

Co-creating city brand identity: the case of Ghent

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Abstract

Purpose – This study examines the co-creation process in place branding, focusing on Ghent. It evaluates how the DART framework – dialogue, access, risk-benefits and transparency – facilitates stakeholder engagement in developing a city's brand identity, aiming to understand stakeholders' perceptions and the effectiveness of co-creation.

Design/methodology/approach – A case study approach was used, involving interviews and policy document analysis. Thirteen interviews with policymakers, consultants and stakeholders were conducted, analysed through the DART framework to assess how communication processes shaped co-creation and their impact on brand identity formation.

Findings – The study reveals mixed results with stakeholders appreciating broad representation and dialogue but raising concerns about limited diversity, conservative risk-taking and minimal influence.

Research limitations/implications – The study emphasises the need for diverse stakeholder representation and clear roles to improve co-creation. However, its focus on a single case study limits generalisability. Future research could explore comparative studies across different contexts to validate findings and identify best practices.

Originality/value – This research enhances the empirical understanding of co-creation in place branding by applying the DART framework in a real-world context. It underscores the potential of service-dominant logic (SDL) in enhancing stakeholder engagement and offers insights into improving co-creation processes in place branding.

Keywords Co-creation, City brand identity, City branding, City branding policy, Stakeholder engagement, Rules of engagement, Brand ecosystem, Service-dominant logic

Paper type Research article

Introduction

Traditionally, place branding has relied on hierarchical strategic communication methods to craft positive place images and strengthen a city's competitive position (Braun *et al.*, 2013; Ripoll González and Lester, 2018). However, places are complex systems that cannot be effectively managed through unidirectional approaches (Zenker and Braun, 2017). Place brand identity refers to the unique attributes and values that characterise a city. These identities are dynamic, emerging from a continuous production and reproduction of the interactions

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between internal and external stakeholders, and only partly regulated by a single entity, such as the municipality (Iglesias *et al.*, 2013; Kavaratzis and Hatch, 2013).

Place branding is inherently a collaborative social process involving multiple stakeholders, rather than being solely the responsibility of a marketing team (Ripoll González and Lester, 2018, p. 60). Reviewing communication patterns is crucial for developing more inclusive participatory place branding models, as effective dialogue and the empowerment of diverse stakeholders foster mutual trust, legitimacy, and authenticity in the place brand formation process (Ripoll González and Lester, 2018).

As a pivotal actor, the municipality plays a central role in facilitating a multi-phase co-creation process by engaging a diverse group of stakeholders. However, practical experiences in place branding projects remain diverse. While Braun *et al.* (2017) found positive outcomes in two place brand strategies, Vanhoose *et al.* (2021) concluded that stakeholders often only reach a point of reframing the town's lacking qualities (p. 7), rather than achieving a desired identity. Stoica *et al.* (2022) encountered non-genuine outcomes, failing to represent the voice of the population.

Golestaneh *et al.* (2022) underscore the critical role of stakeholders in shaping place branding outcomes, noting that their active participation enhances the authenticity and effectiveness of the process. These insights align with Rodrigues and Schmidt's (2021) call for researchers to explore how place brand strategies are co-created within dynamic city ecosystems (p. 34). Furthermore, Camatti and Wallington (2023) argue that achieving inclusivity and balancing local and international dimensions are essential for creating a place brand that resonates with diverse stakeholders while appealing to a global audience. Similarly, Szondi (2010) highlights the importance of fostering a dynamic and inclusive brand identity that evolves through continuous stakeholder engagement and co-creation of meaning.

This poses the question of how an ideal brand identity is co-created within the ecosystem.

Reynolds *et al.* (2023) highlight the prevalent top-down, centrally controlled nature of place branding, emphasising the need for a more inclusive approach that involves all stakeholders. Vuignier (2017) underscores the importance of participatory processes that engage diverse stakeholders, including residents and citizens, in developing place branding strategies. This participatory approach is crucial for creating a brand that genuinely reflects the perspectives and needs of various stakeholder groups. Similarly, Swain *et al.* (2024) identify key themes in place branding, such as the role of storytelling and stakeholder collaboration in co-creating destination brands.

Overall, these literature studies underscore the need for more empirical research and theoretical development in the area of stakeholder engagement and co-creation within place branding, suggesting that these areas are under-researched and hold significant potential for advancing the field (Vuignier, 2017; Swain *et al.*, 2024).

Vuignier (2017) also highlights a lack of conceptual clarity and a fragmented theoretical foundation in the field, which extends to how stakeholder engagement and co-creation are understood and implemented. This inconsistency underscores the need for further research to develop a more coherent and unified understanding of these concepts within place branding.

These gaps highlight the necessity of understanding how place branding strategies can be collaboratively developed within a city's dynamic ecosystem.

This study analyses aspects of this social process from the perspective of value co-creation within the ecosystem of a city seeking to transform its place identity. Frow and Payne (2019) characterise this process as an evolution of value co-creation, as delineated in the service-dominant logic (SDL) framework (Prahalad, 2004; Vargo and Lusch, 2006; Merz *et al.*, 2009). SDL provides a structured approach to co-creation, potentially mitigating negative experiences encountered by participants in place branding co-creation programs.

The study specifically investigates the implementation of key elements from the value co-creation approach, focusing on the impact of adhering to rules of engagement. A prerequisite for successful place branding co-creation lies in engaging relevant stakeholders in open dialogues where they are willing to share insights (Prahalad, 2004, p. 173; Merz *et al.*, 2009;

Hatch and Schultz, 2010, p. 602). Considering relationships as systemic, mutually adapting value co-creating interactions leads to a higher level of commitment to the brand (Frow and Payne, 2019, p. 14).

This study contributes to the understanding of how an ideal brand identity can be co-created within a city's dynamic ecosystem, offering insights into achieving a brand identity that aligns with the aspirations and values of diverse stakeholders.

The city of Ghent offers a compelling case for this study. The municipal organisation of Ghent established a program aimed at co-creating an ideal identity for the city by collaborating with select stakeholders. These key stakeholders play dual roles: actively participating in the co-creation process and possessing the competence to shape and enhance brand experiences within the city across various domains, including local society, economy, hospitality and culture.

Based on interviews and policy document analysis, this case study aims to deepen understanding of the co-creation process in Ghent and contribute to research on the complex, evolving field of place branding by addressing three questions:

- (1) How do stakeholders assess the application of the rules of engagement of co-creation in the program?
- (2) How do stakeholders perceive their interactions and roles within the brand ecosystem during the co-creation process?
- (3) How do stakeholders evaluate the outcomes of the city brand identity program?

Theoretical framework

This study's theoretical framework integrates concepts and theories focusing on the co-creation of place brand identity within an ecosystem model. Recent literature emphasises that place branding should be conceptualised as a dynamic process involving various stakeholders (Reynolds *et al.*, 2023; Rodrigues and Schmidt, 2021; Ripoll González and Lester, 2018). This perspective recognises that place brands are not static entities but are continuously shaped and reshaped through interactions among stakeholders, including residents, businesses and governmental bodies.

The literature reviews by Vuignier (2017) and Swain *et al.* (2024) further underscore the importance of stakeholder engagement and co-creation in the place branding process. They highlight how these interactions contribute to the evolving nature of place brands, emphasising the role of collaborative efforts and participatory processes in shaping the identity and perception of a place.

Such a dynamic approach allows for the incorporation of diverse perspectives and the adaptation of the brand identity to reflect changing societal values and needs. Effective place branding requires ongoing dialogue and collaboration to ensure the brand remains relevant and resonant with its audience.

Co-creation serves as a means to enrich and transform place brand identity, with the goal of achieving an ideal identity that supports the optimum positioning within a given timeframe. This process depends on a deep understanding of identity formation and the engagement dynamics within an ecosystem.

Rodrigues and Schmidt (2021) highlight the fluid and ongoing nature of branding processes, showing that destination marketing organisations (DMOs) facilitate value creation by empowering city stakeholders, often through chaotic yet genuine processes. This perspective underscores the importance of viewing place branding as a dynamic and evolving process, shaped by continuous interactions among stakeholders.

In the context of place branding, identity and image are often discussed as distinct but interrelated concepts. Identity refers to the central, distinctive, and enduring attributes and

values that define the essence of a place, as constructed internally by the organisation or municipality (Szondi, 2010). Image, on the other hand, is the perception of the place held by external stakeholders, shaped by their experiences and interactions with the place (Szondi, 2010). While much of the literature focuses on the alignment of identity and image, this study introduces the concept of ideal identity as a key element in the co-creation process.

Ideal identity is defined as the aspirational version of identity that reflects the shared vision of stakeholders for what the place seeks to become. Unlike ideal image, which focuses on the desired external perception of the place, ideal identity emphasises internal transformation and the alignment of stakeholders' aspirations. This distinction is particularly relevant in the context of co-creation, where stakeholders play an active role in shaping the place's future identity. As Szondi (2010) and Barbu (2016) emphasise, identity is dynamic and evolves through interactions with stakeholders, making the concept of ideal identity a critical framework for understanding the transformative potential of place branding.

Value co-creation, derived from SDL, emphasises stakeholder collaboration within a dynamic ecosystem of interdependent actors at macro- and meso-levels (Frow and Payne, 2019; Vargo and Lusch, 2016). Frow *et al.* (2014) argue that the term ecosystem more accurately describes the dynamic and adaptive nature of relationships between actors, emphasising systemic interdependence and collaborative evolution.

Municipal organisations, functioning at the macro level, act as facilitators and structurers in mutual value creation, influencing changes in place brand identity.

The four rules of engagement in co-creation – dialogue, access, risk-benefits and transparency (DART) (Pralhalad, 2004; Hatch and Schultz, 2010) – are crucial for successful co-creation. Successful co-creation depends on the infrastructure facilitating interaction between the brand regulator and stakeholders.

Dialogue fosters meaningful exchanges between the municipality, as the facilitator and structurer, and stakeholders, enabling mutual understanding and collaboration. It encourages open communication, allowing stakeholders to voice their perspectives and contribute effectively to the co-creation process.

In place branding, access hinges on the willingness to make engagement accessible to stakeholders, ensuring their active participation.

Risk involves exposing culture and management practices, which requires a degree of vulnerability from the municipality and other stakeholders. Transparency, meanwhile, gives stakeholders a sense of control over the co-creation process by ensuring openness and accountability.

The rules of engagement are shaped by two key factors: company/stakeholder engagement (dialogue and access) and organisational self-disclosure (transparency and risk). Table 1

Table 1. Framework for co-creation

		Organisational self-disclosure (transparency and risk)	
		Low	High
Company stakeholder engagement (dialogue and access)	low	Arm's-length approach to engaging certain stakeholders, while ignoring others. Transparency restricted	Organisation takes risks by exposing its practices, but does not manage the process through dialogue and access and thus risks looking foolish or being taken over by others
	high	Efforts to live the brand result in greater dialogue and access with stakeholders and transparency of practices, risks hypocrite if organisation does not live up to brand promise	Total involvement and full stakeholder model; engaging multiple stakeholders in core work; giving reputation risk

Source(s): Adapted from Hatch and Schultz (2010), p. 602

illustrates how these aspects influence the quality of stakeholder engagement and interactions, ultimately shaping the outcomes of the co-creation process and its impact on place branding.

The importance of dialogue and access in co-creation is further illustrated by [Hatch and Schultz's \(2010\)](#) study of the Lego brand community, which highlights how co-creation naturally occurs through engagement involving access and dialogue. This requires an open attitude, inviting stakeholders to participate and take risks. The co-creation community is dynamic, based on networks of constantly changing stakeholder configurations. However, as [Vanhoose et al. \(2021\)](#) caution, such processes can be chaotic and dominated by certain parties, potentially leading to inauthentic results.

To understand these dynamics, this study adopts an ecosystem perspective, which highlights the interdependence and collaboration among various actors. This perspective extends service beyond specific encounters to a broad network of actors at nested ecosystem levels. Municipal organisations, functioning at the macro level, act as facilitators in mutual value creation, influencing changes in place brand identity. [Frow and Payne \(2019, p. 9\)](#) identify four nested levels in the ecosystem: the micro-, meso-, macro- and mega-level. In our research, the interaction on the meso- and macro-level are of interest. This concerns the interaction between local government, not-for-profits, corporates on the macro-level and local (pressure) groups, small and medium enterprises, education and medical institutions on the meso-level. This study uses this model to understand stakeholders' evaluations of interactions within the ecosystem.

This is an exploration of the complexity of interactions within the ecosystem on different aspects: how the stakeholders see their place and role in the ecosystem, how they see their connections within it, how they see their involvement and how they see their influence ([Frow and Payne, 2019](#), pp. 13-15). Relationships are considered as “systemic, mutually adapting value cocreating interactions” ([Frow and Payne, 2019](#), p. 14).

A third perspective is on the interactions and ongoing dialogue among stakeholders, which contribute to brand formation as an organic process. This dynamic interplay between internal and external elements continuously shapes and reshapes place brand identity. Hatch and Schultz's model of organisational identity dynamics ([Hatch and Schultz, 1997, 2010](#)) emphasises the role of facilitators in the identity process, highlighting the evolution of brand identity through four sub-processes: expressing, impressing, mirroring and reflecting.

Expressing is the process by which identity conveys cultural understandings, illustrating how culture is revealed through identity claims and highlighting the internal cultural elements of a place. Impressing refers to how the expressed identity affects others, impacting external stakeholders and shaping their perceptions or images. Mirroring involves the identity reflecting the images of others, showing how external perceptions and images shape and inform the internal aspects of identity. Reflecting integrates identity into cultural understandings, incorporating enriched identity back into the culture, which modifies cultural understandings and influences future expressions of identity.

To address our first question, we evaluate stakeholders' assessments of co-creation processes' adherence to the rules of engagement, identifying which quadrant of the framework best typifies the process.

For the second, we employ the ecosystem model, emphasising interdependence and mutual collaboration among actors ([Frow et al., 2014](#)).

To address the third question, we utilise [Kavaratzis and Hatch's \(2021\)](#) model, which presents place brands as constantly evolving through stakeholder interactions. This model allows us to study the ongoing co-creation and alteration of place brand meaning, viewing brand formation as an organic process.

By answering these questions, we aim to contribute to the literature and fill a research gap. While existing studies on co-creation in place branding describe the process and identity formation, little attention has been given to stakeholders' evaluations of identity formation through the rules of engagement in an ecosystem.

Methodology*Stakeholder engagement*

This study employs an exploratory case study approach to investigate the co-creation process and its effectiveness as evaluated by participants in the city of Ghent. The focal point is the city of Ghent, which sought to intervene in its city brand anchored in its identity. The research centres on the co-creation of an ideal city brand identity between Stad Gent (the local government organisation of Ghent) and a selected group of stakeholders. These key stakeholders were engaged as partners in an initiative to transform the current brand identity.

Ghent serves as an ideal case due to its proactive municipal organisation, which facilitated a co-creation process by bringing together a selective group of stakeholders. In 2019 Stad Gent started a city brand identity project to reposition the city and “give the ambitions of the city a new direction, based on a common story.” (Stad Gent, 2019) Central to the project was a co-creation phase in which the city brand identity was questioned and reformed. This phase was done with two stakeholder groups, the so-called Friday and Saturday Group, consisting of internal and external stakeholders – some 45 in total – selected by Stad Gent. These stakeholders acted as standard bearers, making them well-suited to initiate a movement in the city and contribute to the formation of an ideal identity. The two groups were moderated by two external consultants.

This project was finalised with a brand document, expressing the ideal identity (Stad Gent, 2019), upon which the board of mayor and alderpersons decided and which forms the basis for the city branding policy.

Our case study evaluates the connection between the results of this process and the city’s identity from the stakeholders’ perspective, focusing on their assessment of the outcome and their engagement in the co-creation process.

The analysis is a case study based on data collected using interviews and analysis of secondary material such as policy documents. The case study aims to develop an in-depth description and analysis.

Data collection and analysis

A single case study requires detailed, in-depth data collection, involving multiple sources of information (Cresswell, 2005, p. 97). Between March 2022 and May 2022, the first author conducted 13 interviews with two policymakers from Stad Gent, two external consultants and nine external stakeholders. These interviews were designed to explore participants’ perspectives on the co-creation process, the application of the DART framework and their roles and influence within the brand ecosystem.

The two policymakers are from Stad Gent’s communications department, responsible for the city branding policy. These interviews were conducted first to gain insights into the origins and background of the city branding process and to understand the municipality’s perspective on the co-creation initiative. The policymakers provided valuable context on the goals of the co-creation process, the selection of stakeholders, and the intended outcomes of the city branding program.

The municipality selected 45 stakeholders to participate in two groups, representing diverse sectors such as arts, education, business, and urban planning, to contribute to discussions on the city’s brand identity. From this group of 45 stakeholders, the first author invited all members to participate in interviews. The nine external stakeholders who ultimately participated in the study were those who responded positively to the interview request and were available during the data collection period. These stakeholders represented a range of sectors, including restaurant and nightlife professionals (2), a sports and leisure professional, arts and culture professionals (2), a manager in higher education, a university professor, a city planning professional, a business professional and board members of social and pressure groups (2). Some stakeholders held dual roles, further enriching the diversity of perspectives.

Additionally, two external consultants who facilitated the co-creation process were interviewed to gather their evaluations of the process and its outcomes. These consultants were selected by Stad Gent to moderate the stakeholder discussions and played a key role in guiding the co-creation process.

The interviews were semi-structured, allowing for flexibility while ensuring that key topics were addressed. These topics included the respondents' reception of the expressed city brand identity, their views on the application of the DART framework and their perceived roles and influence within the brand ecosystem. All interviews were audio- or video-recorded with the participant's permission, and most lasted around 45 min. The results are presented here anonymously.

Evaluation perspectives

The interviews were analysed from three perspectives. The first perspective was the evaluation by the external stakeholders of the four rules of engagement of co-creation (dialogue, access, transparency and risk) by the city. The second perspective was the evaluation of the external stakeholders of the functioning of the interconnected elements of the brand ecosystem. The third perspective was the evaluation by all interviewees of Ghent's expression of its city brand identity.

Coding (Table 2) was done in three steps, following the data structure as defined by Gioia *et al.* (2013). First-order concepts were scored in the interviews, using an open coding method. These concepts were stepped up to second-order themes, which show connections to the processes of brand identity formation, the four rules of engagement of co-creation and the evaluation of the influence in the brand ecosystem.

In addition to the interview material, a selection of policy documents was analysed, containing of:

- (1) Policy decisions of the board of mayor and alderpersons: "Traject Merkbeleid – voorstel van merkessentie voor Gent", 21 November 2019. (Stad Ghent, 2019)
- (2) "Gents karakter" city branding brochure 2021. (Stad Gent, 2021)

By analysing these perspectives, the study aims to contribute to the formulation of an effective approach to co-creation in place branding.

Table 2. Coding table

Subject	Code	Meaning
Co-creation themes	SD-T	Organisational self-disclosure: mentions of transparency
	SD-R	Organisational self-disclosure: mentions of risk
	Eng-D	Stakeholder engagement: mentions of dialogue
	Eng-A	Stakeholder engagement: mentions of access
Ecosystem themes	EcoInfl	Mentions of influence in ecosystem
	EcoRole	Mentions of role in ecosystem
	EcoPlace	Mentions of place in ecosystem of each interviewee
	EcoConn	Interconnectedness: how do they see their connection in ecosystem?
	EcoInv	Mentions of involvement with ecosystem of Ghent
Identity themes	EI	Expressing identity
	CU	Cultural understandings
	IM	Identity mirrors the image of others
	RI	Reflecting embeds identity in culture

Source(s): Authors' own work

Research findings

The findings are presented in three sections: the co-creation through the four rules of engagement, the roles and influences within the brand ecosystem and the dynamics of city brand identity.

RQ1. Stakeholders' assessment of the application of the rules of engagement of co-creation in the program

Co-creation process in four rules of engagement

According to [Prahalad \(2004, p. 173\)](#) and [Hatch and Schultz \(2010, p. 602\)](#), co-creation takes place through four rules of engagement ([Table 1](#)): access and dialogue as processes of company/stakeholder engagement and transparency and risk as processes of organisational self-disclosure. To understand the evaluation of these processes by the interviewees, the mentions of concepts connected to these rules of engagement were analysed, following the data structure of [Gioia et al. \(2013\)](#).

Access (sharing power over the brand). Access refers to the extent to which stakeholders were engaged and empowered to participate in the co-creation process. For the selection of stakeholders, the municipality acted as both a selector and gatekeeper, determining the composition of the stakeholder groups. Several interviewees (stakeholders, consultants) confirmed that the stakeholder groups consisted of a broad representation of Ghent's social, cultural, and business life. Stakeholders valued the diversity of perspectives, with one noting, "Usually, people look at the city from their own perspective; the strength of this process was to work in a heterogeneous group".

Referring to Ghent's brand essence, a stakeholder mentioned, the co-creation was seen as a safe haven of its own: stakeholders valued the process as open and accessible.

On the other hand, five stakeholders mentioned that access to the process was limited. This resulted in a narrower diversity in the groups than the diversity as it can be seen citywide, especially in cultural roots. Two interviewees mentioned that individual stakeholders could not be seen as representatives of entire groups, suggesting that some perspectives may have been underrepresented in the discussions.

Dialogue (interactive processes). Dialogue refers to a second process of stakeholder engagement, where interactive discussions were used as a tool for co-creation. It was aimed at grasping the ideal identity of the city by exchanging views on it and working towards a definition. Exchange of views on identity (five mentions) in cooperation (three mentions) led to a process forming unison (four mentions). On the other hand, limited exchange in the dialogue was noted (two mentions), with disappointment in the process also expressed (four mentions).

The aim of the dialogue, which was coached by the consultants, was "to grab identity, but we have to be able to use it. We have formulated the ideal identity in dialogue and aimed for a result that will work for Ghent and can be implemented." Several participants point to their contribution in the definition of the identity, as put down in the brand essence and core values: they stressed for example that "engaging" is an essential value to stress the social character of Ghent.

Several interviewees mentioned the arm's-length approach, leading to a self-fulfilling prophecy: the result of a dialogue that only gave room to certain streams of opinions, leading to a rather provincial brand identity and not giving room to the international profile the city beholds as well. They stressed that Ghent is not only a cosy, not too large, lively city in the middle of Flanders, but also an international university, business and port city with a large national and international student population.

One of the consultants mentions: “Because of the firm discussions that took place in the stakeholder group meetings, we knew that we had come to the point: this evokes emotion. For us, this also proves that this is not the story of the municipality only but was broadly felt within the stakeholder group. The consultants also emphasized that disagreement is a natural and healthy part of the city branding process as it reflects the dynamic and evolving nature of co-creation. They argued that cities should not aim for static identities but instead embrace the fluidity of identity formation over time”.

Risk-benefits. Risk in co-creation is described as the willingness to expose the process with the risk of losing control, distinctiveness, or authenticity (Hatch and Schultz, 2010, p. 602). According to several stakeholders (four mentions), the process tended to take a low risk. They mentioned that on several occasions during the process, a lack of willingness of the city board to really question the city’s identity led to a focus that was too local. By this, the broader focus of internationally oriented organisations was neglected.

This might have led to an arm’s-length approach that valued locally oriented stakeholders while ignoring input from other stakeholders. Taking low risk thus influenced the outcome of the co-creation process. By this, the full stakeholder model (Table 1) was not reached in the entire process.

Transparency. Transparency in co-creation refers to the openness of the process and the extent to which stakeholders feel a sense of control and trust in how decisions are made and communicated. It is a critical dimension of co-creation, as it fosters mutual understanding and ensures that stakeholders perceive the process as fair and inclusive.

According to the consultants, transparency was reached by aiming at an open process in which intensive conversations that lasted three to four hours were possible. The municipality had a gatekeeper role but aimed for an open process. Several interviewees praised the transparency of the process, noting that there was ample opportunity for discussion and consideration of alternative options, even with politicians present. However, some criticised the transparency and felt it was superficial, with one interviewee mentioning that the results were merely “read out.”

Stakeholder engagement vs. co-creation. Overall, it can be stated that the rules of engagement of co-creation were followed, though not fully utilised. Access to the process was evaluated as good and open by interviewees, though not resulting in a diversity of participating stakeholders as could be expected. Several stakeholders valued the level of risk that was taken as low. The rules of dialogue and transparency were followed and valued as suitable by the interviewees from the stakeholder group. Especially, this brings the overall process beyond mere stakeholder engagement.

RQ2. Perceptions of stakeholders’ interactions within the ecosystem

Roles and influences in the brand ecosystem. The process in Ghent encompassed a diverse representation of the city brand ecosystem, including meso-level representatives from various sectors such as culture, nightlife, education, welfare, local and regional economy, pressure groups, along with macro-level representatives from the municipality. While some interviewees appreciated this broad representation (four mentions), others felt that the focus could have been broader and noted that most representatives from central organisations that have a central position at the macro level in the ecosystem (two interviewees).

Two interviewees highlighted their modest role in the ecosystem, yet emphasised the significant collective achievements made through synergy within the city. They perceived the ecosystem as functioning effectively, attributing its success to shared values permeating across

all sectors. Interviewees acknowledged their importance within the city fabric and stressed the necessity of participating in such processes, particularly as meso-level actors lacking formal policymaking roles.

However, criticisms regarding the role of meso-level stakeholders were also voiced. One interviewee expressed concern that the outcomes were too conservative, suggesting a lack of well-defined roles. When a core value like “engaging” is emphasised as a result but not sufficiently enacted, it undermines the credibility of stakeholders’ roles.

Interconnectedness. Several interviewees underscored the importance of fostering connections within the ecosystem, facilitating a conducive environment for continual idea generation and collective responsibility for the city’s well-being. Strong interpersonal ties were deemed crucial for a robust network, with Ghent taking proactive measures to bolster such connections (two mentions).

Expressing dissatisfaction with the perceived superficial interconnectedness, one interviewee proposed adopting a more sectoral approach to understanding the ecosystem. It was argued that different brand expressions may be more effective for both local and international connections, rather than striving for complete interconnectedness.

Involvement. Whether born and bred in Ghent or considering themselves newcomers, most interviewees reported being actively engaged in city life (seven mentions). This reciprocal involvement was further strengthened by the co-creation process, fostering tighter bonds within the ecosystem, although a few interviewees noted concerns about the representativeness of the group (two mentions).

Influence. Opinions regarding the level of influence varied among interviewees. Some mentioned that the broad involvement of stakeholders translated into tangible influence over the process and its outcomes (three mentions). However, doubts were raised about whether the mere presence of stakeholders at the table equated to their opinions being genuinely heard. One interviewee attributed the perceived superficiality of the outcomes to the limited influence of certain participants. Several others echoed sentiments of feeling their influence was minimal (3 mentions), with one interviewee expressing: “we are part of the ecosystem, but the discussion took a direction that we did not support”.

RQ3. Stakeholders’ evaluation of the results of the city brand identity program

Brand identity expression. An important result of the co-creation process in the second half of 2019 in the city brand identity program is the expression of the identity in the form of a document titled “city brand essence” and three core values, which have been decided upon by the board of mayor and alderpersons (Stad Gent, 2019). This expression is the starting point for all city branding activities by the municipality. It is used when local organisations and activities apply for certain subsidies and funds and when the municipality starts new city branding activities of its own.

Putting it briefly, the brand essence is used as a policy document to judge whether activities are “on brand” as Stad Ghent puts it. It states: “*Ghent is a city where we are proud of the fact that everyone can be rebellious. A city where we have the guts to set our own course together. Ghent is a safe haven.*” The core values formulated in this document are: “*engaging, offbeat, groundbreaking*”.

These characteristics reflect how the municipality sees Ghent’s unique identity: its rebellious spirit and independent nature, its role as a safe haven, and its commitment to being engaging, offbeat, and groundbreaking. Together, they capture the essence of Ghent’s identity as articulated by the municipality, guiding city branding activities to align with these defining attributes.

The brand essence document reflects a deliberate effort to articulate a cohesive identity, but its success depends on its ability to balance historical and cultural elements with contemporary and international aspirations. This raises questions about whether the document sufficiently integrates the diverse perspectives of stakeholders or if it risks being a top-down articulation of identity. The alignment between the expressed identity and

stakeholders' perceptions is critical, as a mismatch could undermine the authenticity and acceptance of the brand.

City brand identity in four processes. To evaluate the reception by the stakeholders of this expressed city brand identity, which resulted from the co-creation project in Ghent, the four sub-processes of the identity conversation in place branding, as defined by [Kavaratzis and Hatch \(2013, p. 80\)](#), are discussed.

Cultural understandings are expressed in identity. Several respondents cited the old Ghent saying “no whining, no bending” (“nie neute, nie pleuje”) as a description of the city's identity. This phrase reflects a rebellious and vocal character, which respondents linked to Ghent's historical position since the Burgundy era and its contemporary cultural expressions, such as the Gentse Feesten (Ghent Festivities). This historical and cultural framing of identity suggests that the co-creation process successfully tapped into deeply rooted cultural narratives, as noted by one consultant who emphasised the importance of proposing themes that felt “genuine” to stakeholders.

However, while these historical elements resonate with some stakeholders, others questioned whether they adequately reflect the city's current aspirations. For instance, Ghent's unique combination of port, (biotech) industry and university positions it as a city with significant international potential. Yet, the emphasis on rebellion and social coherence may appeal primarily to local stakeholders and risks overshadowing the city's broader role as a hub for innovation, education and global business. This tension between historical identity and contemporary aspirations highlights the challenge of creating a dynamic identity that evolves with stakeholder needs.

Additionally, stakeholders stressed the importance of seeking connections within the city, emphasising that social coherence is key to Ghent's values. As the cradle of Belgian socialism, Ghent has a strong tradition of looking after one another and enhancing freedom, which continues to shape its identity and values today. This focus on social cohesion reflects a deeply ingrained cultural narrative that stakeholders believe should remain central to the city's brand identity.

Expressing identity. Respondents' opinions on how to express the identity are divided though. According to some, Ghent can no longer be labelled as a safe haven or a rebellious city. It is becoming just one of these “normal” Flemish cities – the raw edges are disappearing – with a chance of over-tourism and too expensive housing for young people. This was mentioned by stakeholders and policymakers alike. Further, it was heard that the rebellious character should no longer be promoted because it is the old story of Ghent as the underdog. This is not the way you should become part of the internationalisation that is taking place.

Expressing identity in contemporary themes was proposed as an alternative, but these are too nonspecific: every city wants to be a climate city or a city to live in.

Staying away from themes that could be recognised internationally did not give room to the heterogeneous identity of the city, as several stakeholders expressed, which was disappointing for them.

The identity expression as laid down in the brand essence and values was chosen, however – as one of the consultants stressed – because a city has to try to connect to more than ordinary city branding. Otherwise, a city will always end up with flat values like innovation, creativity and dynamic city. The number of cities that try to get a profile on that is uncountable.

The failure to fully integrate contemporary themes into the brand identity may indicate that certain stakeholder perspectives were underrepresented or deprioritised. This highlights the importance of ensuring that the co-creation process is inclusive and that all voices are genuinely heard, as emphasised by [Ripoll González and Lester \(2018\)](#).

Identity mirrors the image of others. Policymakers demonstrated sensitivity to how others perceive the city, emphasising that “people have to live the brand; it is not something we can impose.” This reflects an awareness of the importance of aligning the city's identity with external perceptions. However, some stakeholders criticised the focus on external perceptions, arguing that it risks prioritising the image of the city over its authentic identity. For example,

the image of Ghent as the “second city of Flanders” was seen as outdated and misaligned with the city’s aspirations to be recognised as an international hub.

The challenge for Ghent lies in ensuring that its identity is not diluted or distorted in the pursuit of external recognition. This underscores the need for a balanced approach that integrates different stakeholder perspectives.

Reflecting embeds identity in culture. “What makes this activity typically from Ghent?” is a tagline used by Stad Gent to summarise the question the brand essence poses, therefore making it possible to see the brand essence as a conversation starter for other processes in the city.

A city development stakeholder states that the organisation is actively using the values, especially connecting, and changing the standards, in the development of rental housing or in the redevelopment of cultural spaces. The organisation is not obliged to do this but sees the benefits in doing so.

Identity is built through interactions with stakeholders and must adapt to their interests. The success of embedding the brand identity into the city’s culture depends on the municipality’s ability to sustain these interactions and ensure that the brand essence remains dynamic and relevant over time.

Discussion

This discussion addresses the three research questions posed in this study, examining the application of the DART framework in the co-creation process, the roles and influences within the brand ecosystem and the evaluation of the city brand identity outcomes. By critically reflecting on the findings, this section integrates theoretical insights to provide a deeper understanding of the co-creation process in Ghent.

This study contributes to the evolving discourse on place branding by illustrating the potential of SDL to enhance collaborative processes, particularly through the application of the DART framework in fostering stakeholder engagement and co-creation.

The findings reveal that while the framework provides a valuable structure, its effectiveness depends on genuine inclusivity and risk-taking. Addressing gaps in stakeholder diversity and engagement can foster more dynamic and authentic brand identities.

While stakeholders appreciated the open and accessible process, concerns about the diversity of representation were raised. The municipality’s selection of stakeholders, while broad, did not fully reflect the city’s cultural diversity, leading to perceptions of tokenism. This aligns with [Ripoll González and Lester’s \(2018\)](#) emphasis on the importance of empowering diverse stakeholders to foster mutual trust and legitimacy in place branding processes. Addressing these gaps in stakeholder diversity is essential for creating a more comprehensive and authentic brand identity that resonates with the entire community.

Dialogue significantly influenced the co-creation process and the formation of the ideal identity. However, an arm’s-length approach, where certain opinions were prioritised, may have limited inclusivity and contributed to a brand identity that leans towards a more provincial perspective, potentially overlooking the city’s international dimensions.

As [Szondi \(2010\)](#) highlights, fostering a dynamic and evolving brand identity requires ongoing stakeholder engagement and the co-creation of meaning. To enhance the effectiveness of dialogue in future co-creation processes, it is crucial to create an environment where all stakeholders feel empowered to contribute equally. This responsibility lies with the communication department, as exemplified by Stad Gent’s role in facilitating the co-creation process. Their critical position in fostering collaborative engagement is particularly significant when compared to other departments that may focus more on economic growth.

Transparency was another key dimension of the DART framework. While stakeholders appreciated the open discussions and access to information, some felt that transparency was superficial, with limited opportunities to influence outcomes. This perception may have hindered trust and reduced stakeholders’ willingness to fully engage in the process. To

improve transparency in future co-creation efforts, it is essential to establish clear communication and feedback mechanisms and demonstrate how stakeholder contributions are integrated into decision-making. By fostering a truly transparent environment, place branding initiatives can build stronger trust and collaboration among stakeholders, leading to more authentic and effective brand identities.

The findings highlight the importance of diverse representation within the city brand ecosystem, including stakeholders from various sectors and levels of influence. While the process in Ghent encompassed a broad representation of the city's ecosystem, concerns were raised about the adequacy of representation and the clarity of roles, particularly for meso-level stakeholders. For example, some stakeholders felt that their roles were not well-defined, and their contributions were undervalued, which undermined their sense of ownership in the process. This reflects the need for a more equitable representation of stakeholders across various sectors and organisational levels, as well as clearly defined roles and responsibilities.

The ecosystem model emphasises the interdependence and mutual collaboration among actors at different levels (Frow *et al.*, 2014). However, the exchange between the meso- and macro-levels in Ghent appeared limited, with some stakeholders perceiving the outcomes as overly conservative and focused on local perspectives. This suggests that the co-creation process did not fully leverage the potential of the ecosystem model to foster dynamic and adaptive relationships among stakeholders. Future co-creation efforts should prioritise fostering stronger connections across all levels of the ecosystem to ensure a more holistic and inclusive approach to place branding.

The brand essence document, which articulated Ghent's identity as "*engaging, offbeat, groundbreaking*" reflects a deliberate effort to create a cohesive identity. However, stakeholders expressed mixed reactions to the outcomes. While some stakeholders felt the brand essence captured Ghent's unique characteristics, others viewed it as overly provincial, failing to fully reflect the city's broader aspirations. This divergence highlights the challenge of balancing local identity with global ambitions, as emphasised by Camatti and Wallington (2023). The emphasis on Ghent's rebellious spirit and social coherence resonated with some stakeholders, who saw these values as central to the city's identity. However, others argued that these elements risked overshadowing Ghent's potential as a hub for education, business, and innovation on an international scale.

The co-creation process also revealed differing perspectives on how to integrate Ghent's historical and cultural heritage with its future aspirations. While the city's rebellious character and its tradition as the cradle of Belgian socialism were successfully incorporated into the brand essence, some stakeholders felt that these elements alone were insufficient to address the city's evolving role in a globalised context. This tension underscores the importance of creating a brand identity that not only honours the city's past but also reflects its ambitions for the future. As Szondi (2010) and Barbu (2016) emphasise, a dynamic brand identity must evolve through continuous stakeholder engagement and adapt to changing societal and global contexts.

Moreover, the findings suggest that the co-creation process did not fully integrate contemporary themes into the brand identity, which may indicate that certain stakeholder perspectives were underrepresented or deprioritised. For example, while stakeholders proposed themes such as climate action and internationalisation, these were not sufficiently reflected in the final brand essence. This highlights the importance of ensuring that the co-creation process is inclusive and that all voices are genuinely heard, as emphasised by Ripoll González and Lester (2018). Without this inclusivity, the brand risks being perceived as static or disconnected from the city's current and future challenges.

Finally, the brand essence document has been used as a conversation starter for embedding the brand identity into the city's culture. Stakeholders noted that the values of "engaging" and "groundbreaking" have been integrated into municipal projects, such as the development of rental housing and cultural spaces.

Identity is built through interactions with stakeholders and must adapt to their interests. The success of embedding the brand identity into the city's culture depends on the municipality's ability to sustain these interactions and ensure that the brand essence remains dynamic and relevant over time.

Taking the limitations of this explorative single case study into consideration, in conclusion, this study underscores the critical role of stakeholder engagement in the co-creation of city brand identity. The findings reveal that while the DART framework provides a valuable structure for facilitating co-creation, its effectiveness is contingent upon genuine inclusivity and risk-taking. By addressing the identified gaps in stakeholder diversity and engagement, municipalities can foster more dynamic and authentic brand identities that resonate with both local and international audiences.

This research contributes to the evolving discourse on place branding by offering insights into enhancing collaborative processes through co-creation. As cities continue to navigate complex branding landscapes, the insights from this study offer a pathway for more effective and sustainable co-creation practices. Future research should build on these findings to explore innovative strategies and tools that can further empower stakeholders and enrich the co-creation experience.

Recommendations

Future co-creation efforts should consider adopting a more balanced approach to risk, where stakeholders are encouraged to engage in bold, creative thinking while still managing potential challenges. By embracing calculated risks, the co-creation process can lead to a more vibrant and distinctive brand identity that resonates on both local and global levels. Fostering an environment where stakeholders feel safe to take risks is essential for enriching place branding strategies with diverse and innovative ideas.

This study highlights the importance of applying service-dominant logic (SDL) and the DART framework in co-creation processes to enhance stakeholder engagement and brand identity formation. By refining concepts such as ideal identity and clarifying the application of the DART principles, this study aims to contribute to a stronger theoretical foundation for understanding co-creation in place branding.

To build on these findings, future research should explore how SDL co-creation processes can be structured within city brand ecosystems, focusing on tools that enhance dialogue among stakeholders at various ecosystem levels. Understanding the impact of stakeholder diversity on brand identity outcomes remains particularly relevant, as this study has shown that perceptions of inclusivity and representation significantly influence the success of co-creation processes.

Comparative studies across different cities can help identify best practices and common challenges in co-creation processes, providing valuable insights into how cultural, economic and political contexts affect outcomes. Additionally, future research should explore the role of co-creation in phases not covered by this study, such as initiating a movement within the city to transform its identity.

For practitioners, the DART framework offers a guide for managing co-creation. Municipalities should clearly define stakeholder roles and responsibilities. Municipalities should clearly define stakeholder roles and responsibilities and implement feedback mechanisms, such as advisory boards and digital platforms, to foster collaboration and adapt to evolving city dynamics.

Practitioners should also prioritise empowering diverse stakeholders and ensuring that underrepresented voices are included in the co-creation process, as this study has shown that inclusivity is critical for fostering mutual trust, legitimacy and authenticity in place branding.

Finally, municipalities should focus on building long-term relationships within the ecosystem and institutionalising these relationships within municipal governance structures. Engagement in place branding should be seen as an ongoing process rather than a one-time event. Sustained relationships can lead to more meaningful contributions, a stronger sense of

ownership among stakeholders and a brand identity that remains dynamic, relevant and reflective of the aspirations of the community.

Ethical statement

All interviews were audio- or video-recorded. Prior to the commencement of each interview, participants were informed that the session would be recorded and assured that their responses would be used anonymously. Consent for this procedure was obtained from all interviewees.

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