
Miscellaneous

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The use of Sustainable Development Goals as a framework for place branding research: a survey of academic experts.

Abstract

Place branding as a governance and communication tool can play a key role in sustainable development. Former research illustrates how place branding can influence economic growth, social well-being and environmental preservation. Although the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are a globally accepted framework and the main initiative to encourage sustainability, mentions to SDGs in place branding research remain limited. To explore this gap, an online survey was conducted among 44 international place branding academic experts to examine the use of this framework in the discipline and in their own work. The results show that most academics are familiar with the SDGs, but rarely use them explicitly as a research framework. Place branding scholars who incorporate the SDGs in their research link this to enhanced relevance and impact, ethical considerations, funding opportunities, and improved publication chances. Conversely, scholars that do not use this framework, highlight the lack of relevance to the research and a limited understanding of how to incorporate the SDGs as the main reasons. The perspective of place branding academic experts reflects an interest in deepening the integration of the SDGs. Yet, some scholars are reluctant to include imposed frameworks in their research and fear that

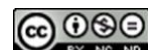
academic discourse could promote greenwashing practices. This investigation provides a first contribution on the use of SDGs as a framework in place branding research and outlines future research directions to enhance place branding SDG-related studies.

Keywords

Place branding, Sustainable development, SDGs, Sustainability, Greenwashing, Communication.

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1. Introduction

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are the main framework for action of the United Nations (UN) 2030 Agenda; a global policy adopted by UN member states in 2015. The 2030 Agenda consists of 17 SDGs, 169 targets and 240 indicators, to address global issues such as climate change, poverty and inequality.

Sustainability and sustainable development are currently prominent topics that are part of policies, debates, plans and strategies in both the public and private sectors (Therkelsen et al., 2022). The importance of these topics has extended into the realm of place branding, as some cities have incorporated the SDGs as a framework for assessing their sustainability progress (Ripoll González & Gale, 2022).

The SDGs have also gained momentum in academic research. Several SDG-related bibliometric and literature reviews show research on this matter has steadily increased and diversified into different areas of expertise since the adoption of the 2030 Agenda (Meschede, 2020; Pizzi et al., 2020; Sianes, 2021; Trane et al., 2023; Yamaguchi et al., 2023; Kumar et al., 2024; Mishra et al., 2024; Yumnam et al., 2024), signalling the influence of the 2030 Agenda as a revitalising agent in the academic production on sustainable development (Trane et al., 2023). Moreover, discussions and debates about the SDGs are expected to increase in the coming years, given the expansion of special issues and conferences dedicated to this subject (Pizzi et al., 2020).

The relevance, importance and opportunity of the SDG framework appear to be paramount for both the professional and academic domains of place branding, as place branding can be conceived as the process of managing the identity and reputation of a city, region, or country to influence its target audiences –whether they be potential tourists, migrant workers, investors, or residents. It entails a strategic approach to connecting with these audiences and, thus, aligning place branding strategies with the SDGs can strengthen a place’s global standing and ensure long-term social and economic well-being, making it more appealing to diverse stakeholders.

Moreover, public-fuelled place branding strategies have the potential to reshape the place and allocate investments. They can be understood as a form of public policy (Potapovs, 2024), and, therefore, must comply with sustainability standards to ensure that growth is environmentally responsible, socially inclusive, and economically viable.

However, despite the growing interest in the SDGs and the relationship between place branding and sustainable development, there are still few place branding studies that approach the 2030 Agenda or the SDGs in a central way. Therefore, the aim of this article is to address this gap by delving into the use of the SDGs as a framework in place branding research through a survey with academic experts.

2. Background

2.1 *Conceptualising place branding*

When talking about place branding, there is no product or service that the brand supports and promotes, but rather it is about effectively communicating a physical place, building on its identity, to attract tourists, investors, qualified workers, to support exports or to generate satisfaction and a feeling of belonging among residents. In this sense, place branding can be understood as a “governance strategy for managing perceptions about places” (Eshuis & Edwards, 2013, p. 1067).

But place branding can also be linked to communication insofar as it manages perceptions. As Fernández-Cavia, Kavaratzis and Morgan explain (2018), a place brand can be seen as a

communicative device that endows a place with meaning, emerging from the place's identity, and that is both the basis of communication and a communication process in itself. Thus, place branding takes a strategic approach to communication because the identity of a place is collectively constructed or co-created (Stoica et al., 2022), and the management of that identity requires a mode of communication that governs and organises (Kaefer, 2021) and that is inherently identity-driven (Boisen et al., 2018).

The concept of place branding “has gained popularity during the last two decades” (Swain et al., 2024, p. 536) although its definition and theoretical foundations are still under discussion (Ashworth & Kavaratzis, 2017). A notable attempt to define it explains that is the process of creating, monitoring, evaluating, and actively managing a place's image to enhance its reputation among a targeted audience (Fan, 2010). This image and reputation are influenced by several diverse controlled and uncontrolled factors that exist prior and independently from the implementation of place branding activities.

For the purpose of this article, we adopt the definition of the International Place Branding Association (IPBA) agreed in the manifesto signed in Helsingborg (Sweden) during the seventh edition of the scientific conference organised by this institution. In the manifesto, place branding is conceived as managing the positive reputation of a place, understanding the reputation of a place as a public good. Place branding is conceptualised as a contributor to creating better places and promoting the development of communities. It applies a strategic and long-term vision “with the aim to improve the quality of life of citizens with respect for the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals” (IPBA, 2023).

2.2. Place branding and the SDGs

Previous research demonstrates how place branding strategies can protect landscapes (de San Eugenio et al., 2017) and heritage (Radosavljević & Čulafić 2019), impact positively on environmental policymaking (Andersson, 2016), promote urban regeneration (Roult et al., 2016) or enhance sustainability through collaborative engagement (Ripoll González & Gale, 2020). However, literature on place branding and sustainable development is still young and mainly focused on the environmental realm of sustainability (Therkelsen et al., 2021).

In reference to research dedicated particularly to the SDGs, Therkelsen, James and Halkier (2022) identify three critical aspects in future place branding research related to the SDGs. First, the approach to place branding taken by public authorities, which can be symbolic or provide actual policy impact. Second, the involvement of several internal and external actors in place branding processes, and third, the multidisciplinary that characterises this discipline.

In this sense, previous research focusing precisely on the application of the SDGs emphasises the vagueness of these goals. For some authors, this ambiguity makes both the achievement and monitoring of the SDGs difficult at the local level (Valencia et al., 2019). For others, the lack of specificity can be considered an advantage, as it allows the creation of participatory processes to achieve the SDGs, providing flexibility in its interpretation, therefore, facilitating the achievement of a common goal through a collaborative approach (Burger & Parker, 2022).

However, the popularity and controversy around sustainability and sustainable development also results in the use of these concepts for unethical practices such as *greenwashing* (Therkelsen et al., 2021), where there is an imbalance between the image projected by regions that are described as “eco”, “green”, “smart”, “low carbon” or “sponge”, and the actual implementation of initiatives and policies that promote changes aimed at sustainability (de Jong, 2019).

The connection between place branding and the SDGs is materialised through *SDG 11: Sustainable Cities and Communities*, which aims to make cities “more inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable” places (UN, n.d.). Furthermore, the multidisciplinary nature of place branding allows establishing connections with the other SDGs, such as *SDG 17: Alliances for Sustainable Development*. This objective requires the involvement of all signatory countries and the collaboration of governments, the private sector and society, and should translate into broad and deep place branding participation processes (Ripoll González & Gale, 2023).

The importance of cities has been highlighted in previous studies. A systematic literature review on research progress to achieve the SDGs in Europe found that SDG-related works focused on cities are becoming increasingly popular, since 90% of this academic production was published after 2019 (Trane et al., 2023). The authors suggest this is an indicator that cities are important places for sustainable development and that city governments are often more proactive than national governments in progressing towards the SDGs, despite being a commitment agreed at the national level.

The crucial role of cities is also reflected in the 2023 Sustainable Development Report (Sachs et al., 2023). In this document, cities are seen as key to shaping the future of the world, mainly due to high levels of population and energy use concentrated in these places. Furthermore, the Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN) – an organisation created by the UN to promote “integrated approaches to implement the SDGs and the Paris Agreement, through education, research, policy analysis, and global cooperation” (SDSN, n.d.) – has defined “sustainable cities” as one of the six interlinked long-term transformations for meeting the SDGs.

Despite this, academic works on place branding that include references to the SDGs usually present this framework in a declarative manner by focusing on the need for cooperation and participation to achieve the SDGs or emphasising the alignment of the research with the goals, but rarely presenting the SDGs as an object or topic of study or as a methodological framework, indicating a lateral approach to the SDGs (Aguilera-Cora et al., 2024).

The considerations outlined above lead to the following research question: How are the SDGs used as a framework in place branding research? Given the significance that the SDGs have in the new conceptualization of place branding signed in the manifesto in Helsingborg, this research seeks to analyse the perspective of academic experts on the relationship between place branding research and the SDGs. For this purpose, three specific objectives have been defined:

- SO1. To examine the relevance academic experts give to the SDGs in place branding scientific production.
- SO2. To identify reasons that explain the inclusion or absence of the SDGs in place branding research.
- SO3. To validate or refute findings in previous studies on the role of SDGs in place branding.

3. Methodology

This study uses a mixed-methods approach including a literature review and a survey, to study the SDGs as a framework in place branding research. The literature review was conducted to establish a foundation for the development of the survey and characterise the scientific production of the domain under study. The search query [“place brand*” OR “destination brand*” OR “city brand*” OR “nation brand*” OR “country brand*”] AND [“sustainable development goal*” OR sdg*] in the fields Title, Abstract and Keywords, with no additional filters or date range applied, was performed in Web of Science and Scopus, obtaining 32 results. After removing duplicates, the final dataset comprised 22 documents.

Survey questions were prepared based on prior research (see Annex, Table 1). In this context, other academic domains have shown that the degree of familiarity with the SDGs among specific populations such as citizens (Fløttum et al., 2022) and university students (Smaniotto et al., 2020; Leiva-Brondo, 2022) can be rather small. Surveying subjective knowledge about the SDGs, contributes to understanding place branding researchers' attitudes and behaviours towards this framework.

Moreover, the SDGs should be used as a framework for research in all scientific disciplines to help mitigate global problems, as research guides public policy decision-making (Fayomi et al., 2018). Previous studies, however, have supported the idea that the SDGs provide a framework for research that has not yet been adequately developed by the scientific community (Singh, 2020), and that in some realms SDG-related research is lacking in top journals (Rodenburg et al. 2021).

Even so, the significance of the 2030 Agenda in scientific production has been confirmed in prior publications highlighting the interest in such framework due to the steady increase in research on this topic (Sweileh, 2020; Trane et al., 2023; Yumnam et al., 2024), identifying transdisciplinarity and a high level of international collaboration as relevant characteristics of the SDG-focused research (Alfirević et al., 2023).

Although the SDGs are widely accepted as a policy framework, universal agreement on their use as a research framework cannot be expected. The SDGs have faced criticism for being too broad, too vague, and too complex, potentially leading to wasting time and resources (Reinert, 2020). Critics also highlight risks such as overuse, misuse and non-use of their indicators by stakeholders (Lyytimäki et al., 2020) as well as greenwashing practices (Jakobsen, 2022). Identifying reasons for SDG inclusion or absence in place branding research contributes to understanding how sustainable development is framed, applied or overlooked.

In addition, previous studies have examined the presence of SDGs in research articles, finding that goals 3, 4, 9, and 11 are the most frequently mentioned (Cortes-Rodriguez et al., 2023). Other works found a connection between local and regional specific problems with special emphasis on the study of goals 4, 11 and 13 (Salvia et al., 2019). In the specific domain of place branding, the SDGs seem to have a limited presence and tend to appear in introductory and final sections of research articles (Aguilera-Cora et al., 2024). Understanding perceptions of SDG prevalence helps assess the extent to which sustainability is integrated into academic discourse and whether it is considered a standard or emerging practice in the field.

Finally, some authors have supported the idea that research should be aligned with the SDGs and have consequently argued that the SDGs can serve to assess the impact of scientific research (Chapman et al., 2020). Prior publications find universities adopt a global approach to SDGs (Alcántara-Rubio et al., 2022), which are recognised to promote university collaboration but require greater integration into teaching curricula and research programmes (Filho et al., 2023).

3.1. Questionnaire

The questionnaire consisted of 25 items distributed in different sections that included questions with 5-point Likert scales, and open and multiple-choice questions. The first section of the questionnaire included introductory questions aimed at identifying respondents' level of familiarity with the SDGs and the use of this framework, both in the discipline in general and in respondents' own work. A second section was designed to explore scholars' perspectives on publishing place branding SDG-related studies and the relevance of the different SDGs. A third section comprised questions related to institutional support received by respondent's universities of affiliation, whereas the final section was designed to collect sociodemographic

data. At the end of the questionnaire, there was also space for respondents to share additional insight regarding the survey topic.

The questionnaire was designed by one of the authors. Before distributing the questionnaire, the other author reviewed it to validate items effectively captured the intended topic. In a second step, an expert in the design and measurement of questionnaires evaluated the instrument. This review focused on refining aspects related to the structure and design, ensuring that questions were clear, unbiased, and fit for purpose.

3.2. Sample

To identify potential respondents, a strategic approach was used, targeting a significant number of academic experts. Every year, place branding scholars attend the International Place Branding Association Conference, the leading international scientific gathering in this field and the only one entirely dedicated to this topic.

Participants and organisers of the 7th edition were identified through the preliminary programme, and their institutional email addresses were searched online. This information was added to a database by one of the authors, who was also responsible for contacting the academic experts who make up the initial population, having received previous permission from the conference organisers.

Given the significance of the conference and building on the momentum of the weeks leading up to the event, the questionnaire was sent to participants and organisers ensuring relevance and accuracy in the responses that could be obtained.

A total of 144 academic experts were contacted individually through a personalised email on 26 September 2023 and were invited to participate in the online survey. The questionnaire was available for two weeks, during which time 44 complete responses were collected, obtaining a response rate of 30.5%.

The sample presents a homogeneous distribution in the sociodemographic variable of gender, with 50% of the respondents being men and 45.5% women, while 4.5% preferred not to answer. The age group that accumulates the highest percentage of responses is 45-54 (36.4%), followed by 35-44 (27.3%), 55-64 (20.5%), 65-74 (9.1%) and 25-34 (6.8%). In terms of academic experience, most respondents claim to have between 11 and 20 years of experience in the sector. The average of this variable is 16.34 years. Finally, the distribution of respondents by professional position shows that the roles of associate professor (25%), professor (22.7%) and lecturer (22.7%) stand out, followed by assistant/adjunct professor (11.3%), lecturer (9.1%) and PhD student (9.1%).

4. Results

This section is structured in two parts. The first section presents results from the literature review. The second section reports survey findings, which are divided into the following subsections: familiarisation with the SDGs, use of the SDGs in place branding research, relevance of the SDGs in place branding research, institutional support, and responses to open-ended questions.

4.1. Literature review

The literature review reveals that most academic publications on place branding and SDGs have been published since 2021, showing a steady increase likely to continue in the coming years. Of the 22 documents, 15 are research articles, 4 book chapters, and 3 conference papers. Notable authors include Boaler, Gale, Lyulyov, Murthy, Pimonenko, Ramya, Ripoll González, and

Ziabina, with two researches each. Publications are scattered across various sources (see Annex, Table 2).

The analysis of the reviewed scientific production highlights key areas of interest, including studies on green branding, the link between place branding and SDGs, the integration of sustainable development into branding strategies, and theoretical or conceptual approaches to this intersection.

Research on green branding examines how countries and businesses integrate sustainability into their brands (Nas, 2023; Lyulyov et al, 2024), while addressing issues such as greenwashing (Ziabina et al., 2024) and corporate social responsibility (Ziabina & Dzwigol-Barosz, 2022).

Studies analysing how place branding aligns with the SDGs explore how destinations can promote economic growth and job creation (Longart & Iankova, 2022), contribute to infrastructure and innovation (Ramya et al., 2024), and how cities can develop more inclusive governance (Ripoll González & Gale, 2023), and support sustainable urban development (Kaefer, 2021).

Publications looking into how sustainability is embedded in place branding strategies include examples from wine tourism destinations (Ravichandran et a., 2023), experiential events (Cristófol et al., 2021), and community involvement in rebranding (Bowen & Sotomayor, 2022) or becoming brand ambassadors (Amani, 2023).

Finally, conceptual studies focus on the evolution of place branding and its intersection with sustainable development, including historical conceptualizations of economic value (Ripoll González & Gale, 2022), reviews on the link between place branding and sustainable development (Aguilera-Cora et al., 2024), and future research agendas (Therkelsen et al., 2021).

4.2. Survey

4.2.1. Familiarisation with the SDGs

Respondents were asked about their degree of familiarisation with the SDGs, as well as references to this framework in place branding research. These questions were designed to gain an initial understanding of the relevance academic experts attribute to this framework, in connection with specific objective 1.

In this regard, 52.3% of experts claim to be very familiar with the SDGs, followed by those who are moderately familiar (26%), extremely familiar (13.6%) and not very familiar (9.1%). To a greater or lesser extent, all respondents claim to be aware of the SDGs, since no responses were recorded for the “Not at all familiar” option.

Regarding the frequency with which academic experts have detected explicit references to the SDGs in place branding research articles, the majority of responses are recorded in the lower part of the scale, with 52.2% of respondents indicating they have never (13.6%) or rarely (38.6%) seen mentions to the SDGs in research on place branding research, while 29.5% of the participants claim to have seen mentions sometimes, and 18.2% often.

The experts were also asked to indicate their level of agreement with the reasons that explain the inclusion of explicit references to the SDGs from a general perspective, focusing on place branding as a discipline. Table 3 shows the mean, standard deviation (SD) and median, for each of the reasons, along with their distribution, where 1 represents “Strongly Disagree” and 5 “Strongly Agree”.

The standard deviation ranges between 0.68 and 1.13, indicating moderate variability over the mean, while the median is slightly skewed towards a higher value. For Perceived relevance to place branding research, Ethical considerations and Enhanced relevance and impact the

distribution is closest to the mean, indicating an agreement among most of the experts. Conversely, most scholars are neutral towards the inclusion of the SDGs understood as a Framework of reference. Data for Publication chances, Funding opportunities, Government and institutional requirements, show a higher dispersion, which translates into contraposed opinions among experts.

Table 3. Reasons for including the SDGs in research articles on place branding, according to respondents.

Question	Variable	Mean	SD	Median	1	2	3	4	5
What do you think are the reasons contributing to the inclusion of specific mentions to SDGs in place branding research articles?	SDGs as the object of study or main research topic	3.00	0.95	3.0	4.5%	29.5%	29.5%	34.1%	2.3%
	SDGs as the main research framework	2.95	0.93	3.0	6.8%	22.7%	40.9%	27.3%	2.3%
	Perceived relevance to place branding research	3.82	0.68	4.0	0.0%	2.3%	27.3%	56.8%	13.6%
	Ethical considerations	3.82	0.81	4.0	0.0%	6.8%	22.7%	52.3%	18.2%
	Enhanced relevance and impact of the research	3.80	0.87	4.0	0.0%	9.1%	22.7%	47.7%	20.5%
	Improved publication chances	3.55	1.08	4.0	4.5%	13.6%	22.7%	40.9%	18.2%
	Funding opportunities	3.84	1.09	4.0	2.3%	11.4%	20.5%	31.8%	34.1%
	Government / institutional requirements	3.66	1.13	4.0	4.5%	11.4%	25.0%	31.8%	27.3%
	Institutional pressure / expectations	3.41	1.07	3.0	2.3%	20.5%	29.5%	29.5%	18.2%

Source: Own elaboration.

4.2.2. Place branding scholars' adoption of SDGs in their own works

Academic experts were asked to evaluate the use of the SDGs as a framework in their research articles. Questions in this segment were aimed at answering specific objectives 2 and 3, by identifying reasons that explain the inclusion or absence of the SDGs, as well as validating or refuting findings in previous studies on this topic.

In this regard, out of the total number of experts surveyed, 63.7% claim to have included mentions of the SDGs in their own research articles on place branding, compared to 36.4% who state they have never included them. However, the distribution of responses according to the frequency with which they include them implies that 11.4% of the experts include them often, 27% sometimes and 25% rarely.

Researchers who include mentions of the SDGs in their own research articles normally do so in the Introduction (67.9%) and Discussion (64.3%) sections, followed by the Conclusions (46.4%), the Theoretical Framework (42.9%) and the Abstract (28.6%). The lowest percentages correspond to the Title, Keywords and Results sections, each with 14.3%, and the Methodology section with 10.7%.

Scholars including SDGs in their works mostly do so due to Enhance relevance and impact, since the mean shows agreement in this reason with the lowest dispersion (Table 4). This is the only reason presenting a percentage greater than 50% in any of the points of the scale. Other reasons to include SDGs are Ethical considerations and Funding opportunities, where the dispersion is higher but leans towards agreement. Instead, the SDGs as an Object of study, Main research framework, or Institutional pressures or expectations are mostly disregarded as reasons for including SDGs.

Table 4. Reasons for academic experts to include mentions of the SDGs in their own research articles on place branding.

Question	Variable	Mean	SD	Median	1	2	3	4	5
Please indicate your level of agreement with the following statements regarding the reasons for mentioning SDGs in your place branding research articles	SDGs as the object of study or main research topic	2.86	1.04	3.0	7.1%	35.7%	25.0%	28.6%	3.6%
	SDGs as the main research framework	2.75	1.14	2.5	10.7%	39.3%	21.4%	21.4%	7.1%
	Ethical considerations	3.32	1.02	4.0	3.6%	21.4%	21.4%	46.4%	7.1%
	Enhanced relevance and impact of the research	4.11	0.74	4.0	0.0%	3.6%	10.7%	57.1%	28.6%
	Improved publication chances	3.21	0.99	3.0	0.0%	28.6%	32.1%	28.6%	10.7%
	Funding opportunities	3.43	1.14	4.0	3.6%	21.4%	21.4%	35.7%	17.9%
	Government / institutional requirements	3.07	1.18	3.0	7.1%	28.6%	28.6%	21.4%	14.3%
	Institutional pressure / expectations	2.82	1.09	3.0	7.1%	39.3%	25.0%	21.4%	7.1%

Source: Own elaboration.

In contrast, among experts who reported never including specific mentions of the SDGs in their place branding research articles, this question displayed the highest variability in responses, with standard deviations ranging from 1.28 to 1.45 (Table 5). Opposition to SDGs as a framework is not regarded as a reason for excluding SDGs in the scholars' research articles. Similarly, is Lack of institutional support. Lack of awareness about SDGs presents a polarised set of responses, with the highest dispersion in this sample, as 39.6% of scholars agree this is one of the reasons explaining the absence of SDGs in their works, while 50.1% disagree. Finally, most experts agree on Lack of relevance to the research (68.8%) and Limited understanding of how to incorporate the SDGs (50%) as reasons for not including SDG-mentions in their research articles.

Table 5. Reasons for academic experts to exclude mentions of the SDGs in their own research articles on place branding.

Question	Variable	Mean	SD	Median	1	2	3	4	5
Please indicate your level of agreement with the following statements regarding the reasons for excluding mentions to SDGs in your place branding research articles	Lack of awareness about SDGs	2.88	1.45	2.5	18.8%	31.3%	12.5%	18.8%	18.8%
	Lack of relevance to the research	3.69	1.30	4.0	6.3%	18.8%	6.3%	37.5%	31.3%
	Limited understanding of how to incorporate SDGs	3.19	1.28	3.5	12.5%	18.8%	18.8%	37.5%	12.5%
	Lack of institutional support	2.25	1.34	2.0	31.3%	43.8%	6.3%	6.3%	12.5%
	Opposition to SDGs as a framework	1.94	1.34	1.5	50.0%	31.3%	6.3%	0.0%	12.5%

Source: Own elaboration.

4.2.3. Relevance of SDGs in place branding research

To further address specific objectives 1 and 3, other questions were designed to gain a deeper understanding of the relevance academic experts attribute to the SDG framework. A first question sought to determine whether the inclusion of specific mentions of the SDGs is a common practice among place branding scholars. The results indicate a clear consensus among

respondents, with 56.8% stating that it is not a common practice, while 25% indicate that they do not know and 18.2% affirm that it is a common practice.

Regarding the statement: “It is necessary to publish more scientific articles on place branding that specifically mention the SDGs”, 45.5% of the researchers are equidistant, and neither agree nor disagree with this statement, followed by researchers who agree or strongly agree with a combined percentage of 38.7%, while researchers who disagree or strongly disagree represent 15.9%.

Academic experts were also asked the question “In your opinion, which SDGs are more relevant to place branding?”. Figure 1 shows the relevance given to each SDG using a three-colour scale. The SDGs that were identified as relevant for 0-33% of the experts are framed in red. Those that scored between 34% and 66% are framed in orange, and those that obtained a percentage between 67% and 100% are framed in green.

In this way, SDG 11 - Sustainable cities and communities is the goal with the highest percentage (77.3%) and the only one framed in green. SDGs framed in orange include SDG 8 - Decent work and economic growth (52.3%), SDG - 13 Climate action (45.5%), SDG 12 - Responsible production and consumption with (43.2%) and SDG 9 Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure (40.9%). SDG 3 - Good health and well-being, SDG 10 - Reduced inequalities, and SDG 16 - Peace, justice and strong institutions registered 36.4% each.

The remaining SDGs are framed in red and include SDG 17 Partnerships for the goals (29.5%), SDG 4 - Quality education (25%), SDG 7 - Affordable clean energy (22.7%), SDG 5 - Gender equality (20.5%), SDG 6 - Clean water sanitation (20.5%), SDG 1 - No poverty (15.9%), SDG 15 - Life on land (15.9%), SDG 14 - Life below water (13.6%) and SDG 2 - Zero hunger (4.5%).

Figure 1. Relevance of the 17 SDGs to place branding, according to academic experts.



Source: Own elaboration based on the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals icons. (<https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment>).

4.2.4. Institutional support

To further explore specific objective 3, a final section was dedicated to institutional support with the aim to link responses to previous research on SDGs in the context of universities. Scholars were asked whether their affiliated institutions promote inclusion of the SDGs, to which 43.2% of respondents answered affirmatively, 34.1% negatively and 22.7% said they did not know.

Experts working in institutions where SDGs inclusion is promoted determine integration of the SDGs into the curriculum or course content (57.9%) as the main mechanism, followed by workshops, training or guidelines for integrating the SDGs into research (47.4%), inclusion of the SDGs in research funding criteria (47.4%) and collaborative projects with other departments or organisations aligned with the SDGs (42.1%). Scholars provided other responses to this question, which include informal encouragement, organisational policies linking the SDGs to research and teaching, as well as forms asking whether the SDGs are referenced in research, when registering publications.

Respondents affiliated to institutions that do not promote SDG inclusion (34.1%) say that having SDG-inclusive initiatives would improve the reputation of the institution (56%). However, increased relevance and impact of research, as well as funding opportunities are not signalled as potential benefits of SDG-inclusive initiatives, with only 32% and 28% of experts identifying these as such. Furthermore, 16% of respondents also stated that the incorporation of such initiatives would not be of any benefit to their institution.

4.2.5. Responses to open-ended questions

The survey included open-ended questions so that scholars could provide additional insights on the topic. An inductive thematic analysis of these responses revealed several recurring themes in relation to the SDGs, namely Significance, Criticism, Application, Challenges and Integration, as shown in table 6.

Table 6. Themes and representative quotes of open-ended questions.

Theme	Answers collected
Significance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • SDGs as a buzz word nowadays, you have to use it • Social perception of the relevance of this issue • It is a very relevant issue, also something the funding instruments might find important • The overall global discussion on climate change, global warming and biodiversity crisis • Because it is the duty of academics to comply with the priorities of society • Sustainability is a crucial issue in any area of research, also in place branding • We live in the Anthropocene
Criticism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sustainability issues may already be seen as cliché or a 'tired' concept for research • Reluctance to frame everything in terms of goals set up by a powerful external actor. Sustainability can be addressed without using the UN, or the SDGs • I don't believe in normative conditioning of scientific research subjects or approaches • I don't think free research should be indoctrinated, streamlined, assessed and merited in terms of societal relevance. Putting sustainability as a label on everything we do, will just increase hypocrisy and greenwashing in academic narratives
Application	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Critical inquiry of place branding practice • As a field of research, we desperately need to engage with SDGs in a more comprehensive fashion • Relevance and accessibility within internationally accepted frameworks, lending credibility to discipline of place branding • The SDGs are fundamental to the development of resilient and sustainable places • It is definitely relevant, both to the topics of research and to the conduct of research. From a practice vantage, attention to SDGs offers a basis for place competitiveness • Place branding can be viewed as a secondary field of expertise 'serving' other fields of expertise for which a more direct link to SDGs can be instead crucial
Challenges	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Little access to information • Lack of understanding of how fundamental the SDGs are to the future of place development and human flourishing • The problem is the lack of interest in working really for the planet and a lot of initiatives can be considered only like greenwashing • Disciplinary approaches. Most of us are from marketing / communications. SDGs are more political science, environmental policy issues • It is most common to see place branding as a commercial strategy than to really contribute to well-being
Integration	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It is relevant to the topic discussed. I make reference to SDG in most of my writing • To mention the broader impact of specific research objectives, I tend to connect it to the UN's SDG goals • I work in the area of social sustainability, so it is relevant for my work • Helps me justify a critical approach • Not my field of expertise

Source: Own elaboration

Significance includes responses emphasizing the importance of SDGs, whether due to their trendiness, global reach, or social impact. Some experts stress the need to connect all human actions to SDGs, especially as we live in the Anthropocene. Others highlight their relevance in academia, stating that scholars have a duty to align with societal priorities and that SDGs are relevant across all research fields.

Conversely, Criticism includes concerns about the overuse and potential drawbacks of SDGs in place branding research. Some view sustainability as a tired or generic concept that can lead to greenwashing practices, while others question external imposition or scientific conditioning.

The Application theme includes responses on how the SDG framework is applied in place branding research. Most highlight its benefits, such as promoting critical research, fostering collaboration with institutions and governments, strengthening links to sustainable development, and enhancing brand relevance and place resilience. However, some responses suggest that SDG application may be more suitable for other disciplines and might not be a priority in place branding.

Responses under Challenges highlight obstacles to SDG inclusion in place branding research, including limited access to information, lack of interest and understanding, funding shortages, disciplinary approaches and the perception of place branding as a commercial strategy rather than a contributor to sustainable development.

Finally, the Integration theme reflects how researchers incorporate SDGs into their own work, either by aligning their research objectives with the SDG goals or by using them to justify a critical approach. However, one respondent stated that the SDGs are not relevant to their expertise, explaining their absence in their work.

5. Discussion and conclusions

The general objective of this study was to examine the use of SDGs as a framework in place branding research. To address this goal, three specific objectives were defined. The first specific objective sought to examine the relevance academic experts give to the SDGs in scientific production on place branding. The results show that 52.2% have never or rarely seen mentions of the SDGs, and 56.8% affirm that the inclusion of this framework is an uncommon practice in the discipline. These findings can be related to the lack of scientific literature on place branding and sustainable development observed in previous studies (Govers et al., 2017; Taecharungroj et al., 2019; Therkelsen et al., 2022). However, 45.5% of those surveyed are neutral regarding the need to publish more research articles that mention the SDGs, which can be interpreted as an indication that this framework is not perceived as essential for place branding academic experts.

The scholars surveyed identify SDG 11 (Sustainable cities and communities) as the most relevant goal, in line with previous research that highlights the exclusively urban focus of this SDG (Caprotti et al., 2017; Kaefer, 2021; Ripoll González & Gale, 2023). This evidence partially confirms results found in a former survey of experts from different sectors (Salvia et al., 2019), which showed a general preference for SDG 4 (Quality education), SDG 11 (Sustainable cities and communities), and SDG 13 (Climate action). In our survey, place branding scholars highlight SDG 11, SDG 8 (Decent work and economic growth), and SDG 13 as the most relevant. These results suggest the general trend in relation to SDGs 11 and 13 is common to the field of place branding, indicating the results are consistent in different contexts. Furthermore, SDG 9 (Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure) and SDG 3 (Health and Wellbeing) are identified as important by 40.9% and 36.4% of respondents, respectively, in line with a global survey of over 9,000

researchers (Lucraft et al., 2020), where academic experts who identified SDG 11 as relevant to their line of research frequently stated that SDGs 9 and 3 were also related to their work.

The second specific objective aimed to identify the reasons for the inclusion and absence of the SDGs in scientific production on place branding. Asked about the discipline in general, academic experts identify the perceived relevance of the research, greater relevance and impact of the study, as well as ethical considerations and funding opportunities as the main reasons that determine the inclusion of SDG-mentions. In contrast, the SDGs as the object of study and the main research framework are the reasons that accumulate the least responses, as shown in Table 3.

This clearly indicates that, in the field of academic research on place branding, the SDGs have so far been considered opportunistically, tangentially or as a complement, rather than being central or structural to the study, at least in the perception of the consulted experts, in line with Aguilera-Cora et al. (2024).

In addition, for experts who claim to have included mentions of the SDGs in their research articles, the main reason is greater relevance and impact on research. Conversely, those who have never mentioned the SDGs in their own work link this omission primarily to a perceived lack of relevance in their research and a limited understanding of how to incorporate the SDGs. Some of these results may find support in previous studies where experts highlight the importance of academic impact to inform future research (Lucraft et al., 2020), as well as the lack of specificity of the SDGs as an obstacle in their implementation (Valencia et al., 2019). Besides, some respondents justify the absence of SDG mentions to the conception of place branding as a commercial strategy and as a developing field of knowledge. These arguments can be linked to what is foreseen in the IPBA manifesto, which is a formal statement to clarify the definition of place branding, its principles and its scope. This document conceives place branding as a “relatively new and rapidly growing discipline” and emphasises “that it is not synonymous with, or even an extension of, pure marketing or promotion” (IPBA, 2023).

From the open questions, a consensus emerges to further integrate SDGs in place branding research. However, contrary opinions were also registered. One respondent is reluctant to imposed frameworks and conditions, and fears a possible greenwashing effect on academic debates. There is also who argues that place branding is part of the problem since it encourages consumption, which is the main sustainability problem. These approaches can be linked to previous literature that relates accusations of “SDG washing” to the lack of clarity of the SDGs, as well as highly unsustainable practices, for example, in the tourism sector (Therkelsen et al., 2021).

Another interesting outcome from the survey is related to institutional support. Academic experts who reported belonging to institutions that promote the inclusion of the SDGs indicated that the most common way to promote the inclusion of this framework is by incorporating it into the curriculum or course content (57.9%). This outcome corroborates findings in a literature review on the implementation of the SDGs in universities, where SDG integration in the curriculum was identified as the most recurrent initiative (Alcántara-Rubio et al., 2022).

The last specific objective sought to validate findings in prior publications on the role of SDGs in place branding literature. The analysis of the survey responses corroborates two of the main results reported in a previous study on place branding and sustainable development (Aguilera-Cora et al., 2024). First, mentions of the SDG are mostly found in the Introduction (67.9%) and Discussion (64.3%) sections, but rarely in the Title, Keywords and Results sections (14.3%) or in the Methodology (10.7%). Second, references to the SDG framework in place branding research articles remain scarce, as most respondents claim rarely or never encountering them in this field. These findings indicate that the SDGs receive limited attention,

with mentions primarily confined to contextual sections of scientific articles. This lack of focus on the SDGs is reinforced by the survey results linked to Table 3, as discussed above. In addition, survey results suggest that the low frequency of SDG mentions observed by Aguilera-Cora et al. (2024) is common to the discipline of place branding and not only to its intersection with sustainable development.

These findings align with previous studies signalling scientific production on SDGs is yet to be consolidated as a field of research (Yamaguchi et al., 2023; Kumar et al., 2024). At the same time, they show that the scientific discussion around the 2030 Agenda requires delving deeper into its academic understanding, as well as offering a comprehensive analysis of the overall vision of this framework (Sianes, 2021). Moreover, the evidence gathered by Pizzi et al. (2020) in the field of business and management can be extrapolated to place branding, as research related to the 2030 Agenda in this discipline remains fragmented, despite the general increase of publications since its adoption.

5.1. *Limitations and future research directions*

This study represents a first approximation to the vision that place branding academics have on the SDGs in the scientific production of this discipline. Despite starting from an initially small population, a significant sample of experts was recruited. One limitation is to have surveyed scholars who attended a particular conference, even if it is the most important conference in the sector. Other ways of gathering experts could broaden the results. Future research can expand the sample to include the views of professional experts. New works can adopt quantitative approaches to a larger sample to test hypotheses and uncover meaningful patterns. Additionally, techniques such as in-depth interviews, Delphi or discussion groups could offer deeper insights into the nuanced factors influencing experts' adoption or rejection of this framework, as well as capture underlying motives.

Research plays a crucial role in achieving the SDGs, by measuring progress to achieve them, identifying policy gaps or translating theoretical ideas into practical strategies and policies, as well as proposing new ways to operationalise them (Trane et al., 2023). However, public and private funding is important, especially considering that the progress towards achieving the SDGs requires a multi-stakeholder approach (Salvia et al., 2019).

Place branding scholars interested in SDGs can provide deeper knowledge of the topic by conducting comparative case studies to capture the impact of SDG-initiatives in different locations or assess the effectiveness of policy measures aimed at achieving the SDGs, as well as identify best cases. Interdisciplinary perspectives would be of great value, since the SDGs are concerned with a variety of issues. For this reason, collaboration between researchers coming from different backgrounds, as well as collaboration with policy and decision makers, would be highly beneficial. Moreover, studies with a comprehensive approach to the 2030 Agenda and its relationship with place branding can provide a better understanding on how to incorporate them in place branding research. Besides, referring to SDGs in academic works can promote knowledge sharing and enhance future collaborations (Meschede, 2020).

5.2. *Implications*

This study has several implications. First, it makes a relevant new contribution to the discipline of place branding, as it is, to our knowledge, the first study to survey place branding scholars on the use of SDGs as a framework. Second, the limited mentions of the SDGs in the title, keywords, or the Methodology and Results sections, suggest the need for a more comprehensive approach to integrate the SDGs in the scientific output on place branding; especially given the importance of cities in the 2030 Agenda, the global acceptance of this policy, and its mention in

the IPBA manifesto. Third, the fact that the IPBA manifesto was signed after the survey was conducted, and that it makes explicit reference to the SDGs, in addition to the fact that the 2030 Agenda is in the second half of the established timeframe, may imply changes in the focus of future research on place branding and sustainable development that may be interesting to monitor. Fourth, if we want the discipline of place branding to deepen its capacity to add good governance and sustainability, more research is needed in this direction to engage more scholars in this important topic, thus increasing the social value of our discipline.

This research article contributes to the following Sustainable Development Goals:



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Annex

Table 1 is available in the Figshare data repository with the following DOI:

<https://doi.org/10.6084/m9.figshare.28458752.v1>

Table 2 is available in the Figshare data repository with the following DOI:

<https://doi.org/10.6084/m9.figshare.28633202.v1>