

## EMBEDDEDNESS THROUGH SUSTAINABLE ENTREPRENEURSHIP IN EVENTS

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This study investigates sustainable entrepreneurship in events businesses to understand the value systems and social good of sustainable entrepreneurs within the sector, through a focus on the place-based, social, and psychological processes of embeddedness. Data were collected through qualitative semistructured interviews, or qualitative surveys with representatives of 12 UK small to medium size enterprises (SMEs) identifying as sustainable entrepreneurial businesses in the events sector. The study employed thematic analysis to develop an initial code framework and subsequent final themes. Findings indicate sustainable entrepreneurship emerged as a value system deeply embedded within the organizational identity of the sample and dependent on the creation of place-based connections. Business expansion for sustainable entrepreneurs is perceived as diversification and adaptation to facilitate further advances in sustainable operation. The study proposes a conceptual model that demonstrates the interrelationship between embeddedness and sustainable entrepreneurship, which emerges through principles of identity, attachment, and place making.

**Key words:** Entrepreneurship; Sustainability; Social impact; Embeddedness; Place

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### Introduction

Sustainability is a key driver for businesses within events. Since adoption in 2015, the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (UNSDGs) have provided a framework for action across 17 strategic areas, and more recently, the global COVID-19 pandemic has been seen as a transformation opportunity by some, through which organizations across events, and hospitality and tourism more broadly, can focus on addressing issues in relation to the

(un)sustainability of growth within the industry (Lew et al., 2020). While these industries have a strong tradition of entrepreneurship in practice, theoretical development is somewhat limited within this area (Elkhwesky et al., 2022; Fu et al., 2019).

Various academics and industry experts have predicted we are at the cusp of a new industrial revolution with “supply and demand curves converging” and entrepreneurs providing assurance as the agents to steer future directions (Hedstrom, 2018, p. 6). In the wake of the COVID-19 global

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pandemic both Ratten (2021) and more recently Mosey et al. (2023) have argued that events, and other leisure service industries, have had to be more entrepreneurial in the way they are managed. Sustainable entrepreneurs are identified as individuals who build businesses that “serve both self-interests and collective interests by addressing unmet social and environmental needs” (Hoogendoorn et al., 2019, p. 1133). Embeddedness conceptualizes sustainable entrepreneurs being embedded not just in markets, but also in social systems and territories (Steyaert & Katz, 2004). This extends beyond the triple bottom line of economic, social, and environmental systems, reframing approaches towards a deepened perspective that uses innovative approaches that can nurture and restore environmental, social, and economic systems (Elkington, 1998; McDonough & Braungart, 2002). As Hjalager (1989) argued, focusing on interwoven independencies; “social, economic and local institutional contexts” (p. 85), and how these influence action will advocate for a more holistic and situated view of entrepreneurship.

Aligned with the UNSDGs, this study highlights the importance of ensuring sustainable consumption and production patterns within the events sector (United Nations, 2022). It profiles how businesses are explicitly placing the UNSDGs at the heart of their social sustainability objectives. The businesses in this study all had an underlying commitment to help shift consumption and production patterns towards a more sustainable path. There is a recognition among those businesses that economic and social growth within their respective leisure-based sectors have led to environmental degradation that is endangering the future development of service industries like events, tourism, and hospitality (Mosey et al., 2023).

This study investigates the psychological, societal, and place-based embeddedness of sustainable entrepreneurship in UK-based events businesses offering a new perspective on sustainability in the events sector. While the phenomenon of sustainable entrepreneurship is documented, the current approach is decidedly piecemeal (Muñoz & Cohen, 2018). Isolated factors are described in abundance; however, to date the inability to make intrinsic links between them has prevented the integration of sustainability as a holistic approach

(Calisto et al., 2021). As such, the underlying objectives of this study are: (i) to better understand what is driving sustainable entrepreneurs to overcome sustainability challenges, (ii) how they are emotionally attached to these efforts, and (iii) how sustainability is embedded within the organizational identities of businesses within the events sector and can be an effective source for social good.

### Theoretical Background

To date, most of the literature encompassing business sustainability has been concerned with established organizations under the umbrella domain of sustainable development (Baker, 2006). However, scholars have begun to make interconnections between sustainability as a principal focus for new and/or innovative business opportunities (Schaper, 2016). Concepts such as “social entrepreneurship” and “ecopreneurship” have been progressively discussed, leading to a refined phenomenon of “sustainable entrepreneurship” (Bennett, 1991; Dees, 2001). The term “sustainable entrepreneurship” is defined as “the continuous commitment by an entrepreneur and, or business to behave ethically and contribute to economic development while improving the quality of life of the workforce, their families, local communities, the society and the world at large, as well as future generations” (Crals & Vereeck, 2004, p. 1). The purpose of sustainable entrepreneurship is larger than providing innovative solutions to market imperfections; it has potential to act as a pioneering tool for the evolution of business practices that account for planetary demands (Hummels & Argyrou, 2021).

Cohen and Muñoz (2015) identified several subthemes linked to sustainable entrepreneurship, including a subdomain referred to as “embeddedness.” According to McKeever et al. (2015), the mechanisms through which an entrepreneur interacts with place and the community is the process of being “embedded.” Foundational studies on embeddedness described a relationship between the entrepreneurial self and schemes of economic behavior, as a direct response to the challenge of “disembeddedness” (Polanyi, 1957). This principal followed the notion that change is not driven

by those who are rational individuals aligned with anchored, regressive business ideals (disembedded), but instead those who are engaged with different and changing social norms and values (embedded) (Cangiani, 2011). However, it has been argued that these earlier debates neglected the role of social interplay (Uzzi, 1997). Murdoch et al. (2000) addressed this shortfall, establishing mechanisms whereby social and natural contexts were acknowledged alongside economic factors. As such, the process of “embedding” requires considering the synergy of individual values, social networks, and bonds, plus the existing ties to local ecology. Therefore, it is argued, the relationships between context and entrepreneurship requires further exploration (McKeever et al., 2015). This study proposes that embeddedness in sustainable entrepreneurship can be understood in terms of psychological, societal, or place-based processes.

#### *Psychological Embeddedness*

Psychological embeddedness explores how sustainable entrepreneurs engage with identity to better understand their sense of self, and how these efforts lead to a more connected entrepreneurial experience (Gregori et al., 2021). Identity is the way one sees themselves, based on belief and values (Stets & Burke, 2000). In context, sustainable entrepreneurs seek to validate their identity through environmentally orientated entrepreneurial activities (Farmer et al., 2011). The Institutional Logics concept aids in understanding how entrepreneurs are ingrained into the philosophy of sustainable business venturing (Gregori et al., 2021). Gregori et al. (2019) argued that true sustainable entrepreneurs are “culturally embedded in different value systems” (p. 4). Psychological embeddedness acts as an agent to self-definition and demonstrates how sustainable entrepreneurs both subliminally and intentionally prioritize different goals to conventional entrepreneurs.

These themes have emerged within events-based research. For example, Dornier’s (2021) research with directors of events companies argues that, above all, those leading the sustainable events field do so because of a personal conviction. Additionally, Devenish and Moital (2019) found that it

was a lack of management support that proved to be a key barrier for practices of event greening. Within hospitality, limited studies have explored the psychological context of sustainability behavior, although recent work by Joshua et al. (2023) focused on employee’s green behavior, arguing that an emotional mechanism exists in employee attitudes towards environmental issues. In the events context, these findings are very closely aligned with several of the UNSDGs, most notably goals 11, 12, and 13 linked to sustainable cities and communities, responsible consumption and production patterns, and climate action (United Nations, 2022).

#### *Societal Embeddedness*

Gössling et al. (2016) set forth that “social connectedness is an interpersonal closeness in a social context” (p. 1588), which can manifest itself as relationships between close family and friends, as well as distant relationships with those within the wider community. Societal embeddedness refers to the nature, depth, and degree of bond formed with the social community (Czernek-Marszałek, 2020).

Granovetter’s (2000) work on “visions of embeddedness” stated that “entrepreneurs are shaped by and in turn shape structures of social interaction” (p. 256). For example, Giannetti and Simonov (2009) found that those individuals who belonged to particularly entrepreneurial neighborhoods were more likely to become entrepreneurs themselves. When a community of likeminded individuals forms around core values the connections become stronger, allowing for a deeper sense of embeddedness to society to occur. Sustainable entrepreneurs who advocate for sustainability and pioneer for change through business venturing become instrumental in societal progress. Social entrepreneurship has emerged as one of the main drivers for sustainable development within hospitality (Gurlek, 2022), as organizations seek to demonstrate a positive impact on host communities. In addition, Czernek-Marszałek (2020) identified a variety of benefits to social embeddedness within tourism destinations that promote entrepreneurship such as easier access to resources, flexibility of behavior, knowledge transfer, and stimulating innovativeness.

### *Place Embeddedness*

Despite the potential relevance of place embeddedness within sustainable entrepreneurship, linkages of place to enterprise, and sustainability have received a lack of theoretical support (Belz & Binder, 2017). Shrivastava and Kennelly's (2013) study first introduced the interrelationship between place and the conditions of sustainable entrepreneurship. Recent work has argued that sustainability is a place-based discourse (Barron et al., 2020), while attitudes and choices towards entrepreneurship may also be influenced by attachment to place (Parkinson, 2020). It is suggested that one who is embedded in place is better equipped to overcome constraints and apply ingenuity to solve place-specific anomalies and generate sustainable impacts (O'Siqueira & Honig, 2019). Hall et al. (2010) proposed that when sustainable entrepreneurs experience an issue within the place they feel connected to, they are more likely to innovate a solution to the problem in hand that, in turn, can be adapted and applied to other contexts. According to Cohen and Muñoz (2015) "a new breed of entrepreneurs is emerging" (p. 265), who generate sustainability through their connections to local places. This rationale is closely aligned to the current UNSDGs relating to sustainable communities (United Nations, 2022).

Placelessness has been defined as richly diverse places being reduced to monotonous mass culture, overdevelopment, and artificial creation of place (Cullen, 1971), through which fewer people having the opportunity to experience a deep-felt sense of place (Relph, 2008). Zimmerbauer (2011) warned of the inauthenticity of cookie cutter, artificially built places, implying that these elements are devoid of place making and identity, and as a result become stripped of the very requirements that define places. Massey (1997) attempts to counter the consequences of mass culture within the realm of place, advocating for a global sense of place. This calls for a rethink of a sense of place, outwardly looking to break down barriers limiting places to areas with boundaries. Massey (1997) proposed that instead of assigning such restrictions we should acknowledge that experiences in places, whether this be in the homeland or in a different country or continent, can all provoke the emotional

attachments worthy of note. This idea has received criticism for being too essentialist, making stark and simplistic dualisms that misrepresent place in reality (Seamon & Sowers, 2008). However, "place" in all dimensions is not static; it follows a cycle of creation, destruction, and regeneration with the passing of time and events.

As highlighted previously within events, and tourism and hospitality more broadly, the social structures that promote sustainable entrepreneurship have received some attention. Hallak et al. (2012) concluded that hospitality and tourism entrepreneurs' sense of identity in relation to the place in which their businesses operate contributes directly to entrepreneurial success; however, the mechanisms and attachments to place as part of these processes is poorly understood (Wen et al., 2021). What emerges from existing studies is the compartmental nature of place, enterprise, and sustainability (Shrivastava & Kennelly, 2013; Thomas et al., 2011). The limited existing studies predominantly address territorial embeddedness as a purposeful tool to connect individuals to place (Cohen & Muñoz, 2018). Nonetheless, while this underpinning provides a valuable starting point, what cannot be ignored is the absence of a holistic consideration of psychological, societal, and place-based embeddedness as part of processes of sustainable entrepreneurship, and how this can be effectively leveraged as a source of social good (Duignan, 2021).

### *Research Methodology*

Given the focus of the study is on sustainable entrepreneurship, the social good component is at the heart of our methodological approach, grounded by the perspectives of the participants being social actors, sharing the experiences, places, and situations they attribute meaning to, and are embedded within (van Leeuwen, 1996). Thus, an interpretive approach is adopted, acknowledging the researcher is aware that the nature of reality is always evolving, and that valuable evidence is discovered by analysis of how subjects behave, interact, and make sense of the world under certain terms (Varpio & Macleod, 2020). Two qualitative research methods were employed: online semistructured one-to-one interviews, and an online qualitative survey.

### *Semistructured Interviews*

In studies relating to sustainable entrepreneurship, the most common data collection method adopted is interviews (Cohen & Muñoz, 2015; Gregori et al., 2019; McKeever et al., 2015). Semistructured interviews are adopted principally to elicit in-depth, yet conversational, interviews that would collect information on a diverse range of behaviors and experiences. Longhurst (2009) advocated the use of semistructured interviews as a “route to partial insights into what people think” (p. 583). It was important to frame the study and accurately snapshot ideas, within a period of time. This method built rapport between the participants and interviewers, coupled with the subject matter being aligned with their sustainability interests, creating a greater depth of engagement (Edwards & Holland, 2013).

A predetermined interview schedule was prepared that acted as an anchor to shape the interviews. This detailed schedule was formed from a condensed list of key concepts that had emerged from the literature on psychological, societal, and social embeddedness including terms such as locality, attachment, values, barriers, expansion, and connection. These themes were organized into a guideline document of 13 core topic areas, each with prompts/follow up questions to be used where appropriate. The first question was consistent across all interviews, and thereafter the interviews all unfolded in a more conversational manner, following the topics of the interview schedule (Clifford et al., 2016). The research team were conscious to frame nonassuming questions to both maintain trustworthiness and to also refrain from using specialized terminology, so the questions were easier to comprehend for the participants. Prior to conducting the individual interviews, participating organizations were researched through publicly available information, with any topics of contextual relevance highlighted in preparation. The researchers conducted a pilot study with one participant in a sustainability role outside of the events sector to pretest the chosen research method (Sampson, 2004). The pilot study tested the structure and clarity of the interview schedule, and some adjustments were made to the order to aid the flow of questions.

Interviews ranged in duration from 45 to 70 min in length. All interviews were conducted online via Zoom video conferencing platform due to the travel restrictions and challenges of face-to-face meetings resulting from the global COVID-19 pandemic. Online interviews are often rated above other mediums such as face-to-face or telephone interviewing by participants, offering ease of use and more convenience for participants (Archibald et al., 2019). Being a cloud-based service, the interviews were recorded and transferred automatically into downloadable files and transcripts. As an insurance policy, voice recordings were also taken on a mobile device and transcribed using the software otter.ai, to help mitigate against any data from Zoom being lost.

### *Qualitative Surveys*

This study adopted a second approach for data collection in the form of online surveys. Qualitative surveys allow the same degree of participation as the semistructured interviews, but without being restricted to a time slot. Participants were invited to choose online surveys in cases where they were unable to commit to a predetermined time for an online interview. Links to an online survey were provided to ensure their voices were also included as part of the research.

The questions closely mirrored the topic areas of the semistructured interview schedule consisting of 13 questions of an open-ended form that allowed participants to answer freely without limits, and on their own terms (Williams, 2007). The arrangement of questions intended to mimic that of the semistructured interview and topics were organized in sequence so that the thoughts of participants were focused, relevant, and rich in information, preventing sporadic responses (Phillips & Stawarski, 2008). Despite this method yielding more rigid responses compared with semistructured interviews, due to the loss of probing or prompting from the research team, answers reflected their own authentic perspectives, contributing to the overall trustworthiness of the responses (Houtkoop-Steenstra, 2000).

The research team had prior experience with using Google forms and its ease of navigation, distribution, and completion made it suitable for the

survey interviews. Google forms organizes all data into a downloadable spreadsheet for analysis in a simple format. Responses varied in length between 2 and 24 lines of text, with some questions, notably regarding future growth of the business, yielding longer answers than others. Given that the surveys were online, this method was both time efficient and appropriate for the macroconditions being experienced at the time. Data collection took place during the third UK COVID-19 lockdown and online surveys enabled the voices of those with caring responsibilities to be included (Olsen, 2012).

### *Research Sample*

To fill the research gap that calls for a deeper insight into various contexts bound to sustainable entrepreneurship, purposive sampling was utilized, targeting SMEs. Organizations were selected on the basis that they fulfilled the following criteria: (i) a clear sustainability-driven business philosophy was articulated on the company website; (ii) they had been awarded for sustainability-related achievements (e.g. Green tourism award) or had obtained B corp status; and (iii) were operating within the events sector. During January 2021, initial contact was made via email with the founders, high-level management, or sustainability leads of 35 companies in the UK that met these criteria.

Seven responses were received; however, only three respondents were able to commit to an online interview. Respondents who had indicated interest were therefore sent a subsequent email offering a qualitative survey instead. This resulted in a sample of eight responses; however, data saturation had not been achieved. A second email was sent to non-responders during February 2021 and this resulted in eight further responses and four were able to complete participation. Data collection ceased in March 2021 when it was deemed data saturation had been achieved. This ultimately resulted in a sample of 12 participants (six online interviews and six qualitative surveys). The participant profiles of the sample are highlighted in Table 1.

### *Method of Analysis*

The analytical framework selected for the study was Thematic Analysis. This technique moves beyond identifying predetermined conclusive outcomes, synthesizing patterns and themes that emerge by discovering consistencies, defining and coding from the data (Guest et al., 2012). Before analysis began, the online interview transcriptions were checked and amended against voice recordings by one member of the research team. Initial coding took place to filter the mass of information collated through which similar phrases, topics, and

Table 1  
An Overview of Sample/Participant Profile

Company	Participant's Role	Data Collection Method
A: Organic farm, hospitality and events business	Site Manager	Online Interview
B: Organic farm and events venue	Events Manager	Online Interview
C: B Corp organic food supplier to events sector	Sustainability Executive	Online Interview
D: Sustainable Arts Festival	Head of Sustainability	Online Interview
E: Outdoor festival specializing in events in wild places	Production Manager	Online Interview
F: B Corp food supplier to events sector	Sustainability Manager	Online Interview
G: Organic farm, hospitality and events business	Operations Manager	Qualitative Survey
H: Michelin starred "farm to fork" restaurant and events venue	Human Resources Manager	Qualitative Survey
I: Food supplier to the events industry specializing in waste reduction	Customer Happiness Team Member	Qualitative Survey
J: Events and adventure tourism company specializing in low carbon travel	Head of Customer Experience	Qualitative Survey
K: Grade II listed sustainable event venue	Venue and Events Planner	Qualitative Survey
L: Florist specializing in low carbon supply to the events and hospitality sectors	Head of Sustainability	Qualitative Survey

sentiments were color coded to assemble a basic code framework of 45 codes. Codes were data led, using singular terms that surfaced repeatedly such as “principals” or “farming” (Guest et al., 2012). From the initial code framework, the research team made a key findings framework: a flow chart style document to systematically structure overarching themes in terms of significance, theme characteristics, and contributing codes. Ten subthemes were established, which were further refined into three overarching themes. For example, the code “stewardship” became subsumed under the subtheme “rural place making,” which was refined further into the overarching theme “place, attachment, and familiarity.” Intercoder reliability was employed to enhance the validity of the process as themes were agreed between the team (Ryan & Bernard, 2003). Once themes had been refined and numbered, the researchers developed substance in each theme with key elements creating a succinct narrative for the study. A quote bank was constructed to organize integral evidence under each theme. The final process was to analyze the data from a theoretical perspective considering the relationship between the themes and psychological, societal,

and place-based embeddedness and to form a conceptual framework (see Fig. 1).

### *Ethical Considerations*

With regards to ethical considerations, and especially to protect the participants, anonymity and confidentiality was promised from the point of first contact (Flick, 2018). This was reaffirmed by providing a detailed study information sheet on initial contact with participants, and an agreement form to sign, before each interview commenced, and at the beginning of the qualitative survey. Participant organization names and identifiable information are also anonymized in this study. While the study involved the collection of individuals’ opinions that reflected their perspectives, asking personal information was avoided. Bringing awareness to the participants rights to take part freely and remove themselves from the study, should they wish to, was also high priority (Gillham, 2000). To further safeguard the study, the research team was subject to ethical approval by the UK Universities ethics process, which included detailed justification of the project and

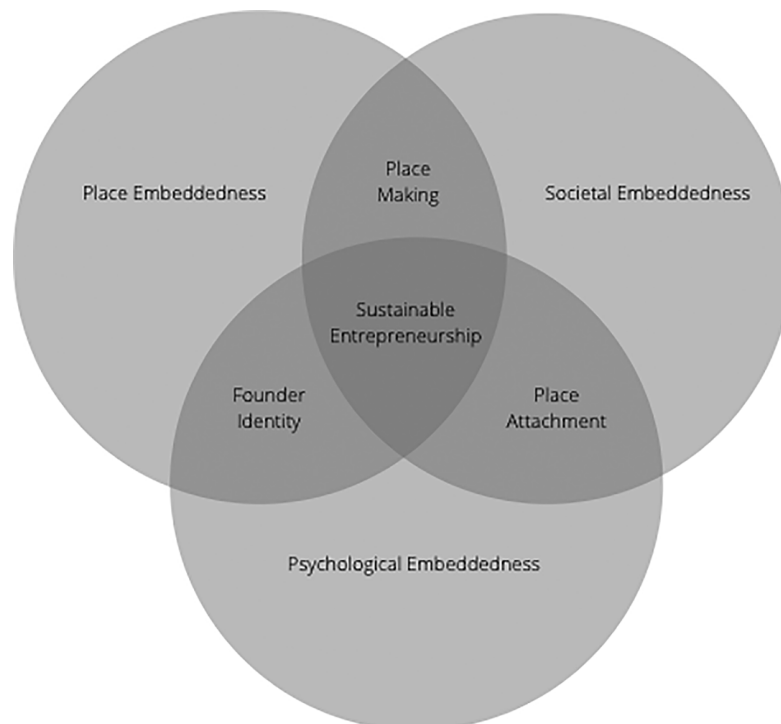


Figure 1. Embeddedness principles in sustainable entrepreneurship for events.

data collection design and implementation. The data collected were rigorously analyzed, interpreted, and expressed with careful consideration of all ethical components to remain trustworthy, and in compliance with the correct handling of participant data (Denscombe, 2010).

To conclude, having drawn from both the literature previously discussed and the methodological stances, the study will now explore the key themes that emerged from the primary data collected.

### Results And Discussion

There now follows scrutiny of the three main themes that emerged from the data: (i) embedded values and sustainability; (ii) place, attachment, and familiarity; and (iii) growing, locally.

#### *Embedded Values and Sustainability*

Sustainable entrepreneurship emerged as a value system deeply embedded within the sample. Participants discussed the significance of “partner founders,” as pairs of individuals who had established the business and were responsible for psychological embedding of “big ideas” of how to be consistently sustainable, and to set an example within their industries. The origins of founder partner relationships were varied. In some cases, these were family partnerships, aligning with a growing body of work in the area of family firms and sustainability (Miroshnychenko et al., 2022). Other partnerships were formed by friends or previous work colleagues, supporting the findings of Gianetti and Simonov (2009) who highlighted those sustainable entrepreneurs who associate themselves and establish meaningful social interactions with other likeminded sustainable entrepreneurs feel a greater sense of community and support to create a venture together, rather than individually.

Like the findings of Gregori et al. (2019), the value systems of sustainable entrepreneurs emerged as important in fostering an institutional logic around sustainable principles and practices. This suggests that the psychological capital in founder teams is an important factor in driving the salience of sustainability goals (Randolph et al., 2022). This was typified by participant G, who observed:

all of our decision making is based on the company's core sustainability principles and our founder is central to these values.

Likewise, participant I commented:

the views of [name 1] and [name 2] (our founders) have definitely filtered down throughout all levels, everything we do here at [org name] is with our mission in mind.

The ethos of the founders emerged as central to wider workplace culture and a motivation to build teams of individuals who also share an embedded value system based on sustainability. Thus, psychological embeddedness to core values can influence hiring decisions and organizational structure. Those employed within the business discussed the shared ethos towards sustainability as fundamental to their job embeddedness (Wen et al., 2021). Once again participant I noted:

I share the same ideals and goals as [org name] do, so I feel very attached to the company as a whole.

This perspective was echoed by participant J who observed:

I would only ever work for a company that is committed to leaving the world in a better place than we found it.

The social embeddedness of sustainability values was demonstrated through a collective language. Participants used collective pronouns to respond to questions on their company's sustainability practice. For example, participant G expressed that:

all of our decision making is based on the company's core sustainability principles

while participant I stated:

I think we all share the same sustainability ideals

and finally participant K noted that:

we are committed to being consistently sustainable.

This collective language system of “we” and “our” demonstrates the shared understanding and



practice of an institutional logic around sustainability (Silva & Figueiredo, 2017). Participants described how their founders built small teams who have high degrees of autonomy with roles that feed into one another's. Contrary to industry trends (Lubin & Etsy, 2010), sustainability-focused roles were in operation from the "start up" stage, displaying a distinct difference in the organizational building blocks of sustainable businesses. This was exhibited in the thoughts of participant D who explained:

when I started 13 years ago, I'd be one of the very few people in the industry with the title of sustainability manager.

This perspective aligned with the thoughts of participant L who observed:

I have built up the company's sustainability strategy almost from scratch. It has become quite a personal project for me and something that I want to set as an example for other companies to follow.

For the study participants, the values and ethos of sustainable entrepreneurs in events was seen as integral to the organizational identity and in turn their business success. For example, one participant (H) describes how:

everything is centered around our values and this in turn forces greater creativity as many easier, simpler options are prevented due to not conforming with our beliefs.

Thus, founder identity was a key driver of sustainable entrepreneurship, and this psychological embeddedness was further demonstrated by employees who shared the organizational, and therefore the founders' ideals. In this sample, sustainability is embedded as a value system which is shared within the organizational community.

#### *Place, Attachment, and Familiarity*

For sustainable entrepreneurs, their connection to their locality was important and founders set up their businesses where they felt a sense of belonging (attachment) and could identify with local clientele (familiarity). The study participants

frequently articulated a feeling of responsibility to nurturing specific localities, communities, or buildings that were connected to their business, in both rural and urban settings.

According to Cohen and Muñoz's (2015) approach to embeddedness, urban environments offer a unique set of challenges and complexities that encourage place-based problem solving. In urban settings, sustainable entrepreneurs embed themselves to a built environment, allowing it to be distinguished by having a particular atmosphere and known identity (Amatyakul & Polyorat, 2017). Protecting the character and communities in these areas emerged as important. Participant K explained:

we have been in [London location] for so long we have an attachment to protecting the area and keeping it as sustainable and as close to its original character as possible.

Similarly, participant J noted:

we feel the need to preserve the authenticity of the place we do business in/from.

These quotes demonstrate a place-based sensitivity of perceived threats to their local operating environment.

For those participants who were operating sustainable enterprises for events in rural places they often took ownership of the land as "place builders" (Thomas et al., 2011) demonstrating what Barron et al. (2020) referred to as a "place-based environmental consciousness" (p. 449). Participants placed high value on the ability to create and change the landscape, but with care not to damage existing ecosystems or traditional practices. Participant A mentioned that:

because of where we are, we've always been very in touch with nature, essentially being a steward for nature.

Participant I found themselves in a similar position and observed:

the family have lived in and farmed in (location details withheld) for generations and so it was the obvious choice to simply enhance and adapt the traditional farming practices.

These two observations align with the findings of Chapin and Knapp (2015) who found that this sense of duty and social good was met with vigor by rural sustainable entrepreneurs working within the events, tourism, or hospitality sectors. These perspectives also echo the work of Dacin et al. (2011), who proposed that the focus of social entrepreneurship is normally on trying to help society by combining societal needs through business practices. Participants from rural communities also highlighted the importance of what Craighead and Ketchen (2021) identified as supply chain entrepreneurial embeddedness and being aware of the whole supply chain of a sustainable product. For example, the messaging of “farm to fork,” as coined by Morath (2016), appeared in various participant responses in discussing the link between the producers and the client experience.

Attachment to the local environment was presented in participant discussions of societal embeddedness. Social embeddedness is an important feature of sustainable hospitality (Gurlek, 2022), and the findings echoed this in discussions of place attachment. Participant H discussed the relationship attachments that they formed locally, through their business and highlighted:

we have become a key part of the local communities around all of our operations and would consider ourselves firmly attached through relationships with our customers and local businesses.

Participant G discussed how end user proximity (Craighead and Ketchen, 2021) resulted in a familiarity with the cliental and the needs of customers in their local region, noting:

Our customers are a key part of our network and many of our regulars visit daily for a coffee and to meet friends and colleagues. In some of our sites we are a destination meeting point and customers consider our presence to be integral to the community feel of their area.

However, for several participants, the local community was not the source of attachment, but the network of businesses through which their own organization connected with. For example, when asked about local community connections, participant I responded:

we don't necessarily have a connection or link still with the area in which we started delivering, nor the area close to the warehouse/office, but our network of suppliers is very important.

Participant E, an outdoor events festival had been using farm and land development as an avenue to initiate a web style network to create community links and embed sustainability strategies across the region. They explained:

The festival is produced as a partnership with X, who have worked to regenerate the landscape from coal mining pits, which were then used as landfills. Now we are planting thousands of trees, working with landowners/farmers/property developers, to bring biodiversity back into the area.

The process of societal embeddedness is often perceived as the foundation of local networks, and as such is advantageous for long-term legacy (De Rosa et al., 2019). The embedded ethos of the business either within the local customer community or within wider business networks was construed as a business strength for many participants. For example, participant G highlighted that:

we like to be integrated into the local community and base many of our business decisions on feedback from our customers and local networks

and likewise participant F reinforced this point noting:

this is the heart of the business and can only remain strong if served by a network of local connections.

It became increasingly evident that sustainable entrepreneurs nurtured social relationships to the benefit of the local community and the development of their own business activities as an active process (Czernek-Marszałek, 2020). On most occasions sustainable entrepreneurs commented that they were determined to exclusively use local suppliers. By virtue of this, sustainable entrepreneurs could build connections with suppliers in a more embedded way, rather than as simply a relationship where exchange of goods simply takes place. To emphasize this point Participant I observed:

we have a very important relationship with our growers

and likewise participant K noted:

we share knowledge with other surrounding venues in the area, and we definitely feel a responsibility having been here for so many years.

Therefore, it was apparent from the findings that embeddedness informed the business strategy enacted through place attachments, which nurtured the link between the business and its local community.

### *Growing, Locally*

The connection that sustainable entrepreneurs feel to the places their businesses are tied to is of central importance. However, discussions regarding expansion of the business highlighted a tension between the sustainable entrepreneur's affiliation to places and their projected business expansion plans within the event tourism sector. Most participants stated that they foresaw their expansion plans within UK markets, with some indicating international expansion. These decisions were influenced largely by how they orientate their sense of place. An example of how participating organizations consider place in their future expansion plans was detailed by participant H who explained:

we would always look at opportunities to expand our offering, however {the company location} would always remain the integral part. The family and business are firmly rooted in the area.

In fact, future expansion was seen as a threat to place embeddedness for some, including participant E who observed:

The overall aim of our company is to keep our team size as small as possible in order to ensure that we can continue to deliver 80% of every pound spent into the local economy, where the trip takes place.

Several participants also discussed international expansion as an extension of their own embeddedness. As such, their global sense of place (Massey, 1997) saw their borders as far less concrete than

some of the other study participants. For them, expansion was not just a geographical exercise, but one that also incorporated developments associated with supply networks and international contacts. This represented a challenge in terms of shared ethos and sustainability values. Participant C noted that:

a big part of my role is trying to influence our suppliers and our manufacturing chain.

Participant E also discussed the importance of bringing in new suppliers with whom they could potentially liaise with and influence their business practices to become more aligned with their own ethos and worldview, reflecting:

You don't want to alienate suppliers. It's got to be a conversation. We've all got to learn and grow together. If you just go to the sustainable suppliers that are already doing good stuff with, then you're just preaching to the converted, aren't you? You're not actually helping the industry grow.

Sustainable entrepreneurs also discussed expansion in relation to their own expertise. Extending expertise in sustainability minded practices was identified as important in nurturing and building the psychological embeddedness of employees and honing their skills. Several participants discussed the importance of innovating to solve internal challenges that could also be used as an example to others. For several, the priority was not exponential expansion but instead diversifying and adapting to situations and showing a greater creativity towards problem solving. Thus, expansion for some represented an opportunity to spread their embedded ethos beyond their immediate communities. Participant I was eager to highlight:

We're always thinking about expansion. We're looking at including more postcodes in the South East and hopefully start moving into the Midlands later this year. We want to get as many people as possible involved.

This point was reinforced by participant J who commented:

Sustainability is at the heart of every decision we make and due to our business model, the more

we expand the better we can do in the world. The more people who join our trips the more money is spent in local economies, and more jobs are created and preserved in sustainable tourism.

Thus, expansion was perceived as being as much about growing the business financially, as about growing awareness and participation in the ethos of the business community.

#### Conclusions: Conceptualizing Embeddedness in Sustainable Entrepreneurship

The insights from study participants have illustrated that embeddedness has emerged as a significant feature of the experiences and perspectives of sustainable entrepreneurs. Based on these findings and discussions, and in the context of events settings, we propose the framework in Figure 1, which conveys how effective socially sustainable entrepreneurship can be achieved through employment of the three dimensions of embeddedness. Sustainable entrepreneurship emerges through embedded identity, attachment to local places, and through an ethos of place making.

The findings demonstrate the ability of sustainable events entrepreneurs to find meaning through placemaking, and to enact this in their business strategies. For founders, their own attachments to their communities and their familiarity and affection for their home environments is also central to their integration of sustainable principles of operation. The findings demonstrate how participants established business networks and community closeness to help collectively safeguard the land, places, and spaces where their businesses were situated. Organizational structures placed entrepreneurs' ethos and values front and center of sustainability narratives, which influenced the operation of their businesses and saw sustainability prioritized as an area for growth and innovation and mirrored in the organizational identity of the business. As event entrepreneurs, they were collaborative, thoughtful, and reflective events experts, who sought out new sustainable ways of collaborating and doing things that were scalable. Any profits made were often reinvested back into their events businesses to be able to solve problems and to operate in a more sustainable, efficient, and effective way. The findings

illustrate that sustainable entrepreneurs were able to (i) regularly create networks among businesses in their local areas and devise strategies to improve the quality of their supplier relations, (ii) expand locally yet maintain firm rootedness in the areas where their businesses had been established, and for several to (iii) support and develop expansion plans through a global sense of place.

#### *Managerial Implications*

A successful transition towards aligning with the UNSDGs can help facilitate improvements in resource efficiency and a broader consideration of the entire life cycle of events, tourism, and hospitality activities (Mosey et al., 2023). These outcomes have managerial implications. It is in the interest of businesses in these sectors to help find new solutions that enable sustainable consumption and production patterns (United Nations, 2022). Positive changes, facilitated by conscientious sustainable businesses, will assist with social stability and social good through supporting quality of life, ultimately without harming the environment. While events consumers can be more thoughtful about their own waste, businesses should continue to advocate and encourage consumers to also be more thoughtful about what they buy and to choose sustainable options, whenever possible. If consumers in these sectors can buy from sustainable entrepreneurs who run local businesses, like those profiled in this study, not only will this make a difference, but it might also lead to pressure being exerted on entrepreneurs and managers of other events, tourism, and hospitality businesses to adopt more sustainable practices.

Modern society faces a series of almost insurmountable challenges linked to areas including healthcare, inequality, and climate change, which all seem so large and all encompassing. The participants in this study were focused on business development for the events sector, but also upon creating positive social change in the world. Society has many perceptions of what constitutes entrepreneurship (Mosey et al., 2017). The stereotype is usually one of individuals who have exceptional ideas, build a business, and make lots of money. Our findings appear to challenge this perception and demonstrate that events entrepreneurs are not

always heroic individuals (Mosey et al., 2023) who embark on selfish business building, and who have made and lost their first million in the events industry by the time they have left school. This is a false reality, and the findings illustrate that activity and change for the better can be achieved within events businesses and this usually starts locally, within local communities, and then builds and grows. In doing so, this then becomes a movement for social change in events.

Similarly, entrepreneurship is often seen through an economic lens of making money, but it is important to understand the social value that entrepreneurs create (Shipway et al., 2023). Our findings suggest that events entrepreneurs were (i) interested in problems their events businesses faced; (ii) they then sought to better understand those events-related problems; and (iii) found solutions that are better than how they were previously operating within the events industry.

#### *Research Limitations and Further Research*

Invariably with qualitative data and certainly within this study (being an analysis of social and business structures), attempting to detangle complex societal challenges happening in real time is fraught with the risk of assumption and interpretation (Beuving & Vries, 2015). This was particularly pertinent with individuals representing and becoming the voice for whole organizations, as only one person per company was interviewed. There is a certain degree of risk involved here, as one person's perception of reality will differ from that of the next person (Mills & Birks, 2014).

Given the data were collected during a global pandemic, and with the organizations working amid COVID-19 restrictions, the researchers found that many of the organizations contacted had reduced staff levels, and consequently fewer individuals were freely available to participate. Likewise, employees within sustainability departments were working in small teams and were time poor. While undertaking semistructured interviews provided opportunities for interactive roles in the data collection process, the constraints of the global pandemic proved interruptive (Shipway et al., 2020). As previously highlighted, interviews were conducted via Zoom video call, which made the fluidity of the

interview harder to maintain than if face-to-face interviews were conducted (Keegan, 2009).

This study has focused on the insights of the senior management and key founders of sustainable entrepreneurial businesses for the events, tourism or hospitality sectors, which while a strength of the research is also recognized as a potential limitation. Moving forward, from a managerial perspective, first there is a clear need to gain a more holistic overview of sustainable entrepreneurship by investigating a far broader and more diverse sample of employees working within businesses on their attitudes and perspectives on sustainable entrepreneurship to support day-to-day operations and future expansion plans. Second, additional scrutiny is required on the intricate balance and challenges between the importance of specific communication systems within sustainable businesses, while still being able to create a united workforce.

Future research would benefit from (i) exploring the role of place embeddedness for understanding entrepreneur's perceptions and meanings for future business expansion; (ii) investigating how sustainable entrepreneurs can demonstrate the authenticity of their value systems through the concept of psychological embeddedness; (iii) more detailed critique of the role of place attachment and place making within the context of societal embeddedness; and (iv) developing a better understanding of the entrepreneurial and innovative perspectives of a wider spectrum of sustainable businesses across the events, hospitality, and tourism industries.

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