

# **BRANDING A SUSTAINABLE WASTE COMPANY AS A FACILITATOR OF A SMART REGION**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Sustainable waste companies currently lack visibility to create formal networks. As the smart region concept is gaining importance, sustainable waste companies can be a facilitator of a smart region as smart waste management is an important factor in the realisation of this concept. To increase visibility, sustainable waste companies could use the smart region concept and their facilitating role as a symbol in their branding strategy. Currently, there is a knowledge gap on how to use this concept in corporate branding. A multiple case study using semi-structured interviews with both people from collaborative initiatives and people from organizations that are a member of an initiative indicate that the corporate brand of a company could use the themes an initiative focuses on and their membership as a symbol in the corporate branding strategy with an accent on the geographical aspects and the role the company has in it. The study proposes that a sustainable waste company can take upon their facilitating role by gathering the right stakeholders. The involvement of stakeholders and citizens will create a support base for the smart region brand, increase legitimacy and reinforces mutual promotion.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Businesses are fundamental stakeholders in society. However, as humanity has reshaped its planet in a few centuries it is facing multiple environmental issues and social challenges (Sardá & Pogutz, 2018). Currently there are 7.7 billion people living on the planet (Demidenko & Dergacheva, 2010). In the coming decade, over a billion more people will join the group of consumers (Sardá & Pogutz, 2018). The world population is growing and resources are becoming scarcer. This increases the pressure on earth systems (ibid.). It is time to take action by changing the way people produce, consume and live by being thoughtful on what is there. A transition towards circularity responds to the increasing pressure from unsustainable economic development, resource scarcity and population growth (Hanumante, Shastri & Hoadly, 2019; Bao & Lu, 2020). Circularity uses closed loops and cycles to bridge consumption and production (Witjes & Lozano, 2016). In order to maintain the limited stock of resources, raw materials should be recovered from waste and recycled (Sardá & Pogutz, 2018). Recycling targets on a European level are constantly being increased. Europe has set itself to the goal of recycling 70% of all packaging by 2030 (European Parliament, 2018). Furthermore, Europe strives to be climate neutral by 2050 through an action plan for a circular economy which is aimed at, among other things, waste prevention and management (European Parliament, 2021).

By initiating and directing waste chains and building ecosystems that evolve around it, sustainable waste companies, that have a focus on collecting and processing waste, can have a proactive role in the transition towards circularity as waste management is an important element in the transition to a circular economy (Deselnicu, Milităru, Deselnicu, Zăinescu & Albu, 2018). Circular economy and circular waste chains as a part of it, help improve the ability of future generations to meet their needs (Sauvé, Bernard & Sloan, 2016).

For sustainable waste companies, that have a focus on collecting and processing waste, it would be beneficial to be part of a formal network. Joining resources and connecting activities will lead to the development of business relationships, development of the network and to greater value creation (Munksgaard & Medlin, 2014). Eventually, the advantages of joining a formal network will be sharing resources, gaining knowledge, creating strategic alliances and sharing resources (Talarowska & Tuzinovic, 2008). The membership of a formal network could be a function of social network connections (Sydow & Windeler, 1998). These connections and membership of formal networks could be achieved when a company is visible for others, outside their region. A strong brand and branding supports the creation of a firm's identity and the central role of branding evolves around establishing the identity of the company and improving its position in the marketplace (Douglas, Craig & Nijssen, 2001). Thus, the goals of visibility towards actors outside the network, which these companies currently lack, and the creation of formal networks could be accomplished by branding. Sustainable waste companies could brand themselves by creating and shaping their identity through concepts and symbols. Sustainable waste companies contribute to the transition towards circularity through smart waste management (Deselnicu, Milităru, Deselnicu, Zăinescu & Albu, 2018). These companies are contributing to the European goal to be circular by 2050 (European Parliament, 2021) and thus help overcoming international challenges.

The smart region concept is emerging and gaining significance since the importance of regions as centres of knowledge and innovation is growing (Hielkema & Hongisto, 2013). Smart development through technology and digitalization is becoming prevalent (Sutriadi, 2018). Due to this digitalization aspect and the European circularity goals, the smart region concept matches very well with smart waste management. Sustainable waste companies, that operate on a regional level, can be a facilitator of a smart region for which a collaborative, co-

creative approach is required that involves all societal actors (Brolcháin, Ojo, Porwol, Minton, & Barry, 2018). To receive acknowledgement and visibility to create formal networks, sustainable waste companies could brand themselves as a facilitator of a smart region and thus play a role in the collaboration with other actors to create this smart region.

Currently, there is no unique definition of a smart region (Bauer, Helbig, Mokhov & Eltsova, 2019). Therefore, it remains unclear how this concept could be used in a branding strategy. In the current literature there is a knowledge gap on how sustainable waste companies, that could act as a facilitator of a smart region, can brand themselves by using this concept and on how this smart region initiative itself could be branded. For example, in the existing literature the meaning and composition of smart regions are investigated with a focus on innovation, digitalization, improved quality of life and the geographical area (Brolcháin et al., 2018), but knowledge on making the initiative visible and how actors that are a member of it are using it in their branding strategy is lacking.

The aim of this qualitative research is to fill the gap in the existing literature and identify how sustainable waste companies, that can be a facilitator of a smart region, can brand themselves using their membership of a smart region initiative and the role they have within it, to become more visible for actors outside their network, receive more acknowledgement, and eventually create formal networks to foster the transition towards circularity.

Therefore, this research aims to answer the question: *“How can a sustainable waste company brand itself as a facilitator of a smart region?”*.

This thesis is structured as follows. In the next section, the theoretical background of the problem is presented, by drawing on previous research, in order to elaborate on the smart region concept, the role of sustainable waste companies in it and the branding process. Then, a method section will describe the research design, data collection method, ethics and the

analysis approach. Later, the data collected from the interviews will be analysed and the results will be discussed. Finally, recommendations will be given for sustainable waste companies who want to brand themselves as a facilitator of a smart region.

## **2. THEORY**

Sustainable waste companies are currently lacking visibility from actors outside their network. Sustainable waste companies can assist in the transition towards circularity by being a facilitator of a smart region through smart waste management. A smart region could be branded via place branding and eventually, sustainable waste companies could use the concept as a symbol in their corporate branding strategy to increase visibility.

### **2.1 Smart region**

The smartness of a city or region is built upon an interconnectivity among several private and public actors in order to promote the development of their city and to increase the quality of life of the population by making use of digitalization and technologies (Hue, 2020).

The smart region concept is gaining importance (Hielkema & Hongisto, 2013). However, currently there is no unique definition of a smart region (Bauer et al., 2019) as this concept is only beginning to emerge (Brolcháin et al., 2018). It can be seen as an evolving concept that is still subject to debates, with a focus on initiatives that make use of technology and digitalization for smart development (Sutriadi, 2018). Brolcháin et al. (2018) define a smart region as follows: *“A high-tech intensive and advanced approach connecting people, information, governance and policies using new technologies to create an efficient, clean, energy secure, sustainable, eco-friendly, competitive and innovative region with an enhanced quality of life”*.

The development of smart regions is especially occurring because of the European Commission’s program for research and innovation strategies for smart specialisation. Within

the European Union, political priorities and principles have been aligning to motivate the development of smart regions. This aligns with their long-standing circular economy approach (Brolcháin et al., 2018).

In the development and maintenance of a smart region, different stakeholders are involved. Brolcháin et al. (2018) indicate that the Quadruple Helix Model draws upon an alliance between four sectors: academic, public, private and community. A co-creative, bottom up approach involving the various actors from the Quadruple Helix Model is suggested in order to develop a smart region (ibid.).

According to Markkula & Kune (2015), a smart region is an active composition of the regional ecosystem around concepts such as knowledge co-creation and exploitation, opportunity exploration and capacity building that are making the region smarter. To achieve this, a regional innovation ecosystem with a strong “smart specialisation strategy”, that also leverages the role of universities as actors is needed (Brolcháin et al., 2018).

Thus, smart regions focus on solving regional problems and increasing the quality of life through digitalization. A smart region has to be supported by several actors in order to strengthen the regional ecosystem and successful digitization.

## **2.2 Smart waste management**

The transition of an area into a successful smart region and the transition towards circularity requires improvements in waste prevention, collection and value recovery (Esmaeillian et al., 2018). This study suggests that this transition could be aided by sustainable waste companies through smart waste management.

Waste generation is a growing problem of modern society due to the service costs of waste collection and the environmental issues of landfills (Esmaeillian, Wang, Lewis, Duarte, Ratti & Behdad, 2018). According to the European Commission (2014) it is time to take

action to increase the reuse and recycling of municipal waste, attempt to eliminate landfills, support the development of markets for high-quality secondary raw materials, clarify the calculation methods for recycled materials and change consumer behaviour in the area of a circular economy. Circularity uses closed loops and cycles for bridging consumption and production (Witjes & Lozano, 2016). In order to maintain the limited stock of resources, raw materials should be recovered from waste and recycled (Sardá & Pogutz, 2018). Sustainable waste companies are able to play a proactive role in the transition towards circularity of a region (Deselnicu, Milităru, Deselnicu, Zăinescu & Albu, 2018). In this study waste management refers to the collection, transport, treatment and destruction of solid waste from households or industries within a municipality or region. The operations of a waste company include, among others: collecting household waste at citizens' homes, hosting facilities for collecting recyclable material, managing landfills, and making combustible waste available for energy recovery and generation of energy by combustion (Kairento & Nygård, 2014).

The ambition to transform towards a smart region could be aided by smart waste management through smart innovations such as The Internet of Things (IoT). IoT can enable waste management practices. It appears to be a promising solution for conducting waste collection and recovery operations in urban areas (Esmaeillan et al., 2018). The IoT consists of several digital tools such as RFID tags, capacity sensors, actuators or wireless antennas. These innovations are considered as highly effective for real-time monitoring and optimized waste collection routes (ibid.).

Thus, sustainable waste companies can make a contribution in the development of a smart region through smart waste management.

### **2.3 Branding a Smart region through place branding**

Place branding and the smart region concept together can be used as a strategy to raise the profile of sustainable waste companies as brands play an important role in the creation of visibility (Douglas, Craig & Nijssen, 2001). It could be used as a symbol in the corporate brand strategy of a sustainable waste company (Hatch & Schultz, 2008). The difficulty for a sustainable waste company lays in the complex process that evolves around place branding as it is not only about brand creation and marketing activities, but about a governance process with different stakeholders as well (Grebosz-Krawczyk, 2021).

As a sustainable waste company could be a facilitator of a smart region, which is about a certain geographical area, place branding could be a suitable approach to brand the smart region and eventually improve visibility (Capdevila & Zarlenga, 2015). The globalized world is a marketplace where regions have to compete with other regions for their share of attention, reputation, goodwill and trust (Anholt, 2005). A place brand allows for popularization of a region (Buyanova, Kalinina & Shiro, 2020) and could act as an umbrella brand to support the promotion and branding of services and places associated with a certain area (Hanna & Rowley, 2015). In place branding, different components of a region could be promoted in order to ensure that the reputation of the region is a fair, balanced and useful reflection of the assets, competencies and offerings it contains (Anholt, 2005). So, it is about creating, sustaining and shaping a meaningful presence in the public's minds and hearts – the identity. The brand identity of a smart region has to be based on emotional, functional and smart values (Grebosz-Krawczyk, 2021). As mentioned earlier, a smart region consists of different actors. This also holds for place branding as it is a collective phenomenon. Not only in the creation of a smart region but also in place branding, collaboration among various stakeholders is important in order to consider how the multidimensionality of a place could be captured and its brand identity could be developed (Hanna & Rowley, 2015). Furthermore, to prevent that smartness becomes a self-imposed label for marketing, it is important to keep all



stakeholders, concluding citizens, involved for the right meaning of the concept smart region (Hollands, 2015). It could be said that place branding is a complex process that is not only about brand creation, marketing activities, but also about a governance process in which different stakeholders are needed for the success of the branding activities (Grebosz-Krawczyk, 2021).

Branding a smart region is about creating a unified and comprehensive brand image that is based on a narrative which refers to the history, tradition and culture of a place and modern solutions that are used in the agglomeration. Thus, in the marketing communication and brand narration that are based on the smart region concept, the intelligent linking of the development of technology and human elements are crucial. Co-creation will eventually contribute to reveal the ethos of the place in terms of symbols, meanings and attributes that shape the place identity (Grebosz-Krawczyk, 2021).

Smart region brand management should rely on building and developing a competitive local identity of a region brand founded on strong and distinct features through the implementation of long-term initiatives by involving the residents and other stakeholders (Grebosz-Krawczyk, 2021).

## **2.4 Corporate branding of sustainable waste companies**

A corporate brand is one of the most important assets of a company. Branding the company means involving every actor that is important to the company (Hatch & Schultz, 2008). Sustainable waste companies, that can be a facilitator of a smart region, could use the concept smart region as a symbol that belongs to the company in their corporate branding strategy. A brand is a symbol as almost everyone equates a brand with the symbols that are carrying its meaning (Hatch & Schultz, 2008). A symbol is any object, word or action that stands for something else. A corporate brand, like the brand of a sustainable waste company,

is represented by a constellation of symbols. The constellation of corporate brand symbols is created to express what the company stands for and it represents how it will act now and in the future (ibid.). Thus, a sustainable waste company could let its corporate branding symbols express that they are a facilitator of a smart region and that they contribute to solving problems by being an actor in the transition towards circularity since these symbols express what the company stands for and how it acts (Hatch & Schulz, 2008).

### **3. METHODS**

#### **3.1 Research Design**

A qualitative study was conducted to answer the research question: “*How can a sustainable waste company brand itself as a facilitator of a smart region?*”. A multiple case-study design was adopted in this research. The academic field of the branding process of a smart region and sustainable waste companies is relatively nascent. Therefore a qualitative approach was used as it could be regarded as an elaboration of theory and generation of theory. This approach allows to explore novel domains and questions (Reinecke, Arnold & Palazzo, 2016). As mentioned, a multiple case-study design has been adopted as this type of design is mostly used for the purpose of comparing the cases that are included. The design promotes theoretical reflecting on the findings, laying focus on the unique context of cases and encourages to consider what is unique and what is common across cases (Bryman & Bell, 2011). Since the research is interested in different parts of each case, a multiple case-study was most appropriate.

According to Cardano (2020), a qualitative method allows accuracy to be brought to the information as it provides participants with the opportunity to express themselves in their own words and refer to their known environment in order to approach the topic with more ease. Therefore, semi-structured interviews were conducted. Semi-structured interviews

ensure that certain topics are covered, while they allow the freedom of asking questions in different sequences, or to ask additional questions (Bryman & Bell, 2011). For this reason, the interviews were semi-structured interviews (see Appendix A) and lasted 31 minutes on average. Key theme's, issues and questions were defined in advance.

### **3.2 Data collection**

This research has the intention to investigate how sustainable waste companies can brand themselves as a facilitator of a smart region. In order to expand the existing theory, collaborative initiatives, that contain elements similar to a smart region, and organizations, that are a member of those initiatives, were selected to interview about their branding strategies and collaborations. Four different people of different collaborative initiatives, who all are engaged with the positioning or communication of the collaborative initiative, that contains elements similar to a smart region, were interviewed. Further, four different people of different organizations, that are a member of these collaborative initiatives, were interviewed. These participants are responsible for the positioning or communications of the organization. In total, eight people were interviewed. They were interviewed as the gap in the literature lays in the area of how an initiative should be branded and how an organization can use the initiative in their branding strategy. All participants played a role in the branding process of the initiative or organization. These cases were selected since they were able to function as a benchmark and to complement existing theory from different perspectives. All selected participants are based in the Netherlands and the interviews were conducted in Dutch. The cases were partly obtained through snowballing, a type of purposive sampling. Cases were sampled in a strategic way, so that the samples are relevant to the posed research question (Bryman & Bell, 2011). Snowball sampling was used for the contact with people because there was no clear sampling frame yet. People were chosen based on their function within the initiative or organization. The participating initiatives were chosen based on

characteristics they have that contain elements of a smart region and the organizations that were chosen are a member of one of the initiatives. For this snowballing technique a Dutch sustainable waste company was informed. Via the head of marketing and communications of this company this research was provided with its first participant, a collaborative initiative. Via this initiative, an organization became a participant. Further, via the researchers own network a municipality was contacted who provided the research with another participant who eventually provided another participant. Two participants were found online when searching for collaborative initiatives with a focus on circularity. These participants provided the research with the last two participants. Due to the COVID-19 regulations, the interviews were conducted online. The interviews with people of the collaborative initiatives were about the branding process of the collaborative initiative, the creation and composition of the initiative and how the members can use the initiative in their branding strategy. An example question from the interview is: *“How do you make sure the initiative is visible for actors outside the initiative?”*. The interviews with people of organizations that are a member of a collaborative initiatives covered the following subjects: the visibility of the organization, the branding strategy of the organization, how the organization brands the initiative, how they use the initiative in their branding strategy and how membership of the initiative benefits them. An example question from the interview is: *“Which parts of the initiative do you use in your branding strategy and why?”*. An overview of the participants including a short description of each organization can be found in Table 1.

Table 1

*An overview of the research’s participants.*

<b>Participant</b>	<b>Position</b>	<b>Type of organization</b>	<b>Description of the organization/initiative</b>
A	Marketing & communications director	Waste company	A family company that focusses on waste collection & recycling, fuel & oil trade and infrastructure & engineering.

B	Intake manager & marketing & communications manager for the technical courses	Educational institution	A post-secondary vocational education institute that considers intensive cooperation with internship companies important and strives for innovations.
C	Senior communications adviser	Network operator for energy supplies	A regulated company that realizes the transport and export of gas and electricity and that realizes connections.
D	Project Manager	NGO	A non-governmental organization that works on a pretty and sustainable province on different themes: energy transition, sustainable agriculture, biodiversity, climate adaptation, mobility and the circular economy.
E	Marketing & Communications director	Private initiative	A platform that helps companies to make the step to circular entrepreneurship by offering circular products.
F	Marketing & Communications manager	Public private initiative	A network organization that aims to promote and maintain the manufacturing and maintenance industry.
G	Secretary and runner of two of the coalitions	Public initiative	A network organization in which organizations attempt to strengthen each other through collaboration on the circular economy theme.
H	Project Coordinator	Public private initiative	A project that focuses on Smart City developments such as an integrated approach for an area development project that looks at making real estate more sustainable and to the development of a smart energy and mobility system.

### 3.3 Ethics

The interview started with an introduction of the research. After this, it was mentioned that participation is voluntary and that the participants have the right to withdraw from the study in any stage if they want to do so. Comments concerning privacy considerations and anonymity regarding the collected data were made. Then, the informed consent was read and signed by the interviewees (see Appendix B). This informed consent prevents the participants of being harmed in any way by the researcher, ensures participants are able to make an informed decision of whether or not they want to participate in the research, prevents the invasion of privacy of the interviewees, and increases transparency of the research (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2011). Later, permission was asked to record the interview, which was

given by all participants. During the interview it was investigated how initiatives, comparable to smart regions, and companies that are a member of such initiatives brand themselves. After transcribing the interviews, the transcripts were sent to the participants, to get their approval on using it.

### **3.4 Data Analysis**

The interviews were recorded and later they were carefully transcribed using Amberscript. The key topics that arose from the research question and theory were captured in advance. In the transcription phase itself, notes of additional important topics were made. After the transcription phase, the transcripts were downloaded and read. Based on the topics, a coding scheme was created and the topics were colour coded. The information was put in the correct category so that the categories could be compared among the different interviews. To structure the data a coding tree was made which can be found in Appendix C.

Triangulation was used by conducting a process of cross-checking findings by interviewing both initiatives that contain elements of a smart region about their branding process and organizations that are a part of the initiative about the branding process of the initiative and their own branding process.

## **4. RESULTS**

The analysis of the results of the primary research shows that the different initiatives and organizations have different branding approaches with some overlap.

### **Branding the initiative**

Branding an initiative involves many different components. To make sure the initiative is visible for actors outside the initiative several approaches are used. All the initiatives are active online via their own website of which two of them also mentioned that

they use the website as a platform to share knowledge as well. Half of the initiatives mentioned using other online communication channels like social media. Further, half of the initiatives create newsletters and one of the initiatives writes the press releases for both itself and its partners, appears on platforms with similar themes and hitches a ride on the national means of communication from partners or platforms. The importance of mutual promotion was repeatedly mentioned by two of the initiatives. In addition, to be more visible, meetings on specific themes are organized, there is a presence at events and workshops and webinars are organized. Participant H emphasized the importance of the communication strategy that takes place on different levels. Each level, local, city, international, has a different approach.

Although the image and positioning of the initiatives show some similarities, all initiatives have a different type of branding strategy. Participant F uses existing initiatives to communicate. As they are a public private collaboration, they do not have the means to create a whole branding strategy of their own and therefore they are collaborating with existing partners. Within this initiative there is a focus on the geographical aspect, but mostly on the themes the initiative covers. A similarity with Participant H is the geographical part that is an accent in the branding strategy as the main focus lays on the subjects they are working on. These subjects are characteristic for the geographical place they operate in.

The initiatives have different strategies to gain acknowledgement / legitimacy from actors outside their network. The involvement of strategic partners was mentioned by half of the initiatives and three out of four initiatives said that membership of governmental parties in the initiative made it more credible. Participant E explained: *“You must have independent third parties that support your claim”*. Three out of four initiatives receive acknowledgement through mutual promotion: when their partners or ambassadors tell about the initiatives and the things accomplished with it. Half of the initiatives emphasize that deeds are more important than words. To receive acknowledgement there has to be prove of what the

initiatives have been doing through their collaborations. Speaking of prove, two initiatives use the Theory of Change to show the impact they have made with the initiative and its projects.

### **Members marketing the initiative**

It has come forward that each member of the initiative uses the initiative differently in their marketing strategy depending on the type of organization and its goals. Participant F explained that governmental parties use it as a showpiece to show what is going on in the area, companies see it as a project they are doing but not as their main activity and that the educational institution sees the initiative as a substantial part of the institution.

Within the guidelines for usage of the initiative in the marketing strategy it came forward that three out of four initiatives strive for consistency in the communication line. However the way of executing it differs per initiative. Participant H mentioned: *“We have a joint line of communication that we have established with each other and we stick to this. But further every party can use the project in their own manner to showcase themselves in their own desired way”*.

### **Branding the organization**

Half of the organizations are positioning themselves as organization that has, next to their main activity, an eye for the greater picture and are tailoring their organizations activities towards those developments. Participant B mentioned the importance of an integrated approach when positioning the organization. There are goals within the strategic policy plan. Those goals have to be translated to the organization and have to be embedded on every level of activity to be consistent as an organization. The participant concluded that only then the organization is able to send a powerful sign.

Half of the organizations is visible in their working area because of frequent display of their logo's. Further, it came forwards that all the organizations actively make use of their



website to increase their visibility and communicate with their target groups. Moreover, social media channels are used frequently alongside with traditional media and specialist media. One of the organizations specifically mentioned that they do web-based marketing: SEO & SEA. Half of the organizations organize events or meetings regarding themes that are important for the organizations to increase their visibility towards actors outside their network.

The organizations all had different manners to receive acknowledgement from actors outside their network. Participant D emphasized the importance of the evaluation process regarding projects and collaborations. In addition, the organization of Participant D makes an annual impact measurement to map the impact that has been made. With this information they create a report that shows what has been achieved, looking both internal and external. For example, they include interviews with external collaborating partners. Participants B and C mention the importance of practical experiences of previous collaborations. Furthermore, Participant B emphasized that an internal support base, in which the strategic lines are translated to all levels of the organization, is important.

When it comes to the usage of symbols, Participant A and B have a similar approach. Next to the standard symbols that all four organizations use like the logo, style, pictures, text and image, these two organizations use their organization as an umbrella brand on which they hang different parts of the organizations and different partnerships as symbols.

The main type of branding that came forward was having an umbrella brand, which is the strategy of two of the participants. The organization itself is the umbrella and parts of the organization and initiatives that they are a member of are hanging on this 'umbrella'. Participant A mentioned that they attempt to make one system out of all the different parts that exist by creating an overarching brand.

### **Visibility & acknowledgement of the initiative via the organization**

For two of the organizations it is their task to make the initiative that they are a part of visible. They are responsible for managing the social media channels, the website and the newsletter. Participant A does this through content marketing, search engine marketing and white papers on the company's website. All the participants mention the initiatives they are a part of on their websites and provide information about them.

### **Usage of the initiative**

The organizations are branding the role they have within the initiatives in different manners. Participant A told that since they created the initiative they are using it in their positioning strategy towards external parties as it supports the entire company for both the image of it and possible collaborations. Participant B is one of the founding fathers of the initiative but does not necessarily mention their role in their branding strategy. They mostly mention their membership of the initiative. Participant D attempts to use the facilitating role in its advantage but they also mostly mention their membership of the initiative. Participant C holds back in branding the organization its role as the organization aims to radiate equality. After mentioning that the organization is quiet modest and that they have to make a shift in becoming more bold in their communication, Participant C explained: *"I think that in this way we will achieve our goals, but it takes a longer breath"*. The Participant continued telling that when they are bolder on some themes, emphasize what is important to them, mention their facilitating role and why they have started a collaboration it will give the outside world more clarity.

Parts of the initiative that the organizations use in their branding differs. Participant D uses the initiative when actors are hard to reach since some members give the message extra weight: *"It helps that we can speak from several organizations since that helps to put the message in place more firmly"*.

Two of the participants mentioned that a benefit of the cooperation with the initiative they are part of is that they are adding value for the future. For two of them is it a mean to foster a transition. Participant A specifically mentioned: *“Waste collection is very important within the circular philosophy. But if that is your only focus and you do not complete the circle, then you are not more than just a service operating in a large system that you are further not a part of. We want to be a part of the circular system and do more than just collecting waste. So, being able to offer circular products and services is very important in order to be able to add those values in the future as well”*. Participant D sees it as helpful as they are focussing on quite a novel theme and through this initiative they are collaborating with other frontrunners in this area. Participant C noticed that they receive more requests to speak at events, more journalists approaching them to ask about certain themes as they are seen as a reliable source of information. Participant B and C noticed an increased interest for collaborations.

## **5. DISCUSSION**

### **5.1 Conclusions**

The purpose of this research was to find out how a sustainable waste company can facilitate a smart region initiative and use their facilitating role in their branding strategy in order to become more visible for outsiders and eventually create formal networks to foster the transition towards circularity. Four people of collaborative initiatives, that contain elements of a smart region, were interviewed and four people of organizations that are a member of those initiatives were interviewed in order to answer the following research question: ‘How can a sustainable waste company brand itself as a facilitator of a smart region?’. The research will continue with a discussion and conclusion in which the theoretical and practical findings will be contrasted.

Theoretically, place branding would be a suitable approach to brand a smart region initiative, as it is about a certain geographical area (Capdevila & Zarlega, 2015). A place brand allows for popularization of a region (Buyanova, Kalinina & Shiro, 2020) and could act as an umbrella brand to support the promotion and branding of services and places associated with a certain area (Hanna & Rowley, 2015). So, in theory the emphasis lays on place branding. However, the practical findings of the research exhibit that for collaborative initiatives the emphasis does not lay on the geographical area. According to the results, the geographical area is mostly used as an accent in the branding strategy of the initiatives who mostly use the themes they focus on in their positioning strategy. The themes are characterising for the geographical area. Grebosz-Krawczyk (2021) mentioned that smart region brand management should rely on building and developing a competitive local identity of a region brand founded on strong and distinct features through the implementation of long-term initiatives by involving the residents and other stakeholders. Based on the results the smart region brand management should rely on the themes that will be covered when developing a brand identity. A feature of this identity could be the region that is operated in. With focus on the main themes and the geographical area as an accent, the suggested local identity of a region can be created. The aspect that is equally important is the involvement of stakeholders and residents as this is not only a governance process but also a prevention from becoming a self-imposed label for marketing (Grebosz-Krawczyk, 2021). This corresponds to the results where the participants emphasized the importance over involving all types of actors for legitimacy. The involvement of stakeholders and citizens will create a support base for the smart region brand and the mutual promotion will increase visibility. To conclude, in the branding strategy of a smart region, the themes it covers should be the centre of gravity and the geographical location should be laying in its extension as an accent.

A corporate brand is represented by a constellation of symbols that express what the company stands for and how it will act (Hatch & Schulz, 2008). The majority of the participating organizations uses symbols in their branding strategy to express the things they do and stand for. They indicated that they have an umbrella brand, which is the organization itself, and this umbrella has different themes hanging on it among which the initiatives the organizations are participating in to show that they are part of a greater good and for a reinforced position. Instead of the place, the theme of the initiative should be a larger symbol in the corporate brand and the place can be an accent. In the theory section it was mentioned that sustainable waste companies should let their corporate branding symbols express that they are a facilitator of a smart region and that they contribute to solving problems by being an actor in the transition towards circularity. Another symbol within the corporate brand can be the role the company has within the initiative. The initiative symbol itself will, according to the results, show that the company is part of a greater good and adds value to the future. The collaboration with fellow frontrunners and mutual promotion with both actors and the initiative will give messages of the company extra weight. Eventually actors will see the company as a reliable source of information on certain topics. This may lead to an increase in demand for collaborations. The role that the company has can be used as a symbol in the branding strategy. According to the findings, the focus should lay on the membership of the initiative itself and the role of the company in it can be an accent. However, most companies that had a facilitating role in an initiative attempt to use it in their advantage and positioning strategy towards external actors as it supports the entire company for both the image of it and possible collaborations. The results show that one should not be too modest in communicating their role as an accent of the membership. When one is a little bold about their facilitating role in their communications the process of achieving certain goals may be faster as it provides actors outside the network with more clarity. However, as learned from the results, to brand

one self as a facilitator one has to be a facilitator as participants mentioned that actions speak louder than words. So, actually gathering the right actors for the smart region initiative and organizing the meetings to set it up are an aspect of this.

## **5.2 Theoretical contributions**

This master thesis puts different notions to light that are able to contribute to theory. This research is a pioneer when it comes to the collection of information on how an organization can use an initiative, they are a member of and their role within it, in their branding strategy to become more visible and receive more acknowledgement from actors outside their network in order to create formal networks. This thesis applies this information to concepts that have not been combined yet which are: smart region, corporate branding and place branding.

## **5.3 Practical Implications**

Primary guidelines for sustainable waste companies to brand themselves as a facilitator of an initiative such as a smart region are the following:

- 1.) Actually facilitate the initiative. Sustainable waste companies can make a contribution in the development of a smart region through smart waste management. The development of a smart region needs different types of stakeholders from the academic, public, community and private sector (Brolcháin et al., 2018). These stakeholders will provide the initiative with more legitimacy. It prevents that smartness becomes a self-impose label for marketing which is also proposed by Hollands (2015). To develop a smart region a co-creative bottom up approach is suggested (Brolcháin et al., 2018). This means that a sustainable waste company can take upon their facilitating role by gathering the right stakeholders who have interests or aspects that match with the smart region concept. Since a smart region contains of

different themes, a project-based approach is recommended so that all actors can use their own angle of approach on a subject and still share the mutual goals of the initiative.

- 2.) Brand the initiative with an emphasis on the themes that it covers. The geographical part can be an accent in the branding strategy. By working on a project bases under the umbrella initiative unity can be achieved. The usage of an umbrella brand is proposed in the literature as well by Hanna & Rowley (2015). Instead of branding services and places associated with a certain area, brand the themes the initiative works on that are characteristic for the area. The involvement of stakeholders and citizens will create a support base for the smart region brand. Within the initiative the mutual promotion is important as it will reinforce the message of both the initiative and its members which is also proposed by Grebosz-Krawczyk (2021) who emphasizes the contribution of co-creation to reveal the character of the region in terms of symbols.
- 3.) Use the initiative and the facilitating role of the company as symbols in the corporate branding strategy. It has to be made sure that all parts of the company communicate about the initiative and, to a lesser extent, about the facilitating role the company has within the initiative. Clarity about the role of the company is important since this will show the values and aspects found important by the company because brand symbols carry the company's meaning (Hatch & Schulz, 2008). The initiative will assist the company in expressing that they are adding value to the future. Mentioning the initiative, the cooperation with stakeholders and fellow frontrunners in the corporate branding strategy will give the messages of the company more weight. This is also proposed by Hatch & Schulz (2008) since they explained that branding the company means involving important actors. The company will be seen as a more reliable source of information on certain themes. Visibility of the company will improve and

acknowledgement will be received which may lead to an increased demand for collaborations.

#### **5.4 Limitations**

As any other research, this research has some limitations and provides recommendations for future research. First, as this qualitative research is a pioneer in combining concepts and looking in to a novel concept, smart region. It is context specific and the research area is nascent. Since the study is only conducted in the Netherlands with a limited number of participants it is not very generalizable and therefore the external validity is low. However, it has created a basis for future research. According to Bryman et al. (2019), concerns about external validity and the ability to generalize do not carry a large weight within qualitative research.

#### **5.5 Further research**

Since the smart region concept is a novel concept, further research could focus on the definition and composition of smart regions since literature was limited on this topic. A comparative literature study would be suitable in order to propose a standardized definition of a smart region and the composition of it. However, a difficulty is that the concept is context dependent since the themes, stakeholders and geographical area differ in reality. Another suggestion for further research would be a cross-sectional research with a focus on the branding processes of smart regions specifically, since this study did not anticipate on smart region initiatives but initiatives that contain elements similar to a smart region. When it has become clear how smart regions brand themselves one could look into the issue of how actors of smart regions use the concept in their branding strategy. In this way, theory addressed in this research will be re-assessed. Further, external validity can be increased when more initiatives and organizations in other contexts are interviewed, on an international level for



example. However, the topic remains highly context dependent. Therefore, is hard to make it generalizable and applicable in practice.

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## APPENDICES

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## **Appendix A: Interview guide for collaborative initiatives**

### **INTRODUCTION**

Before we start with the interview I want to thank you in advance for participating in this research. As you know I am currently a student of the Masters Programme Sustainable Entrepreneurship at the University of Groningen, Campus Fryslân. This interview is a part of my graduation research that investigates how a sustainable waste company can brand itself as a facilitator of a smart region so they can be a part of new formal networks to share knowledge. According to theory, sustainable waste companies can be facilitators of a smart region. I am especially interested in smart regions: *an active composition of the regional ecosystem around concepts such as knowledge co-creation and exploitation, opportunity exploration and capacity building that are making the region smarter* (Markkula & Kune, 2015) and initiatives that contain aspects similar to this concept. This research is interested in how these initiatives are built, brand themselves and how member organizations use them in their branding strategy. With this research I aim to contribute to a transition towards circularity, by gathering information on how sustainable waste companies can increase their visibility by being a facilitator of a smart region, so that new formal networks can be created.

Before we start this interview, I would like to ask you to read the Informed Consent. If you agree with this form, would you please sign it? Further I would like to ask if I could record the interview so that I can transcribe the interview later. The recording and transcript will not be shared with anyone except for my thesis supervisor and second reader. They can only look into the transcript if they want to. Do you have any questions before we start the interview?

### **TOPIC LIST**

The interview is based on a topic list:

A.) Introduction of the company/initiative

B.) Creation of the initiative

C.) Branding the initiative

### **EXAMPLE QUESTIONS**

#### **A.) introduction by respondent**

- Could you please introduce the initiative and your function within the initiative?

#### **B.) creating the initiative**

- What is the purpose of the initiative?

- How was the initiative created and set up?

- Which actors are a part of the initiative?

- Which of these actors have a facilitating role? Why did they take on this role?

- How have they executed their facilitating role and how are they doing it now?

#### **C.) branding the initiative**

- How do you make sure the initiative is visible for actors outside the initiative?

- How do you attempt to increase legitimacy/ receive acknowledgement from actors outside the initiative?

- How do you brand the initiative?

- What types of branding do you use?

- How do you market and position the initiative?

- What image have you created for the initiative?

- Who is responsible for the marketing of the initiative?



- What are difficulties you encounter in this process?

- How do organizations, that are a member of the initiative, use this in their branding strategy?

Are there guidelines to do this?

- Could you describe the initiative and its image in a few words?

### **CLOSURE**

We have reached the end of the interview. Would you like to add anything to what we have discussed?

...

Thank you for your time and the interview. If you have any questions you can always send me an e-mail. If you are interested in the results of the research I could send them to you as well.

This will probably be at the beginning of July. Thanks again and have a good day.

## **Interview guide for organizations that are a member of a collaborative initiative**

### **INTRODUCTION**

Before we start with the interview I want to thank you in advance for participating in this research. As you know I am currently a student of the Masters Programme Sustainable Entrepreneurship at the University of Groningen, Campus Fryslân. This interview is a part of my graduation research that investigates how a sustainable waste company can brand itself as a facilitator of a smart region, to increase their visibility for actors outside their network, so they can be a part of new formal networks to share knowledge. I am especially interested in the branding process of organizations and the part in which organizations use the collaborative initiative and their role within it in their branding strategy. With this research I aim to contribute to a transition towards circularity, by gathering information on how sustainable waste companies can increase their visibility so that new formal networks can be created to share knowledge.

Before we start this interview, I would like to ask you to read the Informed Consent. If you agree with this form, would you please sign it? Further I would like to ask if I could record the interview so that I can transcribe the interview later. The recording and transcript will not be shared with anyone except for my thesis supervisor and second reader. They can only look into the transcript if they want to. Do you have any questions before we start the interview?

### **TOPIC LIST**

The interview is based on a topic list:

- A.) Introduction of the company & initiative
- B.) Visibility of the company/initiative
- C.) Branding (use of symbols)
- D.) Branding the membership of an initiative

## **EXAMPLE QUESTIONS**

### **A.) introduction by respondent**

- Could you introduce your organization and your function within the organization?
- What initiative is your company a part of?
- What is the purpose of this initiative?
- What is the role of the company within this initiative?

### **B.) visibility of the company and initiative**

- How do you make sure your company is visible for actors outside the network and the market?
- How does your company make sure the initiative is visible and acknowledged by actors outside the network?

### **C.) branding of the company**

- How does your organization brand itself?
- How does the organization position itself?
- How does the organization receive acknowledgement from actors outside the network?
- Do you make use of symbols in the branding strategy?
- What type of symbols do you use and how do you use them?

### **D.) branding the initiative**

- Do you use the initiative, that you are a member of, in your branding strategy?
- Which parts of the initiative do you use in your branding strategy and why?

- Do you use the role the organization has within the initiative in the branding strategy?
- Do you use the initiative as a symbol within the corporate branding strategy?
- Does membership of the initiative benefit the organization regarding visibility and acknowledgement? How?

### **CLOSURE**

We have reached the end of the interview. Would you like to add anything to what we have discussed?

...

Thank you for your time and the interview. If you have any questions you can always send me an e-mail. If you are interested in the results of the research I could send them to you as well. This will probably be at the beginning of July. Thanks again and have a good day.

## Appendix B: Informed consent



university of  
 groningen

campus fryslân

### INFORMED CONSENT

#### TITLE OF STUDY

Branding a sustainable waste company as a facilitator of a smart region

#### CONTACT INFORMATION

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

#### I have agreed to take part in the following study:

*Branding a sustainable waste company as a facilitator of a smart region.*

It is a qualitative research related to a Master Thesis project of the MSc. Sustainable Entrepreneurship. The purpose of this study is to investigate how sustainable waste companies can brand themselves as a facilitator of a smart region to increase their visibility and receive more acknowledgement from actors outside their network in order to create opportunities for new collaborations. In general the study investigates how a company could use a collaboration in their branding strategy and how these collaborations could be set up.

I understand and agree upon voluntary participation. I understand that my responses will be kept strictly confidential. I have the possibility to request that my answers will not be used

within this study and that I am allowed to withdraw entirely from this study before 31-05-2021. Last, I have the right to decide not to answer particular questions.

The researchers will be held responsible for a discrete and safe process.

**The following points have been discussed with the interviewee:**

The interview will be recorded, transcribed and analysed by the researcher and their supervisor from the University of Groningen.

1. The interview and the transcript will be sent to the interviewee, who has the right to correct, review and approve the transcript before the final report will be handed in. At all times, the interviewee will have access to the interview, its transcript and the report. Last, the final report will be sent to the interviewee.
2. The interviewee has the right and the possibility to take part anonymously and the possibility to be quoted verbatim.
3. In case of additional questions, the interviewee may contact the student or the supervisor. Contact information is provided.
4. The informed consent has been discussed entirely with the interviewee. The interviewee agreed upon the consent and is taking part in this study. The interview will take approximately 30-50 minutes.

Date:

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Signature Participant:

Date:

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Signature Researcher:

# Appendix C: Coding Tree

