



January 2013

## It's In Minnesota's Nature: An Exploration Into Building Social Capital Through Place Branding

Alyssa Michelle Chandler

[How does access to this work benefit you? Let us know!](#)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://commons.und.edu/theses>

---

### Recommended Citation

Chandler, Alyssa Michelle, "It's In Minnesota's Nature: An Exploration Into Building Social Capital Through Place Branding" (2013). *Theses and Dissertations*. 1407.  
<https://commons.und.edu/theses/1407>

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Theses, Dissertations, and Senior Projects at UND Scholarly Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of UND Scholarly Commons. For more information, please contact [und.common@library.und.edu](mailto:und.common@library.und.edu).

IT'S IN MINNESOTA'S NATURE:  
AN EXPLORATION INTO BUILDING SOCIAL CAPITAL  
THROUGH PLACE BRANDING

by

Alyssa Michelle Chandler  
Bachelor of Arts, College of Saint Benedict, 2009

A Thesis  
Submitted to the Graduate Faculty  
Of the  
University of North Dakota

in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

Masters in Communication

Grand Forks, North Dakota  
August  
2013


Copyright 2013 Alyssa Chandler

This thesis, submitted by Alyssa Chandler in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts from the University of North Dakota, has been read by the Faculty Advisory Committee under whom the work has been done, and is hereby approved.



---

Dr. Lana Rakow, Chair



---


Dr. Richard Fiordo, Committee Member



---

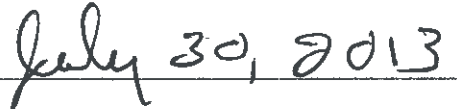
Dr. Richard Shafer, Committee Member

This thesis is being submitted by the appointed advisory committee as having met all of the requirement of the Graduate School at the University of North Dakota and is hereby approved.



---

Wayne Swisher  
Interim Dean of the Graduate School



---

Date

Title            It's in Minnesota's Nature: An Exploration into Building Social Capital  
                    through Place Branding

Department    Communications Program

Degree         Master of Arts

In presenting this thesis in partial fulfillment of the requirements for a graduate degree from the University of North Dakota, I agree that the library of this University shall make it freely available for inspection. I further agree that permission for extensive copying for scholarly purposes may be granted by the professor who supervised my thesis work or, in her absence, by the Chairperson of the department or the dean of the Graduate School. It is understood that any copying or publication or other use of this thesis or part thereof for financial gain shall not be allowed without my written permission. It is also understood that due recognition shall be given to me and to the University of North Dakota in any scholarly use which may be made of any material in my thesis.

Alyssa Chandler  
July 19, 2013

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES .....	vi
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS .....	vii
ABSTRACT .....	ix
CHAPTER	
I.    INTRODUCTION .....	1
II.   LITERATURE REVIEW .....	5
III.  COMMUNITY .....	29
IV.  METHOD .....	41
V.   RESULTS .....	47
VI.  DISCUSSION .....	64
VII. CONCLUSION .....	76
VIII. EPILOGUE .....	78
REFERENCES .....	81

## LIST OF FIGURES

Figure	Page
1. Seven Community Capitals .....	11
2. Bridging and Bonding Social Capital Matrix .....	22
3. It's in Minnesota's Nature Brand Logo .....	38

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I wish to express my sincere appreciation to the members of my advisory committee for their support and patience throughout my time in the graduate program at the University of North Dakota.



To my husband, Mike.

## ABSTRACT

Place branding is a growing practice in communities worldwide. While much academic research has been conducted on the subject, the majority is directed toward the study of tourist perceptions. Research on those living in a branded community is limited. Therefore, this study seeks to explore how a place brand could build or strengthen social capital among residents of a location through a shared representation of a community's identity. A case study was conducted in Grand Rapids, Minnesota where 30 residents were interviewed from diverse socio-economic backgrounds. Through the lens of the seven community capitals, discussed in Flora and Flora (2009), interview transcriptions were analyzed and five stages in the branding process were uncovered where brand decisions tipped the balance of the community capitals. Those stages are as follows: Defining the cultural sphere, producing cultural identities, funneling identities, creating a simplified representation, and restituting culture. By comparing interview responses of those who worked directly with the brand versus the average community member, it was found that social capital was strengthened during place branding, but only among members of the brand committee, whom I also refer to as community leaders. This was due to the model of community development selected. Approaching branding from a technical assistance model, the process strengthened social capital among members of the power elite due to their existing political capital. Interviewed community members not directly involved with the branding, on the other hand

were faced with a loss of cultural capital and did not experience strengthened social capital because of how they were perceived in the selected model of community development.

## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

Communities all over the world are turning to place branding to gain advantage in the marketplace. In its most elemental form, a place brand is a mark that represents a defined geographic location (Kaplan, Yurt, Guneri, Kurtulus, 2008). As place branding practices are gaining popularity, it has become a topic of much academic discussion, even spurring the creation of the journal *Place Branding and Public Diplomacy*.

After a survey of available academic literature about place branding, it was found that ample attention has been given to the effectiveness of place branding on external stakeholders (i.e., increased tourism, how visitors view the town, what attracts people to a locale). Alternatively, there is limited research that explores how people within a branded community feel about their brand.

Internal stakeholders, or community members, are usually not a focus in place branding practices and research, but according to Vasudevan (2008), they should be. She explains, “In order for place branding to truly become relevant, it requires that it emerges from the host community; however, it rarely does, and most often it is a statement created by the marketing and advertising community of the tourism board, at times with a few direct tourism partners” (p. 335). It is the possibility for new research, and personal interest in community development, that drives this project.

### *Building Relationships through Representation*

Social capital is formed from the relationships found in community networks. It is the mutual trust that exists among and within groups and communities. It contributes, and holds together, a sense of common identity and shared future (Flora and Flora, 200, p. 18).

While a brand may have the ability to bring a community together through a shared identity, there has been no research conducted to explore, prove or disprove this. Therefore, in order to advance the academic knowledge on place branding and how residents within a community view it, I will research the question:

**How can a place brand foster the building of social capital between residents due to a shared identity?**

In order to adequately address this question, other foundational questions must first be discussed. Questions include:

- Why do communities feel the need to market themselves?
- What is a community identity and how are they created?
- How does the dominant culture influence how a community identity is represented?

To address the research question, a case study was conducted in the community of Grand Rapids, Minnesota – my hometown. In 2007, the tourism agency in Grand Rapids contracted North Star Destination Strategies (a company based out of Nashville, Tennessee) to create a place brand for the community. The goals for the brand, determined by a group of individuals known as the brand committee with guidance from

North Star, included: increasing visitation, growing interest in business development opportunities and extending the brand into the community (Grand Rapids Brand Print, p. 51).

Grand Rapids was chosen as the site of this case study for multiple reasons, including the size of the community, the timeliness of the project, and my personal connection to the town. I became aware of the place branding project in the summer of 2008 and wanted to study the process to see what benefits, other than economic, could possibly result from the brand.

This study utilized a qualitative approach to gain insight on how residents of a community interact and perceive a place brand, and how that may alter community connectedness. Thirty community members were interviewed and asked about their connection to the brand and their perceptions about the social, cultural and physical attributes of Grand Rapids.

Through this paper, I will look at how the selected model of community development - the technical assistance model which entails community leaders identifying an issue and bringing in external experts to solve that issue - in Grand Rapids impacted the balance of the seven community capitals, highlighted in Flora and Flora (2008). The seven community capitals, which will be discussed in more depth, are built, natural, cultural, human, social, political, and financial.

Upon analysis of interview transcriptions, five stages in the community branding process were identified as the points in which decisions are made to develop a shared community identity. These are: defining the cultural sphere, producing cultural identities,

funneling identities, creating a simplified representation, and restituting culture. Each decision made in one of these stages tipped the balance of community capitals, which led to decapitalization and compromised the community's social inclusion.

Lastly, the discussion will be framed, and discussed, within the context of cultural involution and cultural commodification. Cultural involution is the idea that presenting one's culture (in this case through a place brand) strengthens social bonds because it revives a common past. Cultural commodification, on the other hand, is the belief that a cultural representation is a distortion of culture and breaks down the fabric of a community because residents feel the need to present themselves to outsiders for the purpose of financial gain, not to increase pride or trust.

In the case study of Grand Rapids, Minnesota, it was found that the place branding process there served to strengthen social capital among community leaders due to their existing political capital. Community members (who were interviewed), on the other hand, were faced with a loss of cultural capital and did not experience strengthened social capital because of how they were perceived in the selected model of community development – the technical assistance model.

## CHAPTER II

### LITERATURE REVIEW

#### *The Rise of the Commodified Culture*

While branding may be viewed as a modern phenomenon, in actuality, it has a long cultural history. In antiquity, craftsmen and women would mark their work so customers would be able to identify their product (Keller, 1998, p. 25). Families began associating their names with products to assure a certain level of quality for the consumer (Sheth & Parvatiyar, 1995, p. 404). While product differentiation practices can be traced back as far as 7000 BC, marketing thought as a distinct discipline was born out of industrial-age economics around the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Sheth & Parvatiyar, 1995, p. 397).

With the onset of the Industrial Revolution, marketing practices changed drastically, moving away from face-to-face encounters between the producer and the consumer to a transactional approach with the use of a middleman (Sheth & Parvatiyar, 1995). This shift further separated the producer from the goods produced and changed the way citizens consumed.

With the creation of industrial jobs, people began to move away from rural subsistence farms to large industrialized cities, increasing the number of concentrated consumers. This shift in the market economy subsequently led to increased importance of



branding. As mass production sprawled throughout metropolitan cities, the number of companies grew and goods were readily available. This teetered the balance of supply and demand, creating more supply than demand warranted. Producers, therefore, had to find a way to differentiate their product through the trust accumulated with brand recognition.

At the same time marketing practices were changing, so too were tourism patterns. Scholars believe the Industrial Revolution's impact on labor, technology and class structure changed the ways individuals sought out leisurely travel. According to Towner (1985), "Before the 1850s, tourism was relatively nonindustrialized" (p. 321). As the urban sprawl progressed, work schedules were standardized due to factory conventions, thereby dictating sanctioned times of travel. Also, as the middle class expanded, and technology advanced, transportation became more accessible to the masses.

As the industrialization of tourism advanced, marketing practices in the tourism field developed and became more widespread. Cities began investing in tourism as an economic driver. This shift created new power structures, where select individuals became the managers of the community's identity, tasked with creating a desirable community image to attract potential visitors. Identity, as Lafant (1995) states, "is omnipresent within discourse about tourism" (as cited in Picard and Wood, 1997, p. vii). The market shift during industrialization prompted a community's identity to become a mechanism for economic capital gain.

While it's agreed that tourism patterns and practices have shifted greatly following industrialization, scholars disagree about how this change has impacted host cultures, some celebrating its power to connect communities, others condemning its ability to destroy culture.

Cultural involution purports that tourism revives traditional cultural forms thereby strengthening community bonds. With a representation of a shared identity, a common past can unite a group and build upon an overall community identity. Increased reciprocity, community pride, tolerance, and a stronger sense of cultural identity are said to contribute to the existing social fabric of the community (Besculides, Lee & McCormick, 2002, p. 304). In this conception, cross-cultural tourism can foster acceptance and understanding due to interactions with others, while "presenting" one's culture to outsiders can build social capital by increasing pride and cohesion, subsequently strengthening communal identity. This position also asserts that members of a cultural group are able to differentiate the sacred (that which is not open to tourists) from the profane (that which is susceptible to commodification) (Shepherd, 2002, p. 183). The ability to differentiate between the two allows the unique communal identity to stay intact.

While some scholars support the idea of cultural involution, the majority of scholarly attention has been devoted to uncovering the destructive qualities of tourism. Levi-Strauss states, "Travel books and travelers serve only to preserve the illusion of something that no longer exists, genuine travel has been replaced by movement through a 'monoculture' in a fruitless search for a vanished reality" (as cited in Shepherd, 2002, p.

183). In a vanished reality, objects produced solely for tourism purposes lose their authenticity and signify an imagined Other—objects of the tourist gaze. These objects signify what the tourists wish to find when entering into a place and they serve to represent a manufactured reality. Those who support this idea believe that once given a monetary value, a culture's rituals and traditions become insignificant for local residents. Residents become the Other, being acted upon by a broader cultural force through false representation. As residents' interaction with tourism increases, their reality becomes less genuine, less authentic, and continues to vanish.

As tourism marketing progressed, the language to describe a locale became increasingly based on its marketable qualities. This change in perception led to what is known as commodification of culture, a “process by which things come to be evaluated primarily in terms of their exchange value, in a context of trade, thereby becoming goods” (Stronza, 2001, p. 270). It was during industrialization that places began to be viewed as goods—something to be packaged and sold.

### *Losing Authenticity*

The commodification of a place leads to resident alienation from their true culture. This is the result of what Errington (1982) calls New Age Primitivism, a “situation in which objects come to signify a purely imaginary Other, no longer tied to any specific context, geographical, historical or otherwise” (as cited in Sheperd, 2002, p. 185). Once a monetary value is placed on a cultural group's traditions, they no longer are authentic and therefore become valueless for the group. The value is lost due to the fact that the sacred tradition is now being reproduced for the purpose of being commodified;

packaged nicely for tourists to consume. Tension results when tourists, who are in search of an authentic culture, encounter communities who are eager to “present” their culture in order to attract tourists. This is how culture is devalued for community residents. Tourists gladly consume the representation; deceiving themselves into thinking they’ve gained an authentic cultural experience, “placing authenticity on a pedestal which is also a stage, changing its nature from within” (Walton, 2005, p. 7). The cultural group’s alienation is a result of the switch from *tradition as sacred* to *tradition as profane* (as cited in Shepard, 2002, p. 190).

If the culture was not commodified then it would be created solely for the producers (cultural community) and remain authentic and valuable as it would uphold and perpetuate the shared communal identity.

If authenticity is thought of as pure, than any representation will only serve to further distort. A place brand is then a distortion of culture if produced to represent the Other. As culture turns to a reproduced representation, residents become spectators of their own culture, being coerced to “produce” culture for the sake of commodified consumption.

Many prominent scholars from the Frankfurt school furthered this idea. Stemming from a critical cultural perspective, Horkheimer and Adorno ardently critiqued the autopoietic system they call the culture industry, a system that is blindly perpetuated by cultural groups (Craig & Muller, 2007). Kellner (2002) states that creation of the culture industry derived from, “a major historical shift to an era in which mass consumption and culture was indispensable to producing a consumer society based on homogenous needs

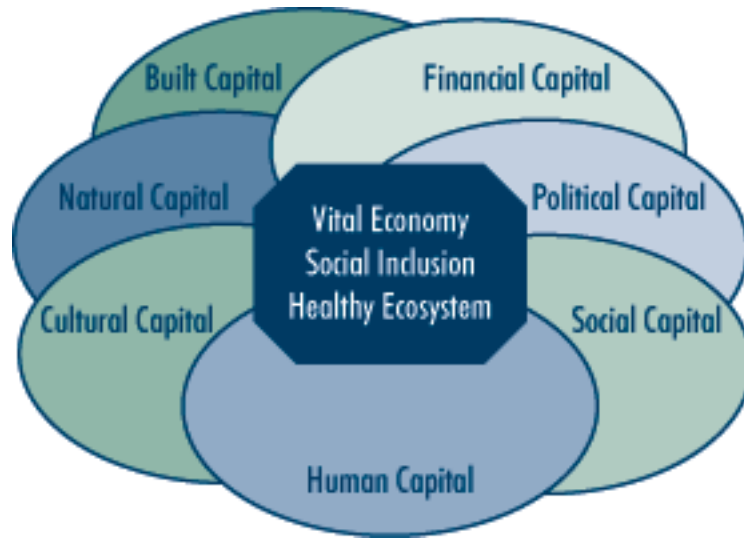
and desires for mass-produced products and a mass society based on social organization and homogeneity” (as cited in Nealon & Irr, 2002, p. 33). With mass reproduction, people stop caring about ‘the artificial’ or non-authentic because they believe their needs are being met regardless of whether it is true or a distortion. Therefore, there is little resistance to the culture industry and the result, as Horkheimer and Adorno argue, is consensual deception, or “the circle of manipulation and retroactive need in which the unity of the system grows even stronger” (as cited in Craig and Mueller, 2007, p. 438).

Consensual deception infers that individuals are aware of a loss of authenticity resulting from the mass production of culture. If they are aware, then they are able to make conscious decisions about maintenance of their culture. Since residents know that tourism marketing is carried out for economic gain, the conundrum then becomes what is the tipping point for when the cultural costs outweigh the economic benefits?

This question is raised in Flora and Flora’s (2008) book *Rural Communities: Legacy and Change*, where they discuss the interplay between the seven community capitals. Capital, at its most basic form, is a resource or asset that can be used, invested or exchanged to create new resources. They argue, “When one capital is emphasized over all others, the other resources are decapitalized and the economy, environment, or social equity can be compromised” (p.17).

To provide an adequate picture of each capital, here are brief definitions, taken from Flora and Flora (2008, p 18):

- **Natural capital** is the base on which all other capitals depend. It is the landscape, climate, air, water, soil, and biodiversity of both plants and animals.
- **Cultural capital** includes the values and approaches to life that have both economic and noneconomic implications.
- **Human capital** is the skills and abilities of each individual within a community.
- **Social capital** includes the networks, norms of reciprocity, and mutual trust that exists among and within groups and communities. It contributes to a sense of a common identity and shared future.
- **Political capital** is the ability of a group to influence the standards of the market, state, or civil society; the codification of those standards in laws and contracts; and the enforcement of those standards.
- **Financial capital** consists of money that is used for investment rather than consumption.
- **Built capital** is the infrastructure that supports other community capital. It can be appropriated by special interests or widely available to all community residents.



**Figure 1 – Flora & Flora (2008) Seven Community Capitals**

Each capital is present in a community, with some outweighing the others at certain times. However, according to Flora and Flora (2008), you must have a cohesive balance in order to achieve a healthy ecosystem, vital economy, and social inclusion. This balance can be tested when the community undergoes a development process, like place branding.

Place branding uses the combination of the different capitals to represent a community. A brand might focus on representing natural, built or cultural capital. However, the purpose of a place brand is to capture the community’s shared identity – a concept that is inherent in social capital.

The following section will discuss modern place branding practices and the current understandings of social capital.

*The Development of Place Branding as a Vehicle for Community Identity*

While place branding is quickly growing and being implemented in many locales worldwide, literature describing the theory and practice of place branding is sparse (Hankinson, 2003, p. 110). Because place branding is a developing field, the most relevant theory is taken directly from product branding theory and, in some cases, applied to places without much consideration. Most scholars have taken classic branding theory and extrapolated to create a theoretical framework for place branding (Kavaratzis, 2005; Hanksinson, 2004; Virgo & de Chernatony, 2005).

Kavaratzis & Ashworth (2005) argue that places have the same characteristics as products (identity, need to differentiate, and personality), yet it is unknown how the meaning of those characteristics transfers to places. They forewarn that, “we can accept places as brandable products if their intrinsic and distinctive characteristics as place products are understood and a special form of marketing developed with accommodations and utilizes these characteristics” (p. 510). This statement illustrates that the transfer of product branding to place branding immediately commodifies a place - dissecting identity, personality and unique markers of differentiation into sellable goods.

Taken from product branding literature, Hannkinson (2003) lays out four brand conceptualizations that provide insight to how place branding emerged from product branding practices as a mechanism in which to represent a community’s identity. In



classic branding theory, there are four common brand conceptualizations dealing with products that scholars argue can also be applied to places.

The first concept is *brands as communicators*. This is where the brand shows ownership to a specific place product with the help of a “mark of differentiation,” such as a slogan or a logo. The second, *brands as perceptions* is when consumers attach themselves to brand images because it appeals to their senses, reason or emotion. The third conceptualization is *brands as a value enhancer*, which can have different meanings depending on your relation to the brand. To the company accountant, it is how much money the brand is bringing in, but to the brand manager, value is measured in product loyalty and recognition. Enhanced value is also found in the consumer, when a specific brand offers a sense of security because it is trusted. Lastly, *brands conceptualized as a relationship* describes where brands are created to have humanlike characteristics and personalities the consumer can form relationships with (p. 110-111).

No one concept works in isolation, but that all are inextricably linked. While these four conceptualizations were created to describe the branding of commodified products, they offer a way in which to view place branding from a different perspective, one that does not stem directly from industrial capitalism.

Place branding literature almost exclusively focuses on tourist perceptions and spends little time discussing residents’ views. While it is clear that dominant place branding literature asserts that places can be viewed as products, can place products spur cultural involution, resulting in strengthened community connections, increased pride,

tolerance and cultural identity, even if it is created within an economically driven process?

To answer this, we must look at how place branding is carried out in a community and how community members participate in its creation.

*Branding Places: Strategy and Practices*

Place branding is becoming a practice carried out in many communities due to the economic benefits that can result. Residents market their community for many reasons, but most frequently discussed are those that feed into a capitalist system. One reason place branding is receiving so much attention is because it differentiates locations and makes one more desirable than another through the use of positive images and associations (Medway & Warnaby, 2008, p. 641). Differentiation has always been important in product marketing, but cities are now interested in gaining unique characteristics that will make the community increasingly desirable to tourists. Place brands beckon tourists to choose a certain location because it is perceived as a tangible product (compared to an unbranded and unknown community). The brand communicates consistency and reduces risk of a bad vacation choice (Baker, 2008, p. 88).

Other reasons to embark on place branding include attracting growing companies to a community, motivating meeting planners to book in the city, and drawing talented workers to relocate in the area (Levine, 2008, p. 5). In most branding literature, place

branding focuses on bringing in tourists to further stimulate the local economy and bring in economic capital.

However, obstacles arise due to the varied players within a given community. Ultimately, there is a lack of control, resulting from fragmented brand ownership and a diverse audience base (Virgo & de Chernatony, 2005). Places are inhabited by people, who adhere to certain cultural patterns, and thus are much more complex than products. Place cannot perform the same way as a branded product. While residents may be viewed as component parts of a place product, they cannot be forced to act as such.

Brand managers compensate for the lack of inherent control by recruiting brand steerers, or the community leaders, who are thought to contribute to the success of the brand due to their influence in coveted social networks. This is the favored practice in a community: selecting influential individuals to weigh-in on the selection of a community's identity and use their social or political capital to drive the brand. Outside consultants are brought in to guide and legitimate the process.

This approach is known as the technical assistance model (Flora & Flora, 2008, p. 350). In this model, local leaders decide to move on an issue and call in an outside expert to solve the problem. Community members use their political capital to influence community development. The internal power structure of a community plays a key role in directing development because they have the power to set the community agenda. They define the problem. They hire the outside expert who will solve the problem. They oversee the work and have the ability to sway the result.

When the problem is identified, it is assumed that it can be solved scientifically in the technical assistance model. Objectivity is the key to uncovering the true solution to the issue and therefore residents are approached as sources of information, not active participants or decision-makers. They are viewed as consumers of development, not participants in it (p. 350).

When communities take this development approach, they are not overly concerned with building social capital. Rather, success is determined by the completion of the predetermined goals – the deliverable end product, which is typically a plan created by the expert to be implemented by the community. Success measurements do not take the process of creation into account.

Modern place branding practices align with the technical assistance because of its capitalistic foundations. The purpose of a place brand is to generate financial capital, predicated on commodifying a community's identity to differentiate between similar place destinations. The shift in marketing practices and travel patterns during industrialization influenced how communities present themselves to outsiders, but the rise in importance of objectivity led to the extraction of community input into their own representation.

However, since place brands are receptacles for a shared community identity, social capital is inherently engrained in a place brand.

*The Role of Social Capital in Place Branding*

Like the common aphorism states, “it’s not what you know, it’s who you know,” social capital encompasses the human interactions that build shared relationships. These relationships are based on “norms of reciprocity and mutual trust” (Flora & Flora, 2008, p. 117). Communities can build high levels of social capital by strengthening existing relationships and creating new relationships through community-wide communication, information sharing, and shared responsibility on community initiatives (Flora & Flora, 2008, p. 118).

While scholars generally agree how social capital is built, they differ in opinion on why individuals intentionally seek it out. To get a comprehensive picture of the meaning of social capital, it is helpful to look at the concept historically.

Social capital is the foundation of human interaction, and therefore has been in existence since the dawn of humanity. However, Emile Durkheim is the first scholar to discuss the concept in any depth. Through his inquiry, he introduced the concepts of collective representations and social solidarity (Flora & Flora, 2008, p. 118). He found that in civil religions, shared rituals, and sacred symbols had the power to unite people. Once in-group characteristics emerge, the resulting feeling of solidarity creates a stark distinction between insiders and outsiders.

This concept is reflected in social identity theory, where individuals create their identities through the knowledge that they belong to certain groups and do not belong to others (Hogg, 2006, p. 115). Both self-categorization and social comparison are employed when crafting personal identities. Self-categorization is the process an

individual goes through when focusing on the perceived similarities between members of in-groups, while accentuating the perceived difference with members of out-groups. Social comparison occurs when in-group characteristics are evaluated in a positive manner, and the out-group is judged negatively.

Durkheim's research illustrated how shared perceptions can strengthen relational networks and contribute to a person's identity.

More than fifty years later, Pierre Bourdieu described social capital as an investment in social relations with expected returns. Much like a component in a culturally commodified community, individuals engage in social interactions and networking in order to pursue personal profit and to further their own interests. Portes (1998) states, "Bourdieu's definition makes clear that social capital is decomposable into two elements: first, the social relationship itself that allows individuals to claim access to resources possessed by their associates, and second, the amount and quality of those resources." (p. 4). An individual aspires to have strong social capital because it will mark them as important and worth knowing (p. 104). In Bourdieu's conception, people invest in building social capital in order to gain access to additional forms of capital, whether it is financial, political, or other forms of capital. He saw it as a form of credit that can be traded in for other resources when needed.

Quite on the other end of the spectrum, Putnam (1995), a rather well known contributor to social capital theory, argues that social capital is the sociological essence of community, and individuals strive to maintain social capital for the good of the

community. He defines social capital as the “features of social life—networks, norms, and trust—that enable participants to act together more effectively to pursue shared objectives” (p. 664-665). Putnam argues that we seek out social capital in order to have fully functioning communities. He believes there is a strong correlation between trust and social engagement, which benefits the community (p. 665). He conceptualizes social capital as a product of the community, and not possessed by an individual (Portes, 2000, p. 3).

In Putnam’s book *Bowling Alone*, he discusses the decline in American’s civic engagement. He uses the analogy of the decline in number of bowling leagues in the United States to illustrate his position, hence the name. People are still bowling, but they are doing it alone. The lethargic civic environment, in Putnam’s perception, is weakening social capital in communities across the U.S.

While scholars disagree on what motivates individuals to seek out social capital, in either case, the foundation of social capital is in human interaction. More specifically, it is interaction between people who are perceived as having similar characteristics as opposed to those who are perceived as different. There are two types of social capital that are based on the idea of in-group/out-group characteristics in social identity theory.

The first is bonding social capital, which primarily holds defined groups together, strengthening existing ties (in-groups). This type of social capital occurs among individuals with similar backgrounds. In *Bowling Alone*, Putnam (2000) defines bonding social capital as ‘inward looking [networks that] tend to reinforce exclusive identities and

homogeneous groups” (p. 22). The homogeneity might be based on class, ethnicity, gender, or social characteristics.

The second is bridging social capital, which brings diverse groups together—groups that wouldn’t have otherwise come in contact (out-groups). For this type of social capital to grow, common ground must be established and the intensity of relationships is heightened as a result. Putnam defines bridging social capital as “Open networks that are outward looking and encompass people across diverse social cleavages.” (as cited in Patulny & Svendsen, 2007, p. 33). The types of relational ties that prompt bridging social capital are usually singular – the group of diverse people is brought together for a reason.

Deepa Narayan (1999) discusses the role social capital play in power relations. When discussing bonding social capital, she said (as cited in Flora & Flora, 2008):

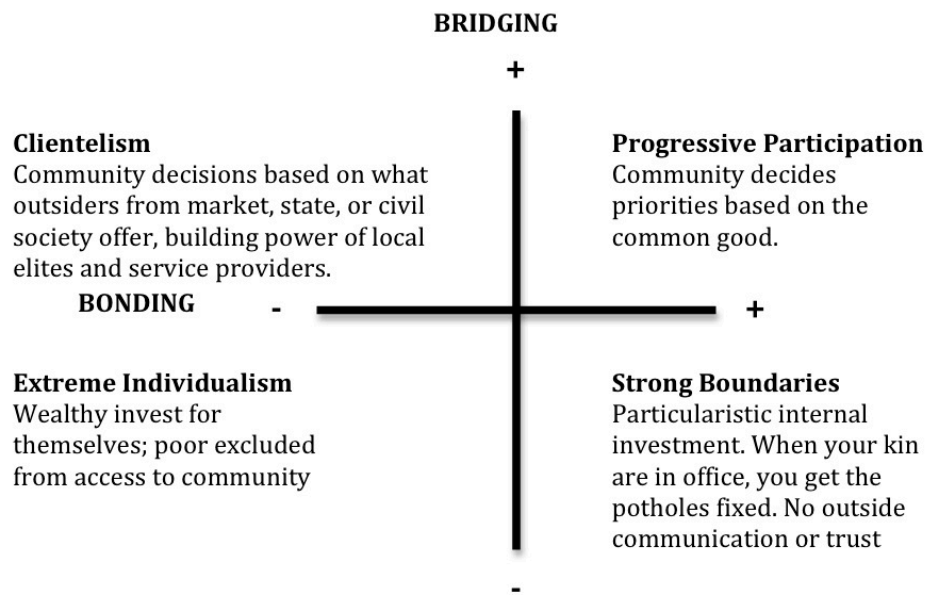
While primary groups and networks undoubtedly provide opportunities to those who belong, they also reinforce pre-existing social stratification, prevent mobility of excluded groups, minorities or poor people, and become the bases of corruption and co-operation of power by the dominant social groups. Cross-cutting ties which are dense and voluntary, though not necessarily strong...help connect people with access to difference information, resources and opportunities. (p. 125)

According to Narayan, it is vital to cultivate bridging social capital opportunities to open up power structures and access to information. The intentional effort to build



bridging social capital could contribute to a reframing of the self's identity because the out-group will be demystified through the process.

However, Flora and Flora (2008) state that it's important to maintain bonding social capital when seeking bridging capital. When bridging and bonding social capital are high, they can reinforce one another and spur collective and effective community action (p. 126).



**Figure 2 – Flora & Flora’s (2008) Bridging and Bonding Social Capital Matrix**

Utilizing this figure from Flora and Flora (2008), scholars can discuss the characteristics of relational networks in a given community utilizing the concepts of bonding and bridging social capital. When communities are lacking both types of capital,

they also lack the capacity for community change (p. 127). When bonding is high and bridging is low, the networks will resist community change. Out-group members are “viewed with suspicion.” Different in-groups might have conflicting ideas on community development and do not trust each other to work together. Internal conflict persists and makes it difficult for collective action to move forward. When bridging is high and bonding is low, power is concentrated and often includes players from outside the community. Relationships are vertical and those on the lower rung of the hierarchy are beholden to those at the top. When both bonding and bridging social capital are high, horizontal relationships are formed where egalitarian forms of reciprocity are realized without being based necessarily on like-characteristics (wealth, education, talents, etc.) (p. 129). Here, all members are expected to give and receive from other members of the community.

In order to foster both bonding and bridging social capital, relationships must be based on trust. Trust is established through repeated exposure, when both parties are honest in their communication and both follow through on the claims they make. Uslaner (2002) says, “trust must be learned, not earned” (p. 77).

Patulny (2004) identified that there are two different types of trust when discussing social capital. The first, generalized trust, is “normative, and related to morals and faith in others rather than information” (Patulny and Svendsen, 2007, p. 34). It reflects our perception of the world and remains stable over time. It is based on the idea that most people can be trusted. Uslaner (2002) argues that individuals who are

generalized trusters are “more tolerant of people who are different from themselves” (p. 12). He continues by stating that this trust is founded in an individual’s morality. For him, moralistic trust is the basis of widespread collective community action. He states, “if trust connects us to our community and helps us solve collective action problems, it must be moralistic trust that does the job. Strategic trust can only lead to cooperation among people you have gotten to know, so it can only resolve reasonably small-scale problems” (p. 21). By conceptualizing trust from a moral standpoint, generalized trust can build bridging social capital by connecting people in a broader community, which allows them to take collective action on a shared problem. This type of trust is learned from close personal relations, like parents.

Particularized trust, on the other hand, is “linked to information and experiences with specific other people and ties in with economic conceptions of rational trust” (p. 35). Attitudes toward one’s own group and toward outsiders are at the core of particularized trust (Uslaner, 2002, p. 77). This is typically reinforced trust between members of an in-group and it asserts that we should only have faith in people like ourselves. While not completely synonymous, this trust aligns with the concept of bonding social capital. This type of trust strengthens pre-existing relationships, and leads to conclusions about why out-group members should not be trusted. There is a strategic element in deciding when to trust, based upon past experiences. Uslaner (2002) says that particularized (strategic) trust is not a result of a negative worldview, but rather upon uncertainty (p. 22). It restricts collective action because, “particularized trusters assume that people unlike

themselves are not part of the moral community, and thus may have values that are hostile to their own” (p. 27).

Through this discussion, the different theories surrounding social capital have been identified. Bridging and bonding social capital were identified as two ways in which social capital is built in different types of relational network. Regardless of the type of social capital, mutual trust was recognized as the key ingredient needed to strengthen social capital. Both generalized and particularized trust were discussed, and differentiated by whether or not an individual assumes a stranger is part of their moral community or not.

These theories will guide my discussion on how social capital can be built or strengthened in a place branding initiative. While my research will help understand how social capital factors into place branding, other scholars have already discussed how social capital influences an individual's, and the overall community's, perceptions of a place.

### *Social Capital and Place Perceptions*

Social capital is a product of human interaction, but it also plays a significant role in place perceptions, place attachment, and place identity. Graham, Mason and Newman (2009) explain that social capital is a component of place perception. They state, “Social capital is not generally conceived as an end in itself but rather a means of achieving aims

such as individual health, well-being and strong, welcoming communities. That said, the idea of social capital is clearly at work in the understanding of place-shaping” (p. 10).

Social capital contributes to an individual’s place attachment. Lewicka (2005) states that most scholars agree that place attachment is a crucial part of human identity. The depth of an individual’s social networks can strengthen their attachment to a given place. Our thoughts, feelings and beliefs about our community influence our behaviors toward the place, and in turn, impact the level of community participation. Participation is key when carrying out community initiatives, like place branding.

Some scholars believe that social capital is at the core of a place brand. Aitken and Campelo (2009) state,

A fundamental understanding about the relationships between people and place is necessary to underpin the development of a place brand. Beginning from individual perceptions, the identity of a place takes shape when similar perceptions are shared across a community. These shared perceptions influence attitudes, define values, create meanings and decide the degree of their importance in the community’s life. (p. 4-5)

Because a place brand is a representation of a community’s cultural identity, Aitkin and Campelo (2009) postulate that it is vital that the brand process be one of co-creation. This disrupts the technical assistance model of community development, and distributes power among the entire community. “Thus ownership becomes stronger with

the emergence of brand communities...brand meanings are constantly co-created and re-presented by the community, reflecting, as they do, the everyday experience of their constituents. The resulting brand essence is dynamic, authentic and, most importantly, collective” (p. 2).

Co-creation may be a way to directly build social capital in a place branding process, however it contradicts the technical assistance model of community development typically employed, and recommended, in a place branding initiative.

### *Exploring How Social Capital is Strengthened in Place Branding*

Through this discussion, many questions arise. What does “authentic” truly signify? Can communities differentiate between the authentic and un-authentic (i.e., are they *aware* of their cultural system)? If so, how much is authentic culture worth to a community? Is simply asking the question of the worth of culture mean that this discussion has already been tainted by the culture industry and thus valueless? Does tourism bring communities together under a common identity or does it strip away their true identity, leaving them a mass-produced good for mass consumption? If it’s agreed that we are intentionally commodifying culture, can cultural involution still occur within a system like the culture industry? Or is that feigning ignorance as we allow ourselves to intentionally be deceived?

We have seen how the shift in marketing practices during the Industrial Revolution greatly influenced tourism, marketing and the joining of the two in place branding, some believing for the better and some for the worse. I have highlighted

cultural involution and cultural commodification as two theoretical structures in which to discuss the rise of tourism and place branding as a mechanism in which to economically drive tourism. Both these structures will now be employed to discuss the dominant literature surrounding place branding and how place branding is carried out in communities.

Through this discussion of relevant literature, the cultural and temporal foundations of place branding were uncovered. From this historical perspective, today's dominant marketing-centric place branding literature can be better understood.

## CHAPTER III

### COMMUNITY

The purpose of this study is to explore the question: how can a place brand foster the building of social capital between residents due to a shared identity? This chapter will describe the community where the study was conducted and the history of the branding project itself.

To study the phenomenon of place branding and how it could build social capital, a case study was carried out in the community of Grand Rapids, Minnesota from April 22, 2011 to May 12, 2012.

Grand Rapids, Minnesota is a medium-sized community of 10,869 residents as of 2010 (U.S. Census). Nestled in the heart of Northern Minnesota, Grand Rapids is surrounded by many small, rural communities, and serves as a regional center for over 40,000 people. It is located about 80 miles northwest of Duluth, Minnesota and 175 miles north of the Twin Cities of Minneapolis/St. Paul, Minnesota.

The area is rich in natural capital that is utilized for both economic gain and as a sustained resource for the community. Water, timber and taconite are the three main resources in Itasca County, where Grand Rapids is the county seat. Grand Rapids holds over 1,000 of Minnesota's 10,000 lakes and the lakes are a main attraction for tourists. In addition to the lakes, the Mississippi River also runs through the middle of Grand Rapids.



The river's power is harnessed through a series of dams that generate energy for local businesses.

Expansive forests also contribute to Grand Rapids' extensive natural capital. The city of Grand Rapids was built around the logger's axe. In the late 1800s, loggers came to cut timber and float it down the Mississippi to larger cities. Around 80 men and women would build a camp in the fall and wait for the snow to fall, because logs could only be moved on ice during the winter. Once the area was cleared, they would pack up, take any milled lumber and move on to build their next camp. The community's logging history has played a significant role in the sustenance of the community and is celebrated today at a Minnesota Historical Society site called the Forest History Center.

Charles Blandin, a Minnesota entrepreneur, saw the potential that the vast forests of Grand Rapids held. In 1902 he opened the Blandin Paper Company, bringing many jobs to the area. To this day, the UPM Blandin Paper Company is the third largest employer in the community.

Another key natural resource for the community, and region, is taconite. Aaron Brown, a local writer and college instructor, says of the resource, "The hills, trees, and waters of this place have held significance to humans for centuries, but since the end of the Industrial Revolution the Iron Range has been the backbone of American progress" (Minnesota Discovery Center, 2011).

The history behind iron mining in the Itasca region has cultivated a very deep connection between residents and the resource. Brown supports this by saying, "The region since formed a wholly unique place, an industrial center with no large city, scarred

by immigrant strife, labor and political battles that wrought the 20<sup>th</sup> century...its people still shape the land and, in turn, become forever changed by the land” (Minnesota Discovery Center, 2011).

Families have deep roots in the iron ore mining industry and are extremely proud of their history. Flora and Flora (2008) support this by saying, “for workers whose jobs depend on natural resources, legacy is often tied to a sense of place” (p.70). The concept of legacy – “what families, communities, groups, and nations pass on to the next generation” – contributes greatly to Iron Rangers’ personal identity. According to a personal interview, it is commonly known that you’re not considered a true Ranger unless “two generations of grandparents have been buried there.”

While the natural capital of the region is bountiful, the history behind it has caused cultural rifts among neighboring communities. Grand Rapids is on the tail end of the Iron Range and has not been significantly impacted by industry market instabilities as much as the smaller communities that make up the heart of the Range.

The Iron Range communities are not the focus of this case study; however, the historical relations between Grand Rapids and the Range communities play a significant role in how Grand Rapids residents classify themselves. In my results, it is apparent that Grand Rapids residents view people who live on the Iron Range as having different personality characteristics, and a different cultural/economic history that influences their place perceptions. This will be discussed in further depth.

Because of the size of the city, Grand Rapids’ labor force is more diversified than surrounding communities. The city’s three largest employers are the school district (675

employees), the hospital (617 employees) and UPM Blandin Paper Mill (460 employees) (Grand Rapids Economic Development Authority, 2013).

Attracting high-quality jobs to the area is the top priority of residents in Grand Rapids (Rural Pulse, 2013). Most residents are still concerned about the state of the economy and its past, current and future impact on the community. According to the Grand Rapids Economic Development Authority (2013) the medium household income is \$41,776, compared to the Minnesota median of \$57,243, and 12.2% of the population lives below the poverty line.

While much of the human capital in the labor market centers around production and manufacturing, the service industry is the largest employer. However, many community members are still tied to natural capital with lumber and wood production making up 1.16% of the labor force, while paper manufacturing is 4.96% (Positively Minnesota, 2010).

The city of Grand Rapids has three public, and one private, grade schools, one middle school, one high school, and a community college. The community has recently invested in a student success initiative, where administrators, teachers and community members have committed to giving every student the opportunity to succeed from cradle to career. With an emphasis on education, over a quarter of the population has a Bachelor's degree or higher and 61% of the workforce is white collar, making 39% blue collar.

The makeup of the community is fairly homogenous. It is a predominantly Caucasian community (94.6%), with the next major race group being American Indian at

1.9% of the population. The concentration of American Indians is mostly due to the Leech Lake Reservation (an Anishinabe tribal land), which operates a casino in the neighboring town of Deer River, Minnesota.

The lack of diversity causes distinct power imbalances among residents. Although not proved by primary research, the majority of residents in leadership positions are white males. This includes the mayor, the city council members, the chamber of commerce president, and the leaders of all three of the biggest employers in town (Blandin Paper Company, Independent School District 318, and the hospital). One exception is the president of the Blandin Foundation, who is an American Indian female.

The local Chamber of Commerce is the main hub for community information. It has a strong member base with over 400 members and prides itself on being a well-respected public policy entity in Grand Rapids. Because of this, the Chamber is often involved in many of the economic and community development efforts taking place.

Large businesses in the area often have a reserved seat at the Chamber's Board of Directors table. One such business is the Blandin Paper Company. This is to ensure that the Chamber is engaging in activities that will benefit key local businesses.

The Blandin Foundation is also a key player in Grand Rapids power relations. With a current endowment of \$381 million, it gives around \$6 million to Grand Rapids nonprofits annually. While the Chamber's community power is based on collective, membership-based support, the Foundation's power is based in financial capital. However, the community challenged this power when a lawsuit was brought against them, the complaint being that Foundation's money was not being spent according to the

will of Charles Blandin, the Foundation's creator. The organization was taken to court and ordered to spend over half of their yearly distributions on Itasca County (Accountability, Blandin Foundation, 2013).

Both the Blandin Foundation and the Chamber of Commerce, among others, often times are involved in community-wide initiatives. They are also involved in setting the community's agenda to identify said initiatives.

Power relations factor in hugely when creating a place brand. Those who are selected as brand steerers have control over the process and resulting brand. This will be further illustrated in the results and discussion section.

#### *Why Grand Rapids?*

Grand Rapids was selected as the site location for this case study for multiple reasons including the size and population of the town, the burgeoning branding initiative and the tourism driven economy.

The size and population of Grand Rapids proved favorable because the city was large enough to support a branding initiative, but small enough so that the community's networks and branding power structures were easily identifiable.

While the Grand Rapids place branding launched in 2009, the thoughts and graphics associated with the branding are still circulating in the community and are fresh in the minds of community members. While the brand is relatively new, residents have had over three years to be exposed to and form an opinion about the brand.

Lastly, tourism is a major component of the town's economy and directly affects the lives of many residents. Because of this, residents were eager and willing to discuss their views on the impact of tourism in their community.

Tourism was the key driver behind the place branding initiative that led to this study. I will now discuss the branding process and my study of it.

*The Place Branding Process: It's in Minnesota's Nature*

In 2007, the community of Grand Rapids, Minnesota contracted North Star Destination Strategies (a company based out of Nashville, Tennessee) to create a place brand for the town. The director of the local tourism agency initiated the process with the intent of increasing recognition of the city, in order to better promote it for tourism. Visit Grand Rapids is a local organization created through the recommendations of the hospitality industry in Grand Rapids in order to have a single entity focused on destination marketing. Its primary mission is to increase tourism in Grand Rapids. This organization was in the lead throughout the entire branding process. The then-director of Visit Grand Rapids directly chose North Star Destination Strategies for the project. There was no request for proposals sent to other local or non-local companies. The company was identified at a tourism conference and directly contacted by Visit Grand Rapids for the job.

North Star Destination Strategies launched in 2000 after Don McEachern, the founder and CEO, saw a need for "an affordable, research-based branding solution for small to mid-sized destinations" (North Star Destination Strategies, 2012). North Star has worked with more than 100 destinations in 30 states, including the Twin Cities of

Minneapolis and St. Paul, Minnesota, with the goal of developing marketing strategies that use a brand for the specific development objectives of the destination.

North Star assures that each town is unique and needs tailored research to create a successful place brand. They offer a multitude of services including creating an entirely new brand, creating a strategy for an existing logo and strapline, conducting market research, or creating certain marketing tools.

North Star was contracted to create a new brand for Grand Rapids, combining the physical properties of the locale and the symbolic elements rooted in the history, culture and society of community members. North Star's website states that a branding initiative is citizen-driven. From their perspective, a brand is "discovered, not created" and it is a "reflection of the genius and the will of the people" (North Star Destination Strategies, 2012). This description of place branding supports the idea that community members are important in the creation of the brand.

In 2008, North Star set out on a journey to determine what made Grand Rapids tick. In order to do this, North Star conducted research in the forms of:

- **Materials & Research Audit** - A review of past research conducted in Grand Rapids and past and current public tourist and marketing materials for the city of Grand Rapids.
- **In-Market Study** – North Star sent two employees to Grand Rapids to gain understanding of the perceptions and attitudes of Grand Rapids residents.
- **Intercept Interviews** – These interviews were conducted in a man-on-the-street fashion. A North Star employee would randomly select someone to talk to about

their perceptions of Grand Rapids. They did this both in Grand Rapids and in communities they traveled through on the main highway from the Twin Cities of Minneapolis/St. Paul to Grand Rapids. They would stop at randomly selected places to talk to outsiders about their perceptions of Grand Rapids.

- **Stakeholder Vision Survey** – Community members were selected to give their opinions about their perceptions of Grand Rapids. This was distributed in paper and electronic form, with all open-ended questions.
- **Community Tapestry Study** – The Community Tapestry Study produced a report based on a market segmentation system that classifies U.S. neighborhoods into 65 lifestyle segments based on socioeconomic and demographic composition.
- **Perception Studies** – Telephone interviews were conducted with constituents in the various target audiences.
- **Consumer Awareness and Perception Study** – A telephone survey was conducted with residents from the greater St. Paul and Minneapolis area.
- **Community Leader Vision Survey** – Individuals were identified by the brand committee to take a specialized survey to obtain their perceptions about the future of Grand Rapids.
- **Online Community Survey** – All residents in Grand Rapids city limits were invited to take a survey to contribute their perceptions to the brand creation. Ads were placed in the local newspaper and on local radio stations. An email invitation was also sent out via the City of Grand Rapids distribution list. Since



the survey was electronic, computer stations were set up at the public library for those who didn't have the equipment or internet access to participate.

The goals for the brand, determined by a group of individuals known as the brand committee with guidance from North Star, identified the three brand goals, were increasing visitation, growing interest in business development opportunities and extending the brand into the community (Grand Rapids Brand Print, p. 51).

The brand committee was made up of a group of local leaders interested in economic and community development. In order to fund the project, Visit Grand Rapids sought out partners who could fund the initiative. The result was five funders who financially supported the branding process and who also sat at the decision-making table. These five were Visit Grand Rapids, the Grand Rapids Chamber of Commerce, City of Grand Rapids, the Itasca Economic Development Agency, and the Blandin Foundation.

These organizations are usually involved when a community-wide project is undertaken. While the regular community leaders were represented in the brand committee, there was also an open invitation for area business owners to join in the meetings.

Once the research component of the process was complete, North Star compiled research results, and presented the findings to the branding committee who then made design recommendations. The branding committee had the final decision-making power when it came to choosing the brand.

After a few iterations, the branding committee selected the tagline "It's in Minnesota's Nature." The words are intended to reference both the natural, cultural and

social capital of the community. It is a play on words, where one could either interpret Grand Rapids as being in the heart of the untamed wilderness – a reference to the place - or filled with good-willed people.

The image selected to represent Grand Rapids is a rather intricate interplay between water, air and a tree encased by a border intended to be an open door. The logo was created to represent an invitation into Minnesota's nature.



**Figure 3 – It's in Minnesota's Nature Brand Logo**

Of course a brand is much more than the logo and tagline. However, these are the recognizable elements for most community members and what they base their opinions and perceptions on.

After the brand had been selected, the committee chose to hold a roll-out event to introduce it to the community. It was here that the research was revealed as well as the finished brand. Attendees were encouraged to include the brand in their business marketing.

Following this event, a consultant was hired to do additional outreach into the business community. She was hired to “sell” the brand to the business community to use in their marketing efforts. However, the consultant’s time was cut short due to another job opportunity and outreach was halted.

Since the launch of the brand, a few community organizations have fully accepted the brand as their own. Both the City of Grand Rapids and Visit Grand Rapids have adopted both the image and the tagline to represent their organizations. Other area organizations have included parts of the brand in their communications. While some organizations have included the brand in their marketing mix, personal interviews with members of the brand committee revealed that the community as a whole has not fully embraced it. The work to implement brand suggestions from North Star Destination Strategies is still ongoing.

## CHAPTER IV

### METHOD

This study employed a qualitative approach to gain insight on how residents of a community interact and perceive a place brand, and how that may alter the connectedness of their community. To approach the topic from a quantitative background, using, for example, a survey tool, would restrict the data collected because the researcher would draft the questions. Through the qualitative approach taken, research participants were encouraged to think in depth about the topic, as well as question the aspects they didn't understand or were unfamiliar with.

The nature of the topic lends itself well to selecting a defined place as the location of study. For this reason, a case study was chosen as the framework for the inquiry, with interviews being the method employed. The method of interviews was selected to allow participants the ability to speak freely, ask questions, and further develop their ideas throughout the process. While interviews have power differentiated role relations, where the interviewer initiates contact, determines the interview topic, crafts the questions and guides the course of the conversation, participants can be more active in the creation of the content, changing the direction of the question, using personal examples, and feeling more secure in a one-on-one conversation.

Through the use of a case study and in-depth interviews, a defined world was sketched out to gain sufficient insight into how residents' perceive a place brand.

### *A Researcher's Role in Community*

During the branding process, I was not living in my hometown of Grand Rapids, Minnesota. I was in my second year of collage but had returned home in the summer of 2008 to be a communications intern at the Blandin Foundation. Through my involvement with this organization, I learned of the brand process. My director supervisor was a member of the branding committee and shared her experiences with me. I was able to view the branding materials throughout the process. While I was attuned to what was happening with the branding project that summer, I did not have any direct influence on brand decisions. My opinions were given to one member of the branding committee who may or may not have taken them into consideration while at the decision-making table.

Durning the summer of 2008, the branding project piqued my interest because I was interested in community-wide collaborative efforts and how power relations play a part in decision-making. This was the impetus behind my thesis project.

When the brand was rolled out in 2009, I had not yet started this thesis. My familiarity with the brand process led to my interest in conducting community action research. Through community action research, a researcher can address a community challenge to generate practical knowledge that is useful to people living in a given place. My thesis research was designed so that the results could contribute to pre-existing community knowledge and help to direct future community development projects.

Now that I've gone into the community to discuss the branding project with brand committee members, business owners, and community members, I've received some attention around my work. I've been asked to speak to the brand committee about my research and share my results with the community – which was always planned.

The most recent development is my new position as the Community Marketing Coordinator for the Itasca area. This position grew out of the branding work. A group of area business, organization and City representatives came together to work on collaborative marketing and communications to residents and visitors. I was hired to help facilitate these efforts and carry them out. While I have been in the position a short time, I have already used my learning to help guide the group's projects. The first project we are embarking on is a collaborative storytelling and information online hub for all residents in the Itasca area. I am doing outreach in each of the sixteen Itasca communities and utilizing existing community social capital to make a connection to the residents. We will learn together how to tell our community's stories and have a venue to share them.

These opportunities would not be possible without this thesis project.

### *Snowball Sample*

Throughout my research project, I collected 30 interviews, using the technique of snowball sampling to secure participants. Atkinson & Flint (2001) describe snowball sampling as “a technique for gathering research subjects through the identification of an initial subject who is used to provide the names of other actors. These actors may themselves open possibilities for an expanding web of contact and inquiry” (p. 1).

It was my intention to find a diverse population to interview in order to gain insight into different perspectives. However, you have to start somewhere in order to get the snowball rolling. Therefore, I decided to identify two main stakeholders, the brand manager and then-director of the local tourism agency and the chamber of commerce president. Both of these individuals played instrumental roles in the branding process, both in time and financial commitments. These were both asked to identify community members who they thought would bring a new perspective to my research. It is in this fashion that I was able to secure the majority of my interview participants.

After a handful of interviews, though, I found that my snowball sampling was not giving me a diverse population, spanning social, racial and class lines, but rather locking me into a cycle of one social network. Because of this, I started seeking participants in different venues, which added to the diversity of my sample.

My pool of research participants spanned an age range from 18 to 85, and included perspectives of those from different cultural backgrounds, socioeconomic classes and religions. I interviewed people who were close to the branding project and those who were not. This included a marketing professional who was not part of the branding, small business owners, students, long-time residents and recent transplants. I interviewed people who were employed and some who were looking for jobs.

I interviewed 12 women and 18 men, for a total of 30 interviews. Sixteen interviewees were not related to the brand in any fashion, six people were not directly involved but were familiar with the process, and eight interviewees were directly

involved and part of the branding committee. For a sample of 30, I was able to reach a broad cross-section of the community and reach a sufficient point of saturation.

### *Collection and Analysis*

All interviews were tape recorded and transcribed by the researcher. At the conclusion of the research, transcriptions were reviewed and the coding process began.

The first step in the coding process was to define the code categories. To do this, I read through the interview transcriptions in their entirety and made a list of possible coding categories. After aggregating the initial categories, codes were then grouped into more comprehensive categories. These categories include:

- Existing community relationships
  - This category identified information that referenced the level of connectedness between residents. Information was further classified into comments on bridging and bonding social capital (relationships).
- Trust
  - This category identified information that referenced confidence both in honest communication and follow-through on claims made between people and brand representations.
- Power relations
  - This category identified information that referenced power differentiation, how that influenced residents' ability to affect change, and what results were perceived because of that.
- Place perceptions



- This category identified information that referenced feelings toward the physical attributes and characteristics of the physical setting of Grand Rapids.
- Cultural identity
  - This category identified information that referenced perceptions about cultural identities that were present in Grand Rapids.
- Representation of community identity
  - This category identified information that referenced feelings toward the place brand.

After codes were established, each one was assigned a letter to easily identify information that correlated to the category. Throughout coding, information was classified as a complete thought, not individual words of key phrases. Each interview transcription was assigned a number, and page numbers completed the symbolic code (example: C2-4 would signify information about power relations in a designated transcription on page 4).

After transcriptions were coded, a grid was created to assemble a single data set from which to draw results.

## CHAPTER V

### RESULTS

The themes identified in this results section are inter-connected and expansive. They are grouped together to encompass a wide-array of thoughts that share common threads. In this chapter, the connections between community, place, trust, power, and brand representation will be discussed from the viewpoints of 30 residents of Grand Rapids, Minnesota. Interviews provide a snapshot of community perceptions at a given time, but are by no means inclusive and comprehensive of all viewpoints. Therefore, when residents are mentioned, the word is used to describe those who were interviewed.

Furthermore, community, for all intents and purposes in this chapter, refers to a group of people that are bound together by their place of habitation, not by a particular interest. Place perceptions are a product of those living in community at a particular place. Power role relations and the levels of trust within them influence the relations between those in a community. These pre-existing, yet constantly developing, role relations shape the representation of community identity.

To begin understanding the role relations that developed the specific place brand in question, the community relationships and culture must be discussed.

#### *Community Relationships*

It is easy to generalize when discussing relationships between community networks, but relational networks are extremely complex and cannot be fully described whether 30, 300 or 3,000 people participate in the research. Through these conversations, inferences were drawn based on commonality in themes. However, that is not to say that there were not responses that fell outside of the main themes.

The majority of interviewees described relationships between residents as tight-knit with a strong place identity and a progressive attitude toward change. Social networks in Grand Rapids, Minnesota are viewed as deep, personal connections between individuals that, at most times, are exclusive and member-oriented. Through responses, interviewees stated that social capital is built through interactions in homes, a private setting as opposed to public gatherings. Through bonding social capital in a private space, it is possible that this interaction breeds the type of deep personal connections that the majority of interviewees discussed. As one interviewee stated:

It's a community of pockets, of deep relationships, which are sometimes hard to cross those barriers. I think it's challenging for new people to the area, to break into those pretty loyal networks. In contrast to a metropolitan area, most of the social life is home-based, rather than in an external environment. People really spend a lot of time socializing that way rather than seeking it elsewhere.

Through in-group identification, residents of Grand Rapids build a collective identity based on not only characteristics they commonly identify with but, more often, characteristics they don't identify with. This is the main construct supporting social identity theory, which is an individual's knowledge that they belong to certain groups and

do not belong to others. This knowledge influences personal identity and the relationships formed between in-groups.

Community-wide group identification – social and cultural solidarity - is apparent in the descriptions comparing the Grand Rapids community and neighboring cities. Through this identification, residents perceive themselves as part of a cultural group that differs from neighboring cultures. This perception drives positive associations in which to build community relationships both bonding and bridging social capital. Cultural, place-based associations include amplified openness and friendliness as compared to neighboring cities. As one community member stated, “I think Grand Rapids has a great personality...compared to people in Hibbing or Virginia, I think the people of Grand Rapids have a much more positive attitude, their much more friendly, more outgoing than those to the east.”

Another interviewee reinforced, “When you get to the Range, it has a different personality. It’s really very drastic.”

While the existing place-based identification could lead to bonding and bridging social capital between residents, those who are new to the community do not feel like they necessarily can tap into that group identification. For this interviewee, the deep-rooted relationship networks generate a feeling of exclusion.

I’m still an outsider. When I sit around a table of professionals who have grown up in this area, there’s a lot of history that they talk about that’s very interesting, very charming, but it’s not my history.

In addition to tight-knit relationships, residents believe that the culture in Grand Rapids is sophisticated and progressive compared to communities around them. With a progressive culture, new and innovative initiatives are thought to arise, like place branding. As one interviewee explains, “I’ve done business all up the Range and there’s a different mentality and attitude. Grand Rapids is much more progressive and aware of what economic drivers are.”

**The strong relationship networks and shared place-based, cultural beliefs expressed by interviewees would be a good foundation for building or strengthening social capital through place branding.** However, community connectedness to the brand depends on the levels of trust and the power role relations that occurred in the process, which will now be discussed.

#### *Levels of Trust*

Trust is a key factor in understanding relationships in a community. It also can help illuminate power relations in a community, which will be discussed in more depth later. Trust is at the foundation of social capital, but it also affects other community capitals. For example, community members may or may not trust local leaders to act in their best interest (political capital) and leaders may or may not trust in the skills of community members (human capital).

For this study, interviewees expressed trust, or lack thereof, in the people involved in the brands, the brand process and the brand representation itself.

When asked, the majority of interviewees agreed that place branding was a worthwhile endeavor because of the possible economic benefits, but when asked about

the process or end product, interviewees who were not directly associated with the brand's development were skeptical about the benefits. Awareness and knowledge of the brand was limited. Interviewees were not familiar or informed about the process and that contributed to the lack of trust.

It was found that when interviewees expressed a lack of trust in the process, it was most often particularized trust – based on information and experiences and founded on reason.

For example, one interviewee and business owner stated, “I don't ever, ever want to jump in. I want to lay back and figure out how it is going to go because so many times things change.” This statement shows a lack of trust in both investing in the product and the unreliability of efforts led by local leaders.

This sentiment was echoed by another community member, “It will probably get put in file 13 like all the other big plans.”

Another interviewee, an American Indian, nontraditional student at the local community college, said of the branding committee, “People like that might be a little bit out of touch with the everyday, average citizen who is cutting coupons...and most of us are.”

These statements demonstrate a lack of trust in both those leading the branding work and the end product. Each statement associates the people, process or product with a different negative experience. Because they are not knowledgeable about the brand, they must use their reason to make a judgment call. That reason stems from the knowledge that something similar has not worked in the past.

There were notable differences in trust levels between those directly associated with the brand.

By being educated and informed about place branding, members of the place branding committee fostered high levels of trust in the place brand itself and the process that led to its creation. Through constant interaction, involvement and openness, brand committee members nurtured trust in one another and were proud of the brand and how it represents Grand Rapids.

One interviewee, and brand committee member, stated, “It took leadership and exposure to other communities who have done this to lead the way.”

Another member of the branding committee showed a high level of trust for the work the consultants carried out. “North Star did an excellent job of understanding us. Grand Rapids needed a way to explain in a simplistic way what we have to offer. I thought they did a fantastic job.”

These perceptions differ from those who were not involved in the brand work. This is because they strengthened their bonding social capital by having existing relational networks and reinforcing those ties with a shared representation they created collaboratively. The branding committee expressed generalized trust, based on the common assumption that people were at the table for the right reasons, trying to move the community forward. Local leaders already have established relationship channels and were able to collaborate on a shared project that strengthened those channels, possibly at the expense of setting a barrier for bridging capital.

**Through this research, it was found that the branding committee expressed high levels of trust in the branding process and the product that resulted. This was because these local leaders already had established networks and were informed about the process. With the information in-hand, they were able to rely on generalized trust to work together to move the effort forward.**

**This was not the case for the sample of community members not associated with the brand. They were more skeptical about the purpose of the brand and the success they expected it to achieve. Since they lacked knowledge and were not part of that relational network, they turned to reason to form their opinion. With particularized trust, they were not able to trust the people, process or product of the place branding initiative.**

#### *Power Relations*

Power role relations often times influences trust between people. Power can come in many forms in a community, examples being a type of job, personal economic standing, level of civic engagement, family reputation, etc.

Power relations immediately altered the branding process in Grand Rapids because of how the brand committee was selected. After the decision to brand was made, partners were selected by how much economic capital they could contribute to the effort. This method of selection brought in the usual decision makers in the community—the city, the chamber of commerce, and the largest area foundation, among others. As one interviewee explained of this type of community process:



There's a room of people that end up sitting at a table to try to decide what's good for everybody else. We see it all the time where somebody has an idea, and they say, you know we should really do this, but they never consult with the people that are going to be involved at the end. So they put all this energy into creating this plan, this master plan, and when they get done, they're all proud of themselves. They run out and they hand it to everybody and everybody looks at it and says, humph, I'm not interested in that.

Here a member of the brand committee is expressing his disenchantment with the model of community development. This was reflected in the branding process when the consulting company that would lead brand creation. The brand committee employed a technical assistance model by contracting with an outside expert to solve the identity problem of Grand Rapids. This decision contributed to the sustenance of the status quo, where the community leaders retained their position to set the agenda and make the final decisions.

The hiring of out-of-state consultants created a schism in public opinion and altered trust levels in the community. For the branding committee, bringing in "outsiders" added validity and an unbiased perception of place to the research. As one brand committee member stated,

I think what they bring to the table is a lack of bias. You know when you live in your own community, sometimes you take things for granted...the things you see every day. You don't have the same perspective as someone coming into your community or someone who is a potential business owner.

When community members were asked, two different opinions emerged. Some interviewees agreed that bringing in an unbiased perspective was the correct way to go. Their opinions aligned with the branding committee, stating that objectivity was the key to a successful brand. A community member illustrates this by saying,

It's definitely a good idea [to bring in consultants] because the branding needs to be targeted to people outside the community anyway, so to bring somebody from outside is a good idea because they have no preconceived notions of what it should or shouldn't be.

While both the committee and community members interviewed thought that an unbiased perspective was best, a few community members believed that the use of consultants allowed the community leaders to control the process while passing on blame to an external group if anything went amiss. This is illustrated by an interviewee who stated, "that's what they always do so no one has to take the blame. That's why there are all these consultants around, because no one wants to make a decision. So when it fails, they can just say, well the consultants told us to do that."

In addition to the decision to hire consultants, the brand committee also had control over other decisions. One decision that had to be made was where to draw the physical boundaries of what was to be branded. Surrounded by an overabundance of small communities and townships, the decision had to be made as to where exactly the brand "stopped." Through the consultants' research, it was found that the town's name, Grand Rapids, was more recognizable to the target market than the greater area in which

it resided, Itasca County. Therefore, lines were drawn based on the promise of added profit, rather than acknowledging cultural networks.

As a member of the branding committee stated, “One of the drawbacks is that you have to start drawing lines. You have to say ‘this is what I’m branding.’ Then you create a sense of have’s and have not’s.”

This decision reinforced pre-existing barriers that separated Grand Rapids from surrounding communities. Once this was decided, the County chose to not participate in the branding and outlying cities and community members were excluded.

Members within Grand Rapids, however, were included in the branding, but were not given any degree of decision-making power. Community input was invited through surveys, limited focus groups and interviews. Residents were approached as sources of information, not as co-creators of the brand. This left the political capital in the hands of the community leaders.

When the brand was released to the community, power relations still dominated implementation and use. While technically created for unlimited use by the community, residents were instructed to inform the brand manager of their intent to use the brand. The manager then brought the request to the committee and decided whether the use was permitted. As one interviewee stated:

She [brand manager] calls herself the branding Nazi, she has taken it on to have to approve things, so even before we order our mugs, we send it over to her and ask. Is this going to work? Is this okay? She gives really good suggestions, but I’m not

sure how long this should be done. Having one person as the go-to is kind of scary.

Another community business owners explained, “You needed to have her permission in order to use the logo and a lot of people went, oh well we can’t use that because it’s hers...the printing shops were afraid.”

By employing the technical assistance model, the community leaders remained in control of the political capital and the decision-making in the branding process to create a shared representation. Community members in Grand Rapids were invited to participate, but solely to be an information source. Interviewees lacked the depth of knowledge and attachment essential to garner a sense of ownership and pride in the brand. Through this awareness, it is evident that **power role relations play a significant role in how the representation of a community’s identity is created and carried out.**

### *Place Perceptions*

Place perceptions are personal and contribute to an individual’s place identity, which in turn plays a significant role in their overall identity. Place perceptions encompass both the physical aspects of a place as well as the social/cultural realm of perceptions.

Physical place perceptions are key to understanding the culture and the type of people who are attracted to Grand Rapids, Minnesota. The land itself is described as having an abundance of natural resources, culminating in a beautiful landscape of forests and lakes. As one interviewee stated:

I see Grand Rapids as a very effective blend of the Range communities to our East and larger metro areas, like Duluth, simply because we are tied to natural resources and industry but at the same time we have a great culture for arts. Just the amenities you take for granted in a larger metro area and don't expect to see in a community of this size.

This statement points to residents' pride in the area's natural, built and social capital. Since the cultivation of natural capital is a main contributor to the area's livelihood, it plays a significant role in how people perceive the place. Words like hardworking, industrious and resourceful were identified as descriptors of the people who live in the area by North Star research. This is an example of how place perceptions influence cultural perceptions.

Another example of this is the thought that place attributes not only attract people to live and visit the area, but also contribute to why unemployment rates are higher in the County. An interviewee, who heads a local program to find work for the unemployed, stated, "I think one reason [for high unemployment] is that people rather be unemployed and live in Grand Rapids than leave their lifestyle."

One reason for this strong place attachment may be the driving perception behind the current brand, which is the concept that Grand Rapids has an ideal balance of untouched wilderness and the amenities of an urbanized city.

One member of the branding committee explained, "The real reason why people really like the Grand Rapids area is because of the balance. So if you're going to market

the Grand Rapids area that's the way you got to do it. There's something here for everyone. We're very fortunate that we have that."

**All interviewees relayed positive place perceptions, focusing more so on the physical attributes of the community. The community's perceived balance between untapped outdoor resources, in combination with modern amenities was the impetus behind the creation of the place brand.**

#### *Representation of Community Identity*

This section will utilize the four brand conceptualizations (brands as communicators, brands as perceptions, brands as value enhancers, and brands as relationships) as a frame in which to categorize and discuss resident perceptions of the brand.

*Brands conceptualized as communicators* set apart one entity from its competitors. This conceptualization illustrates a brand's ability to differentiate.

Out of the four, this is the conceptualization that spurred the creation of the Grand Rapids brand. According to members of the brand committee, a central goal for the creation of the brand was to differentiate between Grand Rapids, Minnesota and Grand Rapids, Michigan. Proving to be a long-standing problem, the creation of the brand was intended to correct the confusion between the two cities.

This issue influenced the identity crafted to represent Grand Rapids because "Minnesota" had to be included in the brand language (*It's in Minnesota's Nature*). This idea was supported by the brand manager, when she said,

One thing that we've always struggled with is this name identity within Minnesota. People get it confused with Grand Rapids, Michigan. So we wanted something that said, we are the Grand Rapids in Minnesota. Something that would highlight this beautiful area we live in and something that different groups in the community could use and try to get over the squabbling about what is Grand Rapids.

This conceptualization took priority in the decisions made by the branding committee because it helped the target audience of Minneapolis and St. Paul identify Grand Rapids as being in Minnesota. If they knew where the city was, they would be more inclined to visit.

*Brands conceptualized as perceptions* appeal to an individual's senses, reason and emotions, creating associations or attributes that have personal value attached.

When asked their opinion of the brand, most interviewees identified the natural capital depicted in the logo and commented on it. Some perceived the brand to be an accurate representation of Grand Rapids, like the interviewee that stated, "I feel like it's a good summary of Grand Rapids because it has the trees and the lake."

However, others had the opposite reaction, citing the lack of uniqueness, the confusing image and/or language or the uselessness of it. This sentiment is highlighted by an interviewee, who said, "It hasn't really clicked with me. It's kind of like, everything's in Minnesota's nature. It doesn't really establish Grand Rapids as a specific place."

One interviewee explained that the community has not accepted the brand because residents are nostalgic about past brand representations. She states, “The people here remember the old logo, they remember the canoe and the tree and that matters to them, so I would say locally the branding did not really catch on. They’re tolerating it, but it didn’t really catch on.”

Each of these observations was founded in how the brand appealed to the individual’s senses, reason or emotion. Overall, brand perceptions varied greatly among interviewees, with no significant pattern emerging. Both reason and emotion were employed in order to form brand associations. Positive associations tended to be based in reason, while negative associations were founded on reason and emotion.

*Brands conceptualized as value enhancers* is the idea that brands have the ability to add worth in a multitude of ways.

Since the reason behind the brand’s creation was to differentiate, the desired outcome was increased economic capital. As one member of the branding committee explained, “Economic development is a driver [of branding] and seeking advantage in the marketplace.”

Residents supported branding efforts that sought to boost tourism. One resident said, “Anything they do to promote tourism is a good thing.”

Another member of the branding committee saw the branding as being not only an economic development practice, but also community development. One member of the brand committee explained, “For sure economic development is a driver...but it’s



also a community development exercise to say what do we care about, what do we stand for and how does that stack up to how the world is seeing us?”

While economic capital was the greatest perceived value enhancer, cultural capital also was mentioned.

*Brands conceived as relationships* assert that the brand has a personality in which an individual can form a relationship.

Those who commented on the brand’s ability to form relationships with the community were all members of the branding committee. Although differentiation and economic advantage were the prime reasons supporting brand creation, some members of the brand committee also noted that creating a unified identity for the community was important. This, in part, had economic underpinnings – if residents form relationships with the brand, they buy into the brand, becoming ambassadors and spreading the brand throughout the town and beyond. As one member of the branding committee said, “If we can get people to see themselves as part of a bigger whole—a bigger thing—it’s a win-win.”

A community member who had never heard of the branding before understood the importance of developing community relationships with a brand. She said, “In order for a community to buy-into a brand for their home community, from the general population, they need emotional buy-in. In order to support something, you need to have your heart in it.”

**Through the framework of brand conceptualizations, it was found that the brand was created primarily to be a mark of differentiation from a town with the**

**same name. Interviewees varied in their opinions about the brand, relying on reason and emotion to make a judgment. The main perceived value enhancer was economic capital, but the strengthening of cultural capital was also mentioned.**

The results from this case study shed light on how pre-existing place perceptions, power relations, trust levels, and community relationships contribute to and help shape a place branding process. In the Discussion Section, I will look at how these results influence the creation and strengthening of social capital throughout the branding process.

## CHAPTER VI

### DISCUSSION

Today's place branding literature is founded on the marketing of products. This is due to the historic capitalistic underpinnings of branding. When transferred to places, it creates a mechanical process where communities are approached as if they were objects.

This mechanized system is a product created and driven by our commodified culture. It comes as no surprise that place branding is carried out in order to stimulate financial capital. However, what does this mean for the other six mutually dependent capitals? Flora and Flora (2008) tell us that overemphasizing one capital, while disregarding others, can be detrimental to a healthy community. Utilizing this idea as a foundation, I will discuss the stages in the Grand Rapids branding process where the balance of capitals was threatened. I will then discuss, based on my research results, if, where and how social capital was built or strengthened due to the place branding.

#### *Five Stages of Branding*

My research findings uncovered five stages in the branding process, giving structure to the discussion of how a place brand might foster the building of social capital.

The stages identified are as follows: defining the cultural sphere, producing community identities, funneling community identity, creating the community identity

representation, and restituting the community identity. Through the discussion of these five stages, it will be argued that **the place branding process in Grand Rapids served to strengthen social capital amongst members of the community leaders due to their existing political capital. Interviewed community members, on the other hand, were faced with a loss of cultural capital and did not experience strengthened social capital because of how they were perceived in the selected model of community development.**

#### *Community Development and Social Capital*

A person's identity is influenced by the place they live. My research results show that shared identities can develop based on cultural norms ensconced in a particular place. Groups feel a sense of pride based on their shared traits that are unique to them because of the physical location they inhabit. They do this through group identification, classifying their place-based shared traits while recognizing and calling attention to traits of out-groups. When looking at these findings, it would seem that the foundation is solid for social capital to be strengthened through the use of a place brand. The physical representation of the shared identity would serve as a "trigger" for those feelings of pride.

However, the feeling of being a part of community is a product of many experiences of attachment. The pride and loyalty that result from a shared identity are cultivated over a period of time. Likewise, for social capital to be strengthened through a place brand, the process must also be inclusive of the community and nurture pride in the representation of the identity.

For this case study, in particular, the roadblock to inclusivity lies in the model of development and its stance on community engagement. Whether it was intentional or not, the Grand Rapids, Minnesota place branding process utilized the technical assistance model of community development.

In this model, outside vendors were hired for their expertise. However, they were not experts because of their extensive knowledge of the community. Rather, they were experts at delivering a consumable product. Community leaders were convened immediately, either because of their position in the community or their ability to contribute financially to the project. This group had the ability to set the agenda throughout the process, and maintain their control to perpetuate the agenda throughout by approaching community members as sources of information for, not contributors to, brand creation. The same community leaders were represented in the decision-making space and they were the final decision makers on how the community's identity was represented.

This alienated community members from the process because they were not kept informed, nor were they approached to be co-creators. They relayed information, but the collective knowledge gleaned from that inquiry was not released until brand decisions were made. Instead, community leaders utilized the information to control the creation of the representation of the community's cultural capital. A vanished reality was then manufactured to foster tourist expectations. Essentially, residents were approached as objects of the tourist gaze. Their natural, social and cultural capitals were commodified to support the tourist expectation. Therefore, with a tagline of "It's in Minnesota's Nature,"

a tourist comes to town expecting to be physically surrounded by nature and to encounter residents who are good-natured.

Additionally, because the technical assistance model of community development was in play, community leaders were able to teeter the balance of community capitals to emphasize those that they deemed to be superior for the success of the project. In doing this, community leaders showed high levels of bonding social capital through increased trust and loyalty in one another and in the brand. They showed their support both in the brand process and in the function of the brand as an economic driver. While they created the brand for an external audience, they reinforced their position of power within the community and strengthened group ties amongst themselves. Since there were high levels of bonding social capital, but not bridging, the process led to limited outside communication about the project and created a lack of trust within the broader community.

Since bonding social capital was strengthened among the brand committee, or the community leaders, but not the uninvolved community members, it is understood that social capital did not grow from the place brand itself, but instead from the process of creation. Through collaboration, the locale's unique characteristics revive the shared identities that resonate with residents. This proves that it is crucial to have a voice when creating the representation of your community's identity, because solely contributing information did not spur trust in the process or loyalty to the brand in the study's sample population.

The branding committee, on the other hand, did build social capital because they had a voice and the political capital to affect change.

### *Balancing Capitals*

Throughout this discussion, the imbalance of community capitals has been highlighted. Flora and Flora (2008) explain that “when one type of capital is emphasized over all others, the other resources are decapitalized, and the economy, environment, or social equity thus can be compromised” (p. 17).

With this in mind, I would like to revisit the historical roots of place branding to illustrate how this has influenced the imbalance of capitals in this case study.

Place branding practices grew out of product branding, which was shaped, in large part, by industrialization. During this time, the interaction between consumers and producers was dwindling. Instead, a middleman – a salesman – was responsible for interacting with the customer. This change led to the deterioration of social capital between the consumer and producer because financial capital was elevated in importance.

Similarly, financial capital was the driving force behind the place brand in Grand Rapids. The brand’s primary intent was to enhance advantage in the tourism marketplace. The technical assistance model of community development further imbalanced the community capitals, placing more emphasis on the political capital of local leaders.

Community leaders exercised their political capital to control the community’s cultural capital in order to boost financial capital. This tipped the community capital scales and decapitalized social capital. This was the case throughout the entirety of the process and resulted in the compromise of social cohesion and trust.

Because of this, the Grand Rapids, Minnesota place brand contributed to the commodification of the community's existing capitals. The place brand was created for the Other. It was meant to be a symbol to entice tourists, not enhance the shared identification of residents. Therefore, when created, its fundamental purpose was to create a symbol that could be a commodified product.

This is illustrated in the 5 Stages of Branding that were identified in my research. In each of these stages, the community capitals were imbalanced due to decisions made by community leaders.

#### *Stage 1: Defining the Cultural Sphere*

To begin the branding process, it is imperative that the unique cultural attributes of a place are explored. Communities can discover the shared qualities that residents identify with and value in order to define their cultural sphere. This includes the existing capital in the community – how a community describes itself socially, physically, and culturally. This sphere can, and should, guide the creation of the community's brand.

The method in which these attributes are uncovered can shape the results. For instance, the Grand Rapids branding process used a mass survey tool to connect with the majority of Grand Rapids residents. This choice impacted the development of social capital. Since this inquiry method utilized pre-defined questions that limited resident feedback, open communication was not encouraged. To build social capital, trust must be established and nurtured through communication. This was not a priority in the surveying process.



Instead, the decision to use a survey tool aligned with the technical assistance model of engagement. Residents were sought out to be a source of information for brand creation. Their feedback, however, was pre-defined to some extent based on the questions asked by the consultants. The overall community was not invited to participate in the co-creation of the cultural sphere, but was able to weigh-in on select questions.

### *Stage 2: Producing Community Identities*

By defining the cultural sphere, the shared identities of the community start to materialize. These identities were congregated and analyzed by North Star after the research was complete. Because the driving force behind the place brand was economic development, it is assumed that North Star selected the shared identities through the lens of financial capital, selecting those that could easily be communicated to people outside of the community.

This stage was also predicated on the political capital of the community's leaders. Only the brand committee had access to the results of the community study. While residents were asked to contribute to the community's research, the results were not shared with them until the brand was finalized, in which case it was used as supporting evidence for the brand selected by the community leaders. In this stage, resident engagement was limited, and trust was not established through information sharing and public awareness.

### *Stage 3: Funneling Identities*

In this stage, all the identities discovered in the research process, made up of cultural norms, traditions, values, and perceptions are run through a "funnel", i.e. a

selection mechanism designed to achieve the branding goal. Since the purpose of a brand is to relay a simple message that is recognizable and memorable, it cannot be represent multiple cultural identities – one has to be selected.

In this stage, the community leaders employed their political capital to influence the selection process. While the consultants were given agency to uncover the shared identities, it was returned to the community leaders for the final decision. This is possible due to the agenda-setting capabilities of the community leaders.

When a shared identity is being selected, the main interests and reasoning behind the place branding surface and guide the decision-making process. For Grand Rapids, the driving factor behind the branding project was to increase tourism and economic capital. Therefore, the identity chosen was one that would appeal most to those outside the community. In all of the branding process, this stage displays the extent of the community leaders' control over other capitals in the community. They have the power to control information and the cultural capital of the community.

Through enactment of this control, my research supports that this is the point in the branding process where social capital was built. Communication and understanding about the purpose of the brand led to higher levels of trust between those involved, and heightened trust in the brand itself. Through group identification, the forming of a collective identity and engaging in collective action to make a decision, bonding social capital was strengthened.

At the same time social capital was being reinforced, the community leaders' political capital was also being fortified. This is due to the nature of the technical

assistance model of engagement. Since the community leaders control the information, and bans together to create and control the shared identity, they are securing their ability to continue setting the community's agenda in the future.

*Stage 4: Creating a Simplified Representation*

Once an identity is selected, the process to create a graphic representation for that identity begins. In this case study, the Grand Rapids community leaders chose the shared identity then directed the outside expert, North Star, to draft the representation. The language and graphic then served as the physical manifestation of the shared community identity chosen by the community leaders.

*Stage 5: Restituting Culture*

After the graphic representation is finalized, in order for the brand to achieve its purpose, it must become recognizable to all selected audiences. The diverse audiences in a given community constitute a major challenge for the community leaders and their control over the community information and symbols encapsulated in the place brand.

Although the community leaders steered the brand creation, they rely on the community as a whole to buy into the idea and spread it. While the community has little control or power with regard to the brand, their common support is necessary for the brand to be successful.

In this case study, the community leaders exercised their political capital in order to control the community's cultural capital through the brand. To do this, they hired a consultant that traveled to area businesses to pitch the brand. This individual went on

behalf of the community leaders to “sell” the representation of the community’s cultural capital back to the residents.

This practice illustrates how emphasis on certain capitals, namely financial and political in this case, can deteriorate others. By using this model of development, place branding steals away true and authentic identity from a community and repurposes it for economic capital, thereby making residents a carrier vessel for the place brand.

I would like to identify this process as the *restitution of cultural identity* or, literally, “selling” a community’s culture back to the community in a reproduced, commodified package for their consumption and resale to external consumers. This process distorts the natural state of identity.

#### *Cultural Commodification and Cultural Involution: Mutually Exclusive?*

The model of community development selected to carry out the place-branding project in Grand Rapids directly affected how decisions were made within the five branding stages identified. The community leaders remained in control of the cultural capital by sustaining their ability to set the community’s agenda. By creating a shared representation together, they strengthened their bonding social capital and limited the possibility of building bridging capital within the community. Finally, the restitution of the community’s identity in the form of the brand representation led to the ultimate form of cultural commodification, where the community was asked to accept a mark of their culture that they had no (or limited) part in creating for the purpose of generating financial capital.

For this case study, the approach to community development that was employed during the place-branding project created obstacles for the ways in which the community could build trust and loyalty between themselves and with the brand representation.

While it is understood that a place brand contributes to cultural commodification, the question remains: can cultural involution occur in the midst of a process that directly contributes to cultural commodification? Are they mutually exclusive or can they happen concurrently? This case study demonstrated that bonding social capital was strengthened when a group of individuals contributed to a shared group representation (depicted in a place brand). This indeed revived perceptions of cultural uniqueness among brand members, while creating a representation that would be used for tourism. This strengthened the bonds between the in-group members and built upon their perception of the community's identity.

However, even though the brand committee experienced increased community pride and a stronger sense of cultural identity, this did not occur for the general community members interviewed. A stronger sense of cultural identity was found within one in-group, not with the overall community, which means the place brand did contribute to the existing social fabric of the community, just not for everyone.

Knowledge of the place brand is the main contributor to this divergence. Brand committee members strengthened their cultural identity, and pride therein, because they facilitated the research, and knew the results. This showed that the balance between nature and community was the most unique identity that differentiated Grand Rapids from surrounding communities. This knowledge contributed to the brand committee's

pride within their cultural identity. Non-brand committee residents viewed the brand as un-unique, not illustrating any of the special qualities of the community. This added confusion and frustration in the place brand. Ultimately, the place brand was not adopted into the cultural narrative of the overall community and did not contribute to widespread cultural involution.

#### *Future Research*

To build upon this research, it would be prudent to conduct another case study in a community that used a different model of community development. By doing so, the relationship between place branding, social capital and cultural involution could be further explored.

## CHAPTER VII

### CONCLUSION

Place branding is a rapidly growing practice in communities worldwide, but little is known about how residents perceive and interact with a place brand. This study sought to determine whether a place brand could build social capital among community members. Since place branding strives to uncover shared characteristics that residents identify with, it was the purpose of this study to see if inter-community relationships can be strengthened as a result of this process. Because of the lack of available academic resources and the potential community benefits, I chose to study whether or not place branding could build or strengthen social capital among community members.

A case study was conducted in Grand Rapids, Minnesota. Through interviews, I found that Grand Rapids was perceived as having close, loyal networks that had shared cultural traits different from surrounding communities. Grand Rapids is perceived as a hub of the region, where innovative ideas are born.

It was found that the model of community development selected for the branding project influenced the decision-making process. Through the technical assistance model, the community's traditional leaders led the project. A shared representation was created that strengthened bonding social capital among brand committee members. Members of the branding committee showed high levels of trust and loyalty in the brand, while the

average community member, regardless of their socio-economic, racial or gender status, did not show trust or loyalty in the brand. By having decision-making power, those close to the brand strengthened the relationships between themselves by coming to a relative consensus on the identity to be represented.

To move this research forward, it would be important to conduct a case study in a community that utilized another model of community development to carry out the branding process. Once completed, it could be juxtaposed against this research to better understand the relationship between approach, social capital and cultural involution.



## CHAPTER VIII

### EPILOGUE

It was an intentional decision to conduct my thesis research in my hometown. By studying my own community, I assumed an added level of complexity not experienced by researchers who distance themselves from the subject of their inquiry. Understanding my position within the context of this study was both challenging, in that I had to be reflexive about my involvement, and rewarding because I can add to my community's knowledge by sharing my findings directly with my community. This epilogue will discuss both the challenges and benefits of studying my home community.

#### *Reflexivity and the Challenges that Come with Studying One's Own Community*

When I first learned of the brand, I was working for a major brand steerer in the community. My position at this organization influenced my perceptions of the brand because I knew more about the brand process than the everyday Grand Rapids resident. My knowledge of the brand led to my inquiry and subsequently shaped my research questions.

When I began conducting my research, I interviewed people I knew personally, people I was familiar with and people I had never met. These pre-existing relationships influenced the tone and content relayed in each interview because the relational dynamics between each interviewee and myself differed.

While some researchers see this type of involvement as being a counter to objectivity, it's my position that no researcher can be purely objective. Every researcher approaches their object of inquiry from a pre-existing perspective. This perspective includes the academic paradigm they adhere to, as well as the knowledge they have absorbed prior to conducting their research.

My dual role as community member and researcher was simply another frame in which to approach my inquiry. While diverging from the dominant positivist paradigm where objectivity is a central concern, studying one's own community combines research and action and building a space where a scholar can put their work to use. This idea is the foundation of public scholarship.

#### *Benefits of Public Scholarship*

Palmer (1987) argues that “objectivism is essentially anticomunal” and a scholar cannot effect positive change if they withdraw from the research context (p. 3). I chose my community intentionally so that I could be a public scholar and contribute my knowledge to benefit the community. By approaching my inquiry from the perspective of public scholarship, I engaged members of the community in research that will be relayed back to their community – furthering both civic and scholarly knowledge production.

I intend to do this by creating a summarized version of this thesis that will be available to the public. I will also present my findings to the existing brand committee. I will work with them to determine whether or not they would be interested in discussing alternative ways to engage the public in brand conversations in the future.

In addition, I will utilize the findings of this study to shape the work I carry out as the Community Marketing Coordinator in Grand Rapids, Minnesota and the greater Itasca County area. In this position, I am working with businesses, nonprofits, and local governments to find ways to communicate with a common voice, through use of our place brand. In order to involve community members in this effort, I've reached out in a multitude of ways – from personal one-on-one meetings, to the creation of an open, shared social media suite. Residents are beginning to interact with the brand because they are being asked and invited to contribute.

While this study was conducted in my hometown community, the findings are applicable for many community development endeavors. Public scholarship provides an avenue where a scholar can make a difference in the population of their study, but can also further the scholarly knowledge in a particular field. Objectivity may not be of chief concern, but this does not de-legitimize the knowledge generated and its overall benefit to the field of study.

## REFERENCES

- Aitken, R. & Campelo, A. (2011). The Four Rs of Place Branding. *Journal of Marketing Management*, 27 (9-10), p. 913 – 933.
- Atkinson, R. & Flint, J. (2001). Accessing Hidden and Hard-to-Reach Populations: Snowball Research Strategies. *Social Research Update*, 33. Retrieved from <http://sru.soc.surrey.ac.uk/SRU33.pdf>.
- Baker, M. & Cameron, E. (2007). Critical Success Factors in Destination Marketing. *Tourism and Hospitality Research*, 8(2), p. 79-97.
- Besculides, A., Lee, M. & McCormick, P. (2002). Residents' Perceptions of the Cultural Benefits of Tourism. *Annals of Tourism Research*, 29 (2), p. 303-319.  
[http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/S0160-7383\(01\)00066-4](http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/S0160-7383(01)00066-4).
- Brown, A (2011). Iron Range History. Minnesota Discovery Center. Retrieved April 2013 from <http://mndiscoverycenter.com/iron-range-history>.
- Craig, R. & Muller, H. (Eds.). (2007). *Theorizing Communication: Readings Across Traditions*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc.
- Flora, C. B. & Flora, J. L. (2008). *Rural Communities: Legacy and Change*. Philadelphia, PA: Westview Press.

- Graham, Mason & Newman. (2009). Historic Environment, Sense of Place, and Social Capital. *International Centre for Cultural and Heritage Studies*.  
[http://eprints.soton.ac.uk/182155/1/Historic\\_Environment,\\_Sense\\_of\\_Place\\_and\\_Social\\_Capital\\_Lit\\_Review.pdf](http://eprints.soton.ac.uk/182155/1/Historic_Environment,_Sense_of_Place_and_Social_Capital_Lit_Review.pdf).
- Grand Rapids Economic Development Authority. (2013). "Demographics." Retrieved from <http://www.grandrapidseda.com/index.php/Demographics/population-a-projections.html>.
- Hankinson, G. (2004). Relational network brands: Towards a conceptual model of place brands. *Journal of Vacation Marketing*, 10 (2), p. 109-121. Retrieved from 10.1177/135676670401000202.
- Kaplan, M., Yurt, O., Guneri, B., & Kurtulus, K. (2008). Branding Place: Applying Brand Personality Concept to Cities. *European Journal of Marketing*, 44 (9/10), p. 1286-1304
- Kavaratzis, M. & Ashworth, G.J. (2005). City Branding: An Effective Assertion of Identity or a Transitory Marketing Trick. *Journal of Economic and Social Geography*, 96 (5), p. 506-514. Retrieved from 10.1111/j.1467-9663.2005.00482.
- Kavaratzis, M. (2005). Place Branding: A Review of Trends and Conceptual Models. *The Marketing Review*, 5, p. 329-342.
- Keller, K. (2003). Brand Syntheses: The Multidimensionality of Brand Knowledge. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 29, p. 595-600

- Keller, K. (2003). *Strategic Brand Management: Building, Measuring, and Managing Brand Equity*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc.
- Kellner, D. (2002). The Frankfurt School and British Cultural Studies: The Missed Articulation. In J. Nealon, J. & C. Irr (Eds.), *Rethinking the Frankfurt School: Alternative Legacies of Cultural Critique*. Retrieved from [http://books.google.com/books?hl=en&lr=&id=XSL3gr4m\\_k8C&oi=fnd&pg=PA31&dq](http://books.google.com/books?hl=en&lr=&id=XSL3gr4m_k8C&oi=fnd&pg=PA31&dq).
- Levine, A. (2008). The Calf Rarely Brands Itself. *Economic Development Journal*, 7(1), p. 5-9.
- Manzo, L. & Perkins, D. (2006). Finding Common Ground: The Importance of Place Attachment to Community Participation and Planning. *Journal of Planning Literature*, 20 (4), p. 335-350.
- Medway, D. & Warnaby, G. (2008). Alternative perspectives on marketing and the place brand. *European Journal of Marketing*, 42, p. 641-653.
- Minnesota Department of Employment and Economic Development. (2010). Grand Rapids Community Report. Retrieved April 2013 from [https://www.positivelyminnesota.com/Business/Locating\\_in\\_Minnesota/Shovel\\_Ready\\_Certified\\_Sites/Gr\\_Rapids\\_Shovel\\_Ready\\_Documents/Gr\\_Rapids\\_DEED\\_Community\\_Profile.pdf](https://www.positivelyminnesota.com/Business/Locating_in_Minnesota/Shovel_Ready_Certified_Sites/Gr_Rapids_Shovel_Ready_Documents/Gr_Rapids_DEED_Community_Profile.pdf)
- Palmer, P. (1987). *Community, Conflict, and Ways of Knowing*. Change Magazine. Retrieved from <http://www.couragerenewal.org/parker/writings>.

- Patulny, RV & Svendsen, GL. (2007). The Social Capital Grid: Bonding, Bridging, Qualitative, Quantitative. *International Journal of Sociology and Social Policy*, 27 (1/2), p. 32-51.
- Picard, M. & Wood, R. (1997) *Tourism, Ethnicity, and the State in Asian and Pacific Societies*. United States of America: University of Hawaii Press. Retrieved from <http://books.google.com/books?hl=en&lr=&id=39p0VTOdc8C&oi=fnd&pg=PR7&dq=%22is+omnipresent+within+discourse+about+tourism%22&ots=ohhbixHnh&sig=WZkWuYoA4oQFkBp7Q8n8MCzIvdQ#v=onepage&q=%22is%20omnipresent%20within%20discourse%20about%20tourism%22&f=false>.
- Portes, A. (2000). The Two Meanings of Social Capital. *Sociological Forum*, 15(1), p. 1-12.
- Shepherd, R. (2002). Commodification, Culture and Tourism, *Tourist Studies*, 2 (2), p. 183-201. Retrieved from 10.1177/146879702761936653.
- Sheth & Parvatiyar (1995). The Evolution of Relationship Marketing. *International Business Review*, 4(4), p. 397 – 418.
- Stronza, A. (2002). Anthropology of Tourism: Forging New Ground for Ecotourism and Other Alternatives. *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 30, p. 261-283. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3069217>.
- Towner, J. (1985). The Grand Tour: A key phase in the history of tourism. *Annals of Tourism Research*, 12 (3), p. 297-333.

- Uslaner, E. (2001). *The Moral Foundations of Trust*. United Kingdom: University Press, Cambridge. Retrieved from <http://books.google.com/books?hl=en&lr=&id=MH3KWFd4fOMC&oi=fnd&pg=PP1&dq=particularized+vs+generalized+trust&ots=3fAH4HeN8b&sig=MQaywEY5VIdszpIlpVnwXyu4T8s#v=onepage&q=particularized%20vs%20generalized%20trust&f=false>
- Virgo, B & de Chernatony, L. (2005). Delphic Brand Visioning to Align Stakeholder Buy-in to the City of Birmingham Brand. *Brand Management*, 13(6), p. 379-392.
- Walton, K. (2005). *Histories of Tourism: Representation, Identity and Conflict*. New York: Channel View Publications. Available from [http://books.google.com/books?hl=en&lr=&id=i54UEQoLjcAC&oi=fnd&pg=PR7&dq=Walton+2005+tourism&ots=xhFEEvEBoS&sig=\\_bFKgKNz\\_k4YqyxdR7hd3lncEtI#v=onepage&q=Walton%202005%20tourism&f=false](http://books.google.com/books?hl=en&lr=&id=i54UEQoLjcAC&oi=fnd&pg=PR7&dq=Walton+2005+tourism&ots=xhFEEvEBoS&sig=_bFKgKNz_k4YqyxdR7hd3lncEtI#v=onepage&q=Walton%202005%20tourism&f=false).