

# CITY BRANDING AND PARTICIPATORY ETHNOGRAPHY IN THE GLOBAL SOUTH: EVIDENCE FROM THE CASE OF TRINIDAD (CUBA)

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## ABSTRACT

Although city branding has been consolidated as a strategic resource for projecting cities internationally, in practice it often reproduces top-down approaches dominated by specialised consultants and urban elites, with only limited citizen participation. This limitation is particularly evident in the Global South, where participation is frequently reduced to symbolic and dismissive consultations during the final stages of projects, and where documented methodological experiences remain scarce. Within this context, the city of Trinidad (Cuba), an United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization “world heritage site” recognised for its cultural, natural, and patrimonial richness, launched the construction of its city brand. This paper aims to present the participatory construction of that brand, whose novelty lies in the use of participatory ethnography. For this purpose, a methodological protocol was designed, validated through expert judgment, and implemented by combining cycles of participatory ethnographic work with critical reflection by the creative professional team. Across three ethnographic cycles, more than 1,200 contributions were gathered from citizens, entrepreneurs, cultural stakeholders, and government representatives, applying the criterion of theoretical saturation by cohorts. The final brand proposal was evaluated by an interdisciplinary expert panel of 20 international specialists, who confirmed both its validity and the robustness of the methodological procedure. In addition to achieving a brand with a high level of social appropriation, the findings highlight active participation and critical reflexivity as means to make visible and address tensions between hybrid identities, community conflicts, the technical criteria of creative professionals, and local aspirations. The validated methodological protocol represents a novel contribution, providing a replicable and adaptable framework for diverse urban governance scenarios. Furthermore, this study contributes to theoretical debate by proposing practical guidelines for implementing participatory city branding.

## KEYWORDS

sustainable development, city branding, participatory ethnography, identity, Trinidad (Cuba)

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# CITY BRANDING E ETNOGRAFIA PARTICIPATIVA NO SUL GLOBAL: EVIDÊNCIAS DO CASO DE TRINIDAD (CUBA)

## RESUMO

Embora o *city branding* se tenha consolidado como um recurso estratégico para a projeção internacional das cidades, na prática, reproduz frequentemente abordagens hierárquicas dominadas por consultores especializados e elites urbanas, com uma participação cidadã limitada. Esta limitação é particularmente evidente no Sul Global, onde a participação é frequentemente reduzida a consultas simbólicas e meramente formais nas fases finais dos projetos, sendo ainda escassas as experiências metodológicas documentadas. Neste contexto, a cidade de Trinidad (Cuba), classificada como “patrimônio mundial” da Organização das Nações Unidas para a Educação, a Ciência e a Cultura e reconhecida pela sua riqueza cultural, natural e patrimonial, iniciou o processo de construção da sua marca-cidade. O presente artigo visa apresentar a experiência de construção participativa dessa marca, cuja inovação reside na utilização da etnografia participativa. Para o efeito, foi concebido um protocolo metodológico, posteriormente validado por um painel de peritos e implementado através da articulação entre ciclos de trabalho etnográfico participativo e reflexão crítica da equipa criativa profissional. Ao longo de três ciclos etnográficos, foram recolhidas mais de 1.200 contribuições de cidadãos, empresários, agentes culturais e representantes governamentais, seguindo o critério de saturação teórica por *coortes*. A proposta final de marca foi avaliada por um painel interdisciplinar de 20 peritos internacionais, que confirmaram tanto a sua validade como a robustez do procedimento metodológico. Para além de alcançar uma marca com elevado nível de apropriação social, os resultados destacam a participação ativa e a reflexividade crítica como meios para tornar visíveis e abordar tensões entre identidades híbridas, conflitos comunitários, critérios técnicos dos profissionais criativos e aspirações locais. O protocolo metodológico validado constitui uma contribuição inovadora, ao fornecer uma referência replicável e adaptável a diferentes contextos de governança urbana. O estudo contribui ainda para o debate teórico, ao apresentar diretrizes práticas para a implementação de um *city branding* participativo.

## PALAVRAS-CHAVE

desenvolvimento sustentável, *city branding*, etnografia participativa, identidade, Trinidad (Cuba)

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

City branding has become an indispensable resource for leveraging cities through the global positioning of their distinctive values (AlShaalan & Durugbo, 2024; Kavaratzis, 2019). Practical experiences and interdisciplinary reflections highlight its impact on economies (Reitsamer & Brunner-Sperdin, 2021), social cohesion (Fernandez de Osso Fuentes et al., 2024), heritage protection (Miño, 2022), identities (Armani, 2024), and public diplomacy (Camatti & Wallington, 2023). These dimensions are now considered opportunities to contribute to sustainable development goal 11, which aims to build inclusive and resilient cities (del-Ponti et al., 2022).

An effective city brand and management strategy must therefore encompass the protection of urban assets, the preservation of cultural values, and an endogenous, transformative process of social reflection and action on local problems (Reynolds, 2024). Consequently, both the image projected externally to global markets and the lived

experience of the city, whether that of a resident, city user, or tourist, should reflect not only what the city is but also what it aspires to become. In other words, its urban identity should be understood as a dynamic and projective phenomenon (Armani, 2024).

A central premise in the field (Anthony, 2024; Collins, 2024; Reynolds, 2024) is that broad public acceptance and the safeguarding of identities require integrating citizen participation in the construction and validation of city brands. Yet, paradoxically, recent systematic studies (Chan, 2023; Leino & Puumala, 2020; Maziashvili et al., 2023; Ripoll González & Gale, 2020) confirm that, in practice, city brand construction continues to reproduce top-down approaches, led by urban administrations and power groups, where specialised consultants and creative teams prevail over local stakeholders. These studies further note that when participatory moments are included, they generally correspond to consultations for final decision-making, rather than opportunities for listening and co-creation from the early stages of projects. This dynamic is counterproductive in a context where participatory methods have been enhanced by digital platforms and social media (Anthony, 2024; Buhalis & Park, 2021).

This pattern is observable in a range of cases, some successful in co-creating brands — e.g., Plettenberg Bay, South Africa (Camatti & Wallington, 2023); Tasmania, Australia (Ripoll González & Gale, 2020); Cardiff, United Kingdom (Reynolds, 2024); Dunga Beach, Kenya (Jernsand & Kraff, 2015) — and others marked by shortcomings in engaging local stakeholders — e.g., Poznań, Poland, and Kutaisi, Greece (Maziashvili et al., 2023); Nagpur, India (Waghmare, 2024); Carvalhal de Vermilhas, Portugal (Rebelo et al., 2020). A well-known example is Porto (Portugal), one of the most awarded city brands for its visual design in recent decades, which sparked essential debates about the importance of participation in building strong brands: although public participation was incorporated at the final stage of the project, citizens ultimately reported a limited sense of involvement, despite acknowledging that they were well represented both visually and conceptually (Casais & Monteiro, 2019).

The critical review of the literature reveals several factors driving this problem internationally:

- the substantial distance between the academic and professional domains of city branding, which has persisted throughout the field's development (Kavaratzis, 2019);
- the complexity of participation for creative teams, given that most developments have emerged outside marketing and public administration, and the natural disciplinary bases of city branding (Anthony, 2024; Hanna et al., 2021);
- the tendency to adopt positivist models to ensure acceptance by economic and political actors and align with the global knowledge system, while overlooking the limitations of such approaches in deepening understanding of the perceptions and meanings in which brands operate (Armani, 2024; Jain et al., 2022; Miño, 2022);
- the persistent intention to reduce costs (Källström & Siljeklint, 2021; Kavaratzis, 2019);
- the concentration of efforts on achieving impactful visual results and attracting capital to cities, rather than representing the interests of diverse urban groups (AlShaalan & Durugbo, 2024; Buhalis & Park, 2021).

This problem reflects longstanding hegemonic relations that have resurfaced since 2020 and become a central object of debate in the field (Fernandez de Osso Fuentes et al., 2024; Leino & Puumala, 2020). Miño (2022) argues that the dominance of professional teams and specific social groups is particularly concerning in the Global South, where territorial branding often exhibits colonialist traits linked to markets and globalisation. This dynamic also generates tensions for local cultures, as certain identity traits may be arbitrarily obscured in favour of those deemed more “marketable” (Maziashvili et al., 2023). Such a context underscores not only the need for transversal citizen participation but also the importance of systematic critical reflexivity within creative teams to design appropriate methodological strategies.

It was within this framework that the city of Trinidad (Cuba) initiated the construction of its city brand. Founded in 1514, Trinidad is recognised as one of the best-preserved colonial cities in Latin America and the third-oldest settlement in the country. Its tangible and intangible heritage, closely tied to the sugar industry of the 17th to 19th centuries, alongside a distinguished artisanal tradition in textiles, clay, and woodwork, has earned the city international recognition as a United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization “world heritage site” (1988), a “creative city in crafts and folk arts” (2019), and a “world craft city” (World Crafts Council, n.d.). Beyond its historical legacy, the city benefits from a privileged geographic location within the Topes de Collantes natural reserve and from its proximity to some of the most renowned beaches in Southern Cuba (Iglesias Palmero & Álvarez Cepero, 2021).

The construction of a city brand for Trinidad was additionally justified by the absence of a consistent strategy for tourism promotion, the main driver of the local economy (Asamblea Municipal del Poder Popular, 2022). The urban framings promoted by Cuba’s Ministry of Tourism agencies diverge significantly from residents’ representations and aspirations, underscoring the need for a branding process that can articulate local perspectives with national and international projection objectives (Guerrero & Espasa, 2020).

For projects of this kind to succeed in Cuba, it is crucial to consider that the country has been updating its economic and social policy since 2012. Citizen participation, territorial decentralisation, science and innovation, and the protection of national culture have been established as pillars of sustainable development, and these foundations must be integrated across all social initiatives (Ministerio de Economía y Planificación, 2019).

The first phase of this study explored the city’s identity and the social factors influencing the proposal of a brand for the urban context. Those results can be consulted online (Castillo-Salina & Yañez Reyes, 2025). The present article focuses on the second phase of the research, whose overall objective was to construct and participatorily validate a brand for the city, respecting its identity and local projections. The following specific objectives were established:

- to design, validate, and apply a methodological protocol for internal coherence analysis of preliminary and final city brand proposals, integrating the critical reflexivity of the creative team with participatory fieldwork;
- to establish a city brand for Trinidad based on the results of the participatory construction process;
- to validate, through expert judgment, both the city brand developed and the applied ethnographic methodological procedures.

This research contributes to the global field of city branding in three key ways. First, it documents one of the few participatory experiences conducted in socialist contexts of the Global South, demonstrating how participatory ethnography can sustain co-creation processes. Second, it designs and validates an innovative methodological protocol that combines theoretical saturation by cohorts, the critical reflexivity of creative teams as ethnographers, and evaluation by international experts, offering a procedure that can be adapted and replicated in other urban settings. Third, it highlights the tensions between professional technical criteria, urban conflicts, and hybrid identities, arguing that these must be critically incorporated into both academic inquiry and practical approaches to city branding.

## **2. CITY BRANDING, PARTICIPATION, AND IDENTITY: CONSIDERATIONS FOR THEIR ARTICULATION IN TRINIDAD**

City branding focuses on identifying the identity traits of cities that can be marketed, often rooted in local and, in some cases, transnational cultures (Henninger et al., 2016), and strategically positioning them as recognisable and distinctive markers of places and their communities (Chan, 2023). The identity of a place is both immediately recognisable and enduring, as it generates images in people's minds (Riza et al., 2012). Thus, city identity is inherently unique and non-reproducible, as it is typically tied to urban elements that have gained public recognition. Research has shown that the identity elements of cities constitute a complex symbolic ecosystem, commonly associated with buildings, monuments, public and private spaces, the natural environment, and the charisma of local people, as well as with intangible dimensions such as historical events, collective memories, traditions, cultural practices, and shared narratives that shape local meanings and senses of belonging (Cohen-Avenel & Roberts, 2024; Miño, 2022; Rebelo et al., 2020; Reitsamer & Brunner-Sperdin, 2021).

However, identity is constantly reconstructed through interactions among diverse actors and the narratives that circulate and re-signify urban space (Ripoll González & Gale, 2020). Because it is not homogeneous, city identity presents challenges in integrating multiple — and at times conflicting — identities that coexist within the same urban context (Ripoll González & Gale, 2020). Some studies (AlShaalan & Durugbo, 2024; Mekarem, 2024) describe the emergence of hybrid urban identities, complicating the selection of symbolic elements for brand representation.

In this regard, Mekarem (2024) identified two hegemonic perceptions of Lod, an ancient Israeli city (known as Lydd in English): the “mixed city” and the “ancient historic city”. The former is widely accepted by citizens to denote the coexistence of two major cultural groups: Arabs and Jews. The latter, promoted by the municipality, seeks to highlight the city's archaeological heritage and contemporary events. The study concluded that although these identities could potentially foster pluralism and coexistence, in practice, they are used strategically and selectively, reinforcing divisions rather than uniting communities. A study focused on the analysis of promotional products from São Paulo

(Brazil), suggests that, although a carefully crafted urban image — shaped by relatively stable strategic guidelines for representation, even in the face of political changes in local administration — and incorporating discourses of citizenship and social integration is maintained, such approaches may nonetheless contribute to the simplification of certain components of a genuinely dynamic and continually evolving urban identity, insofar as it is predominantly defined from above (Andrade, Sampaio, Garcia, Cairrão, & Fonseca, 2024). Similar findings have been documented across different continents (Andrade, Sampaio, Garcia, & Fonseca, 2024; Malamud et al., 2021; Rivero, 2020; Riza et al., 2012; Torres-Zamudio et al., 2021; Waghmare, 2024).

To address this issue, Rivero (2020) and Andrade, Sampaio, Garcia, & Fonseca (2024) emphasised that engaging local residents through dialogical approaches in the construction of the city brand can help identify the symbols most relevant to branding narratives, thereby limiting potential resistance and representational conflicts. This, in turn, increases civic pride and social appropriation of brand proposals while mitigating the alienation that occurs when residents perceive brands as disconnected from their everyday realities (Rivero, 2020; Strzelecki et al., 2024). Ongoing public participation can also help ensure that city brands remain responsive to social change (Reynolds, 2024) and aligned with the needs and aspirations of urban residents who shape the city's projected identity (Andrade, Sampaio, Garcia, & Fonseca, 2024). The latter encompasses both widely recognised, distinctive urban features and the aspirations of all social groups, grounded in attention to their needs and in efforts to eradicate collective problems and social stigmas.

Despite growing attention to the relationship between identity and participation in city branding, this area is often studied in isolation (Ripoll González & Gale, 2020; Waghmare, 2024). Effective public participation requires moving beyond symbolic consultation to allow citizens to influence the creative and managerial decisions that shape city brands (del-Ponti et al., 2022; Rahmawan-Huizenga & Ivanova, 2022). This remains a methodological challenge, frequently linked to the dominance of positivist approaches, which rarely acknowledge their own limitations.

In the field of participatory city branding (Armani, 2024; Maziashvili et al., 2023), it has been shown that such approaches tend to reduce the richness of meaning into standardised narratives, overlooking nuances tied to emotions, collective memories, multiple identities, and everyday practices that shape citizens' relationships with places. They also tend to assume the homogeneity of responses by validating the most frequently occurring ones, thereby obscuring contradictions, tensions, and diverse appropriations that are constitutive of urban life (Andrade, Sampaio, Garcia, & Fonseca, 2024; Camatti & Wallington, 2023; Martim et al., 2022; Riza et al., 2012).

Moreover, city branding strategies require a set of initiatives involving a wide range of public and private stakeholders (Strzelecki et al., 2024). This makes city brands political phenomena often driven by agendas that marginalise certain groups within society (Cohen-Avenel & Roberts, 2024; Rahmawan-Huizenga & Ivanova, 2022). Henninger et al. (2016) and Kavaratzis (2019) noted that this contradiction undermines the development

of prototypical participatory strategies, as the social conditions for brand construction vary from city to city.

The reflections outlined above highlighted for the Trinidad City Brand team the need to address these gaps to develop a solid brand aligned with the territory's sociocultural reality and the demands of Cuban social policies (Ministerio de Economía y Planificación, 2019). Co-creation was adopted because of its demonstrated advantages in capturing the spirit of cities from the perspective of local stakeholders (Chan, 2023; Collins, 2024; Maziashvili et al., 2023) and in strengthening the internal validity of brands (Malamud et al., 2021). Andrade, Sampaio, Garcia, and Fonseca (2024) argue that participation must be sustained over time, as it constitutes a key element for operationalising communication proposals across multiple media and narrative formats, enabling the articulation of the principles of credibility, legitimacy, and seduction. In this way, the brand is configured as a "possible world" capable of integrating identities, aspirations, and narratives into a coherent, networked discourse (Andrade, Sampaio, Garcia, & Fonseca, 2024). This study sought to establish the structural foundations of the city brand, aiming at guiding the future design of comprehensive strategies supported by a socially validated brand structure and high levels of acceptance among its protagonists.

It was considered that a strategy characterised by a qualitative, experiential, and interactive approach would help overcome the limitations of city branding in engaging the public in the construction and evolution of brands. This framework led to the formulation of a strategy oriented toward what Gadamer (1975/2001) called "participatory truth": one that is not independent of the subject but co-constructed between researchers and participants, reflecting a specific social reality closely tied to identity and to both individual and collective projections.

Within social anthropology, this approach has been developed under the framework of participatory ethnography. This entails processes of listening and collaboration at various levels, depending on research objectives, to co-construct outcomes based on implications and consensus (Barraquero-Díaz et al., 2016). This approach has been explored in some city branding experiences (Jernsand & Kraff, 2015; Maziashvili et al., 2023), demonstrating correlations among brand identity, sustainability and strengthening social cohesion. Its main disadvantages include the significant time and resource investment required, as well as potential conflicts arising from the groups' idealised projections regarding the cities' real potential (Dore, 2021; Jain et al., 2022; Martim et al., 2022).

For Trinidad, the classical method of participatory ethnography conducted in face-to-face settings was deemed most appropriate, given the severe limitations of digital connectivity in Cuba. Nationwide, digital participation remains highly restricted: only 60% of the population has active mobile connections, average speeds are low (5.7 Mbps for mobile and 1.9 Mbps for fixed), data packages represent approximately 25% of the minimum wage, and only 7.2% of households have broadband access. These conditions substantially reduce the feasibility of using digital tools to construct a city brand through participatory processes (Frąckiewicz, 2025; Kemp, 2024).

During the reflexivity process between the creative team and the local stakeholders supervising the project, questions emerged about the qualitative nature of ethnography: how could the rigour of the process and the effectiveness of the result be measured? The studies of Cohen and Gómez (2019) and Suzina (2024) addressed these concerns. Qualitative methodology has responded to the main critiques raised by positivism regarding falsifiability, sample representativeness, and the generalisation of results. The response lies in the detailed explication of research processes, theoretical sampling, and theoretical saturation (Cohen & Gómez, 2019).

The detailed explication of processes ensures transparency and traceability, enabling other researchers to understand the findings and assess their reliability. Theoretical sampling focuses on the relevance of selected cases to provide conceptual depth and diversity of experience, thereby reinforcing the study's internal validity. Theoretical saturation establishes an objective criterion for ceasing data collection once emerging categories have been sufficiently explored and findings are not dependent on isolated cases (Cohen & Gómez, 2019).

Some innovative studies in the field of city branding (Torres-Zamudio et al., 2021) corroborate the advantages of these procedures in narrowing down to a few urban identifiers with broad acceptance across multiple groups and in signalling when a brand proposal has achieved majority approval. To ensure reflexivity regarding qualitative and co-creative methodological rigour, the guidelines of Sisto (2008) were adopted as references for the reflexive process:

- Standards of acceptability based on credibility, transferability, and coherence: credibility is grounded in communicative consensus between researchers and community participants, with emphasis on the description of events and data that support the acceptability of results. Transferability refers to the degree of replication and requires exhaustive justification of sampling decisions. Coherence refers to patterns that allow for understanding the widest possible range of interactional micro-sequences;
- Positioning: the outcome reflects the researcher's positioning as a condition for dialogue and the building of bridges with others;
- Community as arbiter of quality: participants' experiences are considered relevant, and triangulation with them enables dialogue with the data collected at different stages of the research;
- Voice and multivocality: both the researcher and participants' voices emerge vividly, including those traditionally silenced, disruptive, or emotionally engaged;
- Reflexivity or critical subjectivity: reflexivity entails making the researcher and their activity objects of analysis in their own right.

Based on these considerations, the study was grounded in the following qualitative assumption: a process of participatory ethnography, structured through multiple rounds of immersion and joint reflection with local stakeholders, would enable the co-construction of a brand proposal refined iteratively until achieving a high degree of community acceptance and social appropriation, both in terms of meaning and identity projection.

### 3. METHODOLOGY

This research was conducted in two phases between September 2022 and March 2023. The first phase focused on validating, with national experts, an ethnographic and participatory protocol for city brand construction and its implementation through to the final brand version. The second phase submitted both the result and the applied methodology for an international expert panel assessment. This dual validation reinforced the robustness of the findings and positioned the Trinidad experience as a useful reference for future city branding projects in similar contexts.

It is worth noting that the authors of this paper were part of the creative and facilitation team involved in the citybranding process. Within this framework, the study incorporated principles of classical action research (Ander-Egg, 1990/2003), particularly the deep involvement of the research and creative personnel in a scientifically informed process of reflection aimed at achieving a concrete transformative outcome (in this case, a new brand for Trinidad). Nevertheless, these principles were operationalised through the lens of applied participatory ethnography (Barraquero-Díaz et al., 2016), which enabled a situated understanding of the meanings attributed to the city and the shared construction of a brand narrative aligned with them.

#### 3.1. ETHNOGRAPHIC STRATEGY FOR BRAND CONSTRUCTION (PHASE 1)

The brand construction process began with the presentation of diagnostic results (Castillo-Salina & Yañez Reyes, 2025) to the City Brand Group, created by the local government of Trinidad to oversee the project. Once familiarised with the collected data, the group discussed and approved a participatory ethnographic strategy based on “moments and roles”, involving both the creative-research team and the publics of Trinidad (Table 1). This strategy was submitted for evaluation by Cuban specialists (three in branding, two in qualitative methodology, and three in communication and heritage). The panel was constituted using the snowball sampling method, yielding a group of 10 experts. Inclusion criteria required verifiable experience in urban studies related to brand design and city branding, implementation of qualitative methodologies, and applied communication. A competence test (K) was administered to the panel, with all experts achieving values equal to or superior than 0.8. Feedback on the relevance of the strategy was gathered qualitatively and structured around two topics: (a) adequacy of the proposal in relation to the stated objectives, and (b) areas for improvement. Overall, the assessments were positive, and five recommendations were incorporated to strengthen the protocol.

MOMENT	OBJECTIVE	ROLE OF THE CREATIVE TEAM	ROLE OF THE LOCAL PUBLIC
Moment 1	Reflexivity and development of brand proposals	Leading role	Not involved
Moment 2	Internal coherence assessment of proposals	Leading role	Not involved
Moment 3	Presentation to the public, collection of feedback, ideas, and contributions to the brand concept and design	Ethnographer	Active participation: express opinions and contribute ideas and feedback on the brand concept and design
Moment 4	Internal evaluation of the process and preparation for a new work cycle	Leading role	Participates through the City Brand Group, led by specialists from the Office of the Conservator of Trinidad and the Valley of the Sugar Mills, together with diverse local stakeholders

**Table 1.** Moments and roles of participants in the brand development process

The creative team developed preliminary versions of the brand. The proposals generated in Moment 1 were subjected to internal coherence analysis (Moment 2), which considered both the technical requirements of a city brand and the findings from the diagnostic phase. The proposals evaluated in Moment 3 fully met the internal coherence indicators outlined in Table 2. To conduct this assessment, the creative team organised workshops in which each indicator was discussed in successive rounds until consensus was reached. The creative team consisted of a general coordinator, a communication and culture consultant, a designer, and two specialists in communication and branding.

INDICATOR	DESCRIPTION
Brand concept	Does it clearly express a close relationship between what Trinidad is (identity) for different publics and what it aspires to be (projected city), grounded in a creative approach that offers multiple ways to distinguish the city from its competitors?
Logo	Does it comply with the general rules of brand design? Is it based on Trinidad's identity elements?
Color	Is it grounded in "Trinidad yellow" terracotta, blue, or green?
Creative universe	Is the visual universe consistent with the proposed logo, aligned with the identity colours, and does its meaning allude to local identifiers?
Linguistic universe (slogan)	While drawing from local elements, can the proposed linguistic universe be used in a global context? Are the keywords derived from terms used by both locals and visitors to refer to Trinidad?
Comparison with other city brands	Does the brand stand out from other international brands, particularly those of Trinidad's competing cities?

**Table 2.** Instrument for internal coherence analysis of brand proposals

During Moment 3, participatory ethnographic work was carried out. In the first round, the entire creative team participated, while in subsequent rounds, it was represented by the coordinator. At the end of each session, evaluations were conducted, held in person during the first round and virtually in subsequent rounds.

For sample construction, the criterion of theoretical saturation was adopted, validated in city branding research by Torres-Zamudio et al. (2021). This criterion establishes that the sample is complete once no new theoretical elements emerge. To ensure the

representation of all strategic groups, theoretical saturation by cohorts was pursued, adapting those identified by del-Ponti et al. (2022) to the case of Trinidad: entrepreneurs, artists and intellectuals, non-State sector entrepreneurs, political and governmental actors, and citizens. All contributions were recorded in a field diary and processed manually using a coding grid. By the time the final version of the brand was achieved, more than 1,200 interactions with local stakeholders had been documented.

Finally, in Moment 4, the results were reviewed, decisions were made to refine or discard brand proposals, and preparations were undertaken for subsequent rounds of evaluation or for refining the final proposal.

### 3.2. COMPOSITION OF THE EXPERT PANEL AND EVALUATION CRITERIA (PHASE 2)

To confirm the validity of the results, the brand and its construction process were submitted to expert evaluation using the Delphi method. The criteria proposed by Landetta (1999) were followed, recommending the selection of 10 to 30 experts. Given the unique characteristics of the Cuban social model, it was decided to include primarily national specialists or those with field experience in the country.

Experts external to Trinidad were selected to avoid potential bias from prior involvement in earlier stages of the study. Additional inclusion criteria required specialised publications in their fields and a minimum of five years of professional experience. Given the interdisciplinary nature of city branding and the methodology employed, the panel was designed to integrate experts from the field's various sub-disciplines. Initially, 15 potential experts were identified and invited to participate, with the additional request that they recommend other evaluators. This process resulted in a list of 34 specialists, of whom 25 agreed to participate.

To ensure the pertinence of the selected experts, a competence test (K) was applied, calculated as the arithmetic mean of the knowledge coefficient and an argumentation coefficient, derived from a closed questionnaire. A total of 17 individuals obtained a coefficient equal to or superior than 0.8. The trajectory of three additional experts with scores between 0.7 and 0.8 was also considered; despite fewer scientific publications, their recognised professional contributions warranted their inclusion. The final panel consisted of 20 experts. Figure 1 shows the experts' areas of specialisation and their relationship to relevant associated fields.

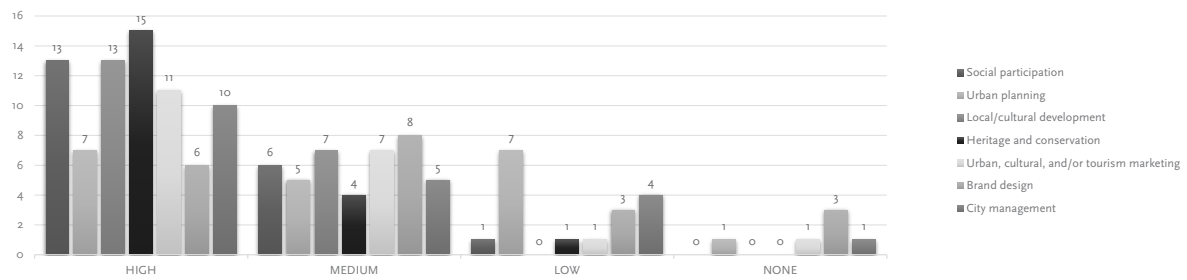


Figure 1. Areas of knowledge and levels of expertise of the expert panel

Notably, 70% of the experts held a PhD, 10% a master's degree, and 20% post-graduate-level specialisations. Their disciplinary backgrounds were diverse (sociology, architecture, economics, heritage studies, education, marketing, design, social communication, urban geography, and anthropology), as were their institutional affiliations and production contexts (Cuba, Argentina, Mexico, and Spain).

Expert assessments were collected through a Likert-scale instrument encompassing 10 variables that covered the comprehensiveness of both the process and brand components: theoretical and referential assumptions adopted; principles guiding brand construction in the Cuban case; diagnostic methodology; diagnostic results; methodology created for the construction and validation of the proposal; brand concept; logo, brand phrases, creative universe; and the utility of the procedures for city brand construction in Cuba. The instrument also included an open-ended question allowing experts to freely express general considerations.

### 3.3. ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

During fieldwork, participants were informed of the research's purpose, the potential benefits for Trinidad (informed consent), and the anonymous and voluntary nature of their participation. Similarly, the invitation to potential members of the expert panel outlined the study's objectives and the commitment to protect personal data beyond institutional affiliation, years of experience, and areas of expertise. It was clarified that, upon request, even this information would not be disclosed in the reports.

## 4. RESULTS

### 4.1. FIELDWORK NARRATIVE OF THE ETHNOGRAPHIC RESEARCH

Based on the diagnostic results, during the first creative session, it was agreed to develop brand proposals grounded in heritage-related urban markers. Proposals exclusively centred on two representative towers of Trinidad, the former convent of San Francisco de Asís and the Manaca-Iznaga sugar mill, were vetoed. Although these

structures dominate the municipality's iconic imagery, some of the specialists who had accompanied the creative team during the diagnostic phase argued that "proposing a brand based on those towers would be repeating the same thing" (specialist from the Office of the Conservator of Trinidad and the Valley of the Sugar Mills, personal communication, 11 March, 2022).

This was compounded by the perception, though not widespread, that an external consultancy (the creative team came from a city over 500 km away) should not be responsible for developing the brand. This perception initially hindered integration and added pressure to the creative phases.

In Moment 1, 10 ideas were discussed, of which only four were deemed suitable for public evaluation (Moment 3). The brand concepts were: "Trinidad, heritage city", "Trinidad, more than a photo", "Trinidad, perfect balance", and "Trinidad, city of encounters". To accompany these concepts, logo sketches were designed based on iconic elements such as cobblestone streets and textiles (inspired by a lace stitch internationally known as *la trinitaria*), as well as narrative designs that combined diverse elements (beaches, mountains, towers, windows, railings, typography, and heraldry; see diagnostic report: Castillo-Salina & Yañez Reyes, 2025).

The first round of fieldwork in Trinidad, conducted over one week, was in certain respects frustrating for the creative team. Proposals based on typography were immediately rejected for their "confusing design" and for "not representing the spirit of Trinidad". While logos based on textiles and cobblestones received greater acceptance, they were seen as representing only sectors of the city's identity. Creative-sector entrepreneurs (craftspeople, cultural goods merchants, etc.) tended to support these proposals, but tourism and private-sector actors argued that they did not feel accurately represented. Citizens expressed mixed views.

Narrative designs gained broader acceptance through their incorporation of diverse elements. As one citizen explained: "the tower of the convent of San Francisco de Asís is the best representation of the town, and if it coexists with the mountains or the cobblestone streets, there is no doubt it is Trinidad" (citizen, personal communication, 11 April, 2022).

By the third day of fieldwork, it became clear that the issue lay in selecting a central element. The following session, therefore, debated whether the brand should be synthesised into a single element or represented as a combination. Consensus emerged that the brand would be more effective if represented by the tower of the convent of San Francisco de Asís.

A similar process unfolded with the brand concepts. "Heritage city" was deemed too close to how tourism agencies and local institutions already promoted Trinidad, a view shared by government, service, tourism, private sector, and citizen actors. Local stakeholders insisted that the concept needed to highlight that Trinidad is an "integral destination, with heritage, city, beaches, mountains, and abundant culture" (tourism entrepreneur, personal communication, 11 March, 2022). For this reason, the metaphor of *encounters* gained stronger traction.

By the sixth day, theoretical saturation had been reached. Interactions were recorded with 214 people, and 14 meetings involving 269 participants from both the public and private sectors. Returning to their headquarters, the creative team decided to concentrate on a new logo proposal, with “Trinidad, city of encounters” as the central concept.

The photographic motif used in previous branding attempts was revisited and reinterpreted to renew Trinidad’s iconic imagery, integrating landscapes and elements. The new logo proposal aligned with the city-of-encounters metaphor. Although other ideas were explored, they failed to achieve consensus when evaluated against the internal coherence indicators of Moment 2. After intense discussion, the decision was made to conduct another round of fieldwork with a single proposal, which was preliminarily approved through consultations with the Office of the Conservator of the City.

The second round of consultations in Trinidad confirmed a high level of acceptance for both the logo and the brand concept. One potential conflict stemmed from the multiple epithets used in local culture to name Trinidad. These epithets, which function as informal brands, remain in active use, with more than 20 identified (see Castillo-Salina & Yañez Reyes, 2025). A persistent concern was how they might affect the new brand proposal. During the second day of fieldwork, the most common epithet, “Trinidad de Cuba”, emerged, primarily intended to distinguish the city from others with the same name in Latin America.

When the concept was presented to specialists from the Office of the Conservator, the need to include this epithet in the logo was strongly expressed. Although the creative team highlighted that Trinidad had distinctive values that could differentiate itself from other cities and warned of the risks of adding more text to the logo, this point was treated as non-negotiable.

Subsequent consultations with local stakeholders and citizens on the feasibility of the modification (without initially presenting it visually) revealed strong support from government actors, private entrepreneurs, and artists and intellectuals. They considered it both “marketable” and “representative of Trinidad”. Other citizens described the logo as capturing “the mysticism of the city”, being “novel” and “refreshing”, while still not straying too far from Trinidad’s classic imagery.

When the idea of including the epithet “de Cuba” in the isologotype was shared, most respondents agreed it could be the element missing for the brand to “fully taste of Trinidad”. A minority expressed indifference. Theoretical saturation was reached after 132 interactions with local stakeholders and 10 meetings involving 197 participants.

The third phase of work focused on developing the brand’s visual and verbal elements. It was agreed that these should emphasise identity elements of Trinidad not represented in the isologotype, using distinctive local colours culturally tied to specific sectors and activities (see Castillo-Salina & Yañez Reyes, 2025). As the central element of the creative universe, patterns reminiscent of *trinitaria* lace were developed. The brand’s verbal system drew on words, phrases, and ideas rooted in local culture to describe Trinidad. Once the complete proposal was ready, it was analysed using the indicators of

Moment 3. Following its approval by the creative team, a third round of fieldwork was conducted in Trinidad.

The feedback gathered confirmed the results of previous stages. Both the visual and verbal systems of the brand were positively assessed, with only minor recommendations and 10 criteria showing significant disagreement. Theoretical saturation was reached in this phase after 98 interactions.

At the supervisors' recommendation, the proposal was presented to the Asamblea Municipal del Poder Popular, the highest local government authority, where more than 300 participants were present. The result confirmed the acceptance of the brand proposal and called for its refinement in preparation for official approval.

#### 4.2. THE BRAND CONSTRUCTED: TRINIDAD DE CUBA, CITY OF ENCOUNTERS

The design presents a simplified, modern representation of the tower of the former convent of San Francisco de Asís (Figure 2). The logotype is framed to evoke Trinidad's iconic photographic imagery; however, the tower rises above the frame, symbolising that the city offers much more. The lower part of the frame is left open, reflecting the idea that its streets and pathways lead to continuous discovery. The primary colour is "Trinidad yellow", established in the local imaginary as the one that best represents the city and its urban heritage. The text of the isologotype incorporates the name "Trinidad de Cuba" in a serif typeface, while the brand slogan, "city of encounters", is written in sans-serif. This typographic contrast highlights the dialogue between the historical–heritage dimension (serif) and the modern (sans-serif).



Figure 2. Presents the brand's isologotype as the outcome of the participatory process

The brand concept asserts: Trinidad de Cuba is a place of encounters. It welcomes encounters among cultures through the constant flow of tourism and the warmth and hospitality of its inhabitants. Geographically, it is an encounter between landscapes: the

city, the Valley of the Sugar Mills, the Topes de Collantes' mountains, and the coastal strip. Through the conservation of its heritage, it is also an encounter with another era.

The narrative's thematic axes are encounters with history, heritage, culture, and nature, and with inhabitants.

The brand is built upon four pillars of local development, represented by specific colours:

- Heritage, symbolised by Trinidad yellow, the brand's primary colour, refers to the city's historical, architectural, and urban wealth;
- Nature, represented by green, encompasses the valley and the mountains;
- Traditions, expressed through terracotta, include crafts, gastronomy, and other elements that reflect the territory's cultural richness;
- Beaches, symbolised by blue, refer to the protection of marine ecosystems and related tourism activities.

Together, these pillars interweave to create a complete and balanced representation of Trinidad (Figure 3).



Figure 3. Relationship between brand sectors and colours

The creative universe was designed around a pattern of discontinuous lines to ensure brand applicability in diverse environments, particularly in contexts where the isologotype or logotype may not be used (Figure 4). This pattern of fluid, interwoven lines alludes to the diverse pathways of local history, while their intersections symbolise *encounters*. Above all, it pays tribute to the ancestral crafts of lace-making and fibre weaving.



Figure 4. Application of the brand pattern

#### 4.3. EXPERT ASSESSMENTS

The experts concurred in highlighting the consistency of both the methodological process and the brand developed, underscoring its validity and relevance. Most of the evaluations were concentrated in the category “highly appropriate” (63%), followed by “quite appropriate” (27%), while only 8% rated it as “appropriate” and 2% as “somewhat appropriate”. No item was considered “inappropriate”, and the overall trend across the items evaluated was toward “highly appropriate”. Among the 20 recommendations formulated, emphasis was placed on improving the fluidity of the logotype, reducing it for certain applications, and developing new claims and taglines. The creative team addressed these observations by giving the logotype greater prominence in reduced-format contexts and prioritising the slogan as the principal verbal element.

Beyond the study’s immediate objectives, the experts also provided recommendations for future phases of the project. These focused on aspects such as brand communication in both global and national contexts, territorial governance and management, the integration of local and external stakeholders, budgetary planning, and the continuity of citizen participation. Overall, the panel agreed on the value of the study for “paving the way for future experiences of city brand construction in a context where there is much to contribute to the country’s culture and development” (Expert 10). They further asserted that the methodology is replicable in other Global South localities, provided that their specificities are taken into account (Experts 1, 2, 9, 10), and emphasized that the experience represents “a step forward in modernizing the territorial management system, bringing it closer to global practices while maintaining the factors that make Cuba a unique environment” (Expert 17).

## 5. CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this study confirm that participatory ethnography, when combined with procedures of theoretical saturation and critical reflexivity, can generate a brand proposal with strong community acceptance and identity coherence. This result is particularly relevant in a context such as Cuba, where social policies establish participation, social inclusion, and the protection of cultural values as indispensable conditions for development strategies (Ministerio de Economía y Planificación, 2019).

The study further demonstrates that territorial brand construction cannot be reduced to technical design exercises or communication strategies exclusively oriented toward markets. By contrast, the integration of more than 1,200 citizen voices in this study enabled the articulation of a shared metaphor that synthesises the diversity of local identities and their future projections. The negotiation of tensions between technical expertise and community perceptions, exemplified by the inclusion of the epithet “de Cuba” in the isologotype, illustrated how deference to local meanings strengthens the brand’s symbolic appropriation and broadens its potential for social reproduction.

A significant contribution of this research is the methodological protocol for constructing city brands grounded in participatory ethnography. This protocol integrated moments of reflexivity, internal coherence analysis, successive rounds of citizen interaction, and expert validation. Experts who assessed the results confirmed its pertinence for the development of similar experiences in Cuba and other contexts of the Global South, positioning it as a useful alternative to the prevailing standardised and top-down approaches in the field (Andrade, Sampaio, Garcia, & Fonseca, 2024; Casais & Monteiro, 2019; Leino & Puumala, 2020). The validation of this protocol not only confirmed the consistency of the process carried out in Trinidad but also provided a replicable and adaptable framework for diverse urban governance scenarios, reinforcing the study’s originality and practical contribution.

From a theoretical perspective, this study advances discussions on the situated and plural character of city brands. Riza et al. (2012) had already noted that urban identity constitutes a complex symbolic ecosystem in constant reconstruction. The Trinidad case reinforces this view by showing how participatory ethnography, grounded in principles of multivocality and reflexivity (Barraquero-Díaz et al., 2016; Sisto, 2008), can overcome the limitations of positivist approaches, which tend to homogenise narratives and obscure the tensions constitutive of urban life (Armani, 2024; Maziashvili et al., 2023). In this way, the study confirms that qualitative methodologies, when applied according to criteria of transparency, theoretical saturation, and communicative credibility, can ensure rigour and transferability in city branding research (Cohen & Gómez, 2019; Suzina, 2024; Torres-Zamudio et al., 2021).

At the practical level, the findings provide valuable lessons for local governments, consultancies, and urban actors. The first is that transversal participation must be planned from the earliest stages rather than confined to formal consultations in the final phases, as has often been the case in numerous projects documented in Europe and

the Americas (Casais & Monteiro, 2019; Leino & Puumala, 2020; Andrade, Sampaio, Garcia, & Fonseca, 2024). The second is that interdisciplinary teams, by integrating cultural, communicative, and social knowledge beyond design and applied communication, hold strong potential to overcome the longstanding fragmentation between professional practice and academic reflection that has historically characterised the field (Collins, 2024; Kavaratzis, 2019).

The study, however, presents limitations that must be acknowledged. The organisation of three rounds of participatory ethnographic fieldwork required a considerable investment of time and logistical resources, which could limit the replicability of the design in contexts with fewer resources, as noted by Leino and Puumala (2020) and Anthony (2024). Although the expert panel validated both the process and the outcome, no longitudinal follow-up was conducted to assess the appropriateness of the brand over time or its impact on indicators such as citizen participation or tourism attraction. This represents an opportunity for future research.

From these limitations emerge several directions for advancing the field. First, longitudinal studies in Cuba are needed to analyse the evolution of brand appropriation and its influence on social and economic dynamics. Second, quantitative and qualitative online methods could be combined (for instance, integrating representative surveys and digital co-creation dynamics) to complement ethnographic findings and reduce costs (Andrade, Sampaio, Garcia, & Fonseca, 2024; Källström & Siljeklint, 2021). Third, adapting and implementing the protocol for constructing the Trinidad brand in different governance contexts would allow for an assessment of its transferability. Finally, this study highlights the urgency of reflecting on the tensions between technical criteria and community perceptions in participatory city branding, an aspect that has been scarcely addressed in the specialised literature.

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