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Citation for final published version:

Reynolds, Laura, Doering, Heike , Koenig-Lewis, Nicole and Peattie, Kenneth 2023. Engagement and estrangement: A "tale of two cities" for Bristol's green branding. *European Journal of Marketing* 57 (9) , pp. 2432-2458. 10.1108/EJM-08-2021-0602

Publishers page: <https://doi.org/10.1108/EJM-08-2021-0602>

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**Engagement and estrangement: A 'tale of two cities' for Bristol's green branding**

Journal:	<i>European Journal of Marketing</i>
Manuscript ID	EJM-08-2021-0602.R3
Manuscript Type:	Original Article
Keywords:	Branding, Stakeholders, Sustainable Development, Participation, Brand Management, Qualitative research

## Engagement and estrangement: A ‘tale of two cities’ for Bristol’s green branding

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### Declaration Statements:

This research is based on a PhD funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC). The authors do not have any financial or non-financial interests or affiliations to disclose connected to the research. All research was approved and adhered to principles set out by Cardiff University’s ethical approval committee. Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study. Data is not open access to protect anonymity of participants.

## Engagement and estrangement: A ‘tale of two cities’ for Bristol’s green branding

### Abstract

**Purpose** – Drawing on the service-dominant logic and taking a multi-stakeholder brand value co-creation perspective, this paper investigates whether positioning a place brand around sustainability helps or hinders stakeholders’ ability to co-create value for themselves and the brand.

**Design/ methodology/ approach** – The paper is based on a case study of Bristol’s city branding following its award of European Green Capital, drawing on 29 in-depth interviews with key informants from multiple stakeholder groups. These interviews are supported by secondary material and field observations.

**Findings** – The findings evidence a ‘tale of two cities.’ When sustainability is used as a positioning device, tensions are identified across three elements of brand co-creation: (1) brand meanings; (2) extraordinary versus mundane brand performances; (3) empowerment and disempowerment in branding governance. These tensions create stakeholder experiences of both engagement and estrangement.

**Research Limitations/Implications** – This article is based on one case study and evaluates face-to-face stakeholder interactions. Future research could access further stakeholders, across multiple cities and also examine their digital engagement.

**Practical implications** – Positioning a brand as sustainable (i.e., ‘green’) requires strong commitment to other ethical principles in practice. Brand practitioners and marketers may benefit from advancing stakeholders’ everyday brand performances to reduce disillusionment.

**Originality/value** – Rallying around virtuous associations, i.e., sustainability, does not in itself facilitate the generation of value for stakeholders and the brand, but instead can illuminate power imbalances and tensions in stakeholder interactions that result in a co-destruction of value.

**Keywords** – Brand co-creation; Brand co-destruction; Sustainability; Stakeholder engagement; Stakeholder Empowerment; Performativity; Branding community

**Paper type** – Research paper

## Engagement and estrangement: A ‘tale of two cities’ for Bristol’s green branding

### 1. Introduction

A key evolution in the field of branding involves the ‘opening up’ of branding processes by adopting a multi-stakeholder perspective. This reflects the developments of the service-dominant (S-D) logic which traditionally rested on the value created by marketer-to-consumer or consumer-to-consumer marketing exchanges (Vargo & Lusch, 2004), particularly through brand communities (Merz et al., 2009), before a rising recognition that value propositions can be explored through a multi-stakeholder perspective (Frow & Payne, 2011; Vargo & Lusch, 2017). This evolving brand logic takes a more process-oriented and holistic view of “brands as dynamic and social processes and brand value as a brand’s perceived value-in-use determined by all stakeholders” (Merz et al., 2009, p. 338). Brand value co-creation therefore captures “the process of creating perceived use value for a brand through network relationships and social interactions among all the actors in the ecosystem” (Merz et al., 2018, p. 80). This, in turn, generates important questions about the processes by which branding is governed and value co-created (Conejo & Wooliscroft, 2015; Hatch & Schultz, 2010).

The literature concerning brand communities and co-creation is large and multi-faceted, and Sarasvuo *et al.*’s (2022) review of it demonstrates that co-creation occurs across a range of brand contexts beyond its origins in products and services. However, Peattie and Samuel (2021) highlight four limiting tendencies within that literature: (1) a focus on a limited range of brand types, particularly high-involvement consumer durables or leisure activities; (2) a predominance of research into online communities of interest, rather than offline or actual geographic communities; (3) a tendency for brands to be considered individually when they can interact in practice; and (4) a continuing preoccupation with the direct interactions amongst brands or brand managers and consumers, rather than Hatch and Schultz’s (2010, p. 601) “full stakeholder perspective”. Beyond this, the focus on consumers in brand community and co-creation research is problematic because, as Haverila *et al.* (2021, p. 3) note: “Broadly speaking, brand communities can be characterized as a group of people who are fans of a particular brand.” Our understanding of brand co-creation will therefore be improved by research that goes beyond relatively devoted brand advocates, to consider all those stakeholders with an interest in, and ability to influence, a brand, its values and its value.

An appreciation of stakeholder breadth and diversity creates a need to unpack the “particularities of collective–conflictual value co-creation process” (Cannas et al., 2018, p. 141) and the extent to which variations in stakeholders’ interactions can result in both co-creation and co-destruction of value (Plé & Chumpitaz Cáceres, 2010; Ripoll Gonzalez & Gale, 2023). As Sarasuwo *et al.* (2022) highlight, important emerging research themes in the field concern the variety of roles that stakeholders can play in co-creation, the risks of unharmonious or negative outcomes, and questions around who gets ‘invited’ to be part of the co-creation process. We therefore posit that a multi-stakeholder approach to brand co-creation requires paying greater attention to empowering stakeholders, i.e. the feeling that stakeholders can make a ‘real’ difference in shaping the continuously evolving brand engaging as active partners in co-creation. According to Cova and Pace (2006, p. 1090) “consumer empowerment has been defined (Wathieu et al., 2002) as letting consumers take control of variables that are conventionally pre-determined by marketers.” Within multifaceted and multi-stakeholder brand communities these variables and conventions become increasingly blurred.

A second development concerns calls for branding, and those involved in brand management, to develop more virtuous, responsible and sustainable brands (Iglesias & Ind, 2020; Powell & Balmer, 2011; Septianto et al., 2020), including positioning brands as encouraging or promoting environmental sustainability (Borah et al., 2021). Such ‘green’ brands ingrain environmental endeavours across their products, services, practices, people and communications (Borah et al., 2021; Rivera-Camino, 2007). Although each of these developments has gained momentum within the branding literature when considered separately, there is a scarcity of research examining how sustainability influences empowerment across brand co-creation processes. This is curious, because adopting or promoting sustainability-orientated values encourages an extension of the range of stakeholders taking an active interest in a brand (Iglesias & Ind, 2020). In this paper, we investigate this relationship through a case study of a ‘green’ place brand, asking if positioning a place brand around sustainability (i.e., green branding) helps or hinders stakeholders’ ability to co-create value for themselves and the brand?

Drawing on the S-D logic and taking a multi-stakeholder brand value co-creation perspective, this paper contributes to the branding literature by critically examining the relationship between sustainability and stakeholder empowerment within a dynamic brand co-creation process. In doing so, we respond to calls to develop the field of brand co-creation from a multi-stakeholder perspective (Iglesias & Ind, 2020), explaining how sustainability and stakeholder participation



1  
2 impact the brand co-creation processes and the resultant outcomes for multi-stakeholder value  
3 co-creation and value co-destruction. This contributes to emergent debates in branding theory  
4 and practice, while also illuminating the tensions relevant in place branding and stakeholder  
5 engagement literatures.  
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10 We structure the remainder of the article as follows. First, we examine how branding (in the  
11 place context) has evolved into a dynamic co-creation process, and unpack the ways place  
12 branding literatures have responded to calls to act more virtuously. We subsequently set out  
13 the empirical investigation of Bristol's place brand, where we detail its positioning as 'green'  
14 and environmentally sustainable following its award of European Green Capital (EGC) in  
15 2015. Themes explaining how multiple stakeholder groups co-create and enact Bristol's green  
16 city branding are identified and then discussed alongside extant theory. Finally, theoretical and  
17 practical implications, as well as avenues for future investigation are outlined.  
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## 28 **2. Literature Review**

### 29 **2.1 Putting brand co-creation in its place**

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32 Place branding represents a valuable context in which to investigate the evolution and  
33 complexities of brand co-creation processes because it is arguably the marketing field in which  
34 participatory branding and co-creation via a wide range of stakeholders is furthest evolved  
35 (Samuel et al., 2018; Vallaster et al., 2018). Place brands are defined as "a network of  
36 associations in the place consumers' mind based on the visual, verbal, and behavioural  
37 expression of a place, which is embodied through the aims, communication, values, and the  
38 general culture of the place's stakeholders and the overall place design" (Zenker et al., 2017, p.  
39 17). Therefore, place brands are sites of multi-stakeholder interactions whereby meanings are  
40 forged, shared and enacted. Meanings are ascribed and exchanged across a range of consumers  
41 and stakeholders, allowing value to be created for consumers, a host of connected and disparate  
42 stakeholders, and society more broadly (Conejo & Wooliscroft, 2015). Places are  
43 "multitudinous in their rich and varied arrays of meaning, infinitely divisible into smaller parts  
44 from different vantage points" (Andéhn et al., 2019, p. 323). Investigating brand meanings  
45 captures stakeholders' varying perceptions of the brand, and the corresponding functional and  
46 psychological value placed upon it (Wilson et al., 2014). The brand is therefore created and  
47 shared through the narratives and discursive activities deriving from these fluid and eclectic  
48 meanings (Green et al., 2016). Gaps inevitably emerge between marketers' strategic brand  
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positioning and the meanings assigned by stakeholders (Wilson et al., 2014). Merrilees *et al.* (2012) also highlight the benefits of exploring multiple stakeholder groups and the variations in the brand meanings they hold, and their resultant expectations of the branding process by comparing residents and businesses. The authors show how residents focused more on the social and human qualities of the place (i.e., community bonds and culture), while business stakeholders looked more at the economic and functional associations (i.e., business prospects and transport infrastructure). While the study identifies how local governments can manage trade-offs between these competing groups, the focus retains an emphasis on manager-to-stakeholder interactions rather than stakeholder-to-stakeholder interactions (i.e., exchanges across residents and businesses).

Another reason why place brands provide an important lens to investigate brand co-creation relates to the complexity of creating effective place brands, which requires far more than trying to distil their essence into logos and slogans. Several alternative suggestions have been put forward, including a consideration of the multifarious brand components, set out as the “vision, mission, personality, values, relationships, visual presentation, strategy and physique” (Casidy et al., 2019, p. 1446). Together these form the essence of the brand, its underlying narrative and how it is presented via communication tools. While the eight components provide a useful heuristic lens, they are often entangled and interconnected. The literature remains dominated by an emphasis on the various ingredients that combine to create a place brand, which can lead to a static view and a comparative lack of focus on the dynamics and interactions between these ingredients (Andéhn et al., 2019).

Place branding involves diverse types of stakeholders who share an innate connection with a ‘place’, who collectively build, enact and share meanings (Samuel et al., 2018), drawing parallels to a governance process (Braun et al., 2018; Klijn et al., 2012). Within it, stakeholders are evolving from being passive audiences into partners and co-producers (Klijn et al., 2012), encouraging ongoing “dialogue, debate, and contestation” (Kavaratzis & Hatch, 2013, p. 82), and creating value for the parties involved (Okazaki et al., 2021). Hanna and Rowley (2015) pinpoint the multifaceted “brand architectures” in which a range of local tourism, cultural, commercial, sporting and governmental organisations (many with their own brand) are woven together in a ‘brand web’. Within such webs, public branding organisations (such as a destination management organisation (DMO)) represent the place brand manager, with varying degrees of influence over the many participating organisations and the development of their brands and agendas. Focusing primarily on the role of the brand manager and their interactions



with other stakeholders can overlook the value of exchanges between groups that have previously been considered auxiliary to the process (Samuel et al., 2018). A breadth of stakeholders are considered in the place branding literature extending beyond the original emphasis on tourism organisations and visitors to include entrepreneurs, local business leaders, and local residents (Aitken & Campelo, 2011; Jain et al., 2021; Samuel et al., 2018). The bulk of studies, however, investigate either the relevance of a single stakeholder group to the place brand, or the interaction between the stakeholder groups and the DMO. Advancements in the place branding literature therefore help to move our understanding of brand co-creation beyond an existing preoccupation with online communities of brand enthusiasts, and considering brands in isolation, to considering the eco-system of stakeholders involved in creating value for themselves and the brand.

## ***2.2 Participation in place branding: engagement and performances***

Stakeholder engagement is a well-recognised tool for brand co-creation (Loureiro et al., 2020; Nysveen & Pedersen, 2014), supporting the identification, production and enactment of shared brand meanings (Hatch & Schultz, 2010) amongst the organisations constituting the pillars of a brand's architecture (Hanna & Rowley, 2015). Ideally, stakeholder engagement is less structured and managerial (Hankinson, 2009) and more of an evolving, social and dynamic process (Hanna & Rowley, 2011). This can help to develop a shared sense of purpose, belonging and pride in the place that stakeholders represent and seek to promote (Govers, 2013). The emphasis is therefore on managing *across* multiple stakeholder groups, who are spread over the voluntary, public, private and civil society sectors (Klijn et al., 2012).

Much of the place branding literature paints an idealised picture of open and inclusive processes, whereas in practice they often remain disappointingly top-down and centrally controlled (Kavaratzis & Kalandides, 2015), and narrowly focused on the construction of a commercialised identity supported by marketing communication campaigns (Green et al., 2016). Moreover, while engagement may be pursued when seeking to overtly develop or update the place brand, ensuring that engagement succeeds long-term is often more cumbersome (Casidy et al., 2019). Barriers to stakeholder engagement can relate to conflicts amongst them, as well as a lack of resources or leadership (Casidy et al., 2019). More critical views of stakeholder engagement have therefore emerged (Ripoll Gonzalez & Gale, 2020), with a distinction drawn between stakeholder engagement in the entire branding process, and a façade of involvement through inflexible and structured meetings and fora (Henninger et al., 2016). Partnerships, for example, may involve a host of stakeholders, but with only the 'core'

partners having the ability to influence the outcomes (Casidy et al., 2019; Hankinson, 2009). In practice, place branding processes are often actively exclusionary (Rabbiosi, 2016), perhaps because the diffused ownership of place branding increases the risk of tensions arising between competing stakeholder interests and concerns (Hanna & Rowley, 2015). Differences in stakeholder interactions may also create an arena within which the value exchange may not be equally experienced by all the parties involved in the process (Plé & Chumpitaz Cáceres, 2010).

Aligning diverse stakeholder interests within place branding is acknowledged as both important to do, and difficult to achieve (Kavaratzis & Kalandides, 2015). Attempts to open up the branding processes are reflected in a push towards bottom-up and inclusive stakeholder participation (Jain et al., 2021), driven by an emphasis on partnerships to engage with and enact “issues of social responsibility, ethical practice and sustainable ways of living” (Morgan, 2012, p. 9). As Rabbiosi (2016, p. 155) summarises, place branding is the “entanglement of material, discursive and embodied performances”, with stakeholder engagement operating as a potential conduit between these often disconnected acts. Andéhn *et al.* (2019), however, question the extent that academic and practitioner calls for collaboration and empowerment are able to move away from the prevailing influence of market logics that infiltrate the meanings attached to places and the processes through which they are enacted. There remains a need for the branding literature, specifically within a place branding setting, to more explicitly surface the underlying discourses, performances and implications. Even when attempts at collaboration are encouraged, multiple stakeholders partake in discursive and socio-material acts that ultimately reflect the power laden identity of the place, absorbed and reflected in the identity of its stakeholders (Platt, 2011; von Wallpach et al., 2017). Despite the rising recognition that these complexities remain embedded within branding, relatively little is known about the processes used to successfully engage multiple stakeholders, how stakeholder interests can be better balanced through effective engagement, and most importantly for this paper, how a positioning around sustainability may impact the process of engaging and representing a brand’s stakeholder community.

### ***2.3 Sustainability as a positioning device***

Using place branding as the case setting also helps to unpack the complexities of ingraining sustainability into the brand positioning. Place brands frequently position themselves as environmentally conscious (Taecharungroj et al., 2019), generating competitive advantage by presenting the brand as sustainable and virtuous (Andersson, 2016; Zerrillo & Thomas, 2007).

A place brand positioned around sustainability facilitates the promotion of a place as somewhere to live, work, visit and invest within. As Ma *et al.* (2019, p. 2) set out:

“place branding... is considered an essential tool to respond to sustainability challenges, to maintain a good reputation and to maintain their attractiveness to investors, companies, and a talented workforce.”

Maheshwari *et al.* (2011) recognise that place branding and sustainability can be mutually beneficial, but only when the stakeholders and initiatives operate in harmony. Their study of Liverpool’s Capital of Culture award, identifies multiple benefits for the city, including rising tourist numbers, investment in cultural and architectural heritage, further investment opportunities, and evidence of heightened responsiveness to governance. Ersoy and Lerner (2020) also describe the potential governance gains ascribed to focusing on sustainability when evaluating urban entrepreneurialism during the European Green Capital award. They were among the first to suggest tentatively that focusing on environmental initiatives, as opposed to traditional economic narratives, can allow greater access to city-wide partnerships. Similarly, Ripoll Gonzalez and Gale (2023) recently showed that even when sustainable city narratives are premised as central, these are often overshadowed by a continued focus on economic growth. However, more research is needed to unpack these complex relationships and evaluate the impact of these normative advancements for a place and its assortment of stakeholders.

Positioning the brand around virtuous principles can provide additional symbolic benefits for the place and its stakeholders (Wang, 2019). Using the example of Fair-trade towns, Peattie and Samuel (2021) identify the pivotal role of local activists in creating an ethical brand identity that creates reputational gains for the place, as well as symbolic benefits for its consumers. Other positive reinforcements suggest that involving stakeholders in co-creating shared local initiatives creates more space for sustainability while adding a further benefit of heightened authenticity (Aitken & Campelo, 2011). However, making claims about the place is not enough, there needs to be an enactment of real change for sustainable development to become a distinctive marker of the place brand (Gustavsson & Elander, 2012). This further suggests that place branding is performed through overlapping discursive and socio-material acts that shape the identity of the place and its stakeholders (Platt, 2011; von Wallpach et al., 2017).

Yet, there is scepticism that attaching associations such as ‘green city’ or ‘eco-city’ to places merely provides ‘greenwashing’ (Lu et al., 2018), rather than material environmental gains. Similarly, there is a paucity of evidence on the extent to which such developments are driven

by top-down approaches whereby brand managers (e.g., local governments and DMOs) devise the branding to achieve reputational gains for their environmental, social and economic ambitions. In particular, there is a scarcity of research on the relationship between brands that are positioned around sustainability (i.e., a 'green' branding) and a brand co-creation process that is inclusive of multiple stakeholder voices.

The breadth of stakeholders with vested interests in green marketing and branding, can also make attempts to identify and represent the diverse and salient voices cumbersome (Rivera-Camino, 2007; Wang, 2019), with further difficulties when considering the empowerment of multi-stakeholders in the brand co-creation process. Sarasvuo *et al.* (2022, p. 543), for example, note in this respect that "not all co-creation is collaborative and mutually beneficial". Without full support by all diverse stakeholders, using sustainability as a positive positioning device could therefore risk place brand co-destruction. This was experienced in Munich's city brand development during the refugee crisis when some citizen's collective actions challenged the co-created meaning of Munich being open, welcoming and 'colourful' (Vallaster *et al.*, 2018).

In summary, there remains a dearth of understanding about how these purportedly normative changes within branding and its governance alter the way in which value is co-created for the 'green' brands and those groups who help to build, share and 'live' them. As such, this research set out to investigate whether positioning a place brand around sustainability (i.e., green branding) helps or hinders stakeholders' ability to co-create value for themselves and the brand.

### 3. Case study: Bristol's green branding

Located within the West of England and with a population of approximately 465,000 people, Bristol is among the UK's ten 'Core Cities' (Bristol, 2021). In addition to being voted 'best place to live' in the UK in 2017 (Sunday Times, 2017), Bristol's visitor economy (pre-pandemic) was estimated to provide £1.4bn and 29,000 jobs to the local economy (Destination Bristol, 2021a). Central to Bristol's international reputation is its association with the green movement, cemented through its award of European Green Capital (EGC) in 2015, and also promoted through its use of smart technology to encourage sustainable living, and its status as a Fairtrade City and a cycling city (Destination Bristol, 2021b). Rallying around 'virtuous' narratives also provides an avenue through which the city's stakeholders seek redemption for

an iniquitous past, namely the city's close association with the nineteenth-century slave trade (Malpass et al., 2007; Peattie & Samuel, 2021).

This paper investigates the Bristol brand following its 2015 EGC award. Originating in 2006, the EGC award celebrates "green cities – fit for life" (European Commission, 2021). To receive the accolade, cities must evidence high environmental standards, outline ambitious goals for a legacy of sustainable development and showcase an ethos of environmentally and socially conscious living, offering inspiration for other cities (European Commission, 2021). The award, however, comes at a cost, with the total expense for the Bristol Green Capital campaign amounting to £12.6m (UK government 55%, private sector 34%, local authority 8% and Arts Council 3%) (Bristol Green Capital, 2016).

Bristol's EGC application set out its environmental credentials and the practices to protect its natural and built environment, including green space management, protection of biodiversity, local transport initiatives, air quality management, waste consumption and treatment and energy performance (Bristol, 2014). Central to these initiatives were partnerships that devolve power, share resources and empower community-led change. Bristol also pledged to contribute to global environmental commitments including ambitious CO2 reduction efforts, e.g. a reduction of 40% by 2020 and 80% by 2050 (from a 2005 baseline) through reducing transport, commercial and residential emissions (Bristol, 2014). The purposive case study provides a noteworthy example of how a brand's positioning is often cemented using a combination of governance and communication tools, providing a helpful lens through which to explore the complexities of combining sustainability with stakeholder empowerment in the brand co-creation process.

#### 4. Methodology

Case studies remain a widespread method for extracting detailed accounts of branding processes (Casidy et al., 2019; Kavaratzis & Kalandides, 2015) and the importance of wider community members when co-creating value (Samuel et al., 2018). Our case study was implemented using a social constructionist epistemological and ontological perspective, evaluating the brand co-creation process through the lens of those involved, and considering the context of the site's social, economic and environmental status. This afforded a critical examination of stakeholder involvement and their dynamic interactions (Eriksson &

Kovalainen, 2008). Using an in-depth case study we also developed a holistic understanding of this phenomenon to generate theoretical, empirical and practical outcomes (Yin, 2009).

Our primary data collection tool was in-depth interviews with 29 key informants from multiple stakeholder groups, undertaken in the 12-months up to March 2017 (aftermath of the EGC award). To prompt discussion, an interview protocol was designed around three areas selected following an analysis of the literature and advanced in line with emergent data: (1) an exploration of stakeholders' perceptions and experiences of the environmentally conscious brand positioning; (2) discussions surrounding stakeholders' involvement in engagement and promotional activities (e.g. consultations, collaborations, partnerships, events and campaigns) where participants were able to enact the meanings and associations assigned to the place; and (3) an exploration of perceived opportunities and barriers when seeking to partake in these activities. Interview duration ranged from 60 to 120 minutes. Informants consented to their interviews being audio-recorded and transcribed, resulting in over 250,000 words of transcription data.

The interviewee sample was determined through a two-pronged approach. First, we adopted a multi-stakeholder approach recruiting participants from stakeholder groups featured in place branding studies (Hanna & Rowley, 2015), namely the business community, local authority, local community, visitor economy and higher education. Second, we focused on senior-level stakeholders with a role in the representation of the city. We identified these participants using Mitchell et al.'s (1997) stakeholder salience model. Participants were selected that had access to one, or more, forms of engagement (power); participated in engagement and collaborative activities that affect their primary stakeholder group (urgency); and were perceived as having a substantial role within their stakeholder category (legitimacy). Once the sample frame was decided, online material was assessed to identify salient stakeholders from across the groups. To help with the challenging task of accessing local community stakeholders, a well-placed "gatekeeper" assisted with the snowballing process.

Interviews were conducted at locations in and around Bristol, including participants' place of employment, visitor attractions, local coffee shops and community hubs. Undertaking interviews at these sites allowed for immersion into the city and ongoing observations of its neighbourhoods, visitor attractions and amenities. Further field visits (n=5) were conducted, including walking tours and visits to attractions. Photographs and fieldnotes were taken allowing for reflexivity in the analysis and helping to inform subsequent interviews (Nadin &



Cassell, 2006). Secondary materials were also collated, based on materials provided by participants (e.g., promotional leaflets, or business information packs) and an online search of relevant policy documents and independent reviews following the EGC award (n=14) (Table 2). Data and methodological triangulation were employed by including multiple groups of stakeholders in the final sample and utilising supplementary observations and secondary sources (see Appendix 1). These measures help to encourage internal and construct validity (Gibbert et al., 2008).

Further measures to support validity and reliability in the data collection instruments included encouraging participants to articulate their perceptions through projective techniques (Belk, 2013), including photo elucidation and sentence completion and word association exercises. Of particular benefit was the incorporation of questions surrounding the personification of the brand, enabling participants to reflect on both the strengths and weaknesses of the city's identity. In addition to providing interview prompts and enriching discussions, the data derived was compared to discussions around the interview themes to check for consistency.

Three stages of analysis were undertaken (Gioia et al., 2013), as illustrated in Appendix 2. The first round of coding identified emergent incidents from the raw data, with codes based on stakeholders' experiences of sustainability and stakeholder empowerment. Participants' experiences of sustainability were evidenced across (a) the brand meanings and narratives they assigned, (b) the way through which these meanings were shared and enacted across a multidimensional place brand web, and (c) stakeholders' conveyance of their role within the brand co-creation process. Second round coding involved identifying variations in the meanings (associations and values) and social processes (engagement performances), which included differences across stakeholder groups. Tensions across the brand co-creation process were identified. Finally, a third set of coding developed core categories aligned with the extant literature, pointing to a juxtaposition of value co-creation and co-destruction for the brand and its stakeholders.

To support the trustworthiness of the results, the initial round of coding was undertaken by the first author, which was checked and refined by the research team. Subsequent second and third order coding was undertaken through iterative exchanges among the research team, whereby codes were compared and evaluated collaboratively alongside theory. Member checking occurred during in-person meetings, where notes were compiled and shared, producing a series of coding instructions. In addition, the second and third order codes were stored, refined and

checked using qualitative data analysis software (NVivo). Coding collaboratively ensures greater rigour in the analysis (Weston et al., 2001) and supports the dependability of the results (Cascio et al., 2019). The methodology was also informed by aspects of grounded theory that advances the investigation of under-researched and complex phenomena (Samuel & Peattie, 2016). For example, the key categories were developed based on immersion into the literature and iterative analysis of the data (Charmaz, 2014). Detailed memos were utilised throughout data collection and analysis, unpacking themes and their connection to theory (Charmaz, 2014; Samuel et al., 2018). However, this research set out to examine the relationship between sustainability and stakeholder empowerment based on understandings from the brand co-creation literature and therefore would not be considered as employing grounded theory.

## 5. Findings: a “tale of two cities”

The findings evidence a series of tensions when positioning a brand around environmentally conscious connotations, with stakeholders presenting an assemblage of brand meanings, enacted through extraordinary and mundane engagement performances, and resulting in uncertain stakeholder roles within a contested brand web (Appendix 2).

### 5.1 Sustainability as an assemblage of environmental, economic and social meanings

The brand’s positioning as environmentally conscious created a juxtaposition of unity and division evident across the brand meanings that were shared and debated by the participants.

#### 5.1.1 Expressions of pride and differentiation

For those supportive of Bristol’s label as a ‘green’ brand, the environmental accolades provided shared sources of pride and differentiation, which expanded beyond the EGC award to include the intangible and tangible character of the city and its organisations:

Bristol has a strong green activism ... It’s sort of in peoples’ DNA to be interested and passionate about the environment ... There’s a whole raft of organisations who are very interested in sustainability and the natural environment, and the wider sense about sustainability ... We have some of the leading people who are making money out of the environment. It is important to align the economy with the environment. (P-2, business community)

For this leading business representative, sustainability in the “*wider sense*” encompassed a need to connect environmental narratives with economic ones. A director of investment within the local council similarly reaffirmed the value of combining sustainability with economic prosperity:

What has shifted in the time I have been here is that Bristol very much sees itself as similar to London and a serious city. They can both have a high quality of life and be concerned about sustainability, but you can also be economically successful. You don't come here to retire, you come here to start your creative, innovative start-up business, which I don't think we would have seen our place as the place to do that years ago. (P-16, local authority)

#### 5.1.2 *Driving narratives around inclusion and exclusion*

Other participants also looked beyond the environmental connotations and related sustainability to social equality:

There is a consciousness to the city. I would say there is a lot more ethics and thinking about fair trade, or the green capital. It's about thinking about the ethics behind everyday life. (P-12, local community)

This wider remit of sustainability was evident during the personification exercises. Running alongside descriptions of being fun, innovative and unorthodox, Bristol was also considered to be thoughtful, caring and considerate:

[Bristol] would be someone who was concerned about the environment and the ethical issues of the day. So, I think it would be somebody who (is) conscious about things (P-16, local authority)

[Bristol] is a thoughtful place. It's a green place. It's a caring place. (P-2, business community)

#### 5.1.3 *Expressions of disillusionment and critique*

Expressions of optimism by some participants were matched with disillusionment by others. Critiques included seemingly contradictory political decision-making by those who advocate strengthening environmental sustainability, but in practice allow or facilitate environmental

degradation. Instead of the local government actions helping to build the social reality of sustainability, contradictions undermined it.

Despite being Green Capital, the council had not adopted any policy that related directly to not having 48 diesel generators banging away in the centre of the city ... That's just one simple example. As a consequence, we're now beginning to have discussions to feel our way towards a clean air and clean energy policy for the city, which are things you would have expected to come up under a green capital. (P-9, local community)

There is a sense of being Green Capital in a city that is dependent on cars ... The mayor previously tried to address some of that by introducing resident parking zones and cycle lanes and it wasn't entirely popular. There was a lobby against it and people even came and parked a tank on the green. There was that sense of, are we really green and sustainable and cycling friendly, or are we a city that is not? (P-16, local authority)

Disillusionment expanded beyond a critique of the natural and built environment, with a scrutiny of social equity and an ability of citizens to access material assets 'equally'. Participants discussed Bristol as a "tale of two cities" (P-15, local authority), whereby the prosperity, vibrancy and innovation are not equally enjoyed. P-11 (local community) identifies the positioning of areas of extreme wealth next to areas of extreme deprivation. Similarly, P-13 (business community) details, "Yes, diversity is brilliant, but there are challenges as a relatively rich city, if you're poor in Bristol then you're excluded". These observations were commonplace among interviewees, emphasising the perceived unfairness and social inequalities, further highlighting that concerns over economic and social sustainability cannot be separated from environmental sustainability.

Positioning around sustainability acted as a unifier *and* point of division for stakeholders based on their specific assemblage of environmental, economic and social brand meanings. For those benefiting from sustainability, environmental assets and their economic outcomes were a source of pride and commonality, but for those unable to access the gains (or for those seeking to represent them) tensions emerge. These tensions were evidenced through the concerns over Bristol being a place of prosperity and opportunity for some, and isolation and deprivation for others.

## ***5.2 Enactment through extraordinary and mundane engagement performances***

Positioning the brand around sustainability prompted large-scale extraordinary performances that attracted local, national and international audiences. These were accompanied by smaller and more incremental engagement performances whereby an assemblage of brand meanings were shared, refined and enacted by city stakeholders.

### *5.2.1 Celebrating sustainability through city-wide events*

Grandiose city-wide celebratory events and promotional activities associated with the EGC campaign were organised throughout 2015. One such event was the week-long Big Green Week festival, featuring live music, debates, family events, flash mobs, yoga, poetry and speakers (S-7). Other activities included a giant water slide through the city-centre, showcasing of a life-sized whale out of recycled materials and a 50-tonnes mechanical fire-breathing spider made from recycled military hardware, alongside a series of family days and street celebrations (S-2). A senior official (P-13) involved in executing these events justified their importance for community enjoyment, enhancing the city's status and developing positive word-out-mouth:

... the bigger thing was Big Green Week, which brought a lot of activities to our streets, with street markets, and things, and national and international speakers. So those are very visible events ... I want people to smile about Bristol. I think that's really, really important. For me it's as important that we're a happy city, as we are an economically successful city.

Heightened international awareness for the city's sustainable positioning could be exchanged for pride and status:

It's [EGC] certainly putting a spotlight on the city, and I hope it made the city proud to be recognised as being one of the more sustainable cities in Europe at the time, and that people saw that as a community the people of Bristol are really committed to sustainability and reducing their impact on the world. (P-1, business representative)

The value of these expensive and short-term celebratory events was not endorsed by all inhabitants. Instead, the campaigns were critiqued by some as "something bestowed upon Bristol" (P-25, visitor economy). Concerns over differing levels of access to these events purporting to celebrate the city's environmental sustainability and unite its communities were raised:

It's been hard going for things like Green Capital ... a huge amount of money went into it, and it only lasted one year. I'm not sure what the legacy is to be honest. I think it's quite good at putting on these huge festivals, but in terms of ongoing drip, drip, drip, building up, then I think you've got to be careful it's not all flash and no substance. Yeah, there's a huge amount of social isolation ... The older community tend to get a bit left out and overlooked. Not everyone wants to go to big events. People want places, affordable places, to meet up. (P-10, local community)

These criticisms were reflected in an EGC final report commissioned by the local authority (S-6), which highlighted that minority communities and disadvantaged groups could have been engaged further. An additional concern related to the dominance of events supporting the EGC branding and overlooking the evolving nature of cities. As P-14 (local authority) expressed, "I'm not saying we ought to neglect our past, and we should cherish and remember that, but we are a living, breathing city, like all cities. We are not going to stay still. We shouldn't be linked only with 2015".

### 5.2.2 Incremental engagement and partnership building

Running alongside these large-scale enactments, the findings evidence the overlooked potential of smaller, rudimental or 'mundane' engagement performances occurring behind the scenes, whereby local stakeholders share their meanings and experiences through their everyday interactions with each other and the city's green movement. The EGC opened opportunities for enactment of the brand through longer-term city-wide discussions and engagement. One prominent example is the strengthening of the Green Capital Partnership, which "is in its widest sense a bunch of 800 organisations who have signed up to pledge to be greener" (P-16, local authority). Signing a pledge demonstrated a commitment for action and provided an arena whereby interpretations could be shared and enacted. The Green Capital Partnership's mission includes supporting environmental sustainability by "providing a leadership voice and enabling collaborative and collective action across sectors towards [a] shared vision" (S-12).

During the EGC award, this partnership, along with others across the city, utilised networking events alongside collegial activities to showcase and reinvent material artifacts, share success stories, plan small and larger scale events, build a community of interest and foster a sense of pride (S-11; S-12). One participant of the monthly "Green Mingle" suggested that when principles could be "bought into" then an "ecosystem" could emerge "built on a premise that this is not us telling you what it is; this is for you to build into. We'll create as many channels



as we possibly can for you to feed into. We'll create organisation and structure, and then project it outwards" (P-6, business community). These informal connections build commonality toward an approach and promote participation:

If you look at that [Green Capital] partnership, it existed, but it had nothing like the structure or the collective voice it does now. Even if that is the sole legacy [of EGC] in giving all those organisations a mechanism to engage with the council, engage with all the kind of big players in the city, then I see that as a positive. Quite often I think it's a process of getting the big organisations working together and the kind of commonality of the goal. (P-29, higher education)

Similarly, the business community established a Go Green network, with a commitment to, and enactment of, sustainability providing a point of unity among their members:

That was a part of our strong pitch to be EGC, but it's also a signpost to the future. We run a programme called Go Green, which we started a few years ago, but had quite a big boost last year in getting businesses to talk to each other about how they're using their facilities, how they're talking to their staff, and using their natural environment. We've put sustainability at the centre of how we operate and position ourselves ... Really aligning these values to the business. (P-2, business community)

Pre-arranged networking events were important in building a community of shared interests, developing collective activities and negotiating different associations.

### *5.2.3 Negotiating and sharing a green legacy*

Small-scale and largely behind the scenes gatherings created an arena whereby larger city-wide events can be planned and providing a platform through which a longer-term green legacy can be endorsed. The connection to sustainability strengthened legitimacy amongst these groups, and provided a point of commonality for promoting their collective activities.

Local community residents were also involved through the Neighbourhood Partnership Scheme, uniting resident groups from across the city and providing a platform for their views, including on how sustainability was incorporated, celebrated and showcased. By aligning with the EGC this scheme provided resources to enable local community stakeholders to enact

cultural and environmental programmes. However, as a senior official described, awareness of these opportunities remained limited:

Using EGC, the fact we gave £2million in grants that were distributed across the city, and we gave a lot of those through the neighbourhood partnerships, for neighbourhood programmes, both cultural and environmental programmes ... Maybe what we failed to do with some of those was brand them very clearly as Green Capital, because that would have given people greater pride in those projects. A lot of people didn't see where the money had come from. (P-13, senior official)

Stakeholders identified collective 'storytelling', negotiation of associations and the resultant development of a sense of community, pride and shared identity stemming from the extraordinary and mundane engagement performances. However, tensions existed, with neither the extraordinary or mundane performances providing equal participation or representation. Therefore, despite the potential of value being generated through meaningful interactions sparked by stakeholders' ongoing celebration of the sustainable brand, the findings denote an overreliance on the exciting and extraordinary performances of the brand with well-positioned stakeholders benefitting most overtly.

### ***5.3 Empowerment and disempowerment in branding governance***

Since improved social equity is fundamental to sustainability, a green brand positioning might seem to imply greater equity, empowerment, and grassroots stakeholder involvement. However, the findings evidence continued hierarchies in involvement, creating dynamic and evolving roles within the brand co-creation process.

#### ***5.3.1 Leveraging sustainability for (active) participation***

Groups of sector-specific stakeholders established themselves as active partners in the branding process by recognising the collective benefits of working collaboratively to share their vision of the city and its sustainable legacy. Having a point of unity helped to strengthen stakeholders' longer-term position:

There was a sense that we needed, together, to affect some really lasting change on how these organisations are led and provided for. It was far better for us and the city. We were far more powerful if we spoke as one voice, rather than battling. (P-22, visitor economy)

The alignment between environmental and economic sustainability also supports the development of sector-specific collaborations creating a “network and ecosystem of organisations around sustainability and high tech” (P-16, local authority), and producing an “economic opportunity” for those involved. Stakeholders with access to these close-knit partnerships, were welcomed into the conversations and routes developed to promote their mutual interests.

Engaged stakeholders (in particular the business community and leading visitor economy members) outlined the opening up of access to the local authority and supported entry to the periphery of the networks occurring with the “big players” in the city (P-29). One of the more pronounced examples for enhanced stakeholder engagement is the above-mentioned Green Capital Partnership with over 800 members (S-11; S-12). For the more influential stakeholders, access to strategic long-term partnerships can present the opportunity to enact shared commitments, relationships, events, information sharing and promotional campaigns across the city.

### *5.3.2 Utilising strategic (large and small) partnerships and collaborations*

Despite the potential for active participation in larger partnerships, such as the Green Capital Partnership, not all stakeholders reported empowerment from its implementation. For example, the local community were unable to undertake coordination-based roles, instead fulfilling ancillary tasks, such as consultations, form-filling and attendance at periodic events. To some extent these stakeholders tried to reduce the hurdles by creating their own vehicles for collective enactment at the local level, developing informal, small-scale resident and community interest groups. These smaller and more concentrated networks, whose participants can formulate and shape the way that their associations and meanings are enacted, were more successful in capturing local community engagement. While stakeholders built their own circles and communities to share knowledge and community capacity, influence over the city-wide partnerships and their corresponding engagement and events remains uneven.

Moreover, there was evidence of tensions within the local authority led organisations. For example, the use of the Neighbourhood Partnership Scheme remained largely structured and top-down with its remit under scrutiny, given ongoing reductions in public-sector resources. It did, however, provide a channel for residents to articulate their vision of the city and gain financial support. The findings, though, highlight dissent and critique relating to these

partnerships, given their perceived advancement of *lip service* as opposed to effective and meaningful engagement. For example, when discussing the unevenness of inclusion for the voluntary sector, a resident outlines the restrictions in engagement activities. The local community member suggested that “cheerful stuff”, such as community events or hanging baskets are encouraged by the local authority, so long as the resident group did not attempt to undertake controversial activities that ran contrary to the local authority’s plans (P-7). Focusing on sustainability was thus not enough to foster a strategic role for residents beyond their roles as facilitators within local-level partnerships and networks.

### 5.3.3 Retaining direct and indirect brand managers

Despite the EGC claims of shared ownership and community empowerment, analysis following the award highlights a divergence in experiences for stakeholders (S-2; S-6; S-8; S-11). Similarly, the interview data reveals the business community’s seemingly heightening stake in overseeing the branding process and the local authority retaining its position of influence. Top-down approaches to engagement co-exist alongside the development of influential networks with a well-established structure of how groups are organised and collaborative engagement activities undertaken. Elected officials and the local authority retained a central role in arranging structured, and often city-wide, activities. However, rather than managing these projects in-house, the local authority looked to long-term, cross-sector partnerships involving the business community and the visitor economy. This included the development of public-private partnerships, with the DMO remaining prominent. More broadly, the local authority retained a role in partnerships led by members of the community, such as the business communities’ investment collective and the retail Business Improvement District.

### 5.3.4 Reinforcing commonality or dissent

Our data points to persistent hurdles for stakeholder involvement and empowerment, even when enactment of the brand is secured through multi-stakeholder partnerships. These partnerships were predominately ‘successful’ when backed by the EGC campaign, with membership largely comprising those with existing influence. Retaining an overall influence, the local authority attempted to overcome some of these barriers for residents by encouraging engagement and seeking to widen participation in the processes. Nonetheless, participation remained cumbersome in practice despite some indication that sustainability can provide a point of commonality. The problem remains that the experience of sustainability, the way that these groups can ‘perform’ the brand, and the type of engagement undertaken remain

inconsistent and uneven. The result of these tensions is enduring hierarchies in stakeholder involvement, which are expanding the gulf between those engaging in, and those becoming estranged by, the brand co-creation process. Despite this study focusing on stakeholder-to-stakeholder interactions across the place brand web, and the ingrainings of sustainability into the brand positioning, the evolving roles created a trajectory of power and influence across the brand co-creation process. Therefore, while a 'green' brand positioning provides engagement and benefits for some, it can also create estrangement (i.e., dissent and disillusionment) for others.

## 6. Discussion and implications

### 6.1 Engagement and estrangement in 'green' branding

The brand co-creation literature recognises stakeholders' interaction with the brand and each other (Conejo & Wooliscroft, 2015; Davari et al., 2017; Merz et al., 2009) and yet, this implies that the stakeholders are a unified and equal collective. Instead, our study suggests that stakeholders are unequal "agents of brand performance" (von Wallpach et al., 2017, p. 443), shaping, sharing, and enacting converging brand meanings through a myriad of interpersonal interactions and engagement performances. Therefore, value is not co-created uniformly for those partaking in Bristol's 'green' branding (Plé & Chumpitaz Cáceres, 2010).

Positioning the brand around sustainability exacerbates tensions across already contested brand webs, illuminating stakeholders' differing and evolving roles that can create both opportunities and barriers for involvement and empowerment. While studies increasingly recognise that value can be created and diminished by stakeholders' relationship with the brand and its stakeholders (Echeverri & Skålén, 2011; Makkonen & Olkkonen, 2017), we show how positioning a brand around sustainability creates underexplored tensions for meanings, interactions and engagement performances that create a disjuncture between those engaged in the co-creation of value versus those disengaged leading to a co-destruction of value. In other words, rallying around virtuous associations, i.e., sustainability and engagement, does not in itself facilitate the generation of value for all stakeholders and the brand, but it can also activate power imbalances and tensions that results in a co-destruction of value.

#### 6.1.1 Sustainability as a catalyst for (dis)engagement

It is well-documented that stakeholders' increased engagement (Okazaki et al., 2021; Pucci et al., 2020) can support firm and stakeholder value co-creation. Yet, studies predominately relay the benefits, such as opening channels for stakeholder communication and debate (Hanna & Rowley, 2015), including to those groups (such as residents) previously considered ancillary in the process (Merrilees et al., 2012; Samuel et al., 2018). Our study, however, provides contrasting and co-existing accounts of stakeholders' experiences of social divides and social inclusion as they seek to engage with the 'green' brand and each other. Positioning around sustainability can help to entrench benefits for some, providing a unifying point through which to collectively rally, access collaborations and partnerships, enact shared commitments, foster relationships, exchange information and share expressions of pride and enthusiasm. However, these opportunities exist alongside concerns over exclusion, rhetoric and replication of positions of influence that create dissent and conflict for stakeholders estranged from the process.

Instilling sustainability as a positioning device did not omit these tensions among stakeholders, but rather illuminated and widened existing divisions. Brand meanings were built and shared based on an assemblage of associations and experiences with the city's environmental, social and economic prosperity. Socio-economic characteristics, however, influenced participants' excitement and involvement in activities 'celebrating' the EGC award and participation in the green movement and contributed to a "tale of two cities". As with sustainable consumption more widely, the relative financial expense of supporting sustainable development through individual consumption practice, and the resultant symbolic value placed upon this 'chic' behaviour, has "infused environmental commitment with elitist class connotations" (Soron, 2010, p. 177). Moreover, sustainable consumers are able to demonstrate and define their own sense of class through these consumption practices (Shaker & Rath, 2019). Similarly, we find that certain stakeholders present themselves as environmentally conscious and proactive citizens, supporting Bristol's 'green' positioning through their sustainable practices and celebration of the city's environmental accolade. However, this creates discord for stakeholders that have limited access to sustainable practices and the associated festivities. Instead, these stakeholders call for attention to be paid to reducing economic inequality in the city rather than supporting unaffordable lifestyles exacerbating the social divide. As such, instead of sustainability providing a catalyst for change (Borah et al., 2021), our study points to sustainability illuminating existing divisions among a brand's stakeholders.

### *6.1.2 Performativity and participation*



Stakeholders partake in a multitude of discursive acts that enable them to negotiate, collectively share and enact their brand associations, narratives and meanings, while also fostering relationships amongst the brand's stakeholders. Overlaps in engagement and performative approaches to understanding branding are recognised (von Wallpach et al., 2017), seeing the identity of a brand as not only shaped and deliberately communicated, but also enacted, for example, through the interactions of consumers and producers 'performing' the roles of consumer and brand manager (Rabbiosi, 2016). As the roles of consumer and producer continue to blur, stakeholders (including residents) enact the brand through a myriad of "stories, discussions, mundane and activities" which create "the character, the icons, the stereotype and the myths of the city bringing new interpretations and negotiating their own sense of being" (Platt, 2011, p. 41).

Bristol's EGC experience reveals a contrast between the discrete, large scale and extraordinary performances of the city's green branding, and the less obvious but ongoing performativity whereby the language and actions of the locals express the brand. Our findings confirm that these incremental, everyday and discursive negotiations of the brand through sharing stories, building a sense of community and unity among participants, signing pledges of allegiance and even lobbying for change are important brand performances. We suggest that performativity between internal stakeholders is often small-scale and behind the scenes through engagement activities that include meetings, networking events, committees and fora but also involve a breadth of informal channels such as knowledge exchange networks and relationship building. These more 'mundane' and commonplace discursive exchanges provide a platform whereby stakeholders negotiate, present and ultimately enact their brand meanings and images (Platt, 2011; Rabbiosi, 2016). However, within the EGC initiative, we identify a disjuncture in value co-creation opportunities, with some stakeholders able to 'headline' large-scale performances, while others remain on the side lines and carry out everyday performances.

### *6.1.3 Re-evaluating the parameters of 'branding' communities and empowerment*

The literature on brand co-creation already extends its focus beyond brand enthusiasts to consider a range of stakeholders who will vary in terms of the level and nature of their interest in the brand, their degree of engagement with the brand, and their participation in the cocreation process (Haverila et al., 2021; Sarasvuo et al., 2022). What our findings revealed within place branding was a distinction between stakeholders able to secure direct involvement with formal discussion and decisions about the brand and branding processes, and others who could only hope to indirectly exert influence through communication, actions and performances. Sarasvuo

*et al.* (2022) note that the majority of the co-creation literature focuses on stakeholders influencing via communicating or acting upon brands in ways that only indirectly influence marketers' branding activities. The more direct involvement in branding that the most engaged and privileged stakeholders achieved suggests that, within the wider brand community, a 'branding community' existed of stakeholders with direct access to, and influence on, formal branding processes and decisions. This term was used by Yakimova *et al.* (2021) to describe social networks operating in franchise marketing contexts, but in our case more closely resemble a 'branding pool' that Mäläskä *et al.* (2011) describe operating in business-to-business markets as "a dynamic group of independent network actors that perform direct branding activities" (p. 1147). Considering the existence of such branding communities could provide additional clarity for future research in place branding and may become important in other brand contexts as branding processes become more open, participative, and orientated towards co-creation.

Key themes within Sarasvuo *et al.*'s (2022) review of brand co-creation included issues around the nature of co-creation 'interactions', who is involved in co-creation, who gets 'invited' into the co-creation process, and the different roles that stakeholders play. Our findings show the interconnection between these elements. In particular, the involvement and roles played by our stakeholders, with those 'invited in' to become fully engaged becoming active brand co-creators, while those left to become disengaged risked becoming not simply passive but involved in co-destruction. The nature of the interaction involved some stakeholders able to become part of the formal branding processes, whilst others relied on just influencing the brand through performances. Moreover, the alternative of only paying 'lip service' to the principles of engagement and collaboration is not only likely to fail (Zenker & Erfgen, 2014), but also intensifies disillusionment in the process itself, which can result in co-destruction of value (Plé & Chumpitaz Cáceres, 2010).

Through our case of a 'green' place brand, we highlight the nuance, contestation and contradictions involved in what ought to be considered as stakeholder empowerment. In doing so, we suggest that existing definitions of empowerment are outdated and continue to centre around notions of consumer empowerment and marketers' sharing of control over branding processes (Cova & Pace, 2006; Wathieu *et al.*, 2002).

## **6.2 Theoretical implications**

We contribute to the brand co-creation literature by examining multiple exchanges and interactions occurring *across* different stakeholder groups that exist within amorphous brand communities (Hanna & Rowley, 2015; Samuel et al., 2018). In doing so, we demonstrate how value is co-created when exchanges occur between different sets of stakeholders, including when both groups are considered ancillary, such as residents and businesses. We show that even within this more open and organic governance place branding context (Iglesias et al., 2013), divisions between those included and those excluded are difficult to overcome (Ripoll Gonzalez & Gale, 2020). Responding to calls to investigate multi-stakeholder perspectives of green branding (Wang, 2019), we also offer insights into the impacts of positioning a place brand around 'green' or environmentally conscious connotations. Our research demonstrates that this virtuous positioning does not automatically encourage stakeholder involvement and empowerment, but can lead to disengagement from, disillusionment with, and contempt for branding processes.

Moreover, we build on notions of multi-stakeholder brand co-creation, which remains a pertinent area of study in branding theory (Iglesias & Ind, 2020; Merz et al., 2009). We specifically unpack these developments within a place branding setting, selected to elucidate the impetus on multi-stakeholder participation given local stakeholders' innate connection to the brand (Casidy et al., 2019; Peattie & Samuel, 2021; Samuel et al., 2018). We evidence that the acceptance of a widening of the catchment of stakeholders involved in the process does not necessarily translate to the automatic or equal co-creation of value for all those involved, with value being shown to be both co-created and co-destroyed (Echeverri & Skålén, 2011; Makkonen & Olkkonen, 2017) depending on the stakeholder's varying participation and empowerment. While value is co-created through often overlooked or taken-for-granted everyday discursive and material brand performances (von Wallpach et al., 2017), this remains an untapped and under-resourced asset within the brand co-creation process. Stakeholders continue to co-create and co-destroy value based on their varying and conflictual meanings, interactions and enactments they share within a multifaceted brand community.

Given the variations in meanings, interactions and value placed on brand performances, being a member of the brand community does not always equate to involvement and empowerment within its branding processes. Instead, we suggest there remains a distinction between everyday sharing of meanings and brand performances in a brand community versus influence over the branding processes that requires entry into the branding community (Yakimova et al., 2021). The latter remains restricted to those with existing positions of influence, such as the local

1 authorities, DMOs and increasingly well-placed business stakeholders, whilst we see many  
2 residents and smaller visitor attractions disengaged and disempowered by the process. The  
3 brand co-creation process resultantly remains orchestrated to give voice to some stakeholders  
4 whilst neutralising others.  
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10 Selectivity is not reduced, but instead illuminated by the ingraining of sustainability as a  
11 positioning device. As with sustainable consumption more widely, the endorsement and  
12 enactment of brands positioned around environmental claims can reinforce connotations of  
13 social class and expand societal divisions within divided communities (Shaker & Rath, 2019;  
14 Soron, 2010). Deliberate or inadvertent associations with environmentally sustainability  
15 prompts heightened expectations of fairness, responsibility and inclusion, propelling narratives  
16 about economic and social prosperity to the forefront of stakeholders' perceptions.  
17 Sustainability does not encourage empowerment, but instead shines a light on its nuance,  
18 complexity and contestation. Instead of continuing to evaluate consumer empowerment (Cova  
19 & Pace, 2006), there is an urgent need to unpack and critique brand co-creation as a route to a  
20 wider and more conflictual notion of stakeholder empowerment. As such, empowerment is a  
21 concept far more contested and nuanced than its current remit in branding theory suggests and  
22 should be updated to reflect the complexities of stakeholder empowerment within brand  
23 communities.  
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### 34 **6.3 Practical Implications**

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36 Our study provides practical implications for stakeholders involved directly and indirectly in  
37 the creation and communication of brands. For those involved in the widening remit of brand  
38 management, we highlight the additional scrutiny attached to positioning around 'green' and  
39 environmentally conscious connotations, which requires a strong commitment to sustainable,  
40 fair and equitable principles in practice.  
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48 We also pinpoint the benefit of supporting the everyday and mundane activities that can help  
49 stakeholders to enact and experience the brand. For example, additional resources could be  
50 provided to enable stakeholders to share stories and knowledge, sign pledges that lobby for  
51 environmental commitment, which build longer term relationships and a sense of community.  
52 Encouraging enactment of the brand through everyday activities may also help to reduce  
53 internal disillusionment and support routes to enhanced stakeholder empowerment.  
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The research also sets out a holistic notion of stakeholder participation and empowerment, reflecting the importance of discursive engagement practices, but also enacting the brand. At the same time, it is important to accept that conflicts and contestation are a central part of branding, especially for place branding, as stakeholders bring different associations, demands and resources to the process. While barriers to participation need to be addressed to create a more holistic, equitable and constructive branding co-creation process, perpetuating calls for a completely unified view of how to represent and express a brand may be counterproductive and privilege the loud voices and extraordinary performances over the less vocal and more mundane activities. Moreover, processes relating to 'real' geographic communities and place branding increasingly applies to other contexts as branding processes (by design or evolution) is becoming more participative, and communities of stakeholders beyond 'fans' are taking a greater interest in a brand and its values.

## 7. Limitations and future research

Our research pinpoints tensions surrounding the 'green' brand, its enactment and the varying stakeholder roles resulting in an uneven brand co-creation process. Future research could explore whether the brand co-creation process might differ where the brand positioning is focused on alternative differentiators, such as heritage or retro brands. Our focus also centres on salient stakeholders (Mitchell et al., 1997), i.e. those who already have access to, and awareness of, the multifaceted brand community. Since this study points to a hierarchy of involvement for stakeholders with a degree a salience, this is likely to be more pertinent for those absent and removed from the process. Future research should access a wider sample of stakeholders. Similarly, this article focuses on face-to-face rather than digital interactions, which remains an important area of stakeholder participation and brand co-creation. Further research could extend these findings and examine how digital and social media advancements impact face-to-face engagement and networking.

Central to our study is an in-depth investigation into 'how' stakeholders are participating in the co-creation process, and through this investigation we identify a disjuncture between co-creation and co-destruction and a need to extend our understandings of stakeholder empowerment. We call for more research on stakeholder empowerment that brings together the need to support open invitations for multiple stakeholders to actively participate in a wider range of branding processes and engagement performances that supports their ability to co-create value for themselves and the brand. Moreover, our research helps to pave the way for

future studies to examine ‘*why*’ certain stakeholders are able to maintain or strengthen their position within the brand(ing) community and assert influence over others.

European Journal of Marketing



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## Appendix 1: Sample description and secondary data sources

In-depth semi-structured interviews (n=29)		
Group	Reference	Participant Description
<i>Business community</i> (n=6)	P-1	Senior Manager in large innovation business group
	P-2	Chief Executive Officer for national business representative collective
	P-3	Operating Manager of large investment enterprise
	P-4	Senior Manager in a city-wide entrepreneurial and third-sector organisation
	P-5	Business representative and community engagement officer
	P-6	Marketing Communications Director for regional development group
<i>Local community</i> (n=6)	P-7	Secretary and coordinator for a local residents' group
	P-8	Committee Chair of a local residents' group
	P-9	Committee Chair of a local planning and city-lobbying collective
	P-10	Chair of a local residents' group
	P-11	Representative for a local community partnership
	P-12	Community engagement representative for community attraction
<i>Local government (local authority and elected officials)</i> (n=7)	P-13	Previously elected senior official representing all sectors
	P-14	Local councillor
	P-15	Senior manager of 'place' framework and implementation
	P-16	Director for investment and innovation department
	P-17	Senior officer in neighbourhood partnership programme
	P-18	Senior manager for state-owned cultural attractions for Bristol and wider region
	P-19	Principal officer for local government cultural strategy
<i>Visitor economy</i> (n=9)	P-20	Chief Executive Officer for Bristol's Destination Management Organisation
	P-21	Marketing and Communications Manager at city-centre visitor attraction
	P-22	Chief Executive Officer for a city-centre arts and cultural attraction
	P-23	Services and Visitor Manager at central landmark
	P-24	Curator for a large city-centre museum
	P-25	Owner and Chief Executive Officer for an independent city tours operator
	P-26	Marketing Manager for heritage attraction
	P-27	Volunteer Coordinator at city-centre visitor attraction
	P-28	Volunteer Coordinator at city-centre visitor attraction
<i>Higher Education</i> (n=1)	P-29	Communications Executive for a city-based University
Online Secondary Sources (n=13)		
Secondary Source	Reference	Source location
Bristol and the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) review	S-1	Fox, S. and. Macleod, A. 2019. Bristol and the SDGs: a voluntary local review of progress 2019. Bristol University. Available at: <a href="https://www.bristol.ac.uk/media-library/sites/cabot-institute-2018/documents/BRISTOL%20AND%20THE%20SDGS.pdf">https://www.bristol.ac.uk/media-library/sites/cabot-institute-2018/documents/BRISTOL%20AND%20THE%20SDGS.pdf</a> [Accessed 01/03/2021]
Bristol European Green Capital 2015 Citywide review	S-2	Bristol Green Capital. 2015. <i>Bristol European Green Capital 2015 Citywide Review</i> . Bristol Green Capital [online]. Available at: <a href="https://bristolgreencapital.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/bristol-2015_annual-review.pdf">https://bristolgreencapital.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/bristol-2015_annual-review.pdf</a> [Accessed 03/02/2019]
Green pioneers for Bristol Green Capital blog	S-3	Greenhouse Agency. 2015. <i>Top 10 Green Pioneers for Bristol Green Capital</i> . Greenhouse Agency [online]. Available at: <a href="https://www.greenhouse.agency/green-pioneers-bristol-green-capital-triados-soil-association/">https://www.greenhouse.agency/green-pioneers-bristol-green-capital-triados-soil-association/</a> [Accessed: 15/02/2021]
Delivering change and low carbon in European Green Capital review	S-4	Centre for Cities. 2016. <i>Delivering change: low carbon. Bristol European Green Capital</i> . Centre for Cities [online]. Available at: <a href="https://www.centreforcities.org/reader/delivering-change-cities-go-low-carbon-supporting-economic-growth/bristol-european-green-capital/">https://www.centreforcities.org/reader/delivering-change-cities-go-low-carbon-supporting-economic-growth/bristol-european-green-capital/</a> [Accessed: 01/03/2021]
B24/7 feature on Bristol's European Green Capital award	S-5	Bristol247. 2015. <i>Bristol Green Capital: success or flop?</i> Bristol247 [online]. Available at: <a href="https://www.bristol247.com/news-and-features/features/bristol-green-capital-success-or-flop/">https://www.bristol247.com/news-and-features/features/bristol-green-capital-success-or-flop/</a> [Accessed: 01/03/2021]
Report to Bristol City Council on European Green Capital	S-6	Bundred, S. 2016. <i>Report to Bristol City Council: Review of Bristol 2015 European Green Capital Year</i> . Bristol City Council [online]. Available at: <a href="https://www.bristol.gov.uk/documents/20182/1352057/European+Green+Capital+Review+report/f7ae017a-57b5-4bc0-acdf-a1ed61380a35">https://www.bristol.gov.uk/documents/20182/1352057/European+Green+Capital+Review+report/f7ae017a-57b5-4bc0-acdf-a1ed61380a35</a> [Accessed: 01/03/2021]
VisitBristol 'green' website	S-7	VisitBristol. 2015. <i>Green Bristol</i> . VisitBristol [online]. Available at: <a href="https://visitbristol.co.uk/inspire/green">https://visitbristol.co.uk/inspire/green</a> [Accessed: 12/05/2018]
Thinktank review of Green Capital	S-8	Bristol's Citizens' Panel. 2015. <i>Citizens' Panel report: Bristol 2015 Green Capital</i> . Bristol City Council [online]. Available at: <a href="https://bristol.citizenspace.com/consultation-research-intelligence/greencapital/results/green-capital---citizens-panel-report-july-2015.pdf">https://bristol.citizenspace.com/consultation-research-intelligence/greencapital/results/green-capital---citizens-panel-report-july-2015.pdf</a> [Accessed: 01/03/2021]
Resilient cities newspaper report on Bristol Green Capital	S-9	Birch, H. 2015. <i>Is Bristol a worthy Green Capital of Europe – or is it all for show?</i> The Guardian: Resilient Cities. Available at: <a href="https://www.theguardian.com/cities/2015/feb/18/is-bristol-a-worthy-green-capital-of-europe-or-is-it-all-for-show">https://www.theguardian.com/cities/2015/feb/18/is-bristol-a-worthy-green-capital-of-europe-or-is-it-all-for-show</a> [Accessed: 01/02/2021]

1	Bristol MP blog on	S-10	Williams, S. 2016. Where has the Bristol Green Capital Money Gone? Stephen Williams,
2	Green Capital		MP blog.
3	Bristol's Decade of	S-11	Bristol Green Partnership. 2020. Creating a Movement: Bristol's Decade of
4	Transformation event		Transformation. Bristol Green Partnership [online]. Available at:
5	review		<a href="https://bristolgreencapital.org/creating-movement-bristols-decade-transformation/">https://bristolgreencapital.org/creating-movement-bristols-decade-transformation/</a> [Accessed:
6			21/04/2021]
7	Bristol Green Capital	S-12	Bristol Green Capital. (2020). Mission & Vision. Bristol Green Capital Partnership.
8	action plans		Retrieved 09.10.2020 from <a href="https://bristolgreencapital.org/who-we-are/mission-vision/">https://bristolgreencapital.org/who-we-are/mission-vision/</a>
9	Bristol One City to	S-13	Bristol City Council. 2020. One city plan: a plan for Bristol to 2050. Bristol City Council
10	2050 plan		[online]. Available at:
11			<a href="https://democracy.bristol.gov.uk/documents/s29198/One%20City%20Plan.pdf">https://democracy.bristol.gov.uk/documents/s29198/One%20City%20Plan.pdf</a> [Accessed:
12	One city climate	S-14	13/01/2021]
13	strategy		Bristol One City. 2020. One city climate strategy: a strategy for a carbon neutral, climate
14			resilient Bristol by 2030. Bristol One City [online]. Available at:
15			<a href="https://www.bristolonecity.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/placeholder-climate-strategy.pdf">https://www.bristolonecity.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/placeholder-climate-strategy.pdf</a>
16			[Accessed: 01/03/2021]

Appendix 2 – Coding summary by stage and themes

