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Cover Page

COVID-19 and the participatory place branding impasse: a study of actor agency

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COVID-19 and the participatory place branding impasse: a study of actor agency

Abstract

Purpose: This paper investigates the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on participatory place branding processes, and in particular, multiple actors' ability to build agency.

Design/methodology/approach: An in-depth qualitative inquiry of place branding processes in Cardiff (UK) was undertaken during the second wave of the COVID-19 pandemic. Semi-structured (online) interviews with 28 city representatives from the public, private, and voluntary sectors are analysed using three-stage conceptual coding.

Findings: Five transitions in the meaning-making and engagement processes at the nexus of participatory place branding are identified: (1) heightening value of the local environment; (2) building and sharing local knowledge; (3) embedding a sense of community into relational networks; (4) innovating engagement channels; (5) and blurring of roles and responsibilities. Combined these demonstrate a cultivating place (brand) attachment and evolving logics around participation.

Originality: Antecedents to actor agency are investigated, highlighting that during a period of disruption actors gained legitimacy for their participation by emphasising the value attached to localities, building place (brand) attachment and drawing on blurred place branding boundaries.

Research limitations: Transitions in actor agency require monitoring over time, drawing on additional studies, wider samples and multidisciplinary frameworks.

Practical implications: Local knowledge and multi-actor networks are increasingly viewed as valuable assets, providing legitimacy for those in possession of these resources and for the brand. Practitioners, policy makers and community representatives should support innovative ways to involve and learn from local actors, including those not currently active across the place brand web.

Keywords: Participatory place branding; COVID-19; stakeholder participation; legitimacy; place (brand) attachment

Article classification: Academic paper

COVID-19 and the participatory place branding impasse: a study of actor agency

Introduction

A decade has passed since ‘participatory place branding’ was coined as a popular phrase to capture the necessity of incorporating local people in the representation and presentation of the places in which they live, work, visit and invest in (Kavaratzis, 2012). During the preceding period there has been a breadth of scholarly and practitioner attention on stakeholder participation (Golestaneh *et al.*, 2022; Zenker and Erfgen, 2014). Beyond inviting multiple representatives (referred to as ‘actors’ in this study) to be involved in the outward communication of a polished ‘brand’, stakeholder participation can encompass the often unplanned and everyday contributions of local actors (Briana, 2021), as they build, share and bring to life the associations, narratives and meanings they attribute to *their* place (Aitken and Campelo, 2011; Green *et al.*, 2016; Lichrou *et al.*, 2008). Attention is therefore granted to the discursive engagement tools that give voice to multiple actors’ meaning-making processes (Hanna and Rowley, 2011). Often place branding is a decentralised, holistic and negotiated process with parallels to a form of soft governance (Eshius and Edwards, 2013; Ripoll González and Gale, 2020).

While these developments bring to the fore calls for inclusivity, the extent to which greater inclusion occurs in practice remains disputed (Ripoll González and Gale, 2020). This gulf in theory and practice signals a participatory place branding impasse, where uneven and tokenistic involvement remains commonplace (Hakala, 2021; Henninger *et al.*, 2016). To better understand why differences in participation prevail, studies have begun to explore actor agency and the ways in which it can be gained and lost across the place branding process. An emerging thread appearing across a number of these studies is a focus on actors’ capacity to obtain and advance legitimacy for their claims (Pedeliento and Kavaratzis, 2019; Reynolds *et al.*, 2022; Warren *et al.*, 2021). Studies observe a tendency to favour traditional notions of legitimacy as attributed to those actors and activities aligned to top-down brand ownership (Pedeliento and Kavaratzis, 2019). Moreover, even when incremental gains in actors’ participation are achieved, these can be counter manoeuvred by those who are able to exchange their existing involvement and resources for legitimacy (Reynolds *et al.*, 2022). In other words, the extent to which actors can share and enact their meanings through discursive engagement channels remains limited, in part because of differences in actors’ ability to build and exert legitimacy.

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic from late 2019 brought with it profound impacts to peoples' lives and livelihoods. Existing studies have begun to scrutinise what the future of cities in a post-pandemic environment might look like (Batty, 2020; Brail, 2021). Authors outline changes to the way that actors live and work in cities, responding to technical innovations (Dubbelink *et al.*, 2021; Huggins and Thompson, 2021), challenging existing work patterns and practices (Buffel *et al.*, 2021; Reuschke and Ekinsyth, 2021; Tanghetti *et al.*, 2022) and forming stronger connections to their locality (Gatti and Procentese, 2021; Uchiyama and Kohsaka, 2020). Initial studies therefore point to potential changes in the way that local actors form, share and enact the associations and meanings they assign to their place. This study builds on these starting points, examining the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on local actors' meaning-making and engagement processes. Specifically, this study asks what was the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on participatory place branding processes, and in particular, on multiple actors' ability to build agency for themselves and the places they represent? To investigate these transitions this paper draws on in-depth interviews with actors from across the city of Cardiff, UK, conducted during the second wave of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Literature review

Participatory place branding

Participatory place branding is a well-established concept that attracts ongoing traction in the place management and branding literatures (Golestaneh *et al.*, 2022; Kavartzis, 2012; Muñoz-Martínez, 2016; Zenker and Erfgen, 2014). Central to this approach are calls for multiple groups of citizens and wider stakeholders (both groups are referred to collectively as 'actors' in this paper) to be able to build, share and bring to life the associations and ultimately meanings that they assign to the material, institutional and social constituents of their place (Braun *et al.*, 2013; Kavartzis and Kalandides, 2015; Lichrou *et al.*, 2008). Place branding is therefore not simply about creating a distinctive and attractive place for external audiences to want to visit, live or work, rather the essence of the place branding process is the internal meaning-making processes whereby those local actors' form, share and (re)negotiate their brand through their everyday narratives, interactions and experiences with the place and each other (Briana, 2021; Lichrou *et al.*, 2008). This multi-directional exchange of brand

meanings is pivotal to the place branding process (Aitken and Campelo, 2011; Green *et al.*, 2016), influencing the brand identity formed and the brand images conveyed.

Unpacking the nuances of place branding, and particularly multiple actor participation within it, is a multidisciplinary endeavour (Muñiz Martínez, 2016). An area of growing consensus across the disciplines is the need to move beyond a focus on top-down management by a few actors (commonly the local government institutions, such as destination management organisations [DMO]) towards encouraging co-ownership of the place brand by an assortment of internal groups (Björner and Aronsson, 2022; Green *et al.*, 2016). The value of actor involvement is also gaining traction. Actors become brand ambassadors (Swanpan *et al.*, 2022) or brand advocates (Eugenio-Velo *et al.*, 2020), fostering knowledge exchange and creativity (Andersson and Ekman, 2009), which brings gains to the credibility, authenticity and overall image of the brand (Aitken and Campelo, 2011; Andersson and Ekman, 2009; Sandbach, 2022), as well as sparking pride (Andersson and Ekman, 2009) and heightened commitment from those involved (Hakala, 2021). Collectively these dimensions of ambassadorship help to build place (brand) attachment, forming the “emotional and social bonds people develop with their surroundings” (Swapan *et al.*, 2022, p.443). Increasing attention is therefore being paid to the ways that internal actors build and communicate their place attachment and the outcomes for the people and places involved (Grocke, *et al.*, 2022; Leal *et al.*, 2022).

Golestaneh *et al.*'s., (2022) review highlights the volume of place branding studies that recognise the importance of internal actors within place branding processes. The authors identified the multitude of actors studied from across the public (e.g. government authorities, local governments, destination management organisations, policy-makers, place planners), private (e.g. business owners, local entrepreneurs, industry collectives, inward investors), scientific (e.g. researchers, academic partners, chamber of commerce) and increasingly the voluntary sectors (e.g. citizens, residents, local influencers, non-governmental organisations and community leaders). Extant research has shown that these multifarious groups co-exist and collectively shape the place branding process within what has been termed a brand web (Hanna and Rowley, 2015), relational networks (Andersson and Ekman, 2009; Muñiz-Martínez, 2016), and communities (Björner and Aronsson, 2022; Leal *et al.*, 2022). Despite advancements in our understanding of multi-actor governance and what this ought to mean for place branding, studies continue to point to the prevalence of top-down and uneven forms

of participation (Green *et al.*, 2016). The resultant gulf in theory and practice signals a participatory place branding impasse, sparking renewed calls to evaluate routes for wider participation (Eugenio-Velo *et al.*, 2020).

Harnessing engagement tools

Stakeholder engagement is the overarching term used to describe the multitude of discursive tools that are intended to bring together and showcase actors' disparate interests, claims and activities (Hanna and Rowley, 2011; Henninger *et al.*, 2016), foster dialogue and information exchange (Andersson and Ekman, 2009; Viglia *et al.*, 2018) and promote trust and interpersonal relationships (Hanna and Rowley, 2015). In doing so, engagement provides the conduit where brand meanings are constructed and shared (Hatch and Schultz, 2010). Golestaneh *et al.*, (2022) highlight a host of activities that place branding actors partake in, ranging from auxiliary activities such as identification of other salient parties, knowledge sharing and communication of brand messages through to coordination and co-delivery of a shared vision. The appropriate engagement tool varies over time and depending on the context (Foo *et al.*, 2011). While sharing information and listening to actors' viewpoints can provide value (Hakala, 2021), other studies call for more active involvement through ongoing collaborations and partnerships (Green *et al.*, 2016).

Despite widespread academic and increasingly practitioner interest in engagement, the extent to which these routes offer meaningful versus tokenistic engagement remains in dispute (Ripoll González and Gale, 2020). Criticisms include a tendency to opt for a standardised approach, which fails to capture the diversity of the groups involved (Hakala, 2021). Moreover, other studies have pointed to the varying capacity for input with select actors accessing influential networks, whereas others struggle to attain the necessary knowledge or expertise to meaningfully participate (Henninger *et al.*, 2016). Even where some incremental advancements are secured, these can be countered and retracted by those with existing resources and connections (Reynolds *et al.*, 2022). Exploring actor agency and its antecedents can help to gain an understanding of why the participatory impasse persists despite the calls for greater participation.

Antecedents of actor agency

As identified above, place branding studies are exploring the notion of agency (albeit often inadvertently) when examining varying actor (or stakeholder) participation within the place

branding processes. Agency can, for example, be subtly obtained and actioned by local representatives when working collaboratively to shape and share visual narratives of a place (Rebelo *et al.*, 2020). Yet, other studies recognise that participation is not always equally attained and identify tensions that can surface (Ripoll González and Gale, 2020; Green *et al.*, 2016; Kavaratzis and Hatch, 2013). Studies have also begun to map a hierarchy of involvement by categorising actors based on their varying ability to participate (Hakala, 2021; Henninger *et al.*, 2016). More recently, studies are beginning to unpack theoretical explanations for differing participation by drawing on social theories.

Pedeliento and Kavaratzis (2019, p.358), for example, draw on Giddens (1984) structuration theory, positing that the place brand is the “interplay of culture, identity and image as they are performed in actions and practices” and that unintentional tensions can arise when political actors gain agency by relying on existing structures of legitimacy. Zavattaro (2013) applies Goffman’s (1959) notions of the front and backstage, observing that complexity creates distinctions between involvement that is overtly apparent and the reflections and expressions that occur in the background. Bourdieu’s (1984) theoretical frameworks have also been applied. Warren and Dinnie (2018) point to the influence of place promoters as cultural intermediaries drawing on their social and cultural capital to shape the place branding fields. Warren *et al.*, (2021) investigates how place promoters negotiate legitimacy and influence over policy and promotional outcomes. Reynolds *et al.*, (2022) investigates how multiple groups compete for legitimacy, showing how potential participatory gains are often countered by those equipped with the resource and knowledge to renavigate the place branding fields.

Unifying across these studies is the search for antecedents to actor agency, exploring who is involved and specifically how and why they are able to gain or retain their influence. While drawing on different theoretical foundations, the studies present a common thread around legitimacy and actors’ varying ability to command or defend their involvement by drawing on existing resources or prevailing logics. Drawing on these approaches, this paper investigates how actors perceive and justify their capacity to share and enact brand meanings through participation in, and influence over, engagement processes during a period of transition, instability and turbulence.

Cities, governance and the COVID-19 pandemic

The impact of the pandemic on the trajectories of cities and the experiences of those who live, work, invest and reside within them remains disputed. At least in the short-term, the pandemic resulted in cities shifting from being epicentres of commercial and leisure activities to spaces of caution, uncertainty and change (Batty, 2020; Brail, 2021). Early commentaries and studies forecasted an acceleration in hybrid working, worker and business relocation, widening social and sectoral divisions, and heightening attention to green public space and local amenities (Gatti and Procentese, 2021; Uchiyama and Kohsaka, 2020). Yet, predictions were tentative, with a recognition that many of these transformations were underway previously and therefore the pandemic largely accelerated the rate of existing change (Brail, 2021). More recent studies remain divided in terms of the longer-term impacts of the pandemic on cities. Huggins and Thompson (2022) highlight the resilience of places, and cities in particular, to adapt and respond through technological innovations. Yet, others point to an illumination of spatial and social disparities (Buffel *et al.*, 2021). Tanghetti *et al.*, (2022) suggest that the pandemic fuelled a period of critical reflection and collective action, revealing the challenges associated with precarious work across the creative sectors and sparking a challenge to the neoliberalism embedded in city and national policies.

Place branding studies have also begun to evaluate the impacts of the pandemic. Existing studies include a call for greater attention to be granted to over-tourism (Skinner, 2021), illustrate how the pandemic response altered the perceived place reputation (Lee and Kim, 2021), explore how digital and social media were utilised (Dubbelink *et al.*, 2021) and point to the potential role of art and culture as a pandemic recovery policy (Sandbach, 2022). While the post-pandemic city as a place to live and work remains uncertain, there is a need to better understand how these evolving place trajectories impact the way in which local actors participate within the place branding processes, and in particular, the ability of these groups to influence the meaning-making and engagement processes at the core of a participatory place branding approach.

Methodology and materials

Case study, methods and analysis

This paper draws on a qualitative inquiry of Cardiff to investigate the potential impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on actors' agency across the place branding processes. The study was

undertaken between January to July 2021, coinciding with the second wave of the pandemic and a period of national lockdown in the UK. Situated in South Wales, Cardiff is the capital city of Wales, UK. The city has a population of 369,200 (StatsWales, 2022a) and a workforce of approximately 186,600 (Stats Wales, 2022b). An exploratory qualitative inquiry provides a flexible and comprehensive method for gaining in-depth insights from real-life settings (DeRuyter and Scholl, 1998), making it a popular approach in place branding studies (Grocke *et al.*, 2022; Rebelo *et al.*, 2020; Sandbach, 2022).

In-depth and semi-structured (online) interviews with 28 informants from across the public, private, and voluntary sectors were undertaken (Table 1). The groups investigated align with the internal actors identified in Golestaneh *et al.*'s., (2022) recent review. Interviews were audio recorded (with permission) and transcribed per dictum resulting in 1640 minutes (approximately 27hours) of interview recordings and 225,500 words of transcribed data. Participants were asked to discuss the narratives that underpin the meanings they associate to the city (Lichrou *et al.*, 2008), as well as their involvement in the everyday shaping and sharing of the city, particularly focusing on potential changes since the onset of the pandemic. Interview protocols based around these key themes of meaning-making, engagement processes and participatory capacity (i.e., agency) were utilised, strengthening the reliability and external validity of the findings (Lindgreen *et al.*, 2021). While the practicalities of researching during a pandemic meant that interviews were conducted using video conferencing software (Zoom or Microsoft Teams), this approach also widens the sample by encompassing participants that may not have time in their schedule for in-person interview logistics (Keen *et al.*, 2022).

[Table 1 here]

The interview sample was recruited purposively focusing on key informants with substantial knowledge and interest in place branding processes. Focusing on well-placed informants supports evidence and theory building from smaller samples, although care was taken to ensure different viewpoints were included within this multi-actor sample (Lokot, 2021). The purposive framework was built on motivation and commitment to be included within the place branding processes (Hakala, 2021), or as Black and Veloutsou (2017, p.416) set out those “highly motivated working consumers”. These ‘working’ (or active) participants were considered as those holding representative roles across the public, private and voluntary

sectors and with existing experience of collaborative engagement processes. Participants were first identified using detail searches of publicly available data. Recruitment recruited based on participants' recommendations continued until data saturation was met (Boddy, 2016).

Three stages of concept coding and analysis were completed (Saldaña, 2021), with the use of diary entries to support ongoing analysis. The first-order codes pointed to a series of conceptual processes set out by the participants and centred around the pre-established research themes (namely meaning-making, engagement, participatory capacity). During the second-order coding these were grouped based on their explanatory similarity, identifying a series of transitions. Finally, these were aggregated and considered alongside existing theory, with two overarching themes pertaining to shifts in actor agency during the pandemic. These themes were checked and stored using qualitative-data-analysis software (NVivo.12). To strengthen construct validity, secondary data sources were collated (publicly available statistics, reports and documents shared by participants) and evaluated alongside the codes.

Findings and discussion

This study investigates how internal actors perceive their influence over the meaning-making and engagement processes underlying participatory place branding during the second wave of the pandemic. A central aim of the research is to evaluate the potential impacts of the pandemic on the way that actors established agency. The analysis identifies five transitions in the meaning-making and engagement processes, namely (1) *heightened value of the local environment*; (2) *building and sharing local knowledge*; (3) *embedding a sense of community*; (4) *innovating engagement channels*, and (5) *blurring of roles and responsibilities*. The final coding stage reveals two aggregated outcomes for actor agency, namely *cultivating place (brand) attachment* and *evolving notions of participation*.

Cultivating place (brand) attachment

The first overarching theme captures developments to place (brand) attachment, with heightened value being ascribed to the local environment, local knowledge, a sense of community and the sharing of brand ownership. The intensification of place (brand) attachment provides new and extended avenues for obtaining legitimacy and influence over the place branding processes.

Heightened value attached to the local environment

Building on other studies conducted during the pandemic (e.g., Gatti and Procentese, 2021; Uchiyama and Kohsaka, 2020), the findings demonstrate actors' altered connection to their locality, with a heightened appreciation for local amenities, businesses, greenery and shared spaces:

“Now we've taken a step away from that and see this great city, and we have loads of outdoor space, and parks and water. It's not that we haven't done that before, it's just it hasn't always been our main focus.” (P22)

Participants uplift in awareness of local assets (or absence thereof) is often aligned to a need to protect them. As a participant leading a think-tank for community regeneration explains, the pandemic created *“a snapshot of what is in our local areas, where we live, and what isn't there, what's missing”* (P3). Immersion in the locality has been shown to spark a greater appreciation and pride for the local assets (Andersson and Ekman, 2009). However, this study demonstrates how these elevated connections to the locality also provide a catalyst for change and participation:

“With the pandemic shifting the way we work and live so much, it's now the time to engage the conversation around, OK, so now you walk around your community, and you've discovered your local parks. Maybe we can engage the conversation about how we preserve those or make those into nicer spaces. So, I think that there is opportunity for change.” (P20)

These changes incentivise and justify participation (Hakala, 2021), which can involve sharing positive associations and narratives (Swapan *et al.*, 2022), as well as facilitating resistance to activities not considered in the local interest (Grocke *et al.*, 2022):

“There are positives to take from the fact that people have experienced that now, and hopefully that will get reflected when we start to consult on some of these more radical schemes to create local facilities and amenities for people, but they'll remember the [local] benefits.” (P19)

Those actors already vocal and visible in engagement processes can utilise the local exposure to advance their participation (Black and Veloutsou, 2017), encourage others to participate in the process and to justify their future involvement.

Building and sharing of local knowledge

The literature recognises the role of local actors as ‘brand ambassadors’ and advocates using their nuance knowledge and connection to the locality to boost the credibility and authenticity of the narratives shared (Andersson and Ekman, 2009; Sandbach, 2022). As a participant shaping the local authority’s economic development initiatives observes, the pandemic amplified the significance of capturing the local “*authentic voice*”:

“A critical emerging theme that we’re referring to, which has emerged from the pandemic, you know the work that we’ve had undertaken to understand what it means for cities, is there’s a greater appreciation of the local, right? So, these were trends that were happening earlier, and I think [my colleague] was bang on in their analysis, which is [that] you’ve also got to talk to your local audience because actually they drive most of the economic impact that happens in the sector, but what they also do is create an authentic voice for the city.” (P21)

The participant discusses the multifaceted role of local audiences, as simultaneously consumers (with spending power) and producers (with authentic lived-experiences) of the place brand. Of particular interest to this paper, is the indication that the value attached to possessing and sharing local knowledge is intensifying:

“[local knowledge] is really important and adds a huge amount of value to have people who are living and working in the areas that they’re investing in. The local knowledge is absolutely valuable.” (P11)

Previous studies explain how local knowledge attracts recognition and legitimacy, which can be traded for entry and involvement in the web of actor exchanges and interactions inherent within participatory place branding (Aitken and Campelo, 2011; Hanna and Rowley, 2015; Reynolds *et al.*, 2022). The current study indicates that the legitimacy gained by possessing local knowledge is continuing to rise, facilitating local actors’ justification for more active involvement in place branding processes.

Embedding a sense of community into relational networks

While participants in this study acknowledge a sense of community existed prior to the pandemic, seeing the city as having “*that community feel a bit more strongly to it*” (P20), this increased resulting in “*a much bigger sense of community than at the start of the lockdown*” (P15). Participants compare their experiences to living and working in the city to that of

living in “a village” (P14) or “little pockets of communities” (P17). Importantly, this collective sense of community grants local actors’ opportunities to take up ownership and ‘get involved’:

“People have more ownership of their local community now and more aspiration, so maybe getting them involved and understanding their local community will be easier.”
(P1)

The findings also suggest that the heightened sense of community fosters collaboration by strengthening and building professional and personal networks:

“I heard this said to me so many times during that first phase of lockdown, ‘I’ve lived here x amount of years, you know, two, five, ten, 25, and I’ve never met so many people in my community as in this time, and I’ve never felt more connected to my community’ ... I suddenly felt like I had gone from knowing ten people on my street or in my area ... to knowing this whole network of people in house all across the area, from all walks of life, all ages, all backgrounds.” (P17)

These relational networks embedded through a shared sense of community strengthen community brand building (Björner and Aronsson, 2022) and local empowerment:

“It’s really shone, the fact that, having resilient local communities is key in these types of situations ... It just goes to show that in these types of really difficult situation, it is the community and people around you, that are there to help and to bring you together. I think that’s really important. We need to think of ways of empowering communities.”
(P6)

Whereas studies have suggested that actors benefit from information exchange (Andersson and Ekman, 2009), these findings denote that actors are also calling for more immersive involvement and an ability to collectively shape engagement processes (Brodie *et al.*, 2013; Grocke *et al.*, 2022). In doing so, this study highlights a transitioning understanding of what constitutes sufficient participation within the place branding processes and renewed calls to empower communities.

Evolving logics around participation

The second aggregated finding encompasses transitions in the way that participation is performed, and actors’ roles are defined. The study suggests that (at least in the short-term)

the COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the use of innovative and often digital engagement channels, as well as created uncertainty and a blurring of actors' roles and responsibilities.

Innovating engagement channels

Extant research has begun to unpack the unprecedented impact of the pandemic on the way people live and work, including changes brought about by the hastening speed of technical innovations (Huggins and Thompson, 2022). A similar acceleration in digitalisation is evidenced by participants in this study. The utilisation of online forms of communication within the place branding process is not new (Lucarelli, 2019), rather the findings highlight how the pandemic made digitalisation a necessity and justified the need for experimentation and flexibility in its implementation.

Participants discuss a range of available online engagement activities, utilising these digital channels to advocate, learn, share and socialise:

“It’s weird to think that it was always there, COVID never prevented us using the virtual world, it just forced us to do it at a rate and with the creativity that was kind of demanded really quickly ... [the resident association] changed their Facebook group to a community notice board, and it’s still a great way to connect the community.” (P17)

Other digital developments include more widespread utilisation of web-based engagement toolkits, such as those that combine geographic information systems with online with consultations:

“Now that we’ve had lockdowns we’ve developed online consultation tools, which is a way of using GIS mapping information and data to get people to engage. So, we’ll produce a map of an area and ask people to comment ... what the online consultation tools have done is allow us to reach a much wider audience.” (P19)

While web-based tools facilitate an increase in the quantity of participants (Leal *et al.*, 2022), participants identify a series of concerns, which include the narrowing scope of involvement, a potentially limited awareness that these tools exist and evidence of digital fatigue:

“A lot of things have been moved online and that’s great. But you need to promote it in a different way, so people know about it. Sometimes people might have found a consultation going on because they walked past the door and saw the sign, but you don’t have that opportunity when it’s online. You have to know specifically where to go.

Some people won't have online engagement. There'll be some people like me that are so sick of looking at a screen.” (P1)

Existing knowledge of online engagement tools and where to find them can operate as a barrier for those unaware or unfamiliar with these processes. Moreover, participants saw digitalisation as a supplementary tool that may widen the breadth of participation, rather than a replacement of in-person engagement:

“There's no doubt people have missed the face-to-face convening, without a doubt. It does bring a different side of things when you're on these [Zoom]. No matter how you're managing the breakout rooms it's not the same and people are getting tired.” (P14)

“If you're working or you have small children and you can't make the local meeting at seven-pm on a wet winter's night, you might be able to engage more through other methods, online methods, but ideally in the future a blend of the face-to-face and online would be helpful.” (P26)

While the study indicates a widening remit of participation, the more standardised online participation runs contrary to calls for tailored and personalised forms of engagement (Hakala, 2021). Moreover, while previous research highlights the potential emotional and cognitive components of digital engagement (Viglia *et al.*, 2018), the participants primarily observe digital innovations that expand the breadth rather than depth of involvement. As such, the changes did not necessarily unlock the relational and social aspects of engagement. Nonetheless, the current study suggests that the logics around engagement are being explored and expanded, with online tools being considered as a legitimate supplementary source of participation.

Blurring roles and responsibilities

Cities are a “*convenor of people*” (P21), yet the way in which people convened in the city shifted fundamentally and quickly during the pandemic. Consistent with other studies exploring the pandemic's impact on city trajectories (e.g., Brail, 2020; Gatti and Procentese, 2021; Reuschke and Ekinsyth, 2021), participants were adapting to a sudden disruption of work, leisure and social patterns. Working from home brought many of the participants closer to their local areas (as discussed above). However, stemming (in part) from a shift in working patterns were calls for alternative communal and more localised multi-actor collaborations.

Participants forecast a relocation of work from urban centres to local neighbourhoods and an emergence of multi-organisational and cross-sector co-working spaces:

“Whereas before we had a prestigious city centre location with several floors and meeting space, actually maybe in future I’ll be literally walking to [the local high-street] or something to set up my laptop and maybe see a few familiar faces. All of that is potentially in the mix now, whereas it wouldn’t have been a year ago.” (P5)

“We’re not going to lose the want to see people, but almost we’re going to be in a situation where actually, you’re my friend, so I’m going to go to work with you, but you work for [this company] and I work for [another], but we’re just going to hang out and do our work together”. (P6)

While the involvement of workers and residents has been studied extensively separately (Wisuchat and Taecharungroj, 2022), this study highlights a blurring between the role (and agency) of a resident and worker in a hybrid future:

“Most people would like a blended approach of working, sometimes from home, sometimes from the office. I think that’s definitely going to have a long-lasting impact on the sense of community, but also the sense of community around work.” (P20)

Nonetheless, changes to work patterns and overlaps in professional and personal networks risk exacerbating existing social, spatial and sectoral disparities, with areas dominated by hybrid workers gaining investment in local amenities and a strengthening of collective actions, whereas other areas where homeworking is less prevalent potentially experiencing the reverse. As such, working from home, forging new local networks and building a stronger sense of community may support the breakdown of barriers between different groups within the multi-actor governance process (Björner and Aronsson, 2022), or may result in a further neo-liberalisation of cities and neighbourhoods (Tanghetti *et al.*, 2022).

Conclusion

Drawing on a series of in-depth (online) interviews undertaken during the second wave of the pandemic, this paper unpacks actors’ capacity to share and enact their associations, narratives and ultimately meanings through an increasingly diverse array of discursive engagement tools. The results point to a strengthening of place (brand) attachment (Grocke, *et al.*, 2022; Swapan *et al.*, 2022), evolving opportunities for accessible (and often digital) engagement

and a blurring of actors' roles within new and existing professional and personal relational networks. However, the developments must be balanced alongside existing and evolving barriers for participation. While a closer connection to the locality, each other and the wider community provides opportunities for some, it may exacerbate the isolation of those not embedded within these networks and reinforce disparities. Moreover, while the remit of engagement tools available and boundaries of actors' roles expanded, these did not always translate beyond participation in more limited auxiliary activities (Golestaneh *et al.*, 2022). It remained much more difficult to alter the meaning-making and engagement processes that facilitate the building of social and relational connections *across* different groups.

This paper therefore offers insights into how actor agency is created and strengthened across the place branding process, especially during a period of sudden dislocation, disruption and uncertainty. Building on studies that have begun to question the future of cities in a post-pandemic environment (Buffel *et al.*, 2021; Tanghetti *et al.*, 2022), this research also advances understandings of the way local actors interact with the city, and importantly, engage with each other during this period. While in the short-term the series of transitions stemming from the COVID-19 pandemic helped certain actors obtain legitimacy for themselves and for their evolving engagement tools and roles, actors' responses and variations need to be closely monitored to evaluate the extent to which these changes reflect a longer-term move beyond the existing participatory impasse.

Theoretical implications

This paper contributes to place branding theory by unpacking antecedents of actor agency and illustrating how agency can accelerate during periods of disruption. "Places are complex systems of exchanges" (Muñiz-Martínez, 2016, p.74), within which actor agency remains in flux as actors use their assets, resources and membership to negotiate influence and legitimacy (Reynolds *et al.*, 2022). To fully appreciate the breadth and depth of actor participation a more holistic and nuanced analysis of engagement is required that captures the multiplicity of residents, local businesses, and workers' ambassadorial roles. In line with existing research, this study captures the benefits of involving local actors when sharing of information (Andersson and Ekman, 2009), communicating credible, authentic and unplanned messages (Briana, 2021; Aitken and Campelo, 2011) and strengthening community connections (Björner and Aronsson, 2022). Building on these studies, this paper also shows how actors obtain and deploy their connection to their locality, local knowledge,

networks and community cohesion to facilitate and justify their participation now and into the future. In doing so, this study contributes to the place (brand) attachment literature (Grocke, *et al.*, 2022; Swapan *et al.*, 2022), highlighting how periods of sudden change and disruption can inadvertently strengthen actors' ability to accumulate legitimacy for their involvement.

Various forms of engagement and exchanges were forced to go online, encouraging actors to utilise and experiment with previously overlooked forms of digital participation (Brodie *et al.*, 2013). The transitions to work and living patterns also began to blur the boundaries between actors' roles and generate potentially new and evolving professional and personal networks. Rallying together to respond to the pandemic fostered relationships and a sense of community (Björner and Aronsson, 2022; Stevens *et al.*, 2021). Combined these transitions afforded place branding actors additional scope for agency building by accumulating legitimacy for themselves (Reynolds *et al.*, 2022; Warren *et al.*, 2021) and for the wider remit of engagement tools and everyday exchanges that they utilise.

Managerial implications

This study reiterates the well-recognised importance of people and interpersonal connections at the centre of participatory place branding (Björner and Aronsson, 2022; Kavaratzis, 2012). When access to typical in-person discursive activities were suddenly removed, actors from across the city sought new and innovative ways to build connections, share local knowledge, offer support and search for collaborations. In part these changes were motivated by a heightened appreciation for their local assets (or lack thereof), including the local businesses, local shared spaces, heritage and greenery. Importantly, however, people also developed an increased sense of being a member of a local and connected community. This heightened their motivation to be involved in understanding, representing, and supporting the economic, social and cultural value of their local area through an increasingly diverse mix of engagement tools. Practitioners, policy makers and community representatives should look to expand their local networks, recruit local representatives and resource emerging collaborations following this period of heightened local connectivity.

Moreover, the research showcases the increasing significance attributed to local assets, knowledge and connections. Rather than limiting (stakeholder) engagement to carefully planned and executed top-down engagement activities, attention could be paid to the everyday involvement of local people when voicing and enacting their shared perceptions,

experiences and narratives assigned. Practitioners and policy makers could, for example, develop a holistic overview of the place (whether it be at a neighbourhood, city, region or country level) by observing and analysing the myriad discussions, debates and activities arising from local groups and citizens.

Another route through which participation was accessed was through innovations to digital technologies, with this study cautiously confirming the potential for multi-actor engagement through digital platforms (Brodie *et al.*, 2013; Viglia *et al.*, 2018), while also recommending that digital engagement supports rather than replaces in-person interactions. Digital tools should not replace in-person activities where knowledge is iteratively exchanged, and relationships are formed. Instead, these digital channels provide a route to gain awareness and a potential supporting mechanism to capture a wider array of voices. However, in order to expand the breadth of participation, increased effort is needed to make local people aware that these tools exist and to accommodate a diversity of interests.

Limitations and future research

This research centres around participatory changes experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic brought with it profound impacts to peoples' lives and livelihoods. While this study focuses largely on the short-term consequences, ongoing research needs to monitor and track these impacts over time. Moreover, this study specifically explores agency by focusing on actors' capacity to obtain and advance legitimacy for their claims, tools and roles. Future studies could delve further into other multidisciplinary theoretical explanations for varying participation. Another noteworthy avenue of investigation relates to the potential dislocation of the accepted norms and dispositions within the place branding processes, and the extent to which these transitions reflect what Bourdieu (1984) terms 'hysteresis.' Disruption and dislocation provide opportunities and risks for those navigating the normal practices and protocols (Hardy, 2014). Future studies could explore if, and how, these transitions alter the accepted meaning-making and engagement processes since the extended periods of national lockdowns have eased.

Despite signs of some progress beyond the participatory impasse, the participants included in this study have a degree of existing access and influence over the place branding processes, with the sample encompassing key informants who present the interests of the wider communities in which they represent. Opportunities to participate are resource and capital

dependent (Grocke et al., 2022), with the pandemic and subsequent cost of living crisis diminishing already scarce resources. While those engaged within the place branding processes were afforded new and extended routes for participation, there remains important concerns over the narrowing of access for those who do not actively participate. Moreover, the extent to which local actors can extend their influence beyond auxiliary activities into the strategic decisions remains uncertain (Leal *et al.*, 2022). As such, place branding remains a complex and contested process, and future studies should continue to explore the barriers to entry and involvement.

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Table 1: Sample and data description

No.	Informant overview	Interview length (minutes)	Interview transcript (words)
P1	Chief executive for planning and development group	62:01	8434
P2	Coordination of regional economic partnership	61:34	8798
P3	Think-tank specialist and environmental campaigner	68:33	6747
P4	Policy-lead for a city-based business collective	72:02	7214
P5	Research coordination and management for an investment agency	55:14	6996
P6	Regeneration project lead and community representative	62:58	8365
P7	Director of a business collective	59:49	7952
P8	Planning Officer for local authority	90:09	15130
P9	Director at a sustainable investment and regeneration enterprise	59:49	7421
P10	Director for an entrepreneurship network	60:37	9110
P11	Project lead for an investment agency	67:42	9054
P12	Advisor for multiple investment agencies	58:58	7204
P13	Chair of a city-centre entrepreneurial network	54:19	7945
P14	Senior lead for third-sector outreach organisation	54:19	7713
P15	Senior management in community planning group	52:59	7504
P16	Administrative lead for environmental campaign groups	59:14	6459
P17	Chief executive of a social enterprise	59:15	8393
P18	Programme manager for third-sector organisation	61:34	8094
P19	Built environment lead for third-sector organisation	59:11	9131
P20	Coordinator of multiple environmental lobby groups	62:12	9250
P21	Economic development manager for local authority	70:17	12720
P22	Visitor economy manager for local authority	70:17*	12720*
P23	Organising committee for resident group and third-sector organisation	78:34	10501
P24	Organising committee for resident group and third-sector organisation	78:34*	10501*
P25	Organising committee for resident group and third-sector organisation	69:51	9923
P26	Advisor for local engagement, planning and place initiative	57:03	7923
P27	Head of community engagement and innovation for city-centre organisation	64:15	9114
P28	Councillor for city centre ward	60:03	8582

Source: created by author.

* Represents a repeated value where two participants were involved in the interview