

# Unpacking a global spatial brand: brand management practices in the UNESCO City of Gastronomy Network

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – This study investigates the UNESCO Creative City of Gastronomy Network as a global spatial brand and explores the tensions that emerge when this global brand is appropriated locally.

**Design/methodology/approach** – This paper is based on case study research that uses critical discourse analysis to identify the implications of a transferable learning capacity.

**Findings** – This paper identifies three different types of tensions in place brand management that emerge during the local appropriation of global brands: tensions inherent in multi-scalarity, tensions associated with integrating governance and strategy-related tensions.

**Originality/value** – This study advances the theoretical understanding of the spatial complexity inherent in place brand management practices by focusing on the UNESCO Creative City of Gastronomy Network as a global brand in a Scandinavian context.

**Keywords** Spatiality, Brands, Sustainable development, Food, UNESCO

**Paper type** Research paper

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## Introduction

Food and gastronomy (F&G) resources are increasingly used by cities and regions as essential elements of place branding efforts, as these can harness the value of a place and connect several aspects of the place experience (Rinaldi, 2017; Pasquinelli *et al.*, 2021). Territories are branded both locally and globally through F&G (Charters *et al.*, 2013); moreover, brands can become powerful semiotic devices that can shape and reshape local identities by mediating their relationship with the global. This is evident, for example, in how brands and branding are used by place managers and food managers to articulate the sustainable development (SD) discourse (UN, 2015), thus making it a dominant focus of interest among policy makers, businesses and society (Gonzalez and Gale, 2022).

Thus, SD is increasingly deemed to be an unquestionable pillar of any contemporary undertaking of place branding, including in the context of F&G. However, as the sustainability agenda discourse is extremely malleable, places and businesses often use “the language of sustainability selectively” to prioritise, for example, economic and environmental concerns over social justice issues (Long, 2016, p. 156). Moreover, the understanding of what SD and the related Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) mean is subject to the local interpretation of the global SD rhetoric, which is generally very abstract in nature (Rinaldi *et al.*, 2021). In this view, the UNESCO Creative Cities Network (UCCN) can be seen as a suitable object of investigation. In fact, we can view the UCCN as a global spatial brand that conveys the global SD discourse, which necessarily needs to be appropriated by members in the attempt to pursue the 2030 Agenda for SD at the local level through situated practices. Prior studies have addressed the UCCN as a brand. For example, Guo and Hsu (2023) focused on the development of Creative Cities of Gastronomy from the perspective of tourists’ brand experiences within these cities. In addition, Pearson and Pearson (2017) interpreted the UCCN as co-branding between an international brand – the United Nations – and the cities, as a means to enhance the perception of the cities as cultural icons. Others have investigated the tendency to use UCCN membership as a branding tool (Rosi, 2014; Gathen *et al.*, 2021). Still other studies have investigated the intersection between city branding and public diplomacy within the UCCN (dos Santos, 2021). However, no studies to date have addressed the managerial practices and challenges that emerge when managing a global spatial brand in a local context. Therefore, the present paper addresses this gap by exploring the context of Östersund, Sweden, which joined the UCCN as a City of Gastronomy in 2010, to illustrate how the appropriation of a global brand such as UNESCO can create spatial tensions at the local level. In its attempt to advance the theoretical understanding of the spatial complexity inherent in place brand management (Boisen *et al.*, 2011; Pike, 2011), this paper follows what Lucarelli *et al.* (2023) defined as “new context spotting”. Namely, the paper examines “a newer [...] context, which could render a different or complementary understanding of previous contribution attempts” (p. 7). In this case, we investigated the spatial complexity that emerges when an inherently scalable brand such as UNESCO is appropriated at the local level.

## The UCCN as a global place brand strategy for sustainable development

Cities and regions are increasingly attempting to brand themselves as “sustainable” (Rinaldi *et al.*, 2021). On the one hand, many cities across the globe are trying to integrate the SDGs in their urban development and place branding narratives through different strategies (Gonzalez and Gale, 2022). On the other hand, through its various programmes (e.g. the UCCN), UNESCO represents a “vessel” of the SD discourse that crystallises as a global brand, carrying value-based meanings that encompass peace, international cooperation and knowledge-sharing and contribute to the achievement of the 2030 Agenda [1]. In this context, UCCN membership is increasingly used as a branding tool by cities to attract investment and tourism (Rosi, 2014), even though one of the main objectives of the UCCN is to build a stronger identity based on

cooperation between cities. Accordingly, the UCCN is becoming a global spatial brand where member cities are called on to take actions to realise the 2030 Agenda for SD. In particular, SD represents a global discourse that needs to be embedded in local contexts across very diverse UCCN cities and is something that must be materialised through practice. This offers an opportunity to critically investigate how the global–local relation emerges within the context of F&G as “[t]he local-global debate is embedded in the gastronomy literature” (Pasquinelli *et al.*, 2021, p. 563), while exploring the implications the SD discourse may have for both practitioners and scholars. To understand how the SD global discourse embodied by the UCCN brand is translated into local practices, it is necessary to explore globalisation literature and its relationship with brands.

While globalisation literature has evolved throughout the years, particularly in terms of how the global–local relation is conceived, Sharifonnasabi *et al.* (2019) have identified different theoretical perspectives concerning branding (homogenization, glocalisation and deterritorialisation) and further suggested pathways to investigate the symbolic meanings of global brands (GBs) within each perspective. For the purpose of this study, the homogenization perspective is conceptually more restrictive and not fruitful for the analysis, as the flow of the brands and symbols of Western values and ways of living is considered unidirectional (i.e. flowing from the Western countries in the centre to the recipient countries on the periphery) (Levitt, 1983). Instead, the perspectives of “glocalisation” and “deterritorialisation” are conceptually more useful and appropriate to frame our case, as they point to how the periphery receives and adapts global brands and values.

When globalisation is conceived as “glocalisation”, the periphery is not considered as a mere recipient of products, brands and cultural symbols, but it also appropriates these offerings and changes the meanings. Therefore, local cultures in the periphery evolve into a hybrid form of local and global cultures which co-exist simultaneously (Craig and Douglas, 2006). Roudometof (2016) appreciates the concept of “glocalisation” by using the metaphor of refraction (where light or radio waves are deflected when passing through a medium). Globalisation is conceived of as a process where waves spread around the world, while the refraction of waves allows us to understand the global–local binary. Therefore, glocalisation can be considered as the refraction of global qualities through the local. Within the glocalisation perspective, GBs are still considered as symbols of Western culture; however, different cultural contexts make them subject to modification to maintain the ethnic values of the periphery. Within food, the glocal discourse is generally referred to as a scenario where the “new paradigm shifts from the industrialized and conventional food sector towards re-localized production regimes” (Wilhelmina *et al.*, 2010, p. 361).

Finally, when globalisation is interpreted as “deterritorialisation”, the flow of products and cultural symbols is considered multidirectional and interrelated where all nation states are impacted by others, independently from a centre-periphery relation (Appadurai, 1990). Here, ties between culture and place are weakened, and culture is detached from a physical location, leading to a “deterritorialisation of culture” (Faist, 2000, p. 13). Within deterritorialisation, the weakening of ties with particular localities (Cayla and Eckhardt, 2008) causes GBs to appear as a collage of different cultures (Craig and Douglas, 2006). In the context of F&G “[t]erritorialization-deterritorialisation refers to a recurring tension in crafting food products associated with the real or imagined place(s) of origin” (Cruz *et al.*, 2022), which can be examined through spatial lenses.

#### *Understanding spatiality through the global–local continuum*

The different ways in which globalisation is conceptualised shed light on how the global–local relation can manifest. However, within the glocalisation and deterritorialisation perspectives, it

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appears that the local is subject to the global and somehow defined by it. To overcome this impasse and lay the ground for understanding how GBs materialise spatially, one has to offer the “local” the conceptual autonomy it deserves. To do so, it is necessary to draw from human geography and introduce the concepts of “space” and “place” and their relation, as they represent theoretical tools to unpack the spatiality of branding (Giovanardi and Lucarelli, 2018). On the one hand, *space* can be considered “as a location that has no social connections for a human. No value or meaning has been added to it, and it is more to less abstract in nature” (Tuan, 1977, p. 6). On the other hand, *place* is considered as a location created by human experience, where the “meaning of place does not [...] come from locations [but] lies in the largely unselfconscious intentionality that defines places as profound centres of human experience” (Relph, 1976, p. 43). Therefore, place can be considered as a portion of space filled with meanings attributed by human experience (Roudometof, 2019). It follows that space and place concepts, as well as their relation, can be used to create a better understanding of the global–local relation, especially in relation to branding.

In fact, as with global and local, space and place should not be considered as a binary opposition.

This is also pointed by Giovanardi and Lucarelli (2018), who suggest that spatiality should be conceptualised in a way that reconciles the “place VS space” dichotomy. In Gieryn’s (2000, p. 465) words, the space-place nexus can be considered as follows:

Space is what place becomes when the unique fathering of things, meanings, and values are sucked out [...] [whereas] place is space filled up by people, practices, objects and representations.

From this perspective, the local can be considered as a place (Roudometof, 2019), whereas the space becomes the vector which allows the place to move around the globe in the same way brands can be simultaneously global and local because of their spatiality, not only because of their symbolic or physical dimensions (see Giovanardi and Lucarelli, 2018). It follows that the lenses of glocalisation can help us better scrutinise the dynamics that characterise the local–global nexus that is activated when UCCN member cities deploy locally situated brand management practices.

## Methodology

The present study is based on an established approach that understands places and cities (Hastings, 1999) discursively. Accordingly, critical themes can be accessed by studying the way in which local stakeholders frame their branding practices within their sociocultural and institutional context. The city of Östersund was deemed to be a suitable study context as it has a central role in the UCCN. The context could therefore be used to obtain rich insights that the authors could elaborate to engage in meaningful theory building.

Research occurred in two stages. A first round of in-depth interviews was carried out to perform a comprehensive examination of the case study settings. Participants included policy makers and businesses developers from regional administrations, the municipality, learning institutions, gastronomy businesses and brewers. Strategic sampling, which was combined with a snowball approach, laid the foundation for the selection of interview respondents. The ten interviews were integrated with the analysis of official documents and archival resources, thus enabling a deeper understanding of the context in which the UCCN was embedded. Specifically, this first research stage deepened our understanding of the F&G, the relation between food production and consumption, and the policymakers’ and local actors’ approaches to development in Östersund and the surrounding region.

In the second stage, we included five additional interviews with key actors who managed the UCCN brand since the city’s appointment in 2010 to explore more in depth the achievements and challenges they had experienced in adopting and working with the UCCN. More precisely, these interviews were carried out to determine how the adoption of

the UCCN global brand, with a focus on SD in F&G, would be received and what challenges emerged. Accordingly, the research revolved around the relationship between different actors in the food supply chains in Östersund (primary production, restaurants, citizens and exports), how the food production region and the city food consumption places (restaurants, shops, bars, etc.) were interlinked, and what opportunities and challenges emerged from the articulation of the global UCCN branding in local contexts. Interview participants were coded as “P” and numbered.

Following [Lucarelli and Giovanardi’s \(2016\)](#) analytical procedure, this study applied [Wetherell’s \(1998\)](#), discursive approach to place and space. Data was analysed in a search for “interpretive repertoires”, namely, crucial nodal points that “fix” in discourse forms the social processes underpinning the branding dynamics. We triangulated the primary data emerging from interviews with secondary data, including Östersund’s application to the UCCN, policy documents focusing on creative city management and media articles. The Appendix categorises the documents according to their focus, number of articles, and year of publication. The secondary data collection helped to contextualise data from the interviews, and the results are reported within the findings analysis.

[Table 1](#) illustrates relevant data resulting from the interviews from the first and second stage and summarises the findings discussed in the following sections.

### Östersund and Jämtland/Härjedalen in perspective

This section introduces the study setting and the food context.

#### *The context of Östersund*

Östersund is situated in the sparsely populated region of Jämtland/Härjedalen, which stretches from central to northern Sweden. In 2010, Östersund had approximately 900 registered businesses in the cultural and creative industries (CCIs), and in the entire region of Jämtland/Härjedalen, CCIs were dominated by F&G ([Skoglund and Jonsson, 2012](#)). Against this backdrop, the county governor, in cooperation with other stakeholders, decided to initiate the process that led to the city of Östersund being designated a member of the UCCN in 2010 ([Östersunds Kommun, 2010](#)).

The UCCN is a worldwide network of cities that was established in 2004 to “strengthen cooperation with and among cities that have recognised creativity as a strategic factor of

Interviews – first stage		Interviews – second stage	
Purpose	Examine the case study setting and enable a broader understanding of the context for the UCCN	Purpose	Acquire a deeper understanding of the UCCN-specific opportunities and challenges
Sample N = 10	Local actors involved in Östersund F&G	Sample N = 5	Actors specifically involved in UCCN planning, management and activities
Duration	Approximately 1 h per interview	Duration	Approximately 1 h per interview
Analytical approach	Thematic analysis	Analytical approach	Discourse analysis – interpretive repertoires ( <a href="#">Wetherell, 1998</a> )
Findings	Food and community landscape; cooperation among local actors	Findings	Tensions inherent in multi-scalarity; tensions of integrating governance; strategy-related tensions

**Table 1.**  
Primary data: first  
and second stage

Source: Authors’ elaboration

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sustainable development as regards economic, social, cultural and environmental aspects” (UNESCO, 2018). Cities apply to become elected members in one of seven sub-categories: crafts and folk art, design, film, gastronomy, literature, media arts or music. The goal of the Östersund membership application was to “develop the city’s economy, society, and cultural diversity where both the cultural industries and other economic activity will enable further investments in the creative sector” (Östersunds Kommun, 2010). In particular, the UCCN could be considered an example of global place branding or co-branding between the UN and cities that have been successfully awarded a designation by UNESCO (Pearson and Pearson, 2017). The main objective of the UCCN is to “promote cooperation with and among cities that have identified creativity as a strategic factor for sustainable urban development” (<https://en.unesco.org/creative-cities/home>). Therefore, the UCCN explicitly states that addressing SD by means of creativity is the core element through which cities obtain recognition. Activities carried out by the network should comply with and work towards the 2030 SD Agenda.

#### *Food and community landscape*

One of the main characteristics of Östersund that led to UCCN recognition was its capacity to connect the Jämtland food producing region to the city of Östersund as the food consumption/selling city. Jämtland is the European region with the largest number of organic food producers per capita. The food produced locally in the region is considered high quality because of uncontaminated pastures and clean water, while food production is mainly small scale ([www.foodofjamtland.se/english/](http://www.foodofjamtland.se/english/)). However, even though the goal of many producers is to earn a living from their production, growth is not one of the main ambitions of their ventures. The key motives behind artisan food production in the region are enthusiasm; an interest in developing high quality products; and a wish to avoid depopulation by creating new employment opportunities through local development, thus reconnecting people and place (Sjölander-Lindqvist *et al.*, 2020):

We were brewing as a hobby before, and we really wanted to improve our products. Then we got a really good response and started up as a business. (P6).

Even though we’re small, it’s within our philosophy to contribute and make our community a more enjoyable place to live (P7).

#### *Cooperation among local actors*

Formally, the management of the creative city is regulated by an agreement between the Municipality of Östersund and the Jämtland Härjedalen Region (Region Jämtland Härjedalen, 2018). Since 2010, the Jämtland Härjedalen Region and Östersund Municipality have made joint investments so that the UCCN can be used as a tool for business development, skills provision and internationalization for companies and regional players in the creative and cultural sector. The policy documents signed in 2018 featured two main decisions: The Municipality of Östersund and Region Jämtland Härjedalen each allocated working hours for work with the UCCN, and the two parties agreed on a common agenda for further work. The agreement clarifies both parties’ roles more clearly. A Regional Development Director is given the responsibility to develop proposals to be agreed upon by both parties. However, while the management of the creative city is formally assigned to the city and the region, there are different organisations involved in UCCN activities that help manage Östersund’s activities and the activities of local actors. These organisations (e.g. Torsta) work to promote regional development, access to secondary education within

agriculture and forestry, and the preservation and marketing of regional gastronomy, such as the Matakademin (the Food Academy) and Eldrimner (the Swedish National Resource Centre for Artisan Food), which are considered to be crucial to the development of local and artisanal food production and high-quality food businesses. Producers' attitudes towards selling and growing are also highlighted by representatives from Eldrimner:

Here in Jämtland, it's not really making money that drives the craft food sector; it's more the wish to create something [...] it's a bit artistic (P8).

Some of the local craft food producers attribute much of the growth in the sector to courses started at the national artisan food centre Eldrimner. This particularly applies to the dairies, because it was primarily the region's cheese that put Jämtland on the culinary map:

The number of cheese producers in Jämtland has to do with the location of Eldrimner; it would have been different if it would have been in another county (P9).

Beer producers pointed out that they "cooperate a lot locally" (P10), not only with brewers through courses and field visits but also with dairies and bakeries to which they deliver. This cooperation among producers is enacted "from actual co-production to mutual purchasing procedures" (P10) and allows them to "reduce shipping costs" (P9).

### **Unpacking UCCN as a global spatial brand**

First, it appears fruitful to discuss the constructive implications that the UCCN has activated among place brand managers. Östersund is the coordinator for the Creative Cities of Gastronomy, and its team is composed of the municipality and the region and involves organisations such as Eldrimner and Torsta, which include multiple businesses and local and regional policymakers. The representatives of these organisations who were interviewed pointed out that obtaining the UNESCO recognition increased cooperation among them and made "everyone sit at the same table" (P1), allowing them to "work better together" (P1).

Moreover, the UCCN global platform increased the city's visibility at the national level. Indeed, the UCCN affiliation provided "a lot of media attention, both at the national and international level", and allowed the city to enhance cooperation between their organisations:

One of the good things of having UNESCO is the cooperation among different actors in the place. If you have such recognition, you need to sit. Before we didn't really cooperate, we didn't sit at the same table, we were doing our own things. So that is one of the benefits of the UNESCO brand: that we are sitting together at the same table. It helped us to cooperate at the local level, because before we were looking at each other's work a little bit suspiciously, but now there are much closer relations and cooperation (P2).

On the one hand, identifying with a global brand contributed to positive activation among place brand managers. On the other hand, UCCN membership brought with it several challenges that may be considered as tensions. These concern the challenges inherent in multi-scalarity and governance, both vertically (UN to local level) and horizontally (connecting the food producing region and the city), as well as in the opportunities and limitations characterising global cooperation among cities with different structures and agendas. The next section provides an in-depth investigation of these tensions.

*Tensions in place brand management*

The discourse on SD heavily permeates the city's branding activities by emphasizing the importance of F&G. In other words, SD plays a strategic role in orienting all of the branding practices and efforts, but in a problematic manner. In fact, as one interviewee reported, "We are pushed very hard to do every activity in compliance with the 2030 SD Agenda" (P3). On the other hand, the interpretive repertoires presented in the following sections illuminate some of the tensions, which illustrate the obstacles and fatigue inherent in the sustainable practices of place brand management. This, in fact, reveals the global-local tensions that emerge when the global SD discourse embodied by the UCCN trickles down to the local level. Accordingly, the next section explores the tensions that emerge as the UCCN is appropriated as a global brand, and then discusses these tensions in relation to the spatial theorization of globalisation.

*Tensions inherent in multi-scalarity*

This first interpretive repertoire captures aspects of complexity that distinguish branding as a multi-scalar phenomenon (Giovanardi, 2015). In fact, aspirations to articulate and project a sustainable identity appeared to be more ambitious than expected while observing the city in its dialectic relationship with different administrative levels.

The interactions at both the supra-national and the regional levels emerged as a significant source of complication (Giovanardi *et al.*, 2013). On the regional level, Östersund's attempt to brand the city by joining the UCCN develops a relationship between the local authorities and the gatekeeper of an international reputational platform. The official website presents this cooperation by deploying the "think locally act globally" cliché, a "marriage" that is glued together by "sustainable products and methods". However, far from being a straightforward "trickling-down" from the global to the local level, the assimilation of the UNESCO brand and its values in Östersund appears to present significant challenges and uncertainties. The gradual endeavour to "translate" and share the global vision and message among local brand stakeholders is illustrated in the following excerpts, where the respondents seek to clarify, rather than celebrate, the encounter between the local and the global:

We are working with a big, joint vision to be part of a global world and the idea that we can make a difference. It has been really hard for people to understand that we are part of something global with a big potential, so that's why we decided to have this Annual Meeting (P3). [2]

The effectiveness of a community engagement programme in facilitating inter-scalar encounters, however, remains a disputed issue, as a certain level of disengagement is said to affect the local F&G sector, especially in comparison to other cities that have been more effective in appropriating the global message of the UNESCO brand for local purposes:

Many cities are really proud of the UNESCO brand. Here you don't see it. You don't find a restaurant that says, "UNESCO City of Gastronomy". If you look at Parma in Italy, at Chengdu in China, they are so proud, you can see it, and here we could do so much more (P1).

The impact of the tensions between the local and the global on the branding platform is clearly articulated by participants in terms of the dissimilar administrative mechanisms, expectations and degree of accountability that characterises each scale. After specifying that the UN's work is based on principles expressed in "consensus paperwork" elaborated at the level of the nations, one interviewee frames this incommensurability in this way:

The UCCN is something new, because while the UN system generally works at the global level with countries, in the network, it is necessary to work on operative projects with cities, and they



(the UN) have no idea how this should work. They try to apply their usual strategies to members at the local level, but it creates a lot of clashes, because at the local level, you need to have funding and legitimacy to work; we have to show results to our local stakeholders. And we cannot say “we are working for peace on earth”—my politicians would laugh at me (P3).

As an additional source of scalar complexity, the interviewees identify one of the major goals of UCCN membership as the better articulation of the economic relationship between the city and the rural region through the creation of a new sustainable place brand identity. Östersund’s application to the UCCN has been defined by local actors as “unique” (Länstidningen Östersund, 2016) because it included the food producing region as well as the city. As P3 puts it, “‘the mark is on the city’, but the approach was to have a city-region project and try to merge this into a much bigger context”. A notable discursive divergence can be identified in the nature of the relationship between urban and regional stakeholders. On the one hand, this is framed by celebrating a collaborative spirit via an emphatic focus on togetherness: “Here, in the strategy brochure, you see the word ‘together’. It’s the first word, we need to work together” (P4). On the other hand, other actors contradict the celebrative attitude often seen in the conventional wisdom of SD (Coyle and Fairweather, 2005) and institutional place branding discourses (Cai, 2002). Even though P3 acknowledges that the urban and rural regions are “mirrors of each other”, he admits surprise when witnessing the remarkable lack of communication not only at the political level but also at the operational level, which may indicate an ambiguous scenario of antagonism between local-brand stakeholders:

It has been so hard to make the region and the city work together. On the political level, I thought they talked to each other; they don’t. They just give space to each other, but they don’t interact. Then, on the operational side, of course, we work together on different projects, but there is also a tension between the city and the rural area because the rural says that everything comes to the city, and why do they have everything, and we never get anything? So, there is tension in between. And then I tried to say, think about this: what should a region without a city do? (P3).

This aspect is also underlined in a local newspaper, which pointed out that “Creative city gets all the glory, but it is all dependent on the rural area surrounding the city”, therefore, “city and region go hand in hand” (Op-Ed., 2016). The picture resulting from the multi-scalarity described above is a landscape of uneven geographies that seriously compromises the ability to promote a linear trajectory of sustainable development. The tensions emerging between scalar levels may be better explained by also including an assessment of the organisational mechanisms that characterise place brand governance in Östersund.

#### *The tensions of integrating governance*

The second repertoire is related to the “on-the-ground” issues that emerge when trying to integrate food production and consumption. This captures aspects of agonism that are inherent in branding governance mechanisms (Lucarelli and Giovanardi, 2016). While the SD literature considers multi-stakeholder partnerships as the type of governance that allows parties to deal with multi-faceted problems (Pinkse and Kolk, 2012), the implementation of common actions is not as straightforward. The main assumptions of mainstream literature on sustainable integrated development based on F&G were applied in the case of Östersund to address the need to connect primary production to local food consumption places (Björk and Kauppinen-Räsänen, 2016), or between producers and consumers (Sidali *et al.*, 2015). This was based on the recognition that a short food supply chain should be pursued as an appropriate sociospatial platform (Renting *et al.*, 2003) for sustainable branding and related development. And yet, aspirations to achieve sustainable, integrated development in line

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with the UNESCO brand appeared to be more complex and entangled in practice than predicated by the literature. By observing different stakeholders acting in their socio-economic and political landscape, it is possible to identify some of the obstacles that make the virtuous circle among local F&G resources anything but a linear system.

Stakeholders in Östersund emphasised mutual trust and understanding as a precondition for cooperation, as evident in the following, but this collaboration also entailed giving up something or acknowledging the fatigue inherent in pursuing SD:

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It's not about homepages, it's about putting together producers and restaurants because they have to understand each other. Restaurants have to understand why they cannot have the products year-round and so on. [...] They have to understand each other (P2).

As a demanding social duty rather than a procedural celebration of status, it seems that different stakeholders have to come to terms with the implications of collaboration as a sort of *realpolitik*, which implies a certain degree of creativity in reinventing ways to enact the global principles of sustainability. For example, sport-event marketing is seen as an alternative avenue to display and promote local food, by bringing everyone around the same table:

We tried to have more local food at big sport events, but there are these very big food companies, so it's very hard, and I'm not sure if we can do it. Maybe we should look for smaller events, as people that come here as competitors should have good food. We are trying to work on different things, but the conclusion is that you really need to work a lot. So, the thing that we could do is to create these places where people can meet, bringing people together (P2).

This excerpt highlights the contradiction between the values of local cooperation implied by the SD narrative and the more practical and mundane context in which established food commodities dominate the food consumptionscape and food system. The interviewees at least seemed to be conscious that some sort of negotiation and translation are needed to adapt the organisational structures recommended by SD global principles and epitomised by the UNESCO brand to the everyday challenges of Östersund and its surroundings. This is mirrored by nuanced interpretations of the UNESCO brand in relation to integrated SD and an actualisation of “agentic acting” that could facilitate more transformative actions, such as resistance. As P2 pointed out after presenting a rather complicated view of their actions, the solution offered was ideally to create arenas for social exchange: “So, the thing that we could do is to create these places where people can meet”.

This is indeed evident in the complex bundle of organisations involved in the UNESCO City of Gastronomy management and the kaleidoscope of relationships with other stakeholders, which are also partners in other EU and regional projects. One of these projects, which is peculiar in the case of Östersund, is the “Creative Region of Gastronomy”, which focused on B2B activities [3]. On paper, one of the goals of this project is to contribute to strengthening the cooperation among different actors in the food supply chain, and yet the translation of the SD discourse into practice requires never-ending efforts and is not exempt from impediments:

It's not straightforward how the different parts of the value chain interact with each other. We are making an effort now to have more producers selling to the restaurants, but they don't understand each other. The producers are small ones, while the restaurants want steady produce all year round and they want to know the price, steady and stable. But the producers are small and produce during different seasons. They may have quality problems from time to time, so they cannot provide steady and stable produce to the restaurants. Then it's hard for restaurants to buy. That's one thing that is difficult (P3).

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The picture resulting from the above is of an agonist field of disjointed teamwork in which the relational foundations for integrated development are unable to be built without some degree of frustration. The tensions between stakeholders and local organisations create a socio-economic and political “game” that may be better understood through insights into the strategic overview that characterises the management of a UNESCO City of Gastronomy.

### *Strategy-related tensions*

The third and final repertoire deals with what Warnaby *et al.* define as “strategic fissures”, namely, those “differences in the backgrounds/agendas/perspectives of stakeholders which create the potential for competing visions/alternative views” (Warnaby *et al.*, 2010, p. 1377) on how to manage a brand. Even if such an argument appears particularly suited to capturing the opportunities and challenges that emerge within global cooperation among UCCN cities, it does not only reflect a practical way to observe how to manage the place brand. What emerges from the words of the participants is a more nuanced picture of what it takes to coordinate the visions and expectations of a very heterogeneous actor-network, where certain goals and managerial mechanisms are not necessarily convergent:

It’s nice not only to have meetings but actual things going on, on the ground. It’s good because Spain, Italy, Norway, and Sweden are all different but similar in being European (P1).

[...] we have two different ways of organising at the local level: one is the engagement part, which is from the Europeans and South Americans, but then we have these big Asian cities that organise from the upper level and then commission people to do things. And then they have lots of funding, but they don’t have connections to their local level, so it’s sort of an empty box (P3).

It appears that those differences are mirrored not only in opposing top-down (i.e. decision-making “from the upper level”) and bottom-up (i.e. organisations focusing “on the local level”) managerial approaches, but also in the way in which different “funding regimes” (Warnaby *et al.*, 2010) are reproduced. This shows that within a global network, the orchestration of a place brand requires reflection on the misalignment between a top-down mindset that relies on significant available funding, and a bottom-up mindset where funding is regarded as an imperative priority. The latter approach is characteristic of the Nordic context, where the cultural narrative is mobilised through networked and participatory approaches involving multiple stakeholders (Cassinger *et al.*, 2021):

We have extremely little funding, and we have a hard time making the political world understand this. So, it’s constant work and effort, and it gets done with the engagement of only a few. But I prefer to work this way from the local level, because it takes more time, but you cannot do anything if you don’t have the people with you. For example, some big Asian cities commissioned the Chambers of Commerce; so, it’s the upper level people with lots of funding that do this, but they don’t get results. They want to hold festivals, they pay for everything, but they don’t have any operational results, and they do not understand how to address the 2030 Agenda. [...] Interaction and working globally in joint projects is hard: there are language barriers, cultural barriers, and other barriers. (P3).

Even though the amount of energy required is deemed very demanding, the option to submit joint applications for funding is identified as a potential binding mechanism that could favour convergence and strengthen the identification of common goals. This option is mainly connected to the European Union as a practical and realistic source of opportunities, which is likely to encourage cooperation between places where a bottom-up mindset prevails:

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The most interesting thing for us is to work with cities that are a little bit closer to us, because it costs a lot of money if you want to actively work with cities on the other side of the world. But it is also interesting to get this very different input on what we are doing, it sort of broadens our horizons, some new ways of thinking which we would never have gotten otherwise. I think in the long run, we will work more with EU cities, also in EU project applications (P2).

This leaves the problem of how to create synergies between areas characterised by opposite funding regimes relatively unresolved, and more research is needed to explore the influence of income-generating activities on a network of stakeholders that may also include “affluent” stakeholders used to adopting a top-down mindset.

## Discussion

### *Understanding spatial tensions from a global–local perspective*

The findings section identified tensions that emerge at the local level due to the ambiguities inherent in place branding when there is a local appropriation of a global spatial brand, such as UNESCO. Indeed, this unfolds as a “fuzzy” place brand. The fuzziness of place brands is discussed by [Warnaby et al. \(2010\)](#), who examined place branding in the context of a place product that is distinguished by spatial “diffuseness” and “linearity”. A spatially diffuse and linear place product (in their case, Hadrian’s Wall) turns out to be a “fuzzy” place that demands a very careful intervention by place or destination managers. This creates overlapping tensions between different stakeholders and uncertain or multiple definitions of what the place and the place brand may actually mean and to whom. Accordingly, this section explores glocalisation and deterritorialisation as spatial lenses to theoretically frame the different tensions identified in the findings section.

The UNESCO brand lends itself to appropriation by different locales in different contexts, and at different times. It is therefore a discontinuous brand, which manifests itself in an intermittent manner and gets intertwined with already existing platforms of urban or regional brands (e.g. in the case of UCCN gastronomy, music, etc.). The local appropriation of the UNESCO brand may trigger several processes that local stakeholders deem as beneficial and desirable for the region, but we can identify relevant emerging tensions that should not be overlooked when we study the tandem formed by the local brand, in this case the Östersund brand and the global UNESCO brand.

[Table 2](#) presents the theoretical perspectives of glocalisation and deterritorialisation and the related tensions that emerge.

The tensions related to multi-scalarity are indicative of the different ways through which global–local tensions are manifested. This is evident in the first two quotes reported in the multi-scalarity section, where the need to hold an annual meeting in Östersund to make local people understand that they are part of “something global with big potential” is counterbalanced by a certain level of reluctance in appropriating the “UNESCO City of Gastronomy” global brand for local purposes. These examples seem to reveal that the UCCN global brand has not been considered as meaningful for actors at a local level: the limited appropriation of the global brand seems to indicate that the glocalisation process is hindered. In this regard, according to glocalisation theories, glocalisation happens when global qualities are appropriated at local level ([Craig and Douglas, 2006](#)).

Moreover, the subsequent tension shows that due to the fact that the UN system works with countries at the global level, while cities need to work on operative projects, the UCCN can be considered more of a deterritorialised than a glocalised brand, as it brings together contradicting cultures and weakens the ties with particular locations ([Cayla and Eckhardt, 2008](#)). This is also indicated in the “food production landscape” section, where it appears that the desire of local businesses to achieve locality and maintain local products in local

Theoretical perspectives	UNESCO as a global spatial brand	Emerging (spatial) tensions
Glocalisation	The partial appropriation of the UNESCO brand at local level shows that the glocalisation process is fragmented and multifaceted	<i>Multi-scalarity:</i> Limited or uneven local appropriation of the global brand: reference to the UCCN almost absent. <i>Integrating governance:</i> Lack of communication and understanding among stakeholders hinders the integration of the food value chain
Deterritorialisation	UN system works at national level (consensus paperwork), while cities work at local level and need stakeholders' legitimization to implement operative projects. UCCN appears as a deterritorialised brand, bringing together different cultures and weakening the links with particular locations	<i>Integrating governance:</i> Resistance against marketization of culture and willingness of producers to stay small. <i>Strategy-related:</i> Hard for the local level to appropriate a deterritorialised brand at a local level

**Table 2.**  
Framing the spatial  
tensions

Source: Authors' elaboration

markets (keeping the production small) may result in resistance against the marketisation of local culture that could lead to a loss of control over local identity (Askegaard and Kjeldgaard, 2007). Moreover, the local actors' willingness to "keep it small" and support local cooperation through "social terroir" – social ties among place and community rather than on natural characteristics of the place (Sjölander-Lindqvist *et al.*, 2020) – could also indicate that while it is harder to get local actors engaged for a global brand, they appear to have cohesive social bonds at the local level.

Concerning the tensions of integrating governance, the analysis has shown that while the city-region integration of the food value chain allowed Östersund to become part of the UCCN, it did not help overcome the lack of communication between different stakeholders, both at the political and the operational level. Once again, local politicians and entrepreneurs involved in the UCCN have tried to address these issues through a number of initiatives on the ground, which have mainly been aimed at "putting people together" and "creating places where people can meet", to support local actors' capacity to understand each other and implement actions (e.g. integrating the local food supply chain) that can support the path towards the realisation of the global SD discourse at local level. Therefore, while the global SD discourse was appropriated during the bidding phase, its implementation in practice requires constant negotiation and translation in a multitude of actions to facilitate glocalisation. The periphery (in our case Östersund) is not a mere recipient of the discourse that emanates from the centre (the UCCN), it also needs agency to appropriate the discourse and change its meanings (Sharifonnasabi *et al.*, 2019). While organisations working in Östersund acknowledged that the UCCN has increased their capacity for cooperation on the local level, different parts of the food supply chain are spatially dispersed, making it harder for different stakeholders to appropriate the global discourse in a way that facilitates a meaningful integration of the food supply chain.

Finally, in assessing the strategy-related tensions, the analysis has shown that the emergence of a global network and global cooperation among different cities linked to the

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same global brand is hard to achieve in practice. The difficulties associated with pursuing global cooperation between cities appear to emerge due to the different spatialities through which the global brand reaches the local level and vice-versa. For example, in the Nordic countries (Cassinger *et al.*, 2021), acquiring legitimation at the local level requires engaging different stakeholders in a bottom-up manner and carrying out operative projects. On the other hand, in many Asian cities, the brand is reproduced in a top-down approach. It appears that sustaining a glocalisation process for a deterritorialised brand is rather challenging: the very diverse spatial trajectories in the way the local emerges lead to clashes in how global cooperation is conceived.

### Conclusions

Several contributions have explored spatial complexity in the context of marketing (e.g. Giovanardi and Lucarelli, 2018), or more specifically, place brand management practices (e.g. Boisen *et al.*, 2011; Pike, 2011). This article put forward a new context-based endeavour by focusing on the global brand UNESCO, which is increasingly and transversally present across several places and networks worldwide. The World Heritage List, the Intangible Heritage List, the Creative Cities Network and the Biosphere Reserves represent different manifestations of UNESCO: they all build on the local and bear the global UNESCO brand for different purposes. Therefore, the pervasiveness and reach of the UNESCO global brand and its associated meanings increases the urgency of the need to grasp how the global–local relation unfolds. This entails an understanding of the spatial complexity inherent in place brand management practices across such diverse networks, as well as an exploration of how this global brand is appropriated locally.

Accordingly, this paper investigated how the global discourse on SD epitomised by the UCCN global spatial brand is discursively practiced at the local level by presenting the case of Östersund, a UCCN Creative City of Gastronomy. Three main types of tensions were emphasised by participants: the uneasy negotiations implied by the simultaneous contribution of different scalar levels of the branding platform; the organisational challenge of integrating the governance of food production and consumption; and the strategic fissures inherent in the opposing visions, agendas, and funding regimes of stakeholders that hinder or facilitate cooperation among cities. These emerged as global–local tensions related to the “trickling down” of the global SD discourse embodied by the UCCN to the local level. The study contributes to the literature on place brand management by highlighting the role of spatiality in the unfolding of global brands, which results in tensions that emerge during the local appropriation of a global spatial brand. Indeed, one of the main shortcomings observed in the debate on SD concerns the difficulties that manifest when shifting from the rhetorical views of global SD to local, situated programmes. In other words, a “high level of abstraction in the sustainable development debate means that contentious issues are often manifested only at the sector to sub-sector levels” (Nilsson and Persson, 2003, p. 333).

A similar tension concerns the status of UNESCO as a global brand. On the one hand, the UNESCO brand is homogeneous, as the same brand promises a consistent set of values across the globe to those who need its support. On the other hand, it is not homogeneous (and homogenising) in the same way as a global product brand such as McDonalds, which can precipitate the McDonaldisation of food production and consumption (Pasquinelli *et al.*, 2021). In fact, it is up to local entities, such as cities, to appropriate the UNESCO brand. As a homogeneous brand, UNESCO constitutes a carrier of values shared at the global level, such as the promotion of human creativity and the safeguarding of culture and heritage, but it also contains a set of programmes (e.g. World Heritage, Creative Cities, etc.) aimed at transversally contributing to achieving the SDG Agenda 2030. This implies that the appropriation of the UNESCO brand and values strongly depends on the local contexts in

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which they are to be materialised (e.g. the European bottom-up approach versus the Asian top-down approach).

Accordingly, tensions emerge within the spatiality of the glocalisation process, a process that should enable global qualities to be appropriated at a local level (Craig and Douglas, 2006). In order for this to happen, the global discourse must be filled with meanings and practices so that the global space becomes a local place (Roudometof, 2019). Notably, this process is not easy to implement because UCCN represents a global deterritorialised brand, which brings together contradicting cultures and weakens ties with particular locations (Cayla and Eckhardt, 2008).

This study holds managerial implications, as it reminds place managers that the spatiality of a global brand can lead to tensions between the global and local level. However, in this case, it appears that the role of the local actors who manage the brand is pivotal. These actors are situated between the global and the local, receiving the global discourse and adapting it to the local context in which it is carried out, so that it can become meaningful and can support local actions. Their role and approach can be assimilated to what Rinaldi *et al.* (2021) define as “responsibilized boundary spanners”, “agents located between the global and local levels that act as mediators in multi-stakeholder networks, ultimately fostering capacities to implement collective actions in city-branding practices”. These actors’ skills and capacities to work across spatial boundaries will increasingly be necessary to rethink place branding strategies, moving them towards more sustainable trajectories. This study has several limitations that future research projects on the spatiality of global brands should address. First, comparative perspectives between different UCCN members may enrich our understanding of the tensions, as well as the tools that different city managers can mobilise to anticipate or solve those tensions. Secondly, research in different sociocultural and political contexts would play an important role in integrating the peculiarities of this study, as this study focused exclusively on the Scandinavian context.

## Notes

1. [www.unesco.org/en/brief](http://www.unesco.org/en/brief)
2. Östersund hosted the 2016 Annual UNESCO Creative Cities Network Meeting. <https://en.unesco.org/creative-cities/events/ostersund-host-city-uccn-10-annual-meeting-september-2016>
3. [www.regionjh.se/regionalutveckling/projektblad/regionalautvecklingsprojekt/creativeregionofgastronomy.453b5af6315f5ce550f567ea.html](http://www.regionjh.se/regionalutveckling/projektblad/regionalautvecklingsprojekt/creativeregionofgastronomy.453b5af6315f5ce550f567ea.html)

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**Further reading**

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## Appendix

## Unpacking a global spatial brand

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Focus	Number of articles	Years
Application to UCCN	3	2007, 2010
Branding	5	2016
International cooperation/visits	6	2012, 2013, 2015, 2016
Educational efforts	4	2014, 2016, 2019
Activities/festivals	7	2016, 2018, 2019
UCCN-conference	7	2014, 2016
Editorials	4	2010, 2016
Op-eds	3	2016
<i>Total</i>	39	2007–2019

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**Source:** Authors' elaboration

**Table A1.**  
Media coverage of  
Östersund UCCN  
membership

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