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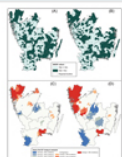
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Assessing roles and strategies of public sector stakeholders in an evolving (lifestyle) migration industry: the case of the Dutch Emigration Expo

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ABSTRACT

This study focuses on local and regional governments using place-branding strategies to attract intra-EU inward migration for demographic and/or economic purposes. This forms an important aspect of contemporary migration industries, whereby the interlinking of lifestyle, work and economic investment is pivotal. Taking the case of the Emigration Expo event in the Netherlands, it draws on interviews with the organizer and with public sector exhibitors to assess their purposes, roles and strategies when participating in the event. In addition, this paper examines to what extent public sector agents perceive this Expo as a viable physical event, contributing to a lifestyle migration industry. Findings suggest a shift in public sector strategies from attracting residents to recruiting skilled workers or lifestyle entrepreneurs and businesses. Exhibitors that maintain a recurring presence at the Expo over several years can build meaningful relations with each other and with prospective migrant visitors, providing practical information and integrated ‘packages’ to promote their destination as an attractive place to work and live. This supports the idea that (e)migration expos remain relevant physical sites of an evolving branch of the migration industry, including public-private partnerships involved in place and relocation branding as part of spatial planning strategies beyond growth.

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Introduction

Since the first Great Exhibition held in London in 1851, international exhibitions, or expos, have been popular and privileged sites for the showcasing and promotion of new ideas and products. Such expos offer ideal venues for cultural exchange, place branding and public diplomacy. Nowadays, there is a multitude of expos with a more focused theme, including those specializing in attracting prospective migrants and facilitating their relocation (e.g. ‘A Place in the Sun’ in the UK or ‘Expo Real’ in Germany). This paper focuses on the Dutch Emigration Expo, and more

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precisely on European public stakeholders from various geographical areas who participate to attract and retain migrants. The paper is positioned at the intersection of migration industries, place branding and lifestyle migration, relating these phenomena with socio-spatial inequalities in migration and mobility (Benson and O'Reilly 2016; Sheller 2018).

Studies of migration industries have examined the facilitation of skilled labour migration through regular channels, as well as human trafficking and irregular migration (Cranston, Schapendonk, and Spaan 2018). It has been shown that private facilitators and intermediaries who work for economic gain represent key actors in migration industries (Gammeltoft-Hansen and Sørensen 2013). However, public stakeholders are also involved in attracting and retaining new inhabitants, not only for reasons of economic growth and capital accumulation through the attraction of talent (Solimano 2008), but also for reasons of population stabilization in certain places. Bearing this in mind, this paper also considers the importance of place attractiveness and affordances in relation to migration trajectories as possible solutions for finding professionals to sustain social infrastructure and services like schools and medical care, as well as local businesses (Hospers and Reverda 2015; Steinführer and Grossman 2021).

Broadly, migration industries facilitate a range of migratory flows including clandestine migration, regulated labour mobility, mobility for international education, sports people, the super-rich, expatriates and return migrants (Collins 2021; Cranston, Schapendonk, and Spaan 2018). Although varying vastly in their patterns, participants, and experiences, volumes and directions, such flows are all part of a wider commercialization of international migration in middle spaces at the crucial meso level (Collins 2021; Faist 2000; Harvey, Groutsis, and van den Broek 2018; Kern and Müller-Böcker 2015; McCollum and Findlay 2018). The dynamics and practices of these middle spaces are simultaneously intertwined with and mediating between the macro-societal level that creates the conditions for migration and the micro-level of individual motivations and mobilities (Hall and Williams 2002). Stakeholders operating at the meso-level include diverse actors such as state authorities and local governments, health care providers, housing associations, employers, and migration intermediaries, alongside a range of private enterprises that potentially profit from migration (Lang 2022).

Migration industries can therefore be situated within globalization processes and the rise of entrepreneurial practices, including by local governments, in neoliberal times (Cleave and Arku 2015; Harvey 1989; Kearns and Philo 1993). This has evolved in parallel with spatial changes in the global political economy, as new nodes of creativity and production have arisen while mobility among markets has increased (Doel and Hubbard 2002). For example, a previous period of dismantling old industries in former industrial regions may now be followed by green reindustrialization and the need to rapidly attract many workers, e.g. in Northern Sweden (Lundmark, Carson, and Eimermann 2022). Such global-scale developments have deeply changed local economies, contributing to uneven economic development through 'creating, embodying, reinforcing and even amplifying the competitive socio-spatial relations between spaces and places' operating on place markets (Pike 2009, 632–633). Hence, migration industries have facilitated, conditioned, and contributed to uneven flows of migration and mobility, leading to high concentrations of migrants in some geographical areas whilst overlooking other areas as potential migration destinations.

Few studies have explicitly connected lifestyle migration with migration industries (examples are David, Eimermann, and Åkerlund 2015; Hayes 2015; Koh 2021), and even fewer have considered the role of public sector stakeholders in this context, which tends to be seen as driven by the private sector, notably the real estate business (Hayes 2015; Janoschka and Haas 2014; Rainer 2019). This paper therefore contributes to filling a research gap by investigating the varying extents to which European public stakeholders in both urban and rural areas search for quality and/or quantity when attracting new residents (Connell and McManus 2011, 85–96). Although these different public stakeholders all try to promote their respective geographical areas as a good place in which to work and live, the expected socio-economic impacts of attracting prospective migrants differ across the various destinations. Further, Martin-Brelot et al. (2010) argue that the European creative class is not as mobile as previously suggested, thus increasing the need for (potential) destinations to

engage in place promotion more actively. The paper focuses on the different public actors' engagements with prospective migrants at the annual Dutch Emigration Expo (henceforth referred to as 'EE'), which serves as an example of a physical space in which the stakeholders try to increase trust and reduce relocation-related risks (De Chernatony and Riley 1998). Simultaneously, the EE reveals itself to be an interesting example of how the lifestyle migration industry, previously seen as being fragmented in nature (cf. David, Eimermann, and Åkerlund 2015), can come together as a 'one-stop shop' for potential migrants.

This is relevant both for conceptual debates around migration industries, and for local policy-making perspectives. The empirical material is provided by local and regional officials aiming to attract new residents and businesses through the EE, which is one of the largest and longest-running events of its kind in Europe. Although the EE hosts stakeholders from all over the world, this study focuses on intra-European flows, specifically from the Netherlands. We began the study at a time when COVID-19 restrictions cancelled physical events and closed borders to avoid spreading of the virus. Whereas some scholars argued this would lead to the end of migration as we knew it (Gamlen 2020), by now it is clear that migration flows and industries have been returning to 'business as usual' or are even increasing.

Against this background, and bearing in mind the socio-spatial inequalities in migration industries, place branding and lifestyle migration, the twofold aim of this study is to assess (1) a selection of local and regional public sector agents exhibiting at the EE as part of an evolving lifestyle migration industry; and (2) the evolving roles and level of importance of the EE as a physical event for public sector exhibitors attracting new inhabitants. The paper draws on interviews with the organizer of the EE and exhibitors representing public stakeholders from several European regions. It revolves around three research questions: (1) what is the overall purpose of participating in the EE and how has this changed over the past years? (2) to what extent do the public sector agents develop different roles and strategies according to their target groups? and (3) to what extent do public sector agents perceive the EE as a viable physical event, contributing to a lifestyle migration industry?

By responding to these questions, we offer novel empirical evidence on place and relocation branding beyond traditional 'push and pull' factors, or the roles of emigration expos attracting only 'the best and brightest' (Ryan and Silvanto 2014; Silvanto and Ryan 2014). In this regard, we do not consider relocation simply as migration from place A to place B resulting automatically in settlement in the destination (Benson and O'Reilly 2009; Zhang 2018). Rather, this paper refers to the concept of migration trajectories potentially consisting of multiple journeys and onward mobilities (Kordel and Weidinger 2019). This empirical study thus broadens knowledge on public sector practices in the lifestyle migration industry, identifying 'themes for further studies' (Hereźniak and Florek 2018, 95) and contributing to discussions combining insights from migration industries, place branding and lifestyle in migration. This approach is used to 'bridge gaps' between theoretical and practical issues in place branding theory (Cleave et al. 2017, 1135).

After reviewing relevant literature in the next section, the empirical material is presented and the scene is set in the methods section before presenting the findings. The discussion and conclusions reflect on public sector agents' roles and strategies when engaging in expos, connecting these issues with spatial planning strategies beyond growth (Leick and Lang 2018).

Public sector agents and expos in (lifestyle) migration industries

The evolving concept of migration industries

Migration industries can be conceptualized as the collective infrastructures and networks that facilitate and/or support migratory mobilities (Cranston 2018). This entails constellations of agents who are involved in providing information, services and products that are related to the process of migration (Spaan and Hillmann 2013), before, during and after the actual move or physical

trajectory (Hernández-Leon 2013). Thus, these industries work to shape mobility patterns at regional, international or global level (Betts 2013; Cranston 2014).

Recent research has noted the diversification of global migration industries (Cranston 2018) alongside the diversification of ‘types’ of migrations and mobilities. Koh (2021), for example, explored a particular type of elite mobilities industry that offers an integrated product comprising elements offered by property developers, real estate agents and their collaborating partners. This aimed at enticing a particular market segment to ‘partake in real estate investments and transnational sojourns’ (Koh 2021, 3) in an urban setting (cf. Koh and Wissink 2018). Such a corporate-based migration industry operates to attract specially targeted, ‘desirable’ migrants to a specific destination by matching it with their perceived lifestyle choices (Yamamura 2022). It can work to overtly build and shape both collective place-identities and physical space, often *in-situ* through discursive and material manifestations in the landscape such as the advertising billboards of real estate agents and related lifestyle migration services (Torkington 2014), and particular designs and styles of properties targeted at lifestyle migrants (Torkington 2012). Such a corporate based migration industry can also work from the outside by the creation and dissemination of place representations and imaginaries through, for example, mass media outlets, social media channels or physical events such as expos. In other words, a discourse about a destination place is mobilized through meso-level agents to forge a version of the place that fits the perceived lifestyle (or economic) requirements and social identities of potential and actual migrants (ibid.). This influential place-branding facet of the migration industry is often, therefore, actively supported by public sector stakeholders who support a specific vision, strategy, or policy of place development.

Indeed, there is a growing awareness that migration industries cannot be dichotomized into ‘from above’ or ‘from below’ agents and practices. Whilst the ‘traditional’ migration industry has been seen to operate mainly ‘from below’, i.e. via private agents and informal networks with an ethnic or national community focus (Yamamura 2022), there is an emerging (albeit scant) literature that is recognizing the ‘novel constellation of services’ that combines elements and stakeholders from both ‘above’ and ‘below’ (ibid., 1). This type of migration industry plays a crucial role at the meso-level of lifestyle-oriented skilled migration, offering mediated but potentially ‘à la carte’ (Tissot 2018) support for migrants and their families (e.g. through providing information on international schools, healthcare plans, financial services, etc.), whilst at the same time providing opportunities for potential migrants to make contact with other, like-minded people in the destination place through networks, clubs and associations (Tissot 2018; cf. Beaverstock 2011; Van Riemsdijk 2015). This can also be offered as a package promoted by public sector stakeholders catering to lifestyle-oriented mobilities within what can therefore be termed a ‘lifestyle migration industry’ (David, Eimmermann, and Åkerlund 2015; Eimmermann et al. 2017; Hayes 2015).

Roles and strategies of public stakeholders in place branding to promote relocation

In line with theoretical developments where stakeholders’ participation, co-creation and co-production are gaining attention in place branding linked with events studies, place brands can be viewed as the expression of networks of multiple stakeholders in a process occurring through a series of interactions among them (Hereźniak and Florek 2018).

To date, public stakeholders such as the state and official authorities at regional and local levels have been involved in migration governance in manifold ways (David, Eimmermann, and Åkerlund 2015). Public stakeholders have a vested economic interest in facilitating certain types of immigration while competing with other potential destinations for ‘desirable’ new residents who are expected to generate both direct revenue through taxation and indirect boosts to local economies. Even though many policies dealing with migration and integration are determined at the national state level, it is important to highlight the role of municipal and regional public stakeholders in such processes. This is reflected in discussions about the relatively recent local turn in immigration policymaking (Caponio and Borkert 2010; Rogers and Tillie 2001; Zapata-Barrero, Caponio, and

Scholten 2017). Municipalities and regions do not simply implement national laws, but also interpret them revealing their scope of action and room for manoeuvre (Schammann et al. 2021).

Accordingly, local public stakeholders can act at different stages of the migration process to attract or retain migrants in certain places or regions (David, Eimermann, and Åkerlund 2015). In the recruitment phase, municipalities and regions driven by bottom-up solidarity mobilization task their own administration or public agencies to pursue domestic and international campaigns to promote the municipality or region as an attractive place in which to live and work (Cleave and Arku 2020).

Through the ‘manipulation’ of places, local and regional authorities can create strong and positive place images composed of the impressions and beliefs that can be leveraged to attract and retain capital (Aharon and Alfasi 2022; Cleave et al. 2017; Gulisova 2021). This capital mainly originates from export markets, (in)direct investments, residents, and tourists (Kornberger and Carter 2010; Kotler, Haider, and Rein 1993; Niedomysl and Jonasson 2012; Pike 2009). To attract this capital, what is often referred to as place branding with a focus on relocation of new inhabitants includes the publication and dissemination of information in overall promotional efforts aimed at specific audiences such as immigrants (Cleave et al. 2017; Cleave and Arku 2020). As such, place branding can be critiqued for being just another cog in the wheel of global competition for capital, rather than offering a solution to the pressures of globalization and neoliberalism (Cleave et al. 2017, 1152).

The participation in the EE of local and regional public agents such as project leaders (for place promotion) or business developers can be one of many activities linked together as part of a long-term strategy to gain a relationship between the place being branded and the desired audience (Andersson 2014). The purpose of the strategy may differ according to the places’ various sizes, types, population densities, economic activities, and geographic contexts (Champion and Hugo 2004; Cleave and Arku 2014; Hopkins 1998; Hugo and Morén-Alegret 2008; Kavaratzis, Warnaby, and Ashworth 2015). For example, many densely populated, urban, renowned and centrally located places with growing populations and spatial concentration of so-called creative people and businesses have long been engaged in attracting a super-creative core (Florida 2002) and high-ranking creative professionals in consulting, finance, management and real estate for economic success and growth (Florida 2005; Martin-Brelot et al. 2010).

On the other hand, many rural, less prominent, less centrally located and often sparsely populated areas focus on social planning goals to adapt services and infrastructure to populations that are not growing (Sysner 2020). For instance, by finding ways to avoid having to close local schools, day care centres, health care posts and similar local societal facilities. Beyond boosting local economies, therefore, such ‘non-core’ regions may also be seeking to sustain a local business climate and to increase populations, develop local communities and avoid further private sector employment loss (Andersson 2014; Jørgensen 2016; Leick and Lang 2018). Yet other rural public stakeholders are coping with shrinking populations, remoteness from major urban areas and economic stagnation (Eimermann 2015). Their rural place marking efforts range from targeting in-migrants in general to attracting specific groups like returnees, families with young children, (lifestyle) entrepreneurs, or employees for larger industries (see Connell and McManus 2011 for Australia; Eimermann et al. 2017 for Sweden; Kordel and Weidinger 2020 for Germany). These public sector agents thus actively engage in promoting redistribution of population to counteract negative socio-economic effects of population shrinkage (Hospers 2011), although some scholars argue that such place branding strategies should focus more on material issues such as housing development and job opportunities (Aasetre, Carlsson, and Hembre Haugum 2020).

In this context, a place brand represents symbols and encoded messages to generate values, strengths and uniqueness that local and regional authorities want the audience to associate with the branded place (Cleave et al. 2017; Silvanto and Ryan 2014; Zenker and Jacobsen 2015). One overall goal is to create a proposition that attracts the target audience (in this study: prospective migrants visiting the EE) to buy into the ideas, senses of place and the connecting psychosocial meanings being presented (Cleave et al. 2017). As such, place branding and relocation branding

are geographical since the places' brand design and perception are situated in and critically influenced by geographical traits (Andersson 2014; Pasquinelli 2013; Pike 2009). Based on research into the 'commodification [of the] traditional multidimensional meanings of place' (Gold and Ward 1994, 295), place branding and relocation branding studies extend beyond corporate-type promotion, marketing and branding of goods and services into regional development policy and complex geographical entities (Aasetre, Carlsson, and Hembre Haugum 2020; Bell 2016; Kavaratzis and Ashworth 2005; Ma et al. 2019; Pike 2009). A novel approach is that this includes depopulating areas that are planning sustainable futures beyond growth (Hospers and Reverda 2015; Leick and Lang 2018; Sysner 2020).

Expos as spaces for encounters and social interaction

Although expos have been studied in place branding literature, little research has focused on expos as a nexus point of migration industries. Therefore, this final part of the literature review highlights studies that informed our understanding of emigration expos as spaces for social interaction (Beckert 2010) and for the construction and (re)production of spatial imaginaries and identities. Expos, like trade shows and fairs, are physical events, bounded in spatial and temporal frames, where various agents including business groups, local authorities, and government departments meet each other and prospective migrants to promote and facilitate particular types of international migration (Connell and McManus 2011). Cranston (2014, 1124) sees trade shows as both a reflection of an industry sector and a space that produces it into being, acting as an 'arena in which the latest trends, products, services and opportunities within an industry are presented'. For instance, trade shows are integral parts of economic value chains and marketing activities in sectors like fashion (Skov 2006), tourism (Hausmann 2007) and real estate (Siemieniako and Gebarowski 2017). Motivations for exhibitors to attend trade shows include receiving feedback to improve their performance (Bathelt and Schuldt 2008) or enhancing their corporate image (Khongasawtkiat and Agmapisarn 2023).

Moreover, trade shows are bound in social and symbolic frames within which exhibitors may leverage aspects such as social networks, symbolic hierarchies and cultural capital that could outweigh economic dimensions (Moeran 2011). They can provide a good venue to work on both 'vertical' (with suppliers, intermediaries or customers) and 'horizontal' (with associations, partners or regulators) interactions (Bathelt and Schuldt 2008). In such interactions, face-to-face encounters serve to enable trade, to exchange knowledge, and/or to sustain relationships and networks (Skov 2006). The micro geographies of such events are important, as the way in which spatial proximity of otherwise distant actors is structured can enable or hinder the exchange and promotion of ideas and services. This is why in-event smaller sites are also deliberately constructed for greater visibility, presentations, and specific encounters (Craggs and Mahoney 2014).

However, regarding the period of COVID-19 restrictions, some studies found that attempts to perform virtual expos and trade fairs could not substitute on-site live experiences (e.g. Seraphin 2021). This was due to online fatigue, difficulties regarding concentration, distraction, and lacking sensory experiences like smelling and tasting food at stalls (Zenger 2022). Thus, physical encounters and immersion into staged experiences are crucial parts of expos and trade shows (ibid.).

As such, studying the Dutch Emigration Expo (including its 2022 edition which was cancelled due to COVID-19 restrictions) advances our understanding of migration by providing insights into public sector exhibitors' roles in promoting and enabling high skilled individuals' and their families' international relocations. What makes this part of an industry is the EE's physical and digital gathering of otherwise distinct and disparate organizations (Cranston 2014) providing services and products that facilitate migration, including lifestyle and skilled labour migration.

Eimermann (2015) has already explored the EE with a focus on Swedish public sector exhibitors during the 2008 and 2011 editions. This study observed that generic representations of idyllic natural amenities like forests and lakes were most mediated, but that some stakeholders had initiated a shift to actively inviting prospective migrants (in the final stage of decision-making) to visit their

region. This corresponds with Connell and McManus (2011, 83) finding from the ‘Country Week’ expo in Australia that municipalities participating in several consecutive meetings have evolved their strategy from a ‘touristic focus on the aesthetic’ to a more ‘prosaic yet vital focus on employment, housing, and other services’.

Connell and McManus (2011, 85–96) suggest seven concrete tools to measure success for exhibiting at expos: (1) taking account of visitor numbers; (2) engagement in internal marketing and identity formation in the exhibiting organizations; (3) increasing awareness of prospective movers’ motives; (4) inviting people to visit the municipality after the expo; (5) counting the number of families who move to a particular municipality as a result of the expo; (6) counting the number of businesses that move to a particular municipality as a result of the expo; and (7) the ability to justify funding for attending another year. However, not all exhibitors are able to build trust and credibility or to cement relationships by performing a post-show follow-up (Rosson and Seringhaus 1995). Further, it is hard to distinguish the effect of expos from other migration dynamics (Connell and McManus 2011; cf. Eimermann 2015; Niedomysl 2007). Also, Connell and McManus (2011) note the drop-out rate of small, remote councils for whom it is relatively costly while returns are limited, suggesting that partaking in such expos is not easy for all local authorities.

As such, this literature review aids in assessing not only the role but also the level of continued importance and success of the EE as a physical event for public sector exhibitors from different countries. The next section details the methods and data used for the study and introduces the public sector exhibitors who participated in the study.

Materials and methods

The paper draws on 14 qualitative semi-structured interviews conducted with informed consent in 2022: one with the event organizer and 13 with representatives of public sector exhibitors representing local and regional authorities in rural areas of France, Germany, and Sweden, and a Spanish metropolitan area. These are popular destinations among Dutch migrants (Eimermann 2015), and they are well-represented at EE. The different geographies represented by these stakeholders range from heavily urbanized areas where various industries are complemented by tourism and an overall sustainable economic growth imperative (Spa1) to minor towns and villages facing population decrease in one of Europe’s most sparsely populated areas experiencing reindustrialization (Swe2). Table 1 provides socio-economic and geographical contexts for the analysis, a description of locations (central or more peripheral in Europe), administrative collaboration (municipality, regional authority or public-private partnership), and socio-demographic traits (from rural and combating population decline to urban and growth oriented). The ‘a’ or ‘b’ indicate the same exhibitor but a different interviewee.

Public sector exhibitors such as municipalities and regional councils (some collaborating with private stakeholders) were identified based on information obtained at the 2019 event and the list of exhibitors for the 2020 edition, available on EE’s website (consulted for background information although this edition did not take place due to the lockdowns). The selected exhibitors from France, Germany and Spain are all the public stakeholders from those countries represented in 2019 and 2020. However, as there were many Swedish public sector exhibitors on the list, we selected those taking particularly relevant and novel approaches.

The interview guide for the organizer included socio-demographic aspects in European rural and urban areas, the fair’s background and future, employment issues, collaboration, and coordination of exhibitors. The interview guide for exhibitors regarded general information, motivation to participate, target groups, economic, social and environmental sustainability, visitors’ perceptions (according to the exhibitors), exhibitors’ self-evaluation of their participation, onboarding of potential migrants and outlook. The interviews lasted from 30 to 90 minutes and were conducted on site (e.g. in the headquarters of the public authority), online or via telephone, and one was in written form (upon the interviewee’s request).

Table 1. Anonymized overview of interviewees (and the exhibitors they represent).

Code	General description, administrative unit, relative location, relevant features, population size (density)
Fra1	Public-Private-partnership (PPP): agency working with a 'Région'. North France. Coastal area with dairy farming, nature-based and historical tourism. Two medium-sized towns. Economic axis within commuting distance to Parisian metropolitan area. Approx. 3.3 million (111 inhabitants/km ²).
Fra2	Public sector: spatial planning and development office of a 'Région'. East-central France. Medium-high mountainous area with wine production, agro-tourism and one medium-sized town. Approx. 2.8 million (58 inh./km ²).
Ger1a	Public sector: city. Dpt for economic development. Northern Germany. At the foot of a low mountain range area, on the edge of a metropolitan region. Experienced transition from mining and timber industry to spa tourism. Approx. 20,000 (332 inh./km ²). Joint presentation with Ger1b.
Ger1b	Public sector: rural district. District-, municipality- and financial institutions-owned business development agency. Northern Germany. (at the foot of a) low mountain range area, on the edge of a metropolitan region. Automotive, metal, chemical and recycling industry as well as tourism. Approx. 135,000 (139 inh./km ²). Joint presentation with Ger1a.
Ger2	Public sector: administrative region for spatial planning. District- and chamber of crafts-owned business development agency. Southern Germany. On the edge of a metropolitan region. Mechanical engineering, automotive, electrical, metal and packaging industry. Approx. 920,000 (192 inh./km ²).
Ger3	Public sector: rural district. Central Germany. District surrounding big city, northern part more rural, southern part more suburban. Automotive, logistics, renewable energy and services. Approx. 240,000 (183 inh./km ²).
Spa1a	Public sector: city council, city promotion dpt. Metropolitan area, Spain. Diverse economy. Approx. 5 million (2000 inh./km ²). This interviewee participated at the Emigration Expo.
Spa1b	Same entity as Spa1a, but this interviewee is the head of the city promotion department and a top civil servant within the city council.
Spa1c	Same entity as Spa1a, but this interviewee is the head of the business landing department within a private-municipal company linked to the city council.
Swe1	Public sector: municipality. Business development office. Northwest Sweden. Sparsely populated mountainous area, scattered small villages. Population decline. Approx. 10,000 (1 inh./km ²).
Swe2	Public sector: municipality as part of collaboration with neighbouring municipalities. Communication office. Northeast Sweden, commuting distance from medium-sized town. Experiencing green (decarbonized) industry transitions. Approx. 5000 (2 inh./km ²).
Swe3a	PPP: Swedish state-owned employment agency collaborating with private staffing agency. South-central Swedish region, 12 municipalities. Heavy industry and entrepreneurial spirit. Approx. 370,000 (largest municipality 143,000, other municipalities 7000–30,000) (35.1 inh./km ²).
Swe3b	Same entity as Swe3a, but this interviewee was the main creator of the Mini-Expo. Complementary questions re organizational, local and regional aspects of Mini-Expo.

Sources for population statistics: HSL (2022), INE (2022), INSEE (2022), LSN (2022), Statistics Sweden (2022), Statistik BW (2022).

The interviews were conducted by the multiple authors of this paper in the preferred language of the interviewed representatives (totalling seven languages), providing the advantage of richer and more detailed data. In preparing for the interviews and during analysis of this data, we limited the material by considering only a select number of countries, and by not studying the interactions between different levels of government and governance, between public and private actors present at the EE, or between stakeholders who participate at the EE and those who do not. Another limitation is that we do not consider the perspectives of the visitors or migrants themselves, as this is beyond the scope of this paper.

To systematically analyse the data expressed in multiple languages, we employed meaning condensation to enhance coding and thematic analysis (Giorgi and Giorgi 2003; Kvale 2009, 106–110). Understood as 'an abridgement of the meanings expressed by the interviewees into shorter formulations [...] in which the main sense of what is said is rephrased in a few words' (Kvale 2009, 106–107), meaning condensation involved five steps that assisted in retaining rigour and discipline in the analysis. First, each researcher separately transcribed the interview in the original language and secondly identified the 'meaning units' of the text as expressed by the exhibitor (Kvale 2009, 109). Third, each researcher coded dominant themes based on the meaning units and translated them into English. Fourth, the researchers worked together to specify the respective dominant themes (in all interviews) in relation to each other and to the study's purpose. This resulted in structuring the results along 'pre-show', 'at show' and 'post-show' issues (resembling the structure in Hereźniak and Florek 2018), each with a sentence summarizing the respective main themes as a result of steps two and three. Fifth, the essential themes were jointly analysed in the socio-economic and

geographic contexts described above. Based on these steps, the findings regard the exhibitors' purposes for, strategies, and outcomes of participating at the EE.

Findings

Context: the Dutch Emigration Expo

A return migrant to the Netherlands launched the EE in 1996, four years after the signing of the 1992 Maastricht Treaty, which allowed free movement of people, goods, services, and capital within the EU. As a migration-enabling factor, free movement has played a major role for the event as 'Europe's largest meeting point' (Emigration Expo 2022) for prospective migrants and various organizations linked to potential migration destinations. The EE is organized in a centrally located trade fair hall as an annual two-day weekend event. It attracts around 11,000 prospective migrants, mainly from the Netherlands, Belgium, Luxemburg, and Germany. In 2020, the average age of visitors was 31, with a large proportion of young families. The visitor profile, which has remained relatively stable over time, is well-educated, with 64% of the visitors having a degree in higher education (ibid.).

The homepage photo for the website has been the same for over a decade, showing a white heterosexual couple with two young children (Figure 1). Besides menu buttons directly linked to the physical event (e.g. 'exhibitors', 'programme', 'themes'), other buttons refer the roughly half million annual unique website visitors (Emigration Expo 2022) to 'jobs abroad' and 'houses and businesses for sale'. The website can be accessed year-round, and visitors may register for newsletters and a digital Emigration magazine. This illustrates the idea of the EE being both a physical, face-to-face meeting point, in a specific location at a specific time, as well as part of an ongoing and wider migration process. A comparison of the current website with information material gathered during previous fieldwork shows that although the keywords have long been 'living, working, studying and doing business abroad', the categories 'healthcare jobs abroad', 'jobs in Europe' and 'summer jobs' have now been given special focus. This is in line with the general shift of the EE's focus:

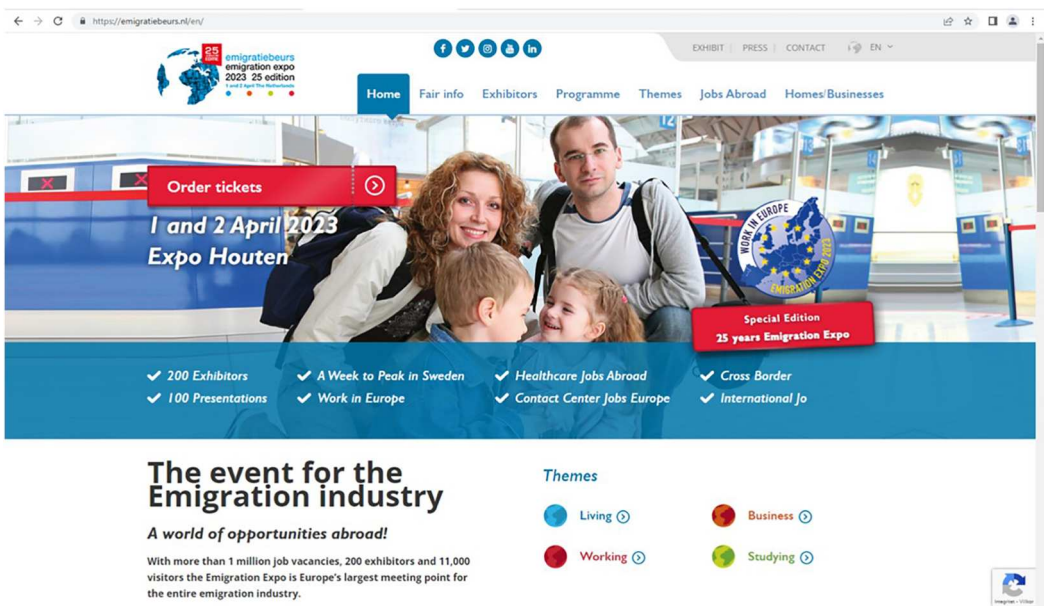


Figure 1. The Dutch Emigration Expo's homepage (27 June 2022). Source: <https://www.emigratiebeurs.nl/en> (reprinted with permission).

In the beginning [...] it was a kind of holiday-like fair. Like ‘come and live with us, the sun always shines’ and things like that. Then at some point came the real-estate agents. It became more of a ‘come to us because we have beautiful houses with large enough gardens for a swimming pool’. And today, it’s almost all job-related. [...] There are very large companies trying to recruit people, so it is becoming more and more of a come-and-work-with-us-Expo. (Interview with organizer)

Over the past years, the number of exhibitors has more than doubled, from 87 in 2009 to 200 in 2020. Whilst the website promises ‘a world of opportunities abroad’, and indeed many countries are apparently represented (although often by the same handful of exhibitors), there is a clear focus on the Nordics and other European countries (including France, Germany, and Spain). This is also evident in the number of exhibitors linked to these countries, and the division of the physical space of the EE into three halls (one for the Nordic countries, one for Europe and one for other overseas destinations), including separate spaces for presentations or job interviews (e.g. Swe3). This shows the importance of micro geographies during the EE (Craggs and Mahoney 2014), also stressed by Fra2: ‘the French exhibitors used to be scattered around the EE and we have been campaigning to form a “French island” for 3 or 4 years’.

Besides the job recruitment exhibitors, there are many other exhibitors offering practical, migration-related services, often with a clear ‘lifestyle’ orientation. The range of private sector enterprises includes those offering financial services, removals and packing services, private medical care, education (international schools and language schools), and real estate. Yet although these commercial service providers comprise the majority of the exhibitors, public sector entities also have a noticeable presence. These public sector stakeholders are clearly promoting particular destinations (regions and municipalities) to attract desirable migrants. Their specific strategies are further explored in the next section.

The interviewed exhibitors’ roles and strategies

Taking as a starting point the conceptualization of emigration as a long-term process, this subsection organizes the findings regarding public sector exhibitors’ roles and strategies before, during and after the EE.

Pre-show: getting a clear aim to participate and anticipating the needs of the audience

Most localities and regions represented at the EE have long-standing relationships with the Netherlands as established tourism or migration destinations for the Dutch, or through trade resulting in skilled labour migration. This resonates with the notions of a tourism-migration nexus (Hall and Williams 2002), chain migration and path-dependency (cf Rodríguez-Pose and von Berlepsch 2020). For the exhibitors Fra2, Ger3 and Swe2, the idea for participation at the EE was raised by an individual at a local level, after which it expanded to a regional level. Other exhibitors’ connections with the Netherlands were also socially oriented – for instance based on interviewees’ own time spent there as student or labour migrant (Ger1) – or more oriented towards creative economic growth stemming from Dutch (business) people already living in the destination (Spa1):

Why the Netherlands? Well, first of all, the Dutch community in [CITY] is so important for us, not only in numbers but also in organizing [...] the Orange Table, which is supported by the Government of The Netherlands. That dynamizes the cluster of the businessmen and businesswomen located in [CITY] ... so I think that it made sense for us to be there and to meet with people. (Interview Spa1a)

Other exhibitors (Ger2) became aware of the EE or the participation of neighbouring municipalities or regions via the internet or media (Ger1). Underlining the proactive role of the organizer, some exhibitors explained how he approached them to meet in person and discuss their participation. During such meetings, the organizer encouraged stakeholders to participate in the EE for a period of at least four consecutive years because:

Emigration is a long-term process in which the exhibitors should be present at the EE: building up trust doesn't happen in one year, you [as exhibitor] need to show familiar faces and that you are at the EE every year, so that visitors understand that you are in it for the longer term. It is also a learning curve; I can tell potential exhibitors everything they should think about and how they should prepare, but they need time to improve their presence themselves. (Interview with organizer)

The interviewed exhibitors stressed that their participation, sometimes facilitated by externally raised funds (e.g. the Swedish Agency for Economic and Regional Growth, Swe2, or EURES – the European Cooperation Network of Employment Services, Swe3), was part of efforts to enhance socio-economic development in the area they represent. Fra2 stated that 'this exhibition is not just an action that serves the regional attractiveness, but it is also part of a broader development strategy'. Spa1 aspired to learn strategies from competing exhibitors and to reinforce its position as an important destination explicitly for talent: 'Our international welcome desk for talent offers information, consultation, and administrative procedures for investors, high-skilled professionals, entrepreneurs with innovative business projects that create employment in Spain, and researchers' (Interview Spa1c).

Ger3's strategies were less ambitious: 'We're interested in visitors' feedback on our overall communication of regional assets'. In line with the increased importance of 'filling of job vacancies' as the main objective of participation for exhibitors (9% in 2011 to 40% in 2020; Emigration Expo 2022), most public stakeholders were looking for doctors, nurses, teachers, and other professionals to sustain basic services. Moreover, some identified specific target groups, like the so-called 'royal group' consisting of Dutch wanting to settle in mountainous parts of East-central France (Fra2), or 'adventurous Dutch aged 30–50 years' (Swe1).

Overall, exhibitors representing declining areas (Fra2, Swe1, Swe2) were open to people of working age with children and any kind of newcomers that could help to uphold social infrastructures and services. Fra2 additionally underlined the importance of jobs in agrotourism and Swe2 was seriously considering attracting people with the skills and expertise needed for the mega investments in green industry transitions. This indicates recent growth-oriented impulses in rural destinations that were previously less growth-oriented (e.g. Lundmark, Carson, and Eimermann 2022; Syssner 2020). Exhibitors with more pronounced orientations towards economic and population growth, in contrast, were more selectively linking their target groups to traditional and transitional industries (Fra1) or to specific skilled professions such as electrical engineers (Ger2, Swe3). They particularly aimed for business settlement and entrepreneurs who promised expertise and wealth as well as job-creation for locals, for instance in the biotech, real estate, logistics and ICT sectors (Fra1, Ger2, Spa1). As Fra1's representative framed it, their overall purpose of participating at the EE was to promote the region as 'a magnificent living environment and a place offering an ideal framework to make a career while combining professional and personal ambitions'. Accordingly, exhibitors collected job offers from local companies and networks to present them at the EE (Fra2, Ger1, Spa1) and also prepared info sheets on how to apply for jobs in the destination (Ger3). Municipalities which are too small to participate alone pooled their resources to market themselves together with neighbouring municipalities or cities, like Swe2 (based on existing collaboration as a tourist destination management organization). The construction of the stands aimed at portraying the lifestyle in the destination areas, e.g. by integrating screens to display videos and pictures.

In line with Bathelt and Schuldt's (2008) findings, feedback from last year's visitors was incorporated just as much as positively perceived aspects from competitors (Ger3). To increase the exhibitors' successful participation, in addition, the organizer attempted to attract the 'right' type of visitors, for instance via free tickets and advertisements in selected professional journals.

At show: putting faces to potential destinations

The exhibitors described the visitors' profile at their stands or seminar presentations as ranging from young middle-class families to empty-nesters in the second half of their careers and (pre)retirees seeking a better quality of life and/or professional reorientation. Employment is seldom the

main goal of these prospective migrants, but exhibitors indicated that visitors often start their process from quality-of-life aspirations and, except for the urban Spanish destination (Spa1), a desire to change their life by moving to tranquil natural surroundings with fresh air and spacious environments as well as ethnocultural homogeneity. In addition, the rural/peripheral areas' cheaper real estate would allow prospective migrants to become owners of homes with enough space to raise children or grow one's own food. However, many visitors do seek help to find a job or expand their business abroad, some are wondering about rules and regulations, while others have bought a house and are looking for support to integrate professionally and socially in the destination place.

Regarding questions on lifestyle, family life, housing and work, exhibitors adapt their information to the visitors' stages in the migration process. At the stands and seminar presentations, the exhibitors provide both generic information about living and working in the destination (e.g. living costs, housing prices, health insurance, language acquisition, application processes and recognition of foreign credentials), and specific guidance regarding job and housing vacancies and available land or business properties, highlighting unique selling points. Thereby, exhibitors draw on promotional material such as leaflets, but also refer to experts present at the stand (e.g. employers or lawyers), show images and online videos and provide the resources to browse information on up-to-the-minute available job offers, real estate, building plots and vacancy registers using laptops and tablets. They pass on contacts to schools and other regional stakeholders, e.g. on give-away USB sticks (Ger1), and display lists or QR codes for newsletter subscriptions. Exhibitors acknowledge that migration is a life changing event, which is not decided '*over a coffee break*' (Swe3). Fra2 estimates that it takes five years on average from the start of an idea to the actual move, also recognizing that this process is not linear. Accordingly, Ger1, Swe1 and Swe2 inform visitors that they provide continued assistance after migration, for instance with bureaucratic services such as car registration, personal service number, bank contacts, or organizing monthly social events where newcomers and locals meet. Overall, the exhibitors adhere to the organizer's recommendations to offer integrated information packages (Tissot 2018).

Besides providing information, the exhibitors also highlight that it is of the utmost importance to create meaningful and personal social relationships with the visitors and to put faces to potential destinations. This is achieved by various strategies among the exhibition staff: firstly, wearing appropriate clothes so as not to come across as 'too stiff' (Ger1, Ger3), secondly, choosing persons who are able to speak Dutch to visitors to reduce language barriers (Ger1, Swe3), and, thirdly, bringing testimonials or coaches (Ger2, Spa1). This third aspect ranges from informal ways to formal public-private partnerships between state organizations or regional authorities and private marketing or staffing agencies (Fra1, Swe3). For instance, there are cases where private individuals or professionals are involved in the stand as 'ambassadors' (Swe1) or 'migration coaches' (Fra2) to inform about challenges and opportunities of migrating to and living in the destination drawing on their own experiences.

When asked about strategies in times of the COVID-19 pandemic, the exhibitors Ger2 and Ger3 kept in touch with prospective migrants via newsletters and social media, while Ger1 published a report in the Emigration magazine drawing on Dutch testimonials. Swe1 and Swe3 were innovative, organizing their own events: a digital fair in 2021 and 2022 and a mini-Expo in the Netherlands in June 2022 (when restrictions were lifted). However, both indicated that the face-to-face meetings at the physical event were invaluable and that they would participate if the EE were organized again in 2023: '*You really need to look people in the eye*' (Swe3a). This indicates the continued importance of social contacts and relationships, enhanced by the EE as a physical meeting point for exhibitors and visitors.

Post-show: helping people to 'take off' and evaluating participation

Entwined with viewing migration as a long-term process, exhibitors' participation at the EE is only one of many steps. Directly after the EE, they try to promptly respond to questions raised by visitors to show appreciation (Ger1). To maintain and develop good relationships with the visitors over time, all exhibitors complement the EE participation with newsletters and/or telephone calls,

inviting visitors to follow them on social media, and sometimes to attend online meetings. Many also offer the opportunity to visit the destination and test what living there is like, for instance during the May holidays, or during reception sessions in the autumn offering help in finding plots of land, potential schools, or employers (Fra2). Spa1 also invites visitors to a festive ‘international community’ day in the autumn with informative stalls of various local organizations, while Ger3 and Swe3 offer trial days with potential employers. Regarding the latter example, prospective migrants are encouraged via the EE website and Emigration magazine to register their CV online. Then Swe3 may invite them to a job interview during the above-mentioned mini-Expo, which can lead to a trial week working with a Swedish employer, with the final goal to offer a six-month contract and possibly a more permanent one. For those who permanently move to the region, exhibitors either refer newcomers to other authorities, clubs and associations, and language course providers (Swe1, Swe2), or provide support on their own regarding housing, business and bureaucracy, as mentioned above (Ger1, Ger3, Swe1):

This family who moved to [PLACE] in 2008; I have worked really closely with them. I followed them personally. Helped them with their Swedish personal identity number, school, looking around. We made a personal evaluation, and we wanted them to have a good feeling about their migration. The locals made sure they had a person to look after the kids. (Interview Swe1)

Although all exhibitors agreed that evaluating success in concrete terms is very hard, they did indicate forms of qualitative and quantitative evaluation, which were reflected against their overall goals (economic growth and/or maintaining social infrastructure and services). Swe2 said:

The qualitative evaluation is a lot about how we worked. Whether the right persons from our side were present before, during and after the EE. How we can increase the flow of people at the stand. (Interview Swe2)

Other measurements of success varied from ‘having a feeling that one was able to generate interest in the region and could match supply and demand’ (Ger1, Ger2), via ‘counting the number of contacts at the fair and the number of PR bags given out’ (Ger1, Swe2), to ‘we’re happy with the one family that migrated to our municipality’ (Swe2). Rather than attracting but not retaining larger volumes of migrants, most interviewees were convinced that personalized approaches matching destination place representatives with people (in a broader sense than talent) increases the likelihood of staying on after relocation. Fra2, representing a larger area, explained:

In the best years, ten or fifteen people who visited the EE moved here – but this is a windfall of fifteen years of work, not to be linked to a specific year’s cohort of visitors. In the worst years, three or four families moved here. (Interview Fra2)

Such evaluations were at the basis of exhibitors’ decisions on potential future participation, but political and economic factors were also important: Ger2 and Ger3, not so active during the COVID-19 restrictions, are not planning to participate in the next EE. For Spa1, participation depends on municipal resources, currently bound to local effects of receiving refugees from Ukraine. Swe1 and Swe3 are planning not only to join the next EE, but to complement it with their novel initiatives (digital information day and mini-Expo). Simultaneously, Fra1, Fra2 and Swe2 are eager to exhibit and to develop a potential ‘Dutch market’ (Fra1) to increase inhabitants and the workforce in green industries, while Swe2 indicated that long-term planning was hard since municipal budgets are usually made for one year at a time.

Discussion

Table 2 schematically presents the findings, from which three overall orientations arise, based on the studied strategies before, during and after the EE. Addressing the first research question regarding changes in overall purpose of participating in the EE, one orientation corroborates a still ongoing ‘war for talent’ (Michaels, Handfield-Jones, and Axelrod 2001). Confirming Florida (2002; 2005) and Martin-Brelot et al. (2010), stakeholders representing more densely populated, urban, renowned,

and centrally located regions focus on attracting qualified and skilled workers to fill specific job offers and vacancies in the creative sectors. These economic growth-oriented exhibitors aim to find the likes of biotech professionals (Fra1), talented entrepreneurs (Spa1), or engineers (Ger2, Swe3). Swe3 even organizes onsite job interviews that may lead to trial periods in Sweden.

Another orientation reveals that rural, less prominent, and less centrally located sparsely populated areas like Fra2 and Swe2 focus on attracting doctors, nurses and teachers to sustain social services and infrastructure without growth (Leick and Lang 2018, Syssner 2020). These public sector agents seek to act as nexus points for practical information gathered from various public and private stakeholders in the destinations, mainly on ‘hard’ factors regarding schools, health care providers, planning offices, and real estate agents. This is also communicated as an integrated image of the place as welcoming and hospitable, focusing on the affordances it can offer to attract and retain prospective migrant job seekers. The agents emphasize creating a memorable, authentic place image co-created by a range of actors, including immigrants already living there who serve as ambassadors. As public sector representatives, they may be better positioned to gain the trust of the prospective migrants since they are not obviously seeking direct financial gain.

A third orientation stems from exhibitors’ evolving purposes and strategies amid rapid changes in the global political economy (Doel and Hubbard 2002). Fra2 and Swe2 are stakeholders in rapidly transforming regions needing new workers for agrotourism and green industry. The EE itself holds a fairly unique role as a meso-level mediator between various destinations and prospective migrants, set within macro-level trends of increased competition for skilled workers, entrepreneurs, and residents, as well as micro-level trends that influence individuals’ motivations for lifestyle changes. This sits well with recent literature which considers the intertwining of lifestyle and work orientations in many forms of migration (Benson and O’Reilly 2016; Carson et al. 2018; Iversen and Steen Jacobsen 2016; Torkington and Ribeiro 2019).

Regarding the second research question, the exhibitors’ main role is to offer integrated information packages covering both lifestyle-led and work-related solutions. Both during and after the EE, many exhibitors provide information and offer relocation packages combining soft location factors (Benson and O’Reilly 2016; Florida 2005) with hard factors such as assistance in public administration and legal issues. They communicate a region’s assets, in both a general sense and with concrete examples, including job offers and properties or businesses for sale.

However, the communication strategies differ depending on the type of regional assets promoted, regarding changing population sizes and densities, economic activities, and geographic contexts (Champion and Hugo 2004; Cleave and Arku 2014; Hugo and Morén-Alegret 2008; Kavaratzis et al. 2015). Findings suggest that public sector stakeholders in more sparsely populated areas (like Fra2, Ger1, Ger3, Swe1 and Swe2) relate this to issues of maintaining public services and social infrastructure and combating ‘medical desertification’ (Fra2). Such agents often collaborate as a region, recognizing the importance of regional branding since the whole may be more well-known than its separate parts (Aharon and Alfasi 2022). The exhibitors collaborating on a regional scale and operating as public-private partnerships are often in a better position to offer solutions combining housing in more rural areas with jobs in more urban surroundings, representing a more integrated work-lifestyle approach (Tissot 2018).

Differences are also seen in the kind of entities present at the stands, such as the spatial planning and development office (Fra2), emphasizing local socio-economic development rather than just economic growth (as Spa1 did through the business landing department). The exhibitors

Table 2. Exhibitors’ main orientations in their strategies for attracting migrants.

	Economic growth (focus on job offers)	Helping migrants reach social and economic goals	Sustaining social services and infrastructure
Pre-show	Fra1, Ger1, Ger2, Ger3, Spa1	-	Fra2, Ger3, Swe1, Swe2
At show	Fra1, Swe3, Spa1	Ger1, Swe1, Swe2	-
Post-show	Fra1, Ger3, Spa1, Swe3	Fra2, Ger1, Ger2, Ger3, Spa1, Swe1, Swe2	Swe2

Source: compiled from findings.

consistently refer to prospective migrants' lifestyle-related aspirations, while reacting to global circumstances, i.e. the COVID-19 pandemic, entrepreneurial trends and labour shortages in specific sectors. Thus, rather than simply trying to 'sell' a place as attractive to live and work in through media with slogans or simplified images, the public sector stakeholders align with broader regional development policies (Aasetre et al. 2020; Ma et al. 2019; Pike 2009). The findings, particularly regarding the sparsely populated public sector stakeholders, thus contradict critiques on place branding as promoting simplified perspectives of places, based on a script for fast and superficial policy to cover the negative aspects of a place and privileging new immigrants by allowing them a level of elitism through the place branding effort (Andersson 2014; Cleave et al. 2017).

Considering that two consecutive years of cancelling the on-site EE may have disrupted its momentum, this discussion now turns to the third research question regarding its continuing viability as a physical event contributing to a lifestyle migration industry. The EE as a physical event and a site for (re)production of place branding continues to provide a space for meaningful social interaction, allowing public sector stakeholders to build and consolidate their place image to attract new inhabitants. Viewing emigration as an on-going process, the EE also provides an essential platform to foster long-term relationships with visitors (Hospers 2011). The exhibitors recognize the need to engage with prospective migrants on a deeper level.

The EE offers a potential 'springboard' to attract interest and maintain visitors' attention through social encounters (Bathelt and Schuldt 2008). Interviewees indicated the value of the EE as a temporal and spatial nexus for exchanging ideas and experiences with other exhibitors. Such physical presence, including face-to-face interactions and putting faces to places, is key to building up trust and social networks beyond online meetings (cf. De Chernatony and Riley 1998; Eimermann 2015; McManus and Connell 2014; Skov 2006). It is not sufficient to mediate a positive image of the destination; exhibitors also offer the visitors contact with well-informed 'real' people offering first-hand accounts of the place while looking them 'in the eye' (Swe3). Existing digital tools (newsletters, social media, the Emigration Expo website, the Emigration magazine) and novel digital developments (Swe1's digital information day, Swe3's mini-Expo) complement rather than compete with physical encounters at the EE (Cleave et al. 2017; Cleave and Arku 2020). This is also confirmed by the number of physical exhibitors found *in situ*, which has more than doubled since 2009 despite the increasing digitization of society in general.

The suggestion that there is still a profitable and useful place for the EE within an evolving migration industry is evident, as the interviewees' evaluations of success considered all seven tools suggested by Connell and McManus (2011, 85-96). Notably, qualitative evaluations centred on teamwork among diverse entities, whether to involve migration coaches, lawyers, or others, and improved visitor flows at the stand. Counting businesses that moved as a result of the EE (tool 6) was evident primarily for more densely populated and growth-oriented exhibitors. The exhibitors focusing on economic growth and attracting businesses were reconsidering participation, while those offering 'packages' integrating quality of life with jobs recognized the benefits of future participation (e.g. Swe1). This contrasts with a previous finding that small remote destinations often discontinue participation (Connell and McManus 2011), which can be explained by the multifarious knowledge that was accumulated by exhibitors over the years as a sunk cost (Ger1).

These findings mark a shift towards integration of lifestyle and work in the overall place and relocation branding strategies by public sector stakeholders aiming to support social infrastructures rather than economic growth only (Hospers and Reverda 2015; Leick and Lang 2018; Steinführer and Grossman 2021).

Conclusions: lifestyle migration industries beyond growth

This paper has assessed why and how various public sector stakeholders participate in the Dutch Emigration Expo to mediate the opportunities of localities and regions for individuals to achieve better lives, thus linking human migration governance with migration industry research.

This study contributes to the scant research on *lifestyle* migration industries by considering the roles of public sector stakeholders at the EE, which is a meso-level nexus point for information flows, products and services related to lifestyle- and skilled employment- oriented migration (Collins 2021; Faist 2000; Kern and Müller-Böker 2015). It reveals how different stakeholders support and/or assist migration processes, thus reflecting and shaping specific migration patterns, flows and destination places (Cranston et al. 2018). By its focus on ‘lifestyle’ in migration industries (Benson and O’Reilly 2009; 2016), we examined drivers and practices before, during and after migration. Since lifestyle migration scholars generally relate lifestyle-oriented migration with relative affluence and choice, specific information flows and discourses disseminated through various media and events are interlinked with lifestyle migration motives (Åkerlund 2013; David et al. 2015; O’Reilly 2000). Yet, the information provided is highly selective. This study has identified how expos also play a dialectical role in shaping and reflecting shifting sociocultural representations of a ‘good’ and ‘desirable’ migrant (McCollum and Findlay 2018). Such reproductions of stereotypes and biases of idealized migrants may reinforce discrimination and marginalization against those deemed ‘undesirable’. Challenges arising from this socio-economically and socio-demographically selective migration process and its underlying notions of consumption and self-realization, e.g. gentrification and social cohesion issues, have been increasingly brought to the agenda. Our findings reinforce notions of *production* in lifestyle migration and show how the combination of valuable employment with quality-of-life aspects could enhance our understanding of lifestyle within migration.

Second, the EE and similar events fill an important gap in matching the needs and aspirations of potential migrants with destination places. Though prospective migrants find information from many sources and an expo organized as a ‘one-stop-shop’ may not be enough, the need for different follow-ups, to develop and cultivate relations, seems to have become stronger. A local perspective on place branding activities is highly relevant, since many exhibitors refer to the destinations’ challenges in local and regional development (Aasetre et al. 2020; Bell 2016; Kavaratzis and Ashworth 2005; Ma et al. 2019; Pike 2009). Hence, places seeking to attract skilled immigrant workers or lifestyle entrepreneurs and businesses, should recognize the benefits of attending such physical events as a part of an ongoing process of place and relocation branding which fits with the ongoing processes of migration and aligns with local development visions and strategies. However, future research should examine public stakeholders’ uneven abilities to compete for (highly skilled) immigrant workers, talented entrepreneurs and residents.

Third, in facilitating social interactions around trade, knowledge exchange and networking (Bathelt and Schuldt 2008; Skov 2006), the organizer’s role as international mediator and his personal efforts in terms of networking are crucial. The organizer recognized a gap in the migration market: whereas the previous focus was on ‘selling the dream’ to wealthy retirees or those seeking a second home, the current focus links lifestyle orientations with career or entrepreneurial opportunities in urban growth poles for some and remote rural areas for others to support people seeking an international move. He thus seeks to match potential supply and demand through the targeting of specific exhibitors and specific audiences, contributing to the continued relevance of this event. An evolving focus on intra-EU mobility of people seeking better quality of life closely linked with work distinguishes this EE from other events centred on real estate (e.g. ‘A Place in the Sun’ in the UK or ‘Expo Real’ in Germany) or jobs (e.g. European Job Days). As such, to include various expo-like events with different characters in future research, a micro-geographical perspective could explore the roles of specific in-event spaces in bringing together public and private agents to facilitate encounters (Craggs and Mahoney 2014; Skov 2006).

Fourth, this study questions ideas of an alleged ‘war for talent’. Rather than plotting the exhibitors on a continuum from economic growth-oriented to social service-oriented, we conclude that many stakeholders seek to attract both people as talent in creative sectors (Florida 2002, 2005; Michaels et al. 2001), people as skilled, immigrant workers in public sectors (Leick and Lang 2018), and residents in general to increase and diversify local populations. We therefore

advocate for more nuanced approaches in studying migration driven by soft location factors (Benson and O'Reilly 2009; Hayes 2021; Martin-Brelot et al. 2010) combined with economic opportunity (Solimano 2008). Rethinking lifestyle migration industries necessitates attention to the spatial planning strategies of local and regional public actors that aim for more than economic growth (Leick and Lang 2018; Syssner 2020). In this regard, however, it is crucial to address ethical issues and question utilitarian perspectives that reduce migrants to their skills and qualifications and, thus, their potential economic benefits and roles as 'living catalysts' for the destinations. Such perspectives neglect the complex aspirations, needs and experiences of migrants, as well as the procedural dimension of mobility justice (Sheller 2018), i.e. who decides on being mobile or immobile. The term 'retention activities' has to be critically assessed, since the development of attachments is a highly subjective practice. We would therefore encourage future research into lifestyle migration industries that specifically focuses on social and spatial inequalities.

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Data availability statement

Due to the nature of this research, participants of this study did not agree for their data to be shared publicly, so supporting data is not available.

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