

Big trouble in little places: understanding the complexities of place micro-brands

Complexities
of place micro-
brands

Maria Fernandez de Osso Fuentes and Brendan James Keegan
School of Business, Maynooth University, Maynooth, Ireland

Jenny Rowley
Manchester Metropolitan University, Manchester, UK, and

Esther Worboys
*Institute of Place Management, Manchester Metropolitan University,
Manchester, UK*

Received 27 July 2023
Revised 2 December 2023
2 February 2024
Accepted 2 February 2024

Abstract

Purpose – This paper aims to investigate place marketing and branding at the micro-place scale through the case study of St Christopher’s Place in London (UK). This study illustrates the distinctive differences of micro-place marketing, in comparison to city and country levels.

Design/methodology/approach – An exploratory case study was conducted through a sequential mixed methods approach involving direct observation, semi-structured interviews, questionnaires and social media analysis. Analysis of data was performed by using thematic analysis and triangulation of quantitative measures collected through the questionnaire and social media analysis.

Findings – Analysis of data illustrated noticeable differences of place management at the micro-place level compared to city or country scale of place marketing and branding. The function of emotional marketing leading to value co-creation is more effective at this level, establishing close and personal ties between occupiers and customers. Yet, measurement of micro-place marketing and branding value creation is difficult to achieve.

Originality/value – This study draws attention to the unique value and benefits of place branding at smaller spatial scales. Findings contribute to the place micro-brand concept by adding knowledge of micro-places through place management activities comparing them with city and country scales, and emotional marketing value co-creation practices, including challenges relating to measurement.

Keywords Place branding, Micro-place branding, Place management, Co-creation, Brand success, Place marketing

Paper type Case study

1. Introduction

Places must promote themselves to attract people through marketing strategies (Anholt, 2010; Kavaratzis, 2005), which are shown to benefit from long-standing decision-making

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Conflict of interest: None of the authors have a conflict of interest to disclose



frameworks (Baker, 2007; Ripoll Gonzalez and Gale, 2023). Place marketing and branding studies are predominantly country and city scales such as Australia (Pike *et al.*, 2010), Slovenia (de Chernatony and Ruzzier, 2013), Bogotá (Kavaratzis and Kalandides, 2015) and Dublin (Byrne and Skinner, 2007). Models to measure the success of place branding are similarly complex and impacted by factors outside of the place's control (Zenker and Martin, 2011). However, the lexicon of place branding studies on the macro-level (i.e. country and city) to date illustrates the lack of scrutiny at the smaller spatial scale.

Whilst place marketing is enacted in countries and cities, the potential for analysing phenomena that occur within the bounds of just one, or a few, streets could be as informative and likely to "reveal factors previously unobserved" (Warnaby, 2021, p.1). Arguably, by reducing the scale of observation, the creation and management of a micro-place brand can be studied in closer detail. Furthermore, with shopping and travel habits limited during COVID-19 restrictions, customer attention has shifted to local high streets and shopping centres, some of which will not have previously considered the opportunities presented by branding, place management and stakeholder engagement (Enoch *et al.*, 2022). Hehir *et al.* (2022) explored the concept of town centre paradigms in the retail landscape and the importance of town centre custodians adapting to challenges. Hence, an analysis of the branding of one such place micro-brands (PMB) – St. Christopher's Place (SCP) in London – forms the central plank of this research.

The overall aim of this research is to investigate place marketing at the micro-place scale by conducting an empirical case study. In doing so, we contribute to the understanding of place marketing and branding through the lens of the micro-place context. At this scale, distinctly different attributes were evident compared to town, city and regional scales, specifically where the role of emotional marketing takes a more dominant role than its larger counterparts.

2. Place marketing and branding

There are four widely recognised place marketing approaches. Geographical nomenclature, such as the Champagne region, links attributes of the place to the product (Kavaratzis and Ashworth, 2005). Place-product co-marketing, associating positive features between the place with a particular characteristic such as Swiss watches (Kavaratzis and Ashworth, 2008). Location marketing involves the location itself being marketed as a product. And place management, which attempts to also respond to the needs of the place users by restructuring at the local level towards place outcomes from a holistic approach (Vandeventer *et al.*, 2023). The Institute of Place Management identified the top 25 priorities that local place leaders should focus on to create sustainable high streets (High Streets Task Force, 2019).

Ongoing debates have attempted to clarify the differences between place marketing and branding. Lucarelli and Berg (2011) view the promotion of a place as a product or service, whereas branding creates associations, expectations and differentiations (see Aitken and Campelo, 2011; Anholt, 2010; Hankinson, 2004; Kavaratzis and Ashworth, 2005). Interest in place branding has been fuelled by its increasing need to compete on a global platform (e.g. Anholt, 2010; Ashworth and Kavaratzis, 2010; Hanna and Rowley, 2008; Kotler and Gertner, 2002; Warnaby *et al.*, 2002). Kavaratzis *et al.* (2015) list its additional benefits, including strategic guidance, common goal creation for stakeholder cooperation, attracting investment and contributing to a positive place experience.

Place branding was initially focused on the country level (Anholt, 2010; Hanna and Rowley, 2008; Kotler and Gertner, 2002) and tourism destination brands (Acharya and Rahman, 2016; Anholt, 2010; Bose *et al.*, 2016). However, it is applicable to non-touristic places (Baker, 2007)

such as town centres (Teller *et al.*, 2010) involving the physical and operational attributes of a place in place branding (Ashworth and Voogd, 1990; Kotler *et al.*, 1999). Recently, explorations of the nature and future of place branding are beyond its tourism approach (see Kavaratzis and Florek, 2021), with scant attempts to bridge the gap between theory and practice (Hankinson, 2010). Marketing a country, city or region is complex due to its multiple identities (Anholt, 2010), and the consideration of the place as a corporate umbrella brand (Skinner, 2008) while also exploring bottom-up challenges of place branding (Ripoll Gonzalez and Gale, 2023).

City branding is based on destination marketing and sense of place (Campelo *et al.*, 2014) and represents the culture and personality perceived through emotional and physical experiences (Geng *et al.*, 2023). This sub-field of place branding (Ghorbanzadeh *et al.*, 2023) goes beyond a city logo (Ashworth and Kavaratzis, 2007) but includes the value proposition that the city offers (Casais and Poço, 2023). Linked to city branding, urban identity as a multifaceted concept has been recently linked to digital technologies such as Smart Heritage as a way to improve city branding and place identity (Geng *et al.*, 2023).

In the city context, emotional place branding refers to the development of a unique position of the place framed in its emotional characteristics, essential for long-term relationships specifically when applied to destination brand image (Casais and Poço, 2023). The involvement and emotional attachment of residents affect their social and political participation in the community (Azevedo *et al.*, 2013; Chiang, 2016). Aligned with emotional place branding, the affective feelings of brand love have been applied to city branding to understand its factors on memorable experience, identity and attractiveness affecting tourists and its benefits to city branding (Ghorbanzadeh *et al.*, 2023).

2.1 Place micro-brands

Within the city scale, micro-brands act as micro-places. Micro-brands have been explored in food products (Kumar and Babu, 2013) and small restaurants (Bin Shahriar *et al.*, 2018), also applying a microlens of brand personality showcasing the advantages of this approach for studying specific sectors (Valette-Florence and De Barnier, 2013). However, scant references to “micro” places appear in place branding literature, such as the Qatari micro-state (Peterson, 2006) or the micro-region of Hateg in Romania (Vesa, 2017).

Micro-brands can be applied to place branding to facilitate highly focused branding efforts for customer satisfaction (Bin Shahriar *et al.*, 2018) due to their narrow smaller scale. Furthermore, their hyper-focused scale can potentially develop unique emotional links that shape the place personality, reinforcing satisfaction, loyalty and place attachment processes (Casais and Poço, 2023) between the micro-place and its consumers.

Our approach to micro-brands refers to smaller-scale places such as neighbourhoods, streets or squares that use branding techniques to differentiate themselves from other urban areas. Our narrow scope for PMB aims to study how these specific locations within locations, in commercial settings, can benefit from branding strategies in multiple areas (Debenedetti *et al.*, 2014; Peterson, 2006; Zenker and Braun, 2010), specifically exploring how emotional branding can develop particular bonds with local consumers (Casais and Poço, 2023).

2.2 The co-creation lens

In this scenario, the role of the consumer can easily transform into co-creators, included in the PMB process. To reflect authenticity, the PMB has to involve internal communities as co-creators to reinforce a sense of place, place satisfaction and loyalty (Casais and Poço, 2023). This involvement in co-creation techniques also helps better define a branding identity and strategies and activate them as ambassadors of the place branding process (Leal *et al.*, 2022). Moreover, digital technologies can play a crucial role in PMB marketing as the users become

co-creators of the place image while social media also acts as an environment for word of mouth (Confetto *et al.*, 2023).

Despite stakeholder involvement in place branding at any scale being essential for the creation of the brand identity and the development of sense of place (Casais and Poço, 2023), it is commonly applied top-down (e.g. Ripoll Gonzalez and Gale, 2023) which is argued to be contrary to its true dynamic, complex nature (Aitken and Campelo, 2011; Kavaratzis and Hatch, 2013). Through the co-creation perspective, a strong brand is formed by the sharing of experiences and opinions amongst its many co-creators (Giannopoulos *et al.*, 2021; Golestaneh *et al.*, 2022; Grönroos, 2000), highlighting the crucial role of residents in place branding (Pedeliento and Kavaratzis, 2019). Ntounis and Kavaratzis's (2017) empirical tests of the co-creation approach present its vital role in town strategy. Hehir *et al.* (2022) explored the concept of the town centre paradigm in the retail landscape, and Leal *et al.* (2022) explored the role of the local community in tourism brand co-creation and the need for their further involvement in this process. However, no studies were found that evaluate continued stakeholder involvement in the place brand in the PMB context.

2.3 Measuring return on investment of place branding

Traditional measures of return on investment (ROI) of place marketing, specifically in tourism (Ghorbanzadeh *et al.*, 2023), calculate place attachment due to its connection with authenticity, quality of life, destination image, satisfaction and loyalty (Casais and Poço, 2023). However, scholars call to better understand how place brand practitioners evaluate success (Hanna and Rowley, 2008) and the complexity of measuring brand equity (Zenker and Martin, 2011). Brand equity is often discussed as the impact of the brand on consumer perceptions, and defined as the additional value of the brand (Andéhn *et al.*, 2014). Aaker (1991), delineates brand equity through four dimensions: brand loyalty, brand awareness, brand association and perceived quality. This has been revisited by Tanveer and Lodhi (2016) confirming the positive impact of brand equity on consumer satisfaction. Brand equity models vary due to factors outside of the place manager's control (Tasci and Denizci, 2009), investment attractiveness of place branding (Bose *et al.*, 2016) or its measurement (Zenker, 2014). Lucarelli's (2012) city brand equity framework is based on three dimensions: city brand elements, city brand measurements and city brand impact.

Moreover, digital technology plays a role in marketing that could be crucial in micro-brand place marketing. Social media outlets are now important platforms through which place brands can be communicated and assessed, as they capture the dynamic nature of place brands (Andéhn *et al.*, 2014), specifically on digital destination branding (Confetto *et al.*, 2023). However, whilst there are many studies which demonstrate the ways in which social media influences place brand equity and place image (e.g. Ebrahimi *et al.*, 2020), the understanding of its implications for a PMB has not been approached. Specifically, there have been calls for more empirical studies on place branding involving multiple stakeholders and social media using user generated content (UGC) (Taecharunroj, 2019).

3. Methodology

An exploratory case study (Yin, 2018) aims to investigate a complex social phenomenon at a deep level and from different points of view to gain insights. SCP was selected as its location, familiarity, availability of information, scale and establishments allowed us to pursue the aim of the study. Insights were gathered through interviews, questionnaires, social media analysis and direct observation. Evidence collected from multiple sources is triangulated to "corroborate the same fact of finding" (Rowley, 2002) thus strengthening the construct validity of the case study (Yin, 2018).

SCP is a commercialised short street and piazza in London (UK), accessed from Oxford Street. The street dates back to the 1760s. Today, SCP is owned by the Bank of Montreal and managed by BMO Real Estate Partners. Together these streets, the piazza in between and some properties fronting Oxford Street and Wigmore Street are jointly branded as SCP with their own design elements and website. BMO employ a separate branding agency and a marketing agency that jointly manages SCP's advertising, social media and events programme. SCP estate comprises 54 retail and hospitality businesses, 40 office suites and 60 apartments (BMO Global Asset Management, 2020). We decided to focus on retail and hospitality businesses within SCP as per their direct involvement in the SCP brand.

3.1 Direct observation

Direct observation evaluated the extent to which SCP uses a holistic place management approach to place branding and how successful this has been. We used the top 25 priority framework developed by the Institute of Place Management (High Streets Task Force, 2019) as an indication of holistic place management. We focused on seven of the top priorities that can be controlled by the SCP's landlord/managing agent using a five-point Likert scale. Data were coded and results were descriptive to be triangulated as part of the overall results.

3.2 Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were held with the SCP General Manager, SCP marketing agency's Account Manager and SCP branding agency's Creative Director. A set of questions involving place management, co-creation and success of place branding was created and sent to the participants in advance. The interviews looked for evidence of the use at SCP of the specific High Streets Task Force (2019). The interviews were recorded remotely through Microsoft Teams and later transcribed. Data were analysed using thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2012,2021).

3.3 Occupier questionnaires

A questionnaire on the occupiers' involvement in the creation and curation of the SCP brand was created focusing on the retail and hospitality businesses, as they would likely have the most direct involvement in the SCP brand. Interview responses were considered in the design of the questionnaire, increasing its internal validity. The questionnaire was previously tested by an independent researcher and was sent through e-mail. The questionnaire assessed attitudes and opinions using a five-point Likert scale and an open question. A data requirements table (Saunders *et al.*, 2016) helped to ensure that the data collected would enable co-creation and brand benefit to be explored, (Table 1). The results were aggregated and anonymised, totals were expressed as a percentage of the maximum potential score. Modal analysis was used to find the most common score for each question and the results were descriptive. An inductive thematic analysis was also conducted of the freeform comments received.

3.4 Social media analysis

An analysis of SCP brand posts and UGC was performed using a social media insight tool over a three-month period on Instagram and Twitter. Posts, mentions and engagement with @SCP and #StChristophersPlace were gathered and prepared for quantitative analysis as well as being analysed for the overall sentiment.

Investigative questions	Variable(s) required	Detail in which data measured	Relation to theory and key concepts in literature
Do occupiers believe that SCP has a strong brand?	Opinion re strength of SCP brand	Feel. . . From “not at all”, to “strongly” (5 point)	Place branding, e.g. Baker (2007) , Anholt (2010)
Do occupiers believe that the SCP brand has contributed positively to attracting visitors/residents/ companies?	Opinion re benefits of SCP brand	Feel. . . From “not at all”, to “strongly” (5 point)	Benefit of place branding, e.g. Kavaratzis et al. (2015)
Do occupiers involve themselves in SCP events and activities?	Level of involvement	From “not at all” to “all of them” (5 point)	Co-creation, e.g. Grönroos (2000)
Do occupiers involve themselves in SCP marketing and communications?	Level of involvement	From “not at all” to “all of them” (5 point)	Co-creation
Were occupiers involved in developing the SCP brand?	Involvement	No, Yes, Don't know	Co-creation
How does their level of involvement at SCP compare with other sites (if applicable)	Level of involvement	From “less involved” to “more involved” (3 point)	Co-creation

Source: Created by authors

Table 1.
Data requirements table

4. Findings

4.1 Interviews

Thematic analysis of interviews produced key themes in relation to place management at the micro-level as well as the role of emotional marketing as a key facet for developing value co-creation and the challenges associated with attempting to identify PMB success factors ([Table 2](#)).

4.1.1 Place management on the micro-scale. SCP's General Manager clearly regards their role as being a holistic approach to place management, fitting into the design and basic services components of competitive place marketing strategy ([Kotler et al., 1999](#)). Their view presents a PMB management that pays attention to different areas to create a cohesive brand with their tenants:

We encourage brands, but it has to be the best on the high street. Not because we're snobs. That's not what we're about. We want to be more eclectic, unique, unusual, things that you can't find elsewhere, just like an alleyway and a pedestrian, ancient street in the middle of the West End (SCP's General Manager (GM)).

In doing so, the BMO deviate from our understanding of city and national place management ([Campelo et al., 2014](#)), by demonstrating extensive efforts to respond to the needs of place users and hence adapting the micro-place as a product whilst championing emotional bonds ([Casais and Poço, 2023](#)) between occupiers and their customers:

Customers care about the experience of the place, ambience, personalization of the shopping experience, the mix of occupiers that create the ambience, which makes it a very inviting, and sort of almost intimate spot in town (Branding Agency's Creative Director).

Participants clearly describe that having an umbrella SCP brand creates a number of longer-term benefits outside of simply driving footfall. Some of the benefits mentioned

Place management		Thematic coding	
		Emotional brand co-creation	
RO	Retail offer	OE	Occupier engagement
APP	Appearance	– OEP	Tenant promotions
NRO	Non-retail offer	– OER	Reciprocal promotions
PM	Place marketing	– OEB	Brand creation
DIV	Diversity	– OEO	Occupier's brand
ATT	Attractiveness	– OEE	Occupiers' equity
REC	Recreational space	– OEA	Occupier as ambassador
VAS	Vision and strategy	SE	Stakeholder engagement
IC	Identity creation	– SC	Stakeholder co-creation
SD	Strategic development	SDL	Customer as co-creator of value
FD	Footfall and awareness drivers	– SDLW	Customer research
NAP	Networks and partnership with council	– SDLI	Customer influencers
		– CPE	Contributing to positive place experience

Table 2.
Interview themes and
codes

Source: Created by authors

were identity creation and strategic development while looking at future growth diversifying channels:

We have a new strategy document that changed the brand guidelines, but more from a strategic level. It was about understanding opportunities with those international audiences through a programme of events and about how we're going to grow the digital channels showing how we will measure ROI (Marketing Agency's Account Manager).

SCP actively uses the spatial function of the space by changing the use of vacant units to construct workspace creative hubs as a further demonstration of holistic place management (Ashworth and Voogd, 1990). The generation of recreational space, relevant to their target audiences, further cements the notion of embracing emotional undertones in their place management initiatives:

It wasn't by accident that we bought an investment that was right in the thick of things, it was very much about the slightly style-conscious, more cosmopolitan customer, above average in affluence. The age varies hugely, and the male-female split, actually unusually was pretty close (SCP's General Manager).

Amidst the extensive efforts to increase awareness and drive footfall to SCP, there was an underlying desire to attempt to rationalise and justify the ongoing efforts of the place branding and marketing teams. Numerous campaigns to raise awareness of SCP were recounted, however, it presented challenges in terms of accounting for the outcomes:

We had a campaign running in Bond St Station and of the 4 million people that saw it, but we can only say that X amount came to SCP. But still, having that brand awareness visibility in such a high-profile location and high footfall through a tube station was great (Marketing Agency's Account Manager).

Finally, networks and partnerships were also considered as part of the place management of SCP, considering the different stakeholders such as neighbours and the city council:

We work very closely with our tenants, Westminster City Council and our neighbours. What we are now doing is working very closely with London and Partners, and the BID - New West End Company - to align behind them (SCP's GM).

4.1.2 *Emotional marketing leading to value co-creation.* A distinct theme which was identified in the analysis of participant conversations was the concept of emotional marketing as a tool to enable value co-creation (Casais and Poço, 2023) across the nexus of occupiers, customers and other stakeholders.

At the micro-place scale, the reliance upon emotional constructs such as affectivity and brand love is a distinctive feature of PMB place marketing efforts. SCP place managers maintained strong relationships with the occupiers, which helped drive the occupiers' involvement in the brand. The reciprocal characteristic of their relationship is key in the value co-creation process that would not be possible with larger stakeholders at the city, or nation-scale:

It's about targeting and creating those relationships and collaborations with we know are really hot at the moment. We've had some advice from brands on our estate about new directions and things that we hadn't thought of (SCP's GM).

The iterative nature of owner-occupiers' communication was a direct and positive influence on the overall SCP brand, which used strategies to listen and interact through co-creation with its stakeholders. Occupiers also played a significant role in creating the SCP PMB, through focus groups held to make strategic decisions about the SCP brand was confirmed:

We ran a series of focus groups and workshops, with occupiers, visitors and residents, to understand the perception of the place (Branding Agency's Creative Director).

Considering the viewpoints of the occupiers in the PMB, it proved to be a vital tool for understanding the optimal strategy for managing the PMB, harnessing their knowledge and awareness of their target and existing customer base. By focussing on the customer needs and wants, it was possible to provide the grounding for strategic decisions that enabled emotional marketing approaches targeting SCP customers.

Conversations with participants revealed multiple layers to the interpretation of the SCP brand, and how it is an attractive offering to the target customer base. By positioning the brand image of the micro-place using emotional characteristics, it has been possible to effectively develop long-term relationships with customers. In particular, the brand image was supported by a strong focus on the heritage of SCP as a compelling offering to its visitors amidst a large city with multiple offerings:

In the heart of London, there is so much competition around, you have to position SCP through its heritage. What people care about is what the place stands for, so you have to retain its character along the way (Branding Agency's Creative Director).

Nevertheless, despite not having direct participation in the strategic direction of the brand, occupiers acted as advocates for the SCP brand:

And I think what's nice about the relationship that occupiers, they all seem to have a sort of an ambassadorial role, they're all really proud about the place. And I think that helps with any kind of change management (Branding Agency's Creative Director).

Emotional affectation towards the place brand (Casais and Poço, 2023) on behalf of occupiers and customers was witnessed through interviews, surveys and social media analysis. Arguably the small-scale level of PMB enabled a value co-creation whereby multiple actors adopted were complicit in providing a positive brand image, both online and on the shop floor.

A further delineation from traditional place branding approaches was a tightly knit community approach, with collaboration opportunities with external bodies and inter-occupier cooperation also highlighted as key benefits to the SCP brand.

Creating those collaborations is about finding that sense of community. How SCP is a community. It's not just a street, it's not just a destination. But it's a community of retailers and restaurants (Marketing Agency's Account Manager).

There is also the strong belief that collaboration through promotions and events benefits all parties, as they all share a common target audience. However, participants recognised the extent of their knowledge and capabilities within such small-scale endeavours. It was acknowledged that occupiers had more success at communicating with the target audience, often online, offering an indirect boost to the SCP brand:

We're always promoting what the occupiers are doing, new launches and collections. We post them, and repost them on our Instagram channels (Marketing Agency's Account Manager).

We will support them but in some ways, individual businesses are better than we are (SCP's GM).

Participants described a challenging landscape when it came to persuading retail brands to commit to investment in a micro-place estate. This was a key frustration for place managers of SCP, highlighted by the extensive efforts used to convince occupiers of the longer-term advantages of the SCP PMB, compared to larger-scale locations which were often deemed to be a safer investment:

We have a lot to learn about trying to get occupiers on board when you're trying to promote the small-scale place such as SCP, which might not necessarily result in direct sales. You might not get an uptick this month, but you might do it in three months. So it's the long game and I think that's the tricky thing (Branding Agency's Creative Director).

However, it was noted that the unique attributes identified in the analysis of findings, such as emotional marketing and centring efforts on heritage were useful fodder for encouraging value co-creation with occupiers and their customers. When successful, these approaches allowed occupiers to create a more thorough understanding of their bespoke target audience due to the small-scale size of the campaign:

SCP attracts what we call Style Hounds and Cosmopolitans. Style Hounds, the kind of people that like to stay up with the latest trends, want to know about the newest kind of eateries to go to, want to know what kind of sales we've got on, what new launches are going on. Cosmopolitans sometimes need to be persuaded, so that's where bloggers and influencers are really good on the fashion side of things and when you have a good occupier mix it can be incredibly effective for the space (Branding Agency's Creative Director).

Emotional marketing and branding strategies are successfully used when creating a space for positive place experiences, involving non-tangible aspects that would then help position the place brand:

We had three buskers in and the last one just got that magical moment where totally unprompted, about 20 people at the various restaurants started singing, you'd pay a huge amount of money to fake that, but we loved it. A lot of events and that is almost like you have to have operational space, you need to be able to tell a decent story (SCP's GM).

Hence, our findings indicate how the micro-place dynamic nurtures co-creation relationships building the PMB is presented as a benefit in target definition rather than mass market scenarios.

4.2 Occupier questionnaire

Questionnaire results indicated a general belief that SCP has a strong brand (68%), which contributes towards attracting visitors (69%). The majority of occupiers indicated a level of involvement in SCP events (65%) and marketing (65%). However, there does not appear to

be a correlation between the level of involvement and how strongly occupiers rate the brand and its ability to attract visitors. These findings correlate with studies describing the challenges of bottom-up approaches to place branding (Ripoll Gonzalez and Gale, 2023). This is an area that could benefit from further statistical analysis of a larger sample. Only one respondent believes that they have more involvement with the marketing at SCP than their other sites (Question 6). Nevertheless, there were differences in response and mean average scores in Questions 1–4 between food and beverage (F&B) occupiers (15.3) and retailers (12.3). Discrepancies were reflected in the freeform comment section of the questionnaire, with retail occupiers believing that marketing and events are predominantly F&B-focused and not always aligned with retailers' needs. Despite co-creation challenges, the emotional bond created through the PMB aids in building a positive brand image. Table 3 provides an overview of the range of results in the occupier questionnaire.

4.3 Social media

Social media data was also analysed to help assess the strength of the place brand through analysis of occupier, influencer and customer UGC and engagement with the brand's posts. Data were collected and analysed in February 2021, when SCP's official social media accounts had 3,963 Instagram followers and 4,345 Twitter followers.

Followers of the SCP accounts only exist because of the brand, and so the SCP social media can be said to have generated 100% more brand awareness than a similar, non-branded cluster of streets. The 189 SCP posts during this period generated 4,429 engagements or an average of 23 engagements per post which is also strong.

Regarding UGC, there were 90 pieces about SCP during the period – 77 on Instagram and 13 on Twitter. A majority (69 pieces) were generated by SCP occupiers (4 out of the 54 retail and leisure occupiers) as shown in Figure 1. This is aligned with the interview data where occupiers' direct online communication with the target audience was recognised as more successful and indirectly boosted the PMB.

The lack of UGC implies that SCP's social media brand has predominantly been created top-down, rather than co-created by either occupiers through reciprocal branding, or by influencers or customers. Influencer content was mainly on Instagram, with a post with 1,546 views, 571 likes and 66 comments. Five out of the eight influencer posts tagged or mentioned individual occupiers as well as SCP, as did one of the partners and one of the customer posts. However, none of the occupier posts tagged other occupiers. Despite the positive value of UGC, our study proves the challenges of top-down strategies in place branding (Ripoll Gonzalez and Gale, 2023), and the opportunity to implement emotional marketing strategies to drive this type of content on social media.

4.4 Direct observation

A visit to SCP on 14 November 2020 provided a thorough set of field notes that were coded and total scores calculated as seen in Table 4. SCP scored 77% in terms of control, in line with the High Streets Task Force (2019) priority factors. Furthermore, observations demonstrated how this control has created a strong identity for SCP (86%). Non-retail services, diversity of occupiers and provision of recreational space through the central piazza, with its striking Christmas display, public toilets and benches, contributed to a distinctive micro-place offering.

4.5 Triangulation

By analysing how the SCP brand is developed and managed, in this article we explore PMB to understand the aspects that affect their management involving challenges, co-creation

Occupier	Type	Question 1 Do you believe SCP has a strong brand? not at all = 1 strongly = 5	Question 2 Do you believe SCP brand contributes to attracting visitors?not at all = 1 strongly = 5	Question 3 Do you take part in SCP events/ activities?never = 1 always = 5	Question 4 Do you take part in SCP marketing? never = 1 always = 5	Question 5 Were you involved in the SCP brand strategy in 2018/ 2019?	Question 6 Do you get more involved with marketing at SCP than other sites? 1 = less 3 = more
1	Retail	3	DK	3	3	DK ^	N/A
2	Retail	3	4	2	2	N	2
3	Retail	3	3	4	3	DK	N/A
4	Retail	3	3	3	3	DK	2
5	F&B	3	3	3	3	Y	2
6	Retail	5	3	4	4	N	N/A
7	Retail	3	4	3	4	DK	3
8	F&B	4	4	4	3	DK	2
9	F&B	5	5	5	4	DK	2
10	Retail	3	3	2	3	DK	2
11	Retail	3	3	4	4	Y	N/A
12	Retail	3	3	2	3	N	N/A
<i>Total</i>		<i>41/60 = 68%</i>	<i>38/55 = 69%*</i>	<i>39/60 = 65%</i>	<i>39/60 = 65%</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>15/2171%</i>
<i>Mode response</i>		<i>3</i>	<i>3</i>	<i>3 and 4</i>	<i>3</i>		<i>2</i>

Source: Created by authors

Complexities
of place micro-
brands

Table 3.
Occupier
questionnaire
responses

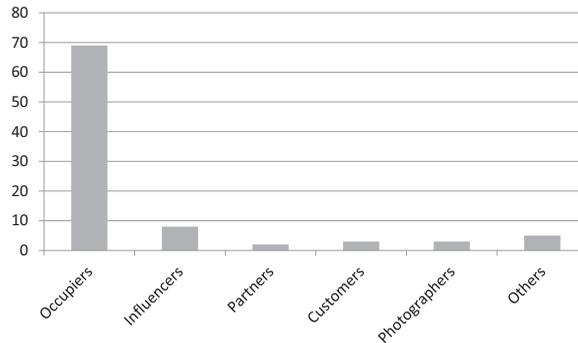


Figure 1.
UGC by user type

Source: Created by authors

practices and success factors. The independent data sources described are brought together in the five premises outlined below. [Figure 2](#) provides an overview of the key areas whereby the data collection represents the triangulation of the findings leading to the broader contributions which will be discussed in the next section.

5. Discussion

Our study sought to explore PMB through an empirical case study setting offering contributions to our understanding of the differences in place management at the micro-scale compared to city and country levels, and the role of emotional branding in PMB to lead to value co-creation. Data analysis unveiled complex practices around the creation and management of a PMB, addressing the gap in the scant references to PMB in literature (e.g. [Bin Shahriar et al., 2018](#)). Moreover, it exposes the views and actions of place brand practitioners offering a novel bridge between practice and theory which has been generally unexplored ([Hankinson, 2010](#)). In line with the triangulation of data and analysis of findings, we offer the following propositions that guide our discussion of the case study findings:

- P1.* SCP uses holistic place management, which has created stronger benefits for the brand than traditional location marketing.

Both direct observation and the interview with the General Manager revealed a high level of place management, particularly proactive curation of the occupier mix which is easier to achieve due to single ownership and management. This has created a stronger identity and differentiation for SCP than the use of logos and branding. Specifically, the place management of the PMB deviates from the common understanding of city and national place management ([Campelo et al., 2014](#)) by adapting the micro-place as a product whilst championing emotional bonds between occupiers and their customers. Evidence of these benefits was found through our research, supporting previous studies on retail mix influence on attractiveness ([Ashworth and Voogd, 1990](#); [Kotler et al., 1999](#); [Teller et al., 2010](#)). Furthermore, in line with [Vandeventer et al. \(2023\)](#) on the need for a holistic approach of place management, we advance the place management approach to PMB by describing stronger benefits than traditional location marketing. Proactively curating all aspects of the PMB will potentially have a bigger impact on the customer's decision, increasingly relevant in today's competitive environment:

	Managed/curated? Not at all Completely					Creates identity for SCP? Not at all Completely					Notes	
	← 1	2	3	4	→ 5	← 1	2	3	4	→ 5		
Priority												
Retail offer			✓						✓			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Boutique, unusual shops, compared to Oxford Street's generic high-street retailers • Mainly jewellery and fashion
Appearance			✓						✓			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A few rubbish bags waiting to be cleared but generally clean • Lots of Christmas decorations, poster sites, etc implying strong management
Non-retail offer			✓						✓			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stronger leisure (food and beverage) offer than retail, including "on-trend" operators such as Homeslice and Patty & Bun • Some on James Street – the outer fringes of SCP, which are less branded than the centre, therefore weaker association • But strong Al Fresco dining offer in the piazza
Place marketing			✓					✓				<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mixed branding, colours, typeface, style, etc. • Eye-catching but does not say much about the brand values and identity
Diversity			✓						✓			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Marketed as "independent", "boutique" but only 23% are genuine independents (i.e. single branch) • Shops appear to be good quality • Mainly high-end fashion, jewellers and services in the centre with F&B in the piazza and along the outskirts • No convenience retail, although this is nearby on Oxford Street
Attractiveness			✓						✓			

(continued)

Table 4.
Results of direct
observation

Complexities
of place micro-
brands

Table 4.

Priority	Managed/curated? Not at all Completely					Creates identify for SCP? Not at all Completely					Notes		
	←	1	2	3	4	5	←	1	2	3		4	5
Recreational space													<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Based on what was visually accessible – column and bollard artwork, Christmas lights and general colour scheme etc. – attractive but mixed branding and not unique in London Red clock on Oxford Street, and Gees Court entrance, create unique signage and welcome A lot of empty units – with mixed branding on vinyl One central piazza, used for events, decorations and other animation Good for al fresco dining and a quiet space in Central London Magical “discovery” of the piazza Piazza includes public toilets and benches which are footfall drivers
Total													27/35 = 77% 30/35 = 86%
Source: Created by authors													

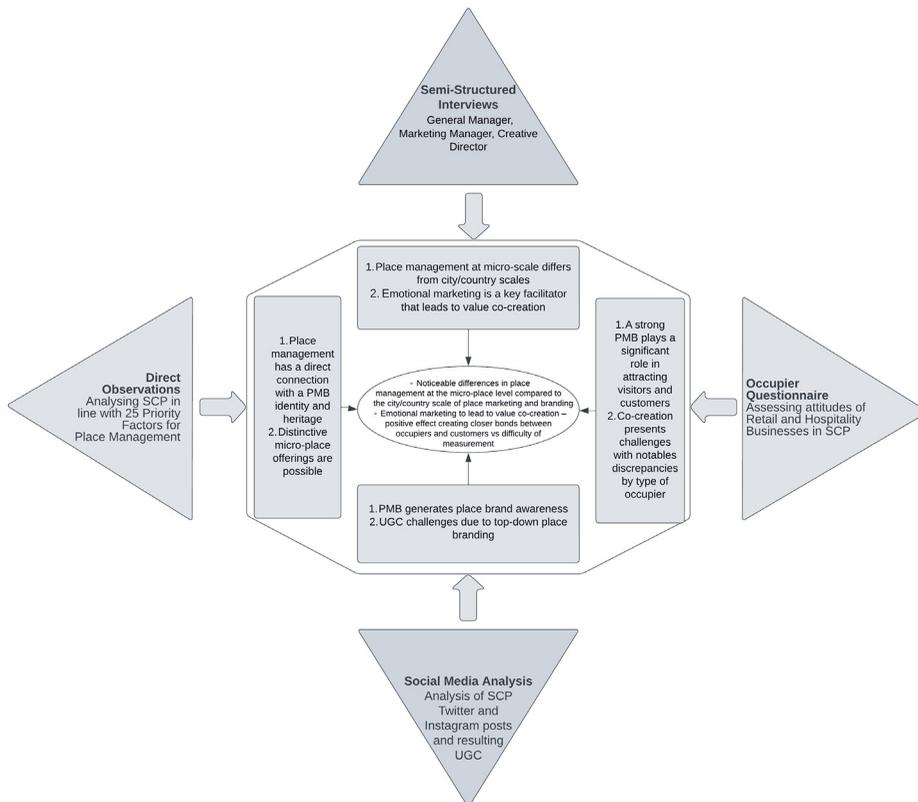


Figure 2.
Triangulation model

Source: Created by authors

P2. SCP has an identity which would not exist without place branding and management.

The efforts from the General Manager strategy, specifically looking at brand and marketing support to the occupiers, help build the PMB of SCP. Participants confirmed raising brand awareness for SCP as one of its important functions. The importance of place branding and place management efforts in building the SCP identity is also evident through our direct observation, occupiers questionnaire and social media results analysed above. Our analysis applies the umbrella brand used from a country-level concept (Skinner, 2008) in an innovative micro-place scenario and micro-brand perspective (Bin Shahriar *et al.*, 2018), confirming many benefits such as place management of the micro-place spaces, occupiers general support and promotion, positive consumer place experiences involving non-tangible aspects and the ability to attract visitors and community creation around the PMB:

P3. Emotional value co-creation is beneficial but challenging at a micro-place scale.

Findings indicate how place marketing and branding are malleable and are suitable to the micro-scale by championing emotional bonds between occupiers and their customers, which translates into emotional marketing that leads to value co-creation (Casais and Poço, 2023).

PMBs are found to have distinctive features such as affectivity and brand love in their marketing efforts. Emotional marketing through a focus on concepts such as heritage encouraged value co-creation with occupiers and customers. This emotional marketing approach allows the PMB to develop long-term relationships with customers also differentiating it from other city and place offers through brand love (Ghorbanzadeh *et al.*, 2023). Co-creation has proved to be a vital tool for understanding place management strategies (Ntounis and Kavaratzis, 2017) for the PMB while allowing emotional marketing approaches targeting their customers (Casais and Poço, 2023). Furthermore, including collaborations with external bodies and inter-occupier cooperation are key benefits of PMB. Findings uncovering the potential benefits of continued involvement of stakeholders in brand creation (Golestaneh *et al.*, 2022) at smaller scale contexts will be of use for future understanding of PMB. We contribute to Hehir *et al.* (2022) work on co-creation in supporting the vitality and viability of place branding at a smaller spatial scale. We offer an exposition of potential stakeholder inclusion, broadening the understanding of the complexity of place branding amidst bottom-up approaches (Ripoll Gonzalez and Gale, 2023).

We extend the empirical tests on place brand co-creation (see Aitken and Campelo, 2011; Ntounis and Kavaratzis, 2017) by exploring the challenges of PMB. Whilst the interviewees felt they were engaging strongly in reciprocal branding, this view was not shared by the occupier responses and managing agents. Yet, they are seen as place ambassadors of SCP, presenting a new perspective of co-creation in PMB where stakeholders help define the branding identity as ambassadors of the place branding process (Leal *et al.*, 2022). Despite digital technology being crucial in recent digital destination branding studies (see Confetto *et al.*, 2023), the results from our social media analysis present a lack of UGC at SCP which could be overcome by promoting the involvement of internal stakeholders through digital and smart innovations that promote place identity processes:

P4. The overarching place brand has also conferred other benefits.

The research identified ways in which the place practitioners at SCP evaluate place brand success. They perceived wider benefits including strategic development of promotional partnerships, amplification of marketing messaging and creation of a community of occupiers as being as important as footfall and other more measurable indicators. Thus, we contribute towards a better understanding of how place brand practitioners evaluate success (Hanna and Rowley, 2008). Participants confirmed the perceived benefits of place branding as identified by Kavaratzis *et al.* (2015). Strategic guidance and contributing to positive PMB experiences were considered important for SCP. Including these within future place brand equity measurement frameworks will help ensure that these better reflect the view of practitioners. This micro-scale to place branding presents the unique opportunity to reinforce satisfaction, loyalty and place attachment processes (Casais and Poço, 2023) due to the proximity of the place managerial team with consumers and retail occupiers, as shown in the interviews. The research has also extended studies of the measurement of place brand equity (e.g. Taacharungroj, 2019; Tasci and Denizci, 2009; Zenker, 2014).

6. Conclusion

This research aimed to investigate place marketing and branding at the innovative micro-place scale by conducting an empirical case study based on London's SCP. We contribute to place marketing and branding through the lens of the micro-place context on two levels: the importance of place management and emotional branding leading to co-creation practices.

PMB themes derived from the study are generalisable for an increased understanding of how place branding and marketing can be applied to other small spatial entities.

This study presents some limitations. The scale and methodology applied may be difficult to transfer to different contexts. However, the contributions could be valuable for smaller-scale shopping centres or business improvement districts, as examples of other types of PMB.

Managerial implications highlighted involve the importance of a place management approach to micro-places. The efforts to promote the different elements inside the micro-place witnessed in this study could be valuable for the creation of positive and cohesive place experiences in other PMBs. As value co-creation in PMB is shown as a powerful tool, place managers should ensure relevant stakeholders are included in the branding process and strategy. This research found several challenges in the micro-place brand co-creation processes. Further research is needed to evaluate places that have overcome these challenges, or where ongoing co-creation has been continued. Revised frameworks of place brand equity measurement would gain from including additional long-term brand benefits. Similarly, further development is needed in the use of social media analysis as a measurement of place brand equity.

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Corresponding author

Maria Fernandez de Osso Fuentes can be contacted at: maria.fernandezdeosso@gmail.com

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