Climate crisis as a business opportunity: Using degrowth to defamiliarize place branding for sustainability

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Abstract

Place branders express a desire for their work to aid in addressing crises such as climate change through sustainable developments that assist with brand positioning, yet little is known about how place branding professionals manage tensions and contradictions that arise between sustainability and investment development. This paper qualitatively explores how place branders talk about ecological sustainability at a place branding conference. We pose the research question, *how do place branders communicatively construct the meaning of place branding for sustainability*? Our key finding is that place branders reframe ecological crises as an "exclusive" business and brand-building opportunity. Rather than viewing this as "business as usual," we use defamiliarization as a method of disrupting common sense and presenting the familiar as "strange," and we employ degrowth ideas as a tool for doing so. We show how place branding for sustainability is constructed as a matter of making a place attractive to businesses that can generate green growth, and how this is done by suppressing aspects that challenge this view. In doing this, we provide a deeper insight into how certain, pro-growth-oriented sustainability practices are communicatively maintained, and into the struggles branders face when tasked with place branding for sustainability.

Keywords Sustainability · Place Branding · Green Growth · Degrowth · Investments

Introduction

Place branding professionals are situated to shape how cities, regions, and nations re-imagine the make-up of sustainable places, including attracting businesses and developing sustainable brand positioning. Like all of us, investment-focused place branding professionals will continue to contend with global climate change crises

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and their impacts. However, unlike most, this group plays a significant role in shaping the practices and communication around sustainability and places. Although definitions vary, sustainability in the place branding literature argues that places should have positive impacts on the present, while reducing negative effects on future generations regarding environmental quality, economic prosperity, and social justice (Taecharungroj et al. 2019, p. 211). As Kavaratzis and Florek (2021) note, "the role of branding in times of crisis is understandably one of the hottest topics of discussion as, at the moment, all place branding happens within a crisis" (p. 63). Seeking win–win solutions, place branding professionals have taken an interest in understanding how place branding can play a positive role in the world, including tackling climate crises through the development of sustainable places, while also using sustainability to positively position their brand (Taecharungroj et al. 2019). This situates place branders amid a tension between ecology and economy. Although it appears that branding and sustainability make good bedfellows in that brand-driven solutions are good for the planet, critical scholars warn that sustainability might be used as little more than a selling device for

growth and business-oriented solutions that lack real commitments to change (Gonzalez and Gale 2022; Walker 2016). Kindly check and confirm the section headings are processed correctly. Section headings appear to be correct.

Although utilizing sustainability in place brand positioning is becoming more common, academic investigations of the phenomenon have been relatively scarce. The main branch takes a managerial perspective, focusing on how branding can successfully signify sustainability for positive returns on investments (Hereźniak and Anders-Morawska 2021; Vesal et al. 2021; Willemsen & van der Veen 2014). Less attention has been paid to the meanings of sustainability that are used and constructed during branding initiatives and how these are produced and reproduced by branding professionals (Gonzalez & Gale 2022). This lack of insight is important to remedy because scholars – particularly those who advocate for degrowth to effectively address sustainability issues – warn that the managerial view of sustainability as something places can do to simultaneously make money and to address ecological and social problems is flawed (e.g., Banerjee et al. 2020; Jackson 2021). Thus, the pathways toward sustainability are diverse and may be at odds. To analyze the meanings of sustainability (re)produced in place branding, we need to explore *how* branding and sustainability are brought together in place branding practice.

This paper analyses place branders' speech and interactions around sustainability at a place branding conference that brings together attracting investments and sustainability. In line with calls to explore the meanings and narratives behind sustainable developments (Gonzalez & Gale 2022; Kaika & Swyngedouw 2011; Zavattaro 2014), we pose the research question, *how do place branders communicatively construct the meaning of place branding for sustainability*? Specifically, based on observation of place branders' interactions at the conference, we analyze how investment-focused place branders construct an everyday or common-sense view of what constitutes sustainable place branding. We do not explore outcomes or efficacies around sustainability initiatives, but rather we seek to understand how place branders' constructions enable and/or constrain their ability to contend with sustainability concerns alongside promotion and brand development, which allows for a better understanding of how social, ecological, and market priorities intersect.

Our key finding is that place branders gloss over the tension between economy and ecology by constructing ecological crises as an "exclusive" business and brand-building opportunity. We show how they do this by framing sustainable place branding as a way of making places attractive to businesses that can generate green growth. In our case, this was accomplished by discursively suppressing aspects that challenge this frame, particularly "dirty" growth and degrowth. By doing so, we provide a deepened insight into how certain, pro-growth-oriented sustainability practices are

communicatively maintained, and into the struggles branders face when tasked with place branding for sustainability.

The remainder of the paper is organized as follows. First, common themes in the literature on place branding and sustainability are outlined. Then we account for our data collection at a sustainability-focused place branding conference, followed by an empirical section comprised of findings. Last, findings are analyzed through the lens of degrowth theory as a defamiliarization device – that is, an analytical tool intended to disrupt common sense and present the familiar as "strange" (Alvesson & Deetz 2000) – and discussed in light of key strands in the literature on place branding and sustainability.

The contested role of sustainability place branding

Sustainability – centering on the notion that the processes occurring today should have positive impacts, while reducing negative effects on future generations regarding environmental quality, economic prosperity and social justice (Taecharungroj et al. 2019, p. 211) – has lately gained increased attention within place and city branding research. It is possible to discern two main threads within extant literature that deal with the exploration and conceptualization of place branding and sustainability. The first thread, which can be labeled green growth, rests on the assumption that growth in GDP can simultaneously protect the environment (Buch-Hansen and Carstensen 2021). Accordingly, it takes an optimistic view of the relationship between branding and sustainability, suggesting that place branding can lead to both sustainability and economic growth by merging, and/or sometimes glossing over, tensions between the economic, social, and ecological goals. The second and more critical strand problematizes a focus on economic growth in place branding for sustainability, suggesting that the increased emissions and use of natural resources stemming from economic growth counteract sustainability. We unpack these two themes in the literature further.

Place branding for sustainability as green growth

Historically, the practice of attracting industrialists and manufacturers from the 1930s-1970s was referred to as "smokestack chasing," meaning that places put significant effort into "landing" business (Ward 2005). Today, although the "smokestack" label is admittedly at odds with modern sustainable brands, scholarship focused on branding to attract business and investments still promotes the idea that places must compete to win businesses by focusing on investors' needs and developing a "business-friendly" identity (Jacobsen 2009; Middleton 2011). Regarding this, Kaika (2004)

argues that many cities seek to provide industry with an *urban dowry* that includes communicating the presence of tax breaks and free land; infrastructure, safe and convenient public transportation, access to airports, quality education and talent, and access to culture and nature (Jacobsen 2009; Sullivan et al. 2023). As such, a central feature of contemporary place branding is that it is a conspicuous way in which places are packaged and sold to stakeholders such as investors by highlighting what stakeholders might see as positive aspects, including sustainability.

Place branding that seeks to communicate that a place is invested in sustainability involves creating a "credible, valuable, and distinctive position in the minds of places' customers, which can lead to customer satisfaction, loyalty and competitive advantage" (Taecharungroj et al. 2019, p. 210). Within this definition, we see a business-friendly slant that seeks to merge sustainability with significant competitive advantages. Literature on place branding for sustainability is largely functionalistic, favoring market-oriented solutions to social problems and primarily focused on issues of brand effectiveness and economic returns on investments. Here, the idea is that with the right model or tools, leaders can make decisions about which industries support sustainable and economic goals. Within traditional investment-focused place branding, economic growth appears to be a key condition of a city's sustainability plans, alongside social and ecological wellbeing. For instance, Gustavsson and Elander (2012) examine three small Swedish towns to ask, "Can climate change mitigation become a marker of place identity through place-branding?" (p. 2). If properly branded, they argue, climate mitigation strategies can give "small, rural, and sometimes declining towns a possibility to survive with a new identity as forerunners in climate change mitigation" (p. 8). Place branding that argues that ecological sustainability can be combined and aligned with economic growth therefore rests on the idea of green growth. Green growth assumes that economic expansion can co-exist with reduced resource use and carbon emissions, a view that dominates national and international policy, including in the UN Sustainable Development Goals (Stoknes and Rockström, 2018).[1]

Communicating a sustainability place brand often mirrors corporate branding practices that put forth relatively homogenous advice that 'involves the conscious decision by senior management to distill and make known the attributes of the organization's identity in the form of a clearly defined branding proposition' (Balmer 2001, p. 281). Here, alignment between vision, image, culture, and identity is considered crucial to presenting specific, consistent, and uniform messages to internal and external stakeholders (Hankinson 2007; Hatch and Schultz 2003; Ren and Blichfeldt 2011). Scholars note that place branding that adheres to this philosophy is often top-down, caters to the needs of the few, and advocates for the value of economic growth (Eshuis and Edwards 2013; Jacobsen 2009; Sataøen and Wæraas 2015). While there are few published empirical articles specific to place branding tactics for sustainability, several scholars encourage the use of pro-environment campaigns and messages committing to environmental sustainability (Vesal et al. 2021) that mirror corporate branding advice. For instance, Gustavsson and Elander (2012) stress that it is not enough to be sustainable; cities must be "cocky" in their branding activities by, as they advocate, coming up with "outstanding" slogans such as Växjö's "The Greenest City in Europe" (p. 8). Like corporate branding advice to be unique and exclusive, Horlings and Kanemasu's (2015) case study shows how rural Shetland Islands developed an exclusive regional brand that uses local resources to cater to urban mainland niche markets for specialized meat products, adventure/eco/cultural tourism, and luxury knitwear. Looking closer, however, we can see that the sustainability brand seeks to *reposition* sustainability as using different or fewer resources than projects such as oil production, while still prioritizing economic growth.

However, within the preceding optimistic stream of literature, concerns have also been raised that place branding promoting green growth tends to gloss over the complexities of protecting and simultaneously promoting ecological, social, and economic gains, often by creating a selective, yet compelling brand message. In other words, concerns exist regarding place branders capacity to fully unite ecological and social sustainability with economic growth. For instance, Reynolds et al. (2023) found that tensions arise when sustainability is employed as a brand positioning device and that uniting around sustainability values does not per se generate value for the city brand and the stakeholders, but may instead lead to a co-destruction of value. Moreover, Wang's (2019) study showed that not all stakeholders share perceptions of a city's green brand, specifically local residents were less convinced about perceptions of a green brand than tourists. These studies thus indicate that although it is desirable and important for place branders to balance ecological, social, and economic sustainability when building a green brand (Taecharungroj et al. 2019), this (quite daunting) task is not without challenges and difficulties.

Critical views on sustainability and green growth

Critical perspectives can shed light on current branding and sustainability framings, encouraging scholars and practitioners to explore and challenge taken-for-granted assumptions. Specifically, critical scholars warn that corporate views of sustainability, which may prioritize

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market value and economic growth over sustainability, are flawed (e.g., Banerjee et al. 2020; Jackson 2021). Rather than addressing long-term sustainability, corporate branding practices, with an impetus to creating uniform attractive messages, can gloss over *tensions* between social values (such as ecological or social sustainability) and market values (such as economic growth and market share) (Hereźniak & Anders-Morawska 2021). But despite attempts to gloss over, tensions remain.

A particular tension between ecological and economic sustainability is generated because corporate branding practices are grounded in the notion of *green growth*. Yet, scholars caution that green growth is "misguided," not least because empirical studies fail to show that sufficient decoupling of economic growth from carbon emissions and use of natural resources is possible on a global scale (Hickel and Kallis 2020). Thus, they argue that policy makers must look to other solutions than business-oriented theories around green growth, suggesting instead that a *degrowth* version of sustainability is necessary if we are to effectively mitigate the climate crisis (Koch 2022). Degrowth theory is an expanding field encompassing not only ecological aspects but also social justice and quality-of-life (Kallis et al. 2018). But broadly speaking, the degrowth view challenges the idea of an economy relying on perpetual economic growth and argues that to effectively address the degradation of the planet, maintained economic growth is simply not sustainable because it tends to go hand in hand with increased CO_2 emissions and use of natural resources (Hickel and Kallis 2020). Instead, it is necessary to find alternative ways of organizing production and consumption (including in cities) that do not assume that economic growth is a self-evident good (Chertkovskaya et al. 2019; Jackson 2021; Parrique et al. 2019).

In light of this economic comment, a significant critique is that, as Kaneva (2018) writes, "the social construction of places, identities, and cultures is, at the present time, intimately intertwined with the workings of the market" (p. 306). Therefore, within the green growth paradigm, it is unclear if city and governmental leaders will foreground sustainability when the economics of doing so are not favorable. Kaika and Swyngedouw (2011) add the specific concern that capitalist speculation in practices of sustainable development, "can sideline issues of justice and equality promoting market-led and technological solutions to 'greening capitalism'" (pg. 99). The concern that economics will trump sustainability efforts seems valid considering assertions like Willemsen and van der Veen's (2014) that, "sustainability is an asset that is difficult to sell on its own and that will usually only provide a marginal return on investment" (p. 236), or Krähmer's (2021) study of Copenhagen's sustainability strategy, which found that although the city brands itself as

sustainable, future growth in consumption-based emission are likely, due to the central aim to a focus on economic growth.

In other words, power differentials created in capitalist societies make it difficult to maintain a balance between economic, social, and environmental concerns. For instance, Broudehoux (2017) argues that all urban image construction is a matter of power and Sullivan et al. (2023) found that industry holds great power over cities and civic values when cities feel compelled to "win" or to compete for industry. Our study seeks to unpack how this balancing act unfolds in the activities of a key stakeholder of place branding for sustainability, namely by focusing on place branders' speech and interaction at a place branding conference. We know little about how *seeking* sustainable investments sits alongside ecological sustainability and economic growth (Maheshwari and Vandewalle 2011). Therefore, we answer the call for additional studies that explore narratives around investment place branding and sustainability (Zavattaro 2014).

Methods

Data collection

We have a long-standing interest in exploring how place branders talk about place branding and its related issues. Viewing place branders as a community of practice – a community consisting of members who share common knowledge and practices (Wenger 2000) – we have studied several place branding conferences over the past five years, largely centered on place branding in the Nordics and Northern Europe. As events where place branders gather to share their work and experiences, the conferences are important sites for exploring how the place branding community develops common knowledge and norms about what constitutes place branding, including place branding for sustainability.

For this paper, we used qualitative and interactionist methodologies to collect data from a 2021 place branding conference. Whereas other place branding conferences we observed had more general themes around attracting industry, tourists, or workers, this conference was of particular interest to us as a research site because of its narrow focus on connecting sustainability with investment promotion and its statement that sustainability is the future of investment promotion. The 3-h and 15-min conference – an open event to which we registered as participants – featured twelve 15-min presentations from branders, leaders in place branding investments (such as business developers and directors of economic development and growth), and leaders in sustainable industries across the Nordics and Europe (See Table 1). Anchored by the United

Table 1 Conference speakers and presentation titles

Name (Pseudonym)	De-identified job title
Bridgette	Director of investment promotion, large city
Charlotta	Head of economic development, municipality
Daavi	Director of economic development, city
Sophie	Director of a multi-country investment agency
Fredrik	Head of business development, municipality
Gunnar	Property development leader, country
Hans	Senior investment advisor, municipality
Kristof	Director, invest in country
Mats	Head of clean industry in invest in business country
Lars	Advisor, invest in country
Ingrid	Investment manager, business country

Speakers' names are pseudonyms and job titles have been kept intact, but de-identified for place

Nations Development Goals and the European Green Deal, speakers at the conference shared how they go from policy goals to action and how they brand themselves as sustainable.

The conference was online due to Covid. All authors attended the conference virtually in real time and took notes. After the conference, all participants were sent the presenters' PowerPoint Presentations, a summary report, and a recording of the conference. The empirical material collected comprises 35 pages of authors' typed field notes from the conference observation, 122 PowerPoint Slides from presentations, a 14-page report and reflections on the conference provided after the conference, and the digital recording of the online conference. We created a transcript of the digital recording that included 26 single-spaced typed pages of text. In the presentation of the data, all names are pseudonyms and we have omitted mentions of specific places.

Data analysis

Our data analysis rests on interactionist methodology, which is concerned with "the creation and change of symbolic orders via social interaction (Silverman 1993, p. 47). In order to understand the meaning of sustainability from this perspective, we thus view the conference as a response to an imperative to engage in sustainability-related place branding (Nascimento and Loureiro 2024), and analyze how sustainability is constructed in the interactions at the conference. This involves paying attention to what is talked about in the interactions, in the sense of the topics addressed (e.g., sustainability, place branding for sustainability), but also how this is talked about. The latter includes attention to the choice of words when talking about the topic, and more generally to the resources/references that actors draw on when framing the interaction (Goffman 1974). In addition, attention to how a topic is constructed also includes paying attention to what is *not* talked about (Tracy 2010). For instance, a topic can be constructed and understood in a particular way by avoiding or being unaware of conflicting topics and perspectives (Deetz 1992). In other words, analyzing how topics are constructed involves connecting the social interaction to the "norms, rules, conventions, etc. that define, control and frame interaction" (Persson 2018, p. 76). This is important for understanding what guides broader social phenomena such as "sustainability" because it is in the interactions that meanings and thereby the basis for action around sustainability is created. Or as Zimmerman (2005, p. 445) has put it: "interactional organization *enables* much of what transpires in the 'larger' social world."

Accordingly, in our analysis, we paid attention both to what was present and absent in the talk at the conference. When it comes to the absent talk, we used one of the absences – that of the notion of degrowth – as a "defamiliarization" strategy to cast critical light on our data (Alvesson and Deetz 2000; Rennstam and Ashcraft 2014). Defamiliarization is a strategy which aims to shed new light on a phenomenon by intentionally presenting as "strange" that which is presented as normal and familiar in a certain context (Marcus and Fischer 1986). We will illustrate this further when we use this strategy in the discussion section.

In more practical terms, our analysis started when we attended the live online conference and continued via reading through all the transcripts, looking for overarching themes in terms of how the participants created meaning around sustainability (Charmaz 2014). Partly informed by previous studies calling for exploration of the meanings behind sustainability initiatives (e.g., Zavattaro 2014), we focused on instances where sustainability was "defined" in the sense of spoken about by drawing on, or not drawing on, certain resources and references. We turn to this next.

Findings

As explained, there are multiple meanings associated with the term sustainability in the place branding literature. Of note, the dominant meaning of sustainability constructed in our data from the conference was strikingly centered on ecological sustainability as it related to growth, foregrounding technological solutions, developing screening and KPI tools for new investments, and ecological solutions to manufacturing. Overall, therefore, the meaning of sustainability rests on green growth, where it is assumed that industrial and technological solutions will decouple growth from resource use and carbon emissions to allow for economic expansion that supports a healthy planetary ecology. This is not to say that the conference was devoid of discussing sustainability

in other ways. Sophie, who is the director of a multi-country investment agency, focused on social sustainability through digitization that provided inclusive and safe access to services. She says, "Internet is definitely a social right in our country today and all residents have an electronic ID." In another example, Fredrick, Head of business development in a mid-sized municipality, states that electric vehicles present an opportunity for a sustainable society, such as encouraging carpooling. Yet, alongside the low focus on social sustainability in favor of ecological sustainability, there were also notable absences around other social sustainability topics such as diversity, public safety, or accessibility. We unpack our key finding, which is that place branders construct ecological crises as an "exclusive" business and brand-building opportunity. Next, we turn to how this is done by framing sustainable place branding as a matter of making a place attractive to businesses that can generate green growth, and by suppressing aspects that challenge this view.

Climate crisis as an "exclusive" business and brand-building opportunity

Speakers at the conference were clear that place branding should be framed in response to the climate crisis, and they did not shy away from the very serious implications of addressing climate change. In a summary document for the conference, the organizers used dramatic imagery – such as likening the Earth to a child in a car on a hot summer day – and explained that the conference should be seen against the backdrop of significant environmental challenges such as climate change in general and carbon emissions from specific activities and industries in particular.

Against this backdrop, conference organizers and speakers affirmed that climate crisis is a business opportunity where solutions focus on ongoing development and growth. In addition to a focus on sustainability as "good business," nearly every speaker specifically talked about how building a brand that links places with sustainability is important for attracting more investors. For instance, conference organizers note that, success breeds success in that sustainable initiatives generate more growth, and as such it is crucial for places to be attractive to industry. Sophie's presentation drives this point home when she explains that including sustainability in their brand, "has of course been a huge advantage for us … and something we can use when communicating with businesses internationally." Speakers such as Fredrick shared this growth-mentality: "social change will always lead to new business opportunities" and "with a clear vision and persistence any municipality has the potential to turn climate challenges to opportunities." As "proof" of success, Charlotta, head of economic development for a mid-sized municipality, explained that attracting green energy in their battery manufacturing plant generated big money for

the city and created a housing boom. Mats (Head of Clean Industry) was more pointed about the need for places to care about the economic success of sustainable industries: "This needs to be good business for the companies; therefore, it also contributes to society." He furthered, "We say that saving the world in a sustainable manner is a good business."

Of importance, our analysis identifies that many speakers promote the idea that a good sustainability brand leans on *exclusivity* around climate solutions, or in other words, places should communicate that they have something that other places do not offer. Kristof (Invest in Country) gave advice to conference attendees that they need to "find some kind of niche where they can sort-of catch onto this green area, be that carbon capture, or be that data centers, or what have you. So, trying to figure out a way to distinguish themselves in green promotion and green transition." In this case, sustainable place branding means shining a spotlight on one's own sustainable good works in ways that *exclude* other places from claiming the same. This led to a phenomenon where many speakers vied for being the best or only place winning the sustainability race. For instance, Fredrick shared that his municipality is "the only city in Nordic countries to look into how we can create a clean train line…." Bridgette, the Director of Investment Promotion for a large city expressed pride that the city's mission and brand is to "Become the most sustainable city in the world." Gunnar, a property development leader, noted that his region is "*the* Green Capital" of the Nordics and that he attracted "*the* greenest steel producers in Europe." Hans started his presentation by sharing that his small municipality is *"the"* Food Tech Arena in his country.

While the speakers' advice and methods appear to be in line with corporate branding-logics that strive for simplicity, exclusivity, uniqueness, and competitive advantages (Ren and Blichfeldt 2011), it appears antithetical to solving a global climate crisis where cooperative solutions are better. Arguably, the place branding frame encourages the professionals to seek exclusivity, which is part of the overall phenomenon of constructing the climate crisis as a business and branding opportunity.

Boosting attractiveness to green business

In the following, we turn to *how* the climate crisis was presented as a business opportunity. We begin by showing how speakers stressed the importance of being attractive to green industry, and some of the tensions that "attraction" brings.

When speakers talked about attracting industry, they mentioned that the work includes bringing new solutions to historically unsustainable industries (like metals/ manufacturing; fisheries; fuel production). Other stories included attracting entirely new industries or practices to the region, then setting up a brand where the place is

known for a single something (e.g., data centers, batteries, digitalization). Regardless of context, *being attractive to green industry* was a key theme. Of importance, speakers often noted that attracting industry meant mitigating governmental or civic barriers or challenges. Hans explained that red-tape and regulations placed on businesses hamper start-ups, and Fredrick shared that slow-moving decisions in the public sector need to change when one is trying to attract green business. Other speakers noted that the best situation is when government shared an entrepreneurial spirit for attracting growth. For instance, Sophie explained that her country, "has always had bright visionaries and innovative politicians who backed up development of the e-state, so you will definitely need that."

Specific work to attract industry entails using corporate brand attributes to let industry know what a place can provide, including letting industry leaders know how easy it is to start a company online and to pay taxes as a foreign investment (Sophie). In line with advice from investment-focused corporate branding literature, Gunnar explained that his goal is to be competitive and attractive to industry so he "starts with the analysis of what industrial customers need… it is issues like power, space, pricing, etc." Other speakers noted that successfully attracting industry means being *more* accommodating than other places. For example, Charlotta noted the competitive nature of attracting industry and explained that a city has to be faster than everyone else, "if the investor set a deadline of receiving a piece of information on say Friday, we would try to deliver it on a Wednesday." Although most speakers talked about the importance of being attractive, one speaker shared a more complicated view. Lars, who works between municipalities and foreign investors, noted that "the demands from new industries coming now and what the municipalities actually can offer, it's not always a good fit." He explained this as a heavy burden for many places and furthered that, "the clients want bigger areas, more power, excellent infrastructure, proactive host incentives, and so on and so forth."

Taken together, this theme speaks to scholars' observation that place branding can invert public sector power relationships such that civic values are trumped by market values (Sullivan et al. 2023). In our case, this remains the strategy when place branding for sustainability is presented.

Suppressing doubt and conflicting views

This final theme also shows how the climate crisis is presented as a business opportunity. We showcase how this is done by expressing and then suppressing a tension between attracting sustainable investments and saying yes to economic growth.

All speakers noted that progress was not perfect, and that there are no silver bullets for the current and future climate crises. Yet, speakers identified that part of their current struggle was saying no to economic growth generated by business that is not considered to be "green." Some were forthright about this struggle. For instance, Mats explained that often they do not have control over existing industry. They can give people information, but at the end of the day, it is up to industry leaders to decide how they can best succeed. Other speakers shared that although they want to and they *must* prioritize sustainability to reach goals such as reducing CO2 emissions, or to reach branding goals such as Bridgette's to be known as "The most Sustainable Capital in the World," it is hard to turn down other, non-sustainable opportunities. Kristof shared his personal view, and perhaps concern, that seeking investments to contribute to "the green transition" could lead investment managers to have "tunnel vision." He furthered:

> "We talk a lot about green investments. That is an important part of our KPI, but we have to ask ourselves, do we neglect target sectors that are not perhaps as green as they could have been but still would benefit and create jobs?"

He then shared, "to say it differently, do we focus too much on the green investments? And my answer would of course be no, but it is something that we should be aware of."

This turn in Kristof's talk – from asking in passing whether they might be focusing too much on green investments to quickly answering that of course they're not – is illustrative of the tendency to mention tensions between "green" and "dirty" growth, but quickly set them aside. Another example is Lars talking about farmed seafood production. In line with optimistic branding talk, he first mentioned the great potential for growth in seafood production: "There are papers saying that it could grow by five times." He then explained, "but it is very much hampered by sustainability issues." Rather than addressing the sustainability issues, he once again established a positive frame that it is "probably the most sustainable protein production in the world."

Thus, the second way in which the climate crisis is constructed as a business opportunity is by suppressing conflicting themes. The branders touch upon issues of neglecting non-green growth, issues that suggest that places may lose industries that generate income and jobs, but gloss over these issues to focus on themes that better rhyme with the idea of place branding for ecological sustainability.

Discussion

Our empirical section provides insight into the place branders' work to address sustainability issues through branding. In the process, our key finding is that the climate crisis was reframed as an exclusive business and branding opportunity, which was done by 1) presenting sustainable place branding as a way to make a place attractive to businesses that can generate green growth, and 2) suppressing aspects that challenge this view. We showed how participants both boosted their attractiveness to industry and marginalized sustainability challenges by quickly sweeping them aside. As such, speakers set up a situation where attracting sustainable industry is an imperative for managing climate crises, the method for doing so mimics corporate branding practices that prioritize economic growth, and tensions such as the growth-related aspects of attracting "dirty" business were suppressed. The latter is perhaps most clearly expressed when Kristof answers his own question about whether they are focusing too much on green investments with "my answer would of course be no."

This observation of ours – that climate problems are framed in terms of business and branding opportunities with a focus on attracting green businesses that can produce green growth – may seem like normal, common-sense business as usual to many scholars. As a case in point, in our review of literature we identified that a great deal of place branding scholarship for sustainability advocates for place branding to develop business-friendly places in general (e.g., Jacobsen 2009; Middleton 2011), and green business-friendly places in particular (e.g., (Taecharungroj et al. 2019). We agree that the "place-branding-for-green-growth" view is normalized. However, to avoid parochialism and further the understanding of normalized practice, such as sustainable place branding practice, it is important to critically analyze that which is presented as normal (Alvesson and Deetz 2000). As described, to accomplish such an analysis we use the strategy of "defamiliarization," which functions as a way to disrupt the normal and common sensical by intentionally viewing the normal as strange (Marcus and Fischer 1986).

Viewing something as strange is a first step of defamiliarization. A second step involves making use of knowledge from a different context to make sense of one's own (Rennstam and Ashcraft 2014). This can be done by using theory for the purpose of "problematizing the self-evident and pointing out that future realities need not be a reproduction of what currently exists" (Alvesson and Deetz 2000, p. 171). In our case, we thus need knowledge from outside the context of "place-branding-for-green growth." Here, degrowth theory offers a useful perspective (e.g., Kallis et al. 2018). Although there are exceptions (Krähmer 2021), this perspective on sustainability is largely absent

from the scholarship on place branding, but it can assist us if we wish to defamiliarize ourselves with the way that sustainable place branding is constructed at the conference. Indeed, degrowth theory suggests that it is *quite strange* to try to solve the climate crisis by relying on the ideas and actors that caused it: economic growth and business.

As noted in the method section, when analyzing interactive constructions of a phenomenon, such as sustainable place branding, it is important to pay attention not only to how constructions are made by what is being said, but also what is *not* being said (Tracy 2010). Degrowth is thus part of the construction of sustainable place branding through its absence from the conference discourse, which suggests that the green growth view is implicitly assumed to be the normal, common-sense view. In this way, the problems raised by the degrowth view (that growth, including "green" growth, tends to increase use of natural resources and CO2 emissions) are avoided.

Thus, a "discursive closure" – suppression of the conflictual nature of a phenomenon – is generated by avoiding two different topics (Deetz 1992): "dirty" growth and degrowth. Sustainable place branding is legitimized as a technique that focuses on making cities attractive to business in order to generate "green growth" by suppressing *both* that "dirty" but job-generating business is economically desirable *and* that economic growth creates rather than mitigates climate problems. Both of these diametrically opposed aspects – one not caring much for ecological sustainability, the other calling for radical sustainability – would challenge the idea of sustainable place-branding-for-green-growth, but by suppressing them it normalizes treating the climate crisis as a business opportunity. The term 'place branding for green growth' has been changed as 'place-branding-for-green-growth' in the article for consistency. Kindly check and amend if necessary. This is fine.

Theoretical and practical implications

Our findings speak to previous scholarship on sustainability place branding in several ways. Overall, following calls to explore the meanings and narratives behind sustainable developments (Gonzalez and Gale 2022; Kaika and Swyngedouw 2011; Zavattaro 2014), we show how place branders communicatively construct the meaning of place branding for sustainability. The insight that the climate crisis is often framed as an exclusive business opportunity, and then showing how this is accomplished via boosting attractiveness and suppressing doubts and conflicting views, is useful for place branding scholars and practitioners interested in understanding how green growth gains a foothold and remains the dominant version. It also sheds light on how corporate branding practices

drive business-friendly attractiveness messages such as exclusivity, uniqueness, and easing the road for industry.

Speaking specifically to investment-focused sustainability branding literature, we show that the place branders' talk at the conference supports and reflects the optimism conveyed by scholarship that promotes green growth, forwarding that place branding may assist in combatting the climate crisis while still generating economic growth by attracting green investments (Taecharungroj et al. 2019, Gustavsson and Elander 2012; Jacobson 2009; Middleton 2011). However, the findings also indicate that the place branders simultaneously struggled to maintain this optimistic view when talking about the challenges of attracting industry in sustainable ways and the pressures to maintain "dirty" growth. Rather than contending with challenges that threatened green growth ideals, they were swept aside. This suggests that place branding literature should pay more attention to the conflicts experienced by place branders when branding for sustainability.

When it comes to the more critically inclined place branding scholarship, our study supports many of their concerns. For instance, we saw that sustainability was foregrounded with association to its economic advantages (e.g., Willemsen and Van der Veen 2014; Zavattaro 2014) and promoting green growth may be more window-dressing than sustainable solutions (cf. Krämer 2021; Reynolds et al. 2023; Wang 2019). Our contribution to this literature is that we show *how* place branding for sustainability is constructed and thus made legitimate by the place branders themselves. The insight that this is done by suppressing conflicting views is useful for those who are interested in understanding how the economic version of sustainable place branding, named place-branding-for-green-growth in our analysis, gains a foothold and remains the normalized version.

In light of the above, our study has a number of implications for the understanding and practice of place branding for sustainability. One implication of framing ecological crises as an exclusive business and brand-building opportunity is that it prompts cities and places to compete around ecological solutions rather than collaborate. When branding advice is to treat sustainability as a "niche" or to boast about being "the best or only" ecologically sustainable development in a region, it becomes less likely that cities collaborate to develop sustainable places. There is thus a paradox in *branding* for sustainability in the sense that branding encourages uniqueness, while the climate crisis is global and can only be addressed effectively if many places are acting in the same way. It is therefore questionable whether competition and the quest for simplicity and uniqueness, which are a key element in corporate branding (Hankinson 2007; Hatch and Schultz 2003; Ren and Blichfeldt 2011), are appropriate tools for addressing the climate crisis.

A related implication is that seeking green growth by branding a place as attractive to business creates power relationships where the public sector caters to industry (Sullivan et al. 2023). This may not be the most effective way of being sustainable, especially not from a degrowth perspective, and in the worst case it may skew the focus away from solving ecological crises in favor of attracting businesses, regardless of their commitments to sustainability. Rather than setting high ecological benchmarks that industry leaders need to prove they meet, this inversion of power may lead to governance and branding practices that compromise on ecological integrity. This has implications for degrowth scholars (e.g., Chertkovskaya et al. 2019; Jackson 2021; Koch 2022) by shedding light on how city communicators manage the tension between ecology and economy *without* bringing in the degrowth perspective. In other words, we offer clues to how the growth paradigm maintains its hegemony. For degrowth scholars, this provides an inroad to understanding and debating concerns regarding the role of cities and city communication as it relates to sustainability.

Last, our study can provide input for how to train place branding professionals regarding sustainability, including being clear about tensions and challenges rather than glossing over them. Management training is often about communicating rather homogenous best practices and established techniques, which can lead to foregrounding taken-for-granted or normalized views, such as place-branding-for-green-growth. But scholars note that believing in the efficacies of green growth are "misguided" (Banerjee et al. 2020; Hickel and Kallis 2020; Jackson 2021), and training of place branders could thus be more progressive. Rather than accepting the normalized version that place branding for sustainability should follow the green growth path, training and conferences could take inspiration from our defamiliarization approach, which suggests that place branders could think and act differently, and even embrace the degrowth perspective. For instance, sustainable place branding could focus on highlighting and supporting practices and organizations – including businesses, such as localized craft-oriented ones (Rennstam & Paulsson 2024) – that do *not* strive for growth, but strive for sufficient rather than maximum profit and output, and that seek small-scale and localized rather than globalized production and distribution (Nesterova 2020). We hope that our paper can be a source of inspiration when including such "defamiliarizing" elements in the training and knowledge development of place branding professionals. To contend with crises, place branding for sustainability might need to develop an entirely new branding roadmap and logic, one more collaborative rather than competitive, and more reflexive around tensions between sustainability and economic growth.

Limitations of study and avenues of future research

This study has limitations and avenues for future research. One limitation is that due to the regional focus of the conference on the Nordics and Europe, we are not able to identify what different themes or branding norms and practices might emerge in other places. However, this limitation offers an opportunity for future research on how various regions communicate sustainability branding practices. A second limitation is that our data are limited in this case to one conference and future studies could seek to analyze a broader set of data related to seeking sustainable investments. Finally, the data in this project, due to the nature of the speakers' foci, were largely on ecological sustainability and future studies could seek to explore how seeking socially sustainable industry develops, including which challenges and opportunities emerge.

Declarations

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