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Integrating technology for a participatory and sustainable urban branding: proposal of a cooperative urban branding model and case study of Tunisian initiatives

Abstract

Research background and purpose: This article aims to explore the motivations and barriers to citizen participation in the field of urban branding by studying the key variables for success in engaging residents and developing an operational model that integrates emerging technologies to facilitate and measure the sustainable involvement of residents in the urban branding process, while taking into account potential conflicts of interest between different stakeholders.

Design/methodology/approach: The authors first conducted a comparative study of various urban branding initiatives. They then conducted a qualitative study among residents of regions that were implementing urban branding projects.

Findings: The analysis of various urban branding initiatives led to the creation of a catalogue of best practices to inspire other cities, as well as the identification of key pillars for a national urban branding strategy. The findings of this study on motivations and barriers to civic engagement can help urban managers design more effective engagement programmes and implement more relevant action plans for cooperative urban branding strategies. In addition, this study will enable managers to optimise the use of resources by identifying the key success factors of urban branding strategies. The analysis of the different approaches to urban branding presented here may encourage policymakers to explore new models of collaboration between the public and private sectors by developing public-private partnerships.

Value added and limitations: The authors explored the motivations and obstacles to citizen participation in urban branding by examining the key variables that contribute to successful engagement of residents. The study allowed us to explore the diversity and richness of urban branding initiatives in Tunisia, a rapidly changing landscape. The authors used a study of residents/citizens, but including other stakeholders could provide more relevant results.

Keywords: *citizen participation, city branding, emerging technologies, urban branding, urban satisfaction*

JEL

Classification: M31, M37

Received: 2025-11-20; **Revised:** 2026-03-05; **Accepted:** 2026-03-23

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1. Introduction

The digital transformation era and the increasing relevance of engaged forces define urban branding as all strategies used to create, communicate, and enhance the city's image. It was long defined by a top-down rationality at the base of institutional marketing communications and expert-narrated storylines (Kavaratzis & Hatch, 2013). Urban branding tends to more actively embrace collaborative processes involving citizens and customers (Zenker & Erfgen, 2014). This is the general development of the context in which cities have, among others, increasing attractiveness, while cultivating competitiveness, sustainability, and social cohesion, encouraging feelings of attachment and co-responsibility among the citizens (Boisen et al., 2018). In this new setup, digital tech is central in making citizen involvement, transparency, and urban identity co-creation. Iconic instances like the Decidim tool for Barcelona, which shapes the policy by and with citizens, or the I Amsterdam campaign, making dwellers brand agents of their city, showcase this shift to more open, democratic, and interactive urban branding. These tests show a wish to go past mere brand placement and pull citizens into a common storytelling task where the city becomes a group effort. Though these practices have been adopted internationally, the body of work concerning urban branding in countries within the global South, particularly in Maghreb countries, remains relatively underdeveloped. In the Tunisian context, territorial upgrading is one of the most significant dimensions of citizen participation since the revolution began in 2011. However, it has generally been a little-considered area, fragmented, mainly on an experimental basis through academic research. Only the Smart Medina and Djerbahood in Djerba initiatives reveal strong innovation potential from within cities, citizen involvement, and the knitting of a storytelling front about the area. These projects do not fall within a coherent and sustainable national strategy for territorial branding. Our study fills this gap and suggests how to run a cooperative urban branding process that ties in with digital technologies and involves people. Consistent with this aim, we articulate the following research questions:

- RQ1. What motivates residents to engage in participatory urban branding, and what barriers hinder their sustained involvement?*
- RQ2. How do emerging digital technologies enable, structure, and assess residents' long-term participation in cooperative urban branding processes?*
- RQ3. Which managerial levers and success factors effectively foster citizen engagement while addressing potential stakeholder conflicts in urban branding?*
- RQ4. How can insights from locally grounded initiatives inform the foundational design of a coherent national urban branding strategy?*

We chose Tunisia as the area of our study to achieve two goals. Accordingly, our research objectives are:

01. *To develop an operational cooperative urban branding model that integrates emerging technologies to facilitate and measure sustained resident participation while explicitly accounting for stakeholder conflicts.*
02. *To derive the foundational pillars of a national urban branding strategy from documented local best practices.*
03. *To identify and analyse the motivational drivers and barriers shaping citizen participation in urban branding.*
04. *To build a conceptual framework through a systematic literature review and to substantiate it via a comparative assessment of initiatives and qualitative interviews with residents.*

To do this, we followed a dual method. A review of the literature allowed the development of a conceptual framework based on the convergence of territorial branding, digital citizen participation, and collaborative planning at urban spaces. Thereafter, we compared the main Tunisian urban branding initiatives through an in-depth study of two emblematic cases: Smart Medina and Djerbahood. After that, we conducted a qualitative survey based on semi-structured interviews with 20 citizens from seven Tunisian governorates to reflect on their perceptions, expectations, and experiences regarding the phenomenon of urban participation.

2. Urban branding in the digital and participative age

Territorial marketing is “an iterative and controlled process of accelerated transformation of the area, aimed at making it more attractive and hospitable, intending to pursue harmonious territorial development in the eyes of all stakeholders” (Chamard & Schlenker, 2017). Indeed, in the era of globalization, territories are viewed primarily as competitors in the struggle to attract the most mobile factors of production, people, and ideas; territorial marketing is part of these competitive dynamics, facilitating the creation of a coherent, visible territorial offering tailored to market expectations (Moilanen & Rainisto, 2009). Territorial branding is “a discipline that provides territories with methods, techniques and approaches to improve their appeal and support their development efforts” (Bourkiza, 2022). Territorial branding is an element of territorial marketing that builds an authentic image of the territory and a high profile for the territory to be promoted by creating clear emotional and mental links with the territory in people’s minds (Eshuis et al., 2014). Territorial branding results in the territorial brand: the visible and operational representation of this identity, which includes logos, slogans, graphic design, and a brand platform that features values, commitments, and narratives (Kotler et al., 2015). Urban

branding is a version of territorial branding at the level of the city. “It mirrors urban spaces’ view and identity as lively spots where people unite and partake in creativity” (Braun, 2012).

The concept of urban branding has changed over many years, from the shift that was taking it from the traditional delivery and implementation to a more engaging digital vision, which speaks to the participation of residents in the co-creation of urban identity. A dynamic model of place brand identity formation has recently been introduced based on the ongoing interaction of all interests (Kavaratzis & Hatch, 2013). This view is supported by that of Merrilees et al. (2013), who emphasize the plurality of urban brand meanings for different groups of stakeholders and thus illustrate branding complexity in contemporary cities.

These experiments relate to the modern idea of place branding from the ‘from below’ approach (Kavaratzis & Hatch, 2013), which means residents, artists, and users actively shape a place’s identity. This is opposed to vertical urban branding, which is seen as institutional discourse, and it brings out the potential that participatory cultural branding must create a dynamic, shared, and internationally recognizable territorial identity. Pantea et al. (2016) identified twelve key elements of place branding, which are classified into two categories: national culture and infrastructure. They also identified five main factors that influence the favourability of place branding: political perception, social media and news, place awareness, place association, and tourism experience. The arrival of digital technologies, especially social media, changed the panorama of urban branding. Foth et al. (2021) investigated the important role of social media in place branding and highlighted its importance for more interactive and participatory communication. This numeric dimension was signalled by Bokolo (2023), who suggested using digital public spaces as online platforms for ongoing engagement. Digital technologies can drive social and economic development by employing Information and Communication Technology (ICT) to promote innovation.

2.1. Emerging technologies and smart cities: a new paradigm for urban branding

The upgrowth of emerging technologies and the notion of smart cities have dramatically altered how cities construct and project their image on urban branding. With the advent of big data, artificial intelligence (AI), the Internet of Things (IoT), and digital platforms, citizens can participate in actions (Romero Zaleta & Ochoa-Romeroll, 2025), cities can optimize their real-time communication, enhance citizen engagement, and improve the urban experience (Gascó-Hernandez, 2018). Therefore, urban branding in the age of Smart Cities does not apply just to visual or communicative promotion; it is dynamic, interactive, and based on real-time information. Kitchin (2014) presents a detailed assessment of the implications of big

data for the city's politics in terms of the branding benefits (better alignment with public expectations) and the ethical dilemmas of controlling personal information. Smart, functional, and emotional values significantly improve the brand image of the smart city. Most crucially, the longer people live in a smart city, the more various values shape the city's brand image. Due to the relational and participative nature of the smart city branding, residents who have lived in a smart city for a long time, or since birth, may be more involved in managing the city's brand (Grębosz-Krawczyk & Zakrzewska-Bielawska, 2024). Lim and Rasul (2022) investigate the potential of AI in destination brand management, opening interesting prospects for urban branding. By understanding the expressed feelings of residents and visitors on social networks, cities can better realize the image they hold of themselves and adapt their communications accordingly. On a similar note, Hudak (2019) recommended a model for integrating digital storytelling (DST) with participatory place branding because residents can participate in the branding process and promote collaborative branding of the space. This model comprises three stages: discussion, and use of individual stories as a mediated narrative in the brand of the place, and support in continually assessing and fitting the brand of the place. Authors contend that the availability of digital storytelling technology makes it possible for residents to share their narratives about the place, which could be used in branding the place. The Smart City approach raises several criticisms regarding citizen participation and social inclusion. Specific Smart city models are questioned because they tend to prefer technocratic governance, which is often brought about by private companies at the expense of actual participation by the residents (Cardullo & Kitchin, 2019). In return for this critical view, some cities have adopted participatory approaches, wherein technology helps co-construct the urban image. Barcelona is a pioneer in the field of smart cities. It blends urban branding with how it runs things. Since the 2010s, a series of digital initiatives have been launched in the city to increase its attractiveness, innovative image, and citizen participation (Batty et al., 2012).

The Smart Specialisation Strategy (S3) approach offers a strategic methodology for aligning urban branding with a specific region's assets and innovation capacity (Foray et al., 2011; McCann & Ortega-Argilés, 2015). S3 adopts a place-based perspective, focusing resources within the region's dynamism potential regarding innovation to increase attractiveness and competitiveness based on variety in the urban branding market. This forms a strong base for the urban brand, which is highly visible and positioned. McCann and Ortega-Argilés (2015) stress the relevance of the concept of S3 through an analysis of its application in different regional contexts for urban development and urban branding. Indeed, if high-potential areas of specialization are easily discoverable and exploitable, a city can possess an identity that is strong, attractive, and innovative. The challenges of this new approach are in terms of governance and stakeholder participation (Capello & Kroll, 2016). Effective public-private-academic interaction is needed for this to take place

and for coherence to be established between economic development and the territorial branding strategy.

2.2. Citizen participation: towards inclusive urban branding

Citizen participation has become a central pillar of contemporary urban branding. Viewing urban branding from this angle shows a shift from the top-down strategy of giving all the powers of public decision-makers to involving dynamics and sharing the co-creation of the territorial brand by residents, local businesses, and civil society, who will henceforth actively participate in determining the image of their territory. Citizen participation has evolved towards more inclusive, collaborative, and democratic forms of building territorial identity (Eshuis & Edwards, 2012; Kavaratzis, 2012). Eshuis et al. (2014) put forward a model of urban branding based on citizen participation, underlining that the legitimacy and authenticity of a territorial brand come mainly from the ability of institutions to mobilize local stakeholders. Kavaratzis (2012) moves in the same direction, underlining the need for relational branding, where citizens are not just “consumers” of the urban image but become co-producers of the territorial story. This view fits a sustainability and shared governance perspective, which is necessary to reinforce the local dimensions of territorial marketing policies. Casais and Monteiro (2019) examined resident participation in co-creating the Porto City brand in Portugal. They found that residents consider the brand city as an external communication tool for tourists more than an internal tool to engage citizens, despite the latter feeling that this brand reflects their sense of place identity. Similarly, Herezniak (2017) concluded that citizens are still underestimated and underrepresented in place branding strategies and practices. Modern technologies have enabled place branding to be created and managed more openly by empowering citizens. Braun et al. (2013) identified residents’ three main roles in forming and communicating place branding. They should be given priority as the first target and must be meaningfully involved in all stages of the place branding process. They should be ambassadors for the place brand. For their part, Zumbo-Lebrument and Lebrument (2020) confirm the importance of citizen participation and propose that it should not be individual and personal but through a support organization, such as associations and local authorities.

2.3. Territorial satisfaction and brand attachment: fundamentals of civic engagement

Territorial satisfaction and brand attachment are the basics of urban branding, determining the perception of the city by the residents as well as the willingness of the individuals to get engaged in its promotion, enhancement, and external representation (Zenker & Beckmann, 2013). Urban branding context largely

influences this satisfaction from structural and relational factors that shape the residential experience daily. One of these factors, the quality of public service - for instance, transportation, education, or health, and the general quality of urban service have a direct and substantial relationship; when residents feel that urban service is well managed with justice, and as they start liking the city more, which indirectly contributes to attachment to the territorial brand (Khairat & Marso, 2023; Zenker & Martin, 2011). Social relationships and community also play a role in dynamism: strong social bonding and quality social interaction strengthen place belonging, a principal element of urban branding centred on local identity. The quality of life, considering environmental conditions and urban leisure, significantly influences the perception of the city as a desirable and “brandable” place. Economic opportunities and personal development prospects, such as employment, training, and entrepreneurship, are also seen as catalysts of territorial satisfaction in the urban area, characterized by migration and economic reconversion, according to Kavaratzis and Hatch (2013).

These variables are not strategic contextual variables but strategic lever variables that local governments can use to integrate within their approach to urban branding to develop a genuine, attractive, and inclusive brand. Studying the factors that influence the involvement of stakeholders, including citizens/residents, in the territorial marketing approach of a territorial brand, Zumbo-Lebrument and Lebrument (2020) found that stakeholder involvement was positively influenced by attachment to the territorial brand. Similarly, brand attachment is positively influenced by regional belonging, organizational involvement, and satisfaction with the brand’s approach. The degree to which these factors influence residents’ attachment to their city’s brand is reflected in observable support behaviours, such as participation in urban initiatives, recommendations, or supporting the area or the values of its identity (Strzelecka et al., 2017; Chen et al, 2013). Viana do Castelo in Portugal developed an emotional city brand to promote emotional bonds and achieve place attachment among residents and visitors (Casais & Poço 2023).

2.4. Trust in the territorial brand: a key success factor

Trust in the territorial brand is a principal factor in seeing the effect of urban branding, especially in situations where the input of citizens, local businesses, and institutions is key to co-creating a shared urban identity. Such are the works of Kemp et al. (2012), who observe that trust serves both as a necessary condition for adherence to the brand’s project and as an amplifier of the engagement of the stakeholders. This forms a basis on which their study indicates that the perceptions of coherence, competence, and good faith in urban communication enhance the legitimacy of the urban brand. In the same view, Eshuis and Edwards (2013) demonstrate that trust is a relational resource that

enables collaborative governance in urban branding projects. It allows the governing body to move away from the top-down logic of the institutional image. It allows them to co-construct a collective image with shared narratives, common values, and transparent actions. This is most apparent in cases of urban repositioning, where the residents must validate or reject the new narratives of the brand. In this sense, trust mediates between brand strategy and the citizens' experiences. Trust is later defined by Zaho et al. (2017) as being shaped not just by practically experienced outcomes but by the daily interaction with digital urban services, thereby underscoring that the quality of urban experience is central to brand building. In the words of Yang et al. (2023), narratives and stories co-created by different actors and actresses play a pivotal role in establishing collective trust for urban projects in cities in a metamorphosis state. At the local level, such as in the Tunis Medina, people must have a sensitive and historical bonding with the urban setting; therefore, trust in the actors of change (whether it is the municipality, designers, or NGOs) would directly condition the success of the identity process.

2.5. Towards an integrated model of cooperative urban branding

Considering the theoretical perspectives presented above, we propose an integrated conceptual framework that combines all essential dimensions for implementing an operational process of cooperative Urban Branding. This model integrates urban branding, emerging technologies, S3, territorial satisfaction, brand attachment, trust, and citizen participation. The model builds on and enriches several fundamental works, positioning digital technologies as facilitators of cooperative branding strategy rather than mere communication tools. First, it extends the work of Florek (2011) on digital urban branding by incorporating the dimensions of territorial satisfaction, attachment, and trust towards the urban brand. This approach provides a better understanding of the relationship between residents and the urban brand in a digital context. The model then integrates the principles of participatory branding presented by Zenker and Erfgen (2014), aligning them with the principles of S3 and emerging technologies. This synthesis will enable the envisioning of urban branding that is at once participatory, technologically advanced, and strategically aligned with the city's specific assets. Also, the aspects of co-creation of the city brand presented by Ripoll González et al. (2025), highlighting the importance of collaboration between stakeholders, are incorporated in the model and have been enriched by the addition of the technological aspect. In addition, the model considers the work on smart cities (such as that of Yigitcanlar et al., 2019) while linking them to the concepts of urban satisfaction and citizen participation, allowing for the exploration of how smart city initiatives can be designed to enhance citizen engagement and increase their satisfaction with their city. Finally, the conceptual framework

integrates reflections on the challenges of implementing S3 (Capello and Kroll, 2016) and applies them to urban branding to optimize the anticipation and management of barriers to alignment between urban branding, citizen engagement, and smart specialization strategies. We therefore propose the following operational model, which consists of 10 steps for implementing good Cooperative Urban branding. Integrating emerging technology into our proposed operational model not only facilitates citizen cooperation in urban branding initiatives but also enables ongoing monitoring and continuous improvement of that cooperation by resolving conflicts of interest among all stakeholders involved in the project. Interactivity (through

Operational Process for Implementing A Cooperative Urban Branding Project Using Emergent Technologies

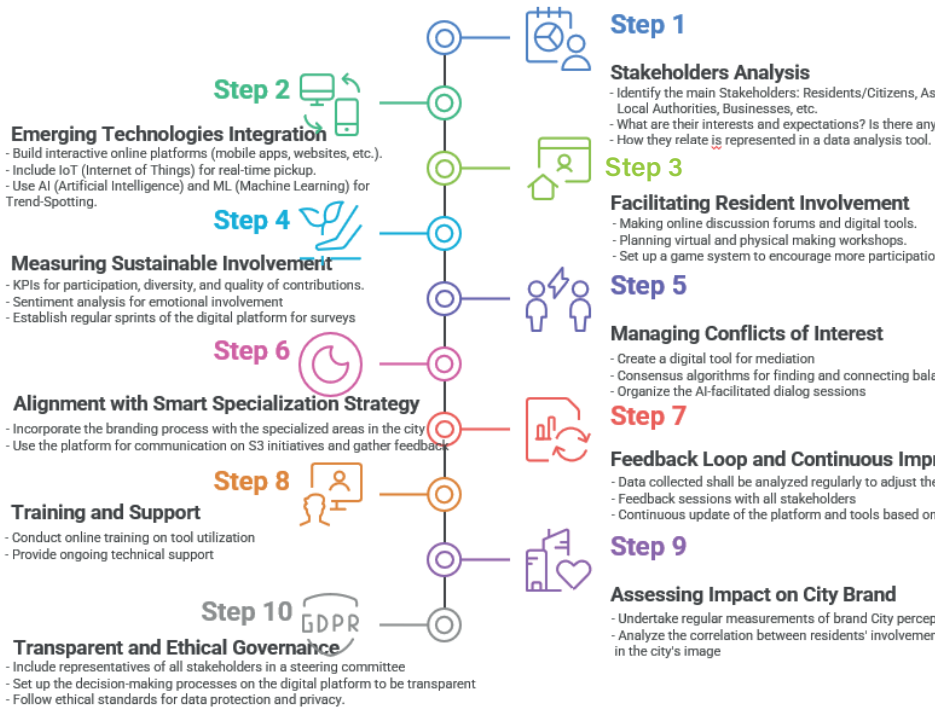


Figure 1. Operational process for implementing a cooperative urban branding project using emergent technologies

Source: created by the authors

AI and machine learning) will increase residents' and citizens' satisfaction and significantly impact their involvement in urban branding initiatives. Continuous measurement of this involvement enables better management of conflicts of interest through digital tools and dialogue to build trust. Technology is therefore changing the power dynamics in urban branding projects, as residents and citizens are no longer passive participants (who must follow local authorities' instructions regarding urban branding projects) but potential actors and active participants throughout the process. Citizens and residents have every right to make suggestions, criticize, and intervene, like all other stakeholders, in decisions relating to urban branding. Ethical and transparent governance involving all stakeholders will be necessary for the successful implementation of a cooperative urban branding project (see Figure 1).

3. Urban branding in Tunisia

3.1. Overview of the leading cases of urban branding in Tunisia

Over the last two decades, Tunisia has seen a surge in urban branding initiatives aimed at boosting the attractiveness of its cities on a national and international scale. These initiatives, which have been led by local authorities, artists, urban planners, and even public institutions, are part of a drive to modernize and enhance the city's heritage and stimulate tourism (see Table 1).

- The Médina - Tunis: The strategic framework for developing the city of Tunis is set out in a vision that branches out into strategic lines, objectives, and goals. Tunis is an inclusive and sustainable capital, the driving force behind an organised and resilient metropolitan area that innovates and shines economically and culturally on the international stage. This project adds value to the Medina of Tunis through heritage description.
- Bizerte - Linking the Smart City with the Strategic Vision of Bizerte 2030; launched in 2017 with the prospect of turning Bizerte into a smart and sustainable city by 2050, this project will attract investments in the ICT and renewable energy sectors to create Bizerte as a regional centre of expertise for renewable energy.
- Tozeur - Branding the desert and oasis heritage: The Saharan and architectural legacies of Tozeur, with their clay bricks and vernacular architecture, have been used to prove its image as a 'cultural and tourist destination.
- Sousse - Integrated urban strategy: In 2018, the city of Sousse presented an integrated urban strategy as part of MedCities. To make Sousse a sustainable, inclusive, and competitive city, this strategy is based on a trilogy centred on enhancing historical heritage, revitalizing public spaces, and citizen involvement.

- Kairouan and Mahdia - Heritage Empowerment via Technology: Incorporating mobile applications, QR codes, and immersive tours under a digital cultural mediation system has given these two cities an advantage in enhancing their heritage appeal.
- Gabès - A modern town in the heart of the oasis: Gabès is a participative artistic initiative that explores the ecological and social stakes of the city of Gabès through work on it as an artistic collective that unites artists, researchers, inhabitants, and NGOs. It improves the city's industrial and oasis landscapes through a new territorial narrative.
- Silian - Street Art and local image: The "Siliana Spray" International Street Art Festival has allowed this town in the Tunisian interior to emerge on the cultural scene by creating spectacular mural frescoes. This strategy is like visual city branding, giving a new image to a town that has long been marginalized.
- Djerba - Djerbahood project: In 2014, "Gallery Itinerrance" launched an initiative with the residents of the village of Erriadh Djerbahood, which turned this traditional village into an open sky museum of street art. More than 150 artists invited and welcomed by 30 countries to paint on the walls of the houses have formed this atypical artistic landscape that anchors Djerba in the global urban art circuit.
- Sidi Bou Saïd: The setting of the village of Sidi Bou Saïd, with its houses painted white and blue that perch on a hill overlooking the sea, has become emblematic of Tunisia. The country's Mediterranean aesthetic is frequently used in national and international promotional media. Since 1915, this town has been classified as a protected site known for its Arab-Andalusian architecture and artistic dimension. It is a case of the aesthetic branding of a city that combines heritage, art, and landscape.

Table 1. A comparison of urban branding initiatives in Tunisia

City/ Project	Approach	Main objective	Key actors	Citizen participation	Technological tools used	Temporal scope
Tunis – The Médina	Patrimonial and digital	Heritage enhancement	INP, associations, municipality	Yes	QR codes, digital maps, Medina-Pedia platform	Continuous since 2015
Bizerte 2030	Strategic and urban	Urban regeneration and attractiveness	Municipality, government, experts	Low	Smart city dashboards, participatory platforms	Long term (2030)

Tozeur	Cultural and touristic	Desert/Heritage positioning	Ministry of tourism, mu- nicipality	Medium	Ecotourism mo- bile apps, digital storytelling (lim- ited)	Periodic and progressive
Sousse – MedCi- ties	Integrated urban devel- opment	Sustainable and competitive city	Municipality, MedCities	Yes	Online consulta- tion tools, GIS platforms	Planned since 2018
Kairouan & Mahdia Digital	Patrimonial and technol- ogy	Enhancing religious and marine sites	Municipality, INP	Moderate	Mobile guides, QR-coded heri- tage paths	Since 2021
Gabès	Ecologic and participative	New territorial stories	Artists, researchers, NGOs	Hight	Participatory mapping, video workshops	Since 2020
Siliana – Street Art	Cultural and visual	Modern image and inclusion	GIZ, munici- pality, artists	Yes	Digital murals Catalogue, social media engage- ment	Annual event
Djerba – Djerba- hood	Urban art and identity	Enhancing the local image through a col- laborative artistic project	Galerie itinerrance, residents of ,Erriadh	Yes	Online exhibi- tion, geo-tagging, digital photo archives	Emblematic project since 2014
Sidi Bou Saïd	Aesthetics and patrimo- nial	Preserving and promoting the image of an em- blematic village	Municipa- lity, ONTT, local cultural actors	Low	No significant tech (regulated aesthetics, tradi- tional model)	Continuous (since 1915, renewed in the 2000s)

Source: created by the authors

Given the diversity of local approaches, a national urban branding strategy could be a structuring lever for enhancing Tunisia’s urban identity at regional and international level. This national strategy should focus on five areas. Firstly, a governance framework for establishing a National Territorial Brand Observatory. Secondly, developing Tunisia’s plural identity highlights Tunisian cities’ cultural, geographical, and social diversity. The fourth point is digital integration, which develops an interconnected digital environment (see Figure 2).

Enhancing Tunisia's Urban Brand Through Strategic Pillars



Figure 2. The pillars of a National Urban Branding Strategy (NUBS)

Source: created by the authors

3.2. Study of citizen participation in urban branding in Tunisia

3.2.1. Methodological approach

This research adopts an inductive approach grounded in a constructivist epistemological stance, recognizing that urban branding practices are deeply embedded within their specific territorial and social contexts. A qualitative methodology, utilizing semi-structured interviews, was selected to capture the subjective frames of reference constructed by the actors themselves, rather than imposing predefined external analytical frameworks (Masson & Parlier, 2004; Oiry, 2006). This exploratory and contextual approach aligns with established scholarly recommendations for studying emerging urban phenomena (Bichon et al., 2010; Bourgault et al., 2010).

Furthermore, a comparative analysis of various urban branding initiatives across Tunisia was conducted. This secondary analysis serves to triangulate the interview data, situating the participants' perceptions within the practical and operational realities of current branding activities in the Tunisian context.

3.2.2. Sampling strategy and participant recruitment

The study employed a purposive and heterogeneous sampling strategy, resulting in a sample of 20 participants. To ensure a comprehensive national perspective and mitigate "capital-centric" bias, the recruitment spanned seven Tunisian governorates (Tunis, Djerba, Bizerte, Mahdia, Tozeur, Kairouan, and Siliana).

It is important to clarify that this geographic dispersion was not intended for a micro-comparative analysis of local dynamics between specific cities – which would require a larger intra-city sample – but rather to aggregate diverse viewpoints into a holistic national narrative. By involving participants from coastal, interior, and southern regions, the study aims to identify cross-cutting patterns and shared challenges regarding citizen participation in Tunisia as a whole.

The selection criteria ensured diversity across several dimensions:

- geographic representation (reflecting varied urban and regional contexts).
- socio-professional categories (including educators, civil servants, liberal professions, and job seekers).
- demographics (gender balance and age groups: 21–35, 36–50, and 51+).
- educational attainment (ranging from vocational training to postgraduate degrees).

Data collection proceeded until thematic saturation was achieved. In the context of this multi-site study, saturation was defined at the conceptual level; it was reached when three consecutive interviews across different regions yielded no significant new categories or insights, confirming the robustness of the identified themes at the national level.

Table 2. **Sample characteristics**

Characteristics		Number	Percentage
Sex	Male	13	65%
	Female	7	35%
Socio-professional category (SPC)	Looking for work	1	5%
	Teacher	10	50%
	Liberal profession	4	20%
	Employee/civil servant	5	25%
Age	21-35 years old	3	15%
	36-50 years	15	75%
	51 and over	2	10%
Education level	BTP/BTS	1	5%
	Bachelor	2	10%
	Master's degree	1	5%
	Postgraduate diploma (master's, doctorate, etc.)	16	80%

Region	Tunis	6	30%
	Djerba	4	20%
	Mahdia	2	10%
	Bizerte	4	20%
	Kairouan	1	5%
	Séliana	1	5%
	Tozeur	2	10%

Source: own study

The sample comprises 65% men ($n = 13$) and 35% women ($n = 7$). Most participants are aged 36–50 years (75%), followed by 21–35 years (15%) and 51 years and older (10%). Teachers represent 50% of the sample, followed by employees/civil servants (25%), liberal professions (20%), and job seekers (5%). The educational level is predominantly high, with 80% holding a postgraduate degree (Master's, Doctorate, or equivalent).

3.2.4. Data analysis

Interview data were fully transcribed and analyzed using an iterative and inductive approach with NVivo and Tropes software, following the method of Miles and Huberman (2003). The procedure included:

1. *Careful reading and immersion* to identify recurring themes and understand the context of responses.
2. *Segmentation into units of analysis*: each relevant excerpt was coded as an analytical unit.
3. *Thematic coding*: open coding to create preliminary categories, followed by axial coding to organize and link categories, resulting in seven final thematic dimensions:
 - urban satisfaction
 - citizen participation
 - motivations for participation
 - urban brand
 - obstacles and barriers to participation
 - trust in the urban brand
 - attachment to the urban brand
4. *Triangulation*: interview results were compared with official documents, local publications, and municipal websites to ensure consistency and robustness of findings.

5. *Intra-case and inter-case comparative analysis* to examine general similarities and differences across governorates and identify patterns of citizen participation and the impact of the urban brand.
6. *Coding validation*: To enhance methodological transparency and reliability, each coding step was iteratively validated by multiple coders. Discrepancies were discussed until consensus was reached, ensuring internal consistency of categories.

The process included:

- open coding to identify units of meaning,
- axial coding to structure and hierarchize categories,
- inter-coder checks at each cycle to strengthen the credibility.

Urban branding initiatives were treated as multiple case studies, with each governorate considered as a separate case. For each case:

- territorial boundaries were defined,
- data sources included interviews, official documents, local publications, and websites,
- comparative logic was applied to identify similarities and differences between cases.

This dual approach (comparative analysis and qualitative study) allows for an integrated understanding of citizen participation dynamics and the impact of the urban brand, while ensuring methodological rigor, transparency, and credibility.

4. Results

4.1. Urban satisfaction

This subject is more closely linked to the experiences of citizens and residents. Not only does it reinforce the feeling of value and evaluation among citizens, but it also plays a crucial role in creating an urban brand. A participant from Tunis said, “*I feel moderately proud because of the major structural shortcomings (safety, infrastructure, health, green areas, etc)*”. Using the data from the corpus and the quotes from the study, it seems that the urban brand can engender singular experiences that elicit a personal resonance, reinforcing the loyalty of citizens (residents) and improving the brand’s persistence. Territorial/urban satisfaction can then be measured by reference to four sub-categories, as this study shows.

4.1.1. Satisfaction with public services

According to the study, these services generally concern health services, infrastructure, public transport, sports facilities, green spaces, and health trails. A resident of Mahdia

said, *“The quality of public transport needs to be improved”*. An interviewee from Tunis said: *“Security is good and contributes to a sense of tranquillity for residents. However, health services could be strengthened to reduce waiting times and improve access to specialist care. The infrastructure is good in education, but additional support for equipment and teaching resources would be beneficial”*. It was considered unsatisfactory by 80% of those interviewed, with the grades catastrophic, mediocre, insufficient, not too satisfactory, and needing improvement. A citizen of Bizerte replies: *“Certainly not. Two edifying examples are the mobile bridge and the maternity hospital, which bear witness to the mediocre quality of our infrastructure. Bizerte has just one municipal swimming pool, and there seems to be no end to the maintenance work required. We suffer from a lack of green spaces and sanitary facilities”*. It was acceptable to only 20% of respondents, who rated it as positive and of good quality.

4.1.2. Social relations and sense of community

These relate to social cohesion, social interactions, special events, civic solidarity, and culture. Interviewees generally described social relations and feelings of community as satisfactory, with qualifications of good relations, people helping each other, and being friendly, rather than close-knit and strong. A resident of Bizerte said, *“Bizerte is a small town, so we all know each other. People are friendly and help each other. I have known my neighbours for 30 years! And even before that! They show solidarity whenever there is a need”*. Solidarity and a sense of community are generally well developed in Tunisia, as one participant from Kairouan said: *“In our culture, we always show solidarity with others when it comes to our country”*.

4.1.3. Quality of life and environment

Interviewees mentioned cleanliness, waste, public areas, hygiene, pollution, pleasant places (green spaces, the sea, nature), well-being, and health. Their satisfaction with the quality of life and the environment was described as unsatisfactory, mediocre, and needing improvement. It is the most influential factor in people’s overall level of satisfaction. The interviewees presented the quality of life and the environment as a primary determinant of territorial attachment, as mentioned by a citizen of the city of Tunis: *“The quality of life in this area has a major influence on my overall satisfaction. Aspects such as cleanliness, infrastructure, safety, and access to green spaces largely determine my day-to-day well-being. When there are shortcomings in waste management, crumbling infrastructure, or a lack of recreational areas, quality of life can suffer, leading to frustration and dissatisfaction. In short, a good quality of life improves comfort and health and creates a sense of belonging and pride in the area”*. Quality of life was also presented as a determining factor in citizen participation in urban branding initiatives,

as one citizen from the town of Tozeur put it: *“It can encourage me to take part in projects in my area”*.

4.1.4. Economic opportunities and social development

The interviewees focused mainly on the economy, job opportunities, and unemployment. They agreed that there is a lack of economic opportunities. A citizen of Tunis told us: *“I consider that the economic opportunities in my region are moderate. Jobs are available but often confined to certain sectors, limiting the options for those who aspire to more varied careers. Although prospects exist for certain profiles, they may lack vitality or support, particularly for young graduates and entrepreneurs. Overall, there are opportunities, but they need to be broadened and better supported to meet the diverse aspirations of local people”*.

4.2. Citizen participation

4.2.1. Perception of citizen participation

The Interviewees described citizen participation in territorial marketing and urban branding as a social commitment and identity for the region and a reflection of a cultural and social reality. They suggested that this participation can be very beneficial and offer interesting prospects. A participant from Tunis said: *“When properly orchestrated and coordinated, citizen participation can be extremely beneficial to territorial marketing. It brings a dimension of authenticity, creativity, and sustainability to projects. However, to maximise the benefits, it is vital to establish inclusive and well-structured arrangements to value each voice, address local issues, and ensure that citizen involvement benefits the community while contributing to the aims of territorial development”*. According to some interviewees, citizen participation can be seen as a tool for enhancing territorial branding initiatives. A Mahdia resident confirmed this: *“Citizen participation contributes to territorial marketing by making it more authentic, credible, and sustainable. Not only do projects involving residents attract more visitors, but they also forge an image of a destination that is warm, lively, and deeply rooted in its cultural and social reality. Consequently, citizen inclusion often indicates success and effectiveness for territorial marketing strategies”*. Respondents involved in territorial marketing and urban branding initiatives said that companies, associations, and clubs mainly offered opportunities for participation. A participant from Djerba said: *“I created ‘The TEAM’, an educational training company that emphasises learning by doing, aligning closely with a real business and focusing on cultural tourism and sustainability. This project aspires to redefine tourism in Djerba and enhance the destination. In March 2024, I inaugurated a new cultural and gastronomic trail focusing on olive oil, inviting visitors to explore the ‘Fessili’ oil mill, a site*

of great historical and cultural importance, to highlight the island's tangible and intangible heritage". They feel that the public authorities' communication efforts are insufficient. Attractiveness must be improved through advertising techniques, communication campaigns on social networks, and public relations. This was revealed, for example, by a participant from Siliana who said: "I am not always informed of events or urban branding opportunities available".

4.2.2. Motivations for participation

There were two types of motivation for citizens to participate in territorial marketing and urban branding actions, as presented by the interviewees. First, Personal motivations: Meeting other people, expanding one's professional network, and establishing business relations. For example, a citizen from Kairouan revealed: *"I am thinking of meeting other people and expanding my network"*. Seeking economic benefits and professional development opportunities, a citizen from Tunis suggested: *"I am looking for professional development opportunities"*. Occupying one's free time, and participation was a source of personal fulfilment for some. A citizen from Tunis told us: *"Participating in territorial marketing initiatives offers tangible benefits both for me (personal fulfilment, professional development) and for my community (economic vitality, social cohesion, and heritage conservation). These benefits generate a synergy that promotes balanced and sustainable territorial development, enabling everyone to contribute actively to building a flourishing and balanced collective future"*. Second, Collective motivations: Promoting and developing the region's image, the region's economic growth, improving well-being and quality of life in the region, teaching the younger generations, social responsibility, territorial attachment to the city, and the spirit of belonging and territorial pride. A Djerba participant explained it well: *"I am deeply attached to my culture, traditions, and local heritage. Committed to territorial marketing, I share this pride and contribute to the conservation and enhancement of my island for the future. I am also driven by the desire to stimulate employment and support local businesses, particularly the small craft, agricultural, and cultural entities that benefit from tourism and cultural events. With its delicate ecosystems, Djerba encourages me to protect my environment and quality of life from the impacts of development. Participating in sustainable, environmentally friendly initiatives allows me to safeguard my place of life while enjoying the benefits of tourism"*.

4.2.3. Barriers and obstacles to participation

The main barriers and obstacles to citizen/resident participation in territorial marketing and urban branding actions presented by the interviewees were of two types: First, Personal barriers and obstacles: Lack of availability due to personal, professional, and

family commitments, differences of opinion, and lack of trust. Second, Collective barriers and obstacles such as a lack of awareness of local initiatives due to a lack of communication, a lack of commitment on the part of public authorities, and non-involvement of the civil community, administrative and legislative difficulties, cultural constraints, and an environment that demotivates participation due to people seeking their own interests.

The brakes and obstacles to participation in territorial branding actions were well described by a citizen participant from Tunis: *“Various factors can prevent or discourage me from contributing to territorial marketing projects, even though they are linked to my territory. Lack of time is one of the obstacles, as my busy schedule and family responsibilities make it difficult to get involved in community projects. This lack of availability greatly hampers my participation. Sometimes I do not participate simply because I do not know what projects are going on or how to get involved. A lack of communication or visibility of local projects can reduce my involvement. In some circumstances, differences of opinion about priorities and values prevent me from getting involved”.*

4.3. The urban brand

This subject concerns an essential aspect of territorial/urban marketing, which involves influencing the thinking of citizens/residents by establishing clearly defined emotional and psychological links in their minds with the area. A participant from Djerba revealed that: *“Djerba’s territorial brand largely captures the identity and values of the island, even if certain aspects could be highlighted more. It effectively highlights Djerba’s cultural richness, craft traditions, and natural beauty, which are essential to its authenticity. The brand also highlights the island’s historical heritage and hospitality, characterizing the local way of life and enhancing its appeal as a tourist destination”.* Consequently, the main objective of creating an urban brand will be to attract individuals who may choose to live, work, study, or visit this area/city rather than another, particularly talented individuals who bring wealth and investment. According to our study, there are two dimensions to consider when it comes to urban brands. First, Sense of belonging: According to the interviewees, the territorial/urban brand highlights the region’s specific features and assets and is linked to heritage. It is a vector of attachment that fosters a sense of belonging and collective pride. Second, Credibility: This represents an image that is real, sincere, faithful to reality, and incorporates the region’s values and identity.

4.3.1. Trust in the urban brand

In the context of urban territorial marketing and the territorial/urban brand, it is essential to constantly focus on openness to move towards a citizen/resident-centred approach. Not only does this philosophy reinforce the feeling of trustworthiness, but

it also fosters a deeper relationship with citizens and increases confidence in schemes. Focusing on clear communication and accountability makes creating a strong bond with citizens/residents possible. Thanks to this bond, the brand can cope with fluctuations in market dynamics. The analysis of the corpus reveals that, through the clarity of the marketing actions implemented, responsiveness to the suggestions of citizens/residents, transparency in communication, and vision within the culture of the region/territory, brands can establish a relationship of trust with citizens/residents, ensuring not only their satisfaction, but also their long-term commitment and loyalty. A citizen from Tunis said: *“To strengthen residents’ confidence in the territorial brand, it is essential to actively involve them by allowing them to participate in the brand’s initiatives. Valuing and communicating the positive spin-offs (economic, social) would show the tangible benefits for the area. Transparency and regularity of information via reports or dedicated platforms would also strengthen trust. By supporting local initiatives and organising events that unite people around the brand’s values, residents will feel more connected to the brand. Finally, highlighting residents’ testimonials and contributions would underline that the brand represents the community”*.

4.3.2. Attachment to the urban brand

This subject deals mainly with the emotional ties between citizens and their region/city, a deep and diverse relationship, and a sense of pride. For a citizen, the territorial/urban brand is the capacity to reinforce or arouse a sense of belonging or affiliation. A participant from the city of Tunis admitted: *“The territorial brand strengthens my attachment to the area. It highlights our region’s unique and authentic elements, such as its culture, heritage, and landscapes, which are a source of pride for local people. By highlighting these aspects, the brand creates a sense of belonging and collective pride, strengthening my bond with the region. It also shows that our region is respected and preserved, while being open to others, which motivates me even more to contribute to its development and promotion”*.

5. Discussion

The results are consistent with those of Kavaratizs and Hatch (2013), where economic opportunities and personal development, such as employability, training, and entrepreneurship, are considered by respondents to be catalysts for territorial satisfaction. Based on our findings, we can conclude that urban/territorial satisfaction is multidimensional and can be measured using four dimensions: satisfaction with public services, social relations and sense of community belonging, quality of life and environment, and economic opportunities and social development. Our results confirm those of Cardullo and Kitchin (2019), Zumbo-Lebrument and Lebrument (2020), and Ripoll González et al. (2025), where a technology-based

participatory approach helps to co-construct the urban image (as in the case of Barcelona), and contradict the views of Herezniak (2017) and Casais and Monteiro (2019), who consider that the urban brand is much more oriented towards external communication aimed at tourists than as an internal tool for involving citizens. This is the context for our operational process, since, according to our approach, the integration of emerging technology is a lever for urban performance, thus changing the power dynamics in urban branding. We have identified two types of motivations for civic participation. First, personal motivations such as meeting other people, expanding one's professional network, and establishing business relationships. Second, collective motivations: promoting and developing the region's image, the region's economic growth, improving well-being and quality of life in the region, teaching younger generations, social responsibility, territorial attachment to the city, a sense of belonging, and territorial pride. On the other hand, we have also identified two types of barriers to citizen participation. The first concerns personal obstacles such as lack of availability due to personal, professional, and family commitments, differences of opinion, and lack of trust. The second concerns collective obstacles, such as a lack of awareness of local initiatives due to a lack of communication, a lack of commitment on the part of public authorities and lack of involvement of civil society, administrative and legislative difficulties, cultural constraints, and an environment that discourages participation due to the pursuit of personal interests. Identify stakeholders, understand their motivations/barriers to participation (*"participation in territorial marketing initiatives offers tangible benefits for both me and my community,"* suggests an interviewee from Tunis), measure their level of satisfaction, and determine whether there are conflicts of interest between these stakeholders that may influence their decisions to participate, as mentioned by an interviewee from the Tunis region: *"In certain circumstances, differences of opinion on priorities and values prevent me from getting involved"*. This is therefore the cornerstone of implementing a cooperative urban branding project. To this end, we have chosen stakeholder analysis as the first step in our operational process.

Interviewees emphasize the importance of communication in informing and raising awareness among stakeholders, such as this one from the Tunis region: *"Sometimes I simply don't participate because I don't know what projects are underway or how to get involved"*, and this one from the Séliana region: *"I am not always informed about events or opportunities to promote the urban brand"*. This justifies the choice to integrate emerging technology (through interactive platforms and the use of artificial intelligence) as the second step in our operational process.

Trust plays a decisive role, as we have seen and as suggested by Yang et al. (2023). Openness fosters a deeper relationship with citizens and strengthens trust in programs. Emphasizing clear communication helps to create a strong bond with citizens/residents. Thanks to this bond, the brand can cope with fluctuations in market

dynamics. The interviews revealed that clear marketing actions, responsiveness to citizens'/residents' suggestions, and transparent communication enable urban brands to establish a relationship of trust with citizens/residents, ensuring not only their satisfaction but also their long-term engagement and loyalty. The co-construction of the territorial brand strengthens residents' sense of belonging. The same applies to stakeholder engagement and involvement, which are influenced by attachment to the territorial brand, manifested through participation in urban initiatives and recommendations (Strzelecka et al., 2017; Casais and Poço, 2023). At this stage, the third and fourth steps of our operational process are justified, namely, facilitating the involvement of residents/citizens and sustainably measuring their involvement. A brand that generates pride but does not create skilled jobs for young talent remains symbolic. Conversely, a brand that is economically attractive but rejected locally becomes fragile.

The fifth step, "Managing Conflicts of Interest," is the "heart" of our approach. One interviewee stated: *"In certain circumstances, differences of opinion on priorities and values prevent me from getting involved"*. Consensus algorithms for finding and linking balanced solutions and the organization of AI-facilitated dialogue sessions make it possible to manage conflicts of interest between stakeholders and strengthen their involvement.

In the case of Djerba, for example, testimonials show a strong internalization of identity: heritage, crafts, hospitality, fragile ecosystems, etc. One participant from Djerba revealed that: *"the Djerba territorial brand largely reflects the identity and values of the island, ... It effectively highlights Djerba's cultural richness, craft traditions, and natural beauty, which are essential to its authenticity. The brand also highlights the island's historical heritage and hospitality, characterizing the local way of life and reinforcing its appeal as a tourist destination"*. The link between identity and sustainability determines long-term attractiveness. The Smart Specialization Strategy (S3) is not a marketing strategy but rather a framework for territorial innovation policy based on identifying local comparative advantages, concentrating resources on priority areas, and co-construction with regional actors. So S3 does not sell an image but structures a knowledge-based "development trajectory." The Djerba framework demonstrates pride in heritage, environmental commitment, support for micro-enterprises in the craft sector, and a desire for sustainable development. These are precisely the intangible resources necessary for a successful S3 (Capello and Kroll, 2016). One participant from Djerba explained it well: *"I am deeply attached to my culture, my traditions, and my local heritage. ... I share this pride and contribute to the conservation and enhancement of my island for the future. I am also driven by the desire to stimulate employment and support local businesses, especially small craft, agricultural, and cultural entities that benefit from tourism and cultural events"*. The sense of belonging is not simply a result of branding, but a condition for activating

the entrepreneurial discovery process. S3 is most successful when it coexists with institutional trust, local cooperation, and entrepreneurial commitment. Without territorial attachment, there can be no sustainable strategic commitment. Without indicators, urban branding remains mere rhetoric, but with indicators, it becomes a measurable public policy.

A testimonial from Tunis suggests: *“Promoting and communicating the positive (economic and social) benefits would help to demonstrate the concrete advantages for the region. Transparency and regularity of information via reports or dedicated platforms would also strengthen trust. ... Finally, highlighting the testimonials and contributions of residents would help to emphasize that the brand represents the community”*. An urban brand can be effective in its communication but perceived as manipulative if its governance is opaque. Ethical governance is based on informational transparency, which strengthens institutional trust, stakeholder inclusion (resident testimonials, highlighting local contributions, organizing participatory events), which makes the brand co-produced, as well as responsibility/accountability. Regular assessment of economic and social impacts is a mechanism for legitimizing the urban brand, while ethical and transparent governance ensures its perceived credibility and sustainability. These dimensions transform the brand from a communication tool into an instrument of territorial regulation. It is in this context that we have included them in our operational process at stages 9 and 10.

6. Conclusion

As part of our study, we explored the motivations and obstacles to citizen participation in urban branding by studying the key success variables for involving residents. This study aimed to develop an operational model integrating emerging technologies to facilitate and measure the sustainable involvement of residents in the urban branding process while considering the potential conflicts of interest between the various stakeholders. The study enabled us to explore the diversity and richness of urban branding initiatives in Tunisia, a landscape undergoing rapid change. Our study makes several original contributions to urban branding and citizen participation, in terms of theoretical, practical, and managerial contributions. In terms of theoretical contributions, our study first proposes a new integrated model of cooperative urban branding that integrates emerging technologies and considers the dimensions of urban satisfaction, citizen participation, trust, and brand attachment in the context of urban branding. Our process model offers a more holistic urban branding perspective, enriching the existing literature. Our second theoretical contribution concerns the conceptualization of citizen participation in urban branding through a deeper understanding of the motivations and obstacles to citizen participation. The role of emerging technologies in modern urban branding is the third theoretical

contribution. Our study also makes many practical contributions. Firstly, at the level of the framework for evaluating urban satisfaction, a practical framework for evaluating citizens' satisfaction with their city, which municipalities and regional authorities can use to improve their services and image. This framework includes the quadruple: public services, social relations and sense of community, quality of life and environment, economic opportunities, and social development. Again, analysis of Tunisia's various urban branding initiatives has enabled us to present a catalogue of good practices that can inspire other cities. On the other hand, our results can serve as a practical guide for cities wishing to integrate emerging technologies into their urban branding strategies. On a managerial level, we have presented five pillars for a National Urban Branding Strategy, offering a concrete managerial framework for policy-makers. The results of our study on the motivations and obstacles to citizen participation can help urban managers design more effective engagement programs and implement more relevant cooperative urban branding action plans. In addition, our study will enable managers to optimize the use of resources by identifying the key success factors for urban branding. Our conclusions on the importance of trust and attachment to the urban brand can guide the communication strategies of cities and regions. Finally, our analysis of the different approaches to urban branding may encourage policy-makers to explore new collaboration models between the public and private sectors by developing public-private partnerships. Our research is not without its limitations. We have limited ourselves to a study of residents/citizens, but including other stakeholders may provide more relevant results. Again, we focused on citizens' perceptions rather than objective measures of the effectiveness of urban branding.

Authors' contribution

M.A.M.: article conception, theoretical content of the article, research methods applied, conducting the research, data collection, analysis and interpretation of results, draft manuscript preparation. **A.Ch.:** research methods applied, data collection, analysis and interpretation of results. **T.Ch:** article conception, data collection, analysis and interpretation of results draft manuscript preparation.

Acknowledgment

The authors would like to acknowledge the Deanship of Graduates Studies and Scientific Research, Taif University for funding this work.

Declaration of Generative AI and AI-assisted technologies in the writing process

During the preparation of this work, the authors used *Napkin AI* to create the graphics. After using this tool, the authors reviewed and edited the content as needed and takes full responsibility for the content of the publication.

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