To demonstrate the methodology presented above for a specific case (Masquefa), this section of results and discussion is divided into four sections. First, the research results in Sections 5.1–5.3 show the main conclusions of the brand story proposed for the municipality and publicly presented to the people of Masquefa. Second, the discussion in Section 5.4 presents a qualitative assessment of the process to identify aspects that can be extrapolated to any place brand conceptualization process.

#### 5.1. Masquefa's Tangible Assets

Geographically, the town of Masquefa stands in an ambivalent overlap of territories. At the administrative level, it belongs to the district of Anoia, the capital of which is Igualada. Its services are based in the city of Martorell, in the Baix Llobregat district, while

it also forms part of the landscape unit of Montserrat, regarded as part of the geographical area of Penedès. We can even associate Masquefa with the industrial landscape of the AMB, as the location of the logistics headquarters of the multinational chain ALDI and the waste management facility of the company CESPÀ.

The territorial ambivalence that defines Masquefa also means that the town can be considered a de facto crossroads or hub which is highly valued in the industrial sector. While 8.6% of the inhabitants of Masquefa also value it very positively (see Table 7), there is another ambivalence associated with this location: according to the public survey, 12.3% of the population regards road traffic as a negative element.

**Table 7.** What do you like most about Masquefa?

Attribute	Percentage of Acceptance
Natural setting	36.5
Quality of life	38.1
Associations and cultural life	1.5
Location	8.6
Sports facilities	0.5
Job opportunities	0.5
Traditions	3.2
Cultural diversity	1
Municipal services	2
Retail options	0
Range and quality of education	1.7
Other	6.4

More specifically, Masquefa has three main tangible assets: the Montserrat massif, the Rogelio Rojo factory, and the Catalan Reptile and Amphibian Rehabilitation Center (CRARC) (see Table 8). The in-depth interviews, the focus groups, and the public survey all cite three places as the main locally recognized spaces, with a respectable fourth ranking for the so-called Old Cemetery.

**Table 8.** What icon do you feel best represents Masquefa?

Icon	Percentage of Acceptance
Catalan Reptile and Amphibian Rehabilitation Center (CRARC)	20.2
Rogelio Rojo factory	21.1
Views of the Montserrat massif	30.7
The <i>Alzinar</i> (holm oak forest) area	4.4
The Old Cemetery and church of Sant Pere	5.9
The Can Mata waste disposal facility	3.7
The vineyards	3.2
Festival figures: giants, devils, and <i>bastoners</i>	3.2
Paleontological finds	0
Popular and street festivals	6.1
Other	1.5

The Rogelio Rojo factory and CRARC become two tourism assets unique to the municipality, as well as essential assets for generating pride in belonging among the citizens. In common with old factories in many Catalan villages and towns, the Rogelio Rojo factory represents the industrial past of the place, but the location of the technological center (CTC) on the site since 2009 also links this legacy of 1900s–1930s industrial Catalonia with the town's adaptation to the digital society.

Several interviewees mention the heritage that the Rogelio Rojo factory represents, referring to it as one of the town's tangible assets, and some comparing it to the Montserrat massif or the importance of the vineyards. Meanwhile, CRARC has become a tourist

attraction, but at the same time a space for generating and transmitting knowledge, as it links the municipality to the Catalan research system thanks to its agreements with several Catalan universities. Our interviewees agreed that CRARC is a positive element for the town, even going so far as to say it is “the only good thing” (interviewee 1). However, others said that “CRARC should promote itself more” and that Masquefa has more things apart from CRARC.

Nevertheless, the Montserrat massif was seen as a loaned landscape, given that it is not exclusive to the municipality, but shared by several municipalities in the Bages and Anoia districts. Here, in attempting to outline Masquefa’s tangible assets, we find a third ambivalence: the Montserrat massif is an identifier of the municipality, but also of other neighboring municipalities. Its heritage is not specific to Masquefa. The non-exclusiveness of this high-added value landscape is both a current strength and a future threat for the town. However, “views of Montserrat” are the element that most interviewees (2, 3, 5, 6, 7, 8, 10) mention as a major attraction of the town.

The fourth ambivalence of Masquefa’s tangible assets is explained by the presence of the CESPÀ waste disposal facility, in the municipal area of Els Hostalets de Pierola, which represents a break in the continuum of landscape surrounding the municipality and follows the visual link between the Montserrat massif and the first vineyards of the DO Penedès area. In fact, the landscape is one of the values most appreciated by the people of Masquefa in the public survey (36.6%), while the dump is the main worry, with 58.2% of responses (see Table 9).

**Table 9.** What do you not like about Masquefa?

Attribute	Percentage of Dissatisfaction
Geographical dispersion	2.2
Zoning	4.9
The effects of the Can Mata dump	58.2
Cultural diversity	1.7
Administrative interdependence (Anoia, Baix Llobregat, Penedès)	5.7
Municipal services	2.5
Transport links	12.3
Social cohesion	1.7
Other	10.8

Although the public survey did not specify zoning as a critical point in negative assessments of the town’s assets (4.9%), the qualitative appraisal of the fieldwork showed that the disconnect between the residential developments and the town center generates two parallel realities in the municipality, requiring new meeting places. While the Town Council has already taken action to harmonize all the settlements of Masquefa in planning terms, such as creating a network of greenways for walking, there are still two different ways of life: the anonymity of the developments versus the more social environment of the town center.

### 5.2. Masquefa’s Intangible Assets

The interviewees and focus groups identified Masquefa’s many associations and cultural life as among its most valuable assets. This includes its calendar of festivals and the local folklore (with carnivalesque figures of giants, *bastoners* and devils). The “main festival” (interviewees 2 and 3) is expressly mentioned in the interviews, and the “giants” (interviewee 2) are one of the town’s outstanding attributes. Similarly, the senior center (*casal*) (interviewee 1) is recognized as an important asset for social cohesion.

However, the public survey showed a certain disdain for what this popular culture can contribute to the identity of the municipality, as only 3.2% of those surveyed considered it important and positive for defining the Masquefa brand, and only 1.5% considered the

town's associations to be important. More specifically, there are also notable ambivalences in the popular culture: while the grape harvest festival is part of the town's calendar of festivals, very few wineries are now located there, and even fewer are seen as assets in territorial positioning. Indeed, this ambivalence was reflected in the interviews, as only one interviewee mentioned the "Grape Festival, the Harvest Festival, the Festival of San Isidro, and the *Garlandes* Dance" as local traditions (interviewee 3).

"Social cohesion" appears throughout the fieldwork as a central concern for the people of Masquefa. This is shown in the interviews, which mention "the lack of social cohesion" (interviewees 7, 9 and 10) and the need for greater "integration" (interviewees 7–9). Some even stated that "most of the inhabitants do not feel like part of the town" (interviewee 2). The qualitative work, both in the interviews and the focus groups, defines a "dual Masquefa" split between "new arrivals and people who have always been here", or put another way, between the people who were living in Masquefa before the construction boom of the early 21st century, and those who came to the town as a result of it. In fact, some interviewees mention the town's "growth" (interviewee 3) and that "so many people arriving" (interviewee 3) has meant losing some of its peacefulness. However, they also say that "so many people arriving kicked off the social life we now have in this place" (interviewee 3). From 2000 to 2007, according to data from Masquefa Town Council, the town grew an average of 15% per year.

The work of creating social cohesion in the town has tended to fall on the schools (Turó and Font del Remei schools, and Vinyes Verdes school in La Beguda). However, this social cohesion should be a concern for all the agents of the municipality to avoid it becoming a dormitory town in the future—a worry expressed by 19.7% of those surveyed (see Table 10). To complement the necessary social policies, the hope is that an integrating story of the place can be created to foreground the idea—as those surveyed claim—that the people of Masquefa are "welcoming".

**Table 10.** What will best describe your municipality ten years from now?

Attribute	Percentage of Acceptance
A better-connected municipality	22.1
A dormitory town	19.7
A municipality with better retail and job opportunities	9.3
A municipality that maintains its tradition and culture	29
A socially cohesive municipality	8.1
A municipality with good zoning	6.4
Other	5.4

Also, one of the elements most highly valued by the members of the public was "the quality of life" of Masquefa (peace and quiet, proximity to nature, accessibility, diversity of services), which was the most highlighted positive attribute (38.1%), together with the natural landscape surrounding the municipality (36.6%). The results of the qualitative interviews corroborate the attributes of "peace and quiet", "quality of life" and "natural setting" as the most important elements of Masquefa (interviewees 4, 6, 7 and 9).

This asset has a major weakness, which is the presence of the waste disposal facility, which disrupts both the architecture and natural landscape of Masquefa, and the concept of quality of life itself. In fact, "the dump" appears as a "very important conflict" in the interviews, for its impact on both "health" and the appearance and "general image of the town" (interviewees 3, 5, 7 and 11). Preventing antisocial behavior should also strengthen quality of life.

### 5.3. Lines of Work to Implement the "Masquefa Brand"

Although Masquefa has three icons that represent the municipality (the Montserrat massif, CRARC, and the Rogelio Rojo factory), none of these can drive a narrative of place with its own discourse. Montserrat is not exclusive to Masquefa; the factory forms part of

an industrial heritage shared with other municipalities around the rivers Ter and Llobregat, and CRARC is a niche asset attracting people in education and research.

At the same time, an idea which repeatedly appears in the fieldwork is that the collective imaginary of Masquefa is a blank page, or in the words of the interviewee 10, “each generation interprets Masquefa differently”. This statement can be our starting point and our framework. Taking into account that “social cohesion” has also become a recurring story among the fieldwork participants, the brand’s value proposition looks to enhance the value of the social component of the place, and the added value contributed by the people who live there.

This social emphasis takes the form of a brand that highlights the quality of life of Masquefa, striking the balance between its tangible and intangible assets. At the same time, the brand must help overcome the ambivalences shown throughout the story taken from the assessment of the fieldwork participants. The construction of a more cohesive story of the town in the future depends on overcoming the ambivalences that appear when describing the tangible and defining the intangible assets of Masquefa.

Thus, according to all the above, Masquefa could be defined by the concept “balance”:

- A geographical balance of the benefits of inland and coastal areas, and the municipality’s location on the frontier between the districts of Anoia, Alt Penedès, and Baix Llobregat, with all the benefits that entails, such as the Penedès designation of origin for its wines;
- A balance of lifestyle, past and present, able to combine rural and industrial settings with ease;
- A balance in its urban dimension, combining the typical benefits of a village, such as neighborliness and a sense of belonging, with the conveniences and public services of a large town;
- A clear balance in zoning terms, thanks to ongoing, well-regulated planning and attention to esthetics;
- A balance in its environmental footprint thanks to a clear commitment to sustainability and the SDGs in its local Urban Agenda (the first Catalan municipality to adopt it);
- A balance in its cuisine, mixing tradition and modernity;
- A balance between its landscapes of vineyards and mountains;
- A balanced sanctuary for the body and soul of travelers spending the night in its spa-hotel.

This idea of balance is also aligned with the local government’s action plan (Plan de Actuación de Mandato, or PAM) [28], which is committed to Masquefa’s values of proximity, sustainability, transparency, inclusion, transversality, efficiency, and innovation. The stakeholders who have worked with us emphasize above all the municipality’s values of integration, social cohesion, friendliness and quality of life, and the adaptability of its people. The concept of balance described above is consistent with these values, and the vision of the town, which adds the concepts of safety, responsibility, dynamism and good quality of life, can also be linked to the idea of balance.

Based on these reflections, we can assume that Masquefa’s most important asset is the unity of its people. So, while the coat of arms of Masquefa shows a hand, and the town’s name comes from the Arabic expression “to live joyfully”, our fieldwork and the co-creation process with the public led to a proposed slogan: “Masquefa *encaixa amb tu*” (Masquefa fits in with you. This slogan is justified because:

- Anyone can fit in there (resident, visitor, investor, etc.). It evokes the ideal of a warm welcome and easy integration.
- The idea of “fitting in” represents social cohesion, a shared cause, integration.
- Fitting in as a connection between citizens, place, economy, sustainability, tradition, and future.
- Technically, it facilitates scalability in brand architecture. For example, sub-campaigns can be planned with the slogans “Masquefa fits in with culture”, “Masquefa fits in with sports”, etc.

At the esthetic level, we recommend applying the concept of balance (symmetry, calm, equilibrium, evenness, etc.). The tone should be friendly and cheerful. And according to those surveyed, the main brand palette consists of four colors: green (27.3%), purple (16.2%), lilac (13.8%), and blue (9.3%). Finally, the brief which the research team delivered to Masquefa Town Council enabled the agency Efectiva Comunicació to implement the brand that was finally presented to the public. According to the agency's suggestions, the proposed slogan evolved to the final "Masquefa connecta" (Masquefa connects) (Figure 3).



**Figure 3.** Final form of the "Masquefa connecta" brand. Source: Masquefa Town Council (2023).

#### 5.4. Considerations on Methodology and Disciplines for Building Future Place Brands: The Multilevel Approach

The methodological process for implementing a place brand is based on qualitative and quantitative social research methodology, which can obtain primary source information and indicators for creating a discourse on the place. This praxis differs significantly from the traditional practices associated with corporate and commercial brands [1–3]. In the words of San Eugenio [3] (p. 732): "In general, the dynamic of introducing place brands is essentially operational (do this) and not reflective (why do this?)".

Thus, the methodological framework presents two main areas for analysis: on one hand, the physical and tangible reality of the place, and on the other, its symbolic and intangible reality. As seen in the section on methodology, the social research process combines three complementary techniques in a triangulation that lets us capture the most objectifiable elements of the place, as well as non-objectifiable elements: in other words, emotional elements, or those valued by the citizens of a given place.

This triangulation also lets us include all the stakeholders linked to the brand in the fieldwork, facilitating a process of co-participation and co-creation of the place brand, where the participants are not only sources of information or opinion, but become a fundamental part of the decision-making relating to the effective implementation of place brands. Thus, as they feel themselves to be part of the process, the fieldwork participants also become "change agents" of a municipality in the mid to long term [11]. To sum up, this process, taken as a whole, is an effective response to the question "why do this?" [3].

The application of this methodology allows for some reflections on the place branding approach. We must take a multilevel approach to the discipline of place branding, in all its complexity. This involves understanding the place branding discipline in both theory and practice.

First, the multilevel approach is understood as the matrix of actors, subjects and practices framing the place brand. Here, place branding must consider power networks, shared subjects and multiple practices among the actors involved in community construction strategies [7,31,32]. Whether or not it plays an active role, local government must be considered as a driver of the co-participation and co-creation process. In the case of Masquefa, we could see how a coalition Town Council was able to understand the intrinsic complexity of the brand co-creation process.

Second, a multilevel approach to place branding must break with the historical dichotomy between academic and professional points of view on place brands and consider a double approach, needed in the research and application of this place brand: a critical

perspective and instrumental approach at the same time. In the case of Masquefa, academic fieldwork and the strict exercise of consulting become complementary through a team consisting of the University, local government, and the private sector (the agency Efectiva Comunicació).

Finally, a multilevel approach must decode the place identity according to a multidisciplinary perspective that can build an inclusive and integrated narrative of places over the long term. This process responds to the complexity of the places, which in each case requires a joint approach based on the unique and unedited interpretation of the values and attributes found in the place in previous social research.

## 6. Conclusions and Limitations

The “Masquefa brand” project is part of a set of strategic projects in the Town Council’s Action Plan (PAM) to promote the municipality sustainably into the future. The project shows us the need to understand the conceptualization and design of a place brand from the bottom up, and how a co-creation process can link the different target audiences who will use the brand.

A wide-ranging process of citizen participation is fundamental to creating a successful place brand, as this methodology has shown. This produces a transversal brand story, which must be shared and accepted by most of the place agents. More participation means the public identifies more with the brand; there is a greater sense of belonging to a community, and more local pride. Here, we see that the brand must be a device for managing identities, especially for the people living in a place, to make them change agents for that place.

Masquefa, a municipality with fewer than 10,000 inhabitants, is a clear example of how this brand co-creation process, if led by a local government aware of the importance of citizen participation, can achieve better results than other places with larger populations and more resources [13,14]. Also, in this case, linking the brand project to a broader strategy of sustainable growth for the municipality, which involves revising zoning and the adoption of the local Urban Agenda, helps to establish the long-term brand story and ongoing assessment of its objectives. Thus, the conceptualization and design process of the new brand also identified possible “change agents” [11] who will help implement the story and will become brand ambassadors of Masquefa and its desire for balanced growth. This case study confirms that a multi-level approach to place branding is necessary for considering all the social and economic implications and agents of a place branding strategy.

Technically, the conceptualization, design and co-creation process of the brand did not end with the proposal that the research team presented to the Town Council: a slogan and an esthetic brief. After the three phases of the methodology described in this article, the local government contracted a design agency with the expertise to translate this brief into an ongoing campaign. In this case, it was Efectiva Comunicació, which produced the project and became a third agent (with the University and the local government) in this place brand conceptualization process.

However, immediately after the brand design, a communication plan must be configured for launching the new brand, as without communication the citizens cannot make the brand their own or act as brand ambassadors. This communication must be led by the corporate channels of the local government and its various departments, but it must be capillary in order to penetrate local, regional, and if possible, national media. Finally, we recommend reviewing lines of action, every quarter if necessary, and every time the PAM (local government action plan) is renewed.

To conclude, we can point to some limitations of the research, mainly relating to the narrow margin now available to place brands based on the approach suggested in this paper. The existing dichotomy in place brands between models shaped by corporate dynamics and others based on co-participation makes it difficult to establish a single standardized model, which would permit the creation of a standard protocol for this complex process and make it more easily understood by stakeholders.

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