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# Contingent self-definition and amorphous regions: A dynamic approach to place brand architecture

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## **Abstract**

This article explores the concept of *contingent self-definition*, whereby place brands employ flexible self-definitional approaches in constructing their place brand architecture. Adopting a view of regions as social constructs, the article builds on and extends previous work on place brand architecture by identifying the underlying factors that drive contingent self-definition decisions. Based on an empirical study of professionals tasked with managing region brands in the Netherlands, eleven factors are identified as drivers of contingent self-definition by place brands. These factors are grouped into four thematic categories: i) external perceptions, ii) proximity, iii) brand relationships, and iv) politics and power. A dynamic approach to place brand architecture is advocated, foregrounding the amorphous character of regions as social constructs that defy reification solely as fixed territorial-administrative spaces.

**Keywords** Place branding, Brand architecture, Contingent self-definition, Region brands, The Netherlands

## **Introduction**

Despite the growth of interest in place branding across diverse disciplines including international relations (Browning, 2016; van Ham, 2001), cultural sociology (Cormack, 2008), urban studies (van den Berg and Braun, 1999), and public diplomacy (Melissen, 2007), most studies of place branding emanate from the field of marketing (Gertner, 2011). Although it has been suggested that “marketing offers much to interpret brand and branding geographies” (Pike, 2009, page 626), there remains a need to incorporate more geographical understanding into place branding (Kavaratzis and Kalandides, 2015) in order to avoid practices that result in place commodification (Kaneva, 2011; Miles, 2010; Aronczyk, 2013) and the promotion of homogenizing identities (Jeuring, 2016). By incorporating more geographical understanding into place branding as advocated by Kavaratzis and Kalandides (2015), place marketers should become more conscious of the complexity of place and thus better equipped to participate in a social constructionist approach to the development of place brands. Such an approach recognises the need for a plurality of stakeholder voices to contribute to the construction of place identity rather than see place identity imposed by dominant elite groups embedded within a neoliberal system that excludes dissenting views (Broudehoux, 2001; Colomb, 2011; Sihlongonyane, 2015). In this light, perspectives from geography that usefully inform our understanding of place branding include Cresswell and Hoskins’ (2008) conceptualization of places as comprising the two key dimensions of ‘materiality’ and a more intangible socially constructed ‘realm of meaning’; Allen and Cochrane’s (2007) notion of ‘regional assemblages’ and the underlying political dynamics of such assemblages; and Hospers’ (2006) conceptualization of regions as ‘imagined space’. Integrating such perspectives from geography enriches the study and practice of place branding.

Place branding has become increasingly prevalent as an area of practice and a field of academic study (Braun et al., 2013; Colomb and Kalandides, 2010; Pike, 2009). The application of precepts of product branding to other entities such as persons (Lair et al., 2005; Parmentier et al., 2013) and places (Anholt, 2007) is now well established. This reflects a trend for places to become more entrepreneurial and marketing-oriented (Warnaby, 2009) in order to achieve goals such as investment attraction (Metaxas, 2010), tourism promotion (Avraham and Daugherty, 2012), the promotion of local products (Charters and Spielmann, 2014; Parrot et al., 2002), and resident satisfaction (Insch and Florek, 2008; Zenker and Petersen, 2014). Place brands are characterized by multiple stakeholders and multiple meanings (Merrilees et al., 2012), which poses considerable challenges in terms of governance (Allen and Cochrane, 2007; Eshuis et al., 2013) and stakeholder engagement (Kavaratzis and Kalandides, 2015). Such challenges are not, however, unique to place brands. Brands of all types may be conceptualized as socially complex constructs deriving from a web of interactions between actors which, when combined with the management of brand identity by the marketing agent, provides the brand with a hard-to-imitate, sustainable strategic advantage (Brodie et al., 2016).

A social constructionist approach conceptualizes places as fluid and changing rather than fixed and stable. Massey (2005, page 55), for example, considers “space as an open and ongoing production”, a view shared by Kavaratzis and Hatch (2013, page 71) who contend that “place identity should be thought of as a complex process of identity construction rather than a specific outcome of such a process”. Van Assche and Lo (2011) assert that places evolve according to stakeholder needs and changing desires, traditions, technologies and economies, a view echoed by Kavaratzis and Kalandides (2015, page 1378) who propose an interactional view of place brands that “highlights their dependence on the interactions

between actors and stakeholders who actually construct the place brand, give it meaning, and suggest its potential”. Similarly, Warnaby et al. (2010, page 1365) view the social complexity of branding in spatial contexts as “a dynamic, ongoing, and co-created concept, negotiated between place user/buyer and place marketer/seller”. Rather than being fixed and homogeneous, branding practices may therefore need to be spatially attenuated and heterogeneous in order to appeal in different market contexts (Pike, 2009). This type of heterogeneous branding practice can be seen, for example, in the case of Australia’s ‘Future Unlimited’ brand which was developed specifically for that country’s education sector, in recognition of the fact that the laidback lifestyle imagery most strongly associated with Australia needed to be complemented by a different brand that showcased attributes such as creativity, innovation and global engagement (Austrade, 2016).

Along the continuum of geographic levels at which place identity may be conceptualized, ranging from small-scale localities to countries, it is in the mid-range of the continuum that place boundaries are more amorphous (Warnaby et al., 2010). Whereas geographic entities such as villages, cities and countries tend to have relatively clearly delineated spatial boundaries, regions are more subject to change in territorial-administrative composition as well as being shaped as imagined spaces by social practice and consciousness (Hospers, 2006; Paasi, 2002). Kalandides (2011) and Paasi (2010) also emphasise the need to regard regions as social constructs. The complex interplay between territorial-administrative boundaries and the amorphous realm of the imaginary represents both a challenge and an opportunity for place marketers tasked with place branding at region level. On the one hand it is a challenge in that political institutions seldom reflect the fluidity of regions as social constructs. As Allen and Cochrane (2007, page 1162) note, “political institutions lend themselves to the language of territory, fixity and boundaries”. However, different target

audiences may perceive a region as an imaginary space rather than as an administrative territory. The whisky region of Speyside, for example, has a far stronger place identity in the minds of the target audience of whisky tourists than the lesser known local government administrative region of Moray within which Speyside is located. As well as existing within the borders of an administrative region, socially constructed regions may also overlap two or more administrative regions – the UK government’s promotion of the ‘Northern Powerhouse’ being a striking example of a shifting, amorphous imaginary space that straddles several administrative boundaries across the north of England. This illustrates the contention by Boisen et al. (2011) that spatial identities as perceived by audiences may overlap, contradict or complement places defined in territorial-administrative terms; Warnaby et al. (2010, page 1368) coined the term ‘fuzzy places’ to describe this phenomenon.

Place marketers at a regional level must address the challenge of co-creating a place brand with relevant stakeholders at an appropriate point on the geographical continuum that makes sense and appeals to target audiences whilst simultaneously satisfying budget-holding policy makers embedded in the fixed territorial-administrative structures of the region. In light of the amorphous boundaries that often characterize regions in the eyes of different stakeholders and audiences, and taking into consideration the creative possibilities provided by conceptualizing regions as imagined spaces, this article explores the concept of *contingent self-definition*, whereby place brands employ flexible self-definitional strategies in designing their place brand architecture. In doing so, this study responds to the call by Boisen et al. (2011) for place branding research to recognize that spatial identities often do not conform to territorial-administrative boundaries, and that place brands must be construed in light of their specific target audiences.

The concept of contingent self-definition is inscribed within a social constructionist view that sees place brands as “ongoing, multiple, open and rather unpredictable” (Kavaratzis and Kalandides, 2015, page 1375) and which accepts that some ‘fuzzy’ places defy clear jurisdictional definition (Warnaby et al., 2010). The theoretical contribution of the current study is to identify the underlying factors that influence the ongoing process of place brand architecture construction in regions which are fixed in territorial-administrative terms yet which are also amorphous in their relationships with internal and external audiences. Contingent self-definition refers to the dynamic approach to place brand architecture that is made possible by the fluidity of spatial identities that characterises regions. Whereas cities and countries tend to be relatively static in their spatial identities, the more amorphous nature of regions permits permutations of place brand architecture construction that are less constrained by fixed territorial boundaries. In this perspective, place brand architecture construction may be viewed as a dynamic capability rather than an uncontested static hierarchy of existing brands. By uncovering the factors that drive contingent self-definition decisions in regions’ place brand architecture construction, the current study adds to our theoretical understanding of place brands as complex social constructions.

### **Place brand architecture**

The concept of brand architecture originally emerged in the context of product and corporate brands. Whilst acknowledging that the “plurality of actors and perspectives influencing the place marketing process somewhat strains business-oriented metaphors” (Warnaby, 2009, page 411), the brand architecture metaphor merits a brief discussion in order to evaluate its usefulness in the context of place branding.

Brand architecture has been defined as “the organising structure of the brand portfolio that specifies brand roles and the nature of relationships between brands” (Rajagopal and Sanchez, 2004, page 236). Douglas et al. (2001, page 99) echo this view and suggest that brand architecture “refers to a formal process and outcome by which management rationalizes the firm’s brands and makes explicit how brand names at each level in the organization will be applied”. The organizing structure of the brand portfolio alluded to by Rajagopal and Sanchez comprises a hierarchical specification that determines whether one or two levels of brands are used; how strongly individual brands within the company’s portfolio are grouped and relate to each other; and the visibility and role of the corporate master brand (Kapferer, 2012). An influential early framework of brand architecture was established by Olins (1989), who identified three branding structures: ‘monolithic’, ‘endorsed’, and ‘branded’. The monolithic structure is where a corporation uses one name and identity worldwide (e.g., Shell). The endorsed structure refers to the use of a corporate name in association with a subsidiary or product brand (e.g., Kellogg’s Corn Flakes). The branded structure describes ‘standalone’ brands where the corporate brand name does not feature (e.g., Johnnie Walker whisky, where the parent name Diageo does not feature). Olins’ perspective on brand architecture was refined in later work by Hsu et al. (2016), who proposed a five-part categorization of brand architecture strategies anchored by the ‘branded house’ approach (equivalent to Olins’ monolithic structure) and the ‘house of brands’ (equivalent to Olins’ branded structure). Whereas the Olins approach includes a single structure (endorsed) between the two polar structures (monolithic and branded), Hsu et al suggest a distinction between two different structures: ‘sub-branding’ (e.g., Apple iPhone) and ‘endorsed branding’ (e.g., Post-it Notes by 3M). Moreover, Hsu et al. add a fifth category of brand architecture strategy which they term ‘hybrid’, to account for cases where companies combine two or more of the four strategies.

The concept of brand architecture, well established in the product/corporate branding literature, has attracted increasing interest in the context of places (Dooley and Bowie, 2005; Dinnie, 2016; Iversen and Hem, 2008). Country, region, and city constitute the three major levels at which place brand architecture has been conceptualized. The issue of boundaries between these spatial identities has an impact on the concept of place brand architecture (Hanna and Rowley, 2015); for example, debate arose as to whether the city of Lisbon should be promoted as a municipality or as a city-region transcending the city boundaries to include the Tagus Valley region within which the city is located (Freire, 2011).

Selecting the most appropriate brand architecture strategy requires sensitivity to the specificities of context. Aaker and Joachimsthaler (2000) provide some guidelines for brand architecture decisions, suggesting that a branded house approach is appropriate in situations where the master brand contributes visibility and positive associations, whereas a house of brands approach is suitable if there is a need to avoid a negative association linked to the master brand or where the separate brand will create and own an association. In the context of place marketing, an illustrative example of these contrasting brand architecture strategies can be observed in the differing strategies employed by the two major cities in Scotland, Edinburgh and Glasgow. With its brand positioning of ‘Edinburgh Inspiring Capital’, Edinburgh adopts a house of brands approach in which the city positions itself as a standalone brand without reference to the Scotland ‘master brand’. In contrast, during the period 2004-2013 the brand positioning of Glasgow was ‘Glasgow – Scotland with Style’, an endorsed branding approach in which the explicit reference to Scotland draws on the visibility and positive associations linked with the Scotland master brand. The subsequent evolution of Glasgow’s branding to ‘People Make Glasgow’ represents a shift in approach

towards a house of brands approach in which the Scotland master brand has been dropped in order to position Glasgow as a standalone brand. This development supports Douglas et al.'s (2001, page 111) contention that "brand architecture is not a static framework but one that needs to be monitored and modified continually".

### **Research context and design**

The context for this study is the regions of the Netherlands, with a specific focus on regional branding activities to attract foreign investment. Defined in territorial-administrative terms, there are twelve regions ('provinces') in the country, forming a layer between national government and local municipalities. These provinces are Drenthe, Flevoland, Friesland, Gelderland, Groningen, Limburg, North Brabant, North Holland, Overijssel, South Holland, Utrecht, and Zeeland. The provinces vary in population from 380,000 (Zeeland) to 3.6 million (South Holland). As well as conducting their own regional marketing activities, some provinces build critical mass by collaborating through agencies such as Oost N.V. (East Netherlands Development Agency), an organisation which works on behalf of Gelderland and Overijssel in order to stimulate the economies of these two eastern Dutch provinces.

The layering of spatial identities alluded to by Boisen et al. (2011) is enacted in the place brand architecture of these Dutch regions. The province of North Holland, for example, employs both national-level ('©Of Dutch Origin') and regional-level ('Noord-Holland Noord') identities in its investment attraction branding (Invest in Noord-Holland Noord, 2016). The three provinces of Drenthe, Friesland and Groningen adopt a co-branding approach and jointly promote themselves as the Northern Netherlands Provinces alliance (SNN, 2016). However, it should be noted that this joint, co-branding approach is employed

for investment attraction and other economic development goals, whereas for tourism purposes a different place brand architecture is used, with each of the three provinces (Drenthe, <http://in.drenthe.nl/nl/p/>; Friesland, <http://friesland.nl/en/about-us/>; Groningen, <https://toerisme.groningen.nl/en/>) promoting its own region brand separately. This illustrates an adaptation to place brand architecture that can be made by regions when targeting different audiences. A further example of place brand architecture construction by Dutch regions is the case of the province of Flevoland, which brands itself for investment attraction purposes as ‘the east wing of Greater Amsterdam’ (OMFL, 2016). This branding practice by Flevoland positions the region through the realm of the imaginary, associating the region with the much more powerful place brand of the city of Amsterdam.

Theory development in place brands’ contingent self-definition behaviour is in an early state, therefore a discovery-oriented qualitative approach was employed (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) based on individual in-depth semi-structured interviews with key informants (Knight et al, 2007). The use of in-depth interviews allows for detailed exploration and probing of complex, relatively under-researched phenomena (Hollmann et al., 2015). A series of twelve interviews was conducted. The number of interviews conducted reflects the optimum number for qualitative research of between five and twenty-five individuals who have all experienced the phenomenon in question, as suggested by Creswell (2007) and Kvale and Brinkmann (2009). It is also in line with Guest et al.’s (2006) observation that saturation tends to occur within the first twelve interviews.

The interviews were conducted with regional authority professionals in the Netherlands whose role included the management of their region brand. Job titles of these key informants included Director of Region Marketing and Communications, Region Marketing Adviser,

Region Brand Project Leader, Region Brand Manager, Adviser Economic and Social Affairs, and Adviser for Economic Internationalization. Seven of the twelve respondents worked within their region's *Provinciehuys* (regional government office). The remaining five respondents worked in arms-length agencies overseen by the local regional government office. All interviews took place at the offices of the respondents, in order to enable the respondents to speak freely in a familiar setting. In order to minimise social desirability bias, respondents were encouraged to articulate their views openly and were assured that they were not being 'judged' by the interviewer. This was addressed by asking respondents if they thought their region would be doing anything differently going forward compared to their strategy to date, and also by using projective techniques such as inviting respondents to comment on the strategies of other regions rather than just their own. A further challenge was to ensure that the respondents were not simply repeating the organisational view (the 'party line'). Again, respondents were encouraged to speak freely and were assured that all interviews would be anonymous. This approach appeared to succeed, with one respondent telling the interviewer that he did not believe in branding; a comment departing significantly from the 'party line' given that the respondent's job was to promote his region brand.

Each interview lasted approximately one hour and was recorded and then later transcribed. It is important to note that in this study the level of analysis – place brand architecture at the region level – was addressed through the responses of the individual interviewees, who were all practitioners in the field though not themselves politicians. Given that political institutions are the ultimate decision-making authority in place branding, the level of analysis could in future research also be approached through data collected from other sources including political decision-makers both within and outside the focal region, thus acknowledging the important issue of agency in the social construction of place brands.

The data collection was informed by the preceding discussion of place brand architecture from its initial conceptualisation in the context of corporate branding to its more recent application in the context of place branding. Questions in the interview focused on place brand architecture issues such as the extent to which other place brands such as city brands and the country brand featured in the region brand, the role of sectoral brands (e.g., electronics, manufacturing, food and drink), and the adaptation – if any – of the region brand to different markets and target audiences. In line with the discovery-oriented approach, questions were kept open-ended and few in number in order to allow respondents to formulate responses that communicated their perspectives rather than the perspective of the interviewer. Early expectations were that the different regions might adopt varying approaches to their place brand architecture strategies, but there was no *a priori* theorising of the underlying factors that drive such strategies; rather, the underlying factors emerged from analysis of the interview data. The interview guide was as follows.

Q. In what ways do the following feature in the region's branding?

- City brands situated within the region
- The nation brand
- Sectoral brands, e.g., food and drink, high-tech, manufacturing, etc.
- Other brands, e.g., celebrities, sports teams, politicians, etc.

The phrasing of the question ('In what ways do the following feature in the region's branding?') was deliberately loose, in order to avoid specifying outcomes that reflected the interviewer's frame of reference rather than the respondent's. A range of potential responses could therefore be elicited. 'Feature in' could include, for example, being present in the logo

of the region, being mentioned in promotional material and/or in policy documents, or being an actor in the construction of the region's place brand architecture.

The analytic procedure employed was thematic analysis (Miles and Huberman, 1994). The interview transcripts were coded by identifying common themes within the data and these initial themes were then grouped into conceptually consistent thematic categories (Moroko and Uncles, 2008). This approach provides a means of preserving “the storied qualities of qualitative textual data, that is the ways in which social actors produce, represent and contextualise experience and personal knowledge through narratives and other genres” (Coffey and Atkinson, 1996, page 54). After the analysis was completed respondents were contacted with a draft of the study findings, and they confirmed that the analysis provided an accurate reflection of their views. As a further credibility step, secondary sources such as promotional materials and organisational websites were used to corroborate the interview findings.

### **Factors underlying contingent self-definition**

Detailed analysis of the interview transcripts led to the identification of eleven factors underlying contingent self-definition in the design of the regions' place brand architecture. The eleven factors were coded as follows: blurred boundaries (BB), critical mass (CM), cultural proximity (CP), diversity (DV), geographic proximity (GP), halo effect (HE), knowledge deficits (KD), political environment (PE), regional exceptionalism (RE), target audience (TA) and toponymic clarity (TC). Descriptions of each factor are provided in Table 1. Further intensive analysis of the data led to the grouping of the eleven factors into four thematic categories: external perceptions, proximity, brand relationships, politics and power (Figure 1). The categories that emerged from this interpretive analysis represent meaningful

themes derived from the “underlying ideas, assumptions, and conceptualizations that are theorized as shaping or informing the semantic content of the data” (Braun and Clarke, 2006, page 84). The individual factors were grouped into conceptually consistent thematic categories as follows: External perceptions (Blurred boundaries, Knowledge deficits, Target audience, Toponymic clarity); Proximity (Cultural proximity, Geographic proximity); Brand relationships (Diversity, Halo effect, Regional exceptionalism); Politics and power (Critical mass, Political environment).

Enter here *Table 1 Factors underlying contingent self-definition*

The four thematic categories (Figure 1) and their associated individual factors underlying contingent self-definition in the design of regions’ place brand architecture are discussed below.

Enter here *Figure 1 Thematic categories underlying contingent self-definition*

### **External perceptions**

External perceptions contribute significantly to the strength of a brand (Keller, 1993). Four dimensions of external perceptions emerged from the interview data: blurred boundaries, knowledge deficits, toponymic clarity and target audience.

### *Blurred boundaries*

The concept of blurred boundaries was identified as an important factor for regional policy makers to be aware of when communicating with international business audiences. One respondent, based in the regional government office of a province that hosts a large number of foreign companies, mentioned the declining relevance of fixed territorial-administrative spatial identities:

What I see is that if you look at the international context, the official borders of a local community, provinces, even countries, they are becoming more blurred or less and less important. Businesses, they don't really care as long as they are not hampered by administrative burdens (R8).

The above respondent articulates a view about blurred boundaries that resonates with Hanna and Rowley's (2015) assertion that place brands may overlap at local, regional and national levels. It is also in line with Warnaby and Medway's (2013, page 348) observation that "spatial identities as perceived by audiences may overlap, contradict or complement places defined in territorial-administrative terms".

### *Knowledge deficits*

Knowledge deficits regarding places occur because it is impossible for people to be familiar with all places that they may interact with at any given point in time. People have limited knowledge of and limited experience with all places (Boisen et al., 2011). One respondent suggested that many of the international students enrolled at a university in his province did not appear to know which province they were in. Rather, their perception was that they were studying in an outer suburb of Amsterdam even though in reality they were in one of the northern provinces of the Netherlands:

Many of these students don't even know that they are in [name of province]. If you come from Shanghai, Amsterdam has lots of parks and at the end of one of these parks there is this university (R2).

The knowledge deficits displayed by the international students referred to by the above respondent are an example of imperfect knowledge (Richardson, 1953) amongst a target audience of the region. In this case, the university and the region benefited from the visibility and strength of the Amsterdam city brand despite the region's geographic distance from that city. Although the economic impact of attracting international students is regarded as export earnings rather than investment attraction (HM Government, 2013), international students having graduated may go on to careers in business with responsibility for making investment location decisions. The knowledge deficits identified by the above respondent among international students may thus extend to future investment decisions.

### *Toponymic clarity*

Toponymy involves naming, place making and power (Vuolteenaho and Berg, 2009) and is subject to endogenous and exogenous contestation (Medway and Warnaby, 2014). The name of a place is an important expression of a place's distinct identity (Kavaratzis and Ashworth, 2008). A place name that lacks clarity for the intended audience represents a challenge for place marketers, as one respondent observed:

As a regional development agency we have as one of our key assignments to develop a brand for the region, so we have this challenge to come up with a very strong proposition, how to brand this region, especially in the economic field, not so much about attracting tourism or

attracting immigrants to live here or students but much more on the economic level. It's a challenge how to do that because the name itself is already confusing (R9).

The lack of toponymic clarity alluded to by this respondent derives from the longstanding confusion between the toponyms 'Holland' and 'the Netherlands'. North Holland and South Holland are provinces of the Netherlands, yet North Holland is not in the north of the Netherlands; the provinces of Friesland and Groningen are located further north. Similarly, South Holland is not in the south of the Netherlands; Zeeland, North Brabant, and Limburg are located further south. The scope for confusion is exacerbated by the decision at national level to brand the Netherlands as 'Holland' when marketing to tourism audiences, using the domain name Holland.com for the country's official tourism website.

#### *Target audience*

Brands are complex, multidimensional and relational (Lury, 2004). The relational dimension of place brands is manifest in the need to match the place brand's appeal to the needs of specific target audiences. Given that places are multisold to different types of place users including residents, businesses, workers, investors and government (Ashworth and Voogd, 1990; Merrilees et al., 2012) and acknowledging that a dynamic view of place identity as espoused by the current study considers identity a constant dialogue between the internal and the external (Kavaratzis and Hatch, 2013), place marketers need to ensure that they integrate target audience perceptions and knowledge into the place branding process. This was acknowledged by one of the respondents:

If you look at the assignment we have, that's what we want to work out as well – focus, map out your target audience and key markets you want to focus on and use that to build your

brand, think about your brand architecture, your key messages, etcetera. It absolutely hasn't happened yet. But I think you should apply the same rigour as a multinational would (R9).

The above respondent emphasises the importance of crafting a combination of the place's features and attributes that will appeal to different target audiences (van den Berg and Braun, 1999). For some regions this combining and clustering of features and attributes is based on industry sectors in which the region has particular strengths:

We have a very strong focus on four technology domains... four strong sectors that we have in the region and those will be the key pillars for the branding. And that directly has an impact on where you will focus your efforts regarding the foreign markets (R9).

The focus on four technology domains is consistent with the need for a brand to have a clear identity that is meaningful to its target audience, rather than trying to appeal to all potential audiences with a one-size-fits-all approach. As Warnaby et al. (2010, page 1379) note, "in trying to make a place 'something for everybody', by including as many competing narratives as possible, care must be taken that it does not become 'nothing for nobody'".

### **Proximity**

Respondents mentioned proximity – both cultural and geographical – as an important issue when deciding on the most appropriate spatial identity for embodying within the region brand.

#### *Cultural proximity*

The boundaries of places can be fluid depending upon who is doing the viewing (Warnaby and Medway, 2013). The cultural proximity of audiences, for example, can influence the place identity that is projected. As one respondent from a northern province of the Netherlands commented:

Sometimes we refer to ourselves as the most southern Scandinavian country, kind of jokingly but it's interesting because the other provinces in Holland don't feel themselves, don't feel any of this kind of adherence so it's a kind of unique selling point (R2).

Diaspora populations played a role in the identity projection of one region, illustrating the fluid range of identities that the region chose to deploy:

We would say '[Name of region], a province of the Netherlands, Europe'. If you are in the Midwest, you probably encounter more immigrants from our region than from the rest of the Netherlands so it's interesting to see that in Nebraska we don't use the Netherlands. So our region has a stronger connotation there than the Netherlands (R2).

The above respondent touches upon the potential power of cultural proximity even in cases where geographical distance is considerable. The presence in the US state of Nebraska of a sizeable diaspora from the Dutch province in question had a direct effect on the place brand architecture used for promoting the province in that state. The 'parent brand' of the Netherlands was not used in that state because the cultural proximity of the target audience meant that there was a sufficient level of existing knowledge about the province for the parent brand to be dispensed with.

*Geographic proximity*

Several Dutch provinces share a border with one or more other countries. Zeeland and North Brabant, for example, share a border with Belgium. Groningen, Drenthe, Overijssel, Gelderland, and Limburg share a border with Germany. This geographic proximity was found to influence the use of the Netherlands as a parent brand:

Within five hundred kilometres it's not necessary to say we're in the Netherlands (R2).

The above respondent clearly states the impact of geographic proximity on place brand architecture decision-making by showing that the country-level parent brand of the Netherlands is not required for physically close international audiences. This view regarding the effect of geographic proximity was echoed by another respondent, who described how the more distant the audience is, the less likely it is they will be familiar with specific Dutch provinces:

Well, Germany is a big country. If you live, for example, in Bavaria or Tübingen, you will have no idea what kind of regions or provinces there are in the Netherlands. It's only in neighbouring Länder like Lower Saxony and North Rhine-Westphalia where they are familiar with our structure and the names of different provinces. For most of them, it's just the Netherlands (R4).

Such comments indicate that place brand architecture decisions, particularly regarding the use or non-use of the national parent brand, are highly contingent on the geographic proximity of target audiences.

## **Brand relationships**

The concept of brand architecture is rooted in the relationships between different brands. In business, such relationships involve the connections made between the corporate ‘parent’ or ‘master’ brand and the sub-brands owned by companies (Olins, 1989; Kapferer, 2012). When applied to the context of place brands, similar relationships occur between the national ‘parent’ brand and place brands at different administrative levels such as cities and regions. From the interview data, three elements of such brand relationships emerged as follows: regional exceptionalism, the halo effect, and diversity.

### *Regional exceptionalism*

The concept of regional exceptionalism refers to the perception that a region is unique or exceptional in some way. Regional exceptionalism can be viewed as “the result of some underlying cultural framework, nurtured by the geographic setting, history, and socioeconomic relations” (Aistrup, 2010, page 909). In this study, regional exceptionalism emerged as a factor in situations where respondents felt that the region brand was not adequately represented by the parent nation brand. In this respect, the use of the Netherlands as a parent brand was found to be contextually-dependent. When asked if his region used the Netherlands in its branding, one informant stated:

Yes it does, but not always, not always. Especially for markets more than 500 kilometres away we have to use it. We have the same problem as the UK – people know the island as England, how to say that our region, or Scotland, is part of the UK and it’s not England? We have exactly the same problem. Internationally, the Dutch tourist board calls itself Holland.com. We’re not Holland. We’re not Holland but we want to cooperate with them. We don’t feel part of Holland but we do feel part of the Netherlands (R2).

The regional exceptionalism in this example derives from the use of ‘Holland’ as the national parent brand that is projected to international audiences, despite ‘Holland’ being a provincial rather than a national name. This explains the above respondent’s statement that “we don’t feel part of Holland but we do feel part of the Netherlands”. However, regional exceptionalism is not always tolerated, as another respondent reported with regard to policies imposed on regions by national-level authorities:

First we had an idea of making a stand with our three provinces but that didn’t fit in their idea of branding, they want the national branding, the Netherlands, the country to be dominant and within that there is not the idea that you would put a strong profile on the region. (R4)

This raises an important issue of governance and power relations between different layers of territorial space, with a direct impact on place brand architecture decisions. The extent to which place brand architecture decisions should be devolved from national level to lower levels of the scalar hierarchy is clearly open to contestation and negotiation.

### *Halo effect*

The halo effect concept suggests that when consumers are not familiar with a country’s products, country image may serve as a halo from which consumers infer a brand’s product attributes (Min Han, 1989). Places as well as product brands may attempt to benefit from such a halo effect. In cases where target audiences are not familiar with a place, it may be possible to transfer associations from other scalar levels (Boisen et al., 2011). This practice was evoked by one respondent:

I was in China last week. There we had two international business seminars and there we promoted ourselves as being a wing of Greater Amsterdam. I mean, it’s a strength, isn’t it?

The fact that we are very close to Amsterdam, with the airport and with the harbour, with the social structures, makes it interesting, makes our region interesting for investing by companies but also as a living environment and also for other international purposes. So I think this branding will better position our province internationally (R10).

Another respondent confirmed that the Holland halo effect is beneficial for his region's attempts to attract foreign investment:

Yes, in our investment attraction activities we do use Holland promotion because Holland is a big and strong identity for foreign companies and we work together with our NFIA, the Netherlands Foreign Investment Agency, and within our region we often do use those landmarks, the tulip and so on (R3).

It was even suggested, albeit humorously, by a respondent from a Dutch province that borders Germany that his region could consider trying to benefit from the halo effect of the neighbouring country:

Maybe we should promote ourselves as 'west Germany', the most western part of Germany! (laughter) I know it's painful for us Dutch. Why don't we connect with an existing strong brand instead of thinking of one of our own? (R3)

When asked in what situations their region would use Holland as a parent brand, one informant stated:

In situations where our region doesn't exist. In the USA, we say our region is a very successful region in Holland. Because everyone knows Holland, it's a good brand, it's a

positive brand, and Holland is branding on innovation a lot, and entrepreneurship, and that's our proposition as well (R6).

Respondents in this study considered the Holland brand to be strong and well respected, and therefore in most cases the halo effect of the national parent brand was positive. However, not all nations benefit from such a positive country brand and in such cases the halo effect may operate less effectively for regions which are located within a country with a weak or negative country brand. This reaffirms the need for contingent self-definition in determining the most appropriate design for place brand architecture in varying settings.

### *Diversity*

A recurring challenge in place branding is how to encapsulate the diversity of a place within a brand (Ren and Blichfeldt, 2011). This challenge increases along with the spatial dimensions of place. Within a region there may already exist other entities, such as cities, that have strong brands themselves. Brand architecture decisions then must be taken with regard to how to express the relationship between the different place brands that are located within the region. In region branding, conflicts can emerge between the region and its towns and cities, with each wishing to protect its interests and have its own brand (Hankinson, 2009). Conflict can occur between a desire to leverage the halo effect benefits of a strong nation brand on the one hand, and on the other hand the need to accommodate strong brands that exist within the region. As one respondent noted:

We are between a rock and a hard place. On the one side we have the nation brand, Holland. The Holland branding is pretty strong, it's good, we do want for example if we go to a trade show somewhere often there is a Holland stand, a Holland exhibition booth, and underneath there are the different regions or the companies. So it's something we can absolutely use, the

Holland branding, especially abroad. Then of course we have a provincial brand, I wouldn't call it a brand yet, but we have the province but then again on the other side you have very strong city brands in this province (R9).

In drawing attention to the complex web of national, provincial and city spatial identities that region brands are embedded within, the above respondent echoes Pike's (2009, page 637) observation that "diversity in the kind, extent and nature of geographical entanglements, cross-cut by tensions between territorial and relational spatialities, suggests potentially rich varieties of brand and branding geographies".

### **Politics and power**

The interview findings indicate that politics and power play a major role in place branding practice at regional level. Links between place and politics form a significant dimension of regions as social constructs (Agnew, 1987). Supporting Medway and Warnaby's (2014, page 155) contention that "where toponyms arise via conscious political decision-making processes, there are arguably significant parallels with the kinds of decisions made by brand managers/marketing teams regarding the brand names of conventional products", the study respondents drew attention to the political decision-making processes surrounding place brand architecture decisions.

### *Critical mass*

The issue of critical mass was raised by respondents with regard to the optimum level within the spatial hierarchy at which a place should be branded. Illustrating Kalandides' (2011) argument that the differing perspectives of various stakeholders result in a net of coexisting narratives about a place, one respondent stated:

So you get competition between the local levels and provincial level, and competition in such a complex subject is the worst thing to happen. Because all activities will stop. So we are thinking about scaling it up, together with our neighbouring province. Then you can say in the branding: five universities, four universities of applied science, one of the universities is world famous. Then you have some unique selling points that are different from other areas... Then you have a kind of mass that you can sell abroad. (R7).

In mentioning the undesirable occurrence of competition between the local and the provincial levels, the above respondent draws attention to the tensions between relational and territorial notions of space and place identified in previous work on the geographies of brands and branding (Pike, 2009). Reflecting the assertion by Boisen et al. (2011) that places are part of a scalar hierarchy through which identities at different scales are selectively layered, the same respondent went on to emphasise the need for establishing the place brand identity at a critical mass greater than the region currently possessed:

We think we are too small to have our own branding and we don't have any unique selling points... I go every year to Brussels for the open days. Bus full, politicians, civil servants, they all go to Brussels. And every time they hear in Brussels, 'Who are you? Why are you here? What are you doing here? [Name of city]? Where's that? Can't you upscale the branding?' (R7).

This layering of identities (Terlouw, 2009) was mentioned by another respondent in the context of accumulating sufficient critical mass in the eyes of external target audiences, particularly with regard to China:

We experience that our region, especially in Europe but it's not very different in China, that we always work together with parties within the region, we make ourselves bigger... as we try to have critical mass (R8).

Collaborative arrangements with other provinces were also cited as a means of acquiring critical mass:

More and more within Europe we define ourselves as [name of supra-regional entity], so together with three other provinces we try to put ourselves on the map as one European region (R8).

The notion of critical mass represents an under-researched area in the field of place branding, despite its clear relevance to the formulation of effective place brand architecture in the eyes of this study's respondents.

### *Political environment*

The evolution of place strategy is a political process (Eshuis et al., 2013). The political environment within which place branding occurs consists of multiple stakeholders with competing claims and sources of legitimacy. The interests of communities should not be overshadowed by other interests such as place authorities, influential business or large property owners (Bennett and Savani, 2003; Clegg and Kornburger, 2010). The influence of the political environment was mentioned by one respondent who commented:

You're also of course acting in a political environment, different than business, and there's a lot of political sensitivity about the hierarchy between our province and the cities in it (R9).

This respondent's reference to the political sensitivity surrounding the hierarchy between the province and the cities within it supports Warnaby and Medway's (2013, page 345) contention that "place product should be regarded as a dynamic concept, composed as much from changing and competing narratives in and over time, as it is from its tangible and material elements". The competing narratives that contribute to region brands as dynamic constructs include the hierarchical contestation between the region and its cities mentioned by the above respondent. The emergence of dominant narratives results from the power relations within the place (Boisen et al., 2011), with the manipulation of geographical scales reflecting the mobilization of interests to construct politically meaningful spatial imaginaries (Allen and Cochrane, 2007).

### **Discussion and implications**

Building on and extending previous work on place brand architecture, this study deepens our theoretical understanding of place brands by identifying the underlying factors that influence place brand architecture decisions. Such decisions reflect a social constructionist view of place branding in which the place brand is co-created with a range of actors and is subject to contextual variation in target audience. This dynamic approach to place brand architecture responds to the call by Kavartzis and Kalandides (2015) for a rethinking of the way we conceptualize place brands, based on a more refined understanding of places and how they are constructed. As Warnaby and Medway (2013, page 357) suggest, "places emerge as socially constructed products, developed and endlessly redefined and reinterpreted via spoken and written word". This view is shared by Brodie and Benson-Rea (2016, page 322), who state that country of origin branding is "a process that facilitates collective meaning within stakeholder networks". The current study demonstrates that the facilitation of collective

meaning alluded to at country level by Brodie and Benson-Rea also occurs at regional level, with continually negotiated place brand architecture constructions reflecting branding as a dynamic capability within amorphous regions.

This study has several implications for marketing theory. The concept of contingent self-definition contributes to the theoretical foundations of place branding theory by providing a lens through which to view regions not only in fixed territorial-administrative terms, but also as spatial identities that evolve and adapt in different contexts. These amorphous regions demand similarly flexible and dynamic approaches to the design of their place brand architecture. This perspective considers branding as a dynamic capability (Brodie et al., 2016) generated from multiple interactions within complex environments involving a wide range of actors (Giovanardi et al., 2013; Håkansson and Snehota, 2006; Pasquinelli, 2015). The selective layering of spatial identities (Terlouw and van Gorp, 2014) underpins the place brand architecture constructions of regions as they configure and re-configure the scalar spectrum of place brands available to them. The spectrum of place brands reflecting different spatial identities potentially includes city, region and nation brands which may be configured flexibly as a dynamic capability. Regions may also seek to associate themselves with metropolitan or city-region brands as in the case of the province of Flevoland, which brands itself for investment attraction purposes as ‘the east wing of Greater Amsterdam’. Complex socio-political and cultural contexts shape metropolitan regions (Cardoso and Meijers, 2016). Such metropolitan regions have, however, been criticised for failing to resonate with local actors because of being imposed by technocratic elites and their lack of a relation to the territory’s cultural or geographical features (Healey, 2009; Lloyd and Peel, 2008).

Another implication of the study concerns new theoretical insights provided by the identification of four thematic categories of factors that underlie contingent self-definition in the socially complex co-construction of regions' place brand architecture. The first category – *external perceptions* – includes factors such as blurred boundaries, knowledge deficits, toponymic clarity, and target audience. Each factor potentially necessitates a dynamic approach to place brand architecture in which the region is conceived as amorphous rather than fixed, responding flexibly to evolving environments rather than maintaining a static set of place brand relationships.

The second category – *proximity* – also speaks to the notion of amorphous regions by identifying the place brand architecture implications of cultural and geographic proximity. Geographically proximate markets, for example, may call forth a place brand architecture strategy that dispenses with the national 'parent' brand in order to focus on the region as a standalone brand. In cases where geographically proximate audiences are already familiar with both the region and its country, it may be redundant to use the parent brand for recognition purposes. Conversely, in geographically distant markets where familiarity with individual regions may be non-existent, a better known national 'parent' brand may deliver significant value and therefore be used in the place brand architecture applied in such markets. One of the region brands in this study, for example, adapts its place brand architecture when targeting audiences in the American Midwest where many inhabitants are descendants of emigrants from that Dutch region. In this case the region brand does not use the parent brand of The Netherlands/Holland because the cultural proximity between the Dutch province and the Midwest audience is so close. Where such recognition and affinity already exist at region level, the parent nation brand may not be required. However, in other

contexts where region-level recognition is low, the national parent brand allows regions to benefit from the halo effect associated with a strong parent brand.

Additional support for a dynamic approach to place brand architecture is embodied in the factors associated with the remaining two thematic categories of contingent self-definition: *brand relationships* and *politics and power*. The brand relationships of regions involve a complex interplay between spatial identities at national, regional and sub-regional levels. The dominance of certain spatial identities within the scalar hierarchy is not fixed but rather is contingent upon regions' relationships with other actors such as national-level organisations and municipal authorities and institutions within the region. Issues of politics and power inform such relationships; as one respondent pointed out, 'You're also of course acting in a political environment, different than business, and there's a lot of political sensitivity about the hierarchy between our province and the cities in it'. These contextually-dependent issues are contingent on conditions so numerous and wide-ranging that a simplistic, homogeneous approach to place brand architecture is clearly inadequate. The conceptual complexity of place brand architecture arises not only from the nature of the phenomenon, but also from the focal concept of brand architecture's initial emergence as a firm-level concept in the context of corporate brand portfolios within which the over-arching corporate brand provides a unifying element. Transferring the brand architecture concept to the context of place brands raises again the question of agency; who or what provides the unifying element for the place brand architecture construction? At region level these issues are played out among institutional actors at region, city and national levels in an ongoing process of contingent self-definition. This collective approach changes our understanding of the brand architecture concept from the static, fixed organisational hierarchy perspective seen in the corporate brand context to a more fluid, amorphous conceptualisation in the place brand context.

The study also has implications for place branding practitioners. The halo effect (Min Han, 1989), for instance, should be taken into account by practitioners at region level in order to evaluate whether the country image of the national ‘parent’ brand is an asset or a liability in the specific context of the market and audience, with brand architecture decisions consequently made as to whether the national ‘parent’ brand should be downplayed or highlighted. Further motivation for a dynamic, flexible approach to place brand architecture stems from the notion of critical mass – another manifestation of the potentially amorphous nature of regions. Regional place marketers need to balance the needs of internal stakeholders and external audiences in determining the required critical mass for their region brand. When, for example, should a region go it alone and when should it collaborate with other regions? If a region is small and little known, the region may need to engage with other actors in the social construction of a higher-level spatial identity that will have an impact on a broad stage as occurred in the case of small Pacific Islands which sought to overcome their perceived smallness by enacting ‘the Pacific Region imaginary of a vast ocean space and network of people’ (Gruby and Campbell, 2013, page 2046). Another important implication for practitioners concerns the need for such professionals to acquire a skills set that includes the ability to negotiate effectively within the complex networks of actors that are involved in the social construction of place brand architecture. The plurality of actors involved in such processes, whose motivations and goals may be contradictory, represents a significant challenge for practitioners seeking to achieve a degree of consensus in place brand architecture decisions.

In light of the above discussion, this article argues that regions that are defined in fixed territorial-administrative terms need to adopt a dynamic approach to the ongoing formulation and re-formulation of their place brand architecture. Flexible approaches to spatial identity are required, reflecting the amorphous nature of regions and the multiplicity of their audiences. Such audiences hold varying perceptions of a region's scale, composition, and characteristics. Contingent self-definition enables regions to manage and communicate their spatial identities by integrating the multiple narratives that constitute regions in an ongoing, open, dynamic process that rejects hegemonic imposition of fixed, static brand hierarchies.

The contingent self-definition perspective on place brand architecture advanced in this article gives rise to several issues that should be addressed for further theoretical development and refinement. First, there is a need for further research that addresses the issue of agency in the social construction of place brand architecture. Previous research suggests that we consider “stakeholders as groups that collectively produce the place brand” (Kavaratzis and Hatch, 2013, page 82). Such a perspective is supported in this article's findings regarding factors such as critical mass, diversity, political environment and target audience that underlie contingent self-definition in the construction of place brand architecture in amorphous regions. However, more needs to be known regarding the specific processes and dynamics that constitute the collective construction of place brand meaning by complex webs of diverse actors. Greater understanding of issues including place brand leadership, initiation, participation and contestation would help advance the field; as Paasi (2010, page 2296) has noted, “it is often unclear how or what it is that ‘constructs’ a region or what this means in practice”. Second, there is a need for greater understanding of the temporal dimension of place brand architecture. Longitudinal studies that track changes in place brand architecture constructions over time would help shed light on the dynamics that influence such changes.

The emergence of new institutions, the decline of existing ones, and changes in the composition of stakeholder networks all potentially impact on the co-construction of place brand architecture. A deeper understanding of these issues calls for a longitudinal research approach that has been largely absent from the place branding literature to date. Third, the current study does not distinguish between the different forms of foreign direct investment (FDI) which may be targeted by regions. Further research is required into these issues. Resource-seeking FDI and market-seeking FDI, for example, are very different from each other (Dunning and Lundan, 2008) and could have a major impact on the investor's view of the place and its identity. Such impacts on investor perceptions may also flow from the particularities of sector-specific FDI and from variation by mode of investment (Papadopoulos et al., 2016). Related to the point of sector-specificity, in the broader context of place brands there needs to be further research to determine whether the contingent self-definition behaviour of region brands for investment attraction purposes differs from their behaviour in respect of other goals such as tourism promotion or resident-focused activities. Fourth, the factors identified as underlying contingent self-definition in regions' place brand architecture could be developed to suggest the dynamics involved – the nature of the influence of these factors, for example, as well as the process outcomes. In this regard the role of stakeholders in place brand architecture adaptations needs to be more closely examined than has been done in extant research. Such stakeholders potentially include local companies, residents, politicians, and target audiences. Whereas all respondents in this study emphasised the importance of co-constructing the region's place brand architecture collaboratively with complex networks of actors, there was little evidence presented by respondents that demonstrated tangible impacts of actors other than the territorial-administrative institutions themselves at city, region and country levels and the target audiences concerned. A re-balancing of agency in the construction of regions' place brand

architecture may therefore be called for, with political institutions ceding some influence to the range of other actors involved in regional networks. Finally, further integration of insights and conceptualisations from the dynamic capabilities literature (Barreto, 2010; Brodie et al., 2016) into the field of place branding could shed light on the complex social processes that engender the co-construction of place brand architecture, as well as providing a platform for comparative case studies that investigate the differential responses of actors in varied geographical settings in relation to their rapidly changing environments. With its focus on issues such as the ability to sense and seize opportunities quickly and proficiently (Teece, 2000) and the reconfiguration of tangible and intangible assets (Teece, 2007), the dynamic capabilities literature could provide a useful theoretical lens through which to view the behaviour of region brand actors as they engage in the socially complex process of place brand architecture construction.

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