

## Article

# Repositioning the City Brand in the Face of the Energy and Ecological Transition Paradigm

Manuel Escourido-Calvo <sup>1</sup>, Antonio Javier Prado-Domínguez <sup>2</sup>, Valentín Alejandro-Martínez <sup>1</sup>  
and Federico Martín-Bermúdez <sup>2,\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup> iMARKA Research Group, Department of Business, University of A Coruña, 15071 A Coruña, Spain; manuel.escourido@udc.es (M.E.-C.); valentin.martinez@udc.es (V.A.-M.)

<sup>2</sup> Department of Economics, University of A Coruña, 15071 A Coruña, Spain; ajaprado@udc.es

\* Correspondence: federico.martin@udc.es

**Abstract:** This article presents a case study on the influence of energy and ecological transition on a city's brand perception. Focusing on As Pontes, Spain, the study reveals how this socio-economic paradigm shift generates uncertainty, undesired expectations, and a negative self-image of the city. The objective is to reposition the city brand in alignment with the new paradigm. A literature review and Delphi technique were employed to validate the paradigm shift and anticipate its consequences. Analysis of a survey using Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) shows a lack of awareness and high uncertainty among the local population. Another Delphi panel suggests cities to emulate and attributes for the city's brand repositioning. Repositioning aims to adapt to the new sustainability model, enhance competitiveness, and restore pride and belonging within the global context of cities. This study underscores the importance of understanding the challenges and opportunities during the energy and ecological transition for a city's identity and governance, providing guidance for effective brand repositioning strategies.

**Keywords:** city marketing; city brand; positioning; paradigm shift; governance; sustainability



check for updates

**Citation:** Escourido-Calvo, M.; Prado-Domínguez, A.J.; Alejandro-Martínez, V.; Martín-Bermúdez, F. Repositioning the City Brand in the Face of the Energy and Ecological Transition Paradigm. *Sustainability* **2023**, *15*, 10922. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su151410922>

Academic Editor: Maria Rosa Trovato

Received: 25 May 2023

Revised: 7 July 2023

Accepted: 10 July 2023

Published: 12 July 2023



**Copyright:** © 2023 by the authors. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

## 1. Introduction

The economic activity of As Pontes (Spain) has been based, since 1976, on the thermal generation of electricity with local coal (open-pit lignite mine). In 2007, it began to use imported coal to comply with the Kyoto Protocol by reducing CO<sub>2</sub> emissions. This process involved the closure of the open pit mine, which was the city's main source of employment. The social and economic impact was minimized with early retirement through public funds. At the same time, a reindustrialization process with public funds was conducted by different administrations. However, these initiatives could not prevent the economic, industrial and demographic decline of the city. The lack of information and communication, as well as the absence of participatory processes in the rethinking of the city, increased to uncertainty about the future. Mistrust brought about negative expectations that deteriorated the sense of belonging and fostered a negative self-image among the citizens [1]. This process triggered the degradation of the city brand. The relevance of this process stems from the fact that the city brand [2] serves to identify and differentiate, in an attractive way, the city from its competitors. Its symbolic, intangible and complex dimension [3] translates into a social and economic benefit, which comes from the relationship between the city and its stakeholders.

This deterioration of the city's brand and governance [4] was impacted by the initial shock of the closing of the local mine and worsened by the announcement of the closure of the thermal power plant. This was set up by the energy and ecological transition process initiated by the national government. This event subjected the city to different impacts with the main challenge of facing an unknown socioeconomic model required by the new paradigm and rooted in very different bases that citizens did not understand.

The new paradigm requires the use of public and city marketing [5] and its participatory processes [6]: Firstly, to detect the possible inadequacy of the city brand and its positioning to the paradigm shift. Secondly, to identify those brand attributes [7] whose assessment has deteriorated. Thirdly, to select the most suitable for the new situation. In a hyper-competitive environment, where cities seek to attract investments, companies, visitors, tourists, administrations and new residents, the battle is not between public products and services, but between the perceptions that these target audiences have in their minds [8], which are concentrated or synthesized in the city brand and its positioning.

## 2. Review of the Concept of Positioning a City Brand

The term “positioning” is used in marketing to define the act of designing an offer and image intended to occupy a place in the mind of the target audience [9]. In this case, it means that a city must create a position for itself in the minds of its target audiences. For that, it must take into account not only its strengths and weaknesses, but also those of its competitors. It refers, therefore, to the perception that the public may have of the city brand [10], which is usually a social synthesizer of the city’s characteristics.

How does a city and/or its brand position itself? The positioning strategy shapes the competitive place that the city desires and tries to make it more attractive before the rest of the competing cities [11] in the eyes of its target audiences. With this strategy, the city distinguishes and highlights the aspects and advantages that differentiate it from other cities. Positioning concentrates on the “sales proposition”, that will define the necessary operational marketing to develop and differentiate the city from others [12]. This strategy involves [13], therefore, identifying possible competitive advantages, choosing the most appropriate according [14] to the objectives proposed in the marketing plan as a result of the diagnosis and the vision of the city’s managers, and to finally communicate its position to the market.

The city’s positioning strategy can adopt two different objectives:

- a. Positioning based on the city’s customers. Strategy based on making interventions that create and reinforce those aspects that residents and other target audiences want.
- b. Positioning based on competition. Interprets and positions the city brand in relation to the set of relevant characteristics that other cities may or may not possess.

On the other hand, repositioning a brand consists of positively readjusting the value proposition (in the process of deterioration) and adapting the brand to the desired perceptions of its target audiences. In the case of a city brand, it starts with the residents who are to recover the pride and sense of belonging and to convert them into “evangelists” of the new positioning [15]. It is a matter of modifying the existing perceptions in the minds of the city’s target audiences with respect to its brand. It is not a matter of drastic changing the image, but of adapting its meaning and making it positive and attractive compared to the other options available to the city’s different stakeholders and “customers”.

The literature review helped us analyze the positioning and repositioning of city brands that are considered success stories. The specific cases of Barcelona and Bilbao in Spain, Medellín in Colombia, The Hague in the Netherlands, New York in the United States and Dubai and Abu Dhabi have been analyzed [15]. In addition, successful and applicable trends have been studied such as the “participatory city” [16], the “lean city” [17], the “sustainable city” [18], the “learning city” [19], the “cultural city” [20] and the “smart city” [21].

The following conclusions can be drawn from the above analysis:

- a. In order to create and strengthen a city brand, a local identity must be built with the capacity to be globally communicated. Based on a vision and local values that provide authenticity, a differentiated positioning on the map of relevant cities must be sought. As in the present case study, medium-sized cities, being caught in the uncertainty and possibilities to both grow or decline, can entirely benefit from city branding to foster their urban development [22].

- b. Socio-economic paradigm shifts—as the case of Bilbao, Medellín and As Pontes—imply a transformation at the cultural level. The attraction of the city’s target public requires a new sustainable economic model [23]. It should be capable of attracting companies, investors and public administrations, which means attracting talent in the form of new residents.
- c. For the development of the city brand, the alignment of strategies and objectives must start with internal audiences (current residents, visitors, companies, local administration), from which it will be extended to external audiences (potential residents, companies, investors, tourists, administrations). At this point, it should be noted that one of the biggest challenges is to recover efficient and effective governance [24], in terms of interaction between the public sector, civil society and the economy to address situations of negative self-image among residents [1].
- d. The city brand positioning process studies the image of the city and compares it with the perceptions it has among its target audiences and with the image and perceptions of competing cities. Based on this analysis, it is possible to determine if it is necessary to reaffirm the city’s current positioning or to reposition the city.
- e. If the conclusion is the need for a repositioning of the city brand, it is necessary to select those variables, attributes and perceptions that serve as an anchor or pivot. From them, new perceptions can be acquired or adapted to reposition the brand in the face of competition, the process of change and moments of crisis, improving its competitive position (improving the attractiveness of the city).

### 3. Methodology

This analysis employed a mixed methodology that combined various research approaches to address the study’s objective. Firstly, an extensive literature review was conducted to develop a robust understanding of the topic of energy and ecological transition and its impact on cities and their brands.

Next, the Delphi technique was employed with representatives from the local community. This technique is suitable for systematically gathering expert opinions and knowledge through rounds of structured questions. In this case, it was used to ascertain the existence of the paradigm shift and anticipate some of its consequences in the specific context of As Pontes, Spain.

Subsequently, a Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) analysis was performed using the data collected from a survey administered to the local population. SEM analysis is a statistical technique that allows for the examination of relationships between latent variables through structural models. In this study, it was used to analyze the level of awareness and uncertainty regarding the paradigm shift within the community.

Finally, another Delphi panel consisting of relevant citizens and successful professionals associated with the locality was convened. This panel was utilized to obtain practical insights and recommendations on how to reposition the city brand in the context of energy and ecological transition. Examples of cities to emulate and key attributes that can serve as the foundation for the city brand’s repositioning strategy are collected.

In sum, the study employed a methodology that combines a literature review, the Delphi technique with representatives from the local community, SEM analysis, and an additional Delphi panel. This combination of qualitative and quantitative approaches allows for a comprehensive and holistic understanding of the impact of energy and ecological transition on the concept of a city and its brand, as well as the identification of effective repositioning strategies to adapt to the new paradigm.

#### 3.1. Delphi 1 Panel

On the one hand, it was necessary to create a first panel to work with using the Delphi methodology (a questionnaire and 3 circulations of the same, until the final consensus was reached). This first panel (January 2021) was made up of 21 representatives of the different

entities and organizations that carry out their activities in the city and that represent the different interest groups in all their aspects: politics, business, trade unions and associations.

The main conclusions obtained from this panel, in terms of the city's situation in the face of the new socio-economic paradigm shift and the city brand and its positioning (past and desired future), are shown below (Tables 1 and 2). The contribution of cities that can serve as an example of a successful brand strategy has also been requested.

**Table 1.** Delphi 1 panel. Conclusions on Future Socio-Economic Development of the City.

| Scope   | Panel 1  |
|---|--|
| Perception and image of the city.                   | Economic and industrial decline, improvisation, depopulation, ageing and waste of resources.   |
| Prioritization of target audiences in the city.     | 1. Enterprises (job creation).<br>2. Investors.<br>3. Current residents (maintenance of standard of living).<br>4. New residents (stop demographic decline).<br>5. Visitors.<br>6. Tourists (potential of the lake-reservoirs-Fragas do Eume axis).<br>7. Administrations. |
| Future social and economic development of the city. | Industrial city and specialization in services in the knowledge economy. Search for a sustainable economic model.  |
| City resources for the future.                      | Artificial lake (and two reservoirs), waste dump and human capital as the main ones. Location, Fragas do Eume and standard of living (in decline) as secondary.  |

Source: Own elaboration.

**Table 2.** Conclusions of Delphi Panel 1 on Perceptions of the City Brand <sup>1</sup>.

| Scope   | Brands   | Comparison, Partnerships and Perceptions   |
|---|--|--|
| Identification of the city brand with other brands. | Volkswagen Golf, Audi 80, Seat 124, Fiat, Alfa Romeo, old Ferrari . . .  | Successful and avant-garde models of yesteryear, but today they are obsolete, with insufficient features for today's world.<br>Disconnection of the city from its target audiences.  |
| Identification with aspirational brands.            | Seat Leon, Honda Prius, Mercedes Benz a-Class, BMW 1 Series, Tesla.  | More functional and efficient brands and models with a good price/performance ratio, low fuel consumption, few breakdowns, agile, reliable and equipped with the latest technologies.  |
| Identification of city models to imitate.           | By proximity: Arteixo, Narón, Vilalba and Oleiros.<br>Generically: Nordic cities and cities with a successful recovery process: Bilbao, Vitoria, Logroño and Pontevedra. | Nearby municipalities with medium-high quality of life, high self-image and/or sense of pride in belonging and socio-economically oriented towards value-added services.<br>Cases of cities with high quality of life and sustainable economies that have also enhanced their attractiveness to all types of target audiences. |

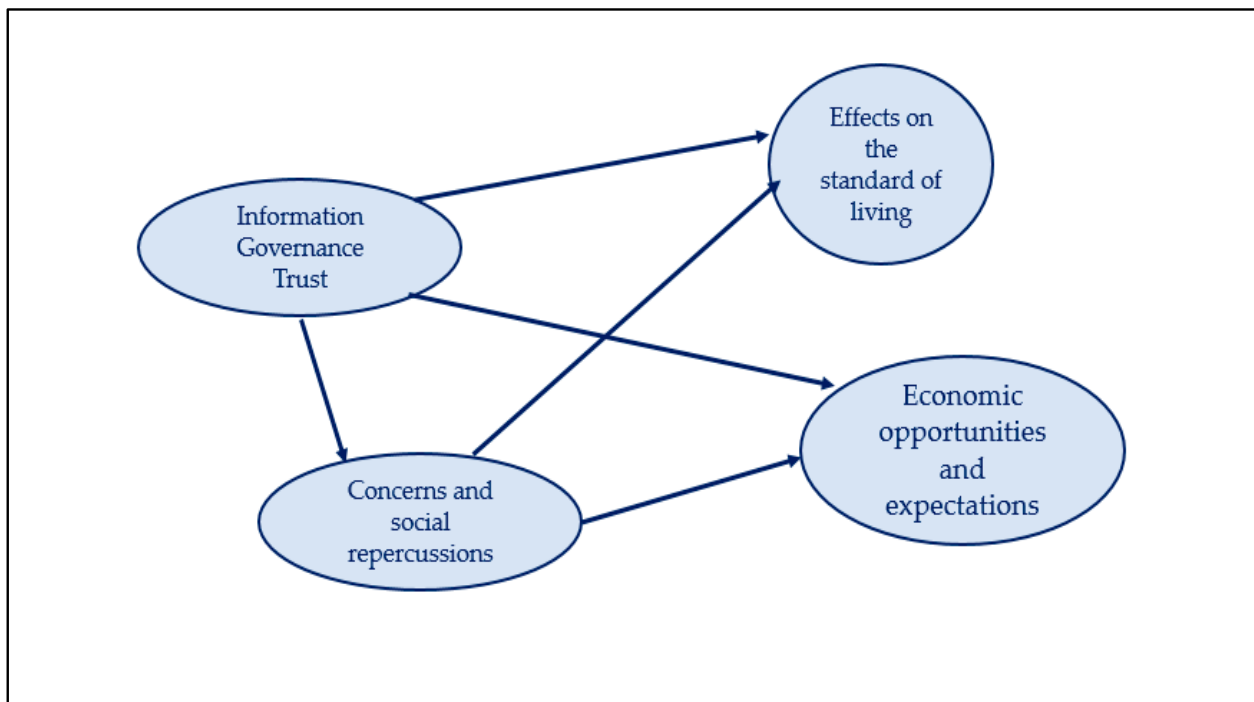
Source: Own elaboration. <sup>1</sup> In this case, given the variability of profiles, we opted for the automobile sector, which is widely known throughout society, to establish comparisons, concept associations and evaluation of perceptions.

### 3.2. Population Survey

To confirm and consolidate the previous results, the next phase of the research involved a survey of the population to identify the evolution of residents' perceptions of the city brand: what it meant and means to live in their city and the value that this brand adds to their lives. The change in the socio-economic paradigm and the uncertainty about it made it necessary to identify what attributes, positive and negative, the city brand possessed and how they have evolved (and whether its deterioration is confirmed). On the other hand, there was the objective of specifying what attributes are desired to recover the value of the brand and face the current situation generating positive expectations.

#### 3.2.1. The SEM Model

Based on the calculation of the population linked to As Pontes [25], the first quarter of 2021, a sample of 401 individuals was constructed, with representation by age (only from 18 years) and gender, to whom the questionnaire was designed. A SEM analysis was used to obtain the main characteristics of the As Pontes city brand and its evolution (in terms of perception). By applying a structural equation model (SEM, Structural Equation Model), the causal relationships between four types of factors (latent variables or constructs, which are unobservable variables) were determined, which have been called, respectively: "Information/ Governance/Trust", "Social concerns and repercussions", "Effects on the standard of living", and "Economic opportunities and expectations". All are variables whose assessment and expectations are synthesized in the concept of city brand [26] (Figure 1).



**Figure 1.** Structural Model. Source: Own elaboration.

The model had 17 observable variables (indicators), 24 unobservable variables (four factors, 17 indicator error terms and 3 endogenous factor error terms); 21 variables were exogenous (the first factor and all error terms) and 20 were endogenous (the 17 indicators plus all factors except the first factor) (Figure 2).

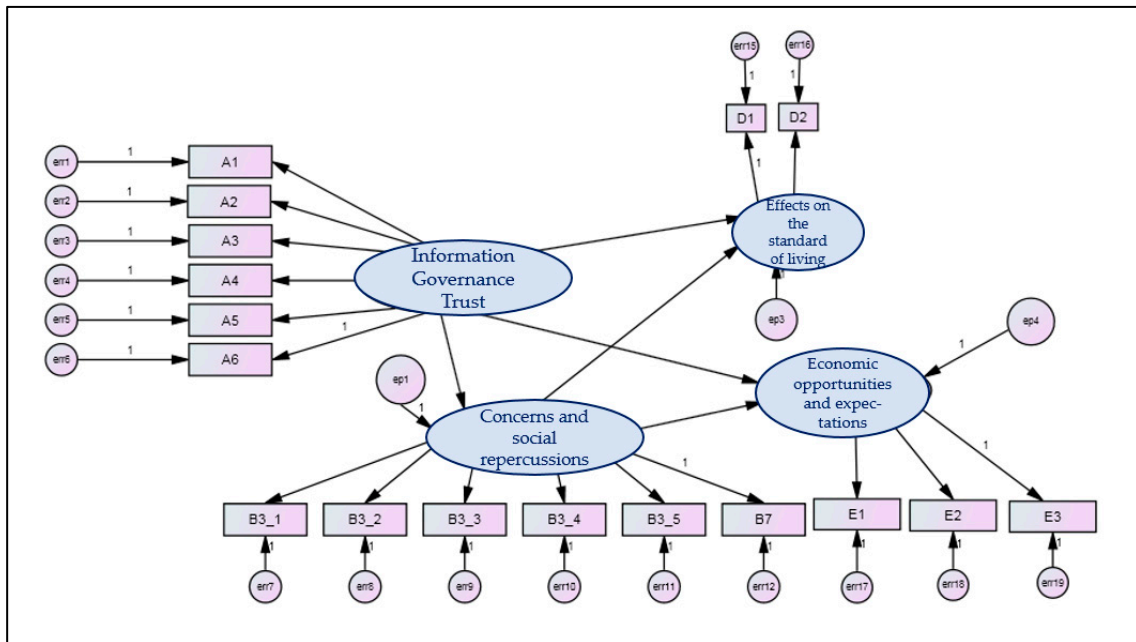


Figure 2. Complete SEM Model. Source: Own elaboration.

The estimation method used was that of maximum likelihood, ensuring multivariate normality with Mardia’s test, [kurtosis 171.3374, r.c. 67.4960; critical value =  $p \times (p + 2) = 17 \times 19 = 323$ , where  $p$  is the number of indicators of the model], achieving a solution for which the chi-squared statistic is equal to 315.6306, a  $p$ -value (for 96 degrees of freedom) of less than 0.001 (Figure 3).

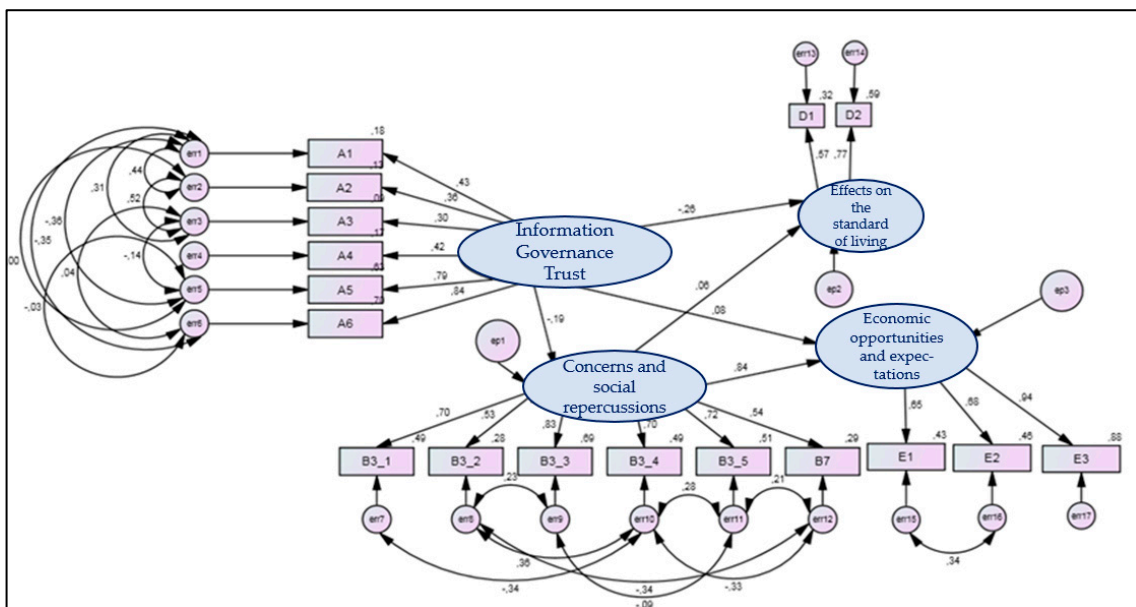


Figure 3. Estimated SEM model. Source: Own elaboration.

Regarding the goodness of fit of the estimated model, applying the criteria used by Liu et al. [27], it can be said that the fit is acceptable: chi-square/g.l. 3, GFI = 0.9192 and RMSEA = 0.0756 (Tables 3 and 4).

**Table 3.** Factors and Indicators.

| Factor                                  | Cronbach's Alpha ( $\alpha$ ) | Items | Factor Loadings ( $\lambda$ ) |
|---|-------------------------------|-------|-------------------------------|
| Information/Governance/Trust            | 0.7232                        | A1    | 0.4268                        |
|   |                               | A2    | 0.3584                        |
|   |                               | A3    | 0.2956                        |
|   |                               | A4    | 0.4178                        |
|   |                               | A5    | 0.7920                        |
|   |                               | A6    | 0.8379                        |
| Social concerns and impacts             | 0.8143                        | B3_1  | 0.7020                        |
|   |                               | B3_2  | 0.5319                        |
|   |                               | B3_3  | 0.8310                        |
|   |                               | B3_4  | 0.7001                        |
|   |                               | B3_5  | 0.7151                        |
|   |                               | B7    | 0.5399                        |
| Effects on living standards             | 0.5970                        | D1 D2 | 0.7683<br>0.5671              |
| Economic opportunities and expectations | 0.8345                        | E1    | 0.6534                        |
|   |                               | E2    | 0.6801                        |
|   |                               | E3    | 0.9381                        |

Source: Own elaboration.

**Table 4.** Regression Coefficients (standardized) between Factors.

|                                   |   |   | Coef.   | p-Value | Hypothesis Testing         |
|-----------------------------------|---|---|---------|---------|----------------------------|
| Information/Governance/Trust      | → | Concerns and social repercussions       | −0.1926 | 0.0063  | H1 is not rejected at 1%.  |
| Information/Governance/Trust      | → | Effects on living standards             | −0.2596 | 0.0143  | H2 is not rejected at 5%.  |
| Information/Governance/Trust      | → | Opportunities and economic expectations | 0.0769  | 0.0756  | H3 is not rejected at 10%. |
| Concerns and social repercussions | → | Effects on living standards             | 0.0576  | 0.3941  | H4 is rejected             |
| Concerns and social repercussions | → | Opportunities and economic expectations | 0.8363  | <0.001  | H4 is not rejected at 1%.  |

Source: Own elaboration.

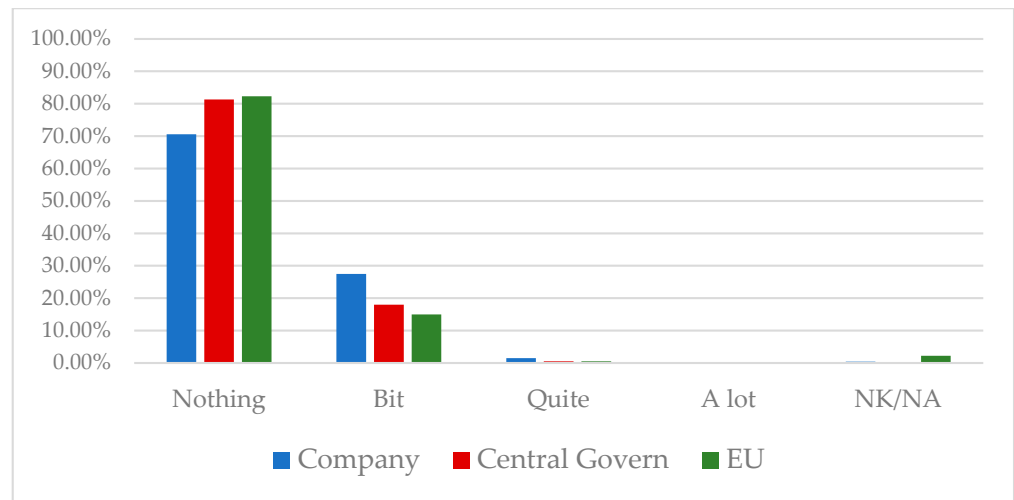
### 3.2.2. Analysis of the Results of the Population Survey (First Quarter of 2021)

Among the individuals interviewed, 96.01% were residents of As Pontes and 43.14% worked in the same municipality, while the remaining 56.86% worked in different communities.

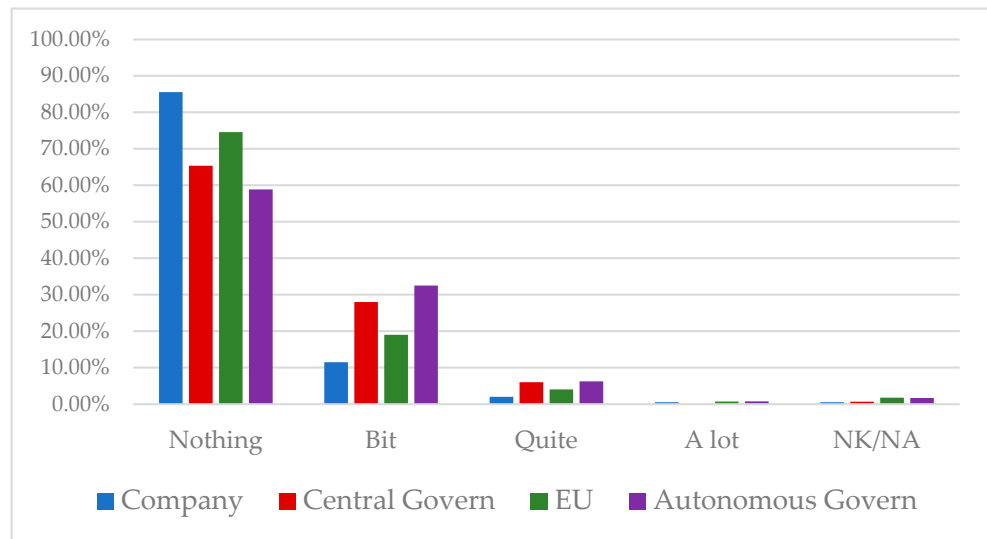
The first objective was to identify the degree of information that citizens have about the current decarbonization process. An additional objective was to review the degree of trust placed in the different participants involved in this process to provide solutions that minimize its social and economic impact.

As shown (Figure 4), the residents of As Pontes show a high degree of misinformation about the decarbonization process, especially from the European Union (82.29%) and the central government (81.30%). This situation influences the high degree of mistrust they show about the possibilities of solutions and the agents that would provide them.

A state of pessimism is reflected, where no solutions are expected from the company that owns the thermal power plant (85.04%) and a slight hope is placed in autonomous govern of Xunta de Galicia (although 58.85% respond “nothing” to this administration) and less so in the case of the central government and the European Union (Figure 5). In this way, the city brand is affected by the construction of negative expectations of the target public regarding the change in the socio-economic paradigm and its possible consequences.



**Figure 4.** Degree of information perceived by the interviewees, according to main source of information. Source: Own elaboration.



**Figure 5.** Level of confidence in the possibility of providing solutions to the paradigm shift, by actor involved. Source: Own elaboration.

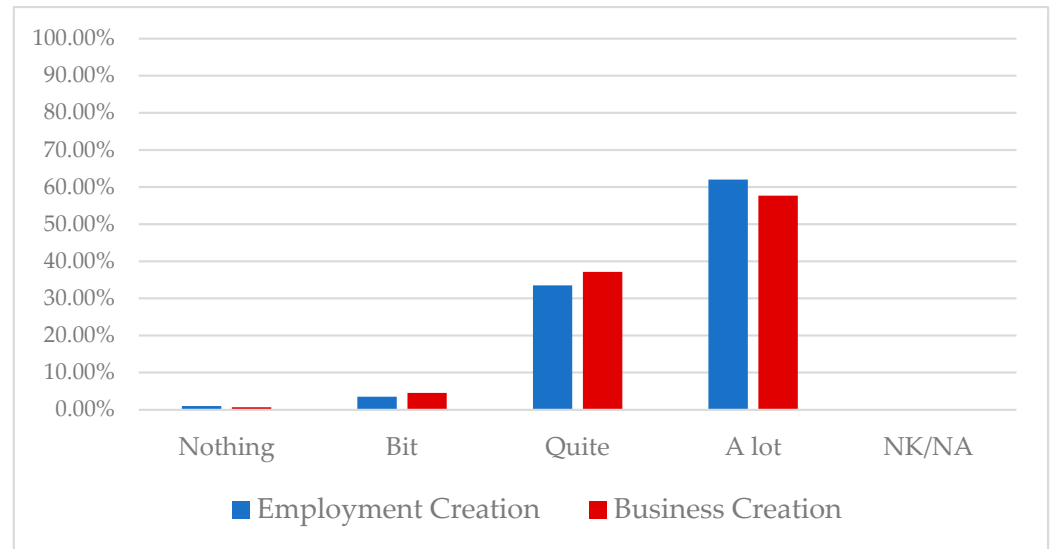
The fact is that the change of model creates a high level of uncertainty among a population accustomed to a stable industrial monoculture (thermal power plant—lignite mine) for decades. In fact, 98% of the population considers that the contribution of the thermal power plant activity to the socio-economic and employment boost in the municipality has been remarkable (answers “quite a lot” and “a lot”) (Figure 6).

On the other hand, 91.52% of respondents believe that the activity of the thermal power plant has benefited the quality of municipal services and a large majority (84.29%) believe that it has had little or no negative social impact. This identifies a time before the current change, where employment, economy, services, positive expectations, etc., surrounded a strongly positioned city brand.

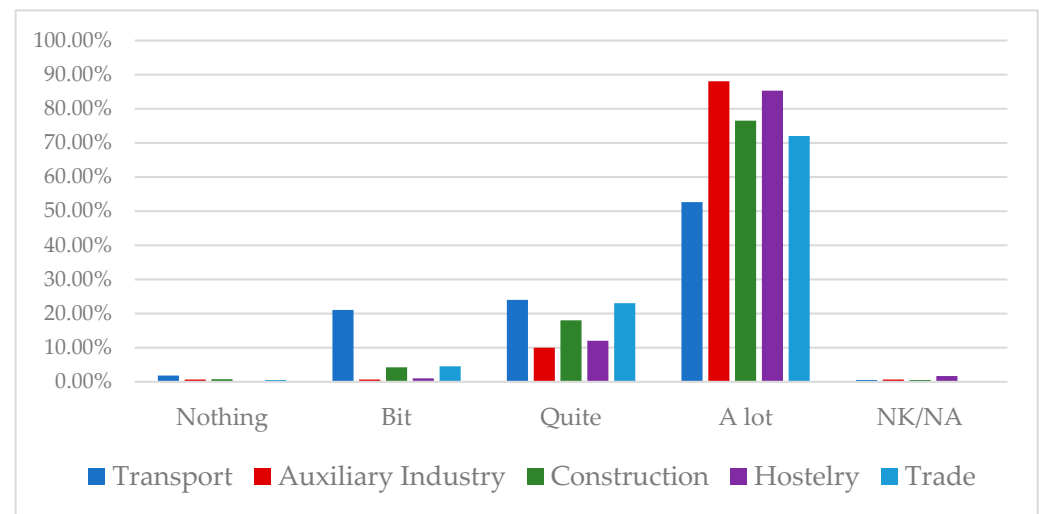
Regarding the impact of the operation of the thermal power plant on different sectors of activity (Figure 7), the population considers that the most affected would be, in the first place, the auxiliary industry (88.03% of respondents answered “Very much” in this case), followed closely by the hotel and catering industry (85.29%). The least affected would be transport (52.62%). Practically all respondents (99.25%) consider that the closure of the plant will lead to a reduction in municipal revenues and a decline in the quality of



services. These aspects, representative of the generation of negative expectations, determine a process of deterioration of the city brand, as it loses the attributes that had made it strong in the past.

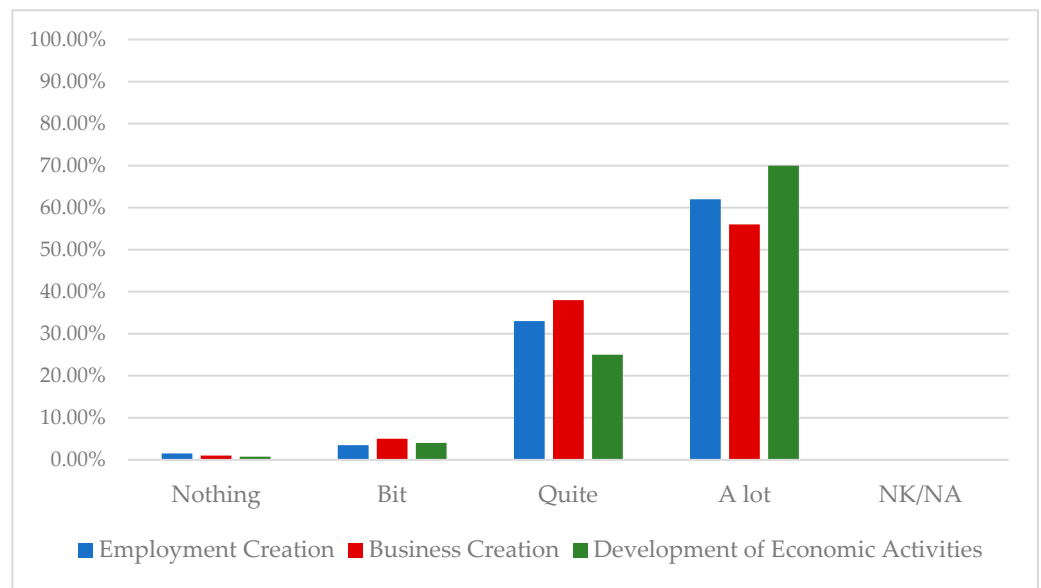


**Figure 6.** Contribution of the thermal power plant's activity to development socio-economic development of As Pontes. Source: Own elaboration.

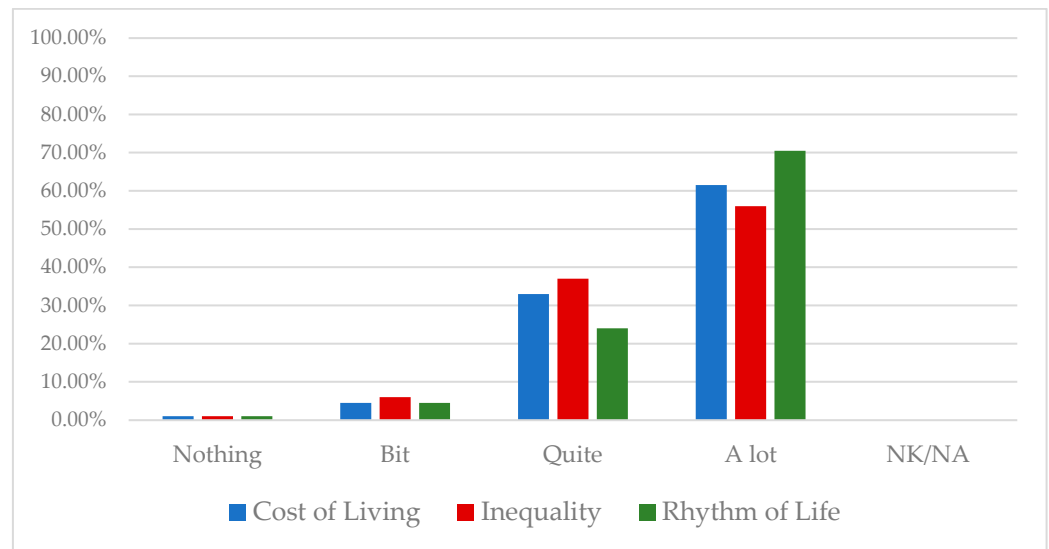


**Figure 7.** Sectoral impact of the As Pontes thermal power plant and its possible closure. Source: Own elaboration.

The majority of respondents (95.02%) believe that the thermal power plant has improved public services in As Pontes since it started operating and has contributed to the creation of new employment opportunities (95.52%) and new businesses (94.52%), as well as to the development of economic activities in the area of As Pontes (Figure 8). However, at the same time, they highlight that there were some negative effects: the cost of living has risen (90.77%) and the level of inequality (80.30%). Only a minority (8.73%) felt that there had been an adverse impact on the pace of life (Figure 9).



**Figure 8.** Economic Impact of the Thermal Power Plant's Activity in Local Economic Activity. Source: Own elaboration.

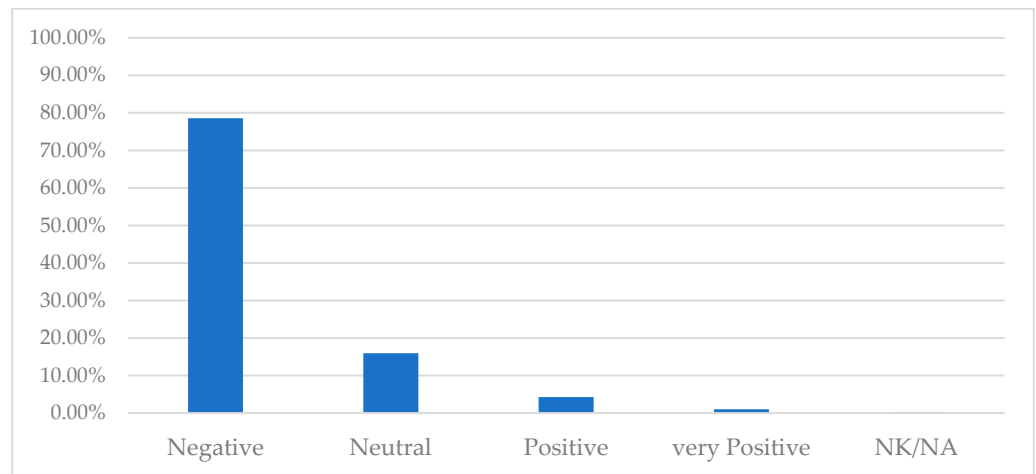


**Figure 9.** Impact of the Thermal Power Plant on the local Quality of Life. Source: Own elaboration.

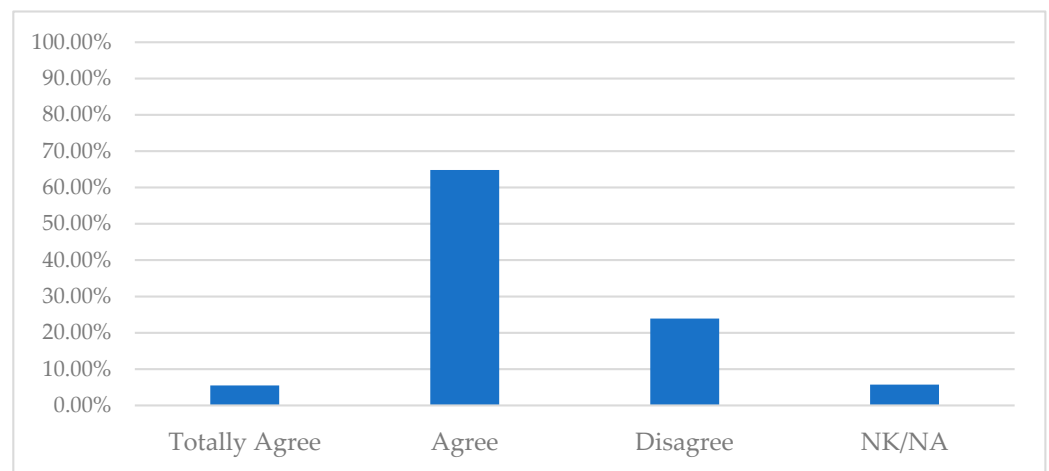
These results reinforce what has been maintained up to now: a notable deterioration of expectations, the main effect of which is the loss of value of the city brand (Figure 10). Only 5.24% of those surveyed were optimistic about the prospects for the new generations to remain living in the town. These prospects are related to the possible disappearance of the role of the thermal power station as an economic driving force and, on the other hand, to the negative effects that industrial monoculture may have caused in the town.

In view of this situation, practically all those surveyed (96.01%) are in favor, in the event of the closure of the thermal power plant, the owner company and the public authorities should encourage the installation of other substitute industries in the area. Companies that, at the same time, should comply with the basic principle, in recent years, of sustainability.

Even 70.32% of those surveyed agreed that the economic future of As Pontes should be based on a line such as "As Pontes, Naturally Industrial". This reinforces the need to reposition the city brand, with the aim of promoting innovative development and sustainable job creation, based on the use and exploitation of the region's natural resources (Figure 11).



**Figure 10.** Future Expectations in the Town. Source: Own elaboration.



**Figure 11.** Degree of Agreement with the Suggested Repositioning. Source: Own elaboration.

### 3.3. Delphi 2 Panel

The Delphi 2 panel (September 2021) was made up of 33 professionals and academics from As Pontes who, given the lack of opportunities in the city, have developed their professional careers in other places, achieving notable success and development. The selection also included the criterion of remaining in permanent contact with the socio-economic reality of the community.

In this case, given that the paradigm shift situation is already a reality and with the qualitative composition of this panel, the objective is what solutions can be provided and where to identify good practices to imitate. In addition, given these desirable solutions and attributes for the city (identification of new competitive advantages, suggested economic strategies and comparison with success stories), define whether a repositioning of the city brand is necessary.

The main conclusions obtained from the second panel, as far as the city brand and its positioning (past and desired for the future) are concerned, are shown below (Tables 5 and 6).

**Table 5.** Conclusions of the Delphi 2 Panel on Future Socio-economic Development of the City.

| Scope   | Panel 2  |
|---|--|
| Perception and image of the city.                   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Economic and industrial decline, depopulation, ageing and a depressed collective mood.</li> <li>- Need to regain a sense and pride of belonging.</li> <li>- A “past full of opportunities, resources, talent . . . and a present of decadence”.</li> </ul>  |
| Prioritization of the city’s target audiences.      | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Enterprises (job creation).</li> <li>2. Investors.</li> <li>3. Current residents (fixing population and recovering graduate talent).</li> <li>4. Administrations.</li> <li>5. New residents.</li> </ol>  |
| Future social and economic development of the city. | Sustainability-oriented city: green industry and energy, water- intensive industries, attraction of high value-added sectors (agri-food, biotechnology, wood value chain . . . ) and meeting current demographic challenges (“silver economy”).  |
| City resources for the future.                      | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Water (artificial lake and reservoirs), soil (industrial, agricultural, slag heap), nature (Fragas del Eume, Monte Caxado, Carballeira, Forgoselo, Fervenzas Somede) and forest resources.</li> <li>- People/Talent (many generations well trained to recover and relevant industrial know how).</li> </ul> |

Source: Own elaboration.

**Table 6.** Conclusions of Delphi 2 Panel on Perceptions of the City Brand <sup>1</sup>.

| Scope   | Brands                                     | Comparison, Partnerships and Perceptions   |
|---|--|--|
| Identification of the city brand with other brands. | Textile sector. Champion, Fila, Umbro.     | In the 1980s and 1990s they were young, dynamic brands with daring designs. They have faded with time, retaining only a past. They sound like another era.   |
|   | Automotive sector. Dacia.                  | Low-cost, old, outdated models that position the brand at a lower level in the sector.   |
|   | Technology sector. Nokia (old), Commodore. | They were strong, reliable and innovative brands a long time ago. They have lost much of their positioning, potential and leadership or even disappeared.  |
|   | Electricity sector. Endesa.                | A brand that has lost its meaning and importance for the current resident of As Pontes. Its lack of roots and its “flight” from this space have brought negative connotations associated with the “old industrial and mining model”. |
|   | Other sectors. Taxi.                       | Traditional sector in decline due to its inability to adapt, with more than doubtful viability.  |

Table 6. Cont.

| Scope                                     | Brands                                  | Comparison, Partnerships and Perceptions  |
|---|---|---|
| Identification with aspirational brands.  | Textile sector. Nike.                   | Constantly adapting and innovating to continue its leadership in the sector.  |
|   | Automotive sector. Volkswagen, BMW.     | Brands preferred by the market for their different attributes: design, technology, mechanics, brand and image.  |
|   | Technology sector. Nokia (new).         | It has now embarked on a process of reinvention and technological adaptation.   |
|   | Electricity sector. HolaLuz.            | Young, dynamic, sustainable, market-oriented and competitive.   |
|   | Other sectors. Uber, Cabify, BlaBlaCar. | New interpretation of a sector, a service and a brand, tightening the links between technology, convenience and market needs.   |
| Identification of city models to imitate. | Bilbao, Birmingham, Vitoria.            | A benchmark for cities that are reinventing themselves. They have reconverted economies based on heavy industrial sectors that have gone to other countries into economies based on cultural, creative, tech industries, etc. |
|   | Pontevedra, Allariz.                    | People-centered cities: mobility, sustainability, etc. Adaptation of disused facilities to new activities, coworking spaces, etc.   |
|   | Arrasate, Mondragón.                    | Localities that base their social and economic development on participation, on the enhancement of the area's resources, projects that are developed between several localities, cooperative activism, etc.                   |
|   | Ribadesaella, Arriondas.                | Villages that, based on a major event, have been able to articulate an economy that functions during the rest of the year (visitors, training centers, amateur sport, hotels . . . ).   |
|   | Loos-En-Gohell                          | The mining basin has been declared a world heritage site and its transformation has been oriented towards bio-construction and renewable energies.  |

Source: Own elaboration. <sup>1</sup> In this case, given the professional and educational level, it was decided to give freedom in terms of the choice of brands in order to establish comparisons, concept associations and evaluation of perceptions.

#### Observations:

- a. The current city brand has a strong image and positioning as an industrial enclave in decline. This model no longer generates added value (at least in the form of employment), pollutes and lacks innovation.
- b. Cities do not go bankrupt, they empty. In As Pontes, there are many trained and qualified young people who “vote with their feet”, migrating to places where the labor market demands (and rewards) their talent and skills.
- c. In the city market, As Pontes was associated with industry. For the city's internal target public, this image persists. However, nowadays, the resources that can be exploited under the requirement of sustainability are water, wind, soil (industrial and rustic/agricultural), wood and people (talent). All of them are susceptible to fit into the new economic model derived from the process of ecological transition that the city is going through.
- d. From city marketing and, above all, from positioning techniques, it is clear that “one cannot be everything to everybody”. This forces pragmatism, seeking a strategy that pivots from the recognized, but deteriorated “Industrial As Pontes”.

- e. Positioning based on tourism, culture and/or commerce lacks proper foundation. The city does not have an image associated with these activities or adequate resources. There is no comparative advantage over localities that have already achieved a positioning in this sense.

#### 4. Repositioning Proposal for the As Pontes City Brand

Nowadays, space and time variables are becoming less important (in terms of the cost of distance between territories and the benefit of the proximity of operational centers) in favor of the global interconnectivity facilitated by new technologies. However, this requires achieving a position among the territories competing for the attraction of investors and companies, for the development and arrival of talent and for the fixation of population. In this context, city management faces the challenge of constant economic and social change, derived from the evolving needs, interests and desires of the city's citizens and other target audiences [28].

The recourse to city marketing and its techniques are an opportunity to design a future flexibly and creatively for the city. This vision is not necessarily complex if conducted through an open and as wide as possible participation of all the groups involved/affected towards reasonably ambitious goals [29]. The end is the creation, communication, delivery, and exchange of value [30].

Today, the city must be competitive and offer its inhabitants educational and employment opportunities, social and economic prosperity, and the quality of life they demand, otherwise they will look for alternative locations [31]. This needs to be completed through an impactful and deliberate concentration on the city image, which is the idea that we wish to evoke in the minds of target audiences: the positioning of the city brand [32].

From the above analysis, it is clear that the positioning of As Pontes (the place it occupies in the minds of its citizens and target audiences) is that of an eminently industrial city. This position, strongly rooted, serves as a pivot to configure the competitive strategy that generates the differential offer of the city at this time of paradigm shift or model, synthesizing it in a credible way in the new positioning of the city brand.

At the same time, during the process, the following have been identified as differential resources of As Pontes: water (two reservoirs and the artificial lake), the natural environment (forest susceptible to timber exploitation, Fragas do Eume Natural Park, Forgoselo mountain, Eume river . . . ), the possibility of industrial development linked to the ecological transition and the "Green Deal" and the agro-industrial potential (especially in the slag heap, today environmentally recovered). This allows that, to the robust image of the industry, the focus on sustainability and respect for the natural environment can be added. In addition, a necessary step to enable meaningful sustainable urban development is to rethink the way in which "value" and "value creation" are being interpreted in urban development policies and city branding narratives [23].

Taking into account all of the above, the positioning (or repositioning) of the As Pontes brand has to be derived from (Table 7):

**Table 7.** The positioning (or repositioning) of the As Pontes brand.

| Perception Anchor or Pivot |                                 | New Perception to Be Generated  |
|----------------------------|---------------------------------|---|
| Industry Energy            | As Pontes, naturally industrial | "Green Deal"<br>Renewable energies<br>Sustainability<br>Innovation<br>Energy transition |
|                            | →                               | ←   |

Source: Own elaboration.

## 5. Conclusions

The concept of positioning refers to the brand perception that the public has. When the image of the city brand retained in the minds of its target audiences is not the one desired, it becomes necessary to reposition it. This process must be based on existing perceptions and images (pivot), which adopt and integrate new desired attributes, to recover a competitive position in the global market of cities. To carry out the repositioning, the city's "internal customers" (residents, businesses, administration) must be involved through participatory processes. These serve for reflection, to solve the negative self-image and to foster a sense of belonging, identifying themselves with a new credible, shared, achievable, exciting, and value-generating proposal.

In the case studied, the research has revealed the next facts:

- a. Existence of a deteriorated city brand, anchored to past paradigms of industry, fossil energy, pollution and mining.
- b. The energy transition process implies the need to face a change of social and economic paradigm in a context of uncertainty, ignorance and doubts about the role of the public and private sector.
- c. The new model that is being proposed for the city revolves around the production of renewable energy (wind, photovoltaic, hydrogen) and the development of a sustainable industry.
- d. Perceptions and desired attributes linked to sustainability must be added to the city brand associated with the industry of the 20th century: sustainable natural resources, innovation, and resilience.
- e. The repositioning of the city brand, within the energy and ecological transition process, is a tool that will recover the competitive position of the city.

Finally, another valuable contribution is to use the city marketing as a useful tool for the recovery, in terms of effectiveness and efficiency, of the governance of the city in those cases in which it has suffered impairment. The city marketing, as highlighted in this article, provides notable instruments that allow evaluating the way of making a city that interests its stakeholders and validating its governance in a transparent manner.

Many are the intense decarbonization processes that are underway in Europe and even more numerous will be carried out throughout the world. That is why the methodology proposed here could be adapted to each specific case to reposition the brands of territories and cities with disruptive socioeconomic processes that share similarities to the one studied: the Frantisek Industrial Zone (Czech Republic), Onnaing (France), Pas de Calais (France), Cap DéCouverte (France), Dortmund (Germany), Gelsenkirchen (Germany), Ruptawa (Poland), Katowice (Poland), Silesia (Poland), and Asturias (Spain), among others.

Consequently, this approach rests on the very foundation of governance, since it deals, in an intense way, with the interaction between public powers, civil society and the economy of the studied city. This makes city governance [15] resume its leading role in a context of energy and ecological paradigm shift towards sustainable development.

**Author Contributions:** Conceptualization, M.E.-C., V.A.-M. and F.M.-B.; Methodology, V.A.-M.; Formal analysis, A.J.P.-D.; Investigation, A.J.P.-D.; Data curation, M.E.-C.; Writing—original draft, M.E.-C., A.J.P.-D., V.A.-M. and F.M.-B.; Writing—review & editing, F.M.-B.; Supervision, A.J.P.-D. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

**Funding:** This research received no external funding.

**Institutional Review Board Statement:** Not applicable.

**Informed Consent Statement:** Not applicable.

**Data Availability Statement:** Not applicable.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The authors declare no conflict of interest.

## References

1. Prado-Domínguez, A.J.; Martínez-Fernández, V.A.; Escourido-Calvo, M. Internalising Negative Self-image Externalities: The First Objective for City Marketing as a Municipal Management Tool. *Adv. Sci. Technol. Eng. Syst. J. (ASTES)* **2020**, *5*, 112–118.
2. Aaker, D. *Managing Brand Equity: Capitalizing on the Value of Brand Name*; The Free Press: New York, NY, USA, 1991.
3. Simoes, C.; Dibb, S. Rethinking the Brand Concept: New Brand Orientation. *Corp. Commun. Int. J.* **2001**, *6*, 217–224. [[CrossRef](#)]
4. Ye, L.; Björner, E. Linking City Branding to Multi-level Urban Governance in Chinese Mega-cities: A Case Study of Guangzhou. *Cities* **2018**, *80*, 29–37. [[CrossRef](#)]
5. Kotler, P.; Haider, D.H.; Rein, I. *Marketing Places: Attracting Investment, Industry and Tourism to the Cities, States and Nations*; The Free Press: New York, NY, USA, 1993.
6. Elizagárate, V. *Marketing de Ciudades*; Madrid, P., Ed.; Editorial Almuzara: Madrid, Spain, 2008.
7. Anholt, S. Mito y Realidad: La imagen internacional de México. *Rev. Mex. Política Exter.* **2012**, *96*, 109–129.
8. Trout, J.; Rivkin, S.; Peralba, R. *Repositioning*; Madrid, P., Ed.; McGraw-Hill: New York, NY, USA, 2011.
9. Trout, J.; Ries, A. *Positioning: The Battle of your Mind*; McGraw-Hill: New York, NY, USA, 1980.
10. Holloway, L.; Hubbard, P. People and Place. In *The Extraordinary Geographies of Everyday Life*; Pearson Education: Harlow, UK, 2001.
11. Janiszewska, K.; Insch, A. The Strategic Importance of Brand Positioning in the Place Brand Concept: Elements, Structure and Application Capabilities. *J. Int. Stud.* **2012**, *5*, 9–19.
12. Insch, A. Positioning cities: Innovative and Sustainable Strategies for City Development and Transformation. *Place Brand. Public Dipl.* **2014**, *10*, 249–252. [[CrossRef](#)]
13. Kavaratzis, M. City Marketing: The Past, the Present and Some Unresolved Issues. *Geogr. Compass* **2007**, *1*, 695–712. [[CrossRef](#)]
14. Ezedudu, O.; Lete, M.; Correia, M.; Taylor, A.M. Competitive Advantage for Brand Positioning: The Case of Sun City in South Africa. *Tour. Rev. Int.* **2014**, *17*, 299–306.
15. Escourido-Calvo, M. El Marketing de Ciudades Como Herramienta de Gestión Pública Local: Una Aplicación Al Caso de as Pontes de García Rodríguez (A Coruña). Ph.D. Thesis, University of A Coruña, A Coruña, Spain, 2017.
16. Precedo, A.; Orosa, J.J.; Míguez, A. De la planificación estratégica al marketing urbano: Hacia la ciudad inmaterial. *Eure* **2010**, *36*, 5–27. [[CrossRef](#)]
17. Seisdedos, G. *Cómo Gestionar las Ciudades del Siglo XXI: Del City Marketing al Urban Marketing*; Prentice Hall: Madrid, Spain, 2007.
18. Parks, D.; Rohracher, H. From sustainable City Branding to Smart: Re-branding or Re-assembling Urban Energy Infrastructures? *Geoforum* **2019**, *100*, 21–59. [[CrossRef](#)]
19. Fernández, G.; Friedmann, R. Gestión y liderazgos en el diseño e implementación de planes estratégicos de marketing de ciudades: Un balance y propuestas a partir de la experiencia alemana. In *IX Coloquio Internacional de Geocrítica*; Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul: Portoalegre, Brazil, 2007.
20. Armas, A. En torno a la mercadotecnia urbana: Reorganización y reimaginación de la ciudad. *Rev. Geogr. Y CCSS* **2007**, *XXII*.
21. Barrionuevo, J.M.; Berrone, P.; Ricart, J.E. Ciudades inteligentes, progreso sostenible. *Rev. IESE Insight* **2012**, *14*. [[CrossRef](#)]
22. Audouin, C. The Role of Multi-level Governance in Branding Medium-sized Cities: The Case of Nantes, France. *Cities* **2022**, *123*, 103577. [[CrossRef](#)]
23. González, L.; Gale, F. Sustainable City Branding Narratives: A Critical Appraisal of Processes and Outcomes. *J. Place Manag. Dev.* **2022**, *16*, 20–44. [[CrossRef](#)]
24. Prado-Domínguez, A.J.; González-Laxe, F.; Escourido-Calvo, M.; Martín-Bermúdez, F. Initial Impact and Socioeconomic Compensation for the Closure of a Coal-Fired Power Plant in a Local Entity. *Sustainability* **2021**, *13*, 7391. [[CrossRef](#)]
25. National Institute of Statistics—INE (2011): Methodology for the Calculation of the Population Vinculada. 2011. Available online: [https://www.ine.es/censos2011/censos2011-\\_meto\\_pobla\\_vinculada.pdf](https://www.ine.es/censos2011/censos2011-_meto_pobla_vinculada.pdf) (accessed on 23 February 2023).
26. Sáez, L.; Serrano, L.; Gutiérrez, V. Creación y Desarrollo de Marca Ciudad. Análisis de los registros de marca de las principales ciudades españolas. *Rev. Dir. Y Adm. Empresas* **2011**, *18*, 125–156.
27. Liu, F.; Tao, L.; Pan, L.; Wang, F. Influencing Factors of Public Support for Modern Coal-Fired Power Plant Projects: An Empirical Study from China. *Energy Policy* **2017**, *105*, 398–406. [[CrossRef](#)]
28. Kotler, P.; Kotler, M. *The Winning Global Markets. How Businesses Invest and Prosper in the World's High-Growth Cities*; John Wiley & Sons Inc.: New York, NY, USA, 2014.
29. Mintzberg, H.; Quinn, J.B.; Ghoshal, S. *The Strategic Process*; Prentice Hall: New Jersey, NJ, USA, 1995.
30. Luque, T. Planificación Estratégica Territorial: Estudios Metodológicos, Colección Textos Legales—Serie Administración Local, Dirección General de la Administración Local. In *Planificación Estratégica Y Marketing de Ciudad*; Martín, M., Merinero, R., Eds.; Junta de Andalucía: Seville, Spain, 2010.
31. Do-Heon, K. *The Effects of City Brand on City Brand Recognition and Loyalty*; LAP Lambert Academic Publishing: London, UK, 2018.
32. Cudny, W. *City Branding and Promotion: The Strategic Approach*; Routledge Contemporary Perspectives on Urban Growth, Innovation and Change; Routledge: Oxfordshire, UK, 2019.

**Disclaimer/Publisher's Note:** The statements, opinions and data contained in all publications are solely those of the individual author(s) and contributor(s) and not of MDPI and/or the editor(s). MDPI and/or the editor(s) disclaim responsibility for any injury to people or property resulting from any ideas, methods, instructions or products referred to in the content.