

Local and sustainable production as vectors of an agrarian branding strategy in Catalonia: Case study of the Baixà Tordera

Abstract

Purpose

This article analyses the implications in terms of economic promotion and local development that ensue from the implementation of a strategy of agrarian branding in five municipalities in the Baixà Tordera region (Catalonia, Spain).

Design/methodology/approach

The research follows a case study logic. First, five focus groups were designed, distributed by sectors of activity. Second, six in-depth interviews were scheduled with opinion leaders from the region. Finally, a survey open to all inhabitants was set up on the town councils' websites.

Findings

The brand understood as a device removed from the connotations of indiscriminate marketing should guarantee the following elements in its deployment and implementation: knowledge, recognition, complicity, development, denomination of origin.

Practical implications

This research contributes to improve the management models of agrarian spaces, but it also helps to expand the research background on studies on agrarian branding.

Originality/value

The place brand must become something close to a denomination of origin that, informally, invites us to define the future of this agrarian area. It therefore also affects

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3 the complexity of the planning and development of this area which, from now on, must
4 necessarily be supramunicipal. In this way, the brand needs to offer a holistic vision of
5 the region to all the agents that work in the strategic and urban planning of the five
6 municipalities under study.
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11 **Keywords**

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14 Baixa Tordera Agrarian Area, agrarian parks, agrarian branding, regional narrative,
15 regional governance.
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19 **Paper type** Research paper
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24 **Introduction**

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26 Agrarian or agricultural parks emerged in Europe in 1993 with the creation of the
27 Agricultural Park of Southern Milan in Italy (Branduini, 2020; Laviscio, Scazzosi &
28 Branduini, 2016). Created in order to revitalize a deteriorating agrarian sector, agrarian
29 parks seek to cope with the progressive fragmentation and transformation of agricultural
30 areas due to inexorable urban and industrial expansion (Simón Rojo, Zazo Moratalla &
31 Morán Alonso, 2012; Yacamán Ochoa, 2018; Zazo Moratalla, 2015). Inspired by the
32 Milanese case, Ferraresi and Rossi (1993) define an agricultural park as “a regional
33 structure destined to primary production, to its protection and valorization, with a
34 secondary objective of cultural and recreational enjoyment of citizens in terms of
35 compatibility with the main activity” (Yacamán Ochoa & Zazo Moratalla, 2015: 15).
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42 Agrarian parks are seen as a tool of governance that improve sustainability and regional
43 cohesion through “food sovereignty” (Zazo Moratalla, 2015: 1), while preserving the
44 natural and landscape heritage. As Matarán Ruiz (2013: 73) warns, in order to achieve
45 sustainable peri-urban agrarian areas there needs to be a guarantee of “processes of
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3 constant social participation”, linked to agreements between public administrations and
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5 the different regional agents, which tend to be very diverse and fragmented.
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8 These initiatives arrived in Spain in 1996 through the creation of the Baix Llobregat
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10 Agrarian Park (Montasell, 2010). This was when the Spanish definition of agrarian park
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12 was created, by the Nature Protection Council of Catalonia (CPN, 1996: 40), which
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14 considered it “an open and delimited area, the purpose of which is to facilitate and
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16 guarantee the continuity of agrarian use, preserving it from its incorporation into the
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18 urban process, promoting specific programmes that allow it to develop its economic,
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20 environmental and sociocultural potential, and to protect the heritage of its
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22 environment”. Following the creation of the Baix Llobregat Agrarian Park, in Catalonia
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24 the Agrarian Park of Sabadell (2005) and the Gallecs Area of Agrarian Interest (2009)
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26 stand out. And in Spain, the Vega de Granada, las Vegas de Narcea (Asturias), the
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28 Agrarian Park of the Guardalhorce Valley (Malaga), Carrizales (Murcia), the Agrarian
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30 Park of Fuenlabrada and the Agrarian Park of Rivas-Vaciamadrid.
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35 In this regard, there has been a growing sensitivity over the last twenty years on the part
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37 of public bodies and social agents to contribute to a reformulation of the role of peri-
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39 urban agriculture in urban contexts. This is especially so at the beginning of the third
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41 decade of the 21st century as a result of the European strategy *From Farm to Fork*,
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43 which was presented by the European Union in May 2020 and which, as part of the
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45 great global initiatives of sustainable development, sets out a new approach that values
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47 the sustainability of food and promotes the creation of a favourable food environment,
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49 facilitates the choice of healthy and sustainable diets that benefit European citizens’
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51 health and quality of life, and at the same increases the income of primary producers
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53 and the competitiveness of the EU in relation to other regions of the world (European
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55 Union, 2020).
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3 In this context, and based on the work led by the Diputació de Barcelona (Barcelona
4 Provincial Council) to create the Baixà Tordera Agrarian Area –located on the border of
5 the provinces of Barcelona and Girona, between the municipalities of Tordera, Malgrat
6 de Mar, Palafolls, Blanes and Santa Susanna– the general objective of this article is to
7 analyse the implications in terms of economic promotion and local development that
8 derives from the implementation of a strategy of agrarian branding. Following this
9 general objective, there are three specific objectives (SO) that can be formulated as
10 follows:
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21 SO1: Analyse the current place identity of the Baixà Tordera Agrarian Area, as a
22 preliminary step to an agrarian branding strategy.
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24 SO2: Study the process of conceptualizing a place brand in the framework of an
25 agrarian area dedicated primarily to agriculture.
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29 SO3: Determine the tangible and intangible values from which a competitive
30 identity is conceptualized in an agrarian area in a European context that values
31 sustainable development of the regions.
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37 **Place branding, rural branding and agrarian branding: a conceptual framework**

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39 Our study is framed within the theory and practice of *place branding* (Papadopoulos,
40 2004; Kavatzis, 2005; Van Ham, 2008; Govers & Go, 2009; Anholt, 2010), which is
41 currently focused on the brand and its capacity to differentiate and position certain
42 places with the principal objective of projecting an image towards an external audience,
43 the aim being to move beyond the attraction of tourists in order to also draw in talent,
44 investment capital, infrastructure, new neighbours, and so forth (San Eugenio &
45 Barniol-Carcasona, 2015).
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55 There are three fundamental concepts linked to place branding that need to be
56 introduced. The first is the concept of place image, which we understand as “the set of
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3 understandings, ideas and impressions that one has with regard to a certain place” (San
4 Eugenio & Barniol-Carcasona, 2015: 110). Place images are diverse and multi-faceted
5 perceptions shaped by culture, history, locality, and even by its famous citizens. The
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7 second, the concept of place identity, is defined as “certain characteristics and
8 distinctive qualities that are visible and brought out by communicative means. It is thus
9
10 crucial in the whole concept of the identity of a region that it serves as a tool for
11 distinguishing one region from another” (Zimmerbauer, 2011: 246). Since people and
12 environment evolve, place identity is also constantly evolving (Pedeliento & Kavaratzis,
13 2020). It is worth noting that these two concepts are interdependent, since in the words
14 of Zimmerbauer (2011: 255), “a strong regional identity is a prerequisite for a regional
15 image, the process is a two-way one”. Finally, the third concept, that of place brand, is
16 understood as a multidimensional construct that takes in both the fundamental
17 functional and emotional values of an organization (or place, in this case) and the
18 psychosocial needs of consumers (De Chernatony and Dall’Olmo Riley, 1998).

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There is no standard manual for place branding, as “every region has its own physical,
social, cultural, historical and institutional features, which define the case-specific
context” (Messely, Dessein & Lauwers, 2010: 23). However, depending on the type of
place brand being worked on, certain coincidences can be detected, as well as shared
opportunities and issues that may be useful at the management level. In that sense, a
stakeholders’ approach to the place branding process is understood as an effective way
to incorporate the needs and views of citizens (including residents, businesses, farmers,
investors, students, city leaders, visitors and tourists, among other key groups) using a
bottom-up perspective that guaranties a more inclusive narrative (San Eugenio, Ginesta
& Kavaratzis, 2019).

Place branding in rural and agrarian environments

The process of conceptualizing and managing place brands in rural and agrarian environments possesses a number of specific features that need to be borne in mind from the beginning. Below, we review some of these drawn from the academic literature.

Unlike *rural branding* (Donner, Horlings, Fort & Vellema, 2017), a more generic concept that includes the branding of all non-urban regions and that tends to be linked to rural tourism (Ohe, 2020), the term *agrarian branding* is linked directly to food products that are produced there, be it by farmers or cattle breeders. However, authors such as Boyne and Hall (2004: 80) also consider that the branding of rural regions in general is “closely associated with agriculture and food, and given that gastronomy is a growth area in tourism, it would appear to make sense to promote appropriate rural regions’ identities through food- and drink-related images”.

In this context, two different trends in rural studies need to be taken into account, namely “distinctive, local, or differentiated food, and sustainability in farming and environmental resource management” (Warner, 2007: 142). These are explained within what is known as “the quality turn” (Goodman, 2004), which explains how differentiated food products, appealing to affluent, reflexive consumers, can provide additional income to farmers and rural areas.

Lopes, Leitão and Rengifo-Gallego (2018) reviewed the literature on place branding for a better understanding of how this practice has provided a synergetic association between territorial brands and agro-food products from given places. Results revealed that the association between place branding and agro-food products could generate synergistic effects for the parties involved. These authors point out that since most agro-food products originate in rural, sparsely populated regions, place branding practices

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3 based on product quality can be a key element of many public policies for developing
4 such territories, adopting qualitative differentiation as a mechanism to potentiate
5 medium-long term competitiveness.
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10 These authors therefore assume that this chance could be even more pertinent due to the
11 extended consideration paid by European public policies to regional development
12 procedures founded on territories' inner qualities and intangible capital, especially in
13 sparsely populated areas that experience a population decrease, an ageing workforce and
14 trouble to reach global consumers. Biological and handmade products from these areas
15 may have a greater chance to access international distribution chains if they possess a
16 differentiating label, that is a place brand that can reach awareness and acceptance
17 around the world (Lopes, Leitão & Rengifo-Gallego, 2018).
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22 In the same vein, Marsden and Smith (2005: 442) point out that, in order to fight against
23 the traditional European agriculture crisis, local economies offer their own brand of
24 comparative advantages based on community trust and commitment, shared ownership,
25 preservation and reduction of trading expenses. Advantages that, above all, help
26 achieving mutually beneficial relationships between suppliers, producers and
27 consumers.
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45 *Agrarian branding, rural governance and community building: a geographical*
46 *overview of examples*
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49 The literature review on agrarian branding shows the need to understand this action in
50 the framework of a more global strategy for the development of rural areas and
51 improvements in regional governance. Moroz *et al.* (2020) argue that the success of
52 rural branding is determined by the following elements: 1) the integrity of
53 representations about the functions of the brand as a factor in defining new economic
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3 relationships; 2) the motives and behaviour of agents in the process of implementing
4 brand projects; 3) comprehensiveness and availability of market information about
5 projects; and 4) the models of decision-making by the agents. Gulisova (2020) states
6 that bottom-up processes in rural branding are more common than in other types of
7 place branding.
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14 In their analysis of the “Territoris serens” (Serene regions) brand of the Lluçanès region
15 (Catalonia), San Eugenio & Barniol-Carcasona (2015) point out that the process of
16 conceptualizing a rural brand must be fully integrated within a strategy of rural
17 development, and that it should not play a secondary role but rather be a fundamental
18 part of the strategy. They insist on a rural system of governance focused on the interests
19 of the local communities, which must first define the identity of their region. And it is
20 from this identity and the brand values agreed upon with the local communities that the
21 economy and the development of projects will need to be based on. This is what Anholt
22 (2010) understands as a process of defining a “competitive identity”. Hence, a well-
23 designed and managed rural brand can generate added value to local products and help
24 promote networking between the local governments and businesses (San Eugenio &
25 Barniol Carcasona, 2015).
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42 Tobias and Müller Wahl (2013) analysed different initiatives of rural branding in the
43 canton of Zurich and concluded that one of the most common problems is the existence
44 of too much strategic planning and insufficient implementation, as well as a
45 considerable lack of public participation and attachment, perhaps because unlike
46 initiatives that brand large cities, in rural areas the municipal councils are often not
47 concerned about involving the public or private companies in their landscape promotion
48 activities. The authors therefore believe that “stronger public participation in landscape
49 planning processes would perhaps not have a direct influence on landscape
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3 management, but it would add to the image of the place” (Tobias & Müller Wahl,
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5 2013:274).

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8 In fact, Yang and Liu (2018) argue that the culture and image of the region positively
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10 affect the development of the rural and agrarian brand. Specifically, these authors
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12 analyse the case of the agrarian brand of Xinjiang (China), created to promote a change
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14 in the region’s food production model, from one of scale and quantity to one of quality
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16 and taste, while also trying to rejuvenate the population of the rural area. As possible
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18 improvements in management of the rural brand of Xinjiang, these authors recommend
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20 that regional companies invest more in technological innovation and improve the
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22 quality of the agricultural food they produce. They also recommend that the companies
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24 be enthusiastic and collaborate in the promotion of the brand, making sure that it is not
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26 left solely in the hands of the public administration. Promotional efforts, they say,
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28 should be done both online and offline. In fact, Wang (2019), after studying the Chinese
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30 provinces of Hunan and Anhui, highlights the growing use of digital platforms by local
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32 agricultural producers, through which they offer e-commerce services aimed at reaching
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34 a larger market of urban consumers who are willing to pay extra for authentic “organic”
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36 agricultural products.
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42 Liang *et al.* (2020) show that in Taiwan the interest of tourists in farms has increased in
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44 the last decade, and they highlight the importance of defining experiential activities to
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46 carry out there – activities that require professionals that attend to the visitors. With
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48 regards to promotion, they recommend focusing on the unique agricultural
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50 characteristics, such as feeding the animals, and on explaining the natural environment
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52 where the farms are situated.
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56 Warner (2007), from the perspective of place-based marketing, analysed the case of
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58 Californian wineries and highlighted the strategic importance of agroecological
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3 partnerships between producers, in order to expand sustainable agricultural practices
4 and unite against the environmental critique of the region's plantations. The use of the
5 term "sustainable farming", as a guarantee of product quality, was also recommended
6 above other common concepts in the field, such as "organic".
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10 Pizzichini, Temperini and Gregori (2020) point to the importance of food *souvenirs*
11 when tourists visit a natural area. Consumers' desire for authenticity and ethical
12 consumption is satisfied with the purchase of local products, which end up being
13 perceived as of better quality. For all this, they encourage promoting tourism and
14 gastronomy together.
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17 Finally, it is important to note that in the implementation of place branding in rural and
18 agrarian environments, the active search and use of external labels that acknowledge the
19 unique characteristics of the region is frequent. Some examples identified in the
20 literature are those referring to the place of origin, such as the label Protected
21 Denomination Origin (PDO) and Protected Geographical Indication (PGI) (Messely,
22 Dessein & Lauwers, 2010). In our case, the label assigned to the region to be promoted
23 is that of Agrarian Area.
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25 26 27 *Description and analysis of the rural area and project under study*

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29 The Baixa Tordera Agrarian Area (BTAA) of the Autonomous Community of
30 Catalonia, is the name given to a newly created inter-county and interprovincial territory
31 made up of five municipalities and their respective agricultural areas. Created in 2017,
32 the BTAA includes the municipalities of Tordera, Palafolls, Santa Susanna, Malgrat de
33 Mar and Blanes, which in turn are part of the counties of the Maresme and La Selva.
34 This latter county has the peculiarity of belonging to two provinces: Barcelona and
35 Girona. The BTAA has a total population of 87,674 inhabitants (Idescat, 2020), with
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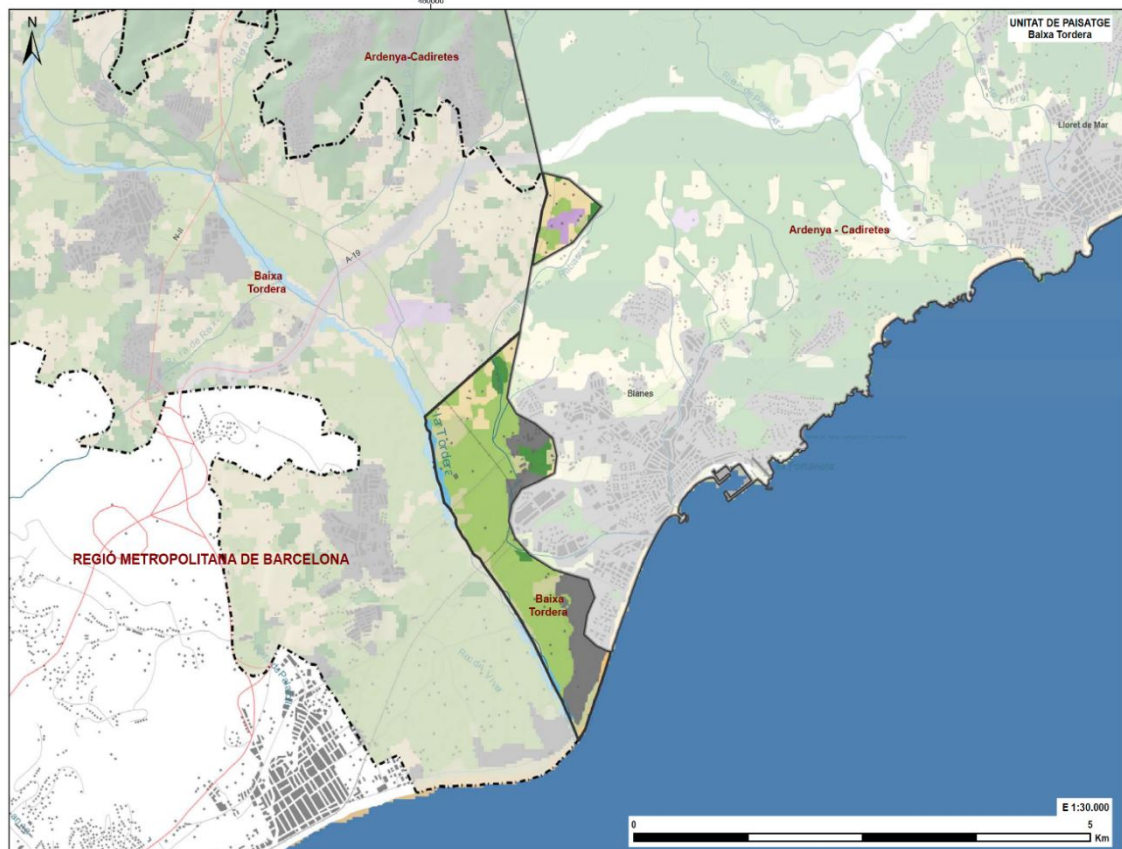
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3 44.5% concentrated in Blanes. In recent years, the population has tended to stabilize
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5 after a decade of significant growth of the resident population in all the municipalities.
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7 Regarding to employment, 1% of the employed population work on the agrarian sector,
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9 while 80,7% work on the service sector in which tourism becomes a central economic
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11 activity (Diputació de Barcelona, 2020).
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14 It covers an area of 139.91 km² and occupies mainly the low and flat lands of alluvial
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16 origin on both banks of the river Tordera (between Malgrat de Mar and Blanes),
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18 although in the north it extends to the foothills of the Montenegre massifs and the
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20 Corridor that together with the coastal mountain range acts as a natural barrier between
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22 the coastal plain and the depressions of the Vallès and La Selva (Diputació de
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24 Barcelona, 2020: 15-16). Administratively, the municipality of Tordera covers over
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26 60% of this area, so that, despite the predominance of the plain dominated by the lower
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28 course of the river, the orography has considerable disparities. Tordera has most of the
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30 agroforestry areas of the region with certain gradients, while Malgrat de Mar has
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32 extremely gentle reliefs. The arable land occupies an area of 19.90 km² (Diputació de
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34 Barcelona, 2020).
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39 According to the Observatori del Paisatge de Catalunya (Landscape Observatory of
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41 Catalonia) (2014), the main distinguishing features of the Baixa Tordera are the
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43 following: alluvial and deltaic plain articulated by the lower course of the river Tordera,
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45 rich irrigated agriculture that takes advantage of the fertile alluvial soils, the lakes of
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47 Tordera that are the last evidence of much more widespread wetlands in the past,
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49 occupation of the delta by various industries and infrastructures that modify the
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51 traditional landscape mosaic; the small towns of Tordera and Palafolls and the low
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53 sandy coast occupied for the most part by campsites. And the main values in the
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55 landscapes are: the deltaic and riparian wetlands of the river Tordera; the aesthetic,
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3 productive and social values of the delta orchard crops; the castle of Palafolls and the
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5 fortified church of Sant Genís de Tordera; the iron bridge and the entrance to the old
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7 town of Tordera; the symbolic and identity values of the elements of the landscape
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9 related to the agricultural work of the delta: canals, ditches, road network, plots, and so
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12 forth.

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15 **Figure 1.** Landscape unit of the Baixà Tordera. Source: Observatori del Paisatge de Catalunya
16 (Landscape Observatory of Catalonia) (2014)



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45 The consensus document between the five town councils, agrarian cooperatives and
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47 unions that gave rise to the BTAA is the “Charter for the management and development
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49 of the Baixà Tordera Agrarian Area”, signed in November 2017 by the mayors of
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51 Blanes, Tordera, Palafolls, Santa Susanna and Malgrat de Mar, the presidents of the
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53 agrarian cooperatives of Tordera, Progrés-Garbí of Malgrat de Mar and Conca de la
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55 Tordera, of Blanes and Palafolls, the spokespeople of the Unió de Pagesos, UP
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57 (Farmer’s Union) and of the Joves Agricultors i Ramaders de Catalunya, JARC (Young
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3 Farmers and Cattle Breeders of Catalonia). The aim of the Charter is to create a broad
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5 tool of territorial cooperation to boost the economy and to give prestige to local agrarian
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7 products.
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11 In 2018, the Diputació de Barcelona (DiBa) (Barcelona Provincial Council) pledged to
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13 materialize the BTAA and began preparing the “Plan for the Management and
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15 Development of the Baix Tordera Agrarian Area” (2020), which is the document that
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17 serves as the starting point for the preparation of the BTAA regional brand, the narrative
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19 of which is the object under study in this article.
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23 The general goal of this management and development plan is to revitalize the economy
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25 of the agrarian sector with the involvement of the region and the citizens. It also has six
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27 strategic lines of action, which, in essence, are: a) the management of infrastructures,
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29 services and agro-territorial resources; b) the preservation of the territory; c) the
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31 establishment of connections between the countryside and the city; d) the revitalization
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33 of agrarian activity; e) the promotion of the agrarian sector in general and the valuing of
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35 the BTAA in particular; f) participation and governance by encouraging the
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37 participation of all agents of the territory involved (Diputació de Barcelona, 2020).
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42 Peri-urban agrarian areas, in addition to being areas specialized in the production of
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44 local food, possess cultural, natural and identity resources and values that strengthen the
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46 urban environments. However, they rarely possess tools or figures that support the
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48 conservation of their agrarian activity and that help articulate public policies to
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50 safeguard their own social, environmental and landscape functions. They are also often
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52 subjected to socio-economic pressures and sometimes even abandoned to the misfortune
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54 of a restricted urban and regional planning. Nevertheless, some, as is the case of the
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56 Baix Tordera, seek to build a leadership to protect and manage together the collective
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3 representation of their territory's identity. This is where the deployment of a strategy of
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5 place branding becomes relevant (Govers & Go, 2009).
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8 **Methodology**

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10 The methodology proposed to initially discover the differential values and attributes of
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12 the place, and finally, to propose a brand narrative for the Baixà Tordera Agrarian Area
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14 combines qualitative and quantitative elements and is based on a methodological
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16 triangulation (non-probabilistic surveys, discussion groups and in-depth interviews) that
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18 generates a process of citizen participation to build an integrative brand narrative. This
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20 is an action research project, where the mix of qualitative and quantitative methods was
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22 applied (Chevalier & Buckles, 2013; Ripoll & Gale, 2020). It is considered that the
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24 combination of quantitative (survey) and qualitative research techniques (focus groups
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26 and in-depth interviews) fits the initial briefing and corresponds with an action research
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28 project. Moreover, it is important to note that this study is part of the development of
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30 the brand itself. The themes of all the research techniques deployed were based on
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32 specifying the values and/or identity attributes that distinguish the Agrarian Area of the
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34 Baixà Tordera.
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40 These three techniques were deployed after the document review of the technical
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42 bibliography previously published in relation to the constitution of the Baixà Tordera
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44 Agrarian Area (Diputació de Barcelona, 2020).
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47 First, five focus groups were designed, distributed by sectors of activity (public
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49 administration, ecological entities, tourism agents, agrarian sector and consumers), the
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51 group dynamics of which were analysed and a brand value and an idea for the definition
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53 of a regional narrative were forged. These work groups were carried out in November
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55 2020.
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Table 1. Work groups deployed in the field research. Source: elaborated by the authors

Work group	Date	Place	Organizations represented
Public administration	5-11-2020	Online meeting	14
Tourism agents	9-11-2020	Online meeting	12
Ecological entities	10-11-2020	Online meeting	14
Agrarian sector (farmers and cooperatives)	11-11-2020	Palafolls town council	10
Consumers	24-11-2020	Online meeting	8

Second, as a complement to the focus groups, six in-depth interviews were scheduled with people from the region who, due to their importance, trajectory, knowledge, reputation and/or prestige, warranted a solo interview to obtain their suggestions and/or impressions.

Table 2. List of people interviewed for this research. Source: elaborated by the authors

Code	Municipality	Professional profile
Interviewee 1	Tordera	Industrial engineer and farmer
Interviewee 2	Palafolls	Businessman and ecological farmer
Interviewee 3	Blanes	Restaurateur and owner of Cal Mut
Interviewee 4	Palafolls	Manager of the Palafolls Cooperative
Interviewee 5	Malgrat de Mar	Businessman and market gardener
Interviewee 6	Tordera	Businessman and cattle breeder

Finally, in order to check the pulse of the citizens, a survey created from Google Forms open to all inhabitants was set up on the town councils' websites. The following items were monitored from this non-probabilistic survey: a) how many people in the study area worked on farms and how; b) the number of farms that sell their products directly; c) the consumption of 'zero-kilometre' products among the inhabitants of the area; d) how knowledgeable the inhabitants of the area are of the farmers' work; e) the level of

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3 affiliation to agricultural cooperatives among the inhabitants of the area; f) the (tangible
4 and intangible) values attributed to the area under study; g) the colours and images
5 associated with the area under study; and h) the perception of the area ten years from
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12 The survey, open to all residents of the Baixà Tordera, was available between 27
13 October and 29 November, 2020. During this month, 238 responses were collected as a
14 non-probabilistic sample, 48.9% of which were men, 49.8% women, and 1.3% non-
15 binary. With regards to age group, 55.7% were between 41 and 60 years old, 30.8%
16 between 21 and 40, and 12.2% between 61 and 80. Respondents under the age of 20
17 represented 0.8%, and those over 80 represented 0.4%. With regards to place of
18 residence, almost half of respondents were from the municipality of Blanes (49.4%),
19 19.8% from Malgrat de Mar, 13.9% from Palafròlles, 11.8% from Tordera and 5.1% from
20 Santa Susanna. Furthermore, it is important to note that 92% of those surveyed are
21 habitual residents of the Baixà Tordera Agrarian Area.
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34 35 **Results**

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38 This section presents the triangulation of results between the surveys, the focus groups
39 and the in-depth interviews. In order to make it understandable, and to sketch a
40 preliminary outline of the narrative of the Baixà Tordera Agrarian Area brand and that
41 is later examined in more detail in the discussion section, the results are presented in an
42 aggregated and descriptive manner, both in terms of the tangible area and intangible
43 values of this territory.
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52 *Baixà Tordera's natural and cultural heritage*

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55 To define the tangible Baixà Tordera, we need to work on three dynamics that make up
56 the typology of the different areas of the region under study: the contrast between sea
57 and mountain and between agrarian and forest area, and the co-existence of industrial
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3 and agrarian areas. These three contrasts enable us to examine a diverse area located in
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5 a peri-urban environment where the place brand must help facilitate the process of
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7 annexation and mutual collaboration between the five municipalities of the BTAA. The
8
9 concretion of this area of collaboration due to the brand can be seen as something close
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11 to a denomination of origin that promotes a feeling of belonging to the land, with
12
13 nuances of inclusiveness and a common strategy of regional development where the
14
15 primary sector should play a predominant role.
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20 With regards to the first duality, the sea and the mountain, various stances were
21
22 observed among the residents. On the one hand, the sea is related to the image of
23
24 “water”, shown in the importance that the respondents and interviewees gave to the
25
26 “deltaic plain”, “the water basin” and the images of the “profile of the river Tordera”
27
28 and “the Delta”. The importance of the water element, as a differentiating factor, was
29
30 also observed in the focus groups, which highlighted the singularity of the behaviour of
31
32 the Tordera river, especially with regard to floods; and also, when relating the river to
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34 the flora and fauna of the region and as an element that structures the landscape. On the
35
36 other hand, the ability of the mountain to outline a differential horizon for all those who
37
38 live there was also remarked upon by most of the participants, thus conferring a unique
39
40 personality to the landscape that has a direct impact on the definition of the individual
41
42 and collective identities of the region. The images of the massifs of “Montnegre” and
43
44 “el Montseny” best represent this. Something that sums up perfectly the singularity of
45
46 this first duality is the landscape that Josep Pla (1976) describes, saying that in the Delta
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48 the landscape of the Maresme region ends and one begins to perceive the aggressiveness
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50 of the Costa Brava, which begins at the change of province from Barcelona to Girona.
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57 There is one element that intertwines this first conceptual duality with the second one
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59 between agrarian and forest areas: the paths. For many participants of the sample, the
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3 network of paths that run through this area structures a diverse landscape, something
4 that becomes an organizational element of the region. The paths trace the route from the
5 forest areas to the agricultural areas, following the river until it reaches the sea. The
6 value of the rural paths is also highlighted in the focus groups as an element not only of
7 connection throughout the region, but also between the people who live there.
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15 The paths and trails, therefore, take us through the farmlands and their particular
16 characteristics. Under the concept of farmlands or crops –or the mental image of the
17 fields of crops and the area called the Pla de Grau– the participants in the fieldwork
18 include a number of characteristics of this region that lead us to define its richness and
19 agrarian (agricultural and livestock) diversity. This is marked by appreciation for the
20 work of the farmers –at the same time as they ask for greater recognition for their jobs–
21 and their capacity to offer zero-kilometre products of great quality that enriches the
22 region’s gastronomy which, in turn, is seen as a valued contribution of the farmers. The
23 work of the farmers is also seen as an essential task of management and conservation of
24 the agrarian area. The farmers, with their diverse way of working, as well as valuing
25 their traditions, are a significant element of identity of this region. The in-depth
26 interviews highlight this idea and emphasise the need to give visibility to the farmers
27 and their products, since they are part of the area’s culture.
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46 The third conceptual duality that arises from the fieldwork is the contrast between
47 industrial and agrarian areas in a peri-urban environment bordering the provinces of
48 Barcelona and Girona. In this situation, the value of the farmers in the creation of an
49 area of resistance to the homogenizing and predatory logic of industrial activity can be
50 seen. The farmers become a guarantor of the unique regional identity and conservation
51 of the Baix Tordera Agrarian Area.
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3 The value that citizens give to natural heritage and the farmlands is contrasted with the
4
5 critique of four structural elements of the Baixà Tordera landscape: tourist pressure,
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7 industrial pressure, the lack of environmental awareness and, to a lesser extent, urban
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9 pressure on agrarian space.
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13 In this regard, the diversity of landscapes, as well as their beauty and richness, is
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15 threatened, above all, by the “activity of the campsites” and the model of mass tourism
16
17 that, historically, the Maresme and the Costa Brava had embraced. This is, without a
18
19 doubt, the main complaint of the residents, who ask for a move towards a model of
20
21 quality tourism that contributes to the repositioning of the area. Also worth noting is the
22
23 concern about how industrial activity will affect the richness of the landscape,
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25 especially due to the large “lorry traffic” that exists and the proximity of the “industrial
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27 estates to the river [Tordera]”.
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32 Finally, it is important to highlight the need for the local governments to carry out
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34 environmental awareness campaigns at all levels. From those that encourage schools
35
36 and families to adopt responsible consumption and reduce the ecological and water
37
38 footprint to those that encourage a move towards a society that is more aware of the
39
40 global preservation of the region. In both the focus groups and the interviews there is a
41
42 significant critique of the lack of environmental awareness of the users of this agrarian
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44 area and its surroundings, pointing to “incivism”, “poor waste management”, “poor
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46 maintenance of areas” or of paths, the non-preservation of the Tordera basin and “noise
47
48 pollution”. The focus groups highlight the need to raise awareness of civic
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50 responsibility and sustainability.
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55 In fact, advancing in environmental education is key to being able to strengthen the
56
57 tangible narrative of the Baixà Tordera Agrarian Area, which lies basically in the
58
59 richness of its diversity of landscapes, painted in green, blue and toasted colours, as well
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3 as the strength, quality and identity of the agrarian areas and those who take care of
4
5 them.
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8 *Baixa Tordera and its people*
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11 Two characteristics, above all, distinguish the inhabitants of the municipalities that
12
13 make up the Baixà Tordera Agrarian Area, according to the survey respondents: they
14
15 are hard-working and rooted in the region. This is very clear and both are core
16
17 characteristics highlighted by most of the respondents.
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21 Being “hard-working” is associated with values such as entrepreneurship, possessing
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23 drive and being adaptable to the environment. They are complementary characteristics
24
25 that define a way of being focused on work and the land. In other words, determined to
26
27 take advantage of the economic potential of the area.
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31 The Baixà Tordera citizen is hard-working, but above all has a strong sense of being
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33 rooted in the region. This is something that is also essential when it comes to presenting
34
35 a brand narrative: the feeling of identity, the sense of place and respect for the
36
37 environment are paramount. In fact, there is a connection between the ten-year
38
39 perspective discussed above and the desire to place the concept of regional identity at
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41 the centre of the equation. There is something in the Baixà Tordera (its farmlands and
42
43 its landscape) that makes it unique, and the respondents are fully aware of these two
44
45 differentiating factors. In fact, the focus groups and the in-depth interviews also
46
47 highlight that the diversity of horticultural products and their quality is a differentiating
48
49 factor of the Baixà Tordera, given its geographical characteristics. This diversity also
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51 makes it possible to highlight local products, which allow you to follow a healthy diet
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53 all year round. They also highlight the landscape of the area as a unique feature, which
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3 reinforces the results obtained in the survey. To all of this a third intangible, with fewer
4 responses, is added: “kindness”, “generosity” or being considered an “open” people.
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8 Just as there is a general consensus about the main virtues of the citizens of the Baix
9 Tordera, so there is a basic consensus in the criticism of their behaviour: most survey
10 respondents consider lack of civic behaviour to be their main defect. The statement of
11 this respondent sums it all up: “We are not empathetic with the environment”. The in-
12 depth interviews reinforce the idea of civic behaviour as an explicit element that needs
13 to be strengthened when it comes to managing the promotion of the region through the
14 brand, and therefore the arrival of people, with the conservation of the environment and
15 its enjoyment.
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27 While lack of civic behaviour is the widespread criticism of the character of the Baix
28 Tordera inhabitants, there is a second element that needs to be borne in mind. In the
29 open survey there was criticism of the “rivalry between towns” or counties (La Selva
30 against el Maresme or vice versa). While not a core criticism, solidarity between all
31 those involved in the construction of a brand narrative is required for it to be successful.
32 The historical perception of a certain “war of bell towers” could be overcome by a
33 comprehensive management of the whole region that provides it with a narrative shared
34 by the five municipalities involved. The will and need to group all the regional actors
35 around a shared objective is also evident in the focus groups.
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48 *The aspirational Baix Tordera*

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51 Such a narrative must be able to break the stereotypes that, according to the residents,
52 those outside the area perceive it through. Here, too, there is a widespread consensus
53 that outside the Baix Tordera, the five municipalities are seen as a “touristified” area
54 and “old-fashioned”, which some research participants call “outmoded”. An area that,
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3 mainly, has not been able to convert mass tourism into quality tourism or to give
4
5 enough added value to the work done by the farmers.
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8 While modifying the first perception depends on the ability of the service sector,
9
10 especially the tourism sector and restaurants, to economically transform the sector and
11
12 seek new market niches, the Baixà Tordera horticultural products are already today a
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14 model in Catalonia at a quantitative level, as the “Plan for the Management and
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16 Development of the Baixà Tordera Agrarian Area”, developed by the Diputació de
17
18 Barcelona, underscores. This highlights the need to design a place brand to also give it
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20 value with regards to quality.
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25 In terms of future projection, the brand must be a driving force of the future
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27 characteristics of the Baixà Tordera Agrarian Area, and ensure a generational change
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29 that is of particular concern in the farming sector, as was noted in the group discussion
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31 that was held with the sector and in the in-depth interviews that were also conducted.
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34 The brand points to the values of the future, aimed at ensuring greater competitiveness of
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36 the primary sector of this area, in line with an identity that is sufficiently rooted in
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38 tradition.
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42 Understanding how citizens see the region after a decade, and in terms of future
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44 prospects, will help to plan the public policies that should contribute to forging a
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46 programme of comprehensive management of this region. If we look at the aspirations
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48 of the residents, the vast majority hope to see this agrarian area “more protected” and
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50 “sustainable”. In fact, sustainability is an area to work on in the future, as the brand
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52 must also become an element of conservation of the region through the projection of a
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54 narrative that denotes the need to maintain a differential regional identity linked to the
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56 primary sector. This idea encompasses a number of concepts, like greater protection of
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58 the natural environment, promoting the consumption of zero-kilometre products for the
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3 benefit of the farmers of the area (highlighting the valuable idea of proximity), or
4 maximizing natural resources, which also means making the farmlands one of the main
5 values of the area.
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10 From the citizen surveys, we obtained proposals such as enabling the paths to be
11 “walkable”, making “a network for ramblers, cyclists and runners”, offering “guided
12 tours and nature activities like bird watching”, as well as “several watchtowers on both
13 sides of the river”. Citizens don’t want more investment in hotel infrastructures, but
14 rather they prefer to transform the region into “an important gastronomic place where
15 the local products are valued”.
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24 Likewise, the citizens participating in this study actively ask for policies that avoid the
25 degradation of the fields and the crops, protect the farmlands, and also avoid mass
26 tourism of the region and the degradation attributable to the effect of urban pressure.
27 They do not want a region “conquered by bricks”. This reflection, from one of the
28 survey participants, exemplifies this:
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37 “Much of the land used for crops will have disappeared due to the growth of
38 populations that form part of this area, whether used for new industrial estates or
39 for the extension of current roads. Unfortunately, the land has never been
40 supported; this area has only focused on tourism, which is why the agrarian
41 sector is now in this situation”.
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49 In the same vein, many participants in the focus groups support the idea of changing the
50 model of tourism, in order to avoid the effects of mass tourism and move towards a
51 model of tourism that is related to the enjoyment of nature or quality gastronomy. This
52 stance also appears in the in-depth interviews. With regards to urban pressure and its
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3 perception as a threat to the region, the focus groups also express their belief that it is
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5 necessary to find balance and focus on conservation.
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8 *Final findings*

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11 As a final findings of this research, it should be noted that the brand understood as a
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13 device removed from the connotations of indiscriminate marketing should guarantee the
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15 following elements in its deployment and implementation. The first element is
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17 *knowledge*, since the brand should always provide ways of understanding the
18
19 importance of the agrarian activity that takes place in the Baixà Tordera Agrarian Area
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21 which, at the time of doing the fieldwork, people were largely unaware of. The second
22
23 is *recognition*, in the sense of valuing the contribution of the agrarian sector, not only
24
25 because its activity maintains the region well kept, but also orders and manages it
26
27 through its daily life.
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32 The third is *complicity*, or a necessary shared approach to and/or work of the processes
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34 of production, diffusion and commercialization of the local agrarian products. The
35
36 fourth is *development*, making possible an environmentally sustainable competitiveness
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38 over time that ensures the survival of agrarian activity for future generations.
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42 The fifth, and final, element is that the brand must become something close to a
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44 *denomination of origin* that, informally, invites us to define the future of this agrarian
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46 area. It therefore also affects the complexity of the planning and development of this
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48 area which, from now on, must necessarily be supramunicipal. In this way, the brand
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50 needs to offer a holistic vision of the region to all the agents that work in the strategic
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52 and urban planning of the five municipalities under study.
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Discussion

Agrarian areas have undergone a process of revaluation as society has become more aware of the need to implement circular economic processes and contribute to promoting local or zero-kilometre products. The *From Farm to Fork* initiative of the European Commission (European Union, 2020) is along these lines and is a good, inspiring framework for state and sub-state (regional and local governments) administrations to bring their guidelines to the local level.

From the perspective of place branding, it is necessary to address derived concepts such as “rural branding” (Ohe, 2020; Boyne & Hall, 2004) and, above all, “agrarian branding” (Tobias & Müller Wahl, 2013; Yang & Liu, 2018; Liang, et. al, 2020), understood as processes of building a regional narrative (place branding) that focuses on the tangibles and intangibles of rural areas, including agricultural and livestock farming, with the desire to integrate them in the framework of a strategy of economic development, not from an auxiliary angle but as a fundamental part of it (San Eugenio & Barniol-Carcasona, 2015). Moreover, with the understanding that, as Messey, Dessein and Lauwere (2010) point out, the conceptualization of the regional narratives is always framed by the singularities of each region. Finding a competitive identity for a territory (Anholt, 2010) is related with the idea that, nowadays, countries, regions and cities compete to capture resources beyond those of traditional tourism: talent, infrastructure and various types of economic investment (Anttiroiko, 2015).

According to the results of this research, the municipalities that make up the Baixà Tordera Agrarian Area have developed a shared narrative that strengthens their sense of community and aims to relaunch the economic development of the area, traditionally deeply rooted in horticultural activities. A historical economic sector severely damaged

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3 by mass tourism and uncontrolled urban growth during the decades of the turn of the
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5 century.
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8 In response to SO1- “Analyse the current place identity of the Baixà Tordera Agrarian
9 Area, as a preliminary step to an agrarian branding strategy”- and SO3 –“Determine the
10 tangible and intangible values from which a competitive identity is conceptualized in an
11 agrarian area in a European context that values sustainable development of the regions”-
12 this research identified the elements that can best help to enhance the brand positioning
13 of this agrarian space and, therefore, help to build a competitive identity in this area
14 (Anholt, 2010). These are as follows:
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- 24
25 • The diversity and singularity of the landscape as a source of differential regional
26 identity. This diversity is explained by the continuum formed, through the five
27 municipalities, by the sea, the deltaic plain, the course of the river Tordera
28 reaching the terraces and the inland mountains: from the massif of Montnegre
29 and Corredor to the region of Maresme and also the massif of El Montseny,
30 where the river is born.
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- 33 • The farmlands as a central and core element in the construction of a regional
34 narrative, ordered by the network of paths and territorial mosaics, colours and
35 smells produced by farming activity. From the horticultural activity, there is an
36 intangible value that appears in the results obtained from the three research
37 techniques used, and that is especially relevant in the context of the COVID-19
38 pandemic, namely, “proximity”: Proximity understood as a value for the diverse
39 horticultural production of the municipalities that make up the Baixà Tordera
40 Agrarian Area.
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- The farmers and their activity as an element of resistance to and/or containment of industrial activity and the regional dynamics that characterize peri-urban areas.
- Acceptance that the survival of the traditional primary sector is subject to generational succession and the use of the advantages of technology and digitilization.
- One element that embraces the region under study, and that guarantees its singularity and adaptation to European standards, is the value of sustainability in the broadest sense of the term. This value allows us to foster collaboration between groups with, a priori, conflicting interests.

In relation to SO2 -“Study the process of conceptualizing a place brand in the framework of an agrarian area dedicated primarily to agriculture”-, as San Eugenio and Barniol-Carcasona (2015) point out, the processes of building regional brands need to take into account the opinion of the stakeholders. Regional narratives become enduring the moment the citizens – that is, those who are to use the brand – feel it is theirs and believe that it meets their expectations. As San Eugenio and Barniol-Carcasona showed in the project “Territoris serens” (Serene regions) of the county of Lluçanès, there must always be a communion between brand and public (internal and external) for it to be an effective device for identity management and economic development. Matarán Ruiz (2013) and Gulisova (2020) also point to the importance of creating brands rooted in processes of constant social participation. In this research, a stakeholders’ approach (San Eugenio, Ginesta & Kavaratzis, 2019) to the brand building process becomes essential to find a consensus among different interest groups (farmers, tourist agents and ecologists) in order to create a place brand that can be helpful for the development of two significant economic activities of the region: agriculture and tourism. In fact,

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2
3 according to the focus groups, the brand should help to transform mass tourism into
4
5 other more sensitive tourism activities with the local singularities (for instance, local
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7 farm production or cuisine).
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10 In addition, as Warner (2007) pointed out, in the process of building a brand narrative
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12 for the Baixà Tordera Agrarian Area, the values linked to the quality of agrarian
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14 production and to sustainable production are essential for its projection. In fact, it is
15
16 especially notable that the value of sustainability, applied to all stages of the cycle of
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18 production and consumption of an agrarian product, is one of the dimensions that
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20 enables a better cohesion of the brand narrative of the Baixà Tordera Agrarian Area
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22 with all the stakeholders (internal and external), especially the producers and ecologists
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24 or naturalists. The notion of sustainability appeals to everyone equally, based on the
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26 premise that everyone feels part of making the region a more liveable, less degraded and
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28 more welcoming area for residents and visitors alike.
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34 With this common starting point, it is the job of the public administration (in this case
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36 study, the Diputació de Barcelona and the town councils) to implement public policies
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38 that will make the region better kept and improve its tools of governance (Govers & Go,
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40 2009; San Eugenio & Ginesta, 2020). In fact, it should be noted that this work is part of
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42 a process of strategic planning and reflection of the region under study and, as noted by
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44 Tobias & Müller Wahl (2013), local development policies have often remained only at
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46 the strategic stage, failing to progress to the stage of implementation.
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51 As a whole, this initiative can be understood as agrarian branding, because it involves
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53 the alignment of different interested publics (cooperative members, peasants, citizens,
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55 etc.), that is, a stakeholder engagement through the argument of community building
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57 with the aim to create a competitive identity to develop an agrarian place, but, also, to
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59 empower their citizens to begin an economic strategy, taking advantage of the
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3 opportunity that covid-19 offers to rural, agrarian and natural spaces (Karachyna *et al.*,
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5 2020; Chin, 2022).
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8 **Conclusions**

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11 This research has made it possible to understand and analyze the process of
12
13 conceptualization of the brand narrative of an agrarian area, which aims to contribute to
14
15 the economic dynamism and management of the collective identity of the area's
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17 residents. The proposed brand narrative has been built through a qualitative and
18
19 quantitative methodology, deployed with the aim of involving all the stakeholders
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21 (internal and external) and follows, among others, the guidelines laid down by the
22
23 European *From Farm to Fork* strategy, which enable us to place the value of
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25 sustainability at the heart of the story.
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30 This narrative of the Baixà Tordera Agrarian Area brand was presented to the Diputació
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32 de Barcelona on 15 December 2020. The graphic image that derives from this is yet to
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34 be deployed, as is the design of public policies associated with it. In the field of *place*
35
36 *branding*, it is difficult to assess the impact of new place brands without the perspective
37
38 of time and to understand how they have been geographically deployed in the region. It
39
40 remains, therefore, for future research to analyse whether the narrative proposed here
41
42 has ended us being accepted by the residents and visitors of the Baixà Tordera and
43
44 whether, as various authors have recommended (Kavaratzis, 2005; Govers & Go, 2009;
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46 Tobias & Müller Wahl, 2020), the brand has become a true device of governance and
47
48 management of place identity. Regarding the limitations of the research, it should be
49
50 noted that there may be a bias in the results obtained since the researchers involved not
51
52 only in the analysis but also in the final strategic proposal. Another limitation to
53
54 highlight is that we analysed a case study. This research refers to a regional case study,
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56 although we believe that the results obtained are transferable to any other agricultural
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3 area in the world. It should also be noted that this research has implications for the
4 management of agrarian spaces, but it also contributes to expand the research
5 background on studies with specifically focus on agrarian branding.
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