

The Inclusivity of Rotterdam's City Branding Process



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Summary

This thesis explores the inclusivity of Rotterdam's city branding process, focusing on how governance participation practices influence stakeholders' perceived inclusivity of the city's branding strategy. To do so, the study analyses the alignment between the intended branding strategy developed by the municipality and the lived experiences of stakeholders involved in the "Rotterdam. Make It Happen." (RMIH) initiative. Although city branding has become a common tool in urban governance to increase competitiveness and reputation, questions have arisen about its democratic legitimacy, especially when it is created without meaningful involvement from stakeholders. Focusing on marketing, sales, and the consumption of public services may contradict the effective resolution of collective issues, which necessitates thoughtful discussion and engaged citizenship. This research uses a qualitative case study approach to examine the inclusivity of Rotterdam's branding process, comparing the brand's stated inclusivity goals with the experienced perspectives of stakeholders. Based on a conceptual framework established in the literature on urban branding, governance, and participation, this study analyses inclusivity through four key dimensions: stakeholder identity, timing of participation, type of participation, and communication effectiveness. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews and document analysis. The findings show a gap between the inclusivity goals outlined in the brand's strategy documents and the experiences of stakeholders. RMIH distinguishes two groups of stakeholders: seven alliance partners and (external) brand partners. While brand partners are being consulted and involved, many viewed the process as top-down, which limited the influence over decision-making to the small group of alliance partners. This thesis contributes to existing literature by critically examining how inclusive branding strategies are implemented in practice within an urban governance setting. It highlights that without deliberate and transparent stakeholder engagement, city branding risks reinforcing narratives driven by elites, at the expense of broader societal inclusion. The study concludes with recommendations for more equitable and participatory branding processes that align better with public sector values and urban democratic principles, such as a voting systems for important decisions, and the adjustment of the brand's criteria in order to join it.

Key words: City branding, urban governance, stakeholder participation, inclusivity, Rotterdam

Acknowledgement

Writing this thesis has taught me a lot of values lessons, both academically and personally. Coming from a technical background in architecture, I was used to approach problems with a clear, structured design process, precise measurements, and spatial reasoning. However, writing a thesis using qualitative research methodologies was a real eye-opener, using interpretation, and seeking meaning and understanding through dialogue and reflection. Over the past year I have switched from technical analysis to understanding human perspectives and governance processes, learning new research techniques such as conducting interviews, coding data, and engaging with theoretical frameworks. This process has definitely increased my skillset and has showed me the depth of qualitative research. This thesis showcases my technical academic background with my newly acquired qualitative way of thinking.

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1. Introduction

1.1 General Background Information

1.1.1 The Origin of Urban Branding

The challenge of maintaining competitiveness in a rapidly globalising economy has been a longstanding concern for urban leaders (Bonakdar & Audirac, 2020). From the 1970s and onward place marketing was adopted because of a crisis in public sector planning and area management. During this time traditional urban planning, which mainly focussed on regulation, zoning laws, and government-driven development, was seen as ineffective in addressing complex urban challenges (Ashworth & Kavaratzis, 2018). Shaped by the dynamics of industrial capitalism and more recently influenced by financial capitalism, the competitive landscape for attracting financial and human capital has driven civic leaders to progressively focus on city and place branding (Bonakdar & Audirac, 2020), primarily aimed at drawing in tourists, businesses, and international talent (Ashworth and Kavaratzis, 2018). City branding is increasingly recognised as an effective public policy mechanism for governments to communicate their city's identity and fulfil a variety of urban development objectives (Ma, De Jong, Hoppe, and De Bruijne, 2021)

1.1.2 Difference Between Private and Public

A corporate brand represents a company's identity, values, and ethos, assisting in distinguishing its products by claiming that their value comes from the corporation's distinctive qualities. However, implementing this idea within public institutions presents challenges due to the variety of services, objectives, and staff involved, making it difficult to present a unified identity. Although places can be branded similarly to products, the branding process for places is fundamentally different and more complex (Ashworth and Kavaratzis, 2018). Additionally, as highlighted by Hereźniak and Anders-Morawska (2020), these initiatives have frequently led to adverse effects on local communities. Examples are the obstruction of collective problem-solving by excluding citizens, thereby posing risks of biased communication, populist agendas, and the oversight of public interests in branding efforts. With its origin from the private sector, implementing a strategy which aims at maximising profits in a public sector context has been criticised because it contrasts sharply with the broader goals of the public sector (Eshuis & Klijn, 2011).

1.1.3 Participation

Many authorities, especially those in the public sector, tend to view marketing as a rephrasing where services are transformed into branded products, cities are treated as corporations, and citizens are regarded as target markets (Ashworth and Kavaratzis, 2018). However, in public governance, individuals are not only recipients of services but also active participants in the democratic process (Eshuis and Klijn, 2012). When continuous co-creation of brands through interactions of various actors in a given location is underestimated, this will result in unsuccessful branding campaigns (Ripoll Gonzáles et al., 2023). While branding has the potential to motivate and communicate effectively, it cannot take the place of democratic dialogue. The role of governments involves making political decisions and forming policies and regulations, in contrast to the private sector, which emphasises operational efficiency (Bonakdar & Audirac, 2020). A key difference between commercial branding and city branding is that the latter is intrinsically linked to a variety of values, meanings, and social roles tied to a specific location. While product brands aim to appeal to particular consumers, city branding must address the interests of a broader audience, which includes not only tourists, business leaders, and public officials, but also residents (Helmy, 2008). Focusing on marketing, sales, and the consumption of public services contradicts the effective resolution of collective issues, which necessitates thoughtful discussion and engaged citizenship (Eshuis & Klijn, 2011). Citizen participation is crucial for achieving support for a public brand (Ripoll Gonzáles et al., 2023), and is essential for its legitimacy (Hereźniak & Anders-Morwaska, 2020). Without citizen involvement the branding process may fail to consider the public's interests during both the creation of the brand and the rollout of branding initiatives (Eshuis & Klijn, 2011).

1.2 Case Study Background Information

The challenge to maintain competitiveness in the rapidly globalising economy has also reached Rotterdam, and like numerous other cities globally, Rotterdam has made significant investments to improve its image to promote urban development and draw visitors, residents, and investors (Belabas & Eshuis, 2019). Since 2003, the municipality of Rotterdam has actively worked on rebranding the city, to change its identity from an industrial “work city” to a vibrant, modern, cultural and international city (IMISCOE Research Series, 2019). The Rotterdam Durft (Rotterdam Dares) campaign, which started in 2004, was focussed on Rotterdam’s no-nonsense, hardworking mentality (IMISCOE Research Series, 2019). The Chief Marketing Office of Rotterdam wanted to establish a brand identity in which Rotterdam is “a young, international city on the water, down-to-earth, and decisive mindset”, which also formulated the underlying message of the Rotterdam Durft campaign (Braun, 2008). However, despite the effort and some successes, this campaign was seen as too locally focussed and therefore

not internationally suitable (IMISCOE Research Series, 2019). After this, Rotterdam's branding evolved towards global economic appeal with "World Port, World City" in 2006, but its current branding strategy aims at a balanced narrative which includes both economic and cultural identity with "Rotterdam. Make it Happen!" (hereafter: RMIH) (IMISCOE Research Series, 2019). The RMIH brand partnership brings together 41 leading companies from Rotterdam to increase the city's appeal at both local and global stages. By using a shared identity, philosophy, and brand assurance, the partnership intends to represent Rotterdam in a bold, unified, and impactful manner ("Over Rotterdam. Make It Happen. • Rotterdam. Make It Happen.," 2023). The DNA of Rotterdam is centred around three core values: Bold (raw), Forward (entrepreneurial), and Culture (international). This DNA serves as the foundation of the RMIH brand. It provides guidance for policy and strategy, and support for city marketing and communication. During the period from 2020 to 2024, the brand alliance has focussed on activities that align with four central themes: (1) the smart city, represents the power of technology and humanity, especially the innovation that occurs when these two elements collaborate; (2) the healthy city, characterised by sustainability, greenery, and liveability, encouraging residents to adopt a healthy lifestyle; (3) the circular city, utilising resources, water, energy, and waste in a smart and efficient way, focusing on self-regulation; (4) the vibrant city, a dynamic environment where cultural diversity, social interaction, and economic activity flourish (Positionering & Focus • Rotterdam. Make It Happen., 2025).

1.3 Problem Statement and Research Question

1.3.1 Problem Statement

Nevertheless, even though this brand claims to have a balanced narrative, it is still unclear whether this narrative was actually co-created with a diversity of relevant stakeholders, which calls its legitimacy into question. While Belabas (2023) already addresses the lack of inclusion in the branding of Rotterdam, this mainly focusses on cultural inclusion. Research on the process of the creation of Rotterdam's city brand is limited, particularly regarding the inclusiveness of the branding strategy created by the municipality in partnership with various stakeholders, such as businesses and NGOs. In documents such as the Meerjarenstrategie Merkantiel 2025-2029, RMIH specifies its intended strategy and direction for the brand, including its ambitions regarding inclusivity. However, it is still an open question whether this planned inclusivity is in line with the experiences of stakeholders, and what the actual nature and depth of this inclusivity might be. There is a need to understand how participation practices within the governance structure (stakeholder identity, timing of participation, type of participation, and communication) affect stakeholders' perceptions of being genuinely included in the branding process.

1.3.2 Research Question

This thesis seeks to fill this gap by evaluating how the brand's inclusivity ambitions are realised in practice and experienced by stakeholders, or whether they risk remaining symbolic. To this end, the study analyses the alignment between the intended branding strategy developed by the municipality and the lived experiences of stakeholders involved in the RMIH initiative. The central question that guides this research is as followed: How do governance participation practices influence the perceived inclusivity of Rotterdam's city branding strategy?

In order to answer the main research question, it is necessary to explore what the municipality claims, what the various stakeholders experience, and which practices (stakeholder identity, timing of participation, type of participation, and communication effectiveness) explain the difference. Therefore the following sub questions will be addressed:

- How does the governance framework of Rotterdam's city branding strategy define and structure stakeholder participation?
- At what stages were stakeholders included in the branding process?
- How do different types of stakeholders (e.g., citizens, NGOs, businesses) perceive their role and influence in the branding process?
- How does the effectiveness of communication affect the stakeholders' awareness of participation opportunities and their sense of inclusion?

1.4 Relevance

1.4.1 Scientific Relevance

The scientific relevance of this research lies in its focus on the inclusivity of urban branding processes. While Ma et al. (2021) underscore city branding as a strategic communication mechanism for developing competitive urban identities through narratives and events, other researchers point to the cultural and symbolic aspects of branding, such as identity formation and public perception (Ashworth & Kavaratzis, 2018). This thesis builds on these viewpoints by linking branding not only to image creation but also to inclusive growth. Moreover, it addresses critical perspectives offered by Eshuis and Klijn (2012) and Bonakdar and Audirac (2020), who question whether branding as a governance strategy is aligned with public sector principles like inclusion, democratic engagement, and social justice. Lastly, this in-depth qualitative methodology aligns with the research methods used in branding studies, presenting a holistic framework for evaluating perceptions of urban branding initiatives. It highlights the importance of designing urban branding strategies that not only create competitiveness but also uphold inclusivity.

1.4.2 Societal Relevance

As local governments increasingly adopt branding to improve their position in the global economy, it becomes crucial to evaluate whether these initiatives promote inclusive development or worsen existing inequalities. The societal relevance can be found in the fact that this research underscores the necessity of public engagement and democratic accountability in formulating branding policies that align with the interests of a wide range of stakeholders. Insights from this study can assist public administrators, urban planners, and policymakers in aligning branding initiatives with overarching societal objectives, such as ensuring sustainable and inclusive urban development.

1.5 Thesis Structure

This thesis is structured into six chapters. Chapter 1 has introduced the topic and the problem statement, and mentions the scientific and societal relevance of this research. Chapter 2 provides the theoretical background for this research, reviewing relevant literature and creating a conceptual framework that guides the analysis. In Chapter 3, the research design and the justification for the methodology are discussed, including how concepts are operationalised and the approach to data collection. The empirical results from the Rotterdam case study are presented in Chapter 4, structured around the key variables established in the conceptual framework. The fifth chapter concludes by summarising the findings, examining their relevance to urban branding and inclusivity, offer possible recommendations, and reflecting on the limitations of the research.

2. Literature review and Conceptual Framework

2.1 Definition and Evolution of Urban Branding

Ma et al. (2021) define urban branding as “a whole set of actions to build a positive image of the city and communicate it among various target groups via visuals, narratives, and events locally and internationally to gain a competitive advantage over other cities”. As mentioned in chapter 1, city branding gained popularity in the public sector because traditional urban planning failed to address the complex urban challenges effectively (Ashworth & Kavaratzis, 2018). City branding represents a modern approach to urban communication that enhances the promotion of a city's image by transforming its visual representation into a recognisable brand. This process highlights the city's distinctive features and encourages the development of a sustainable urban identity (Rehan, 2013). The concept of urban branding has evolved from corporate branding and marketing into the public sector as cities increasingly seek to differentiate themselves and attract investments, tourism, and residents (Ashworth & Kavaratzis, 2018). According to Eshuis and Klijn (2012), the integration of branding by public managers and policymakers can be explained through the evolving nature of governance processes that prioritise image and perception. Additionally, significant societal shifts, such as mediatisation and the overload of information, have led municipalities to adopt comparable methods and aims (like promotional efforts and image cultivation) similar to those used by private-sector public relations agencies to increase the consumption of goods and services.

2.2 The role of urban branding in urban governance

Ma et al. (2021) explain how branding and governance are interlinked. Firstly, branding seeks to achieve long-term and complex urban development goals that improve the city's image and reputation, focusing on policy objectives designed to transform and revitalise the urban landscape. Secondly, it is a process that is considerably strategic and politically oriented, aimed at changing the city, which requires continuous support from politicians, public officials, important stakeholders, and the general public. Lastly, because of its essential strategic and political relevance, city branding is developed by high-level professionals within departments that work to align branding policies with the city's existing policies. It is anticipated that target groups will actively participate as stakeholders in the development, co-design, and execution of branding initiatives.

2.3 Tensions between Governance and Branding

2.3.1 Audience

While branding has long been used by companies to advertise and sell their products and services, its significance is growing in the public sector (Leijerholt, 2021). However, the product that is being

branded in the public sector differs from the private sector. Unlike commercial branding, which is aimed at distinct consumer groups, city branding is fundamentally associated with a variety of values, meanings, and social roles linked to a specific location (Eshuis and Klijn, 2011). Helmy (2008) emphasises that urban branding must appeal to a much larger audience, including residents, tourists, business executives, and government officials, thus making it a more complex and multifaceted challenge than product branding. Additionally, branding in the public sector is utilised on a larger scale, representing cities, states, nations, destinations, and organisations. Public sector branding, as a governance approach, aims to shape emotional and cognitive responses instead of relying exclusively on rational connections (Zavattaro & Thomas, 2021). For the private sector, achieving survival and success is reliant upon securing a market for its goods and services. On the other hand, the public sector's survival and legitimacy are based on its ability to deliver benefits to society (Leijerholt, 2021).

2.3.2 Critics

Eshuis and Klijn (2012) express concerns regarding the application of branding within the public sector. Branding stands in stark contrast to the wider aims of the public sector. In public governance individuals are not just passive recipients of services, they are also active contributors to the democratic process. Although branding has the ability to engage and communicate effectively, it cannot fulfil the role of democratic dialogue. As mentioned earlier, according to Bonakdar and Audirac (2020), city branding is viewed critically as it tends to offer a refined image of urban settings, often neglecting the difficulties faced by marginalised groups. Issues of social inclusion and equity are seldomly addressed, and the advantages often do not reach the local residents. This has resulted in pushback from neighbourhoods that advocate for the "right to the city," demanding a more inclusive form of urban development. The practice of city branding is closely associated with the "creative class" narrative, which aims to attract talent and investment. However, this methodology often intensifies income inequality, gentrification, and elitism, with the primary beneficiaries being corporate elites who profit from the economic expansion it generates. Critics assert that city branding is an inflated strategy that generates minimal or short-lived economic benefits and does not significantly improve the lives of the majority of urban residents (Bonakdar & Audirac, 2020).

2.3.3 Challenges

Eshuis and Klijn (2011) identified challenges and constraints of branding in governance processes in the Oresund case. It reveals two key concerns; First, branding is not always easy to implement successfully within governance. The Oresund case demonstrates that branding efforts can sometimes overlook the interests of local citizens, favouring particular target groups instead. Second, the effectiveness of branding can be limited. Despite the branding campaign's success in influencing external investors'

views, it did not change how local residents perceived their region. Furthermore, some critics argue that branding often overlooks the local population, especially when it is primarily driven by elite groups of public and private sector leaders, rather than by elected officials or citizens. In these situations, branding can pose a risk to democratic legitimacy by excluding the broader public from the decision-making process (Eshuis and Klijn, 2011). Ripoll Gonz  les et al. (2023) say that citizen involvement in policy-making enhances brand citizenship behaviour (BCB) by empowering stakeholders, which decreases resistance, facilitates better problem identification, and leads to more effective resolutions. However, the issue is complicated by the difficulty of measuring branding outcomes, which depend on long-term shifts in perception both internally and externally (Ashworth and Kavaratzis, 2018).

2.4 Conceptual Model and Analytical Framework

Building on the preceding theoretical discussion, this thesis proposes a conceptual model that examines how governance participation practices influence stakeholders' perceptions of inclusivity in Rotterdam's city branding process. Rotterdam. Make It Happen. brings together 41 leading companies from Rotterdam to create appealing city at both local and global stages ("Over Rotterdam. Make It Happen. • Rotterdam. Make It Happen.," 2023). However, it is unclear whether these actors, NGO's and businesses, actually experience the branding process as inclusive. This conceptual model identifies key variables which show the possibility of this gap arising.

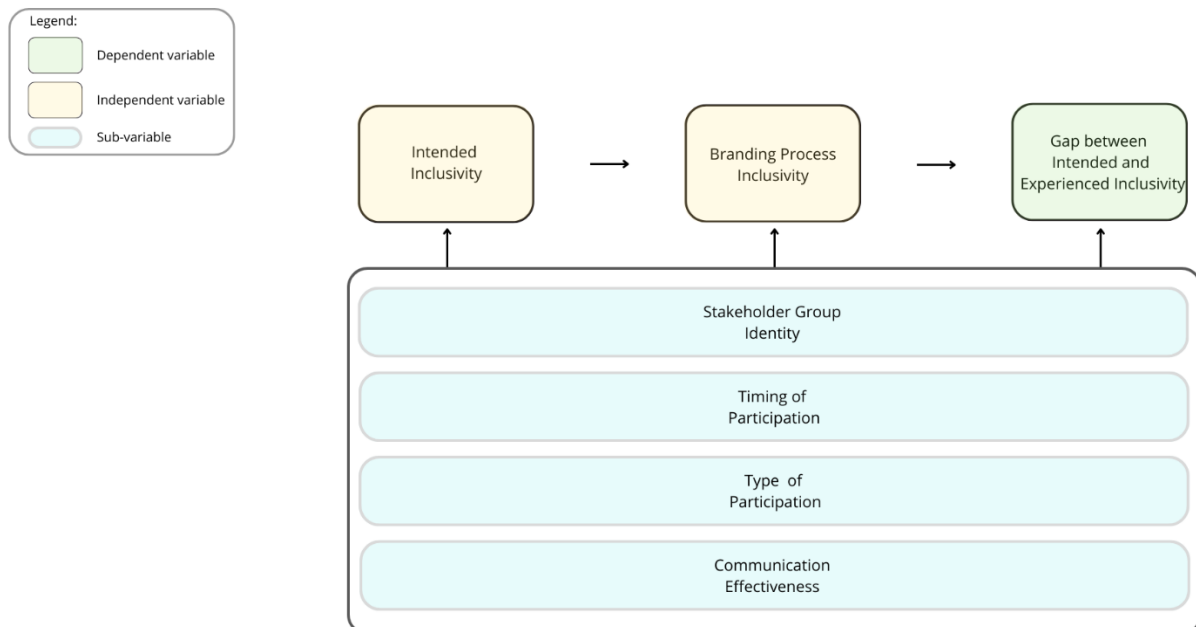


Figure 1: *Conceptual Model*

2.5 Description of model

At the centre of this conceptual model is the dependent variable; the Gap Between Intended and Experienced Inclusivity. This gap is defined as the difference between how inclusive the initial branding process was planned to be, and how included external stakeholders, such as NGOs and businesses, actually feel during and after their participation in the process. The intended Branding Process and Experience Branding Process are the independent variables in this model. Both Intended and Experienced Branding Process Inclusivity, as well as the Gap Between Intended and Experienced Inclusivity, are assessed using the same four sub-variables: Stakeholder Group Identity, Timing of Participation, Type of Participation, and Communication Effectiveness. Measuring through these specific indicators, enables a detailed comparison that highlights potential discrepancies.

- Stakeholder group Identity, this relates to the background and role of the stakeholder. These identities may affect the interpretation or valuation of inclusion, potentially explaining why various groups perceive the same process in different ways.
- Timing of Participation, referring to when stakeholders were invited to participate, whether in the planning, creation, implementation, or maintenance stages, and how long their involvement lasts.
- Type of Participation, shows the nature and depth of external stakeholder's participation by using Arnstein's Ladder of Participation. This tool categorises stakeholders' involvement from manipulative (lowest) to full citizen control (highest). This is further supported by an examination of the roles stakeholders played in the branding process (e.g., advisory, decision-making, symbolic).
- Communication Effectiveness, analysing the clarity, reach, and accessibility of the communication regarding opportunities for participation. This involves accessibility of communication (channels used, clarity of language) and message frequency (how often stakeholders are contacted or informed). Poor communication quality can lead to a lack of awareness among stakeholders, even if the intent was inclusive.

These sub-variables help explain how the intended inclusivity of the branding process is influenced, and how that ultimately might shape the implementation gap. This conceptual model serves as the analytical framework guiding this thesis. It is designed to answer the main research question: How do governance participation practices influence the perceived inclusivity of Rotterdam's city branding strategy?

3. Research design and methodological justification

3.1 Research Design: Case Study Approach

This thesis consists of a single case study to study the difference between intended and perceived inclusion in the city branding process of Rotterdam. A case study is a research technique used to gain an in-depth understanding of a real-world situation, especially when the case is closely connected with its surrounding context (Yin, 2018). The city of Rotterdam, with its ongoing urban transformation and branding efforts, is an ideal case for understanding the potential hindrances or implications that influence the intended branding process and its claimed inclusivity, and the perceived inclusivity experienced by external stakeholders. Gioia, Corley, and Hamilton (2013) highlight that qualitative research, such as case studies, provides deep, context-specific insights that can help understand the complex nature of phenomena, which is particularly critical for this research.

3.2 Justification for Case Study Methodology

The choice of case study research is particularly appropriate because it allows for an intensive exploration of Rotterdam's urban branding in its real-world context, capturing the complexity and nuances that would be difficult to assess through other methods. As Yin (2018) explains, case studies are especially useful for answering "how" and "why" questions, which are central to this thesis. This research aims to provide a holistic understanding of Rotterdam's branding process and its inclusivity, from creation to implementation. Gioia et al. (2013) emphasise that qualitative research is well suited for studying processes of organisational change by showing the lived experiences of actors involved. By focusing on a single case, this research provides a rich, in-depth analysis which led to new insights into the role of inclusivity in the urban branding process. The case study approach is useful when there are many variables, which is why it relies on multiple sources of evidence. In this case, multiple stakeholders offer a comprehensive view of the branding process and its effects (Yin, 2018).

3.3 Data Collection Methods

To analyse how governance participation practices shape stakeholders' perception of inclusivity in Rotterdam's city branding process, qualitative data collection methods have been employed. These methods are particularly suitable for capturing the complex and subjective experiences of various stakeholders and the social dynamics surrounding branding efforts.

- Semi-structured interviews has been the primary method of data collection. This approach is particularly effective for exploring participants' experiences and perceptions, which are central to understanding the inclusivity of the urban branding process. As Gioia et al. (2013) argue, semi-structured interviews offer flexibility, allowing the researcher to dig deeper into

participants' responses while maintaining consistency across interviews. Key stakeholders, such as city officials, businesses and NGO's, have been interviewed to gain a diverse range of perspectives on Rotterdam's branding efforts. Rotterdam. Make It Happen has seven founding partners; Havenbedrijf Rotterdam, gemeente Rotterdam, Erasmus University Rotterdam, Rotterdam Partners, Rotterdam Festivals, Rotterdam Topsport and Erasmus Medical Centre. As new members are joining, the brand now consists of 41 partners. This thesis has interviewed a selection of these partners to gain a comprehensive understanding of the perceptions regarding the inclusivity of the brands' branding process.

- Document analysis has complemented the interviews by providing an understanding of the formal dialogue surrounding Rotterdam's branding initiatives. Yin (2018) suggests that documents can be used to support and add to evidence from other sources by providing specific information that backs up what interviewees have said. In this study, they offer insights into the framing and objectives of urban branding strategies, making them an essential source of data for this study. Analysing promotional materials, policy reports, and campaign documents helped reveal how Rotterdam's intended branding strategy is formulated and communicated.

3.4 Operationalisation of Concepts

In order to empirically examine the connection between the intended inclusiveness of Rotterdam's urban branding practices and its perceived inclusiveness, it is essential to operationalise the key theoretical concepts. Table 1 presents the operationalisation of the primary variables used in this research, detailing their definitions, indicators, and sources of data. The sub-variables were selected based on the existing literature regarding governance and public administration, which highlights that inclusivity should be viewed as a multidimensional process rather than a simple binary condition, making these variables relevant.

- Stakeholder group Identity: Various stakeholders, such as citizens, NGOs, and businesses, have different experiences of inclusion. According to Bonakdar and Audirac (2020), branding typically supports investor-focused narratives, which can neglect the actual experiences and expectations of local communities, justifying the need to examine how inclusion is perceived across different stakeholder groups.
- Timing of Participation: Eshuis and Klijn (2012) show that a delay in engagement can restrict the influence of participation, often leading to branding processes that fail to address local needs. Similarly, Bonakdar and Audirac (2020) suggest that branding is frequently shaped by

the interests of the elite, often leaving out marginalised voices during the initial stages of decision-making, highlighting the importance of the timing of participation.

- Type of Participation: As described in Eshuis and Klijn (2011), participation extends from passive consultation to real co-creation. When branding is limited to a top-down approach, it does not encourage the democratic dialogue necessary for legitimacy, but rather supports superficial inclusion, emphasising the need to assess the depth of the engagement.
- Communication Effectiveness: Good intentions can lead to failure if stakeholders do not recognise opportunities for involvement or are unclear about their roles. Ashworth and Kavaratzis (2018) point out that branding in public governance may become biased or inaccessible if it lacks clear and inclusive communication strategies, making the clarity and reach of communication a key concern.

By pinpointing the sub-variables stakeholder identity, timing and type of participation, and communication effectiveness under the broader concept of branding process inclusivity, the model translates an abstract theoretical discussion into a concrete analytical framework. This allows for a systematic analysis of how inclusion is planned, practiced, and perceived across various stakeholder groups, helping to understand the alignment between the intended inclusivity and the lived experiences. In order to consistently analyse and compare the intended inclusivity, perceived inclusivity, and the alignment between them, the same indicators have been used for each variable.

Table 1*Variables & Indicators*

Variable	Sub-variable	Indicators	Role in Research	Data Sources
Intended Inclusivity	- Timing of Participation	- Stage of involvement (planning, creation, implementation, maintenance) - Length of Involvement -----	Indicates the extent to which the municipality claims to involve stakeholders in the branding processes	Interviews Existing documents
	- Type of Participation	-Level of Participation ((1) Manipulation, (2) Therapy, (3) Informing, (4) Consultation, (5) Placation, (6) Partnership, (7) Delegated Power, and (8) Citizen Control) -Role in branding process (characteristics or tasks within branding process) -----		Interviews Existing documents
	- Communication Effectiveness	- Accessibility of communication (Communication channels used ,		Interviews

	- Stakeholder Group Identity	Language difficulty; is the message understandable for everyone) - Message Frequency (Number of touchpoints, per time period) ----- - Type of actor (citizen, business, NGO, etc.) - Type of partner (alliance partner or secondary partner)		Existing documents Interviews Existing documents
Branding Process Inclusivity	- Timing of Participation - Type of Participation	- Stage of involvement (planning, creation, implementation, maintenance) - Length of Involvement ----- - Level of Participation ((1) Manipulation, (2) Therapy, (3) Informing, (4) Consultation, (5) Placation, (6) Partnership, (7) Delegated Power,	Shows the extent to which the municipality involves stakeholders in the branding processes	Interviews Existing documents Interviews Existing documents

Experienced Inclusivity	- Type of Participation	implementation, maintenance) - Length of Involvement ----- -Level of Participation ((1) Manipulation, (2) Therapy, (3) Informing, (4) Consultation, (5) Placation, (6) Partnership, (7) Delegated Power, and (8) Citizen Control) -Role in branding process (characteristics or tasks within branding process) -----	stakeholder experiences of inclusion	Interviews Existing documents
	- Communication Effectiveness	- Accessibility of communication (Communication channels used , Language difficulty; is the message understandable for everyone) - Message Frequency		Interviews Existing documents

		(Number of touchpoints, per time period) -----		
	- Stakeholder Group Identity	- Type of actor (citizen, business, NGO, etc.) - Type of partner (alliance partner or secondary partner)		Interviews Existing documents

3.5 Target Organisations for Interviews

In order to collect the necessary information needed to answer the main research question, a diverse selection of organisations has been interviewed. The selection includes organisations which operate in the fields of sports, healthcare, creative culture, education, and transport. This approach aims to create a well-rounded foundation of information that will provide the required knowledge.

- Gemeente Rotterdam (Municipality Official)

The municipality embodies the Rotterdam mentality: international, entrepreneurial, raw, and straightforward. Since 2014, it has supported RMIH as a unifying city branding strategy. Together with its partners, the municipality aims to improve Rotterdam's international profile for talent, companies, and tourists, focusing on economic and societal benefits (*Merkpartners • Rotterdam. Make It Happen.*, 2025).

- Rotterdam.MakeltHappen (RMIH)

RMIH is the leading city brand of Rotterdam. The brand represents a partnership of 43 prominent Rotterdam-based companies (partners), which collaboratively aim to increase the local, national, and international attractiveness of Rotterdam through the brand positioning 'Rotterdam. Make it Happen.'

- Erasmus MC (NGO Partner)

As a leading medical centre, Erasmus MC provides exceptional care, scientific research, and education. It is one of the largest employers in the city, providing approximately 13000 jobs in diverse professions, and plays a significant societal role. Through innovative healthcare, sustainable buildings, and collaboration with educational institutions, the organisation greatly contributes to the vitality of the city (*Merkpartners • Rotterdam. Make It Happen.*, 2025).

- Erasmus Universiteit Rotterdam (EUR) (NGO Partner)

Erasmus University Rotterdam (EUR) is an internationally focused research university that aims to achieve societal impact. Its key focus areas include prosperity, health, governance, and culture. EUR invests in global research and education, contributing as a core partner to the Make It Happen initiative with a knowledge-driven, inclusive, and forward-looking vision (Merkpartners • Rotterdam. *Make It Happen.*, 2025).

- Rotterdam Topsport (NGO Partner)

Rotterdam excels in hosting international elite sporting events such as the NN Marathon and the ABN AMRO World Tennis Tournament. Rotterdam Topsport provides support to sports clubs, talent development, and sports infrastructure, which enhances pride, attractiveness, and economic stimulation for the city (Merkpartners • Rotterdam. *Make It Happen.*, 2025).

- Rotterdam Festivals (NGO Partner)

Rotterdam Festivals manage the event policy and encourages cultural participation. They provide support to festival organisers, share knowledge, and assist with permit processes. Under the name Uitagenda Rotterdam, they promote a wide and accessible cultural scene, keeping the city vibrant and appealing (Merkpartners • Rotterdam. *Make It Happen.*, 2025).

- De Kuip

The camaraderie, the forward-looking perspective, and the club slogan 'No words, just action' makes that Feyenoord, as a RMIH brand partner, fits perfectly within the identity of the city of Rotterdam. Together we are strong, no dreaming but acting: Rotterdam. Make It Happen. (Merkpartners • Rotterdam. *Make It Happen.*, 2025)

Table 2

Interview Respondents

Respondent Code	Respondent Pseudonym	Respondent Organisation
R01	Karin	Municipality of Rotterdam
R02	Alexandra	Rotterdam.MakeItHappen
R03	Sophie	Erasmus MC
R04	Max	Erasmus University
R05	Sara	Rotterdam Topsport
R06	Mariette	Rotterdam Festivals
R07	Boris	De Kuip

3.6 Data Analysis: A Qualitative Approach

The data analysis process involved systematic coding to identify patterns and themes related to inclusiveness of the urban branding process. This iterative process allows the researcher and reader to develop a deep understanding of the data while ensuring that it remains closely tied to the research questions.

- Thematic analysis has been the primary method for organising and analysing the qualitative data. The structured coding method developed by Gioia et al. (2013), of first-order concepts and second-order themes, is an effective technique for identifying patterns in qualitative data, especially when the goal is to develop conceptual insights into complex phenomena. Themes related to social inclusion and public engagement have been identified and analysed to explore the implications of Rotterdam's branding process on inclusivity.
- Process-tracing has been used to examine the causal mechanisms that link branding strategies with socio-economic outcomes. As Yin (2018) explains, process-tracing is a way to analyse case study findings by examining how and why something happened through the sequence of events and decisions that led to particular outcomes. In this study, process-tracing has helped to identify the specific steps in the branding process that contribute to the inclusion or exclusion of various stakeholders. By mapping these causal processes, the study gained a deeper understanding of how intended inclusivity in an urban branding process can differ from its perceived inclusivity.
- To further refine the analysis, congruence analysis has been employed. This method compares theoretical expectations with empirical data to evaluate the validity of different theoretical propositions. As Mahoney (2012) suggests, congruence analysis is useful for testing competing theories and refining our understanding of the causal mechanisms at play. In this research, congruence analysis helped to evaluate whether the observed outcomes aligned with the expectations set in the literature on urban branding and inclusiveness.

3.7 Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations are critical in qualitative research, especially when engaging with human participants. This study adhered to ethical guidelines to ensure that participants' rights were protected and that the research process has been conducted with integrity. Informed consent has been obtained from all interviewees, and confidentiality is maintained to protect participants' privacy. As Gioia et al. (2013) mention, to be transparent in both methodology and findings, qualitative rigor requires researchers to clearly show how they gathered, analysed, and interpreted their data.

4. Empirical Findings and Analysis

4.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the empirical findings from the case study of Rotterdam's city branding initiative, and document analysis of the Meerjarenstrategie Merkalliantie 2025-2029 of Rotterdam. Make It Happen (RMIH). Following the conceptual framework developed in Chapter 2, it explores how governance practices related to participation influence how inclusive stakeholders perceive the branding process to be. For the analysis of the interview findings a three-tiered coding structured was used: first-order codes (directly derived from participant quotes), second-order themes (interpreted analytical categories), and aggregate dimensions (thematic areas derived from the theoretical framework). The results are categorised into the four main themes derived from the theoretical framework: (1) Stakeholder Identity, (2) Timing of Participation, (3) Type of Participation, and (4) Communication Effectiveness. Each section uses data from interviews and document analysis to evaluate how inclusivity was intended and implemented by the municipality and perceived by various stakeholders, and concludes with its own analysis of a potential gap between the intended and experienced results to explore how participation practices influence the perceived inclusivity of Rotterdam's city branding strategy. Coding tables for each theme, and an organisational diagram are included to offer a clear overview of the coded data and the structural relationships. Figure 2 shows the layout for each sub-chapter.

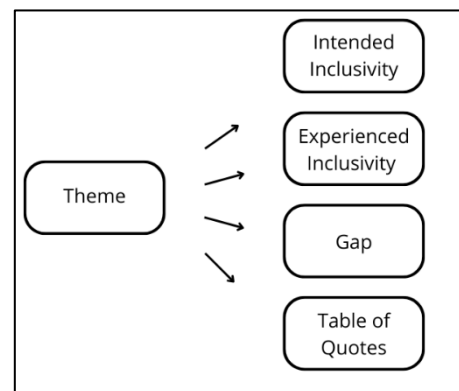


Figure 2: *Sub-chapter Overview*

4.2 Stakeholder Identity

Intended

The stakeholder identity within RMIH consists of seven core alliance partners and 33 additional brand partners (Rotterdam. Make It Happen., 2025). The alliance partners form the basis of the brand's governance framework, and are selected to represent all of Rotterdam's key sectors: government, business, education, culture, and sport. However, the SWOT-analysis in the Meerjarenstrategie Merkalliantie 2025-2029 (hereafter: Meerjarenstrategie) mentions a lack of inclusivity and representation in brand partnerships and management (Rotterdam. Make It Happen., 2025). Therefore the Meerjarenstrategie clearly outlines the goal to improve inclusivity and representativeness within

the brand by actively involving the viewpoints of current institutional partners and the wider societal 'onderstroom' or 'undercurrent of society'.

"Strengthen the inclusivity and representativeness of the brand alliance by integrating the views of brand partners, the upper stream, and the involvement of the lower stream from the city in the decision-making." (Rotterdam. Make It Happen., 2025)

Previously, the focus was primarily international, building a strong network, developing a shared narrative, and creating and sharing content. Although the brand still has the international ambition to broaden the reach of the overarching story, their current mission also aims to strengthen ambassadorial engagement and deepen the integration of the network's value into the heart of the city. This leads to improved credibility and a wider foundation, to achieve further international success and increase their influence (Rotterdam. Make It Happen., 2025).

Experienced

The RMIH network shows both the strengths and weaknesses by representing Rotterdam based on specific sectors. Even though Mariëtte said *"These 7 have been carefully chosen because they represent the entire palette of Rotterdam."*, insights from interviewees also show an acknowledgment of the selection's limitations. As Sara mentioned RMIH was created to put Rotterdam on the map internationally for visitors and businesses. This is closely related to the "creative class" narrative, which aims to attract talent and investment, with the primary beneficiaries being corporate elites who profit from the economic expansion it generates (Bonakdar & Audirac, 2020). Because of the brand's international focus the 'Rotterdamers' had less attention, yet are important in telling the brand's story (Karin). As mentioned in the theory section; city branding is intrinsically linked to a variety of values, meanings, and social roles tied to a specific location, and therefore must address the interests of a broader audience (Helmy, 2008). Including local participation, in this case the 'Rotterdammer', is essential for achieving support for a public brand (Ripoll Gonzáles et al., 2023), and is essential for its legitimacy (Hereźniak & Anders-Morwaska, 2020).

The brand is undergoing a slight focus-shift in which they are including citizens more (Alexandra and Karin). Karin mentioned that *"the involvement of Rotterdamers is essential here, because you cannot convey anything about the city internationally if your Rotterdammer does not experience that pride"*, indicating that they want to involve the local 'Rotterdammer' more to create a stronger narrative internationally. Nevertheless, barriers to including a broader range of organisations still remain, as Sara pointed out: *"There are several criteria that companies must meet."* Statements like this highlight the selective nature of participation, showing structural limitations within the stakeholder framework.

Gap

Both the intended stakeholder inclusion (identity) and the experienced stakeholder inclusion mention the carefully selected stakeholder identity, covering all sectors of the city. Both sections also mention that there are factors limiting broader societal inclusion. There is a recognised need to involve more local voices to ensure that city branding connects with all residents, which is mentioned in interviews and in the Meerjarenstrategie.

Table 3

Quotes about Stakeholder Identity

Quote	First Order Code	Second Order Code	Aggregate Dimension
“Nu hebben we gezegd, ja, maar ja, Rotterdammers zijn ook belangrijk hierin, want je kan niet internationaal iets vertellen over de stad, terwijl je Rotterdammer die trots niet voelt.” – Karin	Inclusion of local citizens	Inclusion Efforts	Stakeholder Identity
“Deze 7 zijn zorgvuldig uitgezocht omdat die eigenlijk het hele palet van Rotterdam beslaan.” – Mariëtte	7 partners representing all sectors	Inclusivity Efforts	Stakeholder Identity
“inclusief deels wel, we zijn echt op de goede weg” – Alexandra	Progress on inclusivity but not fully inclusive yet	Inclusivity Efforts	Stakeholder Identity
“Dus je moet niet de Rotterdamer, en de stad zelf vergeten mee	Shift towards involving local citizens	Inclusivity Efforts	Stakeholder Identity

te nemen en ervoor te zorgen dat ze ambassadeur blijven van je stad. Dus dat is nu de shift die we nu een beetje maken.” – Alexandra			
“En is een aantal criteria waaraan bedrijven zich moeten voldoen.” – Sara	Criteria in order to join	Inclusivity Limitations	Stakeholder Identity
“dat denk ik niet, dat we met alle partners die we nu hebben de samenleving heel goed weerspiegelen” – Sara	Insufficient societal representation	Inclusivity Gap	Stakeholder Identity
“RMIH is natuurlijk ontstaan om Rotterdam internationaal op de kaart te zetten voor bezoekers, voor bedrijven” – Sara	Putting Rotterdam on the map globally to attract visitors and companies	International external focus	Stakeholder Identity

4.3 Timing of Participation

Intended

The seven alliance partners; Havenbedrijf Rotterdam, gemeente Rotterdam, Erasmus Universiteit Rotterdam, Rotterdam Partners, Rotterdam Festivals, Rotterdam Topsport en Erasmus MC, have formed a unique partnership over 11 years ago. Together, they focused on the branding of Rotterdam both nationally and internationally, with a shared city brand, tone, style, and brand promise (*De Merkalliantie • Rotterdam. Make It Happen.*, 2025). The partnership has been formalised in a covenant (Rotterdam. Make It Happen., 2025). These seven partners were part of the initial creation phase of the brand. Since its launch in 2014, the brand positioning of Rotterdam has been ‘Rotterdam. Make It

Happen.' (*De Merkantiel • Rotterdam. Make It Happen.*, 2025). In the following years 33 brand partners have joined the brand (Rotterdam. Make It Happen., 2025). With their main role as informants and brand distributors, the brand partners mainly participate in the implementation phase.

However, through the Meerjarenstrategie the brand intends to improve the inclusivity and representation within the brand by including voices and interaction from the 'lowerstream' sooner in the decision-making process. This change affects the timing of their participation, allowing more input at the beginning of a branding campaign.

Experienced

The timing of participation varies significantly among the interviewed partners. Karin explained that the initial formation in 2014 was led by the Municipality of Rotterdam, specifically Mayor Aboutaleb, and the Port (Havenbedrijf). They actively participated in its development, which established the foundational direction of the brand. Alexandra emphasised that the brand alliance has evolved over ten years, gradually incorporating new partners. Erasmus MC also joined the alliance in the early stages of its development, as mentioned by Sophie, they joined over five years ago but were quickly integrated into decision-making structures. Karin explained, "the largest, so to speak, the Municipality, the Port, and Erasmus MC, were the first." These early additions strengthened the alliance's foundation and extended its reach across various sectors. Sara indicated that their organisation (Rotterdam Topsport) joined after the founding phase but experiences equal participation. Around the same time Erasmus University Rotterdam, Rotterdam Partners, and Rotterdam Festivals also became part of the Rotterdam Make It Happen brand, creating a core group of 7 alliance partners, consisting of so called 'icons' of the city: Municipality of Rotterdam, the Port, Erasmus MC, Erasmus University, Rotterdam Topsport, Rotterdam Festivals, and Rotterdam Partners. After the alliance partners were established, RMIH continued to grow.

"at this point, 33 partners have joined in, all of whom are enthusiastic about putting the city on display." – Alexandra

These 33 'brand partners' joined in the implementation or maintenance phase and are not part of the alliance partners. This phased approach to inclusion shows broader patterns in stakeholder engagement, where the initial focus on key institutions slowly extends to include larger networks of influence and representation, in line with the changing demands of the alliance and the city's branding strategy.

Gap

Compared to the document analysis of the intended strategy, the interviews show a more detailed process of various partners joining RMIH. The Municipality of Rotterdam and the Port were particularly active in the creation phase, setting the main course and developing the foundation of the brand. The other five alliance partners joined later and helped the brand to gradually evolve, but had less influence in the initial creation of the brand. The results indicate that early participation in RMIH has strengthened the authority of founding members such as the Municipality, Port of Rotterdam, and Erasmus MC. Later partners, despite being formally equal, become part of a pre-existing hierarchy where the strategic direction has already been set. This illustrates common patterns in collaborative governance, where initial power dynamics remain in place (Eshuis & Klijn, 2012). The timing influences both the extent and effect of participation, reinforcing established hierarchies instead of providing equal influence. Additionally, the aim to include the 33 partners more in the decision-making process has not yet been realised.

Table 4

Quotes about Timing of Participation

Quote	First Order Code	Second Order Code	Aggregate Dimension
"De merk alliantie in RMIH, bestaat nu 10 jaar. Ooit opgericht door de burgemeester Aboutaleb, samen met directeur van het Havenbedrijf" – Alexandra	Alliance founded 10 years ago	Founding partners and later membership	Timing of Participation
"Ja, nou de grootste wel zeg maar, Gemeente, het Havenbedrijf en Erasmus MC, die waren als eerste, want die hadden behoefte en ze hadden ook allemaal hun eigen potjes" – Karin	First partners	Founding partners and later membership	Timing of Participation

“We zijn nu ruim 5 jaar lid van de merk alliantie als Erasmus MC” – Sophie	Part of alliance for over 5 years	Founding partners and later membership	Timing of Participation
“Wij zijn niet een van de founders, we zijn er wel ietsje later bijgekomen”	Joined after the founding phase	Later membership	Timing of Participation
“Daarnaast ging het netwerk zich steeds meer vergroten met iconen van de stad” – Karin	Icons joining network	Later membership	Timing of Participation
“Wij zijn één van de kernpartners. Dat betekent wat we wel heel goed doorhebben, al eigenlijk vanaf de start” – Max	Participation from the start	Founding partners and later membership	Timing of Participation
“Bij Rotterdam Festivals zijn we vanaf de herijking betrokken” – Mariëtte	Joined after recalibration	Later membership	Timing of Participation
“Daar zijn inmiddels nu 33 partners bij aangesloten die ook heel graag meehelpen om die stad in de etalage te zetten” – Alexandra	33 other partners joined later on	Later membership	Timing of Participation

4.4 Type of Participation

Intended

As mentioned earlier, the alliance partners consist of seven partners. These seven alliance partners work together based on shared decision-making and co-creation. The governance framework of this collaboration is structured through three main entities. At the top of the hierarchy is the Steering Group (Stuurgroep), which meets periodically to approve key strategic documents such as the multi-year plan

(Rotterdam. Make It Happen., 2025). This group determines the overall direction of the brand but remains somewhat detached from the daily operational tasks. The steering group consists of:

- Alderman of Port, Economy, Hospitality (Chair of the Steering Committee)
- Chief Executive Officer of Port Rotterdam
- Chair of the Executive Board of Erasmus University Rotterdam
- Chair of the Board of Directors of Erasmus MC

(Rotterdam. Make It Happen., 2025)

Beneath the Steering Group is the Brand Committee, which functions as the main strategic leadership body for the brand alliance. This committee consists of directors or senior management personnel responsible for marketing and communications across the seven core alliance organisations (Rotterdam. Make It Happen., 2025).

At the operational level, the Brand Team is responsible for implementing the strategies outlined by the Brand Committee. This team is made up of marketing and communications managers from the same seven core partners, accompanied by the RMIH Connector (Rotterdam. Make It Happen., 2025).

The SWOT-analysis in the Meerjarenstrategie mentions complexity in decision-making due to time constraints and differing interests as a weakness (Rotterdam. Make It Happen., 2025). It also explicitly highlights the importance of operational efficiency by reducing joint activities and streamlining collaboration. Therefore they aim to:

“Stop: The aim of wanting to do everything as a group, divide more tasks within the Brand Team.”

“Stop: Place fewer items on the agendas, quality over quantity.”

(Rotterdam. Make It Happen., 2025)

This initiative is presented as a way to improve quality through fewer, more focused collaborations. However the strategy also states: “Strengthen the inclusivity and representativeness of the brand alliance by integrating the views of brand partners, the upper stream, and the involvement of the lower stream from the city in the decision-making.” (Rotterdam. Make It Happen., 2025).

Experienced

Mariëtte and Karin describe the collaboration between the seven alliance partners as a democratic model.

“We are equal to one another, and it is not the case that one has a greater voice, it is truly a highly democratic model.” – Mariëtte

Sara backed this up saying “We truly collaborate on an equal basis.” Within this collaboration the seven alliance partners all help guide the brand’s direction, strategy, and overall vision.

Alexandra explains the governance framework of the alliance and the roles of its three entities. The Brand Committee meets approximately four times annually, focusing on protecting the brand’s long-term strategy, aligning the interests of the organisations, and supervising the execution of the multi-year plan. While the Steering Group has the final approval, the Brand Committee plays a crucial role as an intermediary, shaping and refining the strategic plans. The Brand Team meets each month to collaborate on specific initiatives such as campaign planning, theme development, and strategies for engaging stakeholders. The team plays a vital role in drafting the multi-year plan and annual work plans, which are then passed upwards for validation. Importantly, this team works in a highly collaborative environment, with decisions made collectively, reflecting what several interviewees referred to as a "democratic model".

A notable characteristic of the RMIH structure is the position of the Connector, who works as the key coordinator connecting all layers. Directly employed by the brand alliance, the connector organises meetings, maintains continuity across activities, and manages communication flows both within the core partnership and with (external) brand partners.

The wide network of brand partners supports this formal structure. These organisations, which include commercial entities such as De Kuip, cultural institutions like Scapino Ballet, and public transport companies such as RET, contribute to the brand mainly through storytelling, participation in events, and network engagement.

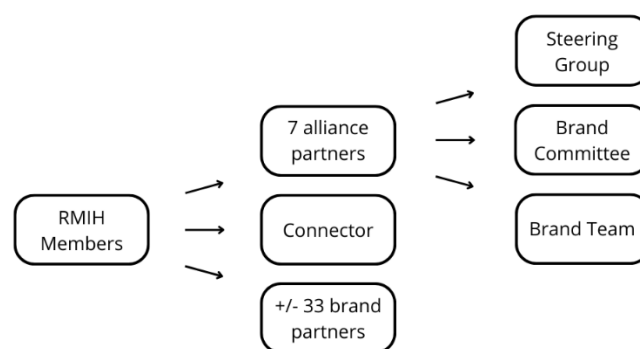


Figure 3: *Organisational Structure*

Equal participation within the brand is limited to the alliance group, it does not include the brand partners, as they have no real decision-making authority. This is a critical point because when the co-creation of brands via the interactions of multiple actors in a given location is overlooked, branding

campaigns are likely to fail (Ripoll González et al., 2023). RMIH has a clear division of tasks, which leads to different types of participation and varying levels of influence over the branding process.

“The alliance partners are responsible for writing the strategy and defining the vision, as it is not feasible to accomplish this collectively with 43 companies.” – Karin

“they (brand partners) really have a different role, they are affiliated with Make It Happen, but they are not part of the policy-making branch.” – Mariëtte

The external brand partners’ involvement is more consultative and project-based than structural, providing advisory support without any formal decision-making influence, which is similar to Arnstein’s ‘consultation’ step. Although they do not take part in formal decision-making processes, brand partners participate through thematic collaborations, and communication channels established by the Connector. As mentioned by several interviewees, the brand partners are vital for the brand in communicating the brand name and spreading the word, giving it authenticity and popularity.

“we need them to spread the story like a wildfire” – Alexandra

The organisational process in which each group fulfils their role is explained in the diagram below.

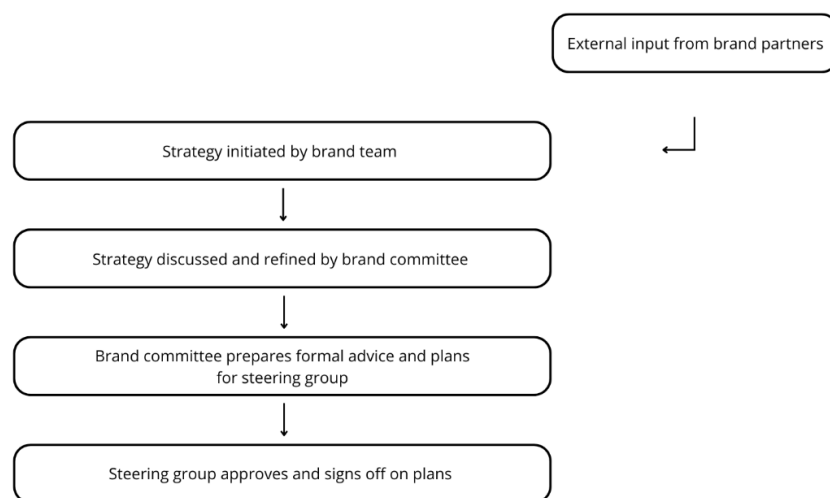


Figure 4: *Organisational Process*

Gap

Overall, the governance of the RMIH city brand is defined by a multi-layered framework that separates participatory engagement, operational implementation, and strategic decision-making. This hierarchical model was consistently referenced in interviews with stakeholders from the main alliance partners and brand partners. Decision-making within RMIH is deliberately reserved for the seven

alliance partners, while the broader network of brand partners remains at a consultative level (aligning with Arnstein's lower steps of consultation/informing), to ensure the number of decision-makers remains workable and strategic alignment is maintained. Including all 33 brand partners in formal decisions would complicate processes unnecessarily. The intended Type of Participation is very much in line with the experienced Type of Participation.

Table 5

Quotes about Type of Participation

Quote	First Order Code	Second Order Code	Aggregate Dimension
"De alliantiepartners gingen democratisch beslissen wat het beste is" – Karin	Democratic decision-making	Co-creation	Type of Participation
"Wij werken echt op gelijkwaardige wijze samen" – Sara	Equal collaboration	Co-creation	Type of Participation
"We beslissen met elkaar welke onderwerpen we uitlichten" – Sophie	Collaborative decision-making on topic	Co-creation	Type of Participation
"Het is oprecht een evenredig team. We zijn gelijkwaardig aan elkaar en het is niet dat de ene een grotere stem heeft, het is echt een enorm democratisch model" – Mariëtte	Democratic model	Co-creation	Type of Participation
"ik ervaar als alliantiepartner dat ik echt volledig mee kan doen en mee kan denken en kan	Collaboration in strategy and vision	Co-creation	Type of Participation

participeren in de koers, de strategie en de visie van RMIH” – Mariëtte			
“De alliantiepartners die schrijven de strategie en de stip op de horizon, omdat je niet met 43 bedrijven dat gezamenlijk kan doen” – Karin	Alliance partners write strategy and direction of the brand	Strategic core role	Type of Participation
“Met die brand teamleden heb ik dus elke maand een overleg en voeren we enerzijds strategieplannen uit en bedenken we ze ook, en adviseren we het Comité” – Alexandra	Brand team provides strategic advice	Strategic core role	Type of Participation
“Dus dat is eigenlijk zoals wij dat noemen het brand comité, dus zij denken mee op strategisch niveau” – Alexandra	Brand committee thinks strategically	Strategic core role	Type of Participation
“En het brandcomité legt weer verantwoording af, één keer in het jaar met een jaarverslag, het plan, de cijfers aan	Brand committee reports to steering group	Strategic core role	Type of Participation

de stuurgroep” – Alexandra			
“En de stuurgroep zijn dus eigenlijk van de 4 betalende ja echt de eindbazen” – Alexandra	Steering group are the final bosses	Formal Decision Authority	Type of Participation
“Ik voel het echt als gedeeld eigenaarschap. Dat is echt heel veel kameraadschap, tussen in ieder geval tussen de mensen in een brand team, en ik weet ook in het gremium van directeuren” – Max	Comradery and sense of ownership in brand team and between directors.	Sense of ownership	
“Daarnaast heb je de merk partners, dat zijn er nog een kleine 40. En die hebben echt een andere rol, die zijn aangesloten bij MakeltHappen, maar zitten niet in de beleidsmatige tak” - Mariëtte	Brand partners not part of the governance branch	Peripheral role	Type of Participation
“De externe partners hebben een adviserende rol” – Alexandra	External partners have an advisory role	Peripheral role	Type of Participation
“En anderzijds hebben wij hun nodig om het	Spreading the brand message	Peripheral role	Type of Participation

verhaal te verspreiden als een olievlek” – Alexandra			
“Ja echt alleen de algemene bijeenkomsten wel.” – Boris	Only regular meeting involvement	Peripheral role	Type of Participation
“Omdat we allemaal even gelijkwaardig zijn, komen we er nu niet echt uit” – Sara	Equality causing indecision	Indecision	Type of Participation

4.5 Communication Effectiveness

Intended

In order to communicate with potential new partners, the brand alliance takes advantage of unique moments within the city and around the world to engage frontrunners by collaborating, positioning, and branding from the RMIH ideology. Additionally, the brand communicates using its own channels (website, branding toolkit, private LinkedIn channel, exclusive brand partner site, social media, networking events, newsletters) and the social media channels of the brand partners to expand their reach (Rotterdam. Make It Happen., 2025).

The communication within the brand differs for each group. The brand team spends an average of eight hours per month on brand-related tasks. This includes a two-hour monthly team meeting, a one-hour meeting with the connector, and around five hours on execution and support. The Brand Committee has six two-hours meetings a year. Additionally, participation in relevant partner programming is essential to maintain connections with broader brand activities and developments. Brand partners take part in six RMIH sessions per year and submit a narrative twice a year in the format of 'Make it Happen' or 'Together. We make it Happen.' Furthermore, they collaborate with the brand team on relevant themes that align with the shared brand objectives (Rotterdam. Make It Happen., 2025).

Experienced

When it comes to branding in public governance, clear and inclusive communication strategies are a key concern to make branding accessible (Ashworth and Kavaratzis (2018). The communication within the alliance is structured and effective, particularly among core partners. Sara described the

collaboration as intensive, involving regular meetings and preparation. The alliance partners meet monthly for discussions at the brand team level making sure all seven alliance partners are aligned and up to date (Sara and Sophie).

“We hold a structural brand team meeting once a month” – Sophie

The brand committee meets less frequently, four times a year. Here the brand committee accounts for their plans and actions. What they have done, what they plan to do, and what the results are. After these four meetings, the brand committee accounts for their plans to the Steering Group, in the form of an annual report.

“The brand committee once again provides accountability, presenting an annual report, the plan, and the figures to the steering group once a year.” – Alexandra

Besides the collaboration within the alliance group, external brand partners are engaged through gatherings once every two months to discuss the development of the four themes.

“Currently we have 6 meetings in a year which we organise in order to develop the 4 themes” –
Alexandra

A key feature of the communication strategy is the role of the connector. The job as the connector is to connect all 33 brand partners with the alliance partners by organising the meetings, preparing and gathering information for the meetings, and communicating the input of the meetings to the organisations that weren't present.

“this role as a connector to essentially connect all 33 parties” – Alexandra

Gap

The communication structure within the brand is structured, frequent, and effective through formal meeting, informal updates, and the Connector role. The intended communication aligns well with the experienced structure. However, for the broader network of the brand partners this communication is hierarchical and limited in influence, even though they are well-informed.

Table 6*Quotes about Communication Effectiveness*

Quote	First Order Code	Second Order Code	Aggregate Dimension
“We hebben nu 6 bijeenkomsten in een jaar die we organiseren om de 4 thema’s uit te werken” – Alexandra	6 meetings per year to work on the 4 themes	Regular contact	Communication
“we hebben een structureel brand team overleg, één keer per maand” – Sophie	Structural brand team consultation	Regular contact	Communication
“4 keer per jaar is dan de brand Committee waar wij verantwoording afleggen” – Sophie	4 times a year brand committee consultation	Regular contact	Communication
“Ik zit zelf dan in het brand team, dan komen we elke maand bij elkaar” – Sara	Monthly meeting with brand team	Regular contact	Communication
“En tussendoor zijn het dan dus die digitale quick meet-ups of als er iets is” – Alexandra	Quick meet-ups when needed	Flexible and direct contact	Communication
“daarnaast hebben we veel contact nog in die weken daartussendoor, via de mail of via de telefoon,	Communication via mail or telephone for quick decision-making	Informal contact between meetings	Communication

als er dingen moeten worden afgestemd” – Mariëtte			
“krijgen ze natuurlijk tussendoor nieuwsbrieven of updates. We hebben we besloten LinkedIn groep waar wat dingen worden gedeeld of oproepen worden gedaan tot samenwerken” – Alexandra	Updates with newsletters and a LinkedIn group for sharing or call-ups	Communication channels	Communication
“deze rol als connector om eigenlijk al die 33 partijen aan elkaar te verbinden” – Alexandra	Connecting 33 parties as connector	Connector role facilitates communication between partners	Communication

4.6 Discussion

This chapter analysed the empirical findings and document analysis through the four dimensions of stakeholder identity, timing of participation, type of participation, and communication effectiveness. These dimensions show a gap between the intended inclusivity outlined in the Meerjarenstrategie Merkalliantie 2025-2029 and the experienced inclusivity reported by interviewees. A key point which occurred from this analysis is the structural trade-off between operational efficiency and broader inclusivity.

4.6.1 Stakeholder Identity

The selective nature of stakeholder identity seems like a broad representation but in practice limits participation to core alliance partners. While there is a recognised need to involve more local voices, including “lower stream” organisations, to ensure that city branding connects with all residents, the current governance structure offers limited opportunities for these stakeholders to participate in decision-making. This supports Bonakdar and Audirac’s (2020) argument that, despite inclusive ambitions, city branding processes often struggle overcome structural biases that prioritise the perspectives of dominant institutional actors. Although the Meerjarenstrategie acknowledges the need to include more local voices the question arises whether they will play a significant role in the creation of future branding campaigns, especially given the continued international focus. Additionally, both the Meerjarenstrategie and interviewees, mention that there are several criteria that companies must meet before they are allowed to join. This is a crucial limiting factor when it comes to diversity in stakeholder identity. Potential new partners that want to join have to have a similar vision to meet the criteria, excluding (local) organisations with differing values and ideas.

4.6.2 Timing of participation

Stakeholders who were not involved in the early stages of brand development tend to have less influence over its direction. However, this limitation is not incidental but a deliberate choice. The brand does not aim to include any new alliance partners, despite their aim for more inclusive and collaborative participation. This contradiction between stated ambitions and experienced participation opportunities weakens the credibility of the brand’s collaborative structure. It emphasises the tension between the aspiration for inclusivity and the practical limits of a closed governance system.

4.6.3 Type of participation

The type of stakeholder involvement further highlights this gap. External brand partners are consulted, but are not included in co-creation. Their role is stops at the level of implementation and storytelling, without influence over strategic branding decision. This aligns with Arnstein’s (1969) concept of “consultation”, which can seem more symbolic than actually sharing decision-making power.

4.6.4 Communication Effectiveness

While communication within the brand is structured and regular, it remains top-down. Its purpose is more informative than participatory, particularly for external brand partners. When governance practices limit participation to information sharing rather than involvement, stakeholders could tend to perceive the branding process as less inclusive.

4.6.5 Conclusion of Discussion

Overall, these four dimensions show that the RMIH governance model is shaped by a trade-off between operational efficiency and meaningful inclusivity. Although the Meerjarenstrategie states that it aims to increase inclusivity and representativeness, it also wants to reduce joint activities to improve quality through fewer, more focused collaborations. This more selective approach raises concerns about the legitimacy of the inclusivity claim, reflecting critiques by Eshuis & Klijn (2012) and Bonakdar & Audirac (2020). It poses the question whether the intended inclusive participation of lower stream organisations/locals is genuine, or at least the extent of its inclusiveness in the decision-making process. Even with good intentions, unintentional exclusion can arise when governance models prioritise efficiency.

The empirical results show how the RMIH brand incorporates aspects of collaborative governance as described by Eshuis and Klijn (2012), taking steps towards an inclusive branding process. The thematic analysis shows that there are some differing experiences of inclusivity between alliance partners and brand partners. This was also backed when the interviewees were asked to rank their experience of inclusiveness on a scale of 1 to 5. The alliance partners (R03, R04, R05, R06) generally score their perceived inclusiveness higher than the brand partner (R07).

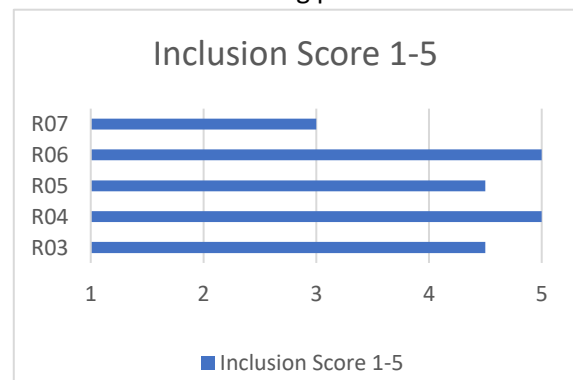


Figure 5: *Likert-Scale Diagram*

This discussion shows that stakeholder identity, timing of participation, type of participation, and communication effectiveness all shape how inclusivity is experienced within Rotterdam's city branding process. These insights provide a basis for the subsequent reflection on inclusivity and the addressing of the central research question in the next chapter.

5. Conclusions & Recommendations

5.1 Answering the Research Question

This research aimed to answer the following research question: How do governance participation practices influence the perceived inclusivity of Rotterdam's city branding strategy?

The findings show that Rotterdam's city branding, through the Rotterdam. Make It Happen. (RMIH) brand, largely achieves its intended strategy of inclusivity within the core group of alliance partners. This alliance structure is designed to represent key urban sectors: government, business, education, culture, and health. Within this group, inclusivity is effectively operationalised through shared decision-making, equal collaboration, and structured, transparent communication. The structure is perceived by the core stakeholders as highly inclusive and democratic, which aligns closely with the strategic ambitions laid out in the Meerjarenstrategie Merkalliantie 2025–2029. Decision-making is divided over three separate organisational groups, Steering Group, Brand Committee, and Brand Team, which ensures clear accountability, operational efficiency, and alignment with the brand's strategic objectives. This clear governance framework allows each partner to play an active role in influence the strategic direction of the brand, while organised meetings and open communications create a sense of collective ownership. Additionally, the Connector role improves this framework by making sure that there is coherence between strategy and implementation through coordinated communication. By limiting decision-making authority to defined group of stakeholders with shared strategic interests, RMIH reduces the risks of inefficiency and weakened accountability that can occur in broader participatory models. This framework promotes effective communication, quick decision-making, and a cohesive representation of the Rotterdam brand internationally. In this sense, the structure serves its intended purpose effectively: it facilitates the development and implementation of a coherent city brand aiming for international reach.

On the contrary, insights from conducted interview and the Meerjarenstrategie also show that there is a need for broader inclusivity on local level, creating an overarching story that strengthens ambassadorial engagement, and deepens the integration of the brand network into the heart of the city. The brand recognises including local organisations is essential to create a stronger narrative and to gain credibility, to achieve international success and increase their influence. However, the operational efficiency of the governance structure limits the potential of broader inclusivity. The level of participation and influence in the branding process does not extend to the wider network of 33 brand partners or other local organisations.

While these brand partners do not engage in formal strategic decision-making, their involvement is still valuable. They contribute through thematic collaborations, storytelling initiatives, and active partnerships. Regular meetings and engagement opportunities allow these brand partners to share ideas and influence specific projects. This shows a well thought-out balance between keeping strategic efficiency and creating space for wider engagement. This aligns with the intended hierarchical structure of participation: strategic co-creation is mainly the responsibility of the alliance partners, with brand partners having consultative role (Arnstein's (1969) 'consultation'). Yet while this framework may be in line with Rotterdam's strategic objectives for brand governance, it poses a risk to the credibility of its claims regarding inclusivity. Wider societal inclusion, including local organisations and businesses, continues to be more of an aspiration than a real objective. This inconsistency is especially significant considering the goals outlined in the Meerjarenstrategie, which acknowledges the necessity to reach beyond the 'usual suspects' and create additional ways for participation within a diverse urban population. This can be further criticized through the criteria that companies must meet before they are allowed to join, limiting or even excluding (local) organisations with differing values and ideas.

In summary, the brand's intended strategy of inclusivity is transparently, effectively, and efficiently structured through a governance model of three groups, Steering Group, Brand Committee, and Brand Team. Each group fulfils its distinct role, aligned with the brand's operational goals. This structure ensures democratic collaboration among the seven alliance partners while also preserving strategic coherence and operational effectiveness, intentionally limiting wider decision-making to avoid unnecessary complications. However, while this strategy provides alignment and effectiveness, it simultaneously raises concerns about the level of inclusivity that exists beyond the alliance. The brand partners' participation remains consultative rather than in decision-making, and the diversity of potential new stakeholders is limited by the several criteria mentioned. In order for the city's branding strategies to successfully meet both their efficiency and inclusivity goals, structural adjustments may be necessary.

5.2 Theoretical Contribution

This research contributes to existing literature on governance, inclusivity, and city branding by providing insights into how process inclusivity can be successfully operationalised within a well-defined governance structure. It confirms earlier studies indicating that city branding, when integrated into governance frameworks, often prioritises efficiency and strategic alignment through selective stakeholder inclusion (Eshuis & Klijn, 2012). However, Rotterdam's case shows that such selectivity does not necessarily exclude meaningful inclusivity within a brand network. Through the selection of alliance partners, RMIH ensures representation across diverse urban sectors, reflecting an intention to create

inclusivity within the brand's governance. This approach challenges the critiques of Ashworth and Kavaratzis (2018) and Bonakdar and Audirac (2020), who argue that city branding often functions mainly as a symbolic process that reinforces the interests of elites at the expense of broader democratic participation. Although the depth of participation within RMIH may raise questions, the findings suggest that the alliance genuinely aims to serve not only economic interests and institutional stakeholders, but also to contribute to the public good by improving the city's liveability and reputation for all its residents, providing further evidence against Bonakdar and Audirac's (2020) critique. At the same time, this study demonstrates the difficulty of moving beyond sectoral inclusion towards genuine societal inclusion. Ripoll Gonz  les et al. (2023) emphasise that inclusive stakeholder engagement enhances brand legitimacy and public support. However, Rotterdam's current practice shows that such engagement remains limited in its practical application, particularly beyond the alliance. This confirms the risk that inclusivity strategies can remain symbolic unless structurally implemented across all levels of participation, aligning with Eshuis and Klijn's (2012) critique that branding poses a risk to democratic legitimacy when the broader public is excluded from the decision-making processes.

In conclusion, this thesis contributes to the literature by showing how inclusive branding strategies can operate effectively within existing governance structures while aiming to broaden participation over time. It highlights the tension between efficient and effective governance models and democratic inclusivity in urban branding.

5.3 Methodological Reflection and Limitations

This thesis implemented a qualitative case study strategy, using document analysis and semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders involved in RMIH. This methodology allowed an in-depth analysis of both formal strategies and real experiences, delivering valuable contextual insights into the dynamics of inclusivity in Rotterdam's city branding process.

However, several limitations must be acknowledged:

- Sample Selection: Most of the interview participants were stakeholders within the alliance. Perspectives from brand partners who are not part of the core alliance were underrepresented. This shortcoming limits the extent of findings regarding broader societal inclusivity.
- Generalisability: Given that this is a single-case study focused on Rotterdam, the findings are specific to that context and cannot be generalised to other cities with different governance or branding cultures without caution.
- Timeframe Limitation: This study presents a momentary overview. The implementation of the Meerjarenstrategie Merkalliantie 2025–2029 may change inclusivity practices in the future, which this study does not take into account.

Despite these limitations, this research offers important insights regarding the operationalisation of inclusivity in city branding governance, providing a framework for academic reflection and policy recommendations.

5.4 Societal Relevance and Policy Recommendations

For society Rotterdam's city branding initiative shows the challenges urban governance face in aligning international competitiveness with local inclusivity. The RMIH brand successfully integrates key sectors, but can improve its legitimacy by including broader societal stakeholders in meaningful participation and decision-making. Exclusivity threatens the brand's credibility and democratic values that are essential to public governance. Considering Rotterdam's diverse population and its goals for inclusivity, these results are especially important. In order to increase the level of participation for brand partners, RMIH could include opportunities for local organisations and non-alliance partners to contribute to strategic discussions. This could be done by an annual meeting to discuss the Meerjarenstrategie, or a voting system when important decisions are made. Additionally, the brand could adjust their criteria for joining the brand, to also include organisations with differing values and ideas, creating more inclusivity. These recommendations align with the ambitions outlined in the Meerjarenstrategie but emphasise that inclusivity needs to be more than a plan, it must be put into practice.

5.5 Future Research Recommendations

There are three recommendations for future research. Firstly, a variation of comparative urban studies would add credibility and scientific value. Comparing Rotterdam's approach with other cities could show whether these patterns are unique to Rotterdam or also experienced in city branding elsewhere. Second, longitudinal research could improve the quality of the findings by investigating how inclusivity practices evolve over time, providing insights into whether current strategies lead to significant change or remain symbolic. Lastly, quantitative surveys among diverse stakeholder groups could validate and expand upon the qualitative findings presented here, offering a more representative understanding of inclusivity perceptions.

5.6 Final Reflection

Rotterdam's city branding through RMIH shows a balance between efficiency, strategic alignment, and inclusivity within its governance structure. Although improvements can be made in extending participation beyond the alliance partners, the existing model is well established, transparent, and carefully structured to reflect the city's key urban sectors. This provides a strong foundation for future developments aimed at broadening inclusion. RMIH's case highlights how governance structures can

support both operational objectives and the broader ambition of urban inclusivity, offering valuable insights for other cities facing similar challenges.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Interview Guide Municipality & Rotterdam.MakeltHappen

Mijn doel voor het interview: Inzicht krijgen in de beweerde inclusiviteit, strategie, participatiemechanismen en communicatie-inspanningen vanuit het perspectief van degenen die leiding geven aan de branding.

Inleidende vragen

1. Kunt u uw rol in het brandingproces van Rotterdam. Make It Happen. beschrijven?
2. Hoe lang bent u al betrokken bij branding of communicatie voor de stad?

Beweerde inclusiviteit

3. Wie waren de belangrijkste belanghebbenden die betrokken zouden worden bij het vormgeven van het stadsmerk?
4. Hoe definieerde de gemeente 'inclusiviteit' in deze context?
- 5a. Werden er formele inclusiviteitsdoelstellingen of benchmarks vastgesteld?
- 5b. Zo ja, welke? Zo nee, waarom niet? Hoe zouden ze hun inclusiviteit meten?

Timing van inclusie

6. Op welk moment in het merkproces werden externe belanghebbenden betrokken (indien van toepassing)?

Type participatie

7. Hoe zou u de aard van de participatie omschrijven: informeren, raadplegen of meebeslissen?
- 8a. Was de aard van de participatie voor alle deelnemers gelijk?
- 8b. Zo nee, wat was de reden voor dit verschil in participatie?

Effectiviteit van de communicatie

9. Hoe werd er met verschillende groepen gecommuniceerd over de mogelijkheden tot deelname?
10. Werd er moeite gedaan om de communicatie inclusief te maken (bijv. verschillende talen, formats)?

Reflecties

- 11a. Heeft u het gevoel dat de inclusiedoelstellingen zijn bereikt?
- 11b. Zo ja, wat was de reden voor dit succes? Zo nee, wat zou de beperkende factor kunnen zijn geweest?
12. Wat had er volgens u anders gedaan kunnen worden om de betrokkenheid van belanghebbenden te verbeteren?

Appendix B: Interview Guide Partners

Doel van het interview: Inzicht krijgen in de ervaren inclusiviteit van de merkpartners, het moment en type van betrokkenheid, en barrières waarmee groepen die inclusie nastreven geconfronteerd worden in het brandingproces.

Inleidende vragen

1. Kunt u de missie van uw organisatie beschrijven en hoe deze zich verhoudt tot de brandingstrategie van Rotterdam?
2. Hoe is uw organisatie betrokken geraakt bij de *Rotterdam. Make It Happen.* branding samenwerking?

Rol en Inclusie in het Merk

3. Wat is uw rol geweest binnen de branding samenwerking (strategisch adviseur, evenementpartner, publiek gezicht, etc.)?
4. Heeft u het gevoel dat uw organisatie betekenisvolle input heeft gehad in de vormgeving van het merk?

Moment van Betrokkenheid

5. Wanneer werd u bij het proces betrokken: tijdens de planning/creatie, tijdens de uitvoering, of pas na de lancering?
 - 6a. Had u een stem in de conceptuele ontwikkeling van het merk, of vooral in de uitvoeringsfase?
 - 6b. Zo niet, had u graag meer zeggenschap gehad in de conceptuele ontwikkeling?

Type Participatie

7. Zou u uw rol beschrijven als collaboratief, consulterend of symbolisch? Waarom?
8. Heeft u de kans gehad om campagnes of evenementen mee te creëren die de waarden van uw organisatie weerspiegelen?

Communicatie en Coördinatie

9. Hoe is de communicatie met de gemeente en andere partners verlopen?
10. Was de communicatie inclusief en toegankelijk voor uw organisatie en uw bredere achterban?

Percepties van Inclusiviteit

- 11a. Denkt u dat het brandingproces de diversiteit en identiteit van de Rotterdamse gemeenschappen weerspiegelt?
- 12a. Waren er momenten waarop u het gevoel had dat bepaalde groepen werden buitengesloten of ondervertegenwoordigd?
- 12b. Zo ja, welke groepen? En wat denkt u dat hiervan de oorzaak is?

Gevoel van Eigenaarschap en Vertrouwen

13. Voelt u persoonlijk of als organisatie een gevoel van eigenaarschap ten opzichte van het *Rotterdam. Make It Happen.* merk?

14. Is er ooit spanning geweest tussen de visie van uw organisatie en de visie van het merk?

15. Over het algemeen, op een schaal van 1 tot 5, hoe betrokken voelt of voelde u zich bij het brandingproces?

Likertschaal voor Betrokkenheid

Van 1 tot 5: 1 = Helemaal niet betrokken

2 = Enigszins niet betrokken

3 = Neutraal / weet niet

4 = Enigszins betrokken

5 = Zeer betrokken