

## Article

# Place Brand Co-Creation through Storytelling: Benefits, Risks and Preconditions

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**Abstract:** Co-creation in place branding is used as an umbrella term for the complex brand meaning emerging through stakeholders' participation in place activities, their contribution, collaborations and interchange of ideas and resources. Co-creation is often an aspiration for places to create and promote their brands collectively. In this context, storytelling—an old technique used in corporate marketing to instigate brand stakeholders' participation—serves as a method which facilitates place brand co-creation through shared place stories. With the rise of online interactions, the chances of place stakeholders' participation in brand meaning creation increase, and place stories are effective in allowing diverse place meanings to emerge from various stakeholders. However, when storytelling emerges as a marketing tactic, mostly from a top-down campaign, the stories are not always accepted by all place stakeholders, and they create contrasting brand meanings. The paper aims to investigate the benefits and risks of participation in “Many Voices One Town” (2018), a top-down campaign from Luton, UK, which used storytelling to instigate place brand co-creation. The campaign was created by the Luton Council with an external advertising agency. The campaign attempted to tackle the town's segregation issues and foster community cohesion through the promotion of seven selected Lutonians' stories about their diverse and multicultural experiences of living in Luton. The study employs a qualitative methodology to analyse the MVOT case study. Interviews with the council and participants in the campaign and netnographic data from Twitter, Facebook and Instagram were used to gain an insight into residents' participation in a top-down approach and examine the outcomes of co-creation. Residents' participation in such a campaign shows numerous benefits but also risks for the place brand. The findings show that participation can sometimes intensify disputes about the town if people's needs are not properly addressed. The study highlights the importance of open communication between all parties involved in the process, bringing into focus the need for careful coordination of top-down initiatives in line with stakeholders' needs. It also demonstrates the ‘power of the people’ in the sense that stakeholder engagement with the shared stories led to negative outcomes that were not predicted by the Council.

**Keywords:** place branding; place brand co-creation; storytelling; stakeholders' participation; expert interview; netnographic data; storyteller recruitment; Luton



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## 1. Introduction

Adding to the considerations of place branding as a holistic and integrated concept, place brand co-creation has become a point of discussion for many place practitioners and academics who debate the meanings associated with stakeholders' involvement, brand co-creation and its benefits. Place brand co-creation, which has its roots in participatory brand culture and service dominant logic, reinforces the debates on the impact of stakeholders' involvement in the brand activities, see, e.g., in [1]. In this context, storytelling—an old technique used in corporate marketing to instigate brand stakeholders' participation—serves as a method which facilitates place brand co-creation through shared place stories.

With the rise of online interactions, the chances of place stakeholders' participation in brand meaning creation increase and place stories are effective in allowing diverse place meanings to emerge from various stakeholders.

Co-creation is often an aspiration for places to create and promote their brands collectively through stakeholders' involvement. This involvement, as presented by most literature, is seen as beneficial for the place brand as it can increase customer satisfaction, strengthen social cohesion and democratise public services [2]; increase place differentiation and competitive advantage [3–5]; reduce the gap between the perceived and projected images together with the tensions emerging from this gap [3,6,7]; offer credibility to the brand [8,9]; and improve destination images and create sustainable place brands [10–12].

All these positive outcomes of co-creation create the illusion that co-creation is an ideal process through which the brand can sustainably develop. However, this process is not yet fully understood and there are attempts in the literature to suggest some negative effects of co-creation and participation, see, e.g., in [13]. The negative aspects of co-creation lie in the risk involved in open brands where the brand's control is shared between the stakeholders [14]. Some authors further emphasise the idea of brand co-destruction due to stakeholders' misunderstandings of the brand or tensions created by various groups and brand managers [13–16]. Many of the stakeholders' involvement and co-creation studies in place branding are hesitant to problematise the adverse effects of stakeholders' involvement. This hesitancy/reluctancy comes from our misunderstanding of the co-creation as a process through which stakeholders are involved in the brand creation and communication [5] mostly as equal partners. However, there are studies which conclude that equal participation from all parties is not practiced in place branding [7,17] and when this involvement/stakeholders' participation does not follow a service dominant logic, results in a process dominated most often by the municipality or brand managers. This dominance is rarely perceived as beneficial for the place brand as the other stakeholders (usually residents and tourists) create messages that contradict official place communication. What that means in a storytelling context is that co-creation processes could possibly show different outcomes especially when storytelling is used as a top-down marketing tactic, and the stories are not accepted by all place stakeholders creating contrasting brand meanings.

This article is investigating storytelling as a means for brand meaning co-creation. It aims to investigate the benefits and risks involved when stakeholders are asked to participate in place brand co-creation through storytelling. There are, of course, many types of internal and external stakeholders that affect place branding projects (e.g., residents, local companies, local communities, local companies, investors, visitors and potential visitors etc.), but our study focuses particularly on the relation between positive and negative outcomes of storytelling co-creation between residents and municipality. The focus of the article is the campaign "Many Voices One Town" in Luton, UK. "Many Voices One Town" (MVOT) was a top-down initiative that attempted to tackle the town's segregation issues and foster community cohesion through the promotion of seven selected Lutonians' stories about their diverse and multicultural experiences of living in Luton. It was created by the Luton Council in partnership with a creative agency from London, UK government programme "Building Stronger Britain Together" and a network of people from Luton's previous campaign—"Luton in Harmony". The previous campaign ("Luton in Harmony") had the aim of establishing and improving community cohesion and fighting against extremism in the town but was highly critiqued because it was funded through a government anti-terrorism strategy scheme, which the main town's community leaders opposed. Thus, the council created MVOT to move away from the previous stigma attached to the "Luton in Harmony" brand and try a different approach [18], whereas "Luton in Harmony" asked for peoples' participation through signing a pledge for peace and community understanding, MVOT was focused on storytelling and tried to engage with the residents by promoting their stories. The campaign featured the individual stories of seven young residents chosen by the council to advocate and discuss their local experiences and their admiration for Luton. The campaign used Lutonians' personal stories to celebrate the diversity within the

town and create the face of Luton by showing the town in a positive light on social media, print and news outlets.

The next section describes the theoretical background of the study, exploring the literature around place brand co-creation, storytelling and co-destruction. Then, we detail the methodology used to study MVOT. This is followed by the presentation of the findings around co-creation through storytelling and a discussion of its outcomes framed in the opposing concepts of co-creation and co-destruction. Finally, three causes of negative co-creation outcomes are identified. This study contributes to a better understanding of place brand co-creation and stakeholder participation in place branding strategies, especially for places with a negative reputation such as Luton

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. Co-Creation for Places and Destinations

For many, “co-creation refers to the active involvement of end-users in various stages of the production process” [2] (p. 1335) and is captured in terms such as co-management, co-delivery and co-assessment [19], or co-design and co-implementation [2]. A more abstract view is also evident that focuses on meaning co-creation through the influence stakeholders have on each other through their usual, ordinary relationships and their routine, everyday activities [20]. In a service setting, it has been shown that participation and co-creation increase the customers’ economic, emotional and relational value [21]. In a place setting, the participants in this value and meaning co-creation process are the place’s various stakeholder groups and prominent amongst them are the residents [22,23]. As noted above, this study focuses on co-creation of place brand meaning between the residents and municipality. Such a brand co-creation approach within place branding brings along significant benefits [23] because of the co-creational nature of places [24], which becomes prominent when the personal construction of places is considered. People create places by interpreting them personally and this personal interpretation relates to all place-based elements including the physical and the symbolic aspects of place. For instance, Urry [25] (p. 24) argues that “the city is a repository for peoples’ memories ( . . . ) these memories are embodied in buildings that can take on a significance very different form that intended by their architect”.

In a co-creational approach, stakeholders become place makers and place marketers through word-of-mouth (WOM), social media and online communities [26]. For destinations, the internet provides the medium which empowers residents (or stakeholders) in destination marketing [10] and they become even more important because the online environment creates a new challenge for marketers to deal with: brands are becoming a projection of audiences’ conversations on social networks rather than a consequence of marketing strategies [27]. As Skinner notes, social media are the main means for stakeholder co-creation using and projecting a place’s organic images [28].

Organic images were a starting point of understanding place brand co-creation in tourism where researchers investigated tourists’ organic content about destinations [29,30] because tourists “construct personal narratives of the places they encounter” [31] (p. 5). These personal narratives in time could merge with place’s official storylines or completely alter the place’s story. Examining the role of residents in destination branding, Uchinaka et al. [9] found that the residents are considered more authentic sources of information and they influence directly the destination marketing efforts by being ambassadors of the place and active promoters in social media.

In the literature, stakeholder participation in brand communication for destinations is mostly associated with positive outcomes. Focusing on the residents, Choo, Park and Petrick [32] suggest that residents can help promote destinations if they are involved in the internal branding process. The study proposes that residents choose to promote the destination if they feel they can identify with the place. Furthermore, destinations can become more sustainable if they involve residents in their branding and promotions [12]. The sustainability comes from the residents’ feeling of responsibility to the place and its

image, which is explained by Jeuring and Haartsen's study [11]. The study suggests that residents would engage in promotion of positive destination images through WOM when they feel a sense of self-responsibility. This positive WOM is inhibited when residents leave the responsibility to promote destination images to the regional municipality. This is also supported by Kemp, Williams and Bordelon's study, which suggests that aligning marketing activities with residents' perception of the brand influences residents to become committed to the destination's branding efforts, leading them to become advocates or 'evangelists' of the brand [33].

Moreover, place attachment theory suggests that tourists' and residents' emotional bonds give them reasons for place satisfaction and authenticity [7,34]. The theory is linked with place identity and numerous authors argue that the residents' place satisfaction, their attachment and their sense of place are critical for a successful promotion of the place [7,35–38].

## 2.2. Storytelling

In marketing, storytelling is employed as a promotional tool to expose an appealing narrative about a service, product or organisation, and stories "focus on conveying the brand values through emotion-laden" narratives [39] (p. 289).

In place branding, storytelling is "bridging the gaps between what the stakeholders perceive to be important by finding, encouraging or generating stories that all parties can relate to" [40] (p.115). Storytelling may also increase the willingness of different stakeholders to participate in place branding, making them more active in the place communication process if they identify themselves with the promoted place story [41]. Storytelling in destination branding reinforces community members' engagement, enhances the customer value [42] and promotes differentiation between destinations [43]. However, Youssef, Leicht and Marongiu [43], while discussing the importance of storytelling in promoting unique destination brands, highlight the importance of involving all place stakeholders in the creation process of the place brand associations and stories to enhance customer value and satisfaction with the destination. There is evidence from the literature that storytelling could be more successful in enhancing customer value and satisfaction if it is creating experiences focused on the hedonic benefits of the tourists rather than utilitarian services [44].

Storytelling for places can be enabled by the online environment which facilitates consumers' capacity to access stories about products, services or places and share their own experiences [45–47]. Online storytelling is highlighted in previous research because online stories have greater potential to become viral, spreading around the world very quickly [26]. In Pera's [42] view, the customer travel experience is shaping other customers behaviors in relation to the destination using online reviews as "powerful storytelling artefacts" (p.2). In this context, residents might be playing a vital role because they are "living the brand" [48] (p. 653), thus experiencing the stories about the place. Hudak argues that one of the best ways to apply participatory place branding is through digital storytelling by the residents, because they can share their experiences and perceptions in meaningful ways and promote a collaborative place brand [49]. In Hudak's view, through digital storytelling residents will feel "empowered to share their stories and community initiatives will be supported ( . . . ) leading to a unique place brand narrative" [49] (p. 97).

There is limited research that examines storytelling and residents' roles for place brands, however, looking back at the impact of storytelling for corporate brands, see, e.g., in [50], we can argue that residents might play a very interesting role in creating place stories. Moreover, considering places with negative reputation such as Luton investigated in this study, residents' stories might have a very interesting role to play in building the image of a town. Their role in this context is not yet clarified in previous research.

### 2.3. Co-Destruction

While most studies focus on the co-creation process for bringing value to the brand, other studies present the negative side of it: co-destruction [15,16,51,52]. Co-destruction of the brand is presented in the literature in multiple shapes, usually through negative stakeholders' attitudes which can damage the brand. For instance, residents might assume the role of activists [53] and launch their own, community-based counter campaigns or boycott and actively oppose formal communications by the authorities. These negative attitudes are usually the outcomes of the tensions between the stakeholders (for example between residents and local authorities) or misunderstandings of the brand and its development activities [13].

Residents can co-destruct the brand when they do not identify with it or they disagree with its development and communication [5]. However, some explanations of residents' negative attitudes and co-destruction of the brand are not only related to the fact that residents disagreed with a certain projected image of the brand, but they also suggested that, for residents, places' brands are more complex than destinations' brands [54], and this complexity is not always well-presented in the place promotion, marketing and branding literature. For example, a study analysing how residents perceived Shanghai [6] observed that some concepts promoted by the authorities were not fully recognised by the residents (e.g., Shanghai Expo), thus causing a mismatch in the place communication. The authors argue that residents form their preconceptions about the place "based on both individual experience and official vision" and that "Shanghai branding should properly conceptualise and manage the city's core values with residents' participation in policy making process" (p. 207).

It could be concluded that some co-destruction beliefs reside in the negative communication of the brand messages usually created when "the competitive place identity and the place brand identity are unknowingly far removed from the identities held by residents" [55] (p. 1085). Due to their wider knowledge about the place, residents can easily disagree with an oversimplified place brand [54]. The fact that marketing activities need to illustrate the residents' perceptions about the place is explained in Shafranskaya and Potapov's study [56]. In their investigation on the Russian town of Perm, they found that the city brand failure was rooted in poor communication of the brand message and the implementation of unsuccessful campaigns which did not illustrate a credible place image, instigating residents' revolts. By doing this, the residents' attitudes acted against the brand, co-destructing the brand. The authors suggest that "city branding is an outcome of city quality" and "the integral ability to satisfy residents' needs" (p. 128).

## 3. Materials and Methods

The study uses a qualitative methodology to investigate storytelling and co-creation in a case study. Yin argues that case study can be an option for seeking to explore the topic and "require an extensive and 'in-depth' description of some social phenomenon" [57] (p. 4). Case study research is often used to understand a process that is not understood yet, or whose reasons for occurring are not clarified in the literature [58]. Thus, case study strategy was applied to understand co-creation through storytelling in Luton, in a case of MVOT.

### 3.1. Luton as a Site for this Research

Luton, which is a large town in Bedfordshire, UK, with a population of ~214,000 people, is used as a site for this research. The town has long proven a challenge for the local municipality and residents due to multiple reputational issues. The town's negative reputation has developed from an aggregation of ongoing social, economic and political problems and numerous events which linked the town's image to Islamic extremism and white supremacy retaliations. Fifty percent of the town's population are coming from Black, Asian and Minority ethnic backgrounds (BAME). The town has a low economic activity rate, high unemployment rates and a high proportion of people working in low-skilled



occupations and manufacturing. In the past five years, the local municipality has made efforts to develop a consistent and attractive Luton brand that is adopted by the wider community with hopes that it will play a role in changing the local and global perception about the place. One of the activities undertaken is the creation of MVOT, the campaign investigated in this study.

### 3.2. Data Collection

The data presented here are taken from a larger study investigating various types of co-creation in different branding approaches from Luton. For this study, the researchers employ a qualitative methodology to analyse the MVOT case study through an iterative-inductive approach using iterations between interviews and netnographic data.

#### 3.2.1. Interviews

The study carried out four face-to-face, semi-structured interviews with people in charge of the promotional activities of the town: two experts (e.g., campaigns' managers) and two residents (participants in the campaign). The study's data collection started with the two interviews with the experts (March–April 2019, while the campaign was still running in the town) to gather background data and build a foundation about Luton as a brand and its activities. Then, the researchers alternate between the data from interviews and netnographic data, ending the data collection with another two interviews conducted with the residents involved in the campaign (January–February 2020). The participants were chosen based on non-random, non-probability sampling: i.e., purposive sampling [59], in the sense that the participants were key informants in the campaign. Although there were 7 residents involved in the whole campaign, due to accessibility issues we only interviewed two. Furthermore, these two were interviewed after the campaign was ended as we wanted to allow the feedback from the public to have a wider reach in the town.

#### 3.2.2. Netnographic Data

Netnography, or digital ethnography, is essential in understanding the place-related online content because the progression of the digital world “radically affects the roles that residents play in place branding and offers a multitude of opportunities for the integration of existing residents in place branding decision making” [22] (p. 22). Social media, like other online environments, boosts the eagerness for participation in public discussion. The existing online spaces, like social media, offer residents an opportunity to openly communicate their opinions and freely strengthen, weaken, complement or reject information.

Kozinetz proposed analysing online data using netnography for understanding the “context in which consumers often partake in discussions whose goals include attempts to inform and influence fellow consumers about products and brand” [60] (p. 61). Multiple sources from the literature highlight the impact of online communication on branding, because stakeholders can support or contradict the brand, having more credibility than the brand managers [26,61]. Therefore, this study uses netnographic data to understand the co-creation through storytelling. The researchers conducted an online investigation of the campaign to see how the campaign was being represented on social media and overall public's reactions. The flexible design allowed the researchers to investigate the campaign on the Council's multiple social media platforms using netnographic data from Facebook, Instagram and Twitter. Netnographic data collection started after the first interview with the experts in March 2019 and ended in January 2020, just before the interviews with the residents. The netnographic data captured a closer representation of the place brand as perceived by the residents, using comments and posts from the public municipality's platforms which were then analysed using NVivo.

### 3.3. Data Analysis and Ethics

The data analysis followed an iterative cycle of collection–analysis–collection as suggested in contemporary ethnographic studies [60]. The data from the first two interviews were partially analysed to help understand the netnographic data. Then, netnographic data was also analysed before conducting the last two interviews with the residents so the researchers could ask the participants for clarifications in the data.

Thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke's [62] guidelines, was conducted on all data sets to capture the key findings from the data by decoding and encoding processes. According to Braun and Clarke, thematic analysis can take multiple forms, offering either a rich description of the data or a detailed perspective, being inductive or deductive, and having semantic or latent themes from a realist or constructionist epistemology [58]. This study adopted an inductive approach to thematic analysis and latent constructionist themes to analyse the data from the interviews with the council and participants in the campaign and from Twitter, Facebook and Instagram and gain an insight into the different perspectives of storytelling. The above process was also followed to analyse the netnographic data. Residents feedback in form of comments was typed into NVivo and analysed in the same way as the interview transcripts. However, some screenshots from social media platforms were also kept and used in the study to maintain the authenticity of the data.

The data collected from the interviews were gathered with full written consent of the participants, who were only voluntarily involved in the study and appropriate measures were taken to securely collect, store and analyse the online data. The online data was collected using screenshots from the public platforms of Luton Council (Luton council's Facebook, Instagram and Twitter accounts) in agreement with their platforms' gatekeeper. Moreover, the data used is publicly available and not protected by passwords or group membership in order to access it. Screenshots were taken to keep the data safe, and then all personal, identifiable data was removed (e.g., names, tags on identifiable pictures without given consent).

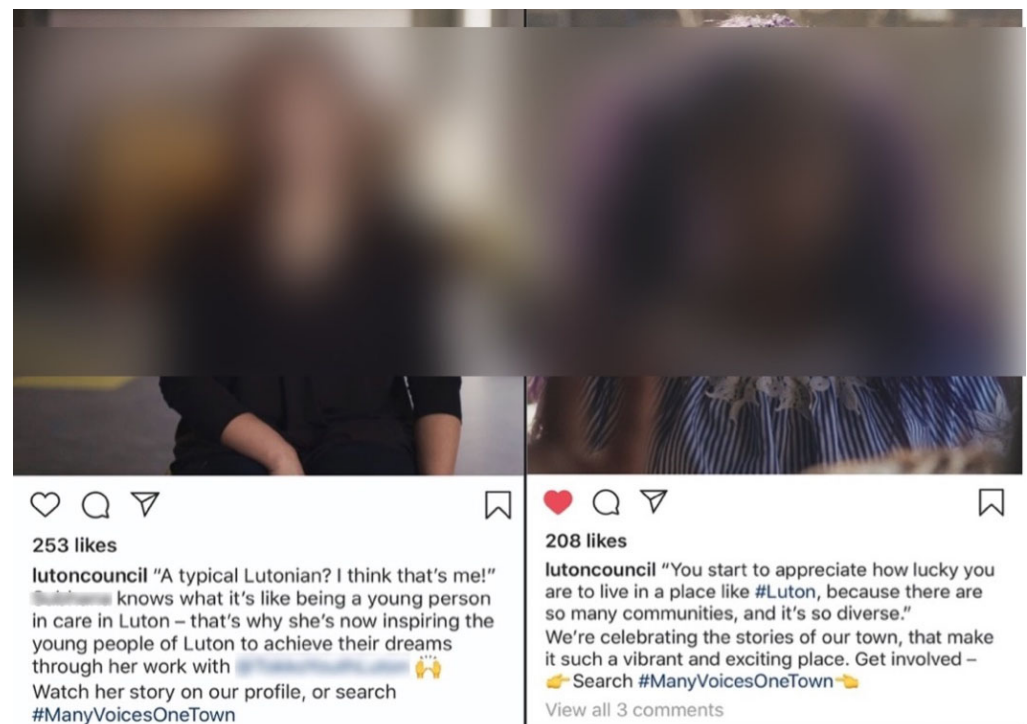
## 4. Results

### 4.1. Co-Creation through Storytelling

Storytelling was used to create the brand image and identity of Luton brand through visual representations of seven personal stories portrayed through videos, posters and banners shared on social media and printed out and exposed in the town centre. Through these representations, the aim was for the brand to gain authenticity based on residents' profiles. Luton was portrayed through seven stories of residents representing different occupations and also coming from different ethnic groups: one professional boxer, one youth worker, one footballer, one actress, one cricketer, two people representing a local non-profit theatre organisation and one artist. The seven chosen residents advocated for Luton and for their ethnic communities (Figure 1).

Storytelling was embedded as a strategy because in the municipality's view "people liked the positive stories, they liked to share positive stories and that creates marketing" (municipality, B). Using seven residents' stories, the municipality helped enhance Luton's promotion by creating a new narrative thread for the town which portrays the positives, the diversity and creative people of Luton, and in their view, residents 'help create a story' (municipality, A).

Moreover, while some participants believed that the campaign 'elevated' who Lutonians were, being "a very honest campaign" and "a journey that it was contributed from both sides" (resident, 1), the wider public vehemently disagreed with participants' and council's statements and tried to boycott the campaign.



**Figure 1.** Many Voices One Town—Lutonians as advocates (netnographic data from Luton Council Instagram account).

#### 4.2. Place Brand Co-Creation and Co-Destruction

According to the municipality MVOT integrated residents into the campaign as an acknowledgement of their importance and an indication of the desire to change the one-way brand communication and offer credibility to the brand messages. This was especially important for Luton because interviewees from the municipality realised that before this campaign happened, they tended to “oversell it” and “promoted a Luton that wasn’t even Luton” (municipality, A). Therefore, according to them, one of the benefits of MVOT was that they revised how they represent the town to build a “real” representation of Luton with the residents’ help by “involving residents from the start and talking to residents; asking them what Luton means to you?” (municipality, A). Thus, MVOT emerged with a potential to collaborate with residents and try to shape the face of Luton, through the stories of residents.

The campaign was “about promoting the positives and educating young people, celebrating their differences” (municipality, A) and it was mainly created with the aim of diminishing extremist ideologies and misrepresentations of particular cultures. The campaign started conversations on diversity and the different communities in Luton. However, the campaign was not entirely welcomed due to numerous issues, most of which were predominantly observed online, and although it intended to enhance the community spirit, it did not always achieve its aim. Online, the conversations took an unexpected turn. For example, one participant emphasised that community tensions in MVOT came out online, and people attacked her participation, trolling her on social media: “they basically tried to say that I was a young Pakistani woman who had no cultural values” (resident, 1). Moreover, the feedback from Instagram suggested that the public assumed that the main characters were paid to tell those stories.

The campaign had numerous positive outcomes including helping the municipality better understand the town and paved the way for collaborations with the residents. It was also beneficial for the residents who participated in the campaign with the stories. As discussed by Choi et al. [21] participation led to emotional value creation for the members involved in the sense that they felt positive emotions towards their town as a



result of their participation as well as relational value as they felt more connected to the municipality. For example, an MVOT participant explained that “after being involved in the campaign, it did give me the platform that I needed to network with people in the industry”, emphasising that the events made her confident that “career-wise I could elevate in this town” (resident, 1).

However, several issues were identified in place representation in MVOT which led to the co-destruction of the brand. Although through this campaign the municipality wanted to create a positive legacy presenting multicultural residents and showing that different backgrounds, cultures and religions are welcomed in Luton, the campaign became a target for the public’s frustrations and the municipality’s role in moderating the seven stories which portrayed the town, was not welcomed by the public online. The public accused the municipality of supporting only artists who bring revenue into the town, being unfair with the recruitment process and of using stories which are scripted or do not represent Luton.

During the interviews, the municipality fully acknowledged the importance of collaboration with the stakeholders in the town, especially with the residents, but in practice the co-creation processes were taking an unwanted direction towards emphasising the negative aspects of Luton due to three main causes.

#### 4.2.1. Selective Recruitment of the Storytellers

The campaign was manipulated by the municipality who acted as moderator by choosing the residents and deciding how they would represent Luton in the videos, being in charge of exposing the place’s USPs. The interviewees from the municipality told us that the residents “were filtered and screened down ( . . . ) final decisions were made on the actual key people who will carry the message in the way we wanted to do” (municipality, B). The storytellers in this case were chosen strategically, so that they could use residents’ personal “networks to get the message out” and benefit from organic engagement (municipality, A). However, due to the small budget, the campaign allowed a reduced number of residents to become the face of the brand because the municipality “only had budget to tell seven stories” (municipality, B). This led to negative reactions such as “this isn’t our town” (municipality, B) and online controversies in which people complained that the campaign does not represent “real Lutonians”, ironically asking “how much are they being paid to say that?”, “what are these duty lies”, “I’ll share my stories with them, see whether they post that on Insta” (netnographic—Instagram comments). Most of MVOT oppositions were observed online where people thought that the chosen residents did not represent Luton, some aggressively posting negative messages (Figure 2). Some residents even boycotted the campaign by using the hashtag #ManyVoicesOneTown with a negative meaning and blaming Luton Council for different issues.

In the public’s view, MVOT offered unequal chances of participation because the municipality chose seven residents to represent the brand without being fully transparent about how and why they were selected. MVOT participants emphasised that not everyone had the opportunity to be selected because they were “approached through work” (resident, 1). However, the municipality offered a contradictory story. As a representative of the municipality stated in their interview: “there was a press and online invitation for people who wanted to be a subject in the films ( . . . ) for everyone in the town” (municipality, B) be part in MVOT. These findings were not confirmed in the residents’ interviews or ethnographic data. Imposed control and unequal chances for participation created distance between the municipality and residents and there was “a long way to go as far as bridging the gap between the local council and the people” (resident, 2).



**Figure 2.** Many Voices One Town negativity expressed in comments (netnographic data from Luton Council Facebook account).

Nevertheless, this mistrust could have also emerged from a lack of communication. It is possible that the municipality did not know how to inform people about decisions during the campaign, thus it raised tensions. Selective recruitment might have been an outcome of a broken communication but also misinterpretation of the municipality's actions. For

example, online the public complained that the chosen representatives are not representing Luton or their particular cultures. However, even the municipality acknowledged that due to social, religious and cultural norms, and the stigma and stereotypes attached to some cultures and faiths, they struggled to attract diverse people from specific cultural backgrounds, and this made it impossible for MVOT to recruit “socially conservative representatives” (municipality, B). Municipality members were disappointed that they did not capture a “more socially conservative Muslim identity” in the films. They mentioned that they initially “had two candidates ( . . . ) wearing hijab ( . . . ) but ( . . . ) a combination of factors ( . . . ) cause them to redraw” (municipality, B).

#### 4.2.2. Involvement of Unwanted Parties from Outside of Luton to Take Decisions for Luton

In the municipality’s view, outsiders were brought in for expertise and they were ‘a way forward for Luton’ (municipality, B). The campaign was initially created with the help of a London advertising agency which ‘went independent outside of the council’s control’ (municipality, B) and came up with the campaign settings, being decisive about ‘the basic parameters for the campaign’ (municipality, B). The stakeholders in the town vehemently disagreed with this approach because they believed that by hiring outsiders, the authorities showed lack of respect and trust in the locals. Moreover, hiring outside ‘experts’ implied the local resources (e.g., the university, local creatives and creative agencies) were inadequate, in contradiction to those Lutonians who had confidence in them.

#### 4.2.3. Communication Issues

It seems that communication was a problem for this campaign on more than one occasion; the lack of transparency in the recruitment—as discussed above, but also in the way they presented the campaign to the public, and the associations with the previous initiatives from the town. When asked about MVOT, a representative of the municipality said: ‘the campaign is not just about the films ( . . . ) we’ve commissioned a number of projects and interventions to underpin the messages of MVOT’ through ‘four community projects ( . . . ) arts initiatives ( . . . ) training for youth leaders ( . . . ) campaigning on social change’ because they ‘wanted to ensure ( . . . ) there was a reality of social development’ (municipality, B). However, when the MVOT residents were asked about these initiatives and workshops, they said: ‘I wasn’t even aware of that’ (resident, 1), and it seemed that most of these initiatives were unknown for the wider public.

Moreover, the associations between MVOT and the previous initiative (Luton in Harmony) also created controversy. Although MVOT was clearly a separate campaign, it was still associated with the fight against extremism, and this led to oppositions between the council, the Muslim community and residents. The campaign was not well-received by some community leaders who addressed a letter of complaint to the municipality because they were concerned about the counter-terrorism associations and they ‘wrote to the chief executive saying: ‘we are very disappointed that once again, Luton’s young people are being framed though the lenses of extremism’ (municipality, B).

## 5. Discussion

As shown in our findings, the meaning created through MVOT was susceptible to people’s interpretation and their identification with the campaign content, bringing both positive and negative brand associations. For example, some people disregarded the stories because they thought that they do not represent Luton, while others identified with the cultural backgrounds presented. While storytelling is suggested as a strategy to bridge stakeholders’ stories by capturing relevant narratives between different groups of stakeholders [40], in MVOT this strategy did not work because the stories did not manage to capture a relevant representation of Luton for the majority of the public. It has been reported in other studies as well [63,64] that often such initiatives lead to detachment from the place instead of the desired attachment. Reasons for this can be the cynical attitudes towards involvement and disapproval of local government actions [63].

Identification with the campaign content was problematic even when the intended message was positive and quite close to the general place perception: Luton as a diverse place with young advocates. Although the general message of MVOT was similar to the residents' experience, the way in which the campaign was designed, including unfair participant selection and the specific stories chosen, made it harder for other residents to identify with the campaign content and created tensions. We could argue that some of the chosen residents in MVOT may have played a role in making it harder for the residents to identify with the story, as Lutonians accused them of not being honest or having been paid to give positive messages. The public's anger may have also come from the fact that some participants were not necessarily involved for the benefit of Luton but to enhance their profiles as artists. This finding contrasts with Campelo et al. [38] and Casais and Monteiro [7] who argued that residents' place attachment motivates participation, as some MVOT participants proved to be motivated by intrinsic benefits of gaining recognition rather than their place attachment.

However, most of the issues created by this campaign raised tensions and negative brand meaning because of the discrepancies in communication (e.g., what the municipality said vs. residents in MVOT), but also between each party's perceptions of the town. Numerous sources showed a mismatch between how the municipality presented the campaign and what the participants experienced. Although they both had similar aims, the municipality discussed wider content and initiatives as part of the MVOT and wanted to work with the residents to promote a prosperous town for potential investors and businesses, and the participants wanted to focus on local benefits and were unaware of these activities. This resonates with the idea that most place initiatives are created for outsiders rather than insiders [65] and the dichotomy of meanings created did not help the brand. Contrasting views led to image incongruencies [66] which added to Luton's negative reputation.

Although the municipality wanted to create a positive legacy through this campaign, presenting multicultural residents and showing how different backgrounds, cultures and religions are welcomed in Luton, for some residents the actual legacy left behind was negative. These residents felt that the initiators of MVOT, as well as the people who designed and participated in the campaign, had been used for other purposes. That resonates with the findings of the insightful study of the French region of Auvergne by Martin and Capelli [64] who found that residents felt that more powerful, institutional stakeholders were commodifying place identity and the process of place branding for their own political gains. This was also proven to be the case in the study of Northamptonshire [53]. Considering the online comments, the campaign became a target for residents' frustrations. These issues suggest that the process and outcomes could have been improved if there was a two-way communication between residents and municipality and the residents had received more active roles.

Another factor creating conflicts in Luton, but not particularly investigated in the branding literature, is the people involved in such approaches. Lutonians' major oppositions derived from the fact that the municipality did not utilise local marketers, designers and resources to build the campaign, and instead hired outsiders. In Luton, disputations were also raised by the residents who felt that by hiring an external agency, important tasks were given to 'outsiders' and this proved the municipality's mistrust of the local organisations and people. Nevertheless, this mistrust could have also emerged from a lack of communication. It is possible that the municipality did not know how to inform people about decisions during the campaign, hence it raised tensions.

## 6. Conclusions: Implications for Place Brand Co-Creation through Storytelling

The findings of our study help us make conclusions about co-creation through storytelling and the necessary processes and pre-conditions that it needs to meet. In general terms, as suggested by Hudak [49], for storytelling to be effective as a place brand co-creation mechanism, it needs to be understood as "more than just telling a story" (p. 101)



and rather as a project that “revitalises place brands through continual renegotiation and retelling of their meanings” (p. 101). More specifically, we propose that there are four major considerations that affect the result of storytelling-based place branding projects:

- a. *The stories:* As we saw in MVOT, the stories chosen to be told were not seen as appropriate by many residents and they were not considered relevant. While arguably no story can become well received by all, it is important to carefully plan the stories that will be told through the project and to ensure that their reception is tested before the project’s implementation. The challenge lies in identifying and shaping stories that are balanced between being perceived as authentic and having the potential to appeal to a wide basis of ‘listeners’.
- b. *The storytellers:* The same inconsistency was noted in MVOT for the chosen storytellers, whose motivations and truthfulness were doubted by many. In this sense, the storytellers who will share their personal stories as part of the project need to be chosen based on specific and clear criteria through a transparent and consistent process of selection.
- c. *The framing and context of the stories:* The stories told as part of MVOT were not judged and perceived solely as individual stories but were framed by the campaign’s design and execution and they became part of the project’s context. For instance, as discussed in the findings, the fact that outsiders had designed the whole project negatively affected the way in which the stories were perceived and evaluated. As Hudak [49] convincingly argues, it is essential to consider and contextualise how each story interweaves with wider narratives of the community and how the stories can demonstrate the role that residents play in the constant re-creation of the meaning of the place brand as well as its communication internally and externally.
- d. *The communication and feedback mechanisms around the project:* Finally, the communication issues that marked MVOT were another crucial factor. In fact, the Council did attempt to contextualise the stories, as noted in the previous point, through wider engagement, but people were not aware of this as it had not been communicated effectively. It is therefore essential to integrate in storytelling projects (and, arguably, in all place branding projects) communications and feedback mechanisms that will allow effective communication between the initiators and the audiences of the campaign.

These propositions are aligned with the participatory turn in place branding, see, e.g., in [15], and can help with reinforcing the significant role that the residents play, see, e.g., in [7,9,35]. It is, of course, important to refine and substantiate these propositions through further research that can focus on the clarification of several aspects of storytelling-based place branding both theoretically and in practice. For instance, it will be necessary to examine the benefits, risks and preconditions of storytelling in place branding and destination branding projects to determine their commonalities and differences. Further examining social media as a field of co-creation through storytelling, see, e.g., in [26,29], is also a very important area of research. Identifying a framework that can guide practical implementation of storytelling for place brand co-creation is also a necessity. Hudak’s [49] proposition to design digital storytelling projects based on the three stages of discussion, emplotment and support would be a very appropriate starting point. If this framework had been followed in Luton, then it is reasonable to expect that MVOT would have been a more effective campaign.

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