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Legitimacy and inclusivity in place branding

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ABSTRACT

Scholars have increasingly called for multi-stakeholder and participatory approaches to place branding. The inclusion of communities is often argued for creating legitimate place brands. However, there is limited understanding of how these notions interact. This paper investigates how stakeholders construct legitimacy and inclusivity in their place branding practices. We develop a theoretical framework for legitimacy-inclusivity and apply it to a case study of Northamptonshire, UK. The analysis reveals contrasting approaches by industry stakeholders and voluntary organisations in terms of representation and advocacy, engagement and co-creation, and effectiveness and impact. The unique characteristics and mechanisms of voluntary organisations, which facilitate community leadership and engagement, have implications for more inclusive and legitimate place branding.

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Introduction

The field of place branding is inherently multidisciplinary with contributions from scholars and practitioners in marketing, public management, geography, and tourism studies. Typically, enhancing destination image and tourism outcomes have been key goals of place branding agendas. This involves positioning the place in the minds of multiple audiences by creating, promoting and maintaining a distinctive identity (Kavaratzis, 2012; Sang, 2021). Beyond creating positive associations for locations, place branding has also been applied to stimulate endogenous development by and for local stakeholders, particularly in rural regions (Donner et al., 2017; Haven-Tang & Sedgley, 2014). There is an increasing acknowledgement in place branding praxis that residents are integral to the brand, and engaging communities as co-producers of the brand can achieve desired outcomes (Kavaratzis et al., 2018; Ripoll-Gonzalez & Gale, 2020).

The benefits and risks of engaging community stakeholders have been much debated in the development of place branding. Its proponents argue that co-creating brand identity and meaning with communities gives the place brand credibility, authenticity, and legitimacy (Campelo et al., 2014; Reynolds et al., 2022). Stemming from this ethos of 'creating with' communities rather than 'creating for', some scholars advocated more inclusive approaches to place branding underpinned by the principles of participation, diversity and democracy (Jernsand, 2016). Democratic legitimacy is a general notion about how authority is recognised as valid or justified (Eshuis & Edwards, 2013). The logic of democratic legitimacy in place branding is rooted in the public sector's leadership and funding of activities, which requires legitimisation of decision-making and representation (ibid). It is argued that

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the place brand has little political or democratic legitimacy if the process lacks transparency and a democratic approach to involving stakeholders who the brand aims to speak for or whose tax payments are used as funding (Pugh & Andersson, 2023).

The input, throughput and output dimensions of democratic legitimacy have been applied to place branding to question whether the agenda is genuinely open, who determines the rules of participation processes and whether the outcomes align with what citizens want respectively (Eshuis & Edwards, 2013). Democratic legitimacy therefore implies an active, engaged role for diverse and marginalised communities. On this critical point, there is a lack of clarity in the literature on the principles and mechanisms which enable the inclusion of marginalised groups in place branding. There are yet gaps in the theoretical conceptualisation explaining the ways and means to align democratic legitimacy and inclusivity in place branding which is the focus of enquiry in this paper.

In theory, cooperation and collaborations across institutional and community stakeholders for the sustainable development and management of destinations are integral to the planning process (Jernsand, 2016; Moscardo, 2011; Rebelo et al., 2020). In practice, the engagement and consultation process is challenging and not readily achievable. Often, there are differing, even opposing, visions and aspirations among the various stakeholders of the place. In the absence of unanimity and shared vision, the pertinent research question raised by this study is how do stakeholders construct legitimacy and inclusivity in place branding?

As the leadership role of the public sector has been receding in light of austerity and neoliberal influences (Bowden & Liddle, 2018), wider participation and representation may be more of an aspiration than guided by an informed mechanism for engagement. Though not formally ascribed, there are examples of the emergence of the voluntary sector in creating collaborative spaces to link public and private sector interests with grassroots groups (Rees et al., 2022). Voluntary organisations have been known to contribute to good governance and social justice in community-led tourism developments (Cole et al., 2021; Minnaert, 2020; Shipley & Kovacs, 2008). Furthermore, the voluntary sector is recognised to be an important facilitator of democracy through its ability to represent marginal members of society, counterbalance the power of the state through diluting social and economic dependence on the public sector, and promote locally accountable governance practices (Curran, 2017). However, the place branding literature has mostly overlooked this function of the voluntary sector in enabling legitimacy and inclusivity in place branding.

This study therefore aims to clarify the principles underpinning the legitimacy-inclusivity practices of different stakeholder groups in place branding. Particularly, it examines the mechanisms by which voluntary organisations enable inclusivity in place branding. The input, throughput and output dimensions of democratic legitimacy provide the theoretical framework for analysing the access and influence of participants (input), the quality of participation (throughput) and the effectiveness of resulting policies (output) to enable more inclusive community participation in place branding.

The case of Northamptonshire is the focus of this study. This county, located in the East Midlands region of the UK, has been applying place branding strategies to build the local visitor economy. Confronted with the complexity of stark contrasts in the economic, natural and cultural assets between urban and rural communities in the county, forging a shared brand identity has been challenging in reconciling the interests and needs of various community groups (Bisani, 2021; NCC, 2019). In the absence of a statutory agency, such as a Destination Management Organisation, several private- and voluntary-led initiatives have formed to develop Northamptonshire's visitor economy, namely *Northamptonshire Surprise* and *Nenescape partnership*. This single case study therefore provides in-depth insights into how legitimacy and inclusivity in multistakeholder and multinetwork settings may be negotiated and enacted in the process of developing a place brand for the county.

Literature review

Place brand governance and stakeholder networks

Place branding is widely recognised as the practice of developing brands for geographical locations such as cities, regions, and nations to trigger positive associations and distinguish a territory or location from others (Anholt, 2010). Creating distinctive identities is a means to attract and retain visitors, businesses, investors, residents and students who are likely to bring socio-economic prosperity and cultural vibrancy to the place (Bisani et al., 2022; Zenker & Braun, 2017). Following a relational approach to place branding, scholars have conceptualised the development of place brands by a network of stakeholders and shaped by their interactions and interrelationships. Zenker and Braun (2010, p.5) acknowledged this shift in their definition of place branding as "a network of associations in the place consumers' mind based on the visual, verbal, and behavioral expression of a place and its' stakeholders". The notion of place brand as 'network of place associations' implies an interactive and evolving image of the place shaped by experiences. The implication for place brand identity is that there is no singular, objective, essential place brand to be built or uncovered, only different valid versions that can be neither entirely reconciled nor dismissed (Kavaratzis & Kalandides, 2015).

The network governance of place branding has been defined as the process of achieving a dynamic identity shared and shaped by various stakeholders interacting through networks (Martinez, 2016). While traditionally, place branding was seen as the sole responsibility of the public sector, new modes of governance and co-production call for the dispersal of planning, ownership and decision-making with private and community actors (Eshuis & Edwards, 2013; Sarabia-Sanchez & Cerda-Bertomeu, 2018). The network configuration requires destination managers working within the framework of a Destination Management Organisation to bring stakeholders together, stimulate them to share information, knowledge and experiences and facilitate them to develop new tourism concepts and products to become a more competitive destination for tourists and travellers (Zee et al., 2017). However, in smaller destinations with limited financial resources, there may not be a dominant place-branding organisation

orchestrating the process, but there may be multiple actors and networks informing and shaping the place brand (Björner & Aronsson, 2022).

Decentralised narratives and visions may emerge from 'loose networks' of enthusiastic and spontaneous actors (Björner & Aronsson, 2022). These actors and networks become co-creators of the place brand, which is not conceived as the outcome of a plan but emerges as a process of continuous multi-party dialogue (Martinez, 2016). This mode of governance is often posited as bottom-up and democratic while rejecting the idea of a one-institution-led place marketing approach (ibid). As multiple networks may co-exist, pursuing their own goals of place branding (Björner & Aronsson, 2022), each network may involve single or multiple configurations of stakeholder groups such as private sector-led, public-private or public-voluntary organisations (Beaumont & Dredge, 2010). The key players must negotiate and determine what is to be said to whom and how, determining which assets and narratives should be featured to convince other stakeholders that their proposed place brand is uniquely positioned to sustain a competitive advantage in the global market (Go & Trunfio, 2012).

Arguably, network governance may flatten hierarchical structures to facilitate collaboration and foster dialogue among stakeholders for inclusive place branding processes (Ripoll-Gonzalez & Gale, 2020). However, evidence suggests that the lack of an institutional structure and fragmentation of political power may hamper the authority and perceived legitimacy of network governance (Pasquinelli, 2015). The wider dispersal of authority in more diffused arrangements may make accountability less clear and establish undemocratic sites of exclusion (Yüksel et al., 2005). Due to the requirement for high collaboration between network actors within a fragmented local governance context, the setting of this study is effective in assessing whether and to what extent governance of place branding is co-created and shared among diverse stakeholders (Go & Trunfio, 2012).

Inclusive place branding

Place branding requires a selection of a distinctive, unified and coherent narrative about the place. However, many identities of a place may co-exist and some scholars contend that these need to be respected and incorporated as part of the process (Kavaratzis et al., 2018). This complexity in place branding has been described as the logic of branding versus the logic of representation, which is focal to the discourse on inclusive place branding (Pugh & Andersson, 2023). The logic of branding stems from creating differentiation for locations and territories through a simultaneous process of inclusion and exclusion of different stakeholders, assets and destinations within it. Branding is seen as 'a dialogue' between the branded object and the targeted group, which requires the brand to be detected, to understand what it stands for and attach value to it. Representation is often discussed in place-branding research when it is lacking, that is, when a plurality of stakeholder representations is missing or when people and places are being misrepresented through place branding (ibid).

Jernsand's (2016) thesis on inclusive place branding emphasised deliberative participation, consideration of complex stakeholder interests and identities, and values of democracy. According to Coletti and Rabbiosi (2020), inclusivity encompasses the incorporation of social concerns and considerations in the place branding process – particularly the effects on communities – ranging from social inclusion of poor and disadvantaged citizens to inter-cultural dialogue, from environmental problems to the risk of overbuilding. Kavaratzis et al. (2018) contend that 'inclusivity' applied to place branding a) goes beyond economic interests and goals, b) focuses on the residents, c) integrates the voices of many stakeholders through participatory methods, and d) 'listens' to the non-powerful. The key differentiating characteristic of inclusive place branding is that it recognises the 'risk of marginalisation' (Jernsand, 2016).

Community stakeholders, often referred to as residents, citizens and civil society, are considered an inchoate and heterogeneous assemblage of individual or collective interests (Sarabia-Sanchez & Cerda-Bertomeu, 2018). Their engagement is considered integral to the place brand formation but also challenging to operationalise within the human, time and financial constraints inherent in place branding. While voluntary organisations such as NGOs, charities and social enterprises are also community stakeholders, there is limited evidence on voluntary organisations' engagement and contributions to inclusive place branding. This contrasts with the plethora of evidence on their contributions to community-led tourism developments.

In tourism management, voluntary organisations are considered a key stakeholder group in promoting heritage and culture, environmental protection, conservation and social justice (Cole et al., 2021; Yüksel et al., 2005). In collaborative governance settings, NGOs and indigenous tribes are known to influence decision-making by framing issues regarding the social values and ideals of the communities they represent (Purdy, 2012). This ability to represent a social justice discourse or speak on behalf of an issue in the public sphere is a source of power for organisations with low authority and resources (ibid). Shipley and Kovacs (2008) list the role of voluntary board members as steering, governing, and running the day-to-day operations of historic sites and museums. In addition to sharing roles and responsibilities, they contribute to good governance in the heritage sector as civil society representatives (ibid).

Rees et al. (2022) highlight the role of locally rooted voluntary organisations in collective place leadership by drawing on situated knowledge and relationships in local governance networks alongside public sector leaders. This was also seen in the public-private-voluntary Partnership in Monmouthshire, Wales, which was deemed as 'best practice' in rural tourism development for creating a coherent, asset-based and community-led product and regional brand (Haven-Tang & Sedgley, 2014). Given the challenges in implementing inclusivity, such as power imbalances among stakeholders, resource constraints and persisting top-down hierarchical approaches to branding, investigating how voluntary organisations contribute to inclusive place brand governance provides a fertile ground for research.

Theoretical framework: legitimacy constructs and the nexus with inclusivity

Legitimacy is an important aspect of maintaining power structures through people's adherence to social norms and existing laws (Weber, 1978). The political strand of legitimacy theory views democracy as a fundamental requirement for the legitimacy of governance across various levels of the global political order (Allen, 2011). The framework of democratic legitimacy is generally applied to investigate and problematise the legitimacy of the European Union institution and its policies. Scharpf (1997) introduced the concept of 'democratic legitimacy', normatively evaluated in terms of: access and influence of participants (input) and the effectiveness of resulting policies (output) (in Schmidt, 2013). Later, Risse and Kleine (2007) added a third construct questioning the quality of the process (throughput). Deliberative participation in public policy processes is the defining characteristic of democratic legitimacy. Due to the centrality of stakeholder and citizen engagement and participatory processes in constructing democratic legitimacy for public policy, this notion has been aptly applied to place branding as a form of public governance (Eshuis & Edwards, 2013).

Eshuis and Edwards (2013) emphasise the necessity of adherence to democratic values and processes by democratic institutions. Involving active and engaged citizens in the broader governance process and viewing them as co-owners of the brand can enhance the democratic legitimacy of place branding processes. They contend that the normative criteria for 'input legitimacy' in place branding relates to the openness of agenda-setting and opportunities for citizen participation (ibid). 'Throughput legitimacy' concerns the legality, transparency, quality of participation, deliberations and checks and balances. The opportunity for deliberation among stakeholders with different views and the prevention of dominance by any one stakeholder group(s) are cornerstones for throughput legitimacy (Guix & Font, 2022). The final construct, 'output legitimacy' is not limited to the symbolic representation of the community in the branding process; their representation and influence also feed into the planning and policies (Eshuis & Edwards, 2013). They argue that the effectiveness and responsiveness of outcomes should be evaluated by policy-makers and place marketers and explained to citizens (ibid).

Alternative governance contexts that mix public, private and community actors in fragmented and networked approaches require new expressions of democratic legitimacy that include residents' legitimacy judgements of place-branding actions (Martin & Capelli, 2017). The input, throughput and output dimensions of democratic legitimacy provide the theoretical foundation for analysing the access and influence of participants (input), the quality of participation (throughput) and the effectiveness of resulting policies (output). What inclusion looks like in each of these dimensions is derived from the literature to develop the Legitimacy-Inclusivity nexus (in Table 1).

Including diverse stakeholders at the outset is an important aspect of place branding, as the implementation begins when stakeholders are invited to the process (Botschen et al., 2017; Källström & Siljeklint, 2021). Similarly, Guix and Font (2022) define *input legitimacy* as accommodating diverse stakeholder groups that are representative of gender, region, minoritised ethnic

Table 1
Theoretical framework for legitimacy-inclusivity nexus in place branding. Source: Authors

Democratic legitimacy constructs	Input	Throughput	Output
Normative criteria for democratic legitimacy	Access and influence of participants	Quality of the process for deliberative participation	The effectiveness of resulting policies
Adapted from Schmidt (2013)			
Normative criteria for analysis of democratic legitimacy in place branding	Openness of agenda-setting process to demands of citizens; Direct and indirect opportunities for citizen participation;	Legality; Transparency in information about branding process;	Outcome of branding process reflects citizens' concerns; Effectiveness, efficiency and responsiveness of outcomes are evaluated and explained to citizens;
Adapted from Eshuis and Klijn (2012)	Responsiveness of the representation to citizen's needs through inputs of representatives.	Quality of participation and deliberation i.e., incorporating diverse identities and interests, real and equal opportunities to discuss; Checks and balances so that power structure allows for consideration of weak interests. Redistributing decision-making power;	Embedded in wider public planning and policy.
Legitimacy-inclusivity nexus in place branding	Recognising the heterogenous nature of communities;	Conditions for long-term involvement;	Added value members see in the network and their willingness to contribute to the network;
(Multiple authors, see in-text)	Invitation and access to agenda-setting is given to diverse stakeholder groups; Inclusion of marginalised groups and voices, active search for under-represented groups.	Methods of consultation and engagement emphasising social value and co-creation.	Non-economic and ethical impact and outcomes, including costs and benefits to communities; Communities feel collective sense of ownership of the outputs.

communities and the range of diverse characteristics in setting the public agenda. Stakeholder consultation, as part of deliberative democracy initiated at the input stage, can positively enhance the throughput and output legitimacy (ibid). Jernsand (2016) adds that rather than 'more participation', inclusivity means an active search for under-represented groups throughout the process. This means recognising the heterogeneous nature of communities and enabling representation from marginalised groups and individuals.

Next, regarding *throughput legitimacy*, democratic participation in inclusive place branding means creating mechanisms for redistributing decision-making powers and the conditions for long-term involvement to represent the unique and complex nature of the place (Ripoll-Gonzalez & Gale, 2020). Co-design and participatory action research methodologies have been the preferred methods to develop models of citizen engagement and input in the place branding process (Jernsand, 2016; Källström & Siljeklint, 2021; Rebelo et al., 2020). While the salience of these methods and models remains to be tested, they share the common themes of social value ethos and co-creation. They emphasise adherence to democratic values and raise questions about ownership, power relations and hierarchies (Jernsand, 2016; Ripoll-Gonzalez & Gale, 2020).

Concerning *output legitimacy*, in their case study of the Auvergne region, Martin and Capelli (2017) present a unique perspective on residents' perceptions of place branding legitimacy. They argue that promoting territorial identity rather than local products heightens the perceived legitimacy of Auvergne's regional brand. However, even with a 'brand fit' between the official and residents' place identity, detachment may arise without engagement by the locals in the branding process (Casais & Monteiro, 2019; Insch & Stuart, 2015). Co-creating brand meaning enhances ownership and internal legitimacy, which is determined by the added value members see in the network and their willingness to contribute (Bregoli et al., 2016). Further, inclusive models necessitate ethical considerations and evaluation of non-economic costs and benefits in destination development (Kavaratzis et al., 2018; Moscardo, 2011). While Arnstein's ladder implies high citizen influence through decision-making, its impact on enhancing legitimacy and inclusivity in place branding is inconclusive (Jernsand, 2016; Zenker & Seigis, 2012). Based on this growing body of literature, the present study proposes a theoretical framework for legitimacy-inclusivity nexus in place branding (Table 1). This analytical framework is applied to the case study of Northamptonshire to clarify what the legitimacy-inclusivity construct is and how it may be operationalised in place branding praxis.

Methodology

Methods and materials

The study is rooted in interpretive epistemologies and seeks to gather rich data from those who experience the phenomenon of place branding through an in-depth, qualitative single case study approach (Stake, 1995). Our understanding of legitimacy as a social construction by multiple actors motivated the investigation of how institutional and community stakeholders construct and negotiate legitimacy for their initiatives (Suddaby et al., 2017). Data was collected through semi-structured interviews and focus groups alongside document analysis.

The interviews aimed to investigate how stakeholders construct legitimacy in place brand governance and practices of stakeholder and community engagement. While many studies investigate either a community-led (Insch & Stuart, 2015; Martin & Capelli, 2017) or institutional perspective (Eshuis & Edwards, 2013; Warren et al., 2021), in the present study, 29 interviews were conducted with local and regional stakeholders from local government (G), businesses (B), higher education sector (U), voluntary organisations (V) and community project initiators (C) (detailed in Table 2). Participants were identified through independent research and mentions in the media (local newspapers, magazines, social media pages) and industry and government reports on tourism and place branding strategies. The interview questions included awareness and evaluations of various place branding initiatives in the county, experiences of engagement in the development process, challenges and successes of implementing branding strategies, and roles and mechanisms of community engagement. The importance of inclusivity and the voluntary sector's role in place branding emerged as key themes, explored further in the focus groups.

The focus groups were conducted in three different towns in the county with participants from varied backgrounds in terms of age, gender, ethnicity, and levels of engagement in past and current place branding initiatives. Participants were invited through open calls posted on the county-based social media pages and snowball sampling. The method was suitable for further discussions and debates on the key themes from the interviews. The focus groups started by exploring the community stakeholders' perceptions and vision for place branding in the county. The diversity of opinions, interests and identities was brought to the fore (Finch & Lewis, 2003). Participants reflected on these discussions in evaluating the successes and challenges of place branding in the local context. This sparked debate on who should lead place branding, who is the expert and whose opinion matters. The focus group discussions provided rich insights into the participants' individual and shared views, and differences of opinions could be explicitly discussed in the group setting.

Braun and Clarke's (2006) steps for thematic analysis were followed. For data familiarisation, the raw data was audio-recorded and transcribed. Audio recordings, on average, were 1 hour long for interviews and 2 hours for focus groups. The raw data were inductively coded using NVivo12 to generate detailed codes by closely adhering to the data and participants' words. The process involved comparing the legitimacy construction and inclusive practices of the two place branding initiatives, *Northamptonshire Surprise* and *Nenescape Partnership*, with reference to the theoretical framework. Further, coding indicated a pattern of similarity between the Nenescape partnership and voluntary sector roles that inductively emerged from the data. This inductive-deductive approach allowed us to utilise the rich descriptions from the qualitative data to address the study aim. Primary data were triangulated with secondary documents on destination management planning, and project governance and evaluation reports were

Table 2
List of interview and focus group participants.

Stakeholder group	Codes	Number of participants	Description of institutions/groups/individuals
Semi-structured interviews			
Local government	G	5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Elected local council representatives (2); • Economic Development Officer (3).
Business or industry	B	6	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Business Improvement District; • Enterprise adviser, • Business networking forum; • Big corporation (F&B manufacturing company); • Tourism promotion Coordinator; • Tourism promotion group Chair.
University	U	6	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Academics or researchers (4); • Senior Executives (2).
Voluntary and community organisations	V	7	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Executive/Chair: • Rural development agency; • Community foundation; • Heritage forum; • Social enterprise; • Community arts organisation (2). Coordinator: • Placemaking and regeneration project. • Urban community project initiator (2); • Artists (2); • Blogger.
Community	C	5	
Focus groups			
Community	C-F1	4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Small business owner (2); • University professional services staff/resident; • University recent graduate.
	C-F2	6	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Museum and archiving services staff (2); • University recent graduate (2); • Volunteer (1); • Resident (1).
	C-F3	4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Chair of a local resident association; • Active volunteer; • Voluntary sector staff; • Resident.

obtained from online sources such as local government, network and voluntary organisations' websites. Such integration and convergence of information from different sources enabled a better understanding of the case (Tasci et al., 2020). This was particularly pertinent for corroborating the project plans and implementation of the Nenescape Partnership, which was extensively documented in reports.

Case study context

Northamptonshire is a county in the UK, located in the South East Midlands region of England, within proximity of renowned destinations such as Oxford, Cambridge, Birmingham and London. Northamptonshire is a socio-economically peripheral region with higher levels of urban and rural deprivation in comparison with most of its neighbouring counties in terms of education, income and employment (GOV.UK, 2019). Following the central government austerity programme in 2010, Northamptonshire had its budget drastically reduced, much like other local governments across the UK. In 2017, the Northamptonshire County Council was in a financial crisis (GOV.UK, 2018). At the time of the study, the county lacked a statutory agency for economic development, such as a Local Enterprise Partnership or a Destination Management Organisation. The context of receding public sector leadership and funding and the active mobilisation of private and voluntary sector actors to shape the county branding strategy sets the scene for investigating the construction of legitimacy and inclusivity in place branding. In this paper, we present findings on the place branding initiatives by the industry-led *Northamptonshire Surprise Group* and the voluntary sector in the *Nenescape Landscape Partnership*.

Findings from Northamptonshire Surprise

Background

In 2016, 'Britain's Best Surprise' tourism campaign for the county was launched by the Northamptonshire Lieutenancy with support from key industry stakeholders and the university. In 2018, the initiators formed the *Northamptonshire Surprise Group*, an industry-led network with membership from Arts, Culture and Heritage attraction sites and Hospitality, Food and Beverage

and Footwear businesses (Northamptonshire Surprise, 2019). In the initial years, annually themed campaigns promoted the various sites and assets that were deemed 'hidden secrets' about Northamptonshire, starting with stately homes (in 2016), churches (2017), F&B (2018–19) and arts and culture (2020). This approach also allowed the network to grow its membership gradually; by 2019, it had achieved its main agenda of drafting a Destination Management Plan for Northamptonshire (Northamptonshire Surprise, 2019). Next, the network is preparing to formalise the visitor economy governance by setting up a Destination Management Organisation.

Input: public sector as representatives of 'public' views

The private industry stakeholders were perceived as the most creative and commercially adept among the stakeholder groups to lead the place branding strategy, marketing campaigns and creative decision-making. Their ability to secure industry buy-in as network members, bring the different sectors of the visitor economy under an umbrella brand, and promote the campaigns nationally and internationally using their marketing and brand competencies created confidence in their ability to achieve their goal. The strategic and operational abilities of Northamptonshire Surprise Group (referred to as Northamptonshire Surprise from here on) became their main claim to legitimacy construction. Notably, the most significant contribution of Northamptonshire Surprise was their leadership in filling a crucial gap in county branding, which was particularly commended by the public sector:

"it's [Northamptonshire Surprise group] got a [membership] package that it's offering to people, that people have to buy into in order to market itself. And that's great. It seems to be driven by a private individual who's got an agenda, we're not entirely sure where they got that agenda from, doesn't matter. But that's interesting because they are trying to fill a vacuum that a) the county and b) the local authorities just couldn't fill."

[G-01]

However, there were no direct opportunities for community representation and participation in the Northamptonshire Surprise initiative. Public sector representatives on The Northamptonshire Surprise's membership Board were seen as representatives of the 'public' view. The network coordinator explained that as Northamptonshire Surprise did not have a Destination Management Organisation status, they did not have the resources or responsibility for wider stakeholder and community engagement and consultation. From their perspective, the representative democracy mechanism of the public sector provided a means of indirect citizen participation. In contrast, from the perspective of community stakeholders, the local government had the statutory responsibility of wider engagement; however, the local councils did not represent their voices and views in place branding (C-F1). One participant explicitly pointed out the dissonance between the experiences of the council leaders and the local communities:

"... they [the Borough Council] can lead on it as a statutory body and as a body that is probably the most representative of the people because essentially, people have elected these members of council. But the council *doesn't know about Northampton* [...] they don't understand how people feel here, what they see, what they're proud of, and what they identify with."

[C-01 (participant's emphasis)]

Output: exclusivity, impact on communities and resulting narratives

The inception of 'Britain's Best Surprise' campaign is linked to a sentiment shared by most participants in this study that the county of Northamptonshire and its towns have not been recognised as tourist destinations. A common explanation offered by the participants was that Northamptonshire was a "hidden secret" which was not widely known despite its natural beauty and diverse cultural environment. Northamptonshire Surprise was seen to fill this gap by providing a joined-up strategy to promote the county as a destination brand.

Despite the engagement and inputs from industry partners and its outputs in establishing a network, website, and social media pages and campaigns, Northamptonshire Surprise was criticised for its focus on external audiences while neglecting the needs and identities of the resident communities. It was interesting to note that even those community participants who agreed that the county is a hidden secret (describing the county as "underrated", "secret", and "delightful") criticised the Northamptonshire Surprise campaign for lack of consideration for benefits to communities:

"... it's that feeling of actually, yes, we're a town and we are a county but actually we're more interested in people that come in. [...] 'Come on everyone look at how beautiful we are. Look at our big rich privately-owned state houses and things like that'. But actually like does that benefit the people that live here?"

[C-03]

Further, the risk of marginalisation, a non-economic cost to communities, was not considered. Critiques highlighted that the campaigns from 2016 to 2019 were rooted in dominant representations as they celebrated historic houses, churches and food and beverage productions predominantly associated with the rural county. This narrative about the 'shire' was perceived as a "conservative" and "conventional" approach to branding, which did not fully account for the county's alternative cultural heritages. While it celebrated ruralness, open green spaces, kings and queens, it overlooked urban narratives of the towns, such as their industrial heritage, the story of post-industrial decline, migration of diverse communities in the towns, and the many independent, non-conformist thinkers and changemakers from Northamptonshire.

"... stately homes and forests and nice things on the river Nene, but I worry that's a bit disingenuous to all the people that live in some of the urban environments, because maybe it isn't to them. I would love it if we became the kind of county of like *mavericks* and changemakers."

[B-05 (participant's emphasis)]

The marginalisation of urban heritages and identities was attributed to a lack of representation of diverse identities and stakeholders' interests in Northamptonshire Surprise, which opponents claimed resulted in 'mainstream' campaigns indistinguishable from other rural counties. Hegemonic representations and the so-called 'high culture' were prioritised in the initial stages of campaign planning. However, in the 'Arts and Culture 2020' campaign an active search for under-represented groups later included community groups from urban areas, such as arts-based community organisations and organisers of Northampton Carnival. As this focus group participant reflects, the cultural and ethnic diversity in the towns was seen as an asset which should be celebrated in the promotion of the county:

"... you only have to watch the carnival to realise how many different communities are here [...] There's 20 or 30 different, it's amazing but should I know about them? Should other people know about [them]. I don't know whether they should be advertising. But we have so much diversity that's unknown, or at least not promoted [...] But that's clearly a strength of the town and the county most likely."

[C-F1-03]

Generally, in the practices of Northamptonshire Surprise, the criteria for throughput legitimacy were not considered since they did not have a legal mandate for deliberative participation. The critical voices who raised concerns about inclusivity and the outputs and outcomes of the campaign paved the way for an active search for underrepresented groups in the 'Arts and Culture 2020' campaign. However, this has been a one-off event in the overall brand strategy and therefore does not provide evidence of the distribution of decision-making or longer-term engagement of wider and more diverse community groups.

Findings from Nenescape Partnership

Background

The Voluntary and Community sector is a prominent contributor to the county's economy, with 2600 organisations and groups registered on the database of Local Infrastructure Organisations and attracting income close to £300 m through external funding and the procurement of grants and contracts (VIN, 2021). 'Nenescape Landscape Partnership', a voluntary and public sector-led initiative, brought together several partner organisations, including education, local planning authorities, and voluntary and community interest groups, for riverside regeneration. It was established in 2012 following the designation of the Nene Valley Nature Improvement Area. In 2017, the Partnership secured five-year Heritage Funding to help protect and promote the natural and built heritage in the Nene Valley (Nenescape.org, 2017).

Nenescape Partnership is considered an exemplar of stakeholder engagement with its two-tier governance structure. The top tier, *The Board*, comprises strategic lead partners from the public, private, higher education and voluntary sectors who provide expertise in ecology and biodiversity, history, local government and planning, tourism and community engagement (Nenescape.org, 2017). The second tier, *Delivery Steering Group*, oversees the delivery activities under three themed projects - Listen to the past, Explore the now and Secure the future - with partner organisations and has the function of wider engagement with landowners and resident communities. As a funding requirement, the reporting of the project outcomes and impact on communities was built into the governance. A full-time appointment of an Interpretation and Community Engagement Officer supported these functions.

Input: discursive ability and intermediary position of community leaders

The Nenescape Partnership (hereby referred to as Nenescape) leveraged its mandate to develop and promote community-based assets by partnering with the public sector and heritage and nature conversation agencies to construct legitimacy. Over and above the associations with ruralness and nature, the project included spaces and stories of the industrial Boot and Shoe heritage of the towns. The plurality of identities was embraced by reframing the narrative of industrial decline as that of 'transformation' to recreational spaces and 'legacy' to be shared and valued. As noted in their mission statement their main purpose was to.

“Promote the Nene Valley as a visitor destination and improve opportunities for local residents to learn about local heritage and traditions and identify with the River Nene as it progresses from an industrial landscape to a recreational space.”

[(Nenescape.org, 2023, p.16)]

“the landscape’s industrial, cultural and archaeological legacies are shared and valued by those living and working in the Nene Valley.”

[(Nenescape.org, 2023, p.7)]

Nenescape’s goal of tourism development and regeneration along the Nene Valley and the intent to engage wider stakeholders and communities were built into the governance arrangements. Moreover, a commonality between the voluntary participants in our study was their mission to serve the most vulnerable and ‘hard to reach’ groups in society. They were working in response to the complex environment and unique needs and aspirations of the communities they served. Voluntary participants in this study emphasised that by engaging ‘hard to reach’ and ‘disengaged’ groups, they were filling a crucial service gap that was not economically viable for the private sector and was difficult for the public sector to fill in the current financial environment. From the public sector perspective, community leaders are advocates for and in their communities:

“... we normally have a main representative to represent the organisation or the community group, and they would stand on a steering group or a panel and then it’d be their job to attend. They get the information, go back to, deliver it to their community.”

[G-02]

“... we are always about getting people to engage with high quality [provision], but for a community group, it might be about community cohesion, it might be about reducing antisocial behaviour from young people. So actually, it’s about understanding how two priorities can sit together.”

[V-04]

The findings reveal that voluntary organisations occupied an ‘intermediary position’ between institutional and community stakeholders. Consequent to their organisational mission, values and activities, the voluntary sector claimed the role of ‘community leaders’, stating that they had the knowledge, connections, and trust in and of the communities they served and were willing to engage in place branding at the strategic level – presenting an opportunity for voluntary organisations to employ their resources to foster the inclusion of marginalised groups in place branding.

Throughput: social value ethos and co-creation mechanisms for community engagement

Co-creating with communities for the ‘bottom-up regeneration’ of places was found to be a key theme in voluntary organisations’ contributions to place branding. One voluntary organisation explicitly stated that their objective was: “engaging local people in making communities better places to live, work, play and do business”. Another participant noted their role in co-creating with communities was to “give them control” and foster community pride, reflecting the social value ethos of the sector.

“... we try and encourage them to be proud of the village they live in. And things like community planning, neighbourhood planning, help us to do that, by giving them that control [...] And that often will bring out quite a lot pride in the people in the village they live in, their rural area.”

[V-02]

For engaging and empowering communities, the voluntary sector used the mechanisms of grant funding and advisory panels and supported these engagements through training and workshops (throughput). The operationalisation of all three mechanisms to engage and empower communities was observed in the community grant funding awarded to volunteer-led projects aligned with Nenescape’s themes. The grant aimed to fund ideas, and provide resources, capabilities and expertise in the community. Nenescape supported various initiatives that celebrated heritage in the Nene Valley and highlighted the ‘hidden stories’ that were not widely known before the scheme (Nenescape.org, 2023). Moreover, in selecting the winning application, volunteers were invited to form the judging panel. They were supported with guidance and tools, such as evaluation scorecards, and provided access to archival resources and training. The provision of training and upskilling of communities demonstrated the commitment of the voluntary groups to long-term engagement and empowerment of communities.

However, a key critique of these activities was that they provided more meaningful engagement for ‘the typical heritage volunteers’ who were active in the community, and the representation on the panels and projects was not very diverse. To address this issue, the voluntary sector participants in our study noted that they were actively engaged in developing new mechanisms for widening participation and engagement with their services.

“... our grants panels are made up of community advisors, so people who are active in the local community sector.”

[V-03]

“... our partners, Nenescape, we love them, but you know, [they] are a certain type of organiser you know, its heritage, its its middle class volunteering.”

[V-07]

Output: partnership working under resource constraints to achieve joint goals

Internally, it was felt that Nene Valley and its brand represent an area of natural beauty and heritage spanning the county and beyond (to the neighbouring county of Peterborough). Several participants mentioned that it is a legitimate facet of the Northamptonshire destination brand, so much so that one public sector participant suggested rebranding their local authority area to ‘Nene Valley Council’:

“I think with destination Nene Valley, we have got a ‘label’ that we could get behind. And you know, Nene Valley Council could work quite well because you then can define it, and if you were to define it, and then deliver very quickly.”

[G-01 (participant’s emphasis)]

However, there is limited evidence on how far the work of Nenescape reached a wider external audience to support Nenescape’s claims of external legitimacy. They faced a key challenge: ‘the pressure’ to provide services and operate within already constrained resources and capacity and reliance on voluntary groups in the county. Relative to the private sector, participants expressed concerns about the resources, capabilities and deliverables of the voluntary sector, particularly those of smaller organisations and groups:

“The voluntary sector, more and more are being a having to provide services, the private sector organisations or publicly funded organisations did before [...] but they’re still seen as voluntary, like not as professional, not as good as private sector, you know, there’s still there’s still a stigma around the voluntary sector.”

[C-01]

With the challenges of resource constraints, forming a partnership to work within the sector and with public and private actors was a key strategy employed by the voluntary sector to achieve their organisational and social mission. Engagement in place-based schemes (such as Nenescape) was vital for voluntary organisations to secure funding for their programmes and create local and regional impact (VIN, 2021). Moreover, voluntary and community organisations in the county formed a consortium to consolidate the sector’s voices and interests and enable representation and voice for smaller community organisations and groups. For Nenescape to reach and engage a younger audience, Nenescape leveraged the community connections of one of its local delivery partners (a film production company). This collaboration led to the co-production of project outputs: a feature film about river Nene and an interactive map of the ‘Northampton Boot trail’ with young people from disadvantaged backgrounds – which was noted as an important achievement in the project evaluation report:

“... working with [the filming company], with its strong track record in engaging with diverse communities and disadvantaged people, was a key factor in its success reaching new audiences.”

[(Nenescape.org, 2023, p.70)]

This example illustrates the key themes relating to the praxis of the voluntary and community sector, i.e. their active search for and engagement with disadvantaged groups and the various mechanisms they employ to co-create with communities. There is no conclusive evidence if these engagements led to a heightened sense of ownership of the co-produced outputs among communities. Nonetheless, targeted measures and mechanisms were employed towards this goal.

Discussions and implications

The case study analysis of Northamptonshire reveals three main principles (issues) and a range of mechanisms for constructing the legitimacy-inclusivity nexus. In response to the research question, the practices of Northamptonshire Surprise Group primarily uncover the tensions that emerge when inclusivity is not considered and built into place brand governance. Meanwhile, the voluntary sector’s role in fostering community engagement in the Nenescape Partnership reveals the ethos and practices that create the enabling mechanisms for inclusivity.

Representation and advocacy for marginalised groups (input)

A key issue of legitimacy-inclusivity practices was representation and advocacy for marginalised groups in place brand governance. Unsurprisingly, the access and influence of participants are determined based on the network's goals and objectives, funding requirements, and governance arrangements. Northamptonshire Surprise's primary goal was securing buy-in and support from tourism industry stakeholders. Consequently, engagement with actors with strategic and operational abilities concerning place branding, such as creative marketing and commercialisation, was prioritised. This aligns with recent findings on how key players (such as place marketers and private industry stakeholders) leverage their cultural and social capital to negotiate access and influence in place brand development (Reynolds et al., 2022; Warren et al., 2021). Further, the Nenescape case illustrates this phenomenon in the voluntary organisations' engagement in the place-based scheme. The discursive ability of the voluntary sector groups to advocate for community needs and interests (Purdy, 2012) positioned them as strategic partners in achieving Nenescape's objectives. This includes engendering local pride, redressing disparities in regeneration, promoting community cohesion, and environmental conservation, thereby potentially enhancing sustainable and equitable place branding (Bisani, 2019; Coletti & Rabbiosi, 2020).

Furthermore, their intermediary position between institutional and community stakeholders was advantageous for them to fulfil their community leadership function. They added value to Nenescape through their deep understanding of and connections with local communities, particularly for engaging disadvantaged and hard-to-reach groups. These mechanisms, by which the local voluntary organisation enabled community representation, were more inclusive of marginalised groups compared to the public sector's representation of community interests in Northamptonshire Surprise. The power distance between institutions and communities and weakened confidence in the public sector's ability to lead place branding, in the context of austerity, posed significant challenges in this role. Relatively, the unique characteristics of the voluntary sector enabled them to represent and advocate for the most vulnerable groups and individuals in society, showing their immense untapped potential in furthering inclusivity in place branding processes.

Operationalising community engagement and co-creation mechanisms (throughput)

In the absence of a legal mandate for deliberative participation, as observed in Northamptonshire Surprise, the key issue is operationalising community engagement and co-creation mechanisms. The workings of the voluntary sector, guided by their social value ethos and community engagement practices, can enhance participation quality. The findings of this study illustrate how community grants, advisory panels, and capacity-building workshops enable redistribution of decision-making and sustained community involvement. This widens conventional public-private approaches to representative democracy, which aim to engage the citizens and voters of a particular political-admin territory via traditional methods such as opinion surveys and focus groups (Eshuis & Edwards, 2013; Martin & Capelli, 2017). Community engagement mechanisms can be employed within a more targeted approach for co-creation and bottom-up regeneration of places. For instance, in Nenescape, communities construct the symbolic representation (of urban and rural narratives) and the programming and delivery of brand experience through community projects and events. These mechanisms engage and empower issue-specific communities to co-produce outputs, as evidenced in the co-production of the 'Northampton Boot trail'. Systematically amplifying the voices of marginalised groups can aid collective ownership over the co-produced outputs and achieve a dynamic identity in place branding (Kavaratzis & Kalandides, 2015).

Effectiveness and impact of place branding (output)

The effectiveness of outputs and outcomes of place branding, including the resulting social and ethical impacts, represent key determinants of legitimacy and inclusivity in place branding. In this case, the outputs are the results of the process regarding the place brand narratives and artefacts (of marketing communications). Outcomes refer to the changes resulting from these outputs, such as costs and benefits to communities. Foremost, the lack of value-added benefits that communities perceived in the case of Northamptonshire Surprise can be explained by the lack of public-facing communication about the effectiveness of the campaigns (Eshuis & Edwards, 2013). This is because communities were not considered key stakeholders. Nonetheless, as the narratives and artefacts produced by Northamptonshire Surprise are in the public forum, they are open to critique and evaluation by all stakeholders.

The findings of the output analysis of Northamptonshire Surprise revealed that internal stakeholders challenged the effectiveness of the campaigns in creating a distinctive brand for the county and representing the plural interests and identities of local communities. Ultimately, the campaign is considered to have delivered weak branding outputs consequent to a lack of representation and participation of diverse community voices. By contrast, the plurality of urban and rural representations and embedding of community engagement in the governance arrangements from the outset of Nenescape enabled them to claim that the project delivered benefits to communities since it was co-produced with local groups (Nenescape.org, 2023). This echoes the findings by Guix and Font (2022) and Schmidt (2013), attesting to the positive effect of participatory inputs on the effectiveness of resulting policies.

Arguably, the co-existence of various networks and their initiatives contribute to a dynamic identity in the place branding process shaped by various stakeholder interests and narratives (Martinez, 2016; Pugh & Andersson, 2023). Faced with the common challenge of place branding Northamptonshire in the context of receding public sector leadership, the two networks have contributed to place branding practices in the county by mobilising membership from different groups and responding to emerging

issues in different and complementary ways. The embeddedness of community engagement in the two-tier governance arrangements of Nenescape provides a blueprint for implementing inclusive approaches to enhance output legitimacy. The ongoing efforts of Northamptonshire Surprise since 2016 have created a membership framework for the various visitor economy sectors to promote the region under an umbrella brand to national and international audiences. The findings affirm that a partnership between stakeholders and networks comprising the private, public, and voluntary sectors, centred in social value and co-creation, is a preferred governance model for achieving inclusive place branding. This means sharing responsibilities and roles to alleviate limited resources and capacity constraints and to capitalise on each stakeholder group's unique capabilities and expertise.

Conclusions

This paper has examined how stakeholders construct legitimacy and inclusivity in their place branding practices, focusing on the mechanisms employed by voluntary organisations to enable inclusivity. The findings reveal three main principles underpinning the legitimacy-inclusivity nexus. First, the issue of *representation and advocacy for marginalised groups (input)* is the distinguishing characteristic of inclusive place branding. Meaningful community participation in place branding addresses the risk of marginalisation and advocates for the active search and inclusion of underrepresented groups. The democratic legitimacy framework proposed by Eshuis and Edwards (2013) centres citizens' needs, demands, and participation. However, in this paper, we have argued that inclusivity in place branding should not only be prescribed within the legislative framework governing citizens and voters. Instead, we contend that community inclusion and participation should be interpreted more critically and widely, spanning diverse communities of residents, migrants, refugees, and other underrepresented groups. This study has spotlighted the pivotal role of voluntary organisations in the inclusion of diverse and marginalised communities in place branding campaigns.

Significantly, it also foregrounds the invaluable potential of voluntary organisations in providing leadership in engaging and facilitating the co-creation of place brand narratives – addressing the issue of *operationalising mechanisms for engagement and co-creation (throughput)*. This does not imply diminishing the public sector's statutory responsibility in building partnerships and supportive arrangements for good governance in place branding (Horgan & Dimitrijević, 2021; Shipley & Kovacs, 2008). However, this competency of voluntary organisations provides value-added benefits in gaining diverse representations and the sharing of complementary expertise and capabilities in place brand governance to foster inclusivity. To explore the scope of these study findings beyond this single case of Northamptonshire, it is recommended that future research should focus on the effectiveness of such co-creation and engagement practices in differentiating the place brand for external audiences. Further studies could also explore mechanisms for accountability and transparency that will effectively disperse responsibilities while minimising undemocratic exclusion within networks (Yüksel et al., 2005).

Lastly, the issue of *effectiveness and impact of place branding (output)* with consideration for social and ethical impact is significant for legitimacy and inclusivity. The logic of branding and representation explains how community stakeholders evaluate place branding (Pugh & Andersson, 2023). They highlight the importance of differentiating the brand, representing a plurality of narratives and perspectives, and considering the implications for community costs and benefits. Within the wider context of tourism studies, discourses of the 'local turn' in the sector advocate for the centring of resident stakeholders at the heart of policy, planning and marketing of destinations (Higgins-Desbiolles & Bigby, 2022). This local turn in tourism is no less relevant in the specialist field of place branding where the governance and business of shaping the identity of, and the imagining of places are having to reckon with the claims of social justice values of democratic legitimacy and inclusion in policy and praxis.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Shalini Bisani: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Visualization, Validation, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Marcella Daye:** Writing – review & editing, Supervision, Conceptualization. **Kathleen Mortimer:** Writing – review & editing, Supervision.

Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

Declaration of competing interest

This research is based on data produced during a PhD funded by University of Northampton, UK studentship scheme. The authors do not have any financial or non-financial interests or affiliations to disclose connected to the research. All research was approved and adhered to principles set out by University of Northampton's ethical approval committee. Informed consent was obtained from all participants included in the study.

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Appendix A. Supplementary data

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