Branding Through Knowledge: Exploring Place Branding and Legacy of International Academic Conferences in Gothenburg

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Abstract

With increasing globalization and travel opportunities, alongside a growing focus on sustainability and social impacts, events such as international conferences are increasingly encouraged to reconsider their social, environmental and economic contributions, impacts and outcomes, tying into the concept of legacy. In the context of place branding, events are often proposed as a strategic tool in embracing the visibility and competitiveness of places and destinations. The aim of this study is to explore whether and how international academic conferences contribute to legacy and to conceptualise it in relation to place branding. The empirical focus is on international academic conferences arranged in Gothenburg, Sweden. The study uses a qualitative method and fifteen semi-structured interviews with people that have hosted conferences in Gothenburg. Findings show that conferences facilitate knowledge exchange and that cutting-edge topics discussed in conferences can contribute to legacy. Additionally, conferences may enhance place branding organically through the adaptation of conference themes to the local expertise. While actors in Gothenburg actively work with legacy, a lack of understanding of the concept exists among conference hosts, with a need for clear responsibilities, evaluations and strategies for successful implementation of both legacy and place branding to reinforce its commitment to sustainability.

Key words: *International academic conferences, Legacy, Place branding, Event, Social impact, Environmental impact, Sustainability, Qualitative method*

Introduction

At a first glance, international academic conferences may appear as routine and formal events with minimal relevance outside scholarly communities. However, conferences are among the fastest-growing areas of the event industry (Santos et al. 2023). While events come in various forms (Wood, 2009; Zarantonello & Schmitt, 2013), this study focuses on international academic conferences (Hansen, 2020). In this study, the term *event* is used as an overarching category that includes various forms such as festivals, exhibitions, sporting events, and conferences (Mair et al., 2021). The term *conference* refers to a structured gathering often focused on a specific topic. More specifically, this study focuses on international academic conferences, which are organized by universities, research institutions or companies to present, discuss and share academic research and foster collaboration (Holden et al., 2017; Neugebauer et al., 2020). International academic conferences are essential platforms for bringing people together and allowing them to solve societal and environmental challenges (Hansen, 2020). They also foster research collaboration world-wide among researchers, practitioners and institutions (Santos et al., 2023).

Conferences have grown significantly from the 1960's to date (Hansen, 2020), driven by increased globalization and travel opportunities (Albrecht et al., 2024; Klemes, 2016). Additionally, events cause negative impacts on sustainable development and the environment due to, for example, greenhouse gas emissions and pollutants (Dickson & Arcodia, 2010;

Toscani et al., 2024) and the environmental impact of international academic conferences has been addressed before by several studies (Caset et al., 2018). Conference delegates often travel by air, to and from these meetings - causing a carbon footprint which accounts for the largest share of conference-related carbon emissions (Caset et al., 2018: Higham et al., 2022; Raby & Madden, 2021). However, in recent decade, the event and travel industry has begun to strongly rethink their contributions to and impact on society to reinforce their commitment to sustainability (Belatto & Pollock, 2023; Dredge, 2022; Getz, 2017; Mair et al., 2021; Werner et al., 2017). The emphasis on reinforcing the contributions of events to society also reflects a global priority articulated in the Agenda 2030 and the Sustainable Developments Goals (United Nation, n.d; Werner et al., 2017). However, while many organizations understand and support the idea of events becoming more sustainable, such values and norms are often not implemented into practice - leaving events unable to legitimize its sustainable effects (Werner et al., 2017)

Moreover, evaluation of events has often focused on the economic impacts of events (Albrecht et al., 2024; Dwyer et al., 2000; Getz, 2008; Mair et al., 2023), leaving social, cultural and environmental impacts largely unexplored (Mair et al., 2023; Wood, 2009). Consequently, scholars have argued for the need for evaluation beyond economic outcomes to develop understanding of what other impacts events can create and contribute to (Albrecht et al., 2024; Foley et al., 2013; Getz, 2008; Getz & Page, 2016; Mair, 2014). However, there is a lack of frameworks and methodologies to explore such outcomes from conferences (Foley et al., 2013; Hansen, 2020; Richards et al., 2013). Additionally, post-conference evaluations primarily rely on participant surveys and interviews exploring the *experience* of conferences, rather than the organizing and hosting of conferences (Mair et al., 2023).

In parallel to this development, concepts of legacy have evolved, referring to benefits that extend beyond tourist economics benefits (Foley et al., 2013; Petersen & Ren, 2015) - meaning social, economic, cultural and infrastructural impacts that remain after an event (Mair et al., 2023; Kaplanidou et al., 2013; Thomson et al., 2013), a view and definition that this study aligns with. Today, the success of events is increasingly described as dependent on its social, environmental and economic contributions, both nationally and regionally (Belatto & Pollock 2023). Hence, successful events are about going beyond making events more sustainable, to considering how events can contribute to the wider sustainability agenda. This includes a focus on the contribution of events to social, economic and environmentally sustainable development in the context of place or destination where events are hosted (Mair et al., 2021).

The meaning of events in the context of place branding and destinations have been explored in the place branding literature (Anholt, 2007; Greg, 2017). Place branding has gained attention - in research and practice - over the last three decades due to increased globalisation, movement of people and businesses across the world, as well as competitiveness between cities and destinations (Armstrong & Kotler, 2015; Hankinson, 2010; Lecompte et al., 2017; Ruiz-Real et al., 2020; Swain et al., 2024). Places worldwide have engaged place branding due to its potential to enhance trade and inward investment, and create economic security to

local communities (Knott et al., 2015). Place branding has been conceptualised as a process to promote and develop the economic and sociopolitical developments of places (Ashworth & Kavaratzis, 2009; Hanna & Rowley, 2011).

Since place branding can be analyzed through a multidimensional perspective through other concepts and theories (Kavaratzis & Hatch, 2013) - such as, place image (Ashworth & Kavaratzis, 2009; Hanna & Rowley, 2011), place identity (Kalandides, 2011; Kavaratzis & Hatch, 2013), city branding (Ashworth & Kavaratzis, 2009), corporate branding (Hankinson, 2010), place marketing (Kavaratzis & Hatch, 2013) rebranding (Ashworth & Kavaratzis, 2009) and nation branding (Knott et al., 2015) - this study will refer to *destination image* (Swain et al., 2024) since previous studies regarding place branding have been focusing on the destinations image A positive destination image is associated with satisfaction and brand loyalty among the visitors (Veasna et al., 2013) that can form a positive word of mouth of the place (Boo et al., 2009; Kemp et al., 2012). Similarly, events are said to play a crucial role as drivers of socio-economic developments and have been depicted as powerful marketing tools that can attract tourists and other stakeholders (Amorim et al., 2021; Dalgiç & Birdir, 2020). Previous research has also addressed the use of events to *rebrand* a destination or place and its destination image (Bodet & Lacassagne, 2012; Knott et al., 2015).

While the role of large events have been thoroughly addressed in place branding research (Bodet & Lacassagne, 2012; Dolles & Söderman, 2008; Mair et al., 2023; Knott et al., 2015; Preuss, 2007), the role of smaller events, such as international academic conferences - have not been studied at length (Bodet & Lacassagne, 2012; Knott et al., 2015). Such conferences are interesting and worthy to investigate in the context of place branding for some main reasons, one being that we see a steady growth of international academic conferences (Hansen, 2020). Moreover, conferences - like events - can be a tool to position a place in competition with other places (Braun et al., 2013; Kotler & Gertner, 2002; Lecompte et al., 2017). Also, events can contribute to the sustainable development of a place and to the image of a place as sustainable (Maheshwari et al., 2011).

To summarise, the event industry is increasingly focused on legacy, and thus the social, economic, cultural, environmental and infrastructural impacts that remain after an event. However, there is a lack of the research on legacy of international conferences, since legacy of events is often tied to the place where the event is hosted, which has been researched in the context of large events, such as mega-events (Mair et al., 2023; Matheson 2010; Preuss 2007; Thomson et al., 2013). Nevertheless, while previous research has studied legacy and place branding together in connection to mega-events (Knott & Swart, 2017), limited research has explored the legacy of international academic conferences in relation to places, nor conceptualised it in relation to place branding. Consequently, the aim of this study is to explore whether and how international academic conferences contribute to legacy and to conceptualise it in relation to place branding. Therefore, two research questions guide this study:

RQ1*: How can international academic conferences contribute to legacy?*

RQ2: *How can legacy of international academic conferences be conceptualised in the context of place branding?*

International academic conference organised in Gothenburg is the empirical focus for this study. Göteborg & Co - the Destination Management Organisation (DMO) in Gothenburg - profiles Gothenburg as a *meeting city* that creates better opportunities for local research, businesses and sustainable growth (Göteborg & Co, 2024). The DMO outlines how the meeting industry brings together business and academica, and contributes to national and international collaboration. This, in turn, is said to profile Gothenburg as a city of knowledge, creating economic and social value and strengthening the place brand (Göteborg & Co, 2024). Moreover, Gothenburg has a strong sustainability focus, and the DMO's efforts have led to the ranking of Gothenburg as a top destination in the *Global Destination Sustainability Index* multiple times (Göteborg & Co, 2024). The study uses a qualitative method involving fifteen semi-structured interviews with people that have hosted international academic conferences in Gothenburg.

The remainder of this study is structured as follows: First, I provide an overview of the theoretical framework, consisting of previous research about academic conferences, legacy and place branding – concluding with a conceptual model. This is followed by a section about the research methodology, where I present the study's research context, qualitative approach, method for gathering and analysing empirical material, together with a discussion about the quality of the study. Thereafter, in the findings and analysis section, key results are presented and analysed in relation to the theoretical framework. This builds the ground for the last section, the concluding discussion including the theoretical contributions and practical implications, along with limitations and future research.

Theoretical Framework

In the following section, I first present prior research about *academic conferences* as a foundation for this study. Secondly, I will present the concept *legacy*, before I elaborate on *place branding*. I end this section with a visualisation of the interconnections between the concepts using a conceptual model.

Academic Conferences

An event is planned, themed, time-limited and can include arts and cultural festivals, sports events, and business or education-oriented conferences and exhibitions (Mair et al., 2021). Events are structured with a clear beginning and an end, often situated in a specific location and planned with scheduled programs (Getz & Page 2016). Events can be held on a regular basis and vary between small and informal meetings to major political or economic forums and mega-events (Getz, 2011).

Academic conferences can be referred to as *academic events*. Academic events work as an umbrella concept, incorporating conferences, conventions and congresses (Hansen 2020;

Mair et al., 2018). Some scholars even present academic events as business events (Mair, 2012). However, several scholars and researchers share the same understanding of conferences as platforms for knowledge dissemination (Albrecht et al., 2024; González-Santos and Dimond, 2015; Nichols et al., 2020, Klemes, 2016). A delegate, which is a person attending the conference as a representative of an institution, organization, research center, regional organization, or company - participates in discussions, presentations and networking during the conference (Holden et al., 2017; Raby & Maden, 2021). The topics presented during the conferences feature a wide range of cutting-edge research and new technologies (Klemes, 2016).

That is, conferences serve as an arena for exchange of research-based insights and offers opportunities to present, engage with and develop knowledge in collaboration with various stakeholders (Albrecht et al., 2024: Fitjar & Huber, 2015; Klemes, 2016; Nichols et al., 2020; Raby & Maden, 2021). Academic conferences allow people to meet face-to-face which is essential for networking (Mair et al., 2018). Networking at academic conferences is a core element of a successful career for the delegates participating at the conferences, however, engaging in research topics during the conferences can foster new perspectives on problems or issues and result in future collaboration among several delegates, institutions or companies (Mair et al., 2018). Hosting an academic conference is therefore acknowledged as an investment that can strengthen individuals, professionals and their organizations (Nichols et al., 2020).

Moreover, Hansen (2020) highlights the need for collaboration when organizing an academic event, including representatives from the meetings industry assisting with practical arrangements. For example, convention bureaus that deliver bid material to win the right to host an event, restaurants organizing the conferences dinners and hotels caring for accommodation for attendees and speakers. Scholars therefore also argue that successful planning of all certain events, depends on active communication, strong social connections, and negotiation with a variety of stakeholders, such as committee members, administrators, event organizers and community representatives, suppliers and sponsors – to enable collaborative decision-making (Ashworth & Kavaratzis, 2009; Chalip et al., 2003; Hanna & Rowley, 2011; Holmes et al., 2015; Nichols et al., 2020; Toscani et al., 2022; Xing & Chalip, 2006; Yuan, 2013).

Legacy

The concept of legacy has emerged as a strategic focus in both research and practice, and is originally found in literature of mega-events and sport events (Mair et al., 2023; Matheson 2010; Preuss 2007; Thomson et al., 2013). While there is no single definition of legacy, it is commonly understood as encompassing a range of benefits that extend beyond *touristic economic benefits* (Foley et al. 2013), and thus, social, environmental, economic, cultural and infrastructural benefits that remain after an event has been conducted, often connected to the host destination.

Legacy is often associated with terms like *effects*, *consequences*, *outcomes* and *impacts* of events (Matehson, 2014). *Economical outcomes* typically include increased sales, employment, delegate numbers, and investment (Albrecht et al., 2024; Greg, 2017; Mair et al., 2023; Wood, 2009). *Social outcomes* refer to changes that influence the quality of life for individuals, communities, cities, and nations across multiple levels. (Fredline et al., 2003, cited in Mair et al., 2023; Ritchie et al., 2020; Smith et al., 2019). Legacy also encompasses the development of human capital through knowledge exchange, skill enhancement, and academic value (Albrecht et al., 2024). Lastly, *environmental outcomes* are focusing on reducing ecological and carbon footprints. That is, such impacts, or legacies, could improve physical activity levels, educational level, sustainability driven regeneration and broader economic and social developments (Matheson, 2010). However, such legacies are often intangible and complex, and challenging to evaluate (Mair et al., 2023). They can also be planned or unplanned, positive or negative, and often focused on long-term or permanent outcomes (Preuss, 2007; Thomson et al., 2013).

Matheson (2010) and Thomson et al. (2013) emphasizes that legacy is not an automatic or guaranteed outcome from events, but rather requires strategic planning and evaluation from the beginning of planning the event, and throughout the entire event lifecycle - to ensure that the event generates lasting impacts for the host city and its residents. Scholars argue for short-term impacts being insufficient for achieving meaningful results (Matheson, 2010; Thomson et al., 2013) and claim that events must embed legacy ambitions in the pre-event planning phase to realize lasting impacts. This involves defining the concept of legacy within the specific context and for the organisation or persons working with it since it has different definitions. It also involves assigning clear responsibilities to individuals, and identifying key stakeholders early in the process of organizing an event (Albrecht et al., 2024; Thomson et al., 2013: Preuss, 2007).

Sustainability and social responsibility should represent the core goals of legacy planning (Albrecht et al., 2024). Moreover, pre-event evaluation is a critical tool for identifying potential impacts and tracking their development throughout the event lifecycle (Gratton and Preuss, 2007). It allows organizers to adapt legacy strategies in real time and avoid missed opportunities. For example, studies of mega-events event like the Olympic Games and FIFA World Cups reveal that stakeholders - across different phrases, such as bidding, planning and implementation – can influence both the trajectory and outcomes of legacy (Gibson et al., 2014; Minnaert, 2012; O'Brien, 2006; Tournis, 2018). In contrast, a lack of legacy planning, as in the case of Athens Olympics 2004, can result in failure to capitalize on potential long-term benefits since the evaluation happened two years after the event took place (Matheson, 2010).

Given that events involve multiple stakeholders with diverse interests, fostering community engagement and collaboration during the planning process is crucial (Greg, 2017; Matheson 2010, Misener & Mason, 2006). According to the International Olympic Committee (IOC), delivering legacy outcomes requires strong collaboration between city leaders, event organizers, regional and national authorities, and local communities (IOC, 2012, cited in Mair

et al., 2023). That entails aligning the event's objectives with the host destination's long term development strategies, is essential to achieve long-term impacts (Essex & Chalkley, 1999; Hiller, 2000). It has even been argued that legacy should contribute to the long-term development of a destination and to reinforcing the destination's values and identity (Greg, 2017). The IOC's 'New norm' agenda exemplifies this by urging host destinations and places to tailor events to local visions and priorities - across economic, social and environmental dimensions rather than reshaping the place to fit the event (IOC 2018, cited in Mair et al., 2023).

Nevertheless, it is important to recognize that not all events are capable of generating meaningful legacies (Spilling, 1996; Albrecht et al., 2024). In some cases, mega-events have left host destinations burdened with long-term debts tied to urban infrastructure, along with underutilized facilities and unmet development goals (Gold & Gold, 2007).

Evaluating the Impacts of Events and Conferences

A growing body of literature emphasizes the multifaceted impacts of events (Albrecht et al., 2024; Klemes, 2016; Nichols et al., 2020). Despite this, there is to date no standardized framework for evaluating these impacts, particularly in the context of academic conferences (De Leon & McQuillin, 2020). Much of the existing evaluation practice continues to prioritize quantifiable economic indicators, such as revenue, delegate numbers and employment, while overlooking broader and often intangible outcomes (Albrecht et al., 2024; Greg, 2017; Wood, 2009). A central critique in the literature regarding event evaluation concerns the limited scope of most evaluation models, which often are based on single case events rather than longitudinal or comparative studies across multiple events (Greg, 2017). In addition, some studies have explored the *experience* of events, emphasizing dimensions such as attendee satisfaction, enjoyment, and social interaction in shaping the overall atmosphere of an event (Mair et al., 2018; Morgan, 2008; Yoshida & James, 2011).

However, despite the demand for evaluation of other impacts that go beyond economic outcomes, such assessments remain rare (Albrecht et al., 2024). The limitation of evaluations can be attributed to both conceptual and practical challenges, including a lack of understanding of how to identify values, as well as the influence of stakeholders who prioritize return on investment (ROI), such as governments, funders and private sector partners (Albrecht et al., 2024; Matheson, 2010; Wood, 2009). Moreover, conferences and their variables are complex and difficult to coordinate and multiple interconnected factors contribute to the impacts of events, rather than a single isolated element (Wood, 2009). Additionally, scholars warn of *trickle-down-effects*, which are impacts difficult to attribute or connect to a single event (Matheson, 2010; Preuss, 2007). Another factor for lack of evaluation, can be due to that post-event studies are conducted within a year after the event (Kim & Petrick, 2005; Rojas-Mendez et al., 2019) whereas legacy outcomes usually take up to 15-20 years to emerge (Albrecht et al., 2024; Garcia, 2003; Heinemann, 2003; Matheson, 2010; Spilling, 1996; Thomson et al., 2013).

Consequently, a lack of standardized evaluation tools of events can result in challenges for conferences to demonstrate and quantify the outcomes of new approaches and innovations introduced by delegates (Albrecht et al., 2024). This, in turn, can hinder the ability to evaluate legacy over time (Matheson, 2010). Since event funding increasingly depends on justifying outcomes to various stakeholders, it becomes essential to establish clear objectives and corresponding indicators that align with both immediate and long-term goals (Albrecht et al., 2024).

Place Branding

Place branding is conceptualized as a tool of branding and marketing strategies to promote the economic and sociopolitical developments of towns, cities, regions and countries (Ashworth & Kavartzis, 2009; Hanna & Rowley, 2011). Historically, it is built upon concepts of place promotion (Hankinson, 2010; Kavaratzis & Hatch, 2013; Short and Kim (1999) explains that one of the drivers of place branding was the need of industrial cities to *reimage* or *rebrand* themselves.

We have witnessed the use of mega-events in processes of rebranding. For example, Beijing hosted the Olympics in 2008 to reshape the international perception of both Beijing and China (Bodet & Lacassagne, 2012) while South Africa hosted the FIFA World Cup in 2010 to reframe the nation's global image globally – dissociating it from the perception as nation of crime, to promoting narratives of safety and beautiful landscapes (Knott et al., 2015). Similarly, Qatar, hosting the FIFA World Cup in 2022, used similar strategies to enhance its international profile (Dolles & Söderman, 2008). However, place branding strategies like rebranding have primarily been examined in the context of mega-events (Mair et al., 2023; Preuss, 2007), while their application to smaller events, such as conferences, has received little attention in previous research.

Place branding has gained attention over the last three decades due to increased globalisation, movement of people and businesses across the world, as well as competitiveness between cities and destinations (Armstrong & Kotler, 2015; Hankinson, 2010; Lecompte et al., 2017; Ruiz-Real et al., 2020; Swain et al., 2024), with gained attention from 2008 and forwards (Hankinson, 2010; Swain et al., 2024; Ruiz-Real et al., 2020). Noticeable place branding has shifted from focusing on exploring factors that drive touristics attitudes toward a destination brand, to a more focus on studying the effectiveness of stakeholder collaboration in co-creating a destination brand (Swain et al., 2024).

As documented by Ashworth and Kavaratzis (2009) place branding strategies should ensure that consumer expectations are met in the way people experience the city which can be generated through communication and promotional activity (Ashworth & Kavaratzis, 2009). Moreover, several authors have illustrated similarities (and differences) between place branding and corporate branding (Ashworth & Kavaratzis, 2009; Braun et al. 2013; Martin & Capelli, 2017). That is, places compete with each other to attract economic, political and social outcomes (Kavaratzis & Ashworth, 2005). This includes revenue from tourism, inward

investment and enhanced cultural identity as desired outcomes (Kavaratzis & Ashworth, 2005). Swain et al. (2024) also include areas such as education, technology and hospitality. That is, one key driver for place branding is differentiation from other cities and to position the place as attractive for different actors (Braun et al., 2013; Kotler & Gertner, 2002).

Place branding has similarities with legacy, as it is a co-constructed process being shaped through interactions by different stakeholders. Scholars therefore argue that place branding must integrate strategy, corporate communication and organizational culture (Ashworth & Kavaratzis, 2009; Perkins et al., 2020) and have an interplay between vision, culture and image (Hatz & Schultz, 2001, cited in Ashworth & Kavaratzis, 2009). In fact, Ashworth and Kavaratzis (2009) suggest that place branding should not only be limited to attracting external audiences such as investment, employment or visitors, rather, it should foster dialogues between citizens and local authorities. Today, scholars increasingly regard place branding as stakeholder-centric with collaboration at the core (Swain et al., 2024). Kavaratzis and Hatch (2013) presents how place branding centers on the idea of brands being co-created by multiple stakeholders, considering relationships as an essential element. Similarly, Hankinson (2010) explains how destinations are not owned or controlled by a single organisation, but rather collectively developed and delivered by a network of public and private sector organisations.

In line with this, Pasquinelli et al. (2024) emphasize that place branding is not solely the result of top-down strategies but emerges through processes of formation and appropriation, where regional actors engage with and reinterpret place-based symbolic, and cultural values. Pasquinelli et al. (2024) explain that such innovation is a multi-actor process involving multiple actors, such as companies, universities, government and civil society. Such an emerging process is rooted in the everyday habits and norms of a place, and primarily exchanged through informal and face-to-face interaction (Pasquinelli et al., 2024). In doing so, the stakeholder perspective increased by including firms and other institutional actors as co-creators of place brands through knowledge interaction and symbolic meaning-making (Pasquinelli et al., 2024).

However, place branding literature is still limited regarding stakeholders collaborations and especially in connection to companies' involvement in place branding (Perkins et al., 2020). While Perkins et al. (2020) presents strategies that could be used, these do not consider themes such as *destination's image*, which Swain et al. (2024) explains are an essential element when driving for successful place branding. Moreover, the lack of research on stakeholders involvement in place branding is due to many studies focusing on the participation of citizens rather than other stakeholders (Vuigner, 2017).

Events connection to Place Branding

Hosting events has been an important strategy to brand cities (Van Limburg, 1998 in Greg, 2017). In recent decades the relationship between place branding and events has received increased attention (Greg, 2017). Events can influence how a city is perceived and

represented, contributing to a competitive destination image through symbolic and creative expressions (Anholt, 2007).

The concept of *eventalisation* from Smith et al. (2019) represents the idea that events generate narratives and images that shape the place brand and attract people. Similarly, Richards and Palmer (2010) developed the concept of *eventful cities* which demonstrates that cities do not just host events, they rather strategically employ them to shape and redefine the place's identity. For events to be meaningfully integrated into a place's strategic vision and place branding, there must be a connection and alignment between the place's characteristics and the programme of events, which in turn can lead to long term impacts rather than short term impacts (Richards & Palmer, 2010). Thus, events need to be perceived as a part of the long-term development process to have an impact on the place (Anholt, 2007). Hence, the way people experience and identify with a place, must align with how the place is officially represented or marketed, which can be realized through events (Greg, 2017).

Furthermore, events play a crucial role in socio-economic development (Amorim et al., 2021; Dalgiç & Birdir, 2020) where notions like *strategic* and *sustainable place branding* is tied to a view of events as catalyst for long-term outcomes by adapting strategic approaches (Palermo & Ponzini, 2015). There are cases where events have implemented sustainability principles not only to reduce environmental impact, but also to educate event-participants about green practices (Mair et al., 2014). Such efforts may include promoting green messages through vegetarian or organic menu options with lower environmental impacts (Santos et al., 2023) - elaborating on how events can highlight education of new sustainable practices. That is, the impact of events should be understood in broader terms, extending beyond economic and image-related outcomes (Greg, 2017).

Conceptual Model

The conceptual model developed in this study, and presented in Figure 1, illustrates the interconnected relationship between three core elements: international academic conferences (events), legacy and place branding, as well as how they relate to the increased priority to sustainability in the event industry. The connection between *legacy* and *events* is well-documented in previous research on mega-events, especially in the contents of economic outcomes (Mair et al., 2023; Preuss, 2007). Similarly, *events* and *place branding* are linked in previous research through the use of events as strategic tools to brand, rebrand and promote places and destinations (Bodet & Lacassagne, 2012; Knott et al., 2015; Dolles & Söderman, 2008). Lastly, the overlap between *legacy* and *place branding* reflects previous research (Knott et al., 2015; Mair et al., 2021; Maheshwari et al., 2011) emphasizing that place branding can positively influence sustainability and have social impacts. This reflects how legacy - which strives for social, economic, environmental, cultural and infrastructural outcomes (Kaplanidou et al., 2013; Mair et al., 2023; Thomson et al., 2013) - and place branding, can be interwoven.

While each pair has been studied individually, little attention has been given to how all these elements function together. Thus, the conceptual model illustrated international academic conferences as a unique setting where events, legacy, and place branding converge, with sustainability priorities as a common denominator.

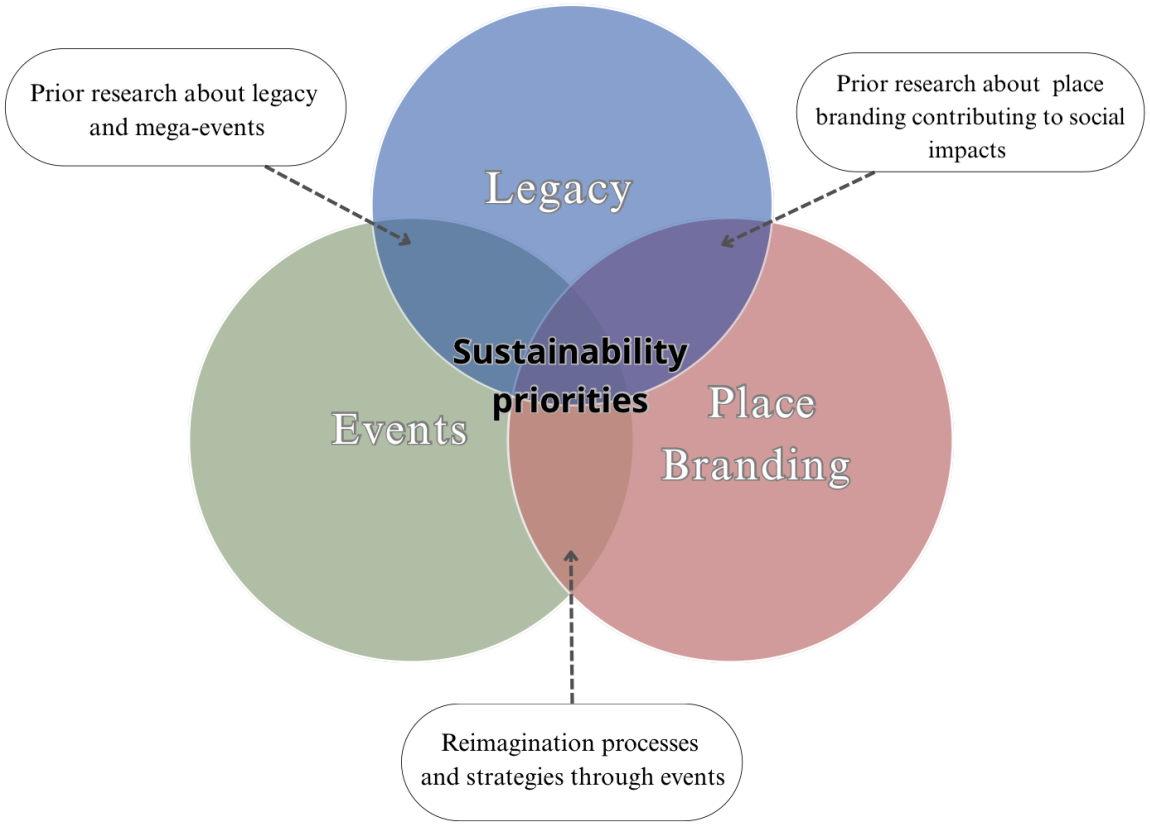

Figure 1: A conceptual model illustrating international academic conferences as a unique setting where events, legacy and place branding converge, with sustainability priorities as a common denominator.

Research Methodology

The aim of this study was to explore how international academic conferences contribute to legacy and how legacy of international academic conferences can be conceptualised in the context of place branding. To answer this aim, I explored the objectives, perceptions and experiences of conference hosts, using qualitative, semi-structured interviews and an inductive approach. In this method section, I start with explaining the relevance of the chosen context before presenting the methodological approach further. Thereafter, I present the sampling strategy, data collection as well as the data analysis. The research methodology ends with a presentation of ethical considerations.

Contextual background

This study reflects characteristics that aligns with case study methods and is described as a *multi-case* according to Yin (2014) since this study used several conferences as its empirical focus. I used these conferences as a mean for understanding a broader issue and for exploring a social, complex and general phenomena (Bryman, 2011; Flyvbjerg, 2006; Silverman, 2022; Yin, 2014). While the findings of this study are hard to generalize, one can expect to find similar patterns in other, similar contacts (Flyvbjerg, 2006). Gothenburg was selected as a study context based on three key points, explained next. Choosing Gothenburg moreover allowed me to explore the aim and research questions in depth and within a real-word context, something Yin (2014) explains is important when choosing a research context.

Firstly, the City of Gothenburg - through its destination management organisation (DMO) *Göteborg & Co* - has many years of experience in hosting international academic conferences (Göteborg & Co, 2024). The city and the destination also work actively with sustainable development, and with branding Gothenburg as a sustainable destination (Göteborg & Co, 2025). Much of this happens through collaboration between different regional actors, such as Business Region Göteborg (BRG) (Business Region Göteborg, 2025).

Secondly, according to reports by Business Region Göteborg (2024) regarding business and growth for year 2024 and 2025, the west part of Sweden is perceived as an innovation leader within Europe, with high scores for its well-educated people, developed institutions, strong labor market, and resources for research. BRG presents Gothenburg as Sweden's most important region of innovation (ibid.). Thirdly, the report by BRG (2024) emphasizes the importance of diversity between residents and companies, regarding different skills and industry orientations since it creates opportunities for specialization. BRG argues for densely populated regions, such as Gothenburg, being unique places for growth and renewal where using different competences could be efficient if companies, education and research institutions, and public parties are collaborating. BRG also argues for the importance that meeting places have for different actors, as they can meet and build a ground for innovations and ideas for the region (Business Region Göteborg, 2024).

Considering that legacy is a concept emphasizing long term outcomes, a city prioritizing growth, innovation and knowledge was essential for this study. Moreover, since place branding is central to this study, it was also essential to find a city working with strategic and continuous branding of the destination and the place. Also, since conferences aim to develop knowledge for institutions, organizations and companies, and since Gothenburg works with promoting growth and renewal through competences - Gothenburg is legitimized as a researched context for this study since a case study should be based on the anticipation of where one can expect learning at its greatest (Bryman, 2011, p. 60).

Purposive Sampling

This thesis was carried out in collaboration with Gothenburg's DMO Göteborg & Co, since they have a strong involvement in events, including work with bidding processes promoting Gothenburg for different events. They also have a well-established contact network with different actors involved when organizing various conferences. My contact person at Göteborg & Co helped me get in contact with suitable hosts of previous conferences, referred to as *conference hosts* in this study. I used a purposive sampling technique as I got in touch with conference hosts that were in the exposition to answer the aim of this study (Bryman, 2011).

Collection of empirical material

Since a case study can involve complexity and intensity of detailed examination, a qualitative study was promoted (Bryman, 2011) and is perceived as the primary data of this study. A qualitative approach, using semi-structured interviews, was deemed suitable since this study aimed to explore objectives, perceptions and experiences, and gain insight into how different people perceive and understand a phenomena or certain subject (Bryman, 2011; Silverman, 2022), and since this study did not consider quantifying impacts. Yin (2014) also emphasizes that interviews are one of the most important sources of case study evidence and often found in case study research. Moreover, as this study contributes to existing literature within legacy and place branding, a qualitative approach gives the opportunity to develop theoretical perspectives through in-depth knowledge (Saunder et al., 2016).

Using guided, semi-structured interviews and an interview guide, I prepared questions based on themes and topics related to the theoretical framework, connected to the conference hosts' experiences of hosting international academic conferences in Gothenburg (Bryman, 2011; Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008) that can be presented through an *interview guide* (Bryman, 2011). For this study, I sent out the interview guide beforehand to make the interviewees comfortable with the questions and give them time to reflect on their answers. Moreover, due to prior research demonstrating that legacy impacts are intangible and context-specific, using guided and semi-structured interviews was suitable since interviewees could develop their answers and I could ask follow-up questions. Additionally, based on the respondents having different experiences from industries and conferences, using semi-structured interviews allowed me to be flexible and adjust flexible questions based on the respondents answers and different themes (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008; Saunders et al., 2016; Silverman, 2022). To increase the validation and reliability of the study, I rewrote the questions, ensuring that the respondents understood the questions in the way intended (Sunder et al., 2016).

In total, I conducted 15 interviews with conference hosts, ranging between 27 and 75 minutes per interview, with two of the interviews being limited to approximately 27 minutes (for more information, see Table 1). All interviews were conducted between the beginning of March 2025 and the end of April 2025. While the span of years of the conferences ranged from the earliest being hosted in 1989 to the latest in 2024, the majority have taken place within the

last decade. Although the inclusion of a conference from 1989 could pose a potential limitation due to the historical context and changes over time, the fact that most conferences are from recent years strengthens the relevance and comparability of the data, minimizing the impact of the broader time span on the overall findings. Moreover, the respondents had experiences from different conferences and industries which resulted in a variety of experiences. The conference host's titles varied between researchers, doctors and people in senior positions in companies and organizations that all hosted international academic conferences in Gothenburg.

Including perspectives from different industries and from different years, provided differences and similarities in the empirical material. In doing so, this study analyzed different cases to understand a broader context (Bryman, 2011). Lastly, the industries from the conference hosts ranged between communication, law studies, healthcare, biological chemistry, space technology, electromagnetics, technology, dental health, women's health, as well as dam safety and technical safety (For more information, see Table 1).

All interviews were conducted both via the video application Teams and in person. This enabled both me and the respondents to observe each other's facial expressions and reactions (Björklund & Paulsson, 2012; Bryman et al., 2011; Bryman & Bell, 2015). With the respondents' permission, all interviews were recorded which allowed me to remain focused during the conversation and review the data in detail afterward. This approach helped me to get familiarized with the data as I could repeat and engage with the transcripts, which facialited the thematic analysis and are one of the "six phases of analysis" for thematic analysis according to Braun and Clarke (2006). Additionally, all interviews were held in Swedish, and the presented quotes in the section "findings and analysis" are translated to English. Before all interviews, I made sure that the computer and the voice microphone worked.

Respondents	**Conference topic**	**Time (h:m:s)**
Hans	Communication	00:29:23
Annika	Legal studies	00:53:28
Bengt	Healthcare	00:36:28
Olof	Space technology	01:30:04
Anders	Communication technology	00:48:10
Mona	Technical Safety of Vehicles	00:43:49
Karin	Dental health	00:41:47

Karl	Electromagnetic	00:57:38
Julia	Biological Chemistry	00:40:30
Lena	Health care	00:26:10
Örjan	Medical informatics	00: 40:51
Mattias	Dams	01:05:55
Patrik	Immunology	00:55:41
Lars	Women's health	01:09:52
Erik	System simulation	00:52:41

Table 1: Overview of pseudonymous, conference topics and time of interviews.

Analysis of empirical material

Clarifying the process of analyzing data is essential for future research to evaluate this study and compare it with other studies focusing on legacy, place branding and events (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Since the conference hosts' different experiences of hosting conferences and the variety of industries they represent generated several different perspectives in the empirical material, it was essential for me to analyze the empirical material in a comprehensive and categorized way to present a well-nuanced analysis.

Flyvbjerg (2006) explains that case studies can contain narratives that represent complexities of real life, that may be difficult to summarise into general propositions and theories, and explains that such narratives is not a problem, but rather a sign that the study has uncovered rich problematic perspectives. For this matter, I chose to adapt a *thematic analysis* when analyzing the empirical material. Since patterns and themes are characteristics for thematic analysis, the approach allowed me to capture patterns, responses or meanings within the data set that I perceived as important in relation to the research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Hence, a thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) allowed me to adapt an active role where I identified and selected patterns or themes which were of interest for this study. Themes that were perceived as unnecessary data were categorized away (Mayring, 2014) to not affect the studies scope.

With that said, this study adopted a *contextualist method* as a theoretical position for thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). That is, a mixture between an *essentialist* which reports experiences, meaning and the reality of participants, and a *constructionist perspective* which examines the ways in which events, realities, meanings and experiences are the effects of a range of discourses operating within society (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The research philosophy for this study can thus be described as *ontological interpretivism* (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Moreover, the themes and patterns were found through highlighting the respondents' answers in different colors before I displaced them to their assigned themes and codes. As there are no specific rules for prevalence within thematic analysis, I used coding to categorize the founded themes, resulting in this study fostering an inductive approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The codes were associated with the themes, and allowed me to pick up relevant narratives and expressions. Table 2 therefore presents an overview of the four themes found from the empirical material together with an example of codes and data extract.

Raw Data Excerpt	Initial Codes	Focused Codes	Theme
"No, you can't, because it could be exactly these conclusions that someone shows and has come to these conclusions and shows with credibility that "this is how it is". It would take you a very long time to acquire that knowledge."	Collaboration opportunities. Shared learning	Strategic and spontaneous collaborations.	**Knowledge exchange and collaborations**
"No, I don't have any examples of that off the top of my head, but there are certainly cases. I can't really point to anything specific […]I'm sure that there are outcomes that were new then, and that you today will find implemented in the vehicle. Absolutely."	Lack of follow-up. Assumptions of long-term impact. Unmeasured outcomes	Dominance of economic measurement. Intangible outcomes. Diffusion of responsibility.	**Beyond the numbers: untracking responsibilities**
"We like to collaborate and be creative with other creative people. It is not just about doing our jobs, but about being prosperous and contributing to the city's resources." (Olof, Conference in Space industry."	Sustainability, civic expression impacts	-City values communicated through conference design - techniques - material	**Conferences way to legacy**
"Why did we want to bring them here? There were several different reasons. We wanted to be involved and put Gothenburg, its businesses and the city's law firms on the map. It is quite lawyer-heavy in Stockholm for natural reasons and we wanted to open the eyes and network for Gothenburg lawyers as	Unintentional branding. Different industries. Competition. Reputation.	- Implicit city image formation - Strategic alignment with local expertise	**Place Branding Through Conferences**

much as the Gothenburg firms. Furthermore, we wanted to introduce and help spread the network to young lawyers in Sweden."			

Table 2: Data extract with themes, codes and raw data

Quality of the study

To ensure the quality and trustworthiness of this study, I applied Lincoln and Guba's (1985) four criteria of evaluating qualitative research: *credibility, transferability, dependability* and *confirmability* (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Guba & Lincoln, 1994, cited in Bryman, 2011). Since the research questions for this study was about both legacy and place branding in international academic conferences, this study aligned with Guba and Lincoln's (1985) view, emphasizing that there exists multiple truths of the social world – where one wants to increase the understanding of them.

That is, credibility was addressed by following good research practices and enduring respondent validation. This was done through three steps, (1) repeating my understanding of the respondents answers back to them during the interviews, (2) getting approval of their quotations afterward, and (3) conducting interviews until saturation was reached, where no new insights emerged (Silverman, 2022). Furthermore, the aim of this study was not to implicate the findings to every context, but to develop the knowledge regarding both legacy and place branding in the chosen context of international academic conferences. Hence, this study's transferability could therefore be presented through two strategies. Firstly, by me providing "thick description" (Guba & Lincoln, 1985; Bryman & Bell, 2011) through detailed, rich and contextualized insights into the studies' phenomena. Secondly, through this study using multiple cases, which according to Flyvbjerg (2006) increases the analytical strength and generalization of the study by illuminating different dimensions of the phenomenon.

Dependability was reached through a transparent and structured research process, where one can trace the development of this study from the first idea to the final analysis. Lastly, confirmability was maintained by avoiding researcher bias. As a researcher I tried to be objective with no personal values or theoretical inclinations, although being completely objective is impossible. However, efforts were made to remain natural, for example by declining to answer questions that might be influenced by the theoretical framework during interviews.

Ethical considerations

Informed consent was obtained prior to recording the interviews. Since the conduction of interviews was via Teams and in person, it allowed for observation of signs such as potential

discomfort or confusion from respondents, an aspect Bryman (2011) highlights as important. All respondents were informed about the study's purpose and were assured that the data would not be used for any non-research purpose, which aligns with ethical guidelines on confidentiality and anonymity (Bryman & Bell 2011; Lind, 2019). Since this study was conducted in collaboration with Göteborg & Co, the identities of the conference hosts remain anonymous, despite their approval to be named, in accordance with Göteborg & Co's preference. Given that qualitative research involves considerations of confidentiality and anonymity, it is important to prevent the identification of individuals, organizations, and locations (Bryman, 2011). To address this, I assigned pseudonyms and referred only to the general topics of the conferences (For more information, see Table 1), since presenting a full name of all conferences and corresponding years of the conferences would have increased the possibility to track the respondents.

Moreover, since this study focused on the experience of hosting conferences, the interview questions were experiential and not of sensitive nature of the respondents, which avoided invasion of privacy (Bryman & Bell, 2011). However, since many topics can be judged sensitive to everyone, all respondents were treated with sensitivity where I gave them space to withdraw, as recommended by Bryman (2011). Additionally, each of the respondents was given the opportunity to review and approve their citations afterward, for validity reasons and for strengthening the statements in the findings and analysis. Finally, it was essential for me to establish a mutually beneficial relationship, where they understood that this study is of beneficial exchange – where it can be of practical value for different stakeholders, including the conference hosts. This approach aligns with Brymans' (2011) belief of fostering shared ethical norms.

Findings and Analysis

The following section combines the findings and the analysis of this study, through presenting the empirical material and linking it to the theoretical framework. The empirical material provided four central themes that will be presented in this section.

Knowledge exchange and collaborations

Despite differences in industries and experiences, all respondents emphasize conferences as crucial meeting places among researchers, institutions, and companies. Conferences are by respondents viewed as arenas for knowledge exchange, which align with prior research (Albrecht et al., 2024; González-Santos & Dimond, 2015; Nichols et al., 2020, Klemes, 2016). Respondents also highlight what earlier studies emphasize (Albrecht et al., 2024; Fitjar & Huber, 2015; Klemes, 2016; Nichols et al., 2020), that conferences foster long term collaborations through presenting and engaging in research. The respondent Örjan, explained that face-to-face presentations are very efficient for knowledge transfer in comparison with months of studying literature reviews:

"*No, you can't, because it could be exactly these conclusions that someone shows and has come to these conclusions and shows with credibility that "this is how it is". It would take you a very long time to acquire that knowledge.*"*(Örjan, Conference in Medical Informatics)*

Similarly, Karin described that spontaneous interaction during conferences may evolve into sustained international collaboration in the long term. Moreover, several respondents expressed that some outcomes would not have occurred without the conference. For instance, Julia expressed how the conference led to new research collaborations with Hungary and Switzerland. That is, conferences can lead to legacy outcomes such as educational and knowledgeable impacts (Albrecht et al., 2024) that can emerge and foster innovative ideas. In doing so, conferences contribute to building human capital, skills and academic value, which benefits society (Albrecht et al., 2024). For such a reason, the social outcome through education and knowledge, remains after the event has been conducted (Mair et al., 2023; Kaplanidou et al., 2013; Shipway et al., 2020 and Thomson et al., 2013). This can be further explained through Örjan who highlights the role of research for society, where conferences and institutions historically have introduced new practices and ideas to researchers.

Further, I asked all respondents whether the knowledge from the conferences remains local or global. However, all of them demonstrated that the knowledge remains global since researchers today mostly work globally in collaboration with each other. However, since several respondents explained that more Swedish researchers and companies are able to participate if the conference is hosted in Sweden, one could question whether the hosting destination and country of the conference benefits locally and nationally when hosting the conference in one's own country, as they might gain academic knowledge. In doing so, one can argue that the knowledge outcome remains in the destination or country after the event has been conducted (Mair et al., 2023; Kaplanidou et al., 2013; Shipway et al, 2020; Thomson et al., 2013) – highlighting how beneficial conferences can be for Gothenburgs' and Swedens' researchers, institutions and companies.

However, it is important to acknowledge that while conferences are efficient for knowledge exchange, they are not the sole avenue through which knowledge is acquired. As such, one should be cautious not to overstate their importance. Nonetheless, both the empirical data and previous research suggest that conferences are especially valuable for future research and educational development, thereby reinforcing their value as both global and local assets. Given this perspective, the conferences can be acknowledged as an investment (Nichols et al., 2020) that strengthens both local and global researchers, institutions and companies.

Beyond the numbers: untracking responsibilities

The interviews reviewed a dominant focus in measuring economic outcomes of the conferences, as well as the perceived success of the conferences – reflecting prior research explanation that most organizations focus on economic and experiential outcomes from events (Albrecht et al., 2024; Greg, 2017; Mair & Smith, 2021; De Leon & McQuillin, 2020;

Morgan, 2008; Yoshida & James, 2011). Such economic measurements were related to the costs and the number of delegates participating.

Interestingly, while all respondents explained that they did not measure other outcomes than economic ones, they expressed confidence that their conferences would generate knowledgable long-term outcomes such as increased collaboration, requirements and knowledge that they believe lead to future project collaborations.. Mona's quote reflect the broader uncertainty among participants regarding the conference outcomes:

"*No, I don't have any examples of that off the top of my head, but there are certainly cases. I can't really point to anything specific […]I'm sure that there are outcomes that were new then, and that you today will find implemented in the vehicle. Absolutely." (Mona, Conference in Technical Safety of Vehicles)*

However, while the respondents mentioned outcomes such as increased collaboration, new contacts and recruitment opportunities, there are noticeably limited structured evaluations for these outcomes, as well as a remaining evaluation for legacies other than knowledge and economic outcomes, such as social, infrastructural and environmental outcomes (Mair et al., 2023; Kaplanidou et al., 2013; Thomson et al., 2013). Additionally, it emerges from the interviews that all respondents base their argument on positive comments and compliments from delegates or other people participating in the conferences. In other words, there does not exist a systematic evaluation of the conferences and what outcomes the conferences have led to, aligning with prior research explaining that evaluating impacts beyond economic outcomes, is rare (Albrecht et al., 2024).

Since legacy requires well planned strategies during the whole event lifecycle to ensure positive outcomes are achieved from the event (Albrecht et al., 2024; Matheson, 2010; Thomson et al., 2023) one can argue that the conferences have not had right conditions for potential legacy outcomes to get explored, due to their lack of evaluations and legacy planning. The lack can also depend on poor communication as well as strategies between all parties involved in the event lifecycle of the conference.

For that reason, the findings reveal that it is challenging for the conference hosts' to demonstrate and quantify the value of new approaches or innovations introduced during the conferences (Albrecht et al., 2024). And it hinders the ability to evaluate legacy over time (Matheson, 2010) as well as to present how conferences contribute to legacy outcomes that positively affect the society, since there does not exist any post evaluation. Moreover, some of these conferences are dependent on investment and funding and it could become challenging to concretely present objectives (Matheson, 2010; Wood, 2009, cited in Albrecht et al., 2024) to compare the outcome to the intended goals (Albrecht et al., 2024). For example, whether the conferences contributed to knowledge and collaboration could not be estimated properly as the conferences lack strategies for evaluation and measurement. With that said, the respondents reveal an unexplored gap of their years of planning the event, and how they measure what is achieved afterwards. Reflecting a hinder of reporting how the

conference contributes to sustainable outcomes such as societal, environmental and infrastructure outcomes (Foley et al., 2013; Kaplanidou et al., 2013; Mair et al. 2021; Petersen & Ren, 2015; Thomson et al., 2013).

Moreover, the lack of evaluation strategies of other legacies such as social, environmental, knowledgeable and infrastructural are, according to the respondents, too complex, time consuming and cost-driven to follow. Several respondents explain that one would need to go in depth and consider many factors and stakeholders to get a clear overview over the outcomes. The respondents argument therefore aligns with prior research explaining that events and their variables can be difficult to coordinate due to multidimensional factors playing a huge role, as a single isolated element does not reflect the whole reality (Wood, 2006). It also aligns with intangible outcomes such as social, knowledgeable, infrastructural outcomes being challenging to evaluate (Wood, 2006). Moreover, the respondents explains that the outcomes from the conferences can take up to five to ten years, aligning with literature emphasizing that long term legacy can emerge up to 20 years (Albrecht et al., 2024; Garcia, 2003; Heinemann, 2003; Matheson, 2010; Spilling, 1996; Thomson et al., 2013). However, another reason for the lack of estimation, could be based on the unconsciousness of who is responsible for the evaluations, which could be reflected in Anders's quote:

"We don't have time for that. I hope others do. We have to work on our technological development. It is the responsibility of others to measure it. We don't intend to measure it, it is impossible for us to do that. […] Researchers in social sciences should be able to do that […] Like doing studies on how technological development has affected the quality of life."
(Anders, Conference in Surface and Interface analysis)

Anders explained in his interview that development of technology is expensive but creates life quality. When I asked him how they measure the quality of life afterwards, Anders explained that the estimation of conferences does not fall in his or the conference work. That is, Anders believed that measuring outcomes is an external actors' authority, for example social science researchers. This positions the impact assessment as an external, rather than integrated. However, since the respondents believe in other outcomes besides economic, and knowledgeable outcomes, one can reflect a lack of divided responsibilities and a lack of understanding the concept of legacy, and what conferences can contribute to in such terms.

There remains a question of accountability and responsibility of who is responsible for measuring the outcomes. Since time and money is invested in the conferences, it could be essential for the conference hosts' or congress organizations to understand what their investments can lead to. Especially due to increased sustainability priorities regarding how the events industry shall contribute to society (Belatto & Pollock, 2023; Dredge, 2022; Getz, 2017; Mair et al., 2021).

This study therefore reflects pitfalls that hinder evaluation of conferences, where clarifying of responsibilities and strategies could improve measurements of conferences and legacy work of conferences. Interestingly, in reference to prior research emphasizing a shared

responsibility regarding legacy planning and organizing events (Ashworth & Kavaratzis, 2009; Chalip et al., 2003; Hanna & Rowley, 2011; Holmes et al., 2015; Nichols et al., 2020; Preuss, 2007; Toscani et al., 2022; Xing & Chalip, 2006; Yuan, 2013), prior research does not bring up pitfalls regarding lack of responsibilities, nor how one practically implements such planning and who is responsible for dividing different responsibilities and ensuring that it is practically implemented and followed. This study therefore highlights a need for such explanation from a theoretical perspective, but also a practical need for congress organizations and destinations, such as Gothenburg, to present clear strategies and responsibilities regarding estimation and measurement from conferences to all involved parties, including conference hosts.

Conferences way to legacy

Whether the conferences could influence other legacies, such as social, infrastructural (Kaplanidou et al., 2013; Mair et al., 2023; Shipway et al, 2020; Thomson et al., 2013) and environmental outcomes (Albrecht et al., 2024), was challenging for the conference hosts to answer. However, I believe that conference hosts' explanations of conferences contributing to increased knowledge within different industries, where they allow people to discuss and solve cutting edge topics (Klemes, 2016) – can hence present how conferences can influence long term legacy and positive outcomes for society. For illustration, Karin, Lars and Anders, explained that the conferences achieves sustainability in the long term for the individual by improving patient life through developed treatments and techniques during conferences. Therefore, one can through a similar perspective, find similar contributions that could reflect potential legacy outcomes from the other conferences.

For illustration, Mattias emphasizes new techniques that dam construction can decrease concrete use and green concrete, presenting the industry's adaptation to environmental requirements. He refers to climate change and highlights the requirement for adapting their techniques for water tightness and water regulations, since flooding increases challenges energy production and water management. Julia highlights the collaboration and shared challenges within green chemistry, while Karl highlights the importance of maintaining electromagnetic in electronic devices fields to ensure safety such as in electric vehicles systems (e.g. mobiles can negatively affect electric vehicles as well as security systems that warn about pedestrians when driving). Additionally, Mona highlights how the conferences discuss development of traffic safety techniques for the safety of humans, and explains how the sustainability goals for traffic safety for 2030, is something the industry strives for – reflecting how industries aim to reach sustainability goals. All these illustrations resonates with Olofs' reflection:

"We like to collaborate and be creative with other creative people. It is not just about doing our jobs, but about being prosperous and contributing to the city's resources." (Olof, Conference in Space industry)

Given the illustrations from conference hosts' and Olof's quote, the different conferences allow delegates to collaborate, discuss and solve cutting edge critical topics, while contributing to society by, for example, implementing and adapting better suited techniques afterward. Such outcomes can be perceived as social outcomes, which affects the residents quality of life, individuals and communities positively (Fredline et al., 2003 in Mair et al., 2023; Ritchie et al., 2020; Smith et al., 2019), which in the long term can be perceived as a legacy, and report how conference contribute to society. It can also be perceived as environmental impacts as one focuses on reducing ecological footprints (Matheson, 2010). For illustration, developing and implementing new dam techniques can help people around the world to adapt to natural disasters and save communities from flood increase. Developing traffic safety is essential as vehicles are developing all the time and getting more digitally advanced, increasing the need for new technologies for traffic safety. Moreover, adapting new techniques for electromagnetic fields are also of essential need as electronic devices daily emerge in today's technological world, which can affect the electromagnetic fields for communication and the individual safety. Presenting new clinical techniques and research, helps saving human lives. And discussing important law regulations around the world, helps law bureaus and firms to stay adaptive and follow society changes.

Hence, the conference becomes a place where researchers, industries and companies can adapt to societal and environmental problems both for the individual and the world, and drive both economic, social developments and environmental outcomes (Matheson, 2010), while solving industrial and societal problems (Mair et al., 2018). That is, the conference can influence legacy in the long term through presenting relevant cutting edge topics in the different academic fields.

However, I believe that for conferences influence on legacy to be successful, there must be a well established strategy regarding legacy between different stakeholders in Gothenburg, something Örjan hesitates:

> *"So that you can kind of tell a story around this, like "we are focusing on environmental aspects which then flows over to us having a healthier society which in turn flows over to us involving medical conferences", and bang, bang boom. Well-being can be when we have our conferences about how to build gardens, our pets and things like that so that you somehow have an overall story." (Örjan, Conference in Medical Informatics)*

Örjan emphasizes the need for a destination to have a coherent strategy around conferences, where the destination should interlink the different conferences and have a clear purpose of what one wants to achieve with them, which aligns with prior research emphasizing the need for planning legacy from the beginning to the end of an event (Albrecht et al., 2024; Matheson, 2010; Thomson et al., 2013). Where sustainability and social responsibility should represent the core goals of legacy planning (Albrecht et al., 2024).

Although Örjan may not refer to the legacy-concept, highlighting the need for a coherent strategy between the conference and destination, emphasizes a long-term mindset before a

short-term mindset, which aligns with Matheson (2010) and Thomson et al. (2013) explanation of short-term impacts being insufficient. However, a clear contrast is found regarding some of the conference's underlying aims. Mona emphasizes that the most important outcome from her conference was that the congress organizer, the organization or the association that primarily holds the conference (e.g. the road safety agency of a country), was satisfied with the implementation of the conference. This aligns with prior research explaining that some events base their success on funders and roi-requirements instead of evaluating conferences for other matters (Albrecht et al., 2024; Matheson, 2010; Wood, 2009). That is, the empirical material highlights a contrast in how the conference hosts perceive the core purpose of hosting a conference, and a two-fold understanding of "legacy-thinking".

Örjan' emphasizing a coherent strategy between destinations and conferences aligns with scholars explaining that events involve multiple stakeholders with different interests and involves a process of assigning responsibilities and identifying stakeholders (Albrecht et al., 2024; Thomson et al., 2013). That is, while all respondents mention the City of Gothenburg, the congress facility "Svenska Mässan", the DMO "Göteborg & Co" and the event organizer "MeetX" as central in the process of hosting conferences, this study emphasizes that for legacy to be fully implemented and efficient there must be a clear collaboration between all mentioned parties (Preuss, 2007). Aligning with scholars highlighting successful legacy outcomes requiring strong collaboration between city leaders, event organizers, regional and national authorities and local communities (Greg, 2017; Mair et al., 2023; Matheson, 2010; Misener & Mason, 2006). That is, conferences must reinforce the city's value and identity as well, for legacy to contribute to the long-term destination (Greg, 2017), rather than shaping the city after the conference (IOC, 2018, cited in Mair et al., 2023).

With that said, this study does not state that such collaboration and implementation of legacy does not already occur within the parties in Gothenburg. This study rather, through the experience of conference hosts', expresses how well such work is found from the conference hosts' perspective. For a more detailed elaboration of how legacy is implemented for the City of Gothenburg and conferences, one would need to interview higher-ranking people from the different companies and organizations in Gothenburg, who work with these questions on a daily basis.

Place Branding Through Conferences

Reimagining Gothenburg's City Image

The interviews further reviewed several ways how conferences, from my perspective, can be acknowledged as a tool for shaping the international perception of a city through re-imagining or rebranding processes (Ashworth & Kavaratzis, 2009; Bodet & Lacassagne, 2012; Knott et al., 2015). For illustration, all respondents explained that one of their ambitions when hosting the conferences was to "put Gothenburg on the map". They referred

to Gothenburg being a city that does not get the same academic attention within certain academic fields and expertise, such as destinations like Stockholm, Copenhagen and Helsinki. Therefore, one can perceive Annika's strategy behind the conference as contributing to rebranding Gothenburg as a city with a strong law reputation, Annika elaborated:

"Why did we want to bring them here? There were several different reasons. We wanted to be involved and put Gothenburg, its businesses and the city's law firms on the map. It is quite lawyer-heavy in Stockholm for natural reasons and we wanted to open the eyes and network for Gothenburg lawyers as much as the Gothenburg firms. Furthermore, we wanted to introduce and help spread the network to young lawyers in Sweden." (Annika, Conference in Law)

Annika further explained that similar prior conferences had only been held in Stockholm, a city she believes has a strong reputation of lawyers and law bureaus, while Gothenburg is less perceived as such city. Since the theme of the conference was "The Future of Mobility", it essentially potentiated the destination's connection to the automotive and shipping industries, through Gothenburgs' local connection to "Volvo AB", "Volvo Cars" and "Stena Line", according to Annika. Linking the expertise of lawyers in Gothenburg within those industries, could be an efficient strategy to increase the potential customers for Gothenburg's law bureaus as well as Gothenburgs' relevance and reputation within law. This can be grounded in Richards and Palmers' (2010) explanation where meaningful place branding occurs when the place's characteristics and the programme of the event has a connection.

Moreover, Annika explained that the purpose of the conference was to get more customers and present what kind of city Gothenburg is and what business exists here. However, Annika was not the only one connecting the conference to the place's industries, as both Olof and Lars expressed similar approaches. One of the purposes why Olof organized the space conference was to demonstrate Gothenburg's reputation within space technology and to highlight Gothenburg as a prominent city within the space industry. Olof elaborated:

"We have to make Sweden aware of space. And the other thing was also that we want to show that Gothenburg has 50% of all space employees in Sweden, so there is much more space here than Kiruna, for example." (Olof, Conference in Space industry)

Additionally, Lars described how the conference in women's health focused on clinical research, which Gothenburg has a medical strength in compared to Karolinska Institute in Stockholm, as the Karolinska Institute primarily focuses on what Lars refers to as "basic research". These examples align with prior research showing how events can rebrand a destination's international image (Bodet & Lacassagne, 2012; Dolles & Söderman, 2008; Kavaratzis & Ashworth, 2005; Knott et al., 2015; Short & Kim, 1999), for example through Gothenburg being perceived as more law-oriented within the automotive, shipping and space industry or more clinically adaptiveness within women's health, than Stockholm. In doing so, Gothenburg can compete with other destinations and Swedish cities (Kavaratzis & Ashworth,

2005) through differentiation (Braun et al., 2013; Kotler & Gertner, 2002). Hence, not primarily for economic and social outcomes as Kavaratzis and Ashworth (2005) presents, but rather for education and technology outcomes, as Swain et al. (2024) demonstrates. That is, the author's different view of the aim for differentiation (Kavaratzis & Ashworth, 2005; Swain et al., 2024) can therefore reflect how the concept of place branding in the last decade has changed its focus from tourists to focus on positive impacts for society and its residents, through education and technology. Which align with Greg (2017) explanation about place branding, where impacts of events should be understood in border terms.

Nonetheless, since conferences are small in their proportion in comparison with mega-event such as the Olympics, the possibility for Annika's, Olof's and Lars's conferences to give major impacts on Gothenburg's destination image and international perception within the law, space and women's health industries, remains small. That is, the Olympics handles millions of people during a longer period, with different engagement activities and services from the local destination, while the conferences from this study consist of a total between 300 - 10 000 delegates per conference, during a shorter time and with no enormous engagement from the destination. However, as Annika explained, connecting the industry to the conference's topic legitimizes Gothenburg's law firms being familiar with the industry, where both delegates and potential customers get the chance to discover Gothenburg's expertise within law. This argument can be strengthened by Olof, as he explains that by hosting the space conference, the company gained credibility and visibility from different actors like the European Space Agency, the Swedish government, different institutions worldwide, the City of Gothenburg and customers. That is, connecting the conference to the local expertise could be a well efficient strategy to increase customers, but also brand the destination through highlighting what expertise can be found. Where one can use conferences to change the international perception Gothenburg has within the law, space and incontinence industry (Bodet &Lacassagne, 2012; Dolles & Söderman, 2008; Knott et al., 2015; Short & Kim, 1999).

Strategies connecting the theme of the conference to the host destinations expertise, have for my knowledge, not been theoretically demonstrated before. Prior research within place branding and reimagination has focused on for example, dissociation of a crimeful nation to safety and beautiful landscapes through events (Knott et al., 2015) or transferring positive assertions from the event, such as internationalism and peace from the event to the destination image (Bodet & Lacasagne, 2012). The cases from the international academic conferences can therefore illustrate how smaller events can use strategies connecting academic expertise to the conference itself, to brand the destination's image within a certain academic field. And to, according to some respondents, attract recruitment of new talents.

However, although none of the respondents had formal qualifications or worked professionally within place branding, their strategies reveal how branding can still occur indirectly. This raises an important question: does place branding need to be consciously planned by professionals to be effective, or can it emerge through other ways – such as attracting clients or promoting local expertise? Prior research often emphasizes that

successful place branding requires strategic planning efforts between multiple actors, including local governments, tourism boards, and branding professionals (Bodet & Lacassagne, 2012; Dolles & Söderman, 2008; Knott et al., 2015; Short & Kim, 1999). However, the findings of this study suggest that branding effects can also emerge unintentionally, something that can align with Pasquinelli et al. (2024) emphasizing that place branding is not solely the result of top-down strategies but emerges through processes of formation and appropriation, where regional actors engage with and reinterpret place-based symbolic, and cultural values. Place branding can hence be a process involving multiple actors, where including firms and other institutional actors as co-creators of place brands through knowledge interaction and symbolic meaning-making (Pasquinelli et al., 2024). In the case of Gothenburg, the conference hosts' aimed to increase their credibility and business opportunities, not necessarily to brand the city. Yet by aligning the conference themes with local expertise.

With that said, this study does *not* aim for future conferences to not use place branding strategies, but to strategically apply place branding and develop a shared ambition between all involved parties, as successful place branding requires strategic planning and effort from different stakeholders (Bodet & Lacassagne, 2012; Dolles & Söderman, 2008; Knott et al., 2015; Short & Kim, 1999) and can emerge from multiple actors (Pasquinelli et al., 2024). It also aligns with scholars arguing for integrated strategies, corporate communication and organizational culture promoting branding (Ashworth & Kavaratzis, 2009; Perkins et al., 2020). This study also highlights the importance of exploring the view of people organizing and hosting the conferences, and not only event participants' view which most place branding evaluations studies have been focusing on (Vuigner, 2017).

Place branding through lived experience

The conference in chemistry hosted by Julia, and the conference on women's health hosted by Lars had among its aims to show Sweden as a pioneer within their academic fields. One way of doing that can be illustrated through Julias conference offering guided tours back and forth to the companies headquarter, so delegates could experience the company's work and atmosphere in real life. Following quote presents how Julia they connected the conference to Gothenburg:

> *"By sponsoring this conference and also inviting attendees to visit our company during the meeting made us create this "Ok, this company is in town as well". That we could show and describe what we do created additional value for us [....] Many participants appreciated the opportunity to meet individuals they had heard about, ask questions, and observe what it is like to work in an industry such as ours. This was clearly positive. Maybe we see some applying for a job with us in the future." (Julia, Conference in chemistry)*

This aligns with Ashworth and Kavaratzis' (2009) perspective on place branding, which emphasizes that brand perceptions are shaped through lived experiences rather than through communication alone. From my perspective, the guided tours provided a way for delegates to

associate Gothenburg with cutting-edge research and within the health and chemistry industry, and an experience of the company in real life. However, it is important to recognize that branding efforts do not always lead to measurable changes on an international destination image. As Ashworth and Kavaratzis (2009) note, place branding can struggle with inefficiencies or contradictions. Therefore, any claims that the guided tour shifted Gothenburg's destination image must therefore be made cautiously and not assumed as direct causation. However, I believe that the guided tours, through a *lived experience* (Greg, 2017), are an efficient way to associate Gothenburg's destination image within the health and chemistry industry and its connection to the company.

Another lived experience (Greg, 2017) could be illustrated through the following quote of Mona, who explained that the conference in Gothenburg, differed from earlier conferences. Mona hesitated:

"I think that what you can kind of create from being in Gothenburg made it a little different. Usually these conferences are at large conference centers and then it's hard to know if you're in Korea or Washington, or Paris. But this was more of an experience I would say, where you're in a nice city and there's a good atmosphere in different ways." (Mona, Conference in Technical Safety of Vehicles)

The quote of Mona explains how Gothenburg, compared to foreign destinations holding the same conferences other years, promoted and presented the city while hosting the conference. This can be found through several respondents explaining that the schedules and planning of the conferences allowed delegates to visit and explore places in Gothenburg during the conference. That is, delegates got the chance to experience Gothenburg through experiences and not only communication, as Greg (2017) emphasizes is important. In doing so and with reference to Julia's quote above, Gothenburg differentiated itself from earlier destinations. Based on the interviews, the earlier destinations hosting the same conference did not, planned or unplanned, connect the conference to the destination in a similar way as Gothenburg did. Based on the respondents, the delegates were therefore aware they were in Sweden. Additionally, one of the conference dinners had an ABBA performance, which could be recognizable as a narrative and symbol where the delegates associated the conference with Sweden (Anholt, 2007). Through such narratives the event could have generated images that shape delegates' perception of the destination's brand (Anholt, 2007; Richards & Palmer, 2010). However, since Sweden today represents diversity and is much more than just ABBA, conferences can use other narratives that connect the conference to Gothenburg or Sweden.

The connection between symbolic traits and narratives

Continuing further on experiences and the last section of the "findings and analysis". As constateated earlier, the conference itself did not contribute concretely to legacies. However, the presented and discussed cutting-edge topics within the different fields, was a way to develop and exchange knowledge that could lead to legacies. However, the respondents explanation of how the conference contributed to a more "sustainable event" and its connection to place branding, can be reflected through several conferences focused not using

plastic plates and glasses, and promoting healthy and green food, which is presented in following quote from Mattias:

> *"We didn't have any plastic glasses or plates or anything like that, it was porcelain and the dishes were created in such a way that it would be a sustainability theme. But it was the Swedish Fair that arranged it at the time through its restaurants. The organizers there, that is, "Meetx", "Gothia Towers" and "Svenska Mässan", worked hard for their sustainability theme and we strongly supported it" (Mattias, conference in the dam industry).*

Since Gothenburg aims to be perceived as a sustainable and environmentally friendly destination, promoting such symbolic traits and expressions to the delegates could be a strategy for being perceived as a destination taking responsibilities and being sustainable. Another example, where the mayor of Gothenburg arrived at a welcome speech, on a bicycle, could also be a symbolic trait of how Gothenburg can be perceived - showing that people in Gothenburg may take the bicycle instead of the car. This argument is based on Swain et al. (2024) emphasizing that the destination image can be related to symbolic traits of the city, where beliefs, ideas and impressions that visitors and residents have about a destination, shapes their image of it. As well as Anholt (2007) emphasizing that events can influence how a city is perceived and represented, contributing to a competitive place brand through symbolic and creative expressions. The place branding in conferences can therefore be explored through lived experiences that influences how the city is perceived and represented (Anholt, 2007). Additionally, promoting such symbolic traits can be a strategy to align the place's characteristics and the event, and successfully implement place branding (Richards & Palmer, 2010). The authors emphasize that such an implementation could lead to long-term effects rather than short term effects (Richards & Palmer, 2010). However, I believe that such symbolic traits reflect a more short-term legacy than long-term, since the alternatives of plastic-free plates and glasses are only optional during the conference days.

Furthermore, Mattias revealed that the sustainability theme during the conferences was a shared interest between several parties. This highlights how not only the conference host and the congress organization are involved in conferences when hosting them, rather, several other parties as well. That is, "Metex", "Gothia Towers" and "Svenska Mässan" could be essential stakeholders whose idea for presenting sustainability themes can affect how delegates at the conference perceive Sweden's position within sustainability. Whether that was the idea or not, it could be considered as a creative and effective way for branding a place and presenting values from the place.

Consequently, since events are perceived as negatively contributing to increased air pollution and general travelling (Dickson & Arcodia, 2010; Higham et al., 2022) – changing plates, glasses and food to more environmentally friendly options, might be perceived as a small action in comparison to what negative environmental impacts events contribute to. In doing so, one can question if such "green" alternatives or expressions are enough for enhancing a sustainable destination image or if the conferences could adopt more environmentally friendly alternatives or implementations, to increase its destination image as a sustainable

destination, as well as to actually contribute to a more sustainable event for the purpose of the environment and not mainly for the destination image. That is, Richards and Palmers' (2010) statement that a successful connection between cities characteristics and the event lead to long-term legacy can be questioned. It could rather be a question about how one implements the event and the destination's characteristics *together*. However, prior research has not elaborated how sustainable symbolic traits, such the ones presented in this study, can be connected to place branding. This study therefore contributes to how such symbolic traits could be expressed in a real life event.

Concluding discussion and contributions

The aim of this study was to explore how international academic conferences in Gothenburg contribute to legacy and to how legacy of international academic conferences can be conceptualized in the context of place branding. The remainder of this thesis and section is as follows: first I present a concluding discussion of this study, including key contributions. Afterwards, I present the main theoretical contributions and practical implications before I lastly finish by presenting the limitations and directions for future research.

Concluding discussion

This study arrived at four key contributions. The first contribution relates to legacy outcomes. The findings show that although respondents believe that their conferences result in long-term legacies, such as knowledgeable outcomes, they lack the foundation to articulate these legacies through clear objectives or tangible outcomes, such as fully developed projects, innovations or products. Neither do they aim to evaluate other legacy outcomes such as social, environmental or infrastructural outcomes.

However, in line with previous research (Albrecht et al., 2024; González-Santos and Dimond, 2015; Nichols et al., 2020, Klemes, 2016), this study confirms that conferences function as an arena for knowledge and dialogue across sectors. They allow delegates to discuss critical cutting-edge topics in relation to their specific industries, for example, addressing increased flooding through new dam techniques, improving safety of electric vehicles, navigating new legal regulations, or managing electromagnetic fields between digital devices. By tackling such globally relevant and rapidly evolving topics, conferences offer a valuable place for researchers, industries, institutions and companies to stay adaptive and responsive.

Therefore, while event and legacy scholars aspire for events to *give back* to society (Belatto & Pollock, 2023; Dredge, 2022; Kaplanidou et al., 2013; Mair et al., 2023; Thomson et al., 2013), conferences can contribute to legacy outcomes, such as social and environmental outcomes, through themes and topics presented at the conferences. This study therefore highlights that legacy outcomes of international academic conferences are challenging to measure, one reason being that there is a lack of post-conference evaluation. However, legacy is explored and expressed through the topics presented at the conferences - and since both

previous research and this study shows that conferences fosters collaborations - presenting such topics and strong collaborations could be efficient tools to create and develop positive outcomes for the individual and society in the long term.

The second contribution of the study aligns with the first one, and refers to the planning of legacy. While progress has been made in implementing legacy (Göteborg & Co, 2024), this study shows that some groups, such as conference hosts, lack the same level of understanding and implementation of legacy as Göteborg & Co. A possible outcome for this could be due to lack of clear strategies behind the conferences, where congress organizations are not expressing clear strategies, or strategies that can positively affect society. Another possible outcome could be due to a lack of collaboration between the conference hosts' and the destination of Gothenburg, such as companies working with implementing legacy or increasing innovation through knowledge in Gothenburg (e.g. Göteborg & Co and BRG). This reflects prior research highlighting the importance of all stakeholders in a destination to be involved for it to be successful (Ashworth & Kavaratzis, 2009; Chalip et al., 2003; Hanna & Rowley, 2011; Holmes et al., 2015; Nichols et al., 2020; Preuss, 2007; Toscani et al., 2022; Xing & Chalip, 2006; Yuan, 2013).

However, this study also reveals that academic conferences lack not only legacy planning strategies, but in many cases, overarching strategic planning. Beyond their general goal of knowledge development and exchange within their respective industries or fields of research, several respondents highlight the importance of satisfying the congress organization hosting the conferences. Prevalent here is a short-term focus and a lack of legacy-thinking, rather than a long-term focus with legacy in mind.

This study therefore expresses a broader challenge where the strategic direction behind the conference raises an important question about accountability and responsibility. This study, in line with previous research, emphasizes the need for greater stakeholder involvement and co-creation within the host destination (Greg, 2017; Matheson 2010; Misener & Mason, 2006) but also the conference hosts and their congress organizations. Moreover, by involving conference hosts, the applied legacy strategies for Gothenburg (Göteborg & Co, 2024), might contribute to meaningfully legacy outcomes for all. However, to fully understand why conference hosts often lack a coherent legacy strategy and why no estimations are being measured, further research is needed that includes perspectives from all key actors involved in the event planning chain. Leading us to the third contribution of this study.

The third contribution from this study relates to the evaluation of academic conferences. None of the conferences actively evaluated or measured potential legacy outcomes such as, social, educational, environmental or infrastructural developments. However, this does not imply that such outcomes do not occur, rather, it highlights a gap in the ability to track and demonstrate them, aligning with prior research emphasizing the lack of evaluation (Albrecht et al., 2024; Greg, 2017; Klemes, 2016; Nichols et al., 2020; Wood, 2009). Moreover, it highlights a gap for events, such as conferences, where they could improve their

measurement and in turn demonstrate how their conferences contribute to more sustainable events (Mair et al., 2021:Werner et al., 2017).

Interestingly, whereas previous research (Albrecht et al., 2024; Greg, 2017;Wood, 2009) often frames the measurement of outcomes as difficult, and even, to some extent, *defends* that it is hard to measure events – this study reveals that many of the respondents generally recognize and believe that legacy outcomes potentially exist. However, they emphasize that such measurements require dedicated time and effort which they do not have resources to fulfil. This study therefore not only confirms the lack of measurement of legacy and intangible outcomes regarding events, specifically conferences, but uncovers underlying reasons for the lack of clear responsibilities when it comes to evaluating the outcome from the conferences. This highlights the need for future conferences, and especially future conference hosts and congress organizations, to have clearer evaluations of their conferences.

Lastly, the fourth contribution from this study relates to place branding. The findings demonstrate that conferences can play an essential role in contributing to Gothenburg's place branding through connecting the local expertise within different industries and areas of research to the conferences. In doing so, Gothenburg can be perceived as a pioneer within different academic fields, contributing to the place brand and destination image and successful place branding. Moreover, while no respondent intentionally engaged in place branding strategies, their actions and reflections reveal that conferences nonetheless can serve as platforms through which the place's branding is reinforced, reimagined or communicated to participating delegates and others at the conference.

Moreover, this study shows how place branding is partially reflected in the activities during the conference through the concepts of *eventalisation* (Smith et al., 2019) and *eventful cities* (Richards & Palmer 2010). It presents how Swedish narratives are presented and linked to the place and destination. However, this connection appears in limited ways, and further investigation is needed to assess its significance – especially given that Sweden represents a broader and more diverse set of narratives than those currently highlighted.

Therefore, this study presents how place branding can contribute to Gothenburg's place brand in an organic, stakeholder-centric way, rather than through formal communication strategies. While many conference hosts expressed an ambition to 'put Gothenburg on the map', their primary objectives did not involve place branding. Hence, this study highlights that place branding does not necessarily need to be a planned or integrated objective from the beginning of the conference, but rather evolve as an unconscious by-product, aligning with previous research (Pasquinelli et al., 2024) and hence, contribution to this new perspective of place branding as something emerging organically. However, by aligning the conference content, experiences and communication with the place's broader strategic visions, goals and communication, place branding could become more effective and successfully implemented. That is, while legacy strives for societal and environmental outcomes from events, place branding can be conceptualized as the mechanism through which these outcomes are translated into images that shape a place's and destination's brand over time. As Ashworth

and Kavaratzis (2009) explain, place branding emerges through actions and stakeholder engagement, which makes legacy an essential input. When legacy outcomes such as knowledge exchange, visibility, or global alignment are communicated effectively, they can strengthen place branding by contributing to a place's perceived identity and value. That is, the findings point to the value of a strategic, co-created approach that bridges organically emerging branding with formal destination strategies.

Theoretical contributions

This study advances legacy research by integrating a marketing perspective, illustrating how legacies can be conceptualized beyond economic and experiential outcomes. Hence, revealing how presented topics and themes on a conference not only brands a place or a destination and its expertise, but can be important grounds for legacy to flourish. This study also reveals a gap in capacity among conference hosts' due to limited time, resources, strategies and knowledge – where previous research has not explained practically how legacy responsibilities and resources should be divided within organisations. As such, this study can be positioned in the field of event management (Getz 1999, cited in Dickson and Arcodia, 2010). However, the study mainly contributes to illustrating international academic conferences as a unique setting where events, legacy, and place branding converge, with sustainability priorities as a common denominator.

While prior research has explored place branding together with mega-events such as the Olympics or the FIFA games (Bodet & Lacassagne, 2012; Dolles & Söderman, 2008; Knott et al., 2015), this study contributes to existing research about place branding and events through an empirical investigation of international academic conference, illustrating how place branding can be conceptualized within smaller events. This study therefore advances place branding literature by bridging it with legacy theory from events, presenting a new lens of viewing place branding. Furthermore, this study emphasizes that place branding does not need to be visual or promoted early, rather it can emerge through evolving narratives and the connection between a place's or a destination's expertise and an event, and hence contribution to this new perspective of place branding as something emerging organically rather than strategically.

Practical implications

This study provides the broad conference organizers, event professionals, place branding professionals and policy makers with a nuanced understanding of what certain objectives international academic conferences can fulfill. For conference and event organizers, this study underscores the importance of understanding how conferences generate long term values for society, beyond the desire to please the hosting committee or delegate ambitions (Mair et al., 2023; Matheson, 2010), or contribute to the tourism economy (Albrecht et al., 2024; Greg, 2017; Wood, 2009). It elaborates on how conferences can be organized in a way that can foster legacy in the long term and reach sustainable outcomes in the form of different legacies.

For branding professionals, this study highlights how conferences should not be underestimated in comparison to other events, since prior research has not examined the connection between conferences and place branding, as they could enhance the destination's brand by the place being perceived and positioned as pioneers within different fields. Being positioned as a destination with high expertise within the different industries, could be a way for Gothenburg to differentiate itself from other places or destinations and remain competitive (Braun et al., 2013; Kotler & Gertner, 2002). Thereby attracting both employees and strengthening global reputation within the academic fields and industries, and fostering a long term legacy. Additionally, it inspires branding professionals to explore even further how narratives of the country can be used during events to strengthen the experience of visiting the destination and the country, contributing to an experience of place branding. Lastly, for policy makers, conferences serve as critical arenas discussing and presenting cutting-edge research and societal challenges. Using such an arena, acknowledges politicians for different industrial developments and problems that affect society or that could be beneficial for the society and the country.

This study therefore reveals and enlightens planners and organisers to understand that there exists various unexplored legacies from their invested time and money in conferences. Aligning with previous research (Albrecht et al., 2024), this study emphasizes that implementing measurement standards for evaluation for different outcomes helps organizers and other related stakeholders to follow objectives throughout the whole event lifecycle, and demonstrate and legitimize their contributions from the event, to the society.

Limitations and direction for Future research

Since this study narrowly reviewed the conference hosts' perspectives, future research could consider analyzing the companies or delegates attending the conferences, and their perspective of what they have accomplished from the conferences, for collecting more detailed information of what sort of legacies have emerged from the certain conferences (for example; projects, innovations or other objectives). Such study would require a long timeframe, where one could send out surveys right after the conference and follow up a couple of years after.

Additionally, since respondents pointed out how planning and hosting conferences consist of multiple actors distributed across different fields with different responsibilities, such as Göteborg & Co, MeetX as well as City of Gothenburg and Svenska Mässan, future research could explore how these stakeholders approach conferences and investigate how their work impacts legacy and place branding. Specifically, since Göteborg & Co have departments working with legacy and branding, and since the City of Gothenburg aims for sustainable development. Such exploration would provide a comprehensive understanding of the chain of planning and hosting conferences, as well as of how destinations, like Gothenburg, can further improve their work of connecting legacy to conferences and place branding. It could also provide a wider understanding of the conference hosts' situation regarding limited

strategies and evaluations. Additionally, future research could also focus on studying singular conferences from a beginning to an end, to find where and how both legacy and place branding work can become more efficient and implemented in the event cycle, as well as potential pitfalls.

Lastly, the same study can be done in other contexts to explore if there are any connections between conferences, legacy and place branding in other destinations or places. Such studies could explore how other conference hosts' in other destinations perceive the conference's contribution from a legacy and place branding perspective, and how the stakeholder engagements regarding legacy and place branding is perceived in those destinations.

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