



Sustainable and Green City Brand. An Exploratory Review

Marca Ciudad Sostenible y Verde. Una revisión exploratoria

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ABSTRACT

Although city branding is not new, the importance of sustainability and environmental demands is placing an enormous challenge in city/place branding activities. As such, the aim of this article is to analyze how sustainable/green city/place branding is understood and what its main idiosyncrasies are. For that an exploratory literature review was implemented and 32 articles were analyzed. It is possible to conclude that there are three main strands covering the topic related to green, sustainable, and slow city (cittaslow) or place branding. Moreover, green resources are dealt with seeking to improve the image of the city, the quality of urban life, and the green spaces supporting the city as a tourism destination. Complementarily, sustainability embraces also economic and social aspects, which are not fully covered in the previous strand. Finally, the cittaslow perspective follows a sustainable perspective more closely than the green/environmental one. The three strands are very segmented and the stage of development is still in a growing up stage. The stakeholders play an important role in disclosing the natural resources, the environmental challenges for a city/place to develop a positive sustainable reputation. Finally, there is an important role from the public policy perspective to position the city as a green, sustainable place destination.

Keywords: Green place brand; Green city brand; Sustainable city brand; Sustainable place brand; Green marketing; Sustainable marketing.

RESUMEN

Aunque el estudio de la marca de las ciudades no es algo nuevo, la importancia de la sostenibilidad y las exigencias medioambientales están suponiendo un enorme reto en las actividades de branding de las ciudades/lugares. Por ello, el objetivo de este artículo es analizar cómo son entendidas las marcas sostenibles/verdes de las ciudades/lugares y cuáles son sus principales idiosincrasias. Para ello se ha realizado una revisión bibliográfica exploratoria y se han analizado 32 artículos. Es posible concluir que hay tres vertientes principales que cubren el tema relacionado con la marca de ciudad o lugar verde, sostenible y lenta (cittaslow). Además, los recursos verdes son utilizados buscando mejorar la imagen de la ciudad, la calidad de vida urbana y los espacios verdes que apoyan a la ciudad como destino turístico. De forma complementaria, la sostenibilidad abarca también los aspectos económicos y sociales, que no están del todo cubiertos en la vertiente anterior. Por último, la perspectiva cittaslow sigue más de cerca la perspectiva sostenible que la verde/medioambiental. Las tres vertientes están muy segmentadas y la etapa de desarrollo está todavía en una fase de crecimiento. Las partes interesadas desempeñan un papel importante en la divulgación de los recursos naturales y los retos medioambientales para que una ciudad/lugar desarrolle una reputación sostenible positiva. Por último, hay un papel importante desde la perspectiva de las políticas públicas para posicionar la ciudad como un destino verde y sostenible.

Palabras clave: Marca de lugar verde; Marca de ciudad verde; Marca de ciudad sostenible; Marca lugar sostenible; Marketing verde; Marketing sostenible.

1. INTRODUCTION

As a result of fierce competition and increasing globalization, after the 1990s cities and tourist destinations, started their quest to outcompete each other to attract tourists, visitors, investors, and residents (Doyduk & Okan, 2017). Many European and North American cities are launching a positive image or brand based on growing environmental concerns and complementing their historical heritage and cultural attractions (Turok, 2009). Nowadays, this is already a growing trend, and there are several places, such as cities, countries or regions, that choose to promote their natural resources – such as native species, national parks or landscapes – or their unique characteristics – such as wellbeing or ‘slowness’ – to distinguish themselves from other regions as a differentiation strategy (Doyduk & Okan, 2017; Çiçek *et al.* 2019; Gruffudd, 1994). It is in this context that sustainable city and place brands emerge.

The last decades have seen the growth of high-tech, fast-paced, transnational industries with their intensive communication and materialistic environment that undermine the biodiversity, natural resources and unique local cultural characteristics of places and cities. As a result of all this, food, places, people, and culture gradually begin to lose their identities and become homogeneous (Doyduk & Okan, 2017), which resulted in cities and regions facing difficulties in differentiating themselves from one another. However, there is some disagreement among researchers about whether countries should be branded, because there are no defined rules to create and maintain the brand equity of a country or region (Florek & Insch, 2008), the search for uniqueness and the high sought after environmental/greener perspective, cities and regions started investing in branding.

According to Kavaratzis and Ashworth (2005), city branding is about creating a favorable image or changing a negative one, usually through three main strategies: creating promotional campaigns, creating points of interest in the city, and holding events in the city. However, building a brand identity is the process of selecting the elements of the brand that will represent its identity (Blichfeldt, 2005). In this sense, government authorities (e.g., tourism authorities and marketers) may consider the appropriateness of different elements or attributes to form a projected image that conveys the brand identity. Moreover, little is known about the green, environmental and sustainable aspects that are needed to position a city in the mind of the stakeholders.

There are many cities trying to use creative and effective marketing and branding strategies to offer superior value to current and potential residents, visitors, students, job seekers, investors, and the general public (Doyduk & Okan, 2017; Kerr, 2006). However, addressing tourist activities and using city branding activities to position cities as sustainable and environmental places involve much more particularities than those used to branding products or services.

City branding is different from product/service branding because it is necessary to take into account aspects such as the relationship between the various stakeholders and the structuring of spaces (Hankinson, 2004) or the correspondence between the expectations and perceptions of various stakeholders of the city (Wagner & Peters, 2009). The main objectives of city branding are to understand and meet the expectations of the various

groups of stakeholders of the city, to create a valuable brand and a sense of loyalty and preference for the city in the minds of those stakeholders, to develop regions and countries economically (Ashworth & Kavaratzis, 2009; Kavaratzis, 2004).

Although the themes of cities/places are neutral, i.e., they only represent certain characteristics or reflect certain local identities, since they are built on advantageous, competitive, and distinctive characteristics, contributing to the success of the branding of the city (Kerr, 2006). According to Parkerson and Saunders (2005), the key to having good city branding is to bet on the characteristics that distinguish it from other cities (Andersson, 2016; Fastenrath & Preller, 2018).

There are many definitions of sustainability. However, the most popular and widely known is the definition made by the Brundtland Commission, which will be followed in this paper (WCED, 1987): sustainable development is a development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.

Green or sustainable resources are important preserve sustainable development, as they improve the city's image and the quality of urban life, contributing to greater sustainability (Birch & Wachter, 2008). In order to boost the tourism industry, there are several green initiatives being implemented. For example, Chan and Marafa (2017) and Konijnendijk (2010) state that green resources, such as parks, trees, and landscapes, offer cities an opportunity to create a brand for their city and attract tourists, residents, and other stakeholders. So, sustainable city brands encompass aspects such as green spaces, air and water quality, waste management and recycling, food, urban agriculture, and transportation (Chan & Marafa, 2017). For sustainable city branding to be successful, associations with the environment and sustainability must be authentic and convince consumers that they are a point of differentiation from other competing destinations (Cai, 2001).

Considering the complexity of the subject and the plurality of perspectives on sustainable/green city/place branding, the aim of this paper is to answer the following research question: “How sustainable/green city/place brands are understood and what are the main idiosyncrasies found?” Thus, a bibliographical study will be made about sustainable/green city/place branding/marketing, revealing the main differences between the articles found on the branding and marketing of cities or places, which are the biggest difficulties that cities/locations go through in the process of sustainable branding, what are the perceptions of consumers and their perception regarding cities/locations whose branding strategy is sustainability, among other issues related to the theme of city brands. To this end, the methodology adopted for the systematic literature review was the one proposed by Denyer and Tranfield (2009).

The structure of this paper is as follows. After this introduction, the research method followed in the article will be analyzed. The third section analyzes the results obtained. In the fourth section the discussion is presented. Finally, in the last section the conclusions are presented.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

Although there are several strategies when conducting literature reviews, two forms stand out in peer-review reputable inter-

national journals: narrative and systematic reviews. The former normally resorts to a qualitative evaluation of the manuscripts analyzed based on a limited selection of literature from a certain domain. The latter, normally seeks to systematically review the entire corpus of the literature on a certain topic. There is no 'correct' approach and each of them has its own methodological challenges (Weatherbee *et al.*, 2019).

In order to obtain as much information as possible, it was decided to follow the procedures implemented in systematic literature reviews, as proposed by Denyer and Tranfield (2009), following the following steps:

1. Formulation of the research objective;
2. Location of studies;
3. Selection and evaluation of the studies found;
4. Analysis and summary of the studies found;
5. Presentation of results.

According to Mallett *et al.* (2012), this method has some advantages, such as valuing the importance of empirical evidence over preconceived knowledge. Furthermore, it is based on principles of transparency, rigor, and replicability.

As stated in the introduction, the aim of the research was to answer the following question, "How sustainable/green city/place brands are understood and what are the main idiosyncrasies found?" Next, in the phase of locating studies, the Scopus database was accessed and the search terms "green place brand*", "green city brand*", "sustainable place brand*", "sustainable city brand*", "green place market*", "green city market*", "sustainable place market*", "sustainable city market*", "green destination brand*", "sustainable destination brand*", "green destination market*", and "sustainable destination market*" were entered. The search, conducted in September 2022, yielded 39 results, which included all manuscripts obtained until September 2022. 31 were scientific journal articles and four of them were book chapters.

Subsequently, in order to select and evaluate the relevant studies, the abstracts were read, and if they were not related to green/sustainable city/place/destination brands, they were re-

jected. After this screening, we read the whole documents to analyze the proper fit with the analysis we were carrying out. The final result was 18 relevant manuscripts considered for further analysis. Furthermore, based on the interdisciplinary nature of the topic, and taking into account that the concept of 'slowness', a similar search was taken using the search "cittaslow*", also conducted in September 2022. In this case, 66 hits were returned, which were subsequently analyzed taking into account the main objective of this SLR: city/brand marketing/branding. After screening the abstracts, eight documents were selected for further reading. After a thorough analysis of the whole manuscripts, six articles were included in the SLR.

Considering the small number of manuscripts, it was decided to use the snowball sampling technique in order to address articles that were not captured by the search questions. For that we analyzed the references of the articles so far included in the search and assessed the references searching for similar traits of the focus of the analysis: green/sustainable city/brand/place marketing/branding. As such, our primary data source was the references of the 28 manuscripts originally selected (point 3 and point 6 of Table 1) so far selected, in search of complementary sources to be included, that could not be included due to the limitations of the search strings used. Originally, we managed to select 14 articles for further analysis, as shown in point 7 in Table 1. After reading the abstracts and subsequently the whole documents, we managed to eight new documents for SLR. As can be seen, the snowball sampling used was purely based on the selection of articles cited in the references of our previous selection, which supported the researchers in the generation of new articles.

After extensive search, 32 manuscripts were included in our sample, which were exported to the citation and reference management tool Mendeley. To standardize the analysis, we used an excel table, where we aggregated information about the authors, the main theories, the objectives of the study, the methods and context of research, and the main conclusions, in order to collect the main contributions of each document analyzed. The selection process is shown in Table 1.

Table 1
Results of the search process

N.º Filter	Description	Total	Excluded	Included	Total
1	All articles covering words such as "green place brand*", "green city brand*", "sustainable place brand*", "sustainable city brand*", "green place market*", "green city market*", "sustainable place market*", "sustainable city market*", "green destination brand*", "sustainable destination brand*", "green destination market*", and "sustainable destination market*" were entered. The initial search, conducted in the title, abstract and keywords until September 2023	39			39
2	Analysis of the titles and abstracts of the articles to ascertain their quality and relevance	39	19		20
3	Analysis of the whole document	20	2		18
4	All articles covering words such as "cittaslow*". The initial search, conducted in the title, abstract and keywords until September 2023	94			94
5	Analysis of the titles and abstracts of the articles to ascertain their quality and relevance	94	86		8
6	Analysis of the whole document	8	2		6
7	Inclusion of snowball search	14	4	8	8
8	Sum of filters 2+5+7				32

Source: Authors' own elaboration.

The 32 articles, written by 69 different authors, amount to 356 total global citations (TGCs), as seen in Table 2. TGCs denote the number of times an article was cited based on the full count of the SCOPUS platform (Alon, Anderson, Munim, & Ho, 2018). This full count denotes the interdisciplinary nature of the articles and their overall impact on academic research. Complementarily, it is also shown in Table 2 the total local citations (TLCs), which reflect the number of times an article has been cited by other articles within the selected literature

(Alon *et al.*, 2018). It is possible to conclude that the values of TGCs are higher than the values of TLCs, which is a clear indication that the topic under scrutiny is still far from being consolidated and the different topics analyzed are scattered around topics such as branding, places, sustainability, citta-slow, and green marketing strategies. The main two authors are Chan C.-S. and Marafa L.M., both from the Chinese University of Hong Kong, participating in six and four articles, respectively.

Table 2
Ranking of the articles based on TGC and TLC scores

	Article	Authors	TGC	TLC
1	'Green cities' going greener? Local environmental policy-making and place branding in the 'Greenest City in Europe'.	Andersson (2016)	47	5
2	Role of place attachment dimensions in tourists' decision-making process in Cittaslow.	Han <i>et al.</i> (2019)	39	0
3	Altruism or entrepreneurialism? The co-evolution of green place branding and policy tourism in Växjö, Sweden.	Andersson and James (2018)	26	1
4	Positioning Vancouver through urban sustainability strategies? The Greenest City 2020 Action Plan.	Affolderbach and Schulz (2017)	24	0
5	The green branding of Hong Kong: visitors' and residents' perceptions.	Chan and Marafa (2016)	23	4
6	Sustainable destination marketing ecosystem through smartphone-based social media: The consumers' acceptance perspective	Sharmin <i>et al.</i> (2021)	19	0
7	Conceptualization and anatomy of green destination brands	Insch (2011)	19	0
8	Rebranding Hong Kong "Green": the potential for connecting city branding with green resources.	Chan and Marafa (2014)	18	4
9	Making small towns visible in Europe: The case of citta-slow network – The strategy based on sustainable development.	Zawadzka (2017)	18	0
10	How a green city brand determines the willingness to stay in a city: the case of Hong Kong.	Chan and Marafa (2017)	16	2
11	Which city theme has the strongest local brand equity for Hong Kong: green, creative or smart city?	Chan (2019)	14	0
12	Health-related elements in green space branding in Hong Kong.	Chan (2017)	11	1
13	The impact of the slow city movement on place authenticity, entrepreneurial opportunity, and economic development.	Çiçek <i>et al.</i> (2019)	10	0
14	Green city branding: perceptions of multiple stakeholders.	Wang (2019)	10	0
15	Connecting the members of generation Y to destination brands: A case study of the CUBIS project.	Bochert <i>et al.</i> (2017)	9	0
16	Stakeholder engagement in green place branding: A focus on user-generated content.	Acuti <i>et al.</i> (2019)	9	0
17	Green-Induced tourist equity: The cross-level effect of regional environmental performance.	Wong <i>et al.</i> (2021)	8	0
18	Starting conditions for the green branding of a city.	Chan <i>et al.</i> (2018)	8	0
19	Sustainable city storytelling: Cultural heritage as a resource for a greener and fairer urban development.	Rivero Moreno (2020)	7	1
20	Sustainability as a place brand position: A resident-centric analysis of the ten towns in the vicinity of Bangkok.	Taecharungroj <i>et al.</i> (2019)	7	0
21	"Cittaslow": An alternative model for local sustainable development or just a myth? Empirical evidence in the case of Tarakli (Turkey).	Ilhan <i>et al.</i> (2021)	4	1
22	Strengths, weaknesses and challenges of municipalities in North Cyprus aspiring to be a sustainable Cittaslow tourism destination.	Ince and Öztüren (2021)	3	1
23	A textual and visual analysis of the intrinsic value dimensions of Romania: Towards a sustainable destination brand.	Lupu <i>et al.</i> (2021)	3	0
24	Freiburg: The emblematic green city.	Fastenrath and Preller (2018)	2	1
25	Sustainable city branding: Cittaslow - the case of Turkey.	Doyduk and Okan (2017)	1	1
26	Planning and Marketing the City for Sustainability: The Madrid Nuevo Norte Project.	Metaxas <i>et al.</i> (2021).	1	0
27	Conceptualizing and assessing the competitiveness of slow tourism destinations: Evidence from the first accredited citta-slow in China.	Tu <i>et al.</i> (2022)	0	0
28	Sustainable city branding narratives: A critical appraisal of processes and outcomes.	Ripoll Gonzalez and Gale (2022)	0	0
29	Model of urban marketing strategy based on ecological environment quality.	Sun <i>et al.</i> (2022)	0	0
30	Can green city branding support China's Sponge City Programme?	Mitchell <i>et al.</i> (2022)	0	0
31	A theoretical approach for sustainable communication in city branding: Multilateral symmetrical communication model.	Biçakçı and Genel (2017)	0	0
32	Green attraction—Transnational municipal climate networks and green city branding.	Busch and Anderberg (2015)	0	0

Source: Authors' own elaboration.

The 32 articles were analyzed based on an interpretative synthesis, as followed by Jones *et al.* (2011). As a result, the main topics analyzed were inductively derived as a result of the main arguments, concepts and ideas covered among the 32 manuscripts. Following Weed (2008) and Silva and Moreira (2019), a content and thematic analysis was used to capture the explanatory core perspective and the main methods used in the articles analyzed, which were then organized and classified according as shown in Table 3:

- Main topic covered (green city/destination/place branding; sustainable city branding; sustainable destination branding; environmental city branding; sustainable tourism development; slowness; sustainable development; slow tourism destination, place marketing, etc.);
- Methodology (qualitative or quantitative research);

Table 3
Topics covered by the articles

Author	Green City Branding	Green Destination Branding	Green Place Branding	Green Equity	Urban Green Resources	Green Brand Hexagon	Energy Efficiency	Sustainable Place Branding	Sustainable City Branding	Sustainable Destination Marketing	Environmental City Branding	Sustainable Tourism Development	Slowness	Place Marketing	Sustainable Development	Place Attachment	Slow Tourism Destination	Urban / Policy Making	Qualitative	Quantitative	
Acuti <i>et al.</i> (2019)			+								+							+		+	
Affolderbach and Schulz (2017)								+	+										+	+	
Andersson (2016)			+																+	+	
Andersson and James (2018)			+																+	+	
Biçakçi and Genel (2017)																					
Bochert <i>et al.</i> (2017)											+				+					+	
Busch and Anderberg (2015)	+	+			+														+	+	
Chan and Marafa (2017)	+					+														+	
Chan (2019)	+			+																+	
Chan (2017)	+					+														+	
Chan <i>et al.</i> (2018)	+				+	+														+	
Chan and Marafa (2016)	+				+	+														+	
Chan and Marafa (2014)	+				+	+													+	+	
Çiçek <i>et al.</i> (2019)													+	+	+				+	+	+
Doyduk and Okan (2017)									+				+		+				+	+	
Fastenrath and Preller (2018)	+						+								+						
Han <i>et al.</i> (2019)												+	+			+	+			+	
Ilhan <i>et al.</i> (2021)													+		+				+	+	
Ince and Öztüren (2021)													+				+	+	+	+	
Insch (2011)		+																	+	+	
Lupu <i>et al.</i> (2021)											+									+	
Metaxas <i>et al.</i> (2021)									+	+					+					+	
Mitchell <i>et al.</i> (2022)	+														+					+	
Ripoll Gonzalez and Gale (2022)									+						+				+	+	
Rivero Moreno (2020)									+						+				+	+	
Sharmin <i>et al.</i> (2021)										+										+	
Sun <i>et al.</i> (2022)											+									+	
Taecharungroj <i>et al.</i> (2019)									+					+	+					+	
Tu <i>et al.</i> (2022)													+							+	
Wang (2019)	+																		+	+	
Wong <i>et al.</i> (2021)		+		+			+													+	
Zawadzka (2017)									+				+	+	+			+		+	

Source: Authors' own elaboration.

3. RESULTS

The evolution over time of the publications is presented in Table 4, in which it is possible to witness that there is a strong concentration of publications from 2017 onwards covering 87.5% of the publications. The manuscripts were published in many different outlets; however, three of them stand out: *Sustainability* with five papers and *Place Branding and Public Diplomacy* and *Journal of Destination Marketing and Management* with two papers each. As such, the manuscripts are scattered around many outlets.

Table 4
Evolution of publications over time

Year of Publication	Number of articles	% of total publications	Cumulative percentage
2020-2022	12	37.50	37.50
2017-2019	16	50.00	87.50
2014-2016	3	9.38	96.88
2010-2013	1	3.12	100.0

Source: Author's own elaboration.

Taking into account the core results shown in Table 3, it is possible to aggregate the results in three —the green, the sustainable and the slowness (cittaslow)— main core perspectives that are followed by most of the authors.

The green marketing/branding perspective has been approached from several perspectives: the city, the place, and the destination (Anderson, 2016; Anderson & James, 2018; Busch & Anderberg, 2015; Chan, 2017, 2019; Chan & Marafa, 2014, 2016; Chan *et al.*, 2018; Fastenrath & Preller, 2018; Insch, 2011; Mitchell *et al.*, 2022; Wang, 2019).

The dimensions of green city branding —green status, green space, green potential, green pulse, green citizenship, and green prerequisites, called Green Resource Brand Hexagon (GRBH)— have been used to study how ecological and environmental factors can be integrated into the branding concept of the city of Hong Kong (Chan & Marafa, 2014, 2016). The first, green status, refers to the international status or position of the city in the provision of green resources. The second, green space, refers to the physical aspect or environment of the city. The third, green potential, is the willingness to spend more monetary funds on tourism, employment, education, and business once the city's green resources are improved. The fourth, green pulse, consists of opportunities to associate excitement with green resources. Green citizenship corresponds to residents' attitudes toward sustainability and safety in green resources. The last, green prerequisites, corresponds to the quality of green resources in the city

Chan and Marafa (2014) conclude that creating a “green” brand has several benefits for various stakeholders. For example, when branding is authentic, local residents actively promote their city through word-of-mouth. In tendency, sustainable branding improves the quality of life and sustainability of cities, and consequently, attracts more private investors, talent,

and professionals. For the government, sustainable branding strengthens the city's competitiveness. They also conclude that green resources can become brand dimensions that affect visitors' intention to stay in Hong Kong. The results show that there are determinants such as safety, accessibility, and the aesthetic value of parks and landscapes that increase the intention to stay in the city (Chan & Marafa, 2014). Chan and Marafa (2016) also conclude that city visitors and residents tend to associate economic benefits with improved green resources in the city. However, visitors' perceptions tend to be more associated with elements related to the experience and physical beauty of green resources. On the other hand, Hong Kong's status as a sustainable city, the government's green policies, and green assets are less well perceived. This study reveals that in Hong Kong, there is no alignment between the brand image the government wants to convey and visitors' and residents' perceptions. This reveals a failure to communicate the brand and its message (Chan & Marafa, 2016).

Chan *et al.* (2018) complemented previous studies comparing the visitor's perception of attributes between Hong Kong and Copenhagen and conclude that the difference is significant and that the two cities have different sustainable brand structures, concluding that despite sharing the same theme, cities need to have their own unique starting conditions and characteristics so they can stand out based on their uniqueness in terms of city's culture, history, creativity, and intelligence. For that, they need to invest in “green resources.”

Following a health-related perspective, Chan (2017) analyzes how urban green spaces can become a green brand. Based on the BRBH among local residents, eight health-related elements show that residents do not evaluate the health-related elements as equally important as the other elements. However, the quality of urban green spaces and the aesthetic attractiveness of urban greening are more associated with the residents' perception of green branding in Hong Kong. The elements related to public policy suggest that the government should play a critical role in bridging this health-related association gap, through strategies such as the continuous provision of a high-quality park environment and facilities for the citizens, and the enhancement of the aesthetic environment in urban green spaces (Chan, 2017).

In order to understand the level of brand equity of the green, creative, and smart themes of the city of Hong Kong as perceived by local residents, Chan (2019) concludes that the smart city theme is very close to green and creative themes. Moreover, the strength of smart city brand equity is focused on their own brand awareness and perceived brand quality. Hong Kong residents are contradictory about the green city theme as, on one hand, they have a high expectation for “greenness”, which leads to Hong Kong being a good place to live but, on the other hand, they claim that a green city theme does not contribute to the brand awareness of the local residents. Chan (2019) also concludes that the theming of a city, especially green co-branding should be part of the co-construction of values in the process of place branding.

Investigating how the continuity of local environmental policymaking is affected by place-branding practices, Anderson (2016) concludes that there were a series of ‘green strategiz-

ing' events that led to the selection of green policy definitions and green place branding as the *Greenest City in Europe*. First of all, historical events of the development of "green Växjö" turned into storytelling, which was subsequently integrated into a broader environmental strategy. Then, a place-based competition was put in place to support Växjö's environmental positioning. Programs and investments were then deployed to develop the place branding strategy and external players were introduced to extend networks and support local policies. Finally, the local population was also included to support branding campaigns (Anderson, 2016).

Andersson and James (2018) analyze the changing role played by policy tourism in shaping both the development of environmental policies and green place branding practices in Växjö, Sweden. They conclude that: (a) policy tourism plays a critical role in supporting green place branding by helping to spread awareness of policy models; (b) The motivations to use environmental policy as a mean to support green brand cities include the attraction of economic investment, manufacturing activities and advanced research and development; and (c) Policy tourism mediates the relationship between place branding and environmental policy making. Moreover, they also claim that the motivations are dynamic and were combined differently over time and reflects tensions between cherry-picking and comprehensive environmental policymaking.

The case study of Freiburg is analyzed by Fastenrath and Preller (2018) who claim that green city branding is the result of a long process in which the city of Freiburg invested first in environmental and energy-led initiatives to implement a city heating policy which resulted in the long-term in a climate neutrality perspective that is the base of Freiburg' recent green city branding, competing with Växjö and Vancouver on sustainable urbanism.

Wong *et al.* (2021) sought to understand what role a destination's greening practices play in tourism equity and further understand how environmental conditions in a source market subsequently influence tourists' greening dispositions. Wong *et al.* (2021) found that: green equity positively influences value equity; green equity positively influences the destination brand equity; green-induced tourist equity (value equity, brand equity, and relationship equity) positively influences destination loyalty intention; and that environmental performance of the source market moderates the relationship between green equity and green-induced tourism equity. They also conclude that the effect of green equity on brand equity is more evident for tourists residing in regions with high carbon emissions performance. In essence "being green" helps to further promote the brand image and quality of the destination, especially for those who perceive that the destination's green efforts are in line with their home regions.

Based on the content published and shared by internet users in determining the attitudes of potential visitors towards certain cities, Acuti *et al.* (2019) conclude that: the more the city is seen as a green city, the more positive people's attitudes towards the city; the lower the social distance among social network users, the more positive will be the visitor's attitude towards the city; and the positive relationship between perceptions of the greenness of the city and attitudes towards the city is amplified (re-

duced) when the social distance between the generator and the receiver of information is low (high)). Acuti *et al.* (2019) conclude that a city's image and media content affect users' attitudes towards the city. These results also show that potential visitors' attitudes toward a city are more positive when the city image includes references to green living, including parks, green spaces, trees, and pastoral landscapes.

Green destination branding is different from other types of product/service branding as marketers have limited control over visitors' experiences, and also have little leeway to expand the destination "portfolio" (Insch, 2011). Another difference is that tourists, unlike consumers, do not own the destination, and are even responsible for protecting the sustainable destination. Moreover, another characteristic is that it is challenging to satisfy the needs and please several stakeholders: residents, inhabitants, and the environment. Furthermore, another important challenge found when analyzing New Zealand, is to ensure that residents protect brand integrity, especially when they are not interested in reducing or even eliminating their negative environmental impacts (Insch, 2011). Despite the difficulties in establishing a green destination brand, there are many countries that do it; however, it is necessary to deal with the consequences of negative word-of-mouth on social media and other digital platforms, as it discourages potential visitors and dulls the image of the city. As such, when positioning the city in the mind of the tourists, it is mandatory to involve other stakeholders so that the green brand can shine through to tourists, who notice how green the city is (Insch, 2011).

German cities use their membership in climate networks for improving their green city branding, however, they need to implement a bolder role in the use of branding considerations and define their green policies tuned to the stakeholders based on their unique local characteristics (Busch & Anderberg, 2015). This is the outcome of defining first green policies and then the branding characteristics.

Based on the study of green city branding from the perceptions of different stakeholders, namely foreign tourists and local residents, Wang (2019) concludes that different social groups have different effects for residents and foreigners, and that foreign tourists have a more diverse and heterogeneous brand perception than local residents. The study further realizes that a green city brand is perceived by foreign tourists as having a higher level of green perceptions than that perceived by local residents. It is clear that the different interpretations between foreign tourists and local residents stem from the different familiarities of residents and tourists with the green city brand.

The sustainable/environmental marketing/branding perspective has been addressed from the city, place, destination, and tourism development perspectives (Affolderbach & Schulz, 2017; Biçakçi & Genel, 2017; Bochert *et al.*, 2017; Lupu *et al.*, 2021; Rivero Moreno, 2020; Taecharungroj *et al.*, 2019).

Through its emphasis on quality of life, livability, and health through the participatory approach that involves the city stakeholders, Vancouver's Greenest City Action Plan seeks to bridge the economic, environmental, and social dimensions of the city's sustainability (Affolderbach & Schulz, 2017). The study also concludes that many strategies for implementing measures within the plan end up challenging other aspects of sustainabili-

ty, which are used to overcome some common problems in implementing sustainability policies and meeting sustainable goals defined. Moreover, this study also shows that green building and urban sustainability policies and visions are clearly driven by the political ambition for world leadership, and policy actions seem to be largely directed, if not motivated, by international ranking schemes and performance indicators. Thus, [Affolderbach and Schulz \(2017\)](#) conclude that being a leader in global rankings may serve an international reputation much more than actions being truly transformative at the local level, reconciling economic, environmental, and social needs and expectations.

Cultural heritage plays a crucial role as a driver of a new type of flexible and democratic urban development ([Rivero Moreno, 2020](#)). The image projection of cities has traditionally been aggressive, physically and literally offering large buildings, monuments, etc., not following an eco-friendly strategy ([Rivero Moreno, 2020](#)), a fact that has alerted major international institutions to the need to transform the urban economy into a sustainable and energy-efficient economy. To develop such an economy, and based on an in-depth analysis of historic European cities, [Rivero Moreno \(2020\)](#) advocates the importance of identifying and collecting testimonies, ideas, and stories of people from its inhabitants, because there needs to be a human aspect in urban representations, which can help create a more sustainable strategy that meets the real challenges and needs of people and the city. In this way, these stories serve not only to express values, attitudes, and behaviors already defined but also to establish future perspectives related to long-term strategies. Thus, the official (top-down) perspective and the alternative (bottom-up) perspective, in which the inhabitants are listened to and are part of the city plans, must be confronted and analyzed in order to find a balance between them, with the major purpose of aligning as much as possible the “big image” that the city wants to convey to the world with the needs of its inhabitants and the city itself ([Rivero Moreno, 2020](#)).

Based on three main actions that mayors can take, including “branding,” “educating,” and “improving,” [Taecharungroj et al. \(2019\)](#) developed a sustainable place branding analysis (SPBA), in ten cities around Bangkok aiming to create a branding tool that could help cities develop a brand position that is credible, drives growth, engages residents, and promotes sustainability. The results show that residents have different levels of perceptions about the dimensions of sustainability. It was possible to group the cities analyzed into five types: elegant city (with high levels of performance and importance in economic growth and landscape), compassionate city (high levels of performance and importance in economic growth and social equality), lively city (high levels of performance and importance in economic growth), peaceful city (exceptional levels of performance and importance in the quality of life and health), and green city (high levels of performance and importance in the natural environment) ([Taecharungroj et al., 2019](#)). They also realize that cities must take a number of actions to further improve their sustainability, specifically to improve energy, water, and waste management and governance through public-private actions and that behind these actions must be mayors who have to inform themselves and research, form partnerships, or give some control to residents or even other stakeholders in city planning. The result shows that it is possible to integrate sustain-

ability and place branding, demonstrating how places can use their particular dimensions of sustainability to develop brand positioning strategies ([Taecharungroj et al., 2019](#)).

In order to understand the impact of stakeholder interaction on brand image, [Biçakçı and Genel \(2017\)](#) analyzed the requirements of city brands through a Multilateral Symmetric Communication Model. They conclude that various types of communication efforts (public relations, advertising, promotion) of each city brand should be coordinated with an integrated approach to developing a professional and sustainable strategic communication management perspective. Furthermore, all city stakeholders should be represented within the structure of the communication department along with the local government as [Biçakçı and Genel \(2017\)](#) realized that having contact with all stakeholders and taking into account their feedback is advantageous to be able to predict the future. As such, they propose that the stakeholders should be composed of different organizations that have a city branding relationship. They also conclude that balanced communication with stakeholders facilitates ensuring a proactive communication process in building the desired city image ([Biçakçı & Genel, 2017](#)).

The use of natural resources and natural environment is important as an aesthetic dimension to develop a sustainable tourism destination ([Lupu et al., 2021](#)). If the use visual and textual contents—that encompass functional, social and emotional elements, enriching the tourist experience in which the natural environment, enjoyment and new experiences are exploited—show a positive image of Romania as a tourism destination, the media reactions were mainly negative, due to external factors such a corruption scandal, critics to the budget and accusations of plagiarism of the logo. As such, although authenticity can and need to be explored, there are other socioeconomic variables that need to be addressed to achieve a true sustainable destination ([Lupu et al., 2021](#)).

The importance of sustainable marketing for a specific group of customers, Generation Y, was analyzed by [Bochert et al. \(2017\)](#). As digital natives, generation Y poses a problem for many destination marketing organizations as they are highly technologically proficient and disloyal consumers. For that, [Bochert et al. \(2017\)](#) claim that for destination brands to succeed they need to actively develop interactive, networked solutions and adapt their marketing strategies to embrace this new challenging, high-tech market segment. How smartphone-based social media influences sustainable destination marketing from the point of view of the destination consumers is important to understand how sustainable/green city marketing could be understood ([Sharmin et al., 2021](#)). Although the focus of the article was not on sustainable/green marketing, it is possible to assess the importance of social networking and platforms to convey destination/city marketing information to support green/sustainable actions both to residents and visitors enhancing sustainable/green city branding experiences ([Sharmin et al., 2021](#)).

Based on the city branding strategy to support Sponge City Program, [Mitchell et al. \(2022\)](#) claim that it is possible to support sustainable development goals aligning future city competitiveness with environmental objectives focused on large-scale financed projects supporting city differentiation based on high-quality eco-living. Also based on a city project that seeks

to implement city marketing strategies to improve both quality of life and the sustainability of the city of Madrid, *Metaxas et al. (2021)* address the importance of public policy to position the city of Madrid emphasizing urban sustainability, embracing social, economic and environmental goals. *Ripoll González and Gale (2022)* analyze the importance of city governance defending that sustainability is necessary to reconcile wealth, economic value, and inclusive development, which involve cross-value dimensions. For that, bottom-up community branding is necessary involving different institutional arrangements that avoid neoliberalism and environmentalism but embraces a multi-stakeholder perspective.

Finally, based on a quantitative study, *Sun et al. (2022)* claim that environmental quality influences city reputation indirectly, with city recognition playing a pivotal role between city image and city reputation and between environmental quality and city reputation. Moreover, they also claim that environmental quality is not important per se as, despite all the environmental resources the city holds, city marketing needs to strive to address city recognition in order to support the city reputation (*Sun et al., 2022*).

The concept of slowness, a movement that incorporates philosophy and commitment to preserving cultural, natural, and historical heritage, has been used to position cities and places as added-value characteristics, very well away from high-tech, fast-paced materialistic characteristics to improve the quality of life of local residents has been one of the most popular themes in place marketing as the characteristics of nowadays society undermine environmental, natural resources (*Doyduk & Okan, 2017; Han et al., 2019; Ilhan et al., 2021; Ince & Öztüren, 2021; Tu et al., 2022; Zawadzka, 2017*). Clearly, the Cittaslow movement aims to protect the local attributes of cities and avoid standardizing them. Consequently, the environment, local crafts, local culture, and lifestyles are preserved, which leads to the sustainable urban development of the cities in this network.

The case of Tarakli, Peru, based on an effective development model, shows that the residents of Tarakli view the Cittaslow movement positively since Tarakli tourism has helped fight unemployment and also increased people's income (*Ilhan et al., 2021*). Moreover, not only women's participation in the workforce and their representation in public places increased, but also the awareness of Tarakli's residents of environmental protection increased.

The importance of germane local characteristics of slow culture, local facilities and services, and local community ambience are important drivers for building the competitiveness of slow tourism destinations (*Tu et al., 2022*). The particularities of the cittaslow movement for municipalities is analyzed by *Ince and Öztüren (2021)*, who call for attention to the role of local government policies in securing economic condition so that local communities achieve a sustainable cittaslow tourism destination status. The importance of the local communities is also addressed by *Doyduk and Okan (2017)*, who claim that the local community should be integrated into the activities, green energy sources should be used, and the cultural identity of cities should be protected. Branding this type of city requires a lot of local and governmental support in terms of urban sustainability, agriculture, tourism, energy, and socio-economic planning. As

such, "slow cities" should be branded according to the needs of the local population (*Doyduk & Okan, 2017*).

The residents' support for the Cittaslow movement was also studied, where *Çiçek et al. (2019)* conclude: residents' support for the movement has a positive impact on the perceived authenticity of places, on the expansion of opportunities for entrepreneurship, and on regional economic development.

The importance of local traditions, history, and the authenticity of inhabitants of small towns and cities with grassroots activities of their local communities are important variables used to promote slowness as part of the promotion of sustainability of small towns (*Zawadzka, 2017*). The cittaslow characteristics take into account the importance of energy and environmental policy, urban quality policy, infrastructure policy, social inclusion policy, and tourism tuned with hospitality as part of the brand positioning of the city. From the city policy perspective, the certification process cities need to go through supports the implementation strategy as this process creates added value, as it supports the inhabitants to realize the endogenous capital of the city and their main distinguishing characteristics (*Zawadzka, 2017*).

The importance of place attachment in a cittaslow tourism destination was addressed by *Han et al. (2019)*, who found that attitude towards the destination is key for increasing the revisit intention. As such, the local characteristics need to stand out so that marketing communications take advantage of the local characteristics to generate a positive word-of-mouth.

4. DISCUSSION

There are several topics that can justify what is meant by green, sustainable city or place branding/marketing. From a marketing point of view, it is clear that the different stakeholders play an important role, either as policymakers, tourists, or residents.

From a deductive perspective, it is possible to pose that social media plays an important role through the peculiar role storytelling plays in conveying messages to tourists. Regarding the use of social media in the branding process of sustainable cities/places, it is possible to conclude that the content posted and shared by internet users about a particular city, as well as the image of the city itself, influence the attitudes and decisions of potential visitors to the city (e.g., *Acuti et al., 2019; Insch, 2011; Wong et al., 2021*).

Based on the importance of city residents' publications on social media in the branding process, it is possible to conclude that involving the population in the creation of the city's brand image is crucial to create a more sustainable strategy that meets the challenges and needs of people and the city itself (e.g., *Chan & Marafa, 2016, 2017; Rivero Moreno, 2020; Wang, 2019*). This is related to personal and social value focus that supports public policy in the creation of a city branding image, based on the unique characteristics of the local stakeholders to be marketed to attract tourists and visitors, as external stakeholders.

In addition to the importance of local stakeholders in this process, visitors and businesses also play an important role in the brand positioning process by allowing stakeholders to dis-

tinguish whether or not certain perceptions are consistent with the city's intended positioning, and also facilitate the effective development of marketing programs (e.g., Chang & Marafa, 2014; Fastenrath & Preller, 2018; Wang, 2019). Chan and Marafa (2016) show an important case with discrepancies among stakeholders, in which there was no good communication between the stakeholders and policymakers of Hong Kong. Stakeholders do not perceive Hong Kong as a sustainable city, but rather as a consumerist city, a "shopping paradise." In this case, the city's brand did not meet the perceptions of the city's consumers. To avoid similar situations, Biçakçi and Genel (2017) propose a balanced multilateral communication model, including all stakeholders.

If city rankings are used to showcase implemented green policies through green building and urban sustainability policies, as is the case of Vancouver (Affolderbach & Schulz, 2017), it is necessary to implement actions that are truly transformative at the local level, reconciling economic, environmental and social needs and expectations (Affolderbach & Schulz, 2017), which goes well beyond green policies and embraces sustainable ones.

Taking a more inductive perspective, the three strands analyzed cover green, sustainable and slowness-related aspects. Normally, the green strand analyzed, with the greatest number of articles, is related to green or environmental perspectives, in which policymakers try to position/segment a city/place as a green place or tourism destination (e.g., Andersson, 2016; Chan and Marafa, 2014, 2017). The sustainable strand tends to cover environmental aspects, as in the previous case, but also take into account local authentic, historical traditions, as well as the economic perspective, to position the city/place as a unique tourism destination for potential visitors, as well as for the local residents (e.g., Chan and Marafa, 2017; Chan, 2019; Doyduk & Okan, 2017). Finally, the slowness perspective, based on the concept of *cittaslow*, uses local attributes to take advantage of local crafts and culture to position the city/place as having a unique lifestyle characteristic to market the city as a sustainable one (e.g., Doyduk & Okan, 2017; Han *et al.*, 2019; Tu *et al.*, 2022; Zawadzka, 2017).

Another important aspect is that the authors refer indistinctly to sustainable and green marketing when conceptually it is necessary to distinguish two fundamentally different aspects. However, if green marketing/branding seeks to create an image clearly linked to the environment, a sustainable image has a broader perspective including social, economic, and environmental characteristics. Furthermore, when analyzing the slowness perspective, it is clear that the studies analyzed deal with unique social and personal values that are praised from the local residents' standpoint, and that are taken advantage of for marketing purposes, usually related to sustainable perspectives, but also including the environmental ones. Finally, based on the analysis of the *cittaslow* perspective, it is possible to claim that those articles follow the sustainable perspective more closely than the green/environmental one.

It is clear that the perspective in which the three strands are examined has an important impact on the characteristics analyzed, as well as on the perspective the authors try to convey. However, none of the perspectives used by the authors address all types of (economic, environmental, social focus,

value focus, type of stakeholder) characteristics, which is the result of the many definitions and standpoints used by authors (sustainability, green, slowness) without the desire to develop a concise encompassing definition of the perspective under study.

Another important perspective is how branding/marketing is focused, i.e., there are articles that deal with the branding/marketing creation process and those that deal with the utilization of the characteristics of the city/place. Both of them represent the importance of how intrinsic (economic, social, environmental, and local) unique value-added characteristics are exploited. As such, public policy plays an important role as policymakers need to deploy consistent actions to position the place/city, vis-à-vis their core characteristics, to the different audiences/stakeholders: residents and visitors. Equally important, some city brands are still 'on the making' (e.g., Çiçek *et al.*, 2019; Doyduk & Okan, 2017; Ilhan *et al.*, 2021), while others have consolidated values, which is the case of Växjö, Freiburg and Vancouver (e.g., Affolderbach & Schulz, 2017; Andersson, 2016; Busch & Anderberg, 2015; Fastenrath & Preller, 2018). Finally, and not less conspicuous, some articles dealt with places, others with cities, and others with destinations, with made harder the analysis.

In any case, there are aspects that deserve further study. First, it is clear that regardless of the ranking, result or understanding, the green/sustainable aspect is something that depends on the political, ideological association of the place branding with the sustainable public policies in which environmentally, economically and socially sustainable practices need to be in place so that the city/place achieves a proper brand positioning. As such, energy policies, urban green spaces, health-related resources need to be nurtured to be properly used as a marketable attribute of sustainable city/place (e.g., Andersson, 2016; Andersson & James, 2018; Chan, 2017).

The biggest challenges in creating a unique sustainable destination brand stem from the differences between destination brands and traditional product and service brands, namely combining the interests of different stakeholder groups, who have different reasons for choosing such a brand (Insch, 2011).

Topics such as sustainable cities and the circular economy should be explored further, as they are clearly interconnected, as Chen (2021) suggests. Moreover, future perspective can be posed following two paths: exploitation strategies, in which policymakers exploit the attributes and resources the city possesses; or exploration strategies, in which the entrepreneurial perspective embraces the challenges of adapting the city to the new environmental, social, economic positioning the city with an added value perspective that embraces visitors and residents alike.

Taking into account the important power of social media, it is important to include references to green living, such as green spaces, trees, parks, pastoral landscapes, social values and well-being perspectives to shape the attitude of potential visitors. As such, place branding strategies should include information that positively influence the attitudes of stakeholders and integrate marketing communication strategies encouraging tourists and residents, to generate content that promotes the green aspects of the city.

5. CONCLUSIONS

Place branding literature is understood as a result of a place marketing activity that stems from the promotion of a place/city. This clearly indicates that the economic, social, environmental, and local characteristics of the place/city can hardly change unless followed by the willingness to integrate green/sustainable perspectives and practices that help places/cities to evolve towards new greener, more sustainable perspectives. The main challenge seems to involve all stakeholders, policymakers, residents, and tourists, so that all of them have a proper or unique understanding of the green equity the city deserves to be identified with.

A country's natural resources represent a source of emotional and symbolic value if managed properly. More than just showcasing the beauty of their natural resources, countries should seek to develop a positive and sustainable reputation. This can be achieved by promoting philosophies, values, and practices of environmental sustainability. To this end, it is necessary to define sustainable energy and environmental policies that help to position the city according to the sustainable strategy to be followed and to define public policies in line with the positioning that is desired for the city.

Green resources improve the image of the city and the quality of urban life, contributing to greater sustainability. Green spaces provide an opportunity to involve the natural environment of cities and their green resources in order to create a brand image that increases the real attractiveness of cities, involving consumers' expectations and perceptions. However, they only cover part of the story, as sustainability embraces also economic and social aspects.

It was possible to conclude that the branding/marketing of sustainable cities/places is a subject that has a pluralistic perspective in the academic field, but it is far from being consolidated. It is possible to conclude that there is little literature regarding marketing and sustainable branding of cities. Moreover, as analyzed, there are several perspectives that have been analyzed by different authors in which it is possible to conclude that, based on the low score achieved by the LTC scores, the theme is still in its growing up stage. It is also necessary to identify which are the most credible and efficient ways to communicate the essence of sustainable destination brands to all potential stakeholders, as well as the long-term effects of greening, more sustainable destination on tourism equity. It is also important to disclose, that there is a threat of sustainable tourism turning into mass tourism.

As regards the implications for management, it is considered that cities should integrate stakeholders in the sustainable branding process, in order to create a multilateral communication that enhances the establishment of a strong brand that meets their expectations. It is also advisable that city executives periodically evaluate residents' perceptions, rather than using a single evaluation to guide long-term decisions.

As with any paper, this one has limitations. Thus, in the first instance, we highlight the fact that this study only focuses on data collected from the Scopus database, and articles that may only be part of the Web of Science, or even of the so-called "grey" literature, were not gathered. Therefore, the study needs to be complemented with searches in other databases.

Being a recent theme, and little studied yet, although it is an interesting line of research to deepen and contribute to in the future, it is not possible to establish an in-depth knowledge of this phenomenon as a whole. Finally, as sustainability is a multi-dimensional topic, it is difficult to cover all the dimensions with as little research as has been done so far.

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