

Master Thesis Human Geography

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# “Don’t come to Den Bosch, it is always a party here”

Exploring the impact of creative tourism and place branding  
on place identity and authenticity in 's-Hertogenbosch



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## **Abstract**

This study aims to answer how the creative tourist identity pitched by local place branding strategies aligns with, and possibly influences traditional place identity in 's-Hertogenbosch. Through qualitative interviews, this research investigates how residents look at key concepts like place identity, creative tourism and branding. The findings reveal a complex relationship between the city's efforts to attract creative tourists and resident's attachment to traditions like carnival. While the economic potential of tourism is valued, there are concerns about maintaining the city's unique character and the impacts of tourism. This study highlights the importance of incorporating residents' views into branding to ensure authenticity, as they are a large part of the identity of the city.

## **Acknowledgements**

Before you lies my Master's thesis, titled "Don't come to Den Bosch, it is always a party here", referring to the slogan developed by the city marketing organization of 's-Hertogenbosch. This slogan encapsulates the complex, and sometimes contradictory processes going on in the city, and maybe also in this research topic.

I have written this thesis as a part of the ending of my Master's program in Human Geography, specialized in Cultural Geography and Tourism at the Radboud University Nijmegen. As I am from Den Bosch and celebrate carnival every year, this was a topic close to my heart, which I hope is reflected in the writing.

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## 1. Introduction

Every year, 's-Hertogenbosch sees more and more visitors coming to the city, especially during large, traditional events like carnival (Marchand, 2024). It is a city known for culture and history, but more trendy and creative spaces are emerging. With the city getting busier, tourism has become a prominent topic of conversation and the city is developing its first official tourism strategy, with political debates focusing on themes like sustainability, visitor pressure and managing tourism flow, including the question if tourism should even be encouraged. At the same time, the city branding organization of 's-Hertogenbosch has launched a new brand identity to promote the city. Den Bosch & Partners, in collaboration with the municipality, is aiming to attract the 'creative tourist', raising important questions about tourism and place identity; how does this brand constructed for the creative tourist align with the city's historical character, and what impact does this have on the city's identity and residents?

's-Hertogenbosch, also known as Den Bosch, is the capital city of the Dutch province Noord-Brabant. It significantly contributes to the province's cultural and economic landscape, partly due to its strategic location and accessibility to other major cities like Utrecht and Eindhoven. The city is renowned for its well-preserved architecture, such as the 14th-century Sint-Janskathedraal, the Binnendieze, a network of canals, and the cobblestone streets characterizing the historical centre. These physical attributes are part of the city and its history, and as the physical shape of a city is closely linked to people's perceptions of it, it is also part of its identity (Peng, Strijker, and Wu, 2020). But the physical environment is also changing, with developments currently underway or planned for the near future. According to a councillor of 's-Hertogenbosch, "the appearance of the city becomes truly significantly different" (Kuilder, 2024).

Although important, there is more to place identity than just physical attributes and the perception of these physical attributes. Paasi (1991; 2009) distinguishes between people's place identity and the place identity of a place, with people's place identity referring to the identification of individuals with a place, influenced by strong bonds to their environment. This is especially important for the city of 's-Hertogenbosch, as research conducted in 2023 by BrabantBranding showed the identity of the city is – more than other surrounding cities – strongly linked with that of its province, Noord-Brabant. The identity is mostly formed by cultural associations like 'friendliness', 'carnival' and 'pretty' (BrabantBranding, 2023).

Although there is no objectively unique Brabant identity, many Brabanders and other Dutch people still subjectively perceive Brabant as different, as highlighted by Verkaar et al. (2006). This perceived difference stems from individuals' choice to identify with the values and lifestyle associated with the region (Verkaar et al., 2006).

Over the last few years, 's-Hertogenbosch has seen an increase in tourists, which is especially noticeable during major events like carnival. While physical attributes and culture have attracted people for a long time, the city marketing is working with a specific new vision – aimed at attracting a certain type of tourist. The decision for the target audience ‘the creatives’ was based on the "glocalities segmentation model," a model developed by marketing consulting firm Glocalities in 2013 through extensive surveys and fieldwork across various countries. The model aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of global values, cultures, preferences, and consumer behaviours by categorizing the visiting population into five segments using cluster analysis: the creatives, the challengers, the achievers, the conservatives, and the socializers (Glocalities, 2023).

The choice to target ‘creatives’ aligns with the creative turn identified by scholars in the tourism industry, which centres experiences rather than products (Richards, 2011). Modern urban tourists increasingly look for authenticity and immersion in the everyday life of cities, rather than just tangible heritage like monuments or architecture (Füller & Michel, 2014). This shift towards ‘creative tourism’ emphasizes a deeper engagement with locals (Nieuwland & Lavanga, 2021; Richards, 2011) and a focus on intangible cultural experiences. According to UNESCO (2003), these experiences encompass “the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills – as well as the instruments, objects, artifacts and cultural spaces” that communities recognize as part of their cultural heritage. Central to these experiences is the pursuit of authenticity, a key driver in the growing demand for more meaningful and immersive interactions. However, authenticity itself is a multifaceted concept, with many tourist experiences often being constructed or staged to appear authentic, even if they are not genuinely so (MacCannell, 1973; Wang, 1999).

### 1.1. Societal relevance

Understanding the creative shift in tourism in general is crucial for addressing how modern tourism trends shape the experiences of both visitors and residents. This is particularly relevant for 's-Hertogenbosch because the city is currently navigating the process of creating its first

official tourism strategy. Having no official previous tourism vision, this process is raising political and public questions about whether to even encourage tourism, and if so, how to manage it sustainably. Important topics of conversation are visitor dispersion, talking about both place and time, and keeping the city liveable (van Bree, 2024).

Simultaneously, the marketing organization Den Bosch & Partners launched a new brand strategy and visual identity in 2023, with the aim of attracting the ‘creative tourist’. Since its establishment at the start of 2022, Den Bosch & Partners has been the official city marketing organization. In their first half-year they focused on thoroughly understanding the city through analysis and research, in collaboration with local partners and creatives, in order to build a strategic foundation for the brand of the city. The vision has now been set, and the organization is actively working on applying it to different facets of the city (Den Bosch & Partners, 2022). Their focus aligns with the previously mentioned trend of urban tourists seeking authentic, experience-based experiences instead of traditional, tangible cultural heritage (Füller & Michel, 2014; Richards, 2011; Nieuwland & Lavanga, 2021).

Understanding these trends is particularly relevant for ‘s-Hertogenbosch, a city renowned for its rich cultural heritage and historical identity within the province of Noord-Brabant. As the city navigates questions about how to sustainably manage tourism, the concept of authenticity becomes increasingly important. For a place with such a strong cultural identity, it is crucial to not only promote what is considered authentic but also to ensure that this authenticity is preserved in the face of tourism growth. Authenticity plays a vital role not just in the city’s tourism strategies, but also in maintaining the integrity of its place identity. Poorly managed tourism, as seen in cities like Amsterdam, can negatively impact residents' quality of life, making it essential to balance tourism development with the preservation of what makes the city truly unique. This balance offers valuable insights not only for ‘s-Hertogenbosch but for cities with similar concerns about protecting their identity while engaging with modern tourism trends.

## 1.2. Scientific relevance

This research contributes to the broader academic discourse on the shift in tourism studies from tangible heritage, to intangible, experience-based tourism, often referred to as the creative turn (Füller & Michel, 2014; Richards, 2011; Nieuwland & Lavanga, 2021). By examining how the creative tourist identity, as promoted by local branding efforts, interacts with and potentially reshapes the traditional place identity of 's-Hertogenbosch, this research can contribute valuable insights to the ongoing discourse on creative tourism and place identity. This is done by exploring the close connection between place identity and the importance of authenticity in branding.

In addition to the focus on creative tourism, this research also examines place identity from the residents' perspective and their lived experiences. Peng, Strijker & Wu (2020) highlight that while collective identities can emerge through branding, they do not always align with individual perceptions of a place. They call for further research into the lived experiences of individuals and communities to better understand how personal and collective identities interact within place branding efforts. This study responds to that call by centring the experiences of 's-Hertogenbosch residents and exploring how these experiences relate to the city's evolving identity.

The core of this study delves into the concept of authenticity, a key factor in creative tourism and place identity. Wang, Liu, Wei & Zhang (2020) emphasize the role of authenticity in enhancing cultural engagement and visitor experiences, which are central to creative tourism. By investigating how the constructed identity of the creative tourist influences perceptions of authenticity in 's-Hertogenbosch, this research aims to provide a deeper understanding of the dynamics between visitor experiences and local identity. With authenticity being so important for creative tourism and thus the current branding strategies in 's-Hertogenbosch, it is important to identify these authentic places and practices (Boisen, Terlouw & van Gorp, 2011).

Much of the existing research on place branding suffers from a lack of conceptual clarity and empirical grounding, as noted by Renaud Vuignier (2017), who attributes this to the significant influence of practitioners and consultants. The field remains fragmented, shaped by interests across different domains, and often lacks a coherent, academic foundation, making it an important topic for academic research. With a strict geographic focus, this research contributes to the growing importance of understanding the identity of a place before implementing

branding strategies (Peng, Strijker & Wu, 2020). This research builds on existing studies about 's-Hertogenbosch, the Imagomonitor by Brabantbranding (2023) and the Glocalities study (Schoemaker, Fan & Van der Kraan, 2023), adding a qualitative, scientific dimension centred on the resident perspective.

### 1.3. Research problem and objectives

The core research problem centres on the potential tension between the traditional identity of 's-Hertogenbosch and the identity being constructed through place branding efforts. As the city seeks to appeal to creative tourists, there is a risk that this externally constructed identity may not fully resonate with residents or reflect the city's authentic character. This research addresses the key question: **"How does the creative tourist identity pitched by local place branding strategies align with and possibly influence traditional place identity in 's-Hertogenbosch?"**

The objective of this study is to explore this central question by:

1. **Defining the traditional place identity of 's-Hertogenbosch**, focusing on its historical, cultural, and social attributes as perceived by its residents.
2. **Identifying who the 'creative tourist' is** in the context of the city according to residents, informed by the branding strategies employed by Den Bosch & Partners and the broader discourse on creative tourism
3. **Examining the influence of place branding** by analysing the residents' perspective of branding materials used by the city.

By addressing these objectives, the research seeks to provide a deeper understanding of how modern branding strategies affect both local identity and perceptions of authenticity, offering valuable insights for cities like 's-Hertogenbosch that aim to balance tradition with modern tourism demands.

### 1.4. Outline

The next section presents the theoretical framework, where key concepts such as 'place identity,' 'creative tourism,' 'place branding,' and 'authenticity' are explored. These concepts help frame the analysis of how residents of 's-Hertogenbosch perceive their city's evolving identity and its representation to both locals and visitors. Following the theoretical framework, the methodological section outlines the research design, which is based on qualitative

interviews with residents. It details the data collection methods, the selection of participants, and the approach to data analysis, providing a rationale for the chosen methods. The results section is structured like the theoretical framework, in three parts: (1) place identity, (2) creative tourism, and (3) place branding. Interview findings are combined with some external perspectives to explore how 's-Hertogenbosch's identity is constructed and perceived. Key themes from the interviews are discussed in relation to these concepts. The conclusion and discussion section summarizes the main findings, answers the central question and reflects on the research.

## 2. Theoretical framework

### 2.1. Place identity

Understanding the nuanced interplay between personal and place identity, as well as the formation and perception of regional identity, is crucial for this research. These theoretical perspectives provide a foundation for analysing how the creative tourist identity promoted by local branding strategies interacts with the traditional place identity of 's-Hertogenbosch. In the 1970s, the definition of a place as a space endowed with meaning was conceptualized (Cresswell, 2009), using contributions of researchers like Relph (1976) and Tuan (1977). This conceptualization was a humanistic reaction to the rationality of the 1960s and early 1970s (Cresswell, 2009). Although this definition of place has been widely accepted since, the concept of place identity remains less clear (Lewicka, 2008).

Although identity may seem to be highly individual, scholars emphasize the importance of the environment, context and other individuals (Jenkins, 2014); all elements that are locally emplaced. Place identity was initially introduced and defined by environmental psychologist Proshansky (1978) as: *“those dimensions of self that define the individual’s personal identity in relation to the physical environment by means of a complex pattern of conscious and unconscious ideas, feelings, values, goals, preferences, skills, and behavioral tendencies relevant to a specific environment”* (Proshansky, 1978, p. 155). This definition underscores the intimate connection between an individual’s identity and their physical surroundings, suggesting that place identity is an integral part of personal identity. However, this definition of place identity has also faced criticism. Lewicka (2008) argues that Proshansky’s definition focuses solely on the individual’s aspects without sufficiently considering the characteristics of the place itself. This critique is particularly relevant to my research as it highlights the need to consider both individual and place-specific elements in understanding place identity.

Paasi (1991) provides nuance to conversations on place identity by distinguishing between people’s place identity and the place identity of a place. People’s place identity, aligning with Proshansky’s (1978) definition, refers to the identification of individuals with a place, influenced by strong bonds to their environment, which in turn affects their behavior (Peng, Strijker, and Wu, 2020). Conversely, the place identity of a place refers to the unique characteristics of a location—its nature, culture, and people—that distinguish it from other regions (Paasi, 1991; 2003; 2009). Building on this, Peng, Strijker, and Wu (2020) have created

a framework, shown in figure 1, for understanding place identity by organizing it into four interrelated quadrants, each of which reflects different dimensions of identity.

	<b>External looks</b>	<b>Internal thoughts</b>
<b>People</b>	Physical appearance (e.g., dress, hair, skin); Behavior (e.g., dialect, diet, traditional practice, skill)	Attitude (e.g., patriot, goal, preference); Feeling (e.g., importance of elements of a place to self, identification with places of different spatial scales)
<b>Place</b>	Physical shape (e.g., territory, landscape, building, land use); Symbolic shape (e.g., landmark, dialect, name of the place, boundary on the map); Institutional shape (e.g., government, firm, neighbourhood)	Individual perception (e.g., place boundary in mind, representative elements of a place in mind, holistic image of a place); Collective perception (e.g., place marketing, discourse about a place)

Figure 1: Dimensions of place identity (Peng, Strijker & Wu, 2020)

External looks refer to the observable characteristics of both people and places. For individuals, these include physical appearances and behaviors, such as clothing, dialect, and customs, which are often influenced by local traditions or genetic heritage. Even when people migrate, they may retain these characteristics; the visible traits contribute to their self-identity (Peng, Strijker & Wu, 2020)

In the case of places, external looks are defined by tangible, geographic, and cultural elements. Paasi (1986) categorizes these into three distinct shapes:

- Physical Shape: The concrete, geographic features of a place, such as landscapes, buildings, and natural environments. In ‘s-Hertogenbosch, buildings like the Sint-Jan Cathedral or the historic city centre form part of this category.
- Symbolic Shape: The meanings and representations associated with a place, including its name, significant landmarks, and cultural symbols like the Bossche Bol (food) or references to Jeroen Bosch.
- Institutional Shape: The governance structures, organizations, and social systems that organize life in a place.

These external characteristics interact to create a visible, collective identity. Internal thoughts concern the subjective connections individuals have with places. This involves attitudes, feelings, and emotional responses that reflect how people perceive their relationship to a place. Researchers study these subjective experiences to explore value-oriented feelings, such as pride in one's city, love for a cultural tradition, or a sense of belonging (Peng, Strijker & Wu, 2020).

Internal thoughts about the place are reflected in the mental images that people hold about it, which are often shaped by the external characteristics of the place and influenced by how it is marketed or represented (Peng, Strijker & Wu, 2020). Peng, Strijker and Wu (2020) do however emphasize that a collective identity, that can emerge over time, does sometimes not align with individual perceptions of the place. In this research, the focus is on that individual perception, specifically that of residents. Figure 1 illustrates the complex interplay between personal and collective identities, as well as the physical and mental aspects of it.

Building on the insights of place identity, the concept of regional identity often intersects with it in geographical literature, adding another layer of complexity to our understanding of identity dynamics. Regional identity, as defined by Raagma (2010), is a phenomenon where people identify with the social system of a region, encompassing its people, culture, traditions, and landscape. This definition, while closely related to place identity, emphasizes clearer boundaries and territorial connections, making it particularly relevant for political and cultural institutions. It is often times conceptualized less flexible than place (Massey, 1994).

Paasi (2003) describes regional identity as the interpretation of the process through which a region becomes institutionalized, involving the creation of territorial boundaries, symbolic elements, and institutions. He outlines four stages in the formation of a region: (1) the delineation of territorial boundaries, (2) symbolic shaping through elements like names, local languages, and landmarks, (3) the establishment of formal and informal institutions, and (4) the development of socio-spatial consciousness and the region's identity (Paasi, 1986). This concept of regional identity is closely tied to physical space, making it more politically charged than place identity, which is often more individually experienced and constructed. However, as previously mentioned, the terms region and place are frequently used interchangeably, leading to the politicization of place identity as well (Paasi, 2003). These stages illustrate the process through which a region like Noord-Brabant becomes institutionalized and culturally significant.

Brabant, as a province and a region, embodies both place and regional identity. Studies by Visser, Norier, and Swanenberg (2015) highlight the subjective perception of a ‘Brabantse’ identity, which is perceived as distinct by its inhabitants. This perception is rooted in cultural and social familiarity rather than strict geographical boundaries, as emphasized by Wagemakers (2017). The sense of ‘Brabantse’ identity, though difficult to define precisely, is shaped by memories, stereotypes, and local knowledge (Wagemakers, 2017; Rieter, 2018; Smit et al., 2018).

## 2.2. Creative tourism

Urban tourism has undergone significant changes in recent years, with a surge in scholarly research examining the evolving dynamics within cities (Ashworth & Page, 2011). Cities are increasingly expected by both visitors and policy makers to be creative and innovative, leading to an evolving relationship between tourism and creativity (Hubbard, 2018), but also possibly alters the identity of a city. According to Richards and Wilson (2007) this so-called ‘creative turn’ in tourism developed out of the earlier ‘cultural turn’ that started in the late 1970s. During this period, culture became a driver of economic and urban regeneration, particularly in cities facing industrial decline (Richards & Wilson, 2007). As these cultural strategies matured, they gradually evolved into what is now recognized as the ‘creative turn.’

Central to this creative turn is the new synthesis of culture and commerce, where the experience economy, in which not products but experiences are central, plays a pivotal role. In this context, culture serves as a catalyst for growth and development. Tourism, as a major driver of economic expansion in the realms of culture and creativity, exemplifies this integration (Richards, 2011). This shift in approach sees cities redefining themselves as cultural centers and creative hotspots. It represents a departure from the traditional focus on physical heritage, like monuments and museums, toward prioritizing the value of cultural engagement (Richards, 2011) As tourists seek to integrate into the local lifestyle and explore everyday aspects of city life, urban dynamics are reshaped, resulting in increased interactions between tourists and locals (Füller & Michel, 2014; Mordue, 2017).

This evolving landscape has given rise to a new type of tourist, referred to in academia as the ‘creative tourist’ (Nieuwland & Lavanga, 2021) or the ‘new urban tourist’ (Füller & Michel,

2014). UNESCO (2006) defines creative tourism as “*travel directed toward an engaged and authentic experience, with participative learning in the arts, heritage, or special character of a place, and it provides a connection with those who reside in this place and create this living culture.*” This definition highlights a distinction between Nieuwland and Lavanga (2021) expand on this definition by emphasizing that cultural or creative elements can both provide a backdrop for an experience and be central to the activity itself. As Füller and Michel (2014) describe, new urban tourism is characterized by a shift in tourist preferences towards authentic and immersive experiences within urban environments.

This search for authentic experiences reflects a desire to see the true essence of a place; it’s identity as lived by locals (Wang, Liu, Wei and Zhang (2020). Even though there is a distinction between authenticity for tourists and place identity for locals, they overlap in creative tourism practices. In their article, Wang, Liu, Wei and Zhang (2020) emphasize the importance of the concepts of memorability and authenticity in creative tourist experiences. Memorability pertains to a visitor's ability to recall specific activities and form lasting attitudes—either positive or negative—toward a destination. Authenticity involves the experiences that are perceived as truly representative of the local culture, rather than being created specifically for tourists.

Authenticity has been an important research topic within tourism studies for decades, as it can have different meanings. In his influential 1973 article, Dean MacCannell explored the dynamics of tourism and the search for authentic experiences, using Erving Goffman’s ‘front’ versus ‘back’ distinction. In the context of tourism, back regions represent the everyday life of locals, while front regions are the tourist attractions and public spaces curated for visitors. In his work, MacCannell (1973) highlights how many tourist experiences are intentionally staged to appear authentic, catering to the tourist’s desire to access the ‘back regions’. This concept of staged authenticity gives the illusion of genuine experiences, but often does not reflect the true nature of local life.

While MacCannell’s (1973) article laid the groundwork for understanding how urban experiences can be fabricated to seem authentic, Ning Wang (1999) expands on these ideas by introducing the notion of existential authenticity. Existential authenticity refers to a state in which individuals connect with their ‘true selves’ through personal and intersubjective experiences, rather than through the authenticity of objects or settings. It emphasizes the

emotional and relational aspects an experience, focusing on how tourists feel and connect with them, whether or not the toured objects are considered authentic. Both MacCannell (1973) and Wang (1999) highlight the complexities and constructed nature of authenticity in tourism settings, with Wang (1999) adding that tourists are often more interested in the authenticity of their personal experiences rather than the authenticity of the objects they encounter. More recent and widely cited studies have built on the foundational work of MacCannell (1973) and Wang (1999), further examining the role of staged authenticity and existential authenticity in shaping tourist experiences (e.g., Beverland & Farrelly, 2010; Steiner & Reisinger, 2006; Park, Choi & Lee, 2019).

Unlike traditional tourism, which often focuses on iconic landmarks and well-known cultural attractions, creative tourism emphasizes engagement with the everyday life of the city. Dirksmeier and Helbrecht (2015) highlight a similar trend, noting tourists' increasing quest for contact with the mundane life in ordinary residential quarters. These creative tourists aim to integrate into local communities, exploring residential neighbourhoods and seeking experiences in less-travelled areas, thus fostering a more intimate connection with the destination (Füller & Michel, 2014). One way of immersing themselves in the cultural fabric of their destinations, is participating in activities that allow them to engage with local traditions, crafts, and ways of life. This experiential approach contrasts with traditional tourism's passive consumption of sights and spectacles, emphasizing instead the active participation and co-creation of experiences (Richards & Wilson, 2007).

The relevance of place identity in the context of creative tourism cannot be overstated. Theories of place identity, as discussed earlier, highlight the deep connections between individuals and specific environments. For creative tourists, the authenticity and memorability of their experiences are closely tied to the place's identity—the unique characteristics and cultural narratives that define it.

### 2.3. Place branding and city marketing

As creative tourists increasingly seek authentic, immersive experiences, cities must adapt their branding efforts to reflect these changing desires. Rather than focusing solely on iconic landmarks or cultural heritage, they now need to craft narratives that resonate with tourists' interest in local culture and everyday life. Branding has attracted scholarly attention across

multiple disciplines for decades, the main ones being marketing, public management, political science and geography, which has led to conceptual ambiguities (Tiwari & Bose, 2013). To avoid any confusion, this thesis focuses exclusively on the geographical perspective, specifically examining place identity and branding in urban settings.

Urban portrayals are crafted, disseminated, and consumed through various channels including film, literature, and (social) media. Cities attract diverse types of travellers for a multitude of reasons, and how a city is depicted can heavily influence individuals' choices whether to visit or not. In city marketing, the goal is to create an urban brand that attracts investors and tourists, often focusing on a specific facet of the urban identity of a city (Hubbard, 2018). In their article, Martin Boisen, Kees Terlouw and Bouke van Gorp (2011) emphasize that the city branding process is inherently selective. Place branding involves strategic choices about which groups to target, which narratives to promote, and how to allocate resources. The focus on a specific group or facet of the city necessitates the exclusion of others, and may cause spatial inequalities due to resources being concentrated on the areas that align with the desired brand identity (Boisen, Terlouw & van Gorp, 2011).

Place identity encompasses the unique characteristics and meanings individuals associate with a location (Proshansky, 1978). In 's-Hertogenbosch, the creative city branding aims to underscore these distinctive attributes, promoting the city as a hub of creativity and innovation. The brand identity of a place is often shaped by the desires of its stakeholders—such as government institutions and local organizations—who seek to influence how specific target groups perceive the location. This involves a conscious effort to manage perceptions through branding strategies, ultimately adding value to the place (Boisen et al., 2011; Vuignier, 2017). For place branding to be effective, it must be authentic; reflecting not just the desires of stakeholders but also "who we really are" as a community (Boisen et al., 2011).

This selective nature of branding plays a crucial role in shaping the experiences and expectations of both residents and visitors. Creative tourism, for example, focuses on offering authentic and engaging experiences that allow tourists to connect with the local culture and community. Graeme Evans (2009) suggests that creative hubs tend to draw more tourists successfully when they emerge organically rather than through top-down initiatives. This organic development fosters genuine interactions between tourists and locals, enhancing the overall place identity of the city. Charles R. Wolfe's concept of 'urbanism without effort' (2019)

further illustrates this idea by highlighting the natural unfolding of urban life as individuals gather and engage in public spaces. This approach underscores the necessity of comprehending cities holistically and recognizing the organic interactions between residents and their environments.

For effective city branding, identifying and nurturing areas of organic development is essential to enhance their growth and attractiveness (Nieuwland & Lavanga, 2020). Moreover, as Frenette (2017) emphasizes, focusing on pre-existing community assets is fundamental to creative placemaking. This perspective encourages leveraging the cultural and social resources already present within a community to foster development and attract creative tourists. By aligning with the broader trends in creative tourism, which prioritize authenticity and local engagement, this approach ensures that branding efforts resonate with the community and contribute to a richer urban experience.

The complexity of places as social constructions further complicates the branding process. Identities of places are layered and can overlap, contradict, or complement each other, indicating that places do not have one single identity (Boisen et al., 2011; Vuignier, 2017). This multifaceted nature also means that place brands are dynamic and can evolve over time. While it is impossible to encompass every facet of a city's identity, acknowledging the selectivity in place branding is essential, as it shapes perceptions and influences behavior. 's-Hertogenbosch's branding demonstrates the complexities of place branding in a city that is rich in cultural heritage yet aspires to be seen as a creative and innovative hub. The dynamic between its historical identity and creative tourism showcases the selective nature of branding, where certain aspects of the city are emphasized to shape external perceptions (Boisen et al., 2011; Peng, Strijker & Wu, 2020).

#### 2.4. Conclusion

The theoretical framework underscores the interconnectedness of place identity, creative tourism, authenticity, and urban branding, which particularly relevant in the case of 's-Hertogenbosch. Place identity, as Proshansky (1978) describes, reflects the unique characteristics and meanings that residents and visitors associate with a place. In 's-Hertogenbosch, this identity is deeply rooted in historical and cultural traditions, such as carnival, which play a central role in shaping both local self-perception and the tourist experience. Moreover, as a city in Brabant, 's-Hertogenbosch's identity is influenced by the

broader regional identity of Brabant, which is often associated with notions of *bourgondisch* culture, conviviality (*gezelligheid*), and a strong sense of community pride (Strijbos, 2018).

‘s-Hertogenbosch targeting ‘the creative’ in its branding strategies aligns with the broader trends in the tourism industry regarding creative tourism, as discussed in chapter 2.2 (e.g. Füller & Michel, 2014; Dirksmeier & Helbrecht, 2015; Nieuwland & Lavanga, 2021). Creative tourism, as discussed by Richards and Wilson (2007) and Nieuwland and Lavanga (2021), centers on tourist engagement with local culture, encouraging deeper connections with the place. In the context of ‘s-Hertogenbosch, carnival provides a platform where tourists interact with local customs, offering an experience that bridges MacCannell’s (1973) distinctions between 'front' (staged) and 'back' (genuine) authenticity.

Place branding in ‘s-Hertogenbosch reflects the inherently selective nature of branding strategies, where cities emphasize specific facets of their identity to appeal to particular groups (Hubbard, 2018; Boisen et al., 2011). The focus on attracting the creative class exemplifies how certain aspects of the city's identity are highlighted. Boisen, Terlouw, and van Gorp (2011) argue that effective branding must align with the community’s authentic identity while also catering to external audiences. In ‘s-Hertogenbosch, the branding strategy showcases the complexities of place branding, as the city balances its rich cultural heritage with its aspirations to be seen as a creative and innovative hub. This dynamic illustrates the selective process in branding, where some elements of the city’s identity are emphasized while others may be downplayed, reflecting both its historical significance and its modern, creative appeal (Boisen et al., 2011; Peng, Strijker & Wu, 2020).

### 3. Methods

This chapter details the methodology employed to address the central research question: *"How does the creative tourist identity promoted by local place branding strategies influence traditional place identity in 's-Hertogenbosch?"* The chapter begins by discussing the research design, with a focus on explaining the rationale for selecting a qualitative approach. It then provides a comprehensive overview of the study area, establishing a framework to understand the city and the reasoning behind its selection as a case study. The subsequent sections delve into the processes of data collection and analysis, outlining the steps taken to gather and interpret the data.

#### 3.1. Research design

To investigate the dynamics between the constructed identity of the creative tourist and the established cultural and historical identity of 's-Hertogenbosch, a qualitative study was conducted. Various methods have been employed to investigate place identity, typically aiming to understand what identity is and how it is constructed. These methods include rank ordering and Likert scales (Lewicka, 2008; White et al., 2008), focus groups and interviews (Vainikka, 2012; Haartsen et al., 2003), analysis of texts, discourses, and narratives (Ritalahti, 2008), the use of photographs (Buijs et al., 2009), and the examination of identity markers (Wheeler, 2015).

In this research, the focus was placed on the residents' perspective, as residents uniquely understand and experience their city and are integral to its identity. Place identity is constructed, dynamic, and individual, yet it can also reflect a collective identity that may not always align with individual perceptions of the place (Peng, Strijker & Wu, 2020). The emphasis on residents is essential because they are both shaped by and actively shape the identity of the place. This approach aligns with recent calls for further empirical studies that examine the lived experiences of individuals and communities, enriching theoretical frameworks and providing practical insights for policy and place branding efforts (Peng, Strijker & Wu, 2020).

While quantitative data can be useful for studying general concepts and relationships, it often lacks the depth needed to explore the underlying reasons and emotions that contribute to place identity. A qualitative research design, with its emphasis on personal experiences and their

associated variations and exceptions (Hay, 2016), is particularly suited to capturing the nuances of place identity and creative tourism. With this in mind, interviews were chosen as the main method for empirical data collection to address the research question. Interviewing is a qualitative method that allows for the exploration of opinions and experiences, providing respondents with ample space to elaborate on their answers regarding the research topic (Hay, 2016). By using this research method, the genuine experiences and opinions of residents could be thoroughly explored.

While the primary data comes from the interviews with residents, additional materials have also been incorporated to provide a broader context. These include findings from previous studies, such as the Glocalities research (Schoemaker, Fan & Van der Kraan, 2023) and the Imagomonitor Brabant by Brabantbranding (2023), which offer insight into external perceptions of 's-Hertogenbosch, particularly among creative tourists and the general Dutch population. These external sources are primarily used for comparative purposes, highlighting potential divergences and alignments with local perspectives.

Moreover, for the analysis of place branding, materials from the city branding organization *Den Bosch & Partners* were also used. These materials include the promotional website and video created by the organization, both of which were discussed during the interviews. These materials are particularly valuable as they represent how the city's branding authorities construct and project the identity of 's-Hertogenbosch to potential visitors, especially creative tourists.

### 3.2. Description research area

's-Hertogenbosch, or Den Bosch, is a city in the southern Netherlands, founded in 1185 and granted city rights in 1196 (Erfgoed 's-Hertogenbosch, 2024). The city played a significant role during the Eighty Years' War (1568-1648) due to its strategic location and natural defenses, earning the nickname "Moerasdraak" (Marsh Dragon) (Erfgoed 's-Hertogenbosch, 2024). These defenses, including the Bossche Broek wetlands, remain integral to the city's identity, with fortifications such as city walls and bastions still visible today, reinforcing its historical character.

As of 2024, the population of 's-Hertogenbosch has reached nearly 161,000, with a growth rate of 1.3% in 2023, higher than the national average of 0.7% (Klerks, 2024; Gemeente 's-

Hertogenbosch, 2024). This increase in population, driven by more people moving to the city than leaving, indicates its growing attractiveness as a place to live. 's-Hertogenbosch also attracts approximately 1.8 million visitors annually, a figure that has been steadily rising (DTVnieuws, 2024). The city's well-preserved historical architecture and cultural landmarks, such as the Sint-Jans Kathedraal, the Noordbrabants Museum, and the Binnendieze canals, are key attractions. Additionally, the city's connection to the painter Jheronimus Bosch plays a significant role in its cultural identity and tourism strategy. Exhibitions and cultural institutions linked to Bosch contribute to its cultural heritage, positioning 's-Hertogenbosch as both a historical and cultural destination. This interplay between historical preservation and cultural tourism highlights the city's approach to place branding, integrating heritage and identity into its economic and spatial strategies

The most important and well-known tradition in the city is carnival. Carnival in 's-Hertogenbosch, or Oeteldonk as it is known during the festival, has its roots in Catholic tradition and is primarily celebrated in the southern regions of the Netherlands. Although it is officially three days – Sunday, Monday, and Tuesday – people often celebrate for longer. In Oeteldonk, the city adopts a unique identity for the duration of Carnival, with its own customs, attire, and music. Next to the municipality, the Oeteldonksche Club of 1882 is the driving force behind the maintaining of these traditions, the organization and protocols that define the festival's character.

A key feature of carnival in Oeteldonk is the emphasis on local pride and heritage. The official website of the Oeteldonksche Club highlights the importance of music, with nearly all compositions created specifically for and by Oeteldonkers. This strong connection to local culture is further reinforced by the traditional costumes worn by participants, symbolizing their collective identity. While Oeteldonk welcomes visitors and celebrates its shared joy and pride, the Oeteldonksche Club also stresses the importance of respecting the city's traditions, ensuring that the authenticity of the festival remains intact amidst its popularity. This balance between sharing cultural pride and safeguarding tradition plays a pivotal role in how Carnival shapes the identity of 's-Hertogenbosch and contributes to its place branding efforts.

### 3.3. Data collection

#### 3.3.1. The respondents

Respondents for the interviews were selected using a combination of typical case sampling and snowball sampling. With typical case sampling, respondents representative for the population relevant to this research are selected. In the case of this thesis, that means residents that are born in or around 's-Hertogenbosch, feel a strong connection to the city and currently live in or near the city centre. The choice for residents responds to the call for more research into the lived experiences of individuals to gain a deeper understanding of how personal and collective identities intersect with branding strategies, as heard by Peng, Strijker & Wu (2020). Branding can create collective identities that might not always align with individual perceptions of a place (Peng, Strijker & Wu, 2020), while for branding to be effective, it must reflect 'who we really are' (Boisen et al., 2011).

Being originally from 's-Hertogenbosch, respondents were initially drawn from my personal network, allowing for easy access to suitable respondents. To extend the sample, snowball sampling was utilized, meaning the network of the respondents. Since residents of the city are likely to know other locals who can provide valuable insights about the city, snowball sampling was particularly useful for this research. Additionally, three of the interviews were conducted with members of a *carnivalsclub*, for which snowball sampling was especially helpful. Members of carnivalsclubs are people who have a particularly strong connection to the city's traditions through their involvement in carnival. These respondents provided an in-depth perspective on topics related to the city's cultural heritage and identity and these interviews included some specialized questions focused on how these traditions intersect with place identity and how they perceive the impact of tourism.

Although the aim was to have a balanced mix of age groups, the final sample has more younger than older individuals due to the nature of my personal network and the willingness of respondents to participate, which could impact the extent to which the findings reflect the experiences of the broader population. Nevertheless, this limitation is partly mitigated by the fact that there is a similar quantitative research, the '*inwonerpanel*' study conducted by the city's Research and Statistics Department, that covers themes like city marketing and city identity, in which there were relatively more older participants (50+) than younger (18-39) (Gemeente 's-Hertogenbosch, 2023). Therefore, this qualitative research complements existing

data by providing insights from a younger group of respondents, that earlier were underrepresented.

Respondent	Name	Age	Connection to 's-Hertogenbosch
1	Noortje	24	Born and raised, currently living there, strong family connection
2	Anne	25	Born and raised, moved away temporarily for university, back now
3	Amber	29	Born and raised in/around 's-Hertogenbosch
4	Christel	57	Lives and works in 's-Hertogenbosch
5	Vera	32	Born and raised, moved away temporarily for university, back now
6	Erik	54	Has lived in 's-Hertogenbosch for 50 years
7	Amy	21	Born and raised, currently living there
8	Anouk	32	Born and raised, currently living there
9	Sietske	25	Member of carnivalsclub
10	Nienke	33	Member of carnivalsclub
11	Peter	44	Member of carnivalsclub

Figure 2: Overview interview respondents

### 3.3.2. Other materials

As outlined in the research design, this thesis draws on additional materials beyond the interviews and literature review to provide a comprehensive analysis. The key materials include the city marketing website *zinindenbosch.nl*, a promotional video, and relevant studies such as the Glocalities research and the Imagomonitor Brabant. These sources were chosen for their direct relevance to understanding how the city is marketed and perceived by both residents and visitors. Each material is described in detail below, focusing on its purpose, content, and how it relates to the overarching themes of place identity, tourism, and branding.

#### **Promotional website – *zinindenbosch.nl***

*The website zinindenbosch.nl serves as the official tourism and city marketing platform for 's-Hertogenbosch. Developed by the city marketing organization Den Bosch & Partners, the website is intended to promote the city to visitors. Its purpose is to present and communicate*

the city's created brand identity, making it an essential resource for understanding how 's-Hertogenbosch is portrayed.

The website features a visually engaging design with bright colors, including pink, which plays a prominent role in the overall aesthetic. The homepage showcases multiple sections, including categories such as “Zien & Doen” (See & Do), “Plannen & Praktisch” (Planning and Practical), and “Uitagenda” (Agenda), which guide users to information on city attractions, events, accommodations, and dining options. The site is organized into various sections that highlight different aspects of the city, such as historical landmarks, cultural activities, and practical travel tips.

In addition to its aesthetic layout, the website offers a variety of resources, including maps, transportation details, and accommodation listings. Visual elements like photographs and icons are prominently featured, with text playing a supportive role.

### **Promotional video**

At the beginning of September, the city marketing organization Den Bosch & Partners launched a nationwide campaign featuring a promotional video. The video opens with a serious tone but soon shifts to a more playful one, incorporating the distinctive Brabant dialect. Actor Tim Haars, who is from 's-Hertogenbosch, guides the viewer through various well-known locations in the city, like the Tramkade, the Noordbrabants Museum and the Sint-Jan Cathedral, and is seen enjoying local food and drink traditions. Throughout the video, there is an ongoing discussion between Haars and the director, who wants to show 's-Hertogenbosch in a more serious manner. Ultimately, the video ends with the slogan: ‘Don’t come to Den Bosch, it’s always a party here’.

Incorporating the video is essential because it illustrates how the city seeks to brand itself. While the video was released later in the process of this thesis and therefore not discussed with all respondents, it remains too significant to leave out entirely.

### **Glocalities research**

Glocalities is a research organization specializing in identifying and quantifying target audiences to provide actionable insights for effective positioning of cities and organizations. Their annual global studies collect data on consumer values, lifestyles, interests, and media behavior, enabling the development of narratives that resonate with potential visitor groups.

In partnership with Den Bosch & Partners and in coordination with the NBTC (Netherlands Board of Tourism & Conventions), Glocalities conducted a quantitative study in November 2023 targeting Dutch consumers interested in visiting 's-Hertogenbosch. The research focused on two key segments: Creatives and Achievers. The Creatives segment, in particular, was highlighted due to their higher engagement with cultural offerings and their desire for discovery and new experiences, making them a valuable target for marketing efforts.

The insights from this research have been used in the interviews to formulate concrete questions regarding the concept of the creative tourist and to provide respondents with a better understanding of the target audience. The insights have also been integrated into the results section, particularly within the analysis of collective perceptions in the context of place identity, under ‘place x internal thoughts’ (4.1.4). This comparison enriches the understanding of how the identity of 's-Hertogenbosch aligns with the expectations and experiences of both local residents and potential visitors.

### **Imagomonitor research**

The Imagomonitor serves as a resource for understanding perceptions of 's-Hertogenbosch within the broader Brabant region. The city edition, conducted in 2023, focuses on how residents and non-residents view the city in relation to its Brabant identity. This research aims to assess whether the values associated with the Brabant brand are recognized and experienced by the public, specifically through the lens of the cities within the region.

Key findings from the city edition indicate that 's-Hertogenbosch is frequently recognized as the most representative of typical Brabant characteristics, with strong associations linked to concepts such as ‘gezellig’ (cozy), ‘bourgondisch’ (culinary lifestyle), and ‘gemoedelijk’ (friendly). The report underscores how perceptions of 's-Hertogenbosch are interwoven with those of Brabant as a whole, emphasizing the city's role in shaping the regional image.

In this thesis, the results from the Imagomonitor have been integrated into the analysis of place x internal thoughts (4.1.4), specifically within the section on collective perception. This approach allows for a comparative understanding of how resident perspectives align with broader perceptions of 's-Hertogenbosch's identity as part of Brabant.

### 3.3.3. The interviews

Interviewing is a qualitative method to uncover experiences and opinions, with room for expanding on answers in relation to the research topic (Hay, 2016). The interviews executed for this research are semi-structured, meaning that some of the questions are predetermined, but the sequence is flexible and respondents can answer freely. Furthermore, semi-structured interviews leave room for asking follow-up questions based on the respondents answers. This approach strikes a balance between open-ended and structured interviews, enabling deeper probing based on respondents' answers (Hay & Cope, 2021). Prior to the interviews, a topic list was developed (see appendix 1) to give some structure to the interviews and to ensure that the important topics were talked about. This list outlines key topics and open questions that follow the research question and the theoretical framework.

All interviews were executed in-person, either in the comfort of their own home or in a café in the city, depending on what the respondent preferred. With the respondents' consent, the interviews were recorded to ensure full focus during the conversations and to facilitate efficient and thorough analysis afterward. Interviews were held in familiar and comfortable environments to help respondents feel at ease and provide honest answers. As some respondents were acquaintances, particular attention was given to maintaining the researcher's positionality and objectivity. This was achieved by closely following the topic list and adopting a professional approach throughout the interviews.

### 3.3.4. Operationalization

The interviews conducted for this research were semi-structured and based on an interview topic list developed to align with the theoretical framework. The interview topics were organized into three main themes: **place identity**, **creative tourism**, and **place branding**, as seen in table 2 and more detailed in appendix I. This structure was derived from the literature review and chosen for its logical coherence, allowing the findings to be presented in a clear and structured manner, consistent with the theoretical foundation of this thesis. This approach ensured a smooth alignment between the interview data and the research questions, focusing on the influence of the city's branding strategies aimed at attracting creative tourists on the traditional place identity of 's-Hertogenbosch.

#### **Sub-theme 1: place identity**

The first sub-theme focused on how participants describe 's-Hertogenbosch, what sets the city apart, and their connection to its traditional identity. Respondents were asked about the typical characteristics of a Bosschenaar, as well as about the city's physical, cultural, and historical features. These questions aimed to encompass different facets of place identity, as described in the theoretical framework. In the last three interviews with members of carnivalclubs, there was additional attention to the relationship between carnival and the city's identity.

**Sub-theme 2: creative tourism and authenticity**

The second sub-theme involved a deeper exploration of tourism in 's-Hertogenbosch, with a specific focus on creative tourism and authentic experiences. Respondents were asked about their general views on tourism, their understanding of creative tourism, and what they believe caters to such visitors, as well as their perceptions of authenticity. In the last three interviews with members of carnivalclubs, the discussion also included tourism during Carnival, focusing on their opinions, experiences, and the impact of tourism on the event and its traditions.

**Sub-theme 3: branding and marketing efforts**

The third sub-theme focused on respondents' views regarding the branding of 's-Hertogenbosch aimed at tourists. In this part of the interview, participants were asked to evaluate existing branding efforts to assess whether they felt these aligned with their own perceptions of the city. In the earlier interviews, respondents were shown the website *zinindenbosch.nl*, which had been previously described. Questions centered around their first impressions, any elements they felt were missing, and the potential impact of the branding. In the final three interviews with members of carnivalclubs, the discussion shifted to the promotional video, which was released later and was not available during the initial interviews.

Main themes	Sub themes
General	- Introduction
Place identity	- City description and uniqueness - Personal meaning and connection - Balance old vs new - <i>Carnival</i>
(creative) tourism	- Tourism

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Creative tourism</li> <li>- Authenticity</li> <li>- <i>Carnival tourism</i></li> </ul>
Place branding	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Impression website/video</li> <li>- Missing elements</li> <li>- Impact</li> </ul>
Closure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Final question</li> <li>- Thanks</li> </ul>

*Figure 3: Main themes and subthemes of preliminary topic list*

### 3.4. Data analysis

After conducting the interviews, they were transcribed and uploaded to Atlas.ti for coding. Coding helps to categorize data from the different interviews according to specific themes. Additionally, coding can reveal themes that may not be immediately apparent on the surface (Hay, 2016). This process allows for comparisons between various topics and interviews. The codes were developed based on the themes identified in the interviews and the topic list, supported by the theoretical framework. Both open coding, which identifies general themes and patterns, and axial coding, which organizes these codes into broader categories, were applied (Hay & Cope, 2021). This process led to the creation of a code tree, shown in Appendix II.

### 3.5. Positionality

In qualitative research, the researcher is the main instrument of data collection, making positionality an important aspect to acknowledge. As a researcher with a personal connection to 's-Hertogenbosch, the research area in this study, my positionality is important to discuss. Being born and raised near the city, I have been exposed to its culture, traditions and community from an early age. This personal connection gives me an insider's perspective on the identity and traditions of 's-Hertogenbosch, and provided me with access to relevant social networks, particularly those involved in carnivalclubs.

At the same time, my personal connection to 's-Hertogenbosch comes with challenges. One of the primary challenges was the risk of over-identification with the respondents, which could lead to assumptions and unintentional bias. For example, as I celebrate carnival yearly myself, I have also witnessed the growing crowds. Because it is my own lived experience as well, requires me to remain extra aware of my potential biases and ensure that my own experiences are not projected onto the data. Throughout the research process, I was aware of my own positionality by engaging in critical reflection, to ensure the voices of the respondents remained at the center of my analysis.

Another challenge was balancing my role as both a researcher and, in some cases, an acquaintance of the respondents, as a significant portion of participants comes from my own network. Although this facilitated access and trust, there was also a risk of potential bias. This required maintaining professional distance during interviews and the data analysis process to ensure that my personal relationships did not influence the research.

Although I have never lived directly in the city center, my proximity to 's-Hertogenbosch and frequent visits to the city mean I have built an insider's perspective on its social and cultural landscape. This gives me unique insight into the local context but also introduces certain biases and assumptions that must be acknowledged, as they are important to this research.

## 4. Results

The results of this thesis are organized around the key themes identified in the theoretical framework: place identity, creative tourism, and place branding. These themes are essential in addressing the central research question, which explores the potential tension between 's-Hertogenbosch's traditional identity and the evolving identity shaped by place branding efforts aimed at attracting creative tourists. By examining how residents perceive their city's authentic character, how they look at tourism and how they respond to the external identity constructed through branding, this section delves into the local identity and the branding strategies designed to promote the city to a broader audience.

### 4.1. Place identity

This section examines the concept of place identity in 's-Hertogenbosch, with a primary focus on the perspectives of local residents, as they play a central role in shaping and maintaining the city's identity. The results found through the qualitative interviews provide insights into how residents perceive and experience the city. Next to the interview findings, this section incorporates the Glocalities research and the Imagomonitor Brabant to gain insights into the collective perception.

The results regarding place identity are presented and structured based on the framework made by Peng, Strijker and Wu (2020). This framework was made to understand place identity by organizing it into four interrelated quadrants, as explained in the theoretical framework. While this framework provides a helpful structure for organizing the results, the interrelatedness of the quadrants means the categories do not present rigid boundaries. Different aspects of identity can overlap and certain themes can cross between categories. The framework is used here as a tool to present the findings more structured and accessible, while while acknowledging the complexity and fluidity place identity.

#### 4.1.1. People x external looks

This section focuses on the visible behaviours, traditions, and physical appearances of the people of 's-Hertogenbosch, highlighting the ways in which their external identity ties into their sense of place.

When asked how one would describe someone from 's-Hertogenbosch, interview respondents provided insights in how they see the *'Bosschenaar'*. In describing the physical appearance and behaviour of *Bosschenaren*, several respondents emphasized characteristics that reflect a strong sense of both place and regional identity. Respondents mostly focused on personality traits and ways of communicating: being direct, making jokes, and being social and friendly.

Several respondents described the *Bosschenaar* as someone who is outgoing and social. A common observation is that people often greet each other when passing by, as pointed out by Vera while we are sitting and talking in her favourite cafe: *"a Bosschenaar is someone who says hello when you walk by."* This sense of openness and inclusion was echoed by Amy, a woman in her early twenties, who noted that 's-Hertogenbosch has a strong *ons kent ons* (everyone knows each other) mentality, but it is not an exclusive community: *"Everyone can be a part of it."* The concept of *gezelligheid* was mentioned by everyone as a defining trait, evident in social interactions and a common behaviour among *Bosschenaren*. A strong emphasis was placed on the *'Bourgondisch'* way of life, characterized by enjoying good food, drinks, and socializing, often on busy outdoor terraces. Respondents emphasized that this lifestyle is visible in daily life, with full terraces and gatherings in public spaces.

Though not mentioned frequently, the local dialect and traditional foods like *worstenbroodjes* and *Bossche bollen* were also brought up by a few respondents, further tying everyday life to local traditions and identity. But, the behavioural aspects dominated the descriptions of *Bosschenaren*.

### **Physical appearance during Carnival**

The interviews reveal that during Carnival in 's-Hertogenbosch, physical appearances and visible behaviour are essential markers of belonging and local identity. Respondents frequently emphasized the importance of the specific clothing and colours worn during carnival in 's-Hertogenbosch: red, white and yellow and a particular type of jacket adorned with emblems. Not wearing the right colours and clothes can lead to exclusion from certain spaces, like specific bars, as noted by Nienke, who is a member of one of the many local 'carnivalsclubs': *"if you don't dress like we do, they don't accept it."* These visible traditions are crucial for inclusion and signify participation in the authentic local experience.

The interviews also pointed to a sense of pride tied to these visible markers. Wearing the right attire is not just about fitting in, but about expressing a shared heritage and a commitment to local customs. Nienke emphasized that there is *"a strong search for who the real ones are and everything that doesn't belong to that,"* highlighting how important these external symbols are in defining who is truly part of the community during Carnival. The distinction between locals and outsiders becomes particularly pronounced in this context, with external appearance functioning as a key indicator of who is considered an authentic participant in the event, reinforcing the idea that identity is partly shaped by local knowledge (Rieter, 2018).

Moreover, nearly all respondents stressed how unique Den Bosch is compared to other cities, particularly when it comes to Carnival. The external looks were often cited as a crucial aspect of this uniqueness. Amy stated, *"Den Bosch is maybe a little bit stubborn. We don't follow the rest. Look at Carnival—while everyone else wears costumes, we wear our own clothes. These are our traditions, and we are proud of that, and it works."* This strong sense of local pride is reinforced by the visible traditions that distinguish Den Bosch from other places. The specific clothing worn during Carnival are not just functional, but symbolic of a broader cultural identity, with many respondents expressing how deeply rooted these practices are in their sense of place. The identification of the respondents with 's-Hertogenbosch is strongly influenced by its traditions and customs, in this case clothing, aligning with Paasi's (1991) peoples place identity.

The interviews consistently highlighted that the uniqueness of Den Bosch lies in its adherence to these visible traditions, with most respondents expressing a collective pride in how the city maintains these customs, particularly during Carnival. The importance of external looks becomes evident here, as it causes a sense of community

#### 4.1.2. People x internal thoughts

This section addresses the internal, emotional, and psychological connection residents have with 's-Hertogenbosch, reflecting on how they perceive the city and their place within it. According to Peng, Strijker, and Wu (2020), place attachment is shaped by subjective feelings and attitudes that reflect individuals' relationship with a place. These value-oriented emotions, such as pride in one's city or cultural traditions, play a crucial role in how people define their sense of belonging.

One recurring theme in the interviews was the strong emotional attachment many residents have to 's-Hertogenbosch. Respondents frequently expressed feelings of pride and a deep love for the city. For example, Anne, who is born and raised in the city, shared: *“I am always very proud of Den Bosch,”* while Erik, a 54 year old business owner who has lived in 's-Hertogenbosch his whole life, added: *“I always promote Den Bosch in my network.”* These statements reflect the emotional resonance of the city for its inhabitants and their desire to share their love for 's-Hertogenbosch with others.

This sense of pride also came forward when talking about carnival. While regional identity links 's-Hertogenbosch to the rest of Brabant, with similar traditions and cultural memories that can create a distinct identity that residents take pride in (Wagemakers, 2017; Rieter, 2018; Smit et al., 2018), respondents specifically mentioned pride because of the uniqueness of carnival in 's-Hertogenbosch compared to other places. Anouk, a woman in her early 30s who expressed a great love for carnival, remarked: *“Here, I think it’s much more traditional than in other places.”* Similarly, Noortje reflected, *“When I think of traditions, I immediately think of carnival. It’s celebrated throughout Brabant, but Den Bosch is definitely different from other places.”*

Family also emerged as an important topic when talking about what it means to be a 'Bosschenaar'. Most respondents highlighted that their families are from 's-Hertogenbosch, strengthening their emotional connection to the city, like Noortje *“My family is from Den Bosch, so that is also a big part of what being a Bosschenaar means to me.”* Interestingly, the same people who highlighted their familial connection to the city, were the same ones who mentioned carnival as a central part of their identity.

Talking about carnival specifically, Anouk illustrated this point: *“I’ve been experiencing that from a young age, also through my family, so I feel really connected to it and wouldn’t want to celebrate it anywhere else.”* Similarly, Sietske, who is a member of a carnivalclub like the rest of her family, highlighted the strong intergenerational connection to carnival, explaining: *“Especially when it comes to carnival. When I think of my grandparents, parents, aunts, and uncles, everyone comes from Den Bosch... It’s so connected with family.”* This shared family experience during carnival plays a crucial role in maintaining the tradition and fostering a unique sense of identity. As Nienke explained, *“I’ve been celebrating carnival there since I was in the stroller. It’s something that comes back a lot in our family.”* Carnival being linked

to individuals identity is thus for a large part rooted in cultural and social familiarity, being shaped by memories (Wagemakers, 2017; Rieter, 2018; Smit et al., 2018).

#### 4.1.3. Place x external looks

This section covers the physical and symbolic identity of 's-Hertogenbosch itself, including its infrastructure, landscape, and how its external appearance contributes to the perception of the city. Just like Peng, Strijker and Wu (2020), this section uses the distinction between the physical and symbolic shape as written by Paasi (1986).

#### **Physical shape**

The physical shape of 's-Hertogenbosch plays a large role in how residents perceive the city (Peng, Strijker & Wu, 2020). Many respondents highlighted the historic centre, with its old buildings and landmarks, as central to the city's identity. Key features like the Binnendieze and the Sint-Jan Cathedral were most often mentioned as defining aspects of the physical environment, as both bring a lot of history as well. Other physical landmarks include the central station, with its Golden Dragon statue, and Theater aan de Parade, a cultural hub for the city. The green spaces, both within the city (such as smaller parks) and on its outskirts (such as Bossche Broek), were frequently mentioned. Additionally, the city's small size and the abundance of restaurants and cafes in almost every street further adds to the city's atmosphere. As Amy described: *"In every street, there's a café or a spot where people are enjoying themselves."*

Respondents expressed that physically, not much has changed in the city over the years, with Anouk even stating: *"No, actually not at all. Everything I know is still exactly the same. Everyone still lives in the same place, the restaurants are in the same place... Everything has stayed true to itself."* The minimal changes there have been, are largely viewed as improvements, with Christel explaining: *"Yes, of course, things are renewed, things are rebuilt, adapted, and so on, but that's just part of it... It all looks beautiful. It has really changed and improved."* The answers overall suggested that according to the respondents, 's-Hertogenbosch has maintained a good balance between old and new, which has reinforced their sense of place attachment.

Talking about what makes 's-Hertogenbosch unique compared to other cities, respondents frequently compared it to neighbouring cities like Tilburg and Eindhoven, emphasizing how its physical shape, particularly its authentic historic centre, sets it apart. Erik stated: *"Den Bosch, compared to Tilburg and Eindhoven, still really has an old town centre. In Tilburg and Eindhoven, much of that was destroyed in the war, and that makes Den Bosch unique compared to cities like those."* The importance of the physical characteristics of a place for its identity, as emphasized by Lewicka (2008), becomes evident here.

While respondents acknowledge some modern changes, like trendy cafes and the Tramkade, there is consensus that these changes have not detracted from the historic identity of the city. Speaking about this, Vera noted: *"I do see a hip coffee place here and there, but it definitely keeps its Bossche history."* There is a clear distinction between the historic and the modern cultural landscape. The creative hubs like Tramkade represent a newer side of the city, contrasting with the traditional, historic character of sites like the Sint-Jan. This juxtaposition of old versus new is central to the physical appearance of 's-Hertogenbosch.

### **Symbolic shape**

The symbolic shape of 's-Hertogenbosch is deeply tied to its cultural history and local traditions, with the artist Jeroen Bosch being one of the city's most recognizable symbols. Amber pointed out: *"You can really see those statues of Jeroen Bosch all over the city, which I think is great. It really makes Den Bosch unique."* Similarly, Amy highlighted the subtle ways Bosch's influence can be seen in the landscape: *"Certainly those small statues or little elements that keep coming back in the city."*

An important feature of 's-Hertogenbosch' symbolic identity is the blend of the old and new. Several respondents expressed that this balance is well-managed in the city: *"I think Den Bosch does that really well, that balance between modern and old."* (Amy). Similarly, Noortje shared a positive perspective: *"When I look at Den Bosch, I don't feel like it's losing its character because more trendy spots are appearing."* The historic character of 's-Hertogenbosch remains central to how residents experience and perceive the city. Sietske stated: *"It should stay old; it's part of the character, and you see new things mixing with it, because the old character is meant to be preserved."*

#### 4.1.4. Place x internal thoughts

This section examines how residents and outsiders perceive the city and how this contributes to its broader identity. It also covers collective perceptions, such as place branding and how the city's identity is marketed.

##### **Individual perception**

All respondents described 's-Hertogenbosch as *gezellig* and *bourgondisch*. These words were not just used in the context of social interactions, but as a core aspect of their and the city's identity with several respondents linking this to the broader *Brabantse* identity. As discussed in the theoretical framework, regional identity plays a significant role in shaping how people relate to their surroundings, and in Brabant, *gezelligheid* and a *bourgondisch* lifestyle are seen as cultural markers of identity (Raagma, 2010; Paasi, 2003). According to Amber, a 29 year old who has grown up in the city and still lives there today; "*Actually, the first thing I think of is the true Bossche Bourgondiër, someone who just loves to make life as beautiful and enjoyable as possible.*" Additionally, the perception of 's-Hertogenbosch as a small city emerged prominently in the interviews. Many residents emphasized a sense of familiarity and community, with comments highlighting how "*it feels like a small village*" where "*everyone knows each other.*" This sentiment contributes to the residents' emotional attachment and sense of belonging.

##### **Collective perception**

For information on the collective perception, information gathered from external researches is used. The Glocalities study, which focuses on the perceptions of creative tourists, highlights ten core associations with 's-Hertogenbosch. Bossche bollen, the local pastry, ranked highest, followed by the city's *gezelligheid* (pleasant atmosphere). The Sint-Jan, a key historical and cultural landmark, also emerged as a significant symbol of the city. Cultural elements like carnival were highlighted alongside the broader association with the Brabant region. Additionally, respondents noted the relevance of the city's infrastructure, including the Binnenstad (city centre) and the Binnendieze canals, as well as its retail and dining opportunities (Schoemaker, Fan & Van der Kraan, 2023).

The Imagomonitor Brabant, which surveyed a broader population of Dutch citizens, revealed similar patterns, with Bossche bollen, Brabant, and *gezelligheid* frequently mentioned. Carnival and the Sint-Jan also featured prominently, underscoring their continued importance

to the city's identity. Additional associations, including the city's aesthetic appeal, shopping, and food offerings, were also identified, reinforcing the role of both tangible and intangible cultural elements in shaping perceptions. However, this research emphasized that the broader regional identity of Brabant was stronger than the identity of 's-Hertogenbosch as an individual city. 's-Hertogenbosch is recognized as the most representative of typical Brabant characteristics when compared to other cities, underscoring how important the regional identity is (Brabantbranding, 2023).

These findings highlight that 's-Hertogenbosch is consistently viewed through both its historical and cultural characteristics, as well as its alignment with broader regional identities.

## 4.2. Creative tourism

This section examines the role of tourism, with a specific focus on creative tourism, in 's-Hertogenbosch. It explores how residents perceive tourism in general, as well as during Carnival, and identifies what they consider to be authentic experiences within the city. The concept of the creative tourist is analyzed from both the residents' perspectives and through external research by Glocalities, which informs the city's branding strategy.

### 4.2.1. Perceptions of tourism

When asked about tourism in 's-Hertogenbosch in general, most respondents indicated that they do not notice much tourism activity in their daily lives. Many described the visitors they do see as mainly domestic tourists, usually on day trips. This often leads to a lesser sense of disturbance in local life, as these visitors tend to blend in more easily with the residents.

A notable observation among respondents is that they perceive a significant number of older tourists visiting the city. Almost all respondents included this in their answer to questions about their impression of tourists. For example, one respondent stated, *"I think especially older people, who indeed want to visit museums and are more into arts and culture"* (Noortje). Another respondent expressed a similar viewpoint, saying, *"I think there are many older people who go out cycling; Den Bosch is a big cycling city, and you notice that they tend to linger longer here"* (Anouk).

Several respondents pointed out that younger visitors are less common, suggesting that younger generations might prefer cities like Amsterdam. For instance, one participant noted, *"I don't know if young people would feel attracted to Den Bosch. I think they would rather visit a city like Amsterdam"* (Christel). Another respondent remarked, *"You don't see many young people; they come here mainly for the terraces and such, but if they're really interested in the buildings and culture, it's mostly older people"* (Anouk).

When discussing the motivations behind these visits, many respondents linked tourism in Den Bosch with its cultural and historical significance. Amber noted: *"I think they come primarily for cultural reasons, to see the Sint-Jan, the Binnendieze, and such."* Others mentioned a broader appeal to the city's aesthetic, with one participant stating, *"I think people come to admire the city; they want to experience the standard attractions, like the Bossche bol and the*

*church*” (Vera). Some residents also noted that the city does not particularly cater to student life or shopping tourism, positioning arts and culture as the primary draw for visitors.

The residents’ views on tourism in Den Bosch reveal a complex blend of neutral to slightly negative feelings. There is an awareness of both the benefits tourism brings and the potential challenges it poses to local customs and community dynamics. For instance, one respondent articulated a largely positive view with a negative sidenote, stating, *“I find it nice when people come by and I can tell them about the city. That’s fun, but sometimes they don’t know the local customs, which can lead to some difficulties”* (Noortje). She also emphasizes the importance of local customs, linking it to the larger regional identity, as highlighted by Visser, Norier and Swanenberg (2015) as well: *“I think in Brabant, there’s a more familiar, friendly atmosphere. When people come from other cities, that familiarity can be lessened, and it can create some friction”*.

Other respondents were purely positive about tourism. Erik noted, *“You can see that more people are coming. There are more hotels in Den Bosch, so the city is being visited more for day trips and short stays. I think that’s a positive thing; it keeps the city lively.”* This perspective underscores the economic benefits of tourism: it can help sustain local businesses and make for a more vibrant urban environment. The sentiment that tourism contributes to a lively atmosphere was echoed by other participants, including Sietske, who added, *“I just think it’s nice, because a busy city centre is also a ‘gezellige’ city centre.”*

However, there was also appreciation for the current balance between tourists and locals. Anouk expressed satisfaction with the relatively low level of tourism in Den Bosch compared to larger cities, stating, *“I think it’s positive because I often find myself irritated by tourism in other cities, where everything is geared towards tourists. It’s nice for a city to maintain its own culture and not solely focus on visitors.”* This reflects a desire to preserve local authenticity and protect the distinct place identity of Den Bosch, rather than seeing the city become overly commercialized or tourist-driven.

Overall, while opinions on tourism in Den Bosch are mixed, there is a common understanding of its importance for the city’s vibrancy and cultural preservation. Residents appreciate the balance of maintaining their local identity while welcoming visitors, reflecting a nuanced perspective on the impact of tourism.

#### 4.2.2. Authentic tourist experiences

In analysing residents' responses regarding authentic experiences in 's-Hertogenbosch, there was one theme that stood out. Authenticity, from the residents' point of view, was often associated with everyday experiences, local culture and social interactions. For example, Anouk explains that *"what I think makes Den Bosch authentic is just the people who are from here. I think people make the city."* Similarly, Noortje noted that an authentic experience is *"going to a traditional bar and just talk to people"*. Both of these examples highlight the importance of social interactions, and with that the importance of people in place identity and authenticity.

While some respondents also mentioned activities linked to the city's physical and cultural heritage, such as walking in the Bossche Broek and taking a boat ride on the Binnendieze, these were often considered more aligned with the tourist experience. For instance, Erik noted that *"a boat trip on the Binnendieze is something unique to the city,"* but there was hesitation in defining this as part of an authentic local experience. Similarly, Sietske initially identified the Binnendieze as an authentic experience, but upon further reflection, clarified that while it is something unique to 's-Hertogenbosch, it does not represent the daily life of a resident. This distinction highlights the difference between an experience that is unique to the city and can feel authentic aligning with Wang's (1999) concept of existential authenticity, and one that actually reflects the authentic lifestyle of its residents.

Carnival was mentioned a few times as one of the most, or even the most authentic experience in 's-Hertogenbosch: *"Yes, carnival. I think that's Den Bosch at its most 'Bosch': Oeteldonk."* (Amy). Sietske even said that *"if you want to experience life as a true Bosschenaar, come to Oeteldonk during carnival."* But, respondents did emphasize that although it is an authentic experience, it is not necessarily one they want to share with tourists. This sentiment hints at a struggle over who has the right to experience and define the city's authenticity. Carnival is a tradition that is an essential part of the city's identity, as highlighted earlier. Amber, while smiling enthusiastically described it as follows:

*"I think you can really taste the 'Bossche' or Brabantine gezelligheid there, and maybe you'll get some jokes about being from above the rivers, but I think everyone can have*

*a great time. During Carnival, it's really the case that everyone is welcome, everyone is equal."*

Although everyone is welcome, there are boundaries. As discussed in the *Place Identity* chapter, the need to dress in specific clothing during Carnival acts as a visible marker of who truly belongs to the local culture. Nienke highlighted that not adhering to these traditions can lead to exclusion: *"You need to dress like we do, otherwise you won't be accepted."* The distinction between in- and outsiders is immediately visible, and it's often easy to tell who doesn't fit in, partly due to these outward markers of participation. Multiple respondents acknowledge that because of this, Carnival in 's-Hertogenbosch might not be that enjoyable for outsiders.

But, people keep coming to the city, especially during carnival, showing how tourists emerge themselves in the cultural fabric of the city by participating in activities that allow them to engage with local traditions, as described by Richards and Wilson (2007). The growing number of visitors has changed how the event is experienced by locals, about which Erik, who has celebrated carnival in the city for decades, said: *"Because of the huge influx of people from outside the city, especially from the Randstad, things don't go the way they used to. More safety measures need to be taken to keep things under control."* An example of these extra safety measures having to be taken by the city, is putting up fences in certain areas or streets – something that wasn't necessary before. Nienke acknowledged the need for these measures, but also expressed concern as *"it does take away some of the charm."*

Moreover, the growing crowds have resulted in locals adjusting their own behaviours, with many choosing to celebrate on the quieter days and skip the busy Friday and Saturday. The presence of tourists has led to more significant disruptions in some traditional practices. Sietske, one of the members of a traditional carnivalsclub, explained that: *"What you notice, especially as a traditional carnivalsclub, is that we can't even enter the bars anymore."* Many bars prefer the business of tourists, as they bring in more revenue, and there is no space left. She also explained that, in some cases, the carnivalsclubs now play their music outside or earlier in the day to avoid the most crowded times. Only a few cafés still make room for these clubs, where the clientele still values the tradition. As a result, many clubs have decided to stop playing in the evenings altogether, as Sietske explained: *"It's too crowded, and we get rude comments from drunk people."*

The increasing number of tourists has clearly affected how Carnival is celebrated, especially for those who partake in the event in a traditional way. Not everyone experiences the same issues, the respondents who are not in a carnivalclub mainly mentioned more crowds, indicating not everyone is affected equally. However, it can be stated that because of the larger crowds, some traditions have been pushed to the background. There is an ongoing tension between growing crowds and maintaining tradition, and while many respondents emphasized that everyone is welcome, there remains a distinction between those who understand and adhere to the local customs and those who do not.

The introduction of new safety measures and crowded streets have created a subtle distinction between the more public-facing parts of the celebration and the moments that feel truly authentic to long-time residents. These shifts can be understood through Goffman's concept of front and back regions, as discussed in the theoretical framework in the context of tourism through MacCannell (1973). The *front regions*, the more visible, accessible parts of the event, are increasingly dominated by tourists, and the *back regions*, spaces and moments where locals celebrate in different ways, are more difficult to find. Nienke emphasized this, describing a specific early morning gathering as one of the moments that feels "authentic": *"The traditions are still there, and in those moments, it's mostly the people who have always been here."*

This distinction highlights the tension between openness to outsiders and the desire to maintain cultural authenticity. As MacCannell (1973) suggests, tourists often seek "authentic" experiences, but their presence can, paradoxically, lead to a commodification of the very culture they come to observe. In the case of Carnival in 's-Hertogenbosch, tourists are attracted by the event's authentic feel, but by joining in, they may unintentionally disrupt local traditions.

#### 4.2.3. The 'creative tourist'

As described in the introduction, 's-Hertogenbosch focusses on a specific type of tourist: the creative. The local tourism organization, Den Bosch & Partners, has strategically aligned its initiatives with research conducted by Glocalities. This marketing consulting firm specializes in identifying, quantifying, and describing target audiences to offer strategic advice for positioning organizations or cities to resonate with potential visitors. The study was commissioned by Den Bosch Partners and the municipality of 's-Hertogenbosch to pinpoint and describe the key visitor segments for the city.

Initial findings from the research highlighted that the ‘creatives’ and the ‘achievers’ are the most pertinent groups for tourism in ‘s-Hertogenbosch. According to Glocalities, creatives are described as 'global citizens who deeply value freedom of expression'. They value equality and freedom of choice, willingly step outside their comfort zones, and frequently engage in activities such as writing and visiting museums and theatres. The emphasis on cultural engagement and creativity reflects the broader trend identified by Füller and Michel (2014), as described in the theoretical framework.

In essence, creatives are characterized by Glocalities by their global outlook, tolerance, cultural engagement, business ethics, self-development, open-mindedness, exploratory nature, idealism, commitment to equality, and creativity, aligning with the idea that modern tourists seek deeper interactions with the local culture and lifestyle of the destinations they visit (Füller & Michel, 2014). The three most important elements for creatives going on a city trip are historical heritage, cultural offerings and food and drinks. This aligns with the notion that creative tourism is not solely about observing cultural attractions but also about experiencing the city in a multisensory and participatory way, as suggested by Richards (2011). The focus on everyday experiences and interactions within a city reflects the increasing demand for authenticity and immersion in urban tourism, further linking the Glocalities findings with broader theoretical trends in the field.

When residents were asked about their view of the creative tourist, they emphasized art, youthfulness and unique experiences. Noortje, for instance, said: *“When I think of a creative tourist, I somehow picture someone younger. If I think of art and culture, I might imagine someone older, but creativity feels more like something with a hip, younger vibe. I think it’s mostly someone who isn’t looking for mainstream things but more for unique, cool places”*. This understanding mirrors some of the characteristics described by Glocalities. Talking about art and culture, many respondents emphasized the importance of key cultural institutions, such as the *Noordbrabants Museum* and the legacy of *Jeroen Bosch*, which remain central to the city’s cultural identity. These attractions align closely with the Glocalities' findings, which indicate that creative tourists are drawn to historical heritage and cultural offerings.

Additionally, more contemporary spaces were mentioned. Amber, for example, highlighted the Tramkade and the Design Museum as key attractions, associating them with the artistic and

cultural engagement that Glocalities attributes to creative tourists: “*I think people who go there fit that profile*”. The Tramkade, a former industrial area turned cultural hotspot, is repeatedly mentioned as a hub for creative activity, drawing a young, art-focused crowd and offering the kind of local cultural experiences that the Glocalities research suggests creatives value. The repeated mentions of the Tramkade suggest that residents view it as an important aspect of the city’s appeal to creative visitors.

In addition to specific locations, residents emphasized the importance of cultural festivals and events in attracting creative tourists. Events like *Boulevard*, a theatre festival, and *Jazz in Duketown* were frequently mentioned as catering to creative tourists. Christel emphasized that these events are not just for tourists, but also appeal to locals: “*I think Den Bosch does a great job with these, and they draw a lot of people, not just tourists but also Bosschenaren*”. This reflects the notion that contemporary tourists, as described by Füller and Michel (2014), are increasingly interested in integrating with local culture. These events, where residents and tourists interact, emphasize the intangible, everyday cultural experiences that are becoming more central to urban tourism (Richards, 2011).

### 4.3. Place branding

This section delves into the residents' perspectives on 's-Hertogenbosch's city branding, with a specific focus on the promotional tools used by Den Bosch & Partners, including the website *zinindenbosch.nl* and the more recent promotional video. Through the analysis of interviews, it examines how local residents view the website's design, content, and overall representation of the city, and how well they feel these align with the identity of 's-Hertogenbosch. Additionally, respondents' opinions on the promotional video are explored to further understand their thoughts on how effectively the city's image is communicated.

#### 4.3.1. The website

To explore residents' opinions about the current branding strategies, respondents were shown the website *zinindenbosch.nl*, made by Den Bosch & Partners and discussed in more detail in the methods section (chapter 2). The website plays a key role in conveying the city's identity, offering information on attractions, activities, and events. The website features a bright, visually appealing design, with categories such as "See & Do" and "Agenda" that provide users with easy access to practical information.

When discussing the design of the city's branding website, respondents expressed generally positive views regarding its layout, describing it as fun and vibrant. However, many also noted that the aesthetic did not entirely reflect the identity of 's-Hertogenbosch. While the design was often characterized as youthful and modern, it was perceived by some as failing to capture the more traditional and authentic aspects of the city. Amber, who herself is a graphic designer, remarked: *"It looks good, but there's nothing particularly original or distinctive about it."* One specific thing respondents mentioned as being youthful and modern, was the use of colour on the website. Amy commented: *"I wouldn't necessarily associate Den Bosch with the color pink."* This view was shared by others who felt that the design didn't immediately evoke the distinctive character of 's-Hertogenbosch. These critiques suggest a gap between the website's modern branding and the rich cultural and historical image of the city. For branding to resonate, it must encapsulate the essence of a place (Vuignier, 2017), ensuring that it remains true to the community's identity.

A key concern was the perceived disconnect between the design and the city's core identity. Several respondents remarked that the website's modern look could just as easily represent a

place like Amsterdam or Utrecht. Noortje articulated this sentiment clearly: *“When we talk about the real, authentic Den Bosch, I feel like that’s missing a bit here. If I didn’t know these places, I could easily think this was for Amsterdam or Utrecht.”* The sleek and modern style of the website seemed to create a sense of detachment from the more traditional elements of 's-Hertogenbosch, particularly those cultural characteristics that residents value.

The respondents' feedback on what was missing from the website, such as the people, coziness, and warmth, underscores the importance of integrating internal aspects of place identity into effective place branding. As discussed by Paasi (1991) and further elaborated by Peng, Strijker, and Wu (2020), place identity comprises both external looks and internal thoughts, with the latter reflecting subjective connections residents have to their city, such as feelings of togetherness and pride. These internal elements, particularly the emotional ties people have to 's-Hertogenbosch's community and ambiance, are central to residents' sense of belonging and were seen as underrepresented on the website. This is consistent with the need for place branding to align with the community's authentic identity rather than simply serving external marketing goals, as Boisen et al. (2011) argue.

In addition to these internal aspects, respondents emphasized the need to include physical elements of place identity—key landmarks that shape the city's character. Specific landmarks, such as the Binnendieze and the Sint-Jan, were mentioned by respondents as essential elements that should be highlighted, and are currently missing. Erik suggested: *“You should definitely include the eye-catchers, like the Binnendieze, Sint-Jan, and the characteristic places you see when you enter Den Bosch. For example, the market and the Moriaan should definitely be included.”* Amy added: *“I think it would be a shame if we don’t draw attention to places like the Binnendieze.”* This demonstrates that both the tangible and intangible aspects of place identity are crucial for residents, aligning with Peng, Strijker, and Wu's (2020) emphasis on the interaction between physical and mental representations of place.

Although elements were missing, respondents were generally positive about the website's content, especially the photographs and the places suggested for visitors. The use of high-quality, recognizable images resonated well with locals. Amber noted: *“I really connect with the photos, as they are very recognizable,”* suggesting that the imagery effectively captured key aspects of the city. However, some respondents pointed out that certain images could have been from any city, indicating a need for distinctiveness. Despite this, the content—including

the suggested activities—was seen as highly relevant to both locals and potential visitors. Noortje, while critical of the design, acknowledged the value of the suggestions: *“I do think the images shown and the suggestions made on the site are very good suggestions, I completely understand them.”* This shows that, even with design concerns, the website’s substance aligns with local expectations.

Several respondents pointed out they recognized specific places featured in the photos, which reinforced the website’s connection to the city’s identity. Amber expressed appreciation for this familiarity: *“It’s really nice for me to recognize so many places. I immediately see Buurt and Tramkade, and those are really the spots where creative tourists would enjoy visiting most.”* Furthermore, the inclusion of important local businesses, such as restaurants and cafes, was viewed as essential for representing the city. Amber also emphasized this point: *“I think it’s great that they’ve included small shops and cafes because that really is what makes Den Bosch for me.”* This focus on local establishments highlights the importance of authenticity and local pride in branding efforts, suggesting that leveraging community assets can enhance the city’s appeal to creative tourists (Frenette, 2017).

#### 4.3.2. The video

The promotional video, described in the methods chapter (chapter 2), uses humor, local dialect and cultural references to show the city. It serves as an example of how the city seeks to balance tradition with modernity when presenting itself.

The resident perspective on the city’s branding, as expressed in interviews, reveals a mixed but generally positive reception towards the video. Peter, Sietske and Nienke appreciated elements of the video, particularly its tone and the way it showcases the city. Sietske found the humor and the portrayal of Den Bosch's "nuchterheid" (down-to-earth character) effective, noting that the city isn’t trying to be overly glamorous or special. She commented, *“It’s nice and down-to-earth, no fuss, and that fits Den Bosch.”* Similarly, Nienke praised the relaxed and cozy feel of the video, stating that it reflects the *“Brabantse gezelligheid”* well, emphasizing the importance of this trait in the city's identity: *“You can just feel that Brabant-style coziness, I think that was well done.”*

However, the respondents pointed out there was something missing that they believe affects the authenticity of the portrayal. A recurring theme in their responses is the absence of carnival, a significant cultural and identity marker for many residents of 's-Hertogenbosch, especially for long-term members of carnivalsclubs. Sietske was surprised that such an important tradition was completely ignored, stating: *“I found it strange... that you completely ignore carnival... I don't know if you can portray the city without it.”* The respondents suggested that this could be a deliberate choice by the city to avoid drawing more visitors during an already busy period, with Nienke even acknowledging, *“I don't necessarily want more people during carnival, and I think most people feel the same.”*

Ultimately, while the residents felt the video aligned with parts of the city's identity, the absence of integral cultural elements like carnival suggests a partial, if not incomplete, representation of how they personally experience and view 's-Hertogenbosch. The perspectives of these interviewees, especially as members of carnivalsclubs for whom carnival holds particular importance, highlight how deeply intertwined this tradition is with their sense of place.

## 5. Conclusion & discussion

In this last chapter, the main conclusions will be presented and an answer to the main question will be given. In the second part, the research will be reflected on, by exploring the limitations and its possible solutions, by referring back to the social and societal relevance, and by offering suggestions for further research.

### 5.1. Conclusion

In this thesis, an answer to the main question about how the creative tourist identity pitched by local place branding strategies influences the traditional place identity in 's-Hertogenbosch is sought through a qualitative research design. Residents of the city were interviewed about place identity, tourism and place branding.

The findings show that place identity in 's-Hertogenbosch is a complex and intertwined construct. Both internal, social traits—such as *gezelligheid* and *bourgondisch*—and external features like the historic center and the Sint-Jan cathedral contribute to the city's identity. These internal traits strongly reflect the broader Brabantse regional identity, characterized by familiarity, warmth, and social interaction (Visser, Norier & Swanenberg, 2015; Wagemakers, 2017). As Peng, Strijker, and Wu (2020) note, place attachment is shaped by emotional connections, and in 's-Hertogenbosch, this is particularly evident during Carnival. The event reinforces both place and personal identity through family traditions, local customs, and the symbolic importance of clothing and colors, which contribute to a sense of social inclusion.

Carnival is often mentioned by residents as the most authentic experience in 's-Hertogenbosch, representing an interesting case within the broader scope of tourism. While residents are proud of carnival and its uniqueness, they are also protective of it. Visitors are said to be welcome, but only if they respect local customs, like the clothing and rituals. This showcases a paradox: although carnival is celebrated as the ultimate expression of the city's identity, residents are hesitant to fully open it to tourists, and there remains a distinction between the front and back areas (MacCannell, 1973). Residents experience changes in how they celebrate carnival due to the increasing tourism, like the need for more safety measures, and members of carnivalsclubs are not able to perform their traditional practices how they used to. This shows how the growing tourist presence even causes changes in the authentic back area of the event.

While people are bothered by tourists during carnival, they experience minimal disruption from tourists in their daily lives in the city. According to respondents, this is because tourism in 's-Hertogenbosch largely consists of domestic visitors on day trips, who easily blend into the urban environment. They do, however, observe that tourists are primarily older visitors, drawn by the city's cultural and historical appeal, and that there are fewer younger tourists. While residents appreciate the economic benefits of tourism, there is concern about maintaining a balance. They wish to preserve local culture without becoming too focused on accommodating tourists. Local customs are seen as vital to the city's identity, and any friction is typically a result of visitors not understanding these customs.

Residents see creative tourism in 's-Hertogenbosch as more than just visiting historic sites—it involves engaging with the city's cultural life. Places like Tramkade and local festivals are viewed as key areas where tourists can immerse themselves in the city's creative atmosphere. These spaces cater to creative tourists by offering a blend of art, culture, and local experiences that go beyond traditional sightseeing, aligning with the idea that modern tourists seek participatory experiences (Richards, 2011) But, residents also observed that the majority of tourists they encounter are primarily older and more interested in traditional sightseeing rather than creative, immersive experiences. While they appreciate the economic benefits that tourism brings, residents noted that 's-Hertogenbosch still feels relatively unaffected by the influx of tourists, especially outside of peak events like Carnival. Most visitors are domestic day-trippers, and many blend into the city's everyday life, causing minimal disruption to local routines.

The place branding strategy in 's-Hertogenbosch reveals a selective approach, where specific facets of the city's identity are emphasized to attract targeted demographics, particularly the creative class (Hubbard, 2018; Boisen et al., 2011). But, respondents noted a disconnect between this modern, youthful image and the city's traditional cultural identity. While the city's website was perceived as too generic, the promotional video was better received for capturing the warmth and welcoming atmosphere of the city. However, the absence of Carnival, which residents see as integral to the city's identity, was seen as a missed opportunity. Boisen et al. (2011) and Paasi (1991) emphasize that effective branding must reflect both external features and the internal sense of belonging that locals feel. The gap between the city's branding and its authentic identity highlights the need for more alignment between promotional efforts and the cultural heritage cherished by residents.

The findings of this research demonstrate the complex and interwoven nature of place identity, tourism, and branding in 's-Hertogenbosch. The city's identity is not static but shaped by both internal feelings of belonging and external representations, such as its historic landmarks and cultural traditions. These layers of identity are closely tied together, as seen in the strong connection between the Brabantse regional identity and the local customs that residents cherish. The strength of this identity, as described by residents, suggests it is not easily adapted, even as the city's branding strategies aim to promote a creative tourist identity.

Carnival provides an interesting example of how different elements of identity come together. Interestingly, residents describe carnival as being one of the most authentic experiences in 's-Hertogenbosch, noting its absence in place branding, but they are reluctant to actually open up for tourists. This creates a paradox: while residents want Carnival to be recognized as a key aspect of the city's identity, they also wish to maintain control over who participates, reflecting a broader tension between authenticity and tourism. With carnival, there is a distinction to be made in what is authentic for residents, and thus connected to the place identity, and what is perceived as authentic for tourists. This relates to Wang's (1999) existential authenticity, which emphasizes that sometimes the emotional and relational aspects of an experience and how tourists feel and connect with them are more important than whether or not something is actually considered authentic.

As MacCannell's (1973) concept of front and back regions highlights, while tourists may access the visible aspects of Carnival, the deeper, more meaningful experiences are reserved for locals, highlighting a challenge of balancing authenticity and tourism. At the heart of this challenge is the need to maintain authenticity. For creative tourism to succeed in 's-Hertogenbosch, the emotional and social connections between visitors and locals must be preserved. Carnival, the city's most authentic event, highlights this complexity—while it draws tourists, it also risks losing its core identity as tourism grows.

In essence, the case of Carnival is an example in 's-Hertogenbosch where place identity, tourism, and branding are deeply interconnected and, at times, contradictory. The city's efforts to position itself as a creative and cultural hub cannot be separated from the cultural traditions that form the foundation of its identity. To successfully manage these tensions, 's-Hertogenbosch must find a balance between promoting itself as a modern destination and

safeguarding the cultural values that residents hold dear, ensuring that tourism growth enhances rather than erodes its authenticity.

## 5.2. Discussion

As discussed in the methodology, my positionality as an insider to 's-Hertogenbosch has undoubtedly shaped this research. On one hand, my familiarity with the city provided me with extra knowledge and easy, valuable access to respondents. On the other hand, this introduced the risk of bias, as my own experiences with carnival and the city's identity could have shaped the way I interpreted the data. Despite the efforts undertaken to avoid bias and assumptions, like peer debriefing with others and reflexive practices, it is important to acknowledge that my personal connection to the city influenced the results. For further studies, the involvement of external researchers could help minimize the insider bias that inevitably shaped parts of this study.

Another important factor that has impacted my research, was the timing of the city's promotional video, which was launched during the research process. As a result, it was not discussed with all respondents, creating inconsistency in the data. Some respondents were able to share their views, specifically the members of the carnivalsclubs, while the others did not have this opportunity, leading to incomplete feedback on this aspect of branding. Due to limited time and resources, it was not possible to go back to discuss the video with the others, though the quality of research could have been improved by doing so.

As discussed in the societal relevance, this research comes at a relevant time. At the moment of writing this thesis, 's-Hertogenbosch is working on its first official tourism strategy. The city needs to balance tourism growth with the preservation of its authenticity and livability. Understanding how residents look at these challenges can inform future policy decisions, particularly when addressing issues such as visitor dispersion and maintaining quality of life for locals (van Bree, 2024). This is also important for city branding, as it is crucial the branding efforts align with residents' perceptions of authenticity to avoid disconnects between what is promoted and what is experienced.

In terms of scientific relevance, this research contributes to the broader academic discourse on creative tourism and place identity by offering insights into the lived experiences of residents

regarding local branding efforts. The study reveals a potential tension between creative tourism and the preservation of cultural authenticity. The concept of authenticity, as revealed in this study, is fluid and subject to reinterpretation. By centering the voices of 's-Hertogenbosch residents, it provides a qualitative dimension to existing studies such as the Imagomonitor and Glocalities research. This perspective adds depth to understanding how branding strategies resonate with local residents and provides an empirical, grounded perspective in the fragmented field of place branding.

Finally, based on the insights gathered from this interview, some suggestions for further research will be presented. Firstly, exploring the creative tourist experience and expectation instead of the resident perspective. Understanding how these tourists perceive the authenticity of their experiences, what they find important and how this aligns with the city branding strategies could add an interesting layer of comparison to this research. Secondly, an in-depth exploration of carnival and carnival tourism. During the research process, it became clear that carnival plays a much larger role in the city's identity and tourism than initially expected. With carnival playing such a complex role in the city's identity and tourism, a focused study on how different people experience this could provide valuable information on authenticity and tourism. Lastly, to explore whether the tensions observed in 's-Hertogenbosch are unique or part of a broader trend, a comparative study could examine how another city looks at these issues.

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## Appendix

### Appendix I – Topic list Interview

#### **Introduction**

- Introduce yourself
- Introduce subject
- Introduce interview

#### **Ethical questions**

1. Can the interview be recorded? This is for data process purposes only.
2. The data obtained from this interview will be handled with care, if desired the statements will be made anonymous.
3. Do you have any questions before we start the interview?

#### **General questions**

4. Could you briefly introduce yourself? (name, age etc.)
5. Were you born in 's-Hertogenbosch? How long have you lived here?

#### **Identity**

6. I'm interviewing you because you are a 'Bosschenaar'. How would you describe a typical Bosschenaar?
7. How would you describe 's-Hertogenbosch to someone who has never been to the city?
8. Which historical or cultural features do you associate with 's-Hertogenbosch?
  - Which physical features?
9. What makes 's-Hertogenbosch unique compared to other cities?
  - In the country/in Brabant
10. How connected do you feel to the history, traditions and identity of the city?
11. Have you seen many changes in the city? How do you see the balance between old (tradition) and new (modernization)?
12. *What does carnival mean to you? How connected is it to the identity of the city?*

#### **Tourism**

13. Do you notice much tourism in 's-Hertogenbosch? Positive or negative feeling?

14. What's your general impression of tourists in 's-Hertogenbosch? How would you describe them?
15. *How do you feel towards tourism during carnival?*
16. *Does tourism during carnival positively or negatively impacts your experience?*
17. *Does tourism during carnival impact local traditions?*
18. Do you feel like the city (tries to) attract a certain type of tourist?
19. The citymarketing organization targets the 'creative tourist'. What do you think of when you hear that?

→ explain the concept of the creative tourist

20. Do you think this fits the city?
21. What do you think caters to this type of tourist in 's-Hertogenbosch?
22. Creative tourists are often looking for 'authentic experiences' in a city. What would you say is an authentic experience in 's-Hertogenbosch?

### **Place branding**

23. Have you seen anything about the new branding towards tourists?
  - Yes: what is your inmpression?
  - No: explain

→ Show website / video

24. What's your first impression?
25. What features match the identity of the city according to you? Which ones don't?
26. Are there elements missing?
27. Do you think the branding, as presented here, matches how you see the city?
28. Do you think the website/video could change the way people see the city?
  - Positive or negative?

### **Closing questions**

29. If you could change anything about the way 's-Hertogenbosch is being presented towards tourists, what would it be?
30. In general, you feel positively or negatively towards the branding (and the tourism that goes with it) in 's-Hertogenbosch?
31. Is there anything you would like to add that we have not yet discussed?

## Appendix II – Coding tree

