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Theorizing the Linkage between Place Branding and Sustainable Destinations: An Integrative and Generative Review

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Abstract

The urgent transition towards more sustainable futures requires places and tourism destinations to leverage every available tool to assist in this effort. Previous research brought attention to the subjective and perceptual dimension of sustainable tourism, suggesting the importance of stakeholders' perceptions in destination development. Place branding can interact with such perceptions, yet its role in advancing the sustainable destination remains unexplored. This article addresses this gap by integrating research from sustainable destinations and place branding and theorising the mechanisms that connect them. An integrative and generative literature review guides this explorative and combining effort. Six thematic clusters framing the sustainable destination and seven thematic clusters framing place branding reveal their frail connections and evidence of the need for integration. By integrating, synthesizing and comparing these results and coupling them with the concept of situational meaning, this study develops a theoretical framework that explains how place branding can be harnessed to foster a more sustainable future for tourism destinations and their communities. Six research streams are proposed that substantiate the potential of place branding in enhancing sustainability meaning-making and, in turn, support the development of sustainable destinations, highlighting future research avenues for sustainability-driven place branding.

INTRODUCTION

In search of a transition towards sustainable tourism development, place managers, understood as individuals or organizations responsible for the strategic coordination and implementation of actions for local development, are required to utilize all available tools. Among these, place branding can help in this effort. While sustain-

able tourism research has developed nuanced insights into sustainability issues and the processes leading to unsustainable tourism development (Milano et al., 2019; Novy & Colomb, 2019), the sustainable destination concept has remained poorly framed in the literature. At the same time, the potential of place branding to assist in sustainability efforts remains rather unexplored (Kavartzis et al., 2023) and has attracted limited research attention (Therkelsen

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et al., 2021). The ambition of this study is to bridge place branding and sustainable destinations research towards theorizing their relationship and frame how place branding can be a lever for sustainable transition within tourism destinations.

Sustainability is a concept that allows different interpretations. However, there is a general agreement that it relates to the quest to satisfy societal needs without compromising environmental integrity in the present and future (Sharpley, 2020). Sustainability is approached here as the effort to balance the socio-cultural, economic and environmental dimensions of the development of places and tourism destinations.

The premise for establishing a link between place branding and sustainable destinations lies in the perceptual dimension of sustainability. This plays a crucial role as it reframes positive and negative tourism impacts through the perceptions of the diverse tourism stakeholders, including residents, tourists, tourism organisations and policymakers (e.g., tourists' and residents' perceived crowding, residents' perceived loss of place authenticity and cultural identity, tourists' perceived value of the destination experience, Pasquinelli & Trunfio, 2020).

Perceptions may align with facts or be dramatically distant. Stakeholders' perceptions represent the subjective dimension of sustainable tourism. Since the 1970s, tourism sustainability's perceptual/subjective dimension has been investigated (Pizam, 1978), showing that the impacts of tourism are highly dependent on human perceptions, with individual norms and values exerting considerable influence on them (Shi et al., 2017; Pasquinelli & Trunfio, 2020). Sustainability relates strongly to the subjective threshold of tolerance to tourism impacts (McCool & Lime, 2001; Dwyer, 2018; Burrai et al., 2019), and such threshold depends upon destination stakeholders' perceptions and understandings of the local role of tourism (Cheer et al., 2019; Pasquinelli & Trunfio, 2020).

Because of sustainability's perceptual/subjective dimension, theories and frameworks that deal with building and managing perceptions and assessing their influence on human behaviours—such as branding—can integrate sustainability research on tourism destinations. Place branding is a fruitful field for such integration, framing how building and managing place brands can support tourism destinations in their effort for sustainable development. In this article, place branding is approached as an action framework that builds on local identities and place reputation to assist local development. Place branding is an identity-driven (Boisen et al., 2018) development of communication programmes focusing on symbolic and representational aspects. It entails utilising the communicative power of a wide range of measures and policies based on a vision for the place's future. At the heart of

the place branding activity lies the formation of the place brand, which is “a network of associations in the place consumers' mind based on the visual, verbal, and behavioural expression of a place and its' stakeholders” (Zenker & Braun, 2017, p. 275). These associations differ in significance for place stakeholders and influence their behaviour differently.

In literature, a sharp differentiation in theory and practice between place branding and destination branding persists. Despite the separate and disconnected discussion, the two are very close and—we argue—can be considered inseparable. Especially when incorporating the sustainability dimension, it is not fruitful to distinguish the tourism function of a place from other functions. Indeed, the argument against such distinction helps us understand what Zenker et al. (2017) call the full complexity of place branding. Branding activities influence both the place and destination brands (Zenker et al., 2017), and both are based on a sense of place (Campelo et al., 2014). Residents and visitors encounter and consume the same landscapes and representations (Selby, 2004), something that makes Rabbiosi (2016) argue that the distinction between place and destination brands is reductive. For Kavaratzis and Hatch (2021), the formation of both the place brand and the destination brand occurs simultaneously for all stakeholders and “the place brand and the destination brand are in essence inseparable” (p. 5). Hanna et al. (2021) also indicate the need to examine place and destination branding together by indicating one of the intersecting concepts that run through the core themes in the literature, which is ‘coherent place and destination brand communications’.

The convergence proposed here between place branding and sustainability further suggests the necessity to move beyond the ‘place branding versus destination branding’ debate. Any sustainable form of place branding, like any discussion of a sustainable destination, needs to balance tourism and non-tourist functions of the place in the interest of local communities. The foundational work of Hunter (1997) argues that the discussion of tourism sustainability needs to embrace elements beyond tourism alone, a key aspect of the approach of this study.

Place branding can impact sustainability at various levels, but the link between place branding and sustainable destinations needs to be clarified. Recent scholarship introduced sustainability concerns in place branding, but the extant research is limited (Chan & Tsun, 2023; Liu et al., 2023; Ripoll-Gonzalez & Gale, 2023). On the one hand, place branding can assist an internal “multilogue” among local stakeholders (Kavaratzis, 2012; Ripoll Gonzalez & Lester, 2018), which may help stakeholders share a sustainable development vision and engage with a common goal. On the other hand, it may allow the local community to express the destination identity (Zouganeli

et al., 2012), share their local vision with visitors and boost sustainable attitudes and behaviours (Frey & George, 2010; Font & McCabe, 2017). Sustainability becomes a focus and vision for place branding practices, and, at the same time, place branding becomes a tool for achieving behavioural change in favour of more sustainable practices by managers, residents and visitors alike. Building bridges between place branding and the sustainable destination literature may also help place branding advance by recalibrating its purpose and scope beyond place attractiveness and competitiveness.

This article aims to theoretically frame the relationship between sustainable destinations and place branding, focusing on how place branding can support the development of sustainable destinations. This study relies on a literature review “to push theoretical boundaries” (Alegre et al., 2023: p. 237). It follows the logic proposed by Post et al. (2020), who argue that ‘making a theoretical contribution with a review article requires combining integrative and generative approaches’ (p. 352).

The effort to review, blend and merge the two research domains is motivated by the need to theorize the mechanisms underlying the connections between sustainable destinations and place branding towards a new theoretical development. A research agenda on sustainability-driven place branding is set to unlock the potential contribution of place branding to the sustainable future of places. In this logic, we start with a semi-systematic literature review to analyse and reach a synthesis of existing research in the two domains (i.e., sustainable destinations and place branding). On one hand, the literature review explores how sustainable development unfolds in those local contexts where tourism plays a role and highlights the centrality of multiple stakeholders’ understanding of and emotional connection with sustainability, and their active behaviour and engagement with it; on the other, it examines place branding concepts and approaches aimed at influencing stakeholders’ perceptions and the extent to which sustainability has informed this debate. By integrating, synthesizing and comparing the results of these research phases, we move beyond to propose a theoretical framework that articulates the causal link between place branding (as the process of shaping perceptions) and sustainable destination development (as embedded in stakeholder behaviours). We identify sustainability meaning-making as a mechanism through which the ambiguous and multidimensional concept of sustainability can become meaningful and actionable. This article ends with six future research streams that provide a platform for future scholarship to refine and empirically test the potential of place branding to enhance sustainability meaning-making and, in turn, support the development of sustainable destinations.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

Semi-systematic, integrative and generative approaches were adopted (Snyder, 2019; Post et al., 2020; Zopiatis et al., 2021) for the literature review. These approaches allowed: (a) exploring two distinct fields of inquiry concerning the concept of sustainable destination and its subjective dimension, and place branding; and (b) combining and integrating the sustainable destination and the place branding domains towards generating a novel theoretical framework.

This design fits the explorative, integrative and theory-development aims of this research. The explorative effort was assisted by the semi-systematic approach, which allowed mapping themes, theoretical perspectives and knowledge gaps in the two distinct fields of inquiry (Snyders, 2019). The semi-systematic review relied on a systematic search strategy and corpus curation (Kraus et al., 2022) and a mix of quantitative (thematic clustering) and qualitative analysis (Snyders, 2019) to develop a comprehensive and in-depth overview of the identified research areas.

The integrative approach was adopted to combine the results of the semi-systematic review to identify potential research avenues. This approach enables the synthesis of knowledge across different fields (Cronin & George, 2020). It aims to frame emerging research topics (Torraco, 2005) by identifying connections, patterns and potential relationships among the analysed research areas (Kastanakis et al., 2022). We coupled the results of this effort with the theoretical lens of situational meaning-making, which allowed us to generate new ideas about the links between the two fields under scrutiny and undertake a “creative synthesis” (Post et al., 2020). A “creative synthesis” combines perspectives and insights emerging from the extant research and critically reconceptualizes them to outline new areas of inquiry and research questions (Elsbach & van Knippenberg, 2020; Post et al., 2020). As our aim was to generate new theory, we combined integrative and generative approaches to enable a new understanding of place branding and sustainability and create a new framework that leads to “new ways of thinking about the topic” (Post et al., 2020: 353).

The research was designed in two phases of a Scopus-based literature review. Although there are different databases, we selected one (i.e., Scopus) to avoid duplication of records (Maseda et al., 2022) while keeping the range of sources broad thanks to the good inclusivity of the selected database. Scopus has an overall broader coverage than Web of Science (WoS) and includes 99.11% of the journals indexed in it (Singh et al., 2021); its broader coverage is confirmed in the social sciences field (Mongeon &

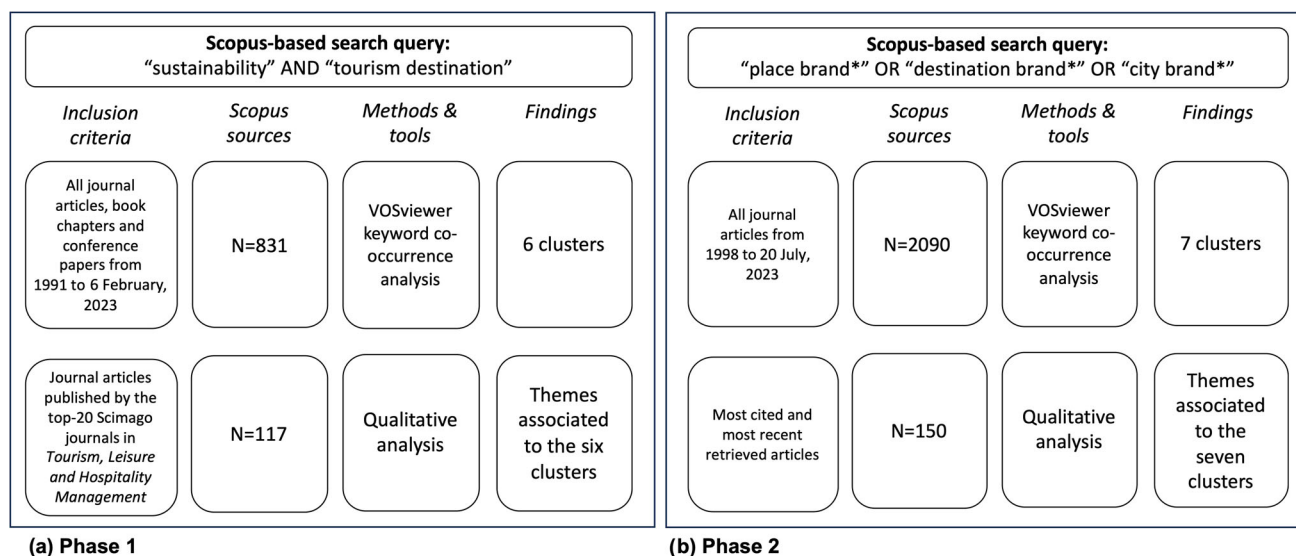


FIGURE 1 Literature review design and methodology.

Paul-Haus, 2016) compared to WoS and the recently established databases (Singh et al., 2021). Scopus and WoS have a similar bias concerning language coverage (Mongeon & Paul-Haus, 2016), but this was not an issue in this study focused on the English language to make the analysis feasible (thematic clustering of the whole retrieved text corpus and in-depth qualitative analysis).

Phase 1 (Figure 1a) retrieved journal articles, book chapters and conference papers in English from 1991 (the earliest year from which relevant results were obtained) to 6 February, 2023 (date of the database query) to reach a broad coverage, including emerging research topics and perspectives not necessarily widely consolidated in the literature. The search keywords (i.e., keywords included in the publication's title, abstract and/or keywords) were "sustainability" AND "tourism destination" and yielded 831 articles. Information concerning title, year of publication, author(s) name, journal, keywords and abstract was downloaded for the analysis. The VOSviewer software was used for the co-occurrence analysis, which identified thematic clusters based on bibliographic data (such as paper titles and abstracts). These clusters resulted from a software-based statistical elaboration creating links when two items (terms identified using natural language processing algorithms, van Eck & Waltman, 2023) occur together in the text data. Clusters were labelled by the researchers based on the clustered terms' analysis, terms' occurrence and relevance score (high relevance scores helped identify more informative terms representing specific topics in the analysed text data, van Eck & Waltman, 2023) developed by VOSviewer.

A subsequent step of Phase 1 consisted of an in-depth qualitative literature analysis to deepen knowledge of the

emerging thematic clusters and make their interpretation more robust (see Table 1). A purposive sub-sample was built based on the criterion of papers positioning in the top 20 Scimago journals in *Tourism, Leisure and Hospitality Management* (N = 117; Appendix 1). This allowed us to consider all the articles in the full sample that were published in the field's most influential journals according to this international ranking. The resulting 117 articles were manually placed in the six clusters based on their titles and abstracts (Appendix 3) and qualitatively analysed. The questions guiding this part of the analysis were: (a) what are the key themes characterizing each cluster? (b) how and to what extent does the subjective dimension of sustainability emerge in each cluster? (c) have place brand and branding concepts and frameworks been adopted? This last question aimed to detect branding-related ideas, concepts and principles.

Phase 2 retrieved journal articles (English language) from 1998 (the earliest year from which relevant results were obtained) to 20 July, 2023 (date of the database query, by using the following search keywords and string (i.e., keywords included in the publication's title, abstract and/or keywords): 'place brand*' OR 'destination brand*' OR 'city brand*').

Data collection in Phase 2 was not confined to studies considering sustainability in place branding. The query mirrors the explorative effort in the place branding literature to reconsider how this body of knowledge can contribute to the sustainable destination debate, opening novel connections and exploiting the untapped potential of place branding.

The above keywords for the Scopus search were finally selected after considering three additional keywords:

regional brand, nation brand and country brand. A preliminary VosViewer-based clustering suggested excluding these keywords since retrieving studies that are distant from this study's scope. 'Regional brand' keywords retrieved 195 articles revealing the dominant focus on geographical origin and provenance of regional products, their effect in the market and agricultural productions, leveraging regional brands for competitiveness and regional development. 'Nation brand' and 'country brand' keywords (724 retrieved articles) unveiled two main clusters: the one concerning public diplomacy, the soft power of national culture, national identity and international relationships; the other focused on the country-of-origin effect in consumer markets and export.

Phase 2 query yielded 2091 articles. The collected information structure and procedure of analysis mirrored Phase 1. For the in-depth qualitative analysis of the literature (see Table 2), it was not possible to refer to top journals in a specific area as a sub-sampling criterion, as place/city/destination branding is a deeply multidisciplinary topic and relevant publications are positioned in very different journals. Two sub-sampling criteria were adopted: article influence (number of citations) and year of publication (to include the most recent ideas and approaches). The sub-sample comprised the one hundred most cited and the fifty most recent articles ($N = 150$, Appendix 2). These 150 articles were manually placed in the seven clusters based on their titles and abstracts (Appendix 3). The questions guiding this step of the analysis were: (a) what are the key themes characterising each cluster? (b) how and to what extent does sustainability emerge in each cluster?

Finally, the findings of Phase 1 and Phase 2 were combined through the theoretical lens of situational meaning-making, which provided a fruitful ground to develop a new understanding of the links between the two fields. While clusters were statistically produced by VosViewer (the researchers interpreted their meanings based on the statistical output generated by the software and an in-depth qualitative analysis of the article sub-samples), a "creative synthesis" based on approaching sustainability as situational meaning-making combined perspectives and insights framed by the emerging clusters and reconceptualized them to develop the theoretical framework and research propositions (Elsbach & van Knippenberg, 2020; Post et al., 2020).

The theoretical framework results from an explanatory form of theorising (Cornelissen et al., 2021) aimed to reveal the mechanisms explaining how place branding can support sustainable destinations. The reasoning was a "process theorizing" that explored the links among the clusters that conceptualized the two research domains and identified 'generative mechanisms' explaining their relationships (Cornelissen et al., 2021, p. 9).

Of course, this methodological approach has limitations. Thematic clustering statistically creates clusters that sharply separate concepts and may obscure potentially relevant links or mix concepts whose connections deserve additional analytical insights. Future research could adopt a problematizing review approach (Alvesson & Sandberg, 2020) to analyse the literature, potentially altering cluster boundaries and offering a different perspective on the existing literature. The adopted review methodology underlies some epistemological assumptions (Elsbach & van Knippenberg, 2020), including the existence of a given body of knowledge to be analysed and the value of the "representative description" of research domains based on an inventory of the accumulated knowledge, to guide future research. Alternative epistemological approaches may problematize this approach (Alvesson & Sandberg, 2020), leading to different results. However, the adopted methodology lays the foundations for integrating place branding and sustainable destination research.

SUSTAINABLE DESTINATION

Sustainable destination is a multidimensional concept according to the six emerging clusters (Figure 2a). The recent academic debate on sustainable destinations has shifted the attention towards resilient communities and smartness (Figure 2b). While the subjective dimension of sustainability emerged across the six clusters, place brand and branding concepts and frameworks did not enter the debate significantly (Table 1).

Sustainable Destination and Strategic Management

SD Cluster 1 frames the sustainable destination as a locally managed system where effective destination management strategies regulate tourism pressure, maintain technical efficiency (e.g., energy use), enhance environmental performance and ensure competitiveness, resource preservation, and quality of life (Mihalic & Kuscer, 2022).

Central to this cluster are the local stakeholders (i.e., policymakers, residents and local organisations) whose perceptions, understanding and participation contribute to defining and sustaining the sustainable destination. A sustainable development path depends upon policymakers' strategic decisions on resource management, actions and regulations, as well as local organizations' and residents' understanding of sustainability, as these need to assist the destination strategy implementation. Fostering local stakeholders' perceptions of tourism's contribution to prosperity and its impact on quality of life influences tourism acceptance and understanding of its sustainable path. Promoting

TABLE 1 Phase 1: Key findings of the qualitative analysis.

Cluster (*)	Key terms (**)	N. Papers (year range)	Concepts and topics
SD Cluster 1: Strategic Management (red)	rural tourism destination,	16 (2013–2023)	- effective destination management (Mihalic & Kuscer, 2022)
	preservation, efficiency, destination	7 (2002–2012)	- territorial competitiveness (Wu et al., 2023)
	competitiveness, pressure, municipality, water,	3 (1991–2001)	- local natural resources preservation and long-term sustainability-oriented tourism development (Pulido-Fernandez et al., 2015)
	coastal tourism destination, regulation		- sustainability indicators (Torres-Delgado & Saarinen, 2014; Gasparini & Mariotti, 2023; Kuscer et al., 2017)
			- models for impact measurement, destination performance and quality, tourism and technical efficiency (Rodríguez-Díaz and Espino-Rodríguez, 2008; Tsionas & George Assaf, 2014; Kelly & Williams, 2007; Mihalic and Kuscer, 2022)
			- centrality of managerial actions, regulation and government's decision-making (Malik & Bhat, 2015)
			- controlled tourism development (Kokkranikal et al., 2003)
			Subjective dimension
			- stakeholders' perceptions of tourism performance and contribution to local prosperity (Falatoonitoos et al., 2022)
			- tourism impacting quality of life and destination quality perception (Mihalic and Kuscer, 2022)
			- destination image among the indicators for assessing destination competitiveness and sustainability (Rodríguez-Díaz and Espino-Rodríguez, 2008)
			- policymaking and the perception of sustainability: instrumental use of indicators, sustainability issues awareness and social learning (Gasparini and Mariotti, 2023)
			Place branding
			<i>no direct reference to place brand and branding</i>

(Continues)

TABLE 1 (Continued)

Cluster (*)	Key terms (**)	N. Papers (year range)	Concepts and topics
SD Cluster 2: Resilient Community (green)	climate change, pandemic , resilience, risk, adaptation , vulnerability , hospitality, overtourism, tourism impact, key stakeholder	28 (2013–2023) 11 (2002–2012) 2 (1991–2001)	- resilient community in the face of global environmental and societal challenges (Kutzner, 2019; Santos-Lacueva & Velasco Gonzalez, 2018) - resilience (pragmatic response to shocks) and sustainability (aspiration to inter-generational fragile resource provision) (Espiner et al., 2017) - vulnerabilities and adaptation capacity (McLeod et al., 2021; Xiao et al., 2023) - adaptive management (Larson & Poudyal, 2012; Csete & Szeci, 2015) - multiple stakeholders as interacting agents of a dynamic system central to the adaptive community (Baktash et al., 2023) - 'human–environment system' as an essential approach to sustainability (Calgaro et al., 2014) Subjective dimension - multiple stakeholders' perceptions of sustainability and opinions influencing decision-making and mobilizing (or not) consensus on sustainability policies (Dimitrovski et al., 2021; Damian et al., 2022) - perceived meaning/perceived manifestations of sustainability issues influence residents' pro-environmental behaviour (Wang et al., 2021) - perceived social–ecological drivers of change influence tour operators' strategies and operations (Kutzner, 2019) - the perceived relationship between climate change and tourism will influence government's actions and their temporal horizon (Santos-Lacueva and Velasco-Gonzalez, 2018) - risk perception and interpretation of the challenges influence destinations' preparedness and response to shocks (Espiner et al., 2017) Place branding - no direct reference to place brand and branding

(Continues)

TABLE 1 (Continued)

Cluster (*)	Key terms (**)	N. Papers (year range)	Concepts and topics
SD Cluster 3: Tourists' Behaviour (blue)	Image, satisfaction, intention,	15(2013-2023)	- tourists' pro-environmental behaviours and its antecedents, manifesting as civilized behaviour intentions (Liu et al, 2020)
	communication,	4(2002-2012)	- green purchasing behaviour (Chin et al., 2018)
	destination image, economic sustainability, loyalty, customer, expectations	0(1991-2001)	- willingness to pay to support sustainability policies (Durán-Roman et al., 2021) - pro-environmental concerns and boycotting attitude (Seyfi et al., 2023) - visitor satisfaction (Newsome et al., 2019) and tourist loyalty (Campón-Cerro et al., 2017) as drivers of long-term sustainability - tourist's "sustainable intelligence" combines commitment, attitude, knowledge and behaviour regarding sustainability (Lopez-Sanchez and Pulido-Fernández, 2016)
Subjective dimension			
			- tourists' civilized behaviours align to subjective norms: perceived social pressure and expectations in a context (Liu et al, 2020)
			- destination image and destination's perceived quality are antecedents of tourists' behaviour and loyalty (Campon-Cerro et al., 2017)
			- destination image and sustainable consumption (Line & Hanks, 2016)
			- messages with an impact on green consumption behaviour (Chin et al., 2018)
Place branding			
			- destination brand and branding contribute to local resource preservation (Ana Isabel et al., 2013)
			- green marketing and communication influence green consumption behaviours (Chin et al., 2018)
(Continues)			

(Continues)

TABLE 1 (Continued)

Cluster (*)	Key terms (**)	N. Papers (year range)	Concepts and topics
SD Cluster 4: Governance (yellow)	governance, involvement, tourism planning, participation, engagement, crisis, policymaker, local government	16 (2013–2023) 2 (2002–2012) 0 (1991–2001)	- governance as a prerequisite for sustainable destinations (Roxas et al., 2020) - governance enabling sustainable tourism development (Mihalic et al., 2016) - bottom-up, inclusive ways to the sustainable destination: coalitions between society, government and business, DMOs (beyond the market focus, Morgan, 2012; La Lopa & Day, 2011) - cooptation dynamics (Nguyen et al., 2022) - bonding capital building (frequent relationships among destination stakeholders to build the tourism product, Córcoles Munoz et al., 2023) - creation of formal interaction spaces for local stakeholders and implementation of sustainable tourism projects (Barandiarán et al., 2019) - stakeholders' interactions as the ground for participation, accountability, transparency and social learning (Islam et al., 2018) Subjective dimension - destination stakeholders' perceptions of the borders of the local community (Fan et al., 2023) - knowledge sharing triggers stakeholders' iterative learning and perceptions of sustainability issues (Islam et al., 2018) - perceived political environment influences residents' satisfaction with tourism and their support to sustainable tourism (Mihalic et al., 2016) - perceived meaning and significance of behavioural change boost sustainable transition (La Lopa and Day, 2011) Place branding - no direct reference to place brand and branding - (indirect reference) DMOs' role of destination stewardship including place identity construction (Morgan, 2012) - (indirect reference) increasing reliance on internal marketing to mobilize change (La Lopa and Day, 2011)

(Continues)

TABLE 1 (Continued)

Cluster (*)	Key terms (**)	N. Papers (year range)	Concepts and topics
SD Cluster 5: Heritage Management (purple)	Heritage, cultural heritage, landscape, tradition, history, economic development, world heritage, authenticity, cultural tourism destination	5 (2013–2023)	- cultural tourism destinations: history and authentic halo essential to the community's livelihood (Ma et al., 2021)
		1 (2002–2012)	- 'history preservation and adaptation actions that enhance the continuity of heritage values and sites' (Li et al., 2022)
		0 (1991–2001)	- sustainability implications of history manipulation for tourism purposes (Wong, 2013)
			Subjective dimension
			- sustainability orientation of firms depends upon the market and CEOs' perceptions of market evolutions (Parra-Requena et al., 2023)
			- emerging tourists' perceptions following manipulated representation may damage intangible cultural capital (Wong, 2013)
			Place branding
			- no direct reference to place brand and branding
			- (indirect reference) manipulated destination identities influencing tourists' perceptions and the risks implied for the intangible cultural capital (Wong, 2013)

(Continues)

TABLE 1 (Continued)

Cluster (*)	Key terms (**)	N. Papers (year range)	Concepts and topics
SD Cluster 6: Smartness (light blue)	technology, innovation , smart tourism destination , smart city	7 (2013–2023) 0 (2002–2012) 0 (1991–2001)	- 'sustainability through smartness' (Soares et al., 2022) - smart approach for enhanced tourist experiences and effective knowledge management (Soares et al., 2022) - smart city: synergies between technology and its socio-economic impacts (smartness) and environmental sustainability (sustainability, Eichelberger et al., 2020) - smart destination as foundation for the smart hospitality (Buhalis et al., 2023) and the entrepreneurial ecosystem (Eichelberger et al., 2020) - 'smart or intelligent solutions', innovation and knowledge transfer (Rucci et al., 2022) - measuring the smart destination in the frame of the smart city indicators (Ivars-Baidal et al., 2021) - online marketing in the smart destination with limited improvements of the tourist experience (Ivars-Baidal et al., 2021) Subjective dimension - residents' and tourists' perceptions of the smart city performance and value (Eichelberger et al., 2020) - limited perceptions of the smart hospitality potential: need to boost a mindset change (Buhalis et al., 2023) - information and data sharing raise risk perceptions and aversion against technologies (Jeong and Shin, 2020 cited in Soares et al., 2022) - data security and privacy issues call for the destination and public actors to play as guarantor of data protection (Soares et al., 2022) Place branding - no direct reference to place brand and branding

(*) In brackets, the colours of the clusters in Figure 2a.

(**) Key terms from the clustering by VOSviewer: terms with an occurrence > 15 (starting from the most frequent) and the highest relevance scores in the cluster. In bold the top terms for the relevance score.

TABLE 2 Phase 2: Key findings of the qualitative analysis.

Cluster (*)	Key terms (**)	N. Papers (Year range)	Concepts and topics
PB Cluster 1: <i>Urban policy, planning and local development (red)</i>	community, heritage, actor, governance , transformation , vision, place branding strategy, urban development, tension, urban planning, urban space , economic growth, commodification, creative city, urbanism , gentrification , neighbourhood, public space, urban regeneration, spatial planning, local development, exclusion	15 (2018–2023) 11 (2008–2017) 3 (1998–2007)	- <i>Policy, policy instruments and limitations</i>: place image-building strategy (Kavaratzis & Ashworth, 2005); local planning instruments for implementing the branding policy (Ashworth, 2009); selective process layering spatial identities (Boisen et al., 2011); limits of place branding as top-down governance process (Eshuis et al., 2014); different multi-level governance affecting place branding performance (Alsayel et al., 2023) - <i>Political nature of place branding</i>: combining marketing with knowledge of the political environment (Braun, 2012) - <i>Urban entrepreneurialism</i>: exclusive spaces (Bell & Binnie, 2004); entrepreneurial tactic (Lauermann, 2018); inclusion and diversity limited to the symbolic realm through city branding (Bain & Podmore, 2023); informality and the politics of place branding (Dovey & King, 2011); urban isomorphism and sycomorphism to attract businesses (Sullivan et al., 2023); the regime of heritage driving oppression and resistance (Thomas Devlin & Piazzoni, 2023) - <i>Creative city branding</i>: 'creatives' attractiveness (Zenker, 2009); creative city representation in post-industrial economy (Vanolo, 2008) - <i>Impacts on residents</i>: frustration and feeling of exclusion, disapproval to official place brands (Belabas, 2023); reactions and contestation (Yazici et al., 2023); inclusive city branding to steer migrants' identification: no effects proved (Belabas & George, 2023) - <i>Sustainability</i>: impact of place branding on sustainable development through the 'National Civilised City' (China) label (Liu et al., 2023); sustainability narrative in city branding focused on generating economic value, not favouring more inclusive governance arrangement and pluralistic approach to generating sustainability value (Ripoll-Gonzalez & Gale, 2023)

(Continues)

TABLE 2 (Continued)

Cluster (*)	Key terms (**)	N. Papers (Year range)	Concepts and topics
PB Cluster 2: <i>Destination branding as consumer marketing adaptation (green)</i>	destination brand equity, brand personality, destination brand image, brand loyalty, brand awareness, destination personality , destination brand experience, behavioural intention, destination loyalty, personality trait, revisit intention , destination brand loyalty , WoM , brand quality , destination brand awareness , affective image , tourist satisfaction , destination brand value	20 (2018–2023) 31 (2008–2017) 9 (1998–2007)	- <i>Brand image</i>: Tourists' brand image and tourists' behaviours, such as intention to revisit and recommend (Qu et al., 2011); plural brand meanings, different stakeholder groups associate different brand meanings to city brands depending on their interpretation (Merrilees et al., 2009); stereotyping the typical local people influence place image and induce perception of difference and tourism consumption (Freire, 2009) - <i>Destination branding practices</i>: DMOs destination branding as a narrow understanding by destination managers (Blain et al., 2005); risky traditional strategies focused only on visitors, disregarding local community and entrepreneurs (Garcia et al., 2012) - <i>Destination brand personality</i>: strong link with emotional brand image (Hosany et al., 2006); Aaker's scale adapted to destinations, impact on intention to recommend (Ekinci & Hosany, 2006; Souiden et al., 2017) and tourists' behaviour (Chen & Phou, 2013); relationship between personality, self-congruity and tourists' behavioural intentions (Usakli & Baloglu, 2011); projected vs. perceived destination brand personality; city brand personality (Kaplan et al., 2010) - <i>Destination brand measurements</i>: brand equity of destinations to monitor positioning over time (Pike, 2009); place brand measurement (Zenker, 2011) - <i>Satisfaction</i>: destination emotional attachment as antecedent of destination satisfaction (Veasna et al., 2013); citizen satisfaction and its influence on place attachment, attitude and positive citizenship behaviour (Zenker and Rutter, 2014) - <i>Destination brand loyalty</i>: symbolic tourism destination brand-self-congruence, brand identification and lifestyle-congruence affecting brand loyalty (Ekinci et al., 2013); previous experiences, place attachment and involvement, service quality and tourist satisfaction impact on destination loyalty formation (Gursoy et al., 2014); perceived authenticity in tourism destination brands boosting relationship orientation, loyalty and advocacy (Kumar et al., 2023) - <i>Destination brand experience</i>: 'sense, feel, think, act and do' of the brand experience determine revisit intentions and WOM (Barnes et al., 2014); brand experience impacts differentiation and brand positioning (Liu et al., 2023); destination brand experience builds trust (Torres-Moraga & Barra, 2023)

(Continues)

TABLE 2 (Continued)

Cluster (*)	Key terms (**)	N. Papers (Year range)	Concepts and topics
			- <i>Brand attitude</i>: brand complexity steering positive place attitude (i.e., place satisfaction, identification, and attachment) and place behaviour (i.e., positive word-of-mouth); city brand attitude among residents (Marrilees et al., 2009) - <i>Brand love</i>: individual psychological process and the result of interactions on different levels such as micro- (individual), meso- (in-group), macro- (in-group vs. out-group) and mega-layer (societal) social dynamics (Aro et al., 2023); emotional city brand promoting residents' and tourists' place attachment (Casais & Poço, 2023) - <i>Destination brand engagement</i>: marketer-traveller interaction and traveller-traveller interaction (Cruz-Milan and Castillo-Ortiz, 2023); tourists' pandemic-related destination brand reputation positive impact on destination-brand-engagement and tourist citizenship behaviours (Rather et al., 2023); sensory and affective destination brand experience impacts customer engagement influencing subjective wellbeing after a travel experience (So et al., 2023) - <i>Sustainability</i>: eco-labels for tourism destinations boosting self-congruence, destination brand identification, perceived destination quality, willingness to pay a premium price among tourists (Can et al., 2023); green, creative and smart city brand equity among residents (capacity to generate brand value): narrow and general understanding of these themes among residents (Chan & Tsun, 2023)

(Continues)

TABLE 2 (Continued)

Cluster (*)	Key terms (**)	N. Papers (Year range)	Concepts and topics
PB Cluster 3: <i>Interactive multi-stakeholder process (blue)</i>	network, municipality, collaboration, place identity, leadership, legitimacy, place branding process, local stakeholder , inhabitant, city branding process, internal stakeholder, place brand identity, stakeholder engagement , brand architecture, place branding practice , municipal government	7 (2018–2023) 16 (2008–2027) 2 (1998–2007)	- <i>Place identity</i>: the practice of steering interactions and dialogue between stakeholders (Kavaratzis & Hatch, 2013); sense of place experienced by residents (Campelo et al., 2014); brand as stakeholders' relationships and behaviours (reality), rather than communication (image) (Hankinson, 2004); complexity of place product, complexity of organisational place marketing dynamics (Warnaby, 2009); cluster identity and trademarks helping community building (Grimbert et al., 2023) - <i>Branding process</i>: place brand process of engagement and participation (Morgan et al., 2003); stakeholder partnerships, brand leadership, brand communications and brand culture (values, beliefs and basic assumptions shared by an organisation) (Hankinson, 2009); place branding process components (Hanna & Rowley, 2011); participatory branding process (Zenker & Erfgren, 2014); technological, relational, and attitudinal factors impact citizen participation in participatory city branding (Maziashvili et al., 2023) - <i>Stakeholders' roles</i>: residents' role as ambassadors granting credibility; as citizens/voters (Braun et al., 2013; Zenker and Erfgren, 2014); public and private sector stakeholders' roles (Morgan et al., 2003); stakeholders include citizens legitimising the place brand and influencing its meaning (Kalandides et al., 2012); co-creation and community ownership of brands grounded in rights, roles, relationships and responsibilities (Aitken & Campelo, 2011); democratic legitimacy of branding and limitations of participatory branding processes (Eshuis & Edwards, 2013); positive outcomes of stakeholders' persuasion and authority in destination branding (Marzano & Scott, 2009) - <i>Sustainability</i>: green city branding for brand engagement but also causing disengagement, dissent and disillusionment, making power imbalances visible in stakeholder interactions (Reynolds et al., 2023)

(Continues)

TABLE 2 (Continued)

Cluster (*)	Key terms (**)	N. Papers (Year range)	Concepts and topics
PB Cluster 4: <i>Place brand and digitalization</i> (yellow)	social medium, user, dmo , brand communication, instagram , smart city , communication strategy, social media platform , facebook , private sector , twitter , communication technology	3 (2018–2023) 6 (2008–2017) 0 (1998–2007)	- <i>User-generated contents (UGC) building the brand</i>: tourists creating contents avoiding the use of official brand meanings (Munar, 2011); consumer-generated videos and DMOs' videos contributing to destination brand building (Lim et al., 2012); tourists' generated contents integral to branding strategies (Oliveira & Panyik, 2015); brand diffusion, brand events and opinion leaders' impact through UGC (Wang et al., 2023) - <i>Social media storytelling</i>: social mechanisms characterising social media as spaces for storytelling ('technology of power') boosting engagement (Lund et al., 2018); a promotional tactic through 'participative, interactive, open and transparent' social media (Zhou & Wang, 2014) - <i>Smart city brand</i>: label for smart urban technologies (Yigitcanlar, 2015); centralized smart city branding, framing single projects and addressing different targets separately, no residents' co-creation mechanisms (Vijaygopal et al., 2023)
PB Cluster 5: <i>Mega-events and host city branding</i> (purple)	mega-event , host city, imagery, legacy , game, Olympic game , sport event, co-branding, Olympic	2 (2018–2023) 1 (2008–2017) 1 (1998–2007)	- <i>Mega-event as city branding strategy</i>: mismatch between projected and perceived/experience host city brand by visitors and residents (Zhang & Zhao, 2009); sport event for co-branding for event-city image transfer (Xing & Chalip, 2006); place branding as social costs/benefit of sport mega-event (Mair et al., 2023)

(Continues)

TABLE 2 (Continued)

Cluster (*)	Key terms (**)	N. Papers (Year range)	Concepts and topics
PB Cluster 6: <i>Identity and power of place brands</i> (light blue)	power, global city , public diplomacy, local identity , artist , local food, soft power	5 (2018–2023) 5 (2008–2017) 0 (1998–2007)	- <i>Power and soft power</i>: postmodern power in international politics (Van Ham, 2008); global city status through fashion and design brand channels (Jansson & Power, 2010); reputation decline for nation brands (Durrani, 2023) - <i>Local identity</i>: food experience producers integrate place into the food experience (Farrelly & Makkar, 2023); firms' place brand appropriation, local heritage recodification and novel place meanings production (Pasquinelli et al., 2023) - <i>Food identity</i>: different identity elements appealing to different audiences including international tourists (Lin et al., 2011); regional food festival triggering positive destination image (Lee & Arcodia, 2011)
PB Cluster 7: <i>Brand positioning communication</i> (orange)	logo , slogan, storytelling, symbolic value , talent	2 (2018–2023) 1 (2008–2017) 2 (1998–2007)	- <i>Logo and slogans</i>: complexity in capturing the essence of place and addressing multiple stakeholders by effectively differentiating the brand (Pike, 2005); critique to the narrow focus on slogans and logo: need to theorize city brand management frameworks (Ashworth & Kavaratzis, 2009); 'urban designscape' as hegemonic network of signifiers in the city: aesthetic markers triggering the urban habitus (Julier, 2005) - Talent attraction: creative cluster image projection techniques (Wu & Coe, 2023).

(*) In brackets, the colours of the clusters in Figure 3a.

(**) Key terms from the clustering by VOSviewer: terms with an occurrence > 15 (starting from the most frequent; excluding 'city brand/branding', 'place brand/branding' and 'destination brand/branding' whose presence in the clusters will be discussed but does not add specific contents to each cluster, as confirmed by the relevance score below the average) and the highest relevance scores in the cluster. For clusters 4 to 7 all clustered terms are reported given their small number. In bold the top terms for the relevance score. Eight articles were not categorized under the seven clusters as not possible because of the limited focus on place branding.

locals' awareness and social learning is important so that tools such as sustainability indicators, performance monitoring and impact measurements, can be relevant in the sustainable destination.

Sustainable Destination as a Resilient Community

SD Cluster 2 conceptualizes the sustainable destination as a resilient community of stakeholders (e.g., residents, policymakers and local organizations) responding to global societal and environmental challenges, such as climate change and the pandemic. Resilience implies adaptive capacity grounded on the destination community's awareness of its vulnerabilities and the need to adopt "human-environment system" thinking. Opinion formation, meaning-making and understanding sustainability challenges transform stakeholders into agents of sustainable development, influencing their behaviours (e.g., residents' and entrepreneurs' pro-environmental behaviours, preparedness to shocks, policymakers' decision-making and timing to action).

Sustainable Destination and Tourists' Behaviours

SD Cluster 3 explores the relationship between the sustainable destination and responsible tourists, drawing attention to their perceptions, attitudes to sustainability and behaviours. It frames the centrality of tourists' "sustainable intelligence" (Lopez-Sanchez & Pulido-Fernández, 2016), emotional involvement in determining their civilized behavioural intentions, green purchasing, willingness to pay for sustainability and pro-environment attitudes. Therefore, a sustainable destination is mediated by the tourist experience and the capacity to catalyse the activation of tourists' responsible and conscious attitudes and behaviours. The influence of the destination image on tourist experiences is discussed in this cluster. Organizations managing destination brands (e.g., DMOs), their communication and green marketing actions (e.g., eco-labels and environmental advertising) can impact tourists' perceptions and understanding of the connections between local sustainability challenges and their tourist experiences, promoting a shift from a tourism consumerism to a participative and responsible orientation.

Sustainable Destination and Governance

SD Cluster 4 conceptualizes the sustainable destination as a local organizational system where governance is grounded in a coalition among public and private actors

and civil society. Destination management organizations (DMOs) are pivotal to the sustainable destination, combining the traditional tourism market orientation with internal system management, including coordination, stakeholder management and membership steering, place identity construction and internal marketing (Morgan, 2012; La Lopa & Day, 2011).

Sustainable tourism governance requires the formation of local coalitions steered through stakeholder engagement, relationship building, and participative and transparent decision making (Mihalic et al., 2016; Islam et al., 2018). Stakeholders' perceptions and understanding of the local context, the meaning of sustainability in their lives, community involvement in local decision-making, and the socio-economic tourism role, foster the formation of such coalitions. Such perceptions represent the fertile ground for collective meanings of sustainability and social learning, essential to sustainable transitions.

Sustainable Destination and Heritage Management

SD Cluster 5 highlights the role of effective heritage management in promoting sustainable cultural tourism destinations. The sustainable destination balances heritage preservation, continuity and adaptation (Li et al., 2022). This cluster underlines that residents', public and private decision-makers' and tourists' perceptions, feelings and valuation of local cultural heritage and its preservation are preconditions for significant and responsible heritage management, which must avoid commodifying manipulations of history and heritage identity.

Sustainable Destination and Smartness

SD Cluster 6 highlights a growing but still underexplored research field at the intersection between the smart and the sustainable destination. Smart destinations are not inherently sustainable but can contribute to local sustainability by promoting digital innovation and stakeholder engagement (de Jong et al., 2015; Buhalis et al., 2023).

Studies have focused on how smart technologies (e.g., sensors, mobile apps, digital connectivity, big data and virtual reality) enhance tourist experiences, destination governance, stakeholders' collaboration and coordination, and destination marketing. Limited attention has been paid to the underlying processes, such as innovation capacity building, knowledge transfer and knowledge management within destinations.

The subjective dimension of sustainability has emerged regarding stakeholders' perceptions, awareness and engagement. These are fostered by digital accessibil-

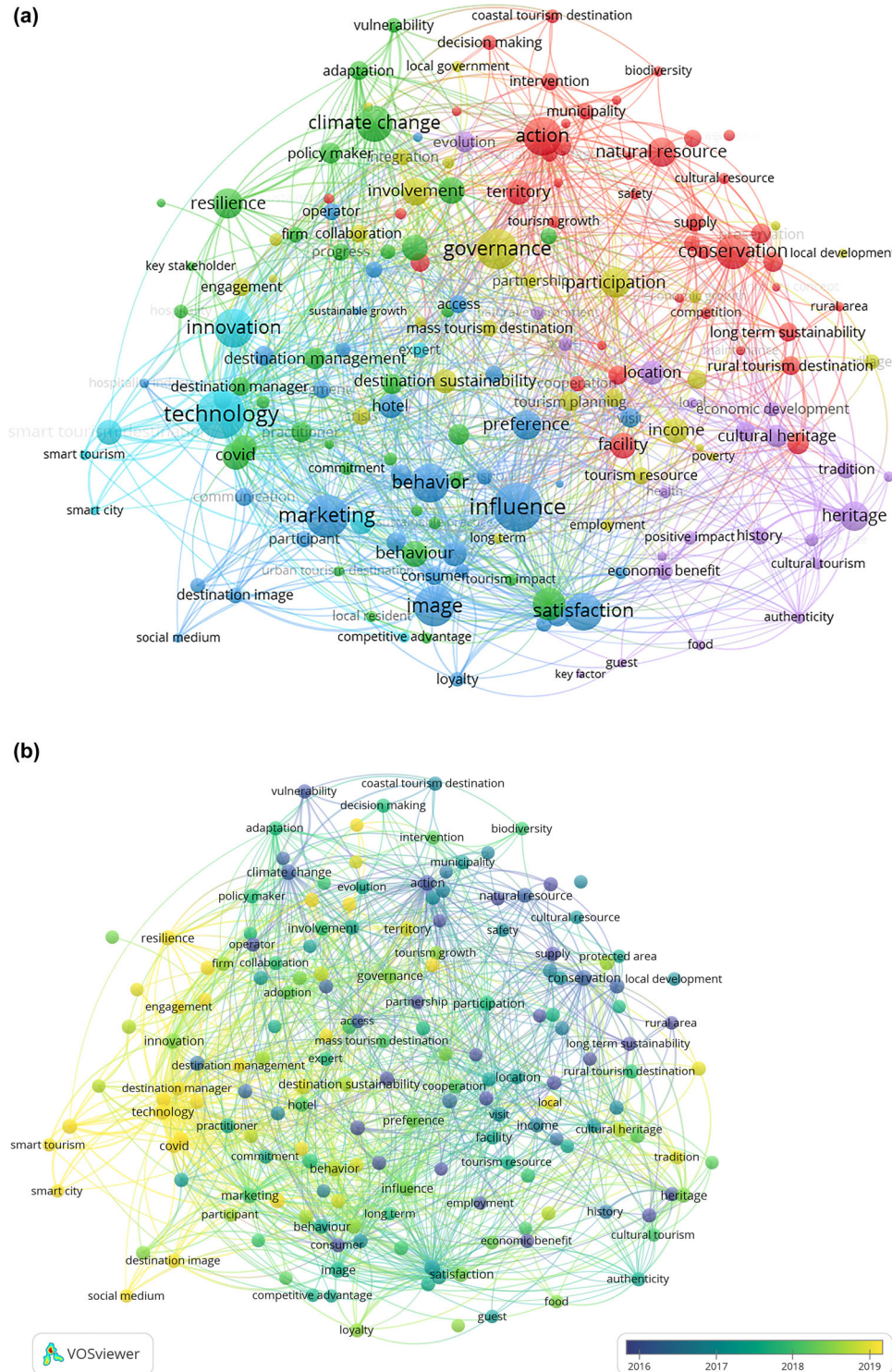


FIGURE 2 Phase 1: (a) Six cluster map and (b) Temporal map. (Size of nodes is proportional to word occurrence.)

ity, facilitating information-sharing, involvement, and learning. While considerable research has focused on tourists' perceptions of smart solutions at the destination, limited studies have addressed residents' and tourists' perceptions of smart city and smart hospitality performance and value (Eichelberger et al., 2020; Buhalis et al., 2023), suggesting a need to enhance awareness of

innovation and change within the sustainable destination. Perceived risk and aversion to technologies may constrain information and data sharing among destination stakeholders, implying the need for destination management to guarantee data protection and security (Soares et al., 2022).

Place Branding

Place branding literature articulates in seven thematic clusters (Table 2), showing polarization between place branding and destination branding. However, recent studies have attempted to intersect them. We introduce the seven clusters below and then discuss to what extent they address sustainability issues.

Urban policy, planning and local development

PB Cluster 1 focuses on city branding as public policy underpinning local development and regeneration. This thematic cluster, a long-standing and consolidated research stream, discusses the strategic role of city branding in urban transformation and development processes through integrating planning instruments and place image-building (Kavaratzis & Ashworth, 2005; Ashworth, 2009). Critical studies have discussed tensions and conflicts inherent in place branding. Locals' frustration, exclusion, lack of identification and contestations are potential negative effects of place branding. This is the manifestation of urban entrepreneurialism, boosting symbolic exclusion, invisibility of several urban social realities, and urban isomorphism that hides significant parts of the urban space and locals' urban experiences to catalyse global attention.

Destination branding and consumer marketing

PB Cluster 2 focuses on consumer marketing concepts and models in destination branding, drawing attention to branding actions and stakeholders' responses. Studies have analysed cognitive, affective and behavioural responses, utilizing marketing concepts such as brand equity, brand personality, brand loyalty and satisfaction. Destination branding concepts have spilled out into the place branding domain, transferring brand satisfaction, brand identification and brand attachment into studies addressing residents' place experience (Merrilees et al., 2009; Zenker et al., 2017; Casais & Poço, 2023).

Interactive multi-stakeholder process

PB Cluster 3 emphasizes the organisational and processual dimensions of place branding, highlighting stakeholders' roles in participatory brand identity building. Place identity is dynamically built as an interactive dialogue among stakeholders, reframing place branding as a prac-

tice of steering relations based on a sense of place and brand culture. The cluster reflects a shift towards framing place branding as a multi-stakeholder, interactive dialogue among stakeholders and identity negotiations, rather than a top-down effort (Morgan et al., 2003; Hanna & Rowley, 2011; Kavaratzis & Hatch, 2013).

At its core is the stakeholder orientation, where residents, policymakers, entrepreneurs and tourists are co-creators of place brand meanings. Sense of place and sense of belonging enable emotional engagement, which may turn stakeholders into brand ambassadors and advocates. Digital tools and participative communication channels (e.g., social media) may enhance engagement in place branding by enabling socialisation and social influence, interest and positive attitude to participation, transparency and trust in place branding facilitators.

Digitalization

PB Cluster 4 frames the role of digitalization for place branding. Two research streams are framed in the cluster: social media brand communication and smart city branding. The former focuses on social media as an enabling factor of interactive, participatory and 'democratized' creation of place meanings. User-generated content fuels brand storytelling, which also gives voice to diverging and antagonist views of the place brand.

The second research stream concerns the smart city. Although still limited, it explores the use of the 'smart city' to label smart urban technology deployment. According to existing studies, the smart city brand is associated with limited participatory projects where decision-making and implementation of tech-based projects remain centralized and top-down (Vijaygopal et al., 2023).

Mega-events and host city branding

PB Cluster 5 discusses mega-events as strategic tools in place branding, particularly within city branding efforts. The focus is on the branding potential of sports mega-events and their role in shaping enduring place images. However, empirical studies evaluating the event legacy and the long-term impact of events on destination brand image remain scarce (Mair et al., 2023).

Identity and brand power

PB Cluster 6 explores place brand power, focusing on identity as its main driver. Place brands' soft and symbolic power influences political and cultural-economic processes. The soft power of nation and city brands

conceptually links this research domain with the public diplomacy agenda. The symbolic power of place identity components (e.g., food, history and culture) is highlighted by recent studies on firms' appropriation of place identity for business value creation, highlighting the value of the place brand and the cultural-economic motivation to interact with it (Farrelly & Makkar, 2023; Pasquinelli et al., 2023).

Brand positioning communication

PB Cluster 7 focuses on brand communication and operative tools (e.g., logos, slogans, urban artefacts and events) to convey symbolic value and position the place brand in the audience's minds (Pike, 2005; Wu & Coe, 2023). An early concern regarded the challenges of summarizing the place identity in a defined set of visual symbols, such as logos and slogans, simultaneously addressing multiple and diverse stakeholders (e.g., residents and tourists). More recently, attention has shifted to storytelling, which is the creation of stories that build mental positioning. Artefacts in physical and virtual lived space (e.g., buildings or media content) are integral to storytelling, contributing to the narrative construction of the place brand. However, research on the strategic design of storytelling, the measurement of its effects on brand positioning and its influence on stakeholders' behaviours remains limited.

Sustainability across the place branding clusters

Sustainability is an inconsistently integrated theme within the place branding literature. The *Urban policy, planning and local development* cluster (PB Cluster 1) includes sustainable urban development in connection with city branding. The theme is relatively recent in this cluster and highlights the role of sustainability narratives in urban governance and place branding impact on sustainable development outcomes.

In the *Destination branding and consumer marketing* cluster (PB Cluster 2), sustainability is marginal but present through studies on destination eco-labels and their influence on tourists' perceptions, identification and attitude. Some contributions suggest linkages to broader community engagement with sustainable development.

The *Interactive multi-stakeholder process* cluster (PB Cluster 3) frames green city branding and stakeholder engagement. Risks of local tensions are discussed in this regard. While sustainability narratives can boost stakeholder participation, they may also reveal imbalances and generate dissonance and brand value destruction.

The sustainability theme did not emerge in the other clusters. The missing connection between sustainability and digitalization in place branding literature (PB Cluster 4) suggests that the smart and sustainable city debates in place branding remain distant, outlining a research gap calling for integrative perspectives.

Towards a theoretical framework of sustainability-driven place branding

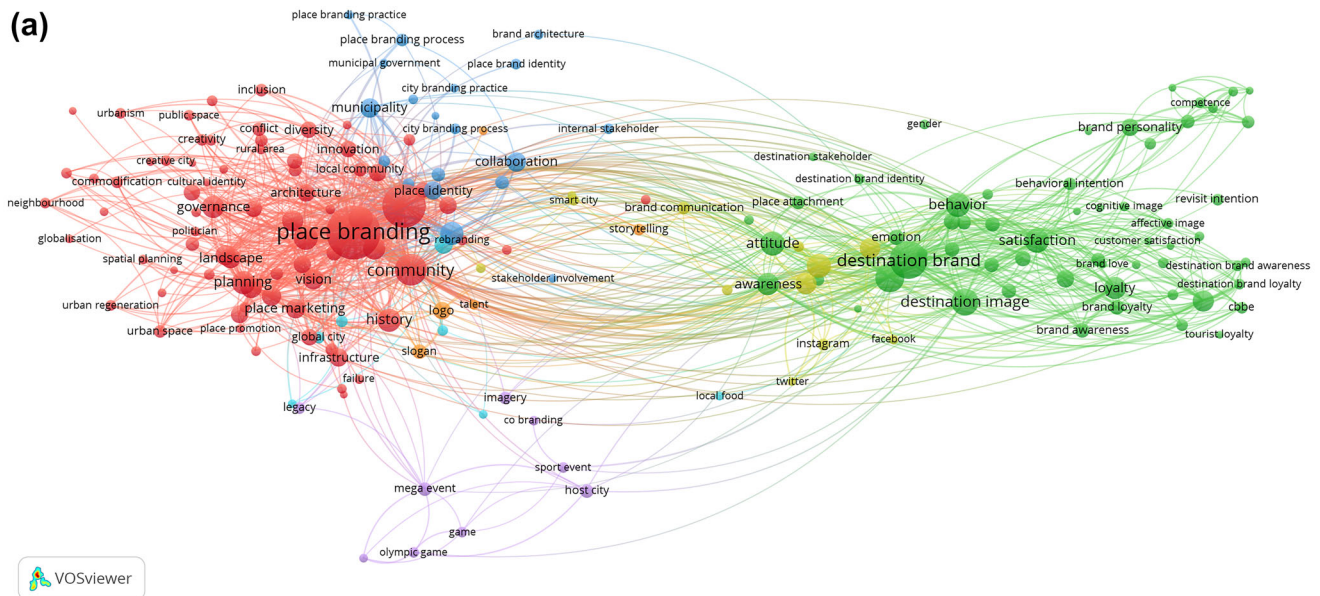
Sustainable destination articulates in six thematic clusters (i.e., strategic management, resilience, tourist behaviour, governance, cultural heritage, and smartness), which mirror its multidimensional and subjective essence. By juxtaposing the SD clusters, two key interconnected patterns emerged: (a) the stakeholder orientation to sustainable destinations, acknowledging the centrality of multiple stakeholders' behaviours and active contribution; (b) the importance of stakeholders' perceptions, understanding and valuation of sustainability in their lived contexts to make it meaningful and actionable.

These converge into the concept of sustainability meaning-making at the core of the sustainable destination, which turns an ambiguous and multidimensional notion of sustainability into specific meanings, helping stakeholders gain interest and orienting their behaviours. It can be explained as situational meaning-making (Park, 2010), which refers to individuals attributing meaning to a particular situation or person-environment interaction (Zoellner & Maercker, 2006) in a context-based and dynamic manner. Situational meaning helps interpret sustainability in a situational and contextual way (within the destination) to make it an actionable concept for stakeholders. Both individual and self-referential meaning-making (*What does sustainability mean to me?*) and collective meaning-making, positioning the self as part of a community (*What does it mean to my community?*), are essential to framing the sustainable destination.

Situational meaning-making explains how meaning influences individuals' reactions to the situation (Park & Kennedy, 2017). Based on situational meaning-making theory, global meaning refers to general, wide and deep beliefs and feelings that give an individual a general sense of orientation and direction. In contrast, situational meaning is an appraised meaning assigned to a particular event or situation that is encountered and determines the individual's reactions after evaluating the event's implications for one's future (Park, 2010).

Sustainability meaning-making explains the causal link between place branding and sustainable destination. Leveraging cognitive and emotional drivers of sustainability meaning-making, place branding is a booster and

(a)



(b)

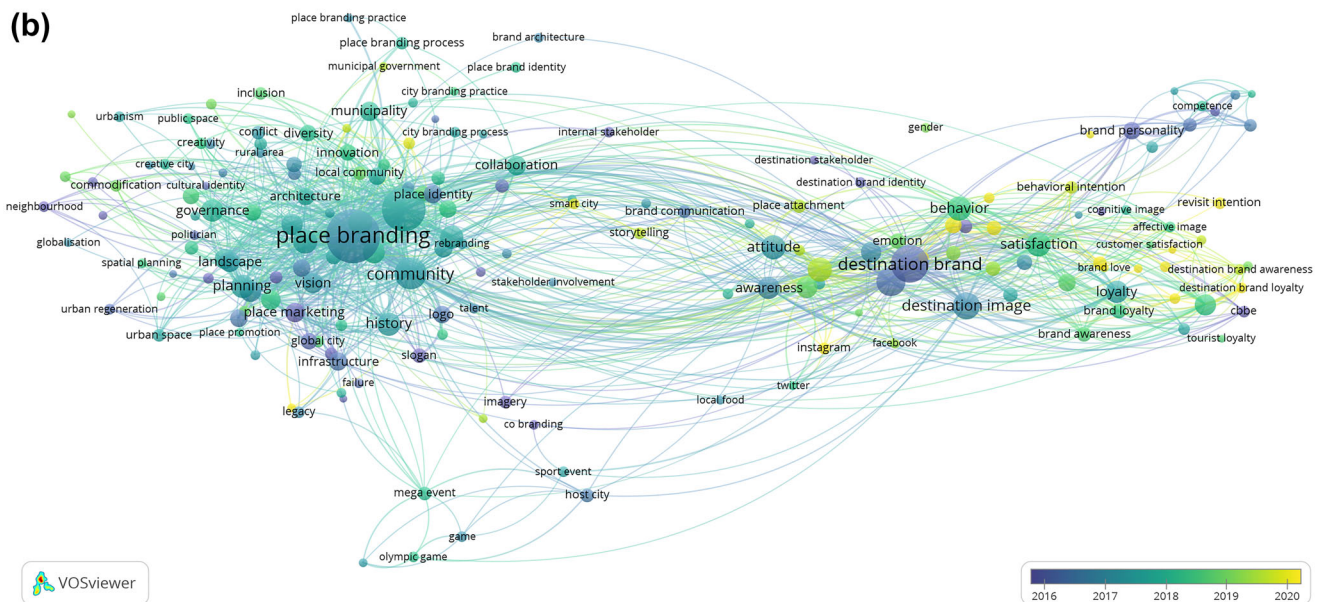


FIGURE 3 Phase 2: (a) Seven clusters map and (b) Temporal map.

facilitator of sustainability meaning-making. It may help visualize, experience and crystallize a situational meaning of sustainability (within the destination's social, environmental, economic and cultural context), individually understood and collectively shared through the formation of expectations, until boosting stakeholders' positive attitudes and behaviours.

Figure 4 represents the *sustainability-driven place branding* framework at the intersection between sustainable destination and place branding clusters, which, combined through the sustainability-meaning making, spill out six future research streams providing clear directions to explore the contribution of place branding

to sustainable destinations. Place branding is reframed as an approach to sustainability meaning-making, aimed at impacting sustainable transitions.

Research Stream 1: Local sustainability brand narratives and strategic destination management

The first research stream relates to how place branding can support the strategic management (SD Cluster 1) practices that are critical to controlling tourism pressure and ensuring quality of life for local communities (Mihalic

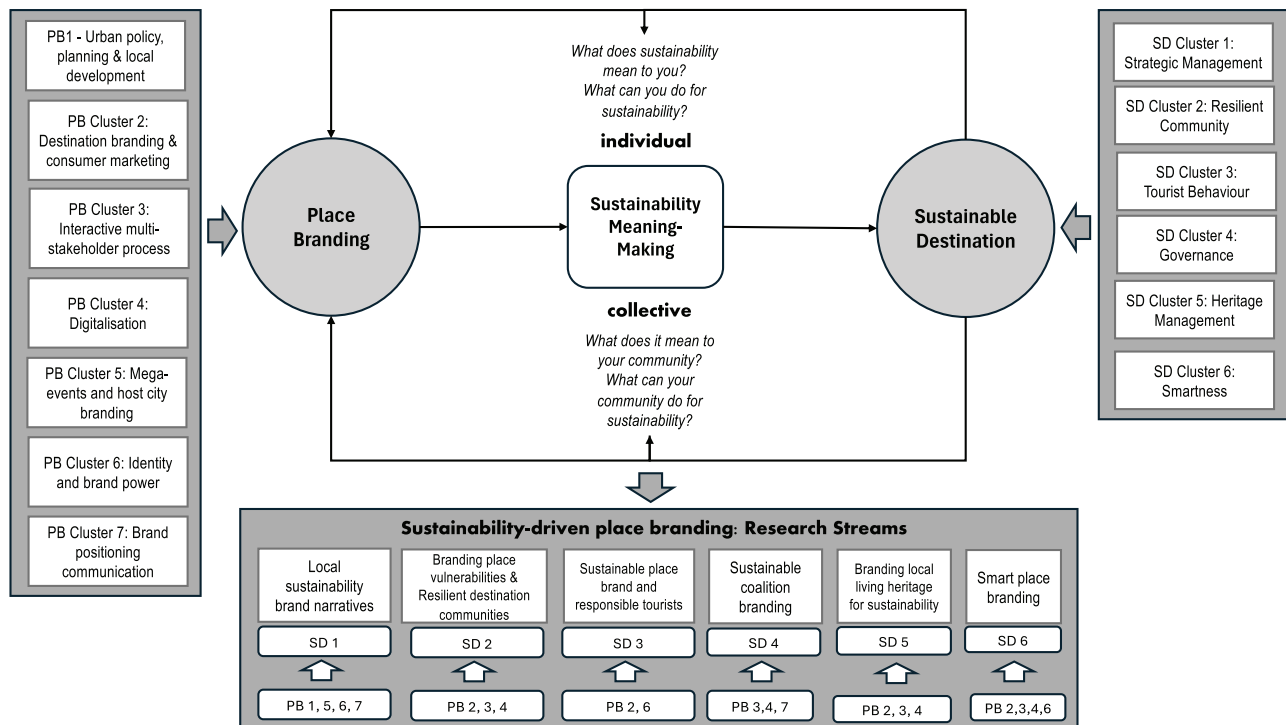


FIGURE 4 Theoretical framework of sustainability-driven place branding.

Source: the authors.

& Kuser, 2022). When approached as urban policy (PB Cluster 1), place branding is an instrument that integrates policy-making and planning processes, contributing to place management and local development. By strategically dealing with identity to boost place brand power (PB Cluster 6) and leveraging events (PB Cluster 5), storytelling and communication for brand positioning (PB Cluster 7), place branding creates and circulates local brand narratives. Visual identity and the urban network of artefacts (PB Cluster 7) materialize local narratives, fostering situational meaning-making. These processes influence how sustainability meanings are constructed, contextualising stakeholders' interpretation and internalisation of sustainability.

Therefore, future studies under this research stream should further determine the symbolic power of local sustainability narratives and their efficacy in fostering stakeholders' meaning-making at the intersection between tourism and sustainable local development. This includes how and to what extent place branding can boost sustainability meaning-making through leveraging local brand narratives that aim at making local stakeholders (e.g., residents, business managers, policy-makers) understand, learn and emotionally connect with tourism and its impacts in the context of the destination. For instance, place branding can tap into local narratives that highlight concrete sustainability challenges (such as overtourism, water scarcity, waste management or gentrification) and

contribute to a shared sense of urgency and agency among stakeholders.

Research is also needed to critically explore the constraints to local brand narratives' emergence and influence on sustainability meaning-making. Empirical studies are needed to understand how and to what extent local sustainability narratives may avoid symbolic exclusion. Attention should also be drawn to the potential of sustainability-driven place branding to extend visibility and symbolic inclusion to stakeholders that are protagonists of local imbalances and disparities, critically reflecting on brand implications. Local imbalances, disparities and conflicts challenge the credibility of sustainability-driven branding initiatives, inducing stakeholders' perceptions of green-washing and rejection. For the same reasons, investigating the conditions that lock in destinations in a 'hushing' approach to sustainable development is relevant to further shed light on the viability of the relationship between place branding and sustainability meaning-making.

Research Stream 2: Branding place vulnerabilities and resilient destination communities

The second research stream lies at the intersection of place branding with the resilient destination. It explores how place branding can support stakeholder engagement,

shared identity, preparedness and adaptive capacity in response to global challenges (SD Cluster 2) that are fundamental to the resilient destination. Resilience relies on the engagement of multiple stakeholders (e.g., residents, policymakers, entrepreneurs and tourists) who collectively construct a shared understanding of sustainability challenges and responses. Place branding can support resilient communities by shaping collective meaning-making through engagement and identity building. Place branding, as an interactive multi-stakeholder process relying on participatory and interactive stakeholder engagement (PB Cluster 3), contributes to meaning-making by providing a framework through which communities articulate and reinforce their identity as resilient and sustainable destinations.

Consumer marketing models and concepts (PB Cluster 2) such as brand personality, attachment and identification with vulnerable places and adaptive communities can boost stakeholders' understanding and contribute to explaining the impact of place branding on stakeholders' meaning-making, willingness to engage with sustainable development, sustainable behaviours, and preparedness to face sustainability challenges. Digital tools (PB Cluster 4) enable stakeholder participation in sustainability branding, fostering the necessary transparency and trust.

Research in this stream can explore further place branding in relation to its impact on local stakeholders' capacity to visualize and frame their destination, the global challenges and the specific place vulnerabilities, evaluating them under the local circumstances. A more detailed investigation is needed focusing on collective meaning making as a moment for community building and sense of belonging, which are critical to the resilient destination. This investigation includes the potential of place branding to boost awareness and knowledge of place vulnerabilities and their meaning for the individual stakeholders and the local community as a whole. Research can investigate in more detail the mobilization of branding mechanisms including identity building, emotional bonding, place identification and attachment, and how they impact on sustainability-meaning making. It is important to shed more light on brand storytelling around place fragility and the extent to which branding can represent this not as a limitation but as a moment of community pride, engagement and sense of belonging.

Therefore, future research should investigate the interactive modalities in which circulating images of place vulnerabilities and narratives of adaptivity can boost meaning-making. Critical scholarship needs to gain insight into the realistic opportunity to brand place vulnerabilities since place and destination branding tend to produce positive images of successful and attractive places. Relatedly, how vulnerable place images impact

stakeholders and how they affect brand identification and attachment need to be further studied and measured.

Research Stream 3: Sustainable place brand and responsible tourists

The third research stream addresses the potential of place branding to effectively boost tourists' responsible behaviours and influence tourists' perceptions and attitudes towards sustainability. This frames the inquiry on the potential of soft power and symbolic values mobilized by the place brand to trigger meaning-making and sustainability as situational meaning, helping tourists understand and feel the connections between sustainability challenges and their travel experiences in the specific context of the destination.

Sustainable destinations nurture responsible tourist behaviours (SD Cluster 3), and communication strategies, marketing initiatives, and destination branding efforts can significantly influence tourists' perceptions, attitudes to sustainability and behaviours (Chin et al., 2018; Seyfi et al., 2023). Consumer marketing principles and models (PB Cluster 2) affects tourists' cognitive, affective, and conative responses to a place context. Brand equity and loyalty may be built to trigger environmentally conscious behaviours. The destination brand can induce recognition and understanding of global sustainability issues and societal challenges, explaining these within the local context and, therefore, facilitating situational sustainability meaning-making. Place identity (e.g., symbolic values usually exploited by tourism products and experiences such as arts and food) and the soft power of place brands (PB Cluster 6) can foster tourists' citizenship of a destination.

Therefore, this research stream includes questions concerning the opportunity to steer a sense of responsibility and citizenship of tourists towards the destination and its local community, driving awareness of the connection between their travel experience and sustainability challenges, conscientious behaviours and promoting a shift in the tourist mindset from consumption to participation (e.g., acceptance of limits to tourist experiences, avoiding visiting tourist hotspots in seasonal peaks, willingness to pay a fair price or higher prices for services with a guaranteed positive social and environmental impact).

Future research is needed to deepen insight into how place branding can boost tourists' meaning-making about local environmental and social issues and what practices and techniques may achieve this result towards enhancing human-to-environment and human-to-human attitudes. Scholars should provide empirical evidence and refined conceptualisations to frame the concrete potential of sustainability-driven place branding to unleash the soft

power of the place brand, fostering sustainability meanings. Furthermore, the connection between place branding and tourists' sense of citizenship, mediated by sustainability meaning-making, should be the object of future research. Attention can be drawn to the time frame for involving tourists in citizenship building since the destination pre-experience, to the measurement of the impacts, including the opportunity to create new tourist markets.

Research Stream 4: Sustainable coalition branding

This research stream relates to the internal impact of place branding on the destination and brings together place branding research that helps destinations shift attention to a coalition of local stakeholders collectively moving towards sustainability and tourism governance arrangements. The focus is on the capacity of place branding to shape a collectively shared meaning of sustainability that serves as the foundation for local stakeholder coalitions committed to sustainable development.

Sustainable destination building and management requires tourism governance arrangements (SD Cluster 4) relying on multi-stakeholder collaboration, adaptive decision-making, and participatory engagement (Mihalic et al., 2016). Stakeholders' perceptions of sustainability and how they perceive their role in tourism development influence these governance processes. Place branding as an interactive and participatory process (PB Cluster 3) can reshape these perceptions and reinforce the collective understanding of sustainability, pushing local stakeholders to build a local coalition toward sustainability goals. DMOs, which play a central role in sustainable destination governance, can leverage place branding as a participatory platform to facilitate dialogue among residents, businesses, and policymakers, steer social learning and foster cooperation. Brand positioning communication (PB Cluster 7) and operative branding levers, such as events, logos, slogans and other visual identity devices, can help DMOs mediate and steer the community's understanding of sustainability. DMOs can use place branding to frame digital media strategies (PB Cluster 4) attempting to orchestrate brand co-creative mechanisms (PB Cluster 3), which support collective meaning-making.

Therefore, research in this stream needs to focus more on the potential of place branding as a stakeholder management tool for DMOs to be used internally, in addition to its impact on tourism markets. The potential of place branding to steer interactions and a co-creative dialogue within the context of the destination can be investigated, with particular attention to the emergence of local stakeholders' understanding of sustainability and their individual roles in the destination.

Future research needs to address and explore the mutual support between DMOs and place branding. An important aim would be to research how effectively and to what extent brand positioning communication, digital branding strategies, and events can legitimize over time the DMOs as facilitators of sustainability meaning-making. It is also important to study how place branding might activate processes that help stakeholders recognize the reciprocal gains and burdens from tourism and build alliances based on shared values, identity, and long-term goals.

Research Stream 5: Branding local living heritage for sustainability

The fifth stream connects place branding to destination heritage management. It focuses on combining local heritage with place branding to foster sustainability meaning-making. In this stream, attention is drawn to how place branding can enhance the sustainability meaning making role of heritage, being a distinctive repository of identity narratives that link past, present and future and give depth and authenticity to the place brand.

Sustainable destination communities manage their heritage to preserve it and maintain its significance to future generations (SD Cluster 5). In this context, place branding can be a mediating tool between heritage preservation and cultural consumption by fostering shared meanings of sustainability. Heritage management and place branding integration may avoid identity distortions, which jeopardize cultural heritage and boost unsustainable tourism trajectories (Wong, 2013).

The relationship between local heritage and place brands is twofold. On the one hand, heritage can be entangled in the place brand, contributing to the mechanisms of situational meaning-making towards responsible behaviours. Applying consumer marketing concepts (PB Cluster 2), such as brand personality, helps shape tourists' and residents' heritage perceptions and understanding, influencing a responsible attitude. On the other hand, place branding can contribute to maintaining local heritage alive and evolving through building narratives and symbolic representations. A multi-stakeholder approach aiming for active community involvement in defining the place brand identity (PB Cluster 3) can enhance stakeholders' understanding of the collective value of heritage towards sustainability meaning-making and a sense of belonging. Digitalization processes and digital branding strategies can be significant (PB Cluster 4) in integrating place branding and heritage management.

Research can examine in more detail the impacts of sustainability meaning-making enhanced by place branding on local heritage preservation (e.g., tangible heritage, rituals, languages, crafts). The role of place branding

in projecting local heritage onto the future and helping stakeholders to link sustainable development with the maintenance of heritage significance for future generations, instead of considering it a static or nostalgic reference, is an important research topic. Research should also examine how social media storytelling can foster social mechanisms (Lund et al., 2018) of symbolic engagement with place heritage and its re-interpretation, not only by institutions but also citizens and tourists. Negative impacts and pitfalls from leveraging local heritage in place branding should be also explored for the risks of an over-exposure and excessive exploitation that may derive from place branding practices. Further knowledge is needed about the capacity of the place brand to foster a relationship between heritage and local stakeholders (including businesses, public authorities, residents and tourists) and, through this, keep local heritage alive without neglecting risks and the implications of heritage manipulation and selective representations that branding may bring about. For instance, in the case of destination heritage that is physically at risk due to climate change (e.g., heritage sites sinking), under war threats, or because of its overuse in overtouristified areas, branding local heritage may symbolically keep local heritage alive and create clear-cut and easily visualized sustainability meanings.

Research Stream 6: Smart place branding dynamics and the sustainable destination

The final research stream lies at the intersection of place branding and the smart destination, acknowledging the contribution of the smart destination to sustainable development. The focus is on the influence of place branding in providing an opportunity for co-creating meaning around smart technologies (e.g., sensors, mobile apps, AI-driven data systems and virtual reality) as part of stakeholders' daily lives and experiences in the context of the destination's sustainability.

Links and synergies between smartness and sustainability (SD Cluster 6) are acknowledged as an important dimension of the sustainable destination, although their conceptual and practical integration remains underexplored (de Jong et al., 2015; Buhalis et al., 2023). Place branding can influence stakeholders' interpretation and interaction with smart technologies and trigger situational meaning-making around change and innovation, which are fundamental to sustainable transitions. The smart city branding debate (PB Cluster 4), connecting with consumer marketing research (PB Cluster 2), can clarify the instrumental role of digital connectivity, the use of sensors, big data (Ivars-Baidal et al., 2021), AI and cutting-edge technologies to enhance human experiences. Place brands' soft power and identity components (PB Cluster 6) and

branding as an interactive multi-stakeholder process (PB Cluster 3) can support destination innovation dynamics such as knowledge sharing and transfer within smart and sustainable destinations.

The potential of place branding to boost smart technology usage and acceptance in favour of a more sustainable development and collective wellbeing should be further explored. Future research may explore the influence of place branding on the engagement and satisfaction with smart technologies for improving the coexistence between residents and tourists; its potential to promote the exploitation of virtual reality experiences to evaluate alternative visit modalities or replace physical visits to fragile or overcrowded areas. This research extends to the exploration of place branding potential to promote sustainability meanings that integrate innovation and change, boosting positive attitude towards these and orienting behaviours towards sustainable transitions. This positive view should be complemented by an inquiry into the possibility that the capacity of place branding to steer meaning-making is negatively affected by stakeholders' technology distrust and aversion (Soares et al., 2022), undermining sustainability meaning-making.

CONCLUSIONS

This study makes four significant contributions. The first contribution is that reviewing and mapping the two literature domains (i.e., place branding and sustainable destinations) filled two significant research gaps. First, the lack of engagement with sustainability in the place branding literature, which is a crucial oversight and a significant area for further research. Secondly, the weakness of the sustainable destination literature that it does not discuss the role of place branding. Place branding concepts and frameworks have only marginally entered the sustainable destination debate despite the widespread emphasis on the subjective dimension of sustainability, which is an area where place branding can exert significant influence. This represents a missed opportunity, as tools like place branding have a significant role in developing and redirecting perceptions and subjective meanings. In other words, perceptions and meaning-making about sustainability are important and research addressing them in the frame of place branding would assist destinations in pursuing sustainable development.

The second contribution is that the study has reframed the relationship between place branding and sustainability by detailing the modality in which place branding can assist sustainable transitions. This is done by introducing the situational meaning-making nature of sustainability, helping make sustainability actionable and setting the foundations for a stronger contribution of place branding

towards the sustainable transition of places. Approaching sustainability as a situational meaning-making process (along with emphasizing its subjective/perceptual dimension) allows us to develop a novel theoretical framework at the intersection of place branding and sustainability, which, on the one hand, sets sustainability as an aim and guiding principle of place branding and, on the other hand, sets place branding as a potent tool for achieving sustainability. This not only helps make sustainability an actionable concept at the local level but also shows how to maximize the contribution of place branding in the local context and guide locally-specific practices. Put simply, this study argues that sustainability should be treated as a localized, context-based, situational notion acquiring different meanings for different stakeholders and that place branding can tap into this situational meaning-making to move behaviours towards sustainability.

This leads to the third significant contribution, which is the introduction of sustainability-driven place branding as a way forward for the place branding discipline towards more sustainable futures in both theory and practice. Introducing sustainability-driven place branding has two important implications that advance the place branding discipline. First, it supports the incorporation of sustainability concerns into place branding, expanding outward-looking destination marketing perspectives towards internal branding approaches that put local communities at the centre stage in the frame of sustainable development. Secondly, introducing sustainability-driven place branding helps alleviate the long-standing and sharp distinction between the place brand and the destination brand. As noted in the Introduction, this distinction contrasts with the necessity for integration when tourism destination management pursues local sustainable development. Place branding integration with destination management and marketing inquiry follows the increasing acknowledgement of the need to conceive tourism as functionally and symbolically integrated with different industries and socio-economic domains co-existing in the local system and push towards a more balanced development (Bellini et al., 2017).

The fourth contribution of this study is the cross-fertilization of research in the two fields and the development of a theoretical framework and six research streams as areas for future research. This study generates a novel research agenda on sustainability-driven place branding, which represents a significant step forward in ensuring a stronger contribution to the transition of local destinations towards more sustainable paths.

The proposed research streams pave the way to further theoretical and empirical explorations. Knowledge of these links, their strengths, the conditions for place branding to influence sustainability meaning-making (e.g., history, social capital, tourism destination lifecycle, tourism

impacts and resource deterioration), pitfalls, limitations and risks is needed.

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SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of this article.

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