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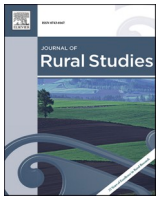
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When place becomes a brand: Creating values and benefits for rural people and places in a whisky region

Rachel Creaney [*], Sharon Flanigan, Kirsty Blackstock, Liz Dinnie, Chloe Thompson [1]

Social, Economic and Geographical Sciences Department, James Hutton Institute, Craigiebuckler, Aberdeen, Scotland, AB15 8QH, United Kingdom

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ABSTRACT

As rural development becomes increasingly shaped by industries that draw on place-based identities, cultures, and environments, understanding how their benefits are distributed within host communities is increasingly important. This paper examines the interconnected whisky and food-and-drink tourism sectors in Speyside, Scotland, where both industries derive value from the symbolic and material qualities of place. In such contexts, place itself becomes part of the product, forming what we conceptualise as a brandscape.

We argue that a mismatch can emerge between the value extracted from rural places through branding, production, and tourism, and the benefits retained within those places. To explore this issue, we combine value chain analysis with a brandscape perspective to develop a new conceptual framework for understanding the relationships between large rural industries, communities, and place. Drawing on multiple sources of qualitative data, we examine the economic, socio-cultural, and environmental values and benefits associated with the interconnected whisky and tourism sectors in Speyside.

Our findings demonstrate that while these industries generate substantial benefits for the region, the distribution of those benefits is uneven and does not always reflect the contributions made by local communities and environments. We therefore argue for a more reciprocal relationship between industry, community, and place, in which the value generated through place-based branding is more effectively retained within rural areas.

1. Introduction

Traditionally, primary industries have been central to rural economies. However, concerns over rural depopulation and sustainable development have prompted growing interest in the role of diversified rural economies and the contribution of non-primary industries to local prosperity (Shucksmith, 2010). At the same time, European and national policy agendas increasingly emphasise place-based approaches to development e.g. Long Term Vision for Rural Areas, Rural Pact (European Commission, 2021, 2022). Along with the importance of harnessing the distinctive natural, cultural and social assets of rural areas (Shucksmith, 2010). As rural economies become more intertwined with industries that draw value from place-based resources and identities, understanding how the resulting benefits are distributed within rural places and communities becomes increasingly important.

While existing research has explored the economic significance of whisky production and tourism (Spracklen, 2014; Bilro et al., 2025), less attention has been paid to how the values and benefits generated through these interconnected industries are experienced by the places and communities upon which they depend. This paper focuses on Speyside, a rural region internationally recognised for malt whisky production and an expanding food and drink tourism sector. Like other destination regions associated with iconic products, such as Champagne in France or Porto in Portugal, Speyside's economic success is closely linked to the relationship between product, place and visitor experience. These places rely on imaginaries (projected imagery) and storytelling through symbolic and cultural capital, along with the authentic and actual economic, social and environmental circumstances and outcomes associated with the key products in these places. We understand these amalgamations as a 'brandscape' (Wood and Ball, 2013; Gilstrap et al., 2021).

To address this gap, we examine the interactions between the Speyside whisky and tourism value chains and their implications for local people and place. We do so through a brandscape lens (Wood and Ball, 2013; Gilstrap et al., 2021), which highlights how the symbolic representation of place and the material realities of place become

* Corresponding author.
E-mail address: rachel.creaney@hutton.ac.uk (R. Creaney).
[1] Present address: Countryside & Community Research Institute, University of Cheltenham, Gloucestershire, GL50 4AZ, United Kingdom.

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intertwined in the creation of value. Although, originating in marketing as the commercial environment in which brands operate (Sherry, 2000), more broadly it now links 'brand' and 'landscape' to define the experience ecosystem that a brand creates (Wood and Ball, 2013). By combining the concept of the 'brand' with 'landscape' consumers are presented with a semiotic visual of spaces underpinned with reassurance and familiarity (Wood and Ball, 2013); they offer the potential to understand linkages between consumers and spaces with inherent experiential quality. In modern society, brands are omnipresent (Maurya and Mishra, 2012) and in destination marketing symbolism is used to present an identity to the visitor market (Kladou et al., 2017). This brandscape partially relies on a stereotypical view of Scotland/Speyside. Scotland has long been associated with a certain 'twee-ness' through stereotyping and heritage-oriented imagery (e.g. Loch Ness monster, Braveheart) (McCrone et al., 1995). And, although this understanding still exists somewhat, a lot of resources have been utilised to develop a more modern Scottish 'brand' (see VisitScotland, 2024). Scotch whisky is therefore somewhat of a paradox – being arguably both a heritage-based product which has been influential in modernising the image of Scotland around the world, whilst also continuing to rely on some of this 'twee-ness' (e.g. see the marketing campaigns of popular Scottish whisky products). By combining value chain and brandscape perspectives, we develop a framework for understanding how benefits and burdens associated with major rural industries extend beyond direct economic outcomes to encompass socio-cultural and environmental dimensions.

The paper has two objectives. First, it develops a conceptual framework for understanding the relationship between rural industries, place branding and local value creation. Second, it identifies the key economic, socio-cultural and environmental values and benefits associated with the interconnected whisky and tourism sectors in Speyside. In doing so, the paper contributes to debates on place-based rural development and the extent to which industries that derive value from rural places support the long-term sustainability and resilience of those places and their communities.

2. Value chains, branding and place-based impacts: a literature review

2.1. Place and place-based development

Place is a meaningful site that combines location, locale, and sense of place (Cresswell, 2015). Location in terms of the 'where', locale in terms of how a place looks (i.e. buildings, parks), and the sense of place, in terms of the feelings and emotions that a place evokes. Similarly, in any given place we encounter a combination of materiality, meaning and practice (Cresswell, 2015; Conroy, 2012), and as such, places have meanings associated with them, which can be individual or shared. This paper explores a place with a common association (and potential meaning), both to those embedded in the place and those visiting it. The common associations and meanings in a place are built around products, historical sites, globally recognised organisations and institutions (Papadopoulos et al., 2018), as well as (often) the personal connections and emotive role that the natural landscape (Kastenholz et al., 2020) and associated cultural heritage can offer (Csurgó and Smith, 2021). Storytelling often plays an important role in place-making, in terms of how a place is 'experienced', understood or promoted. Relatedly then, as mentioned earlier, place-based development and thinking also recognises the importance of community relationships and participation across various spatial scales (Healey, 2010). Such an understanding (and recognition) of the importance of the context of a place is perhaps particularly importance with the increasing diversification of rural areas (Shucksmith, 2010).

2.2. The role of major industries in rural places

There is a wealth of literature relating to the role of major industries in, and on, rural communities and places. From the field of economics, there are many papers highlighting the benefits (both direct and more indirect) from job creation in rural places from large-scale industries (Jacobsen and Parker, 2016; Henderson and McNamara, 2000) . Yet, this job creation, can be insecure and seasonal (Jolliffe and Farnsworth, 2003), or even if it is well-paid and secure, such economic benefits may not always translate to better community wellbeing or benefits. There are studies relating to the responsibilities of large-scale businesses/ industries to the communities and environments within which they operate, including carbon offsetting (Anderson and Peters, 2016) and community benefit agreements/funds or community wealth building (Hess, 2004). Regarding rural area studies specifically, there is often a focus on community ownership, i.e. of energy infrastructure (van Veelen, 2018) or via community development trusts (Rennie and Billing, 2015). However, research has also identified problems with some of these schemes, relating to difficulties in measuring impacts/-success or greenwashing (de Jong et al., 2020; Delmas and Burbano, 2011). Others have highlighted difficulties with power imbalances (Shucksmith, 2010; Bice, 2014) and Sampson and Goliath type situations between 'large industries' and 'small communities' in terms of availability of legal resources for instance. From a spatial perspective there can be power imbalances, also in terms of who/which 'communities' benefit and when, and there are also issues in terms of what is meant by 'community' and who can speak for 'the community' within powerful discussions. Often there can be an assumption that compensation to the communities is 'enough' rather than exploring structural changes which could remove the need for compensation completely (Delmas and Burbano, 2011; Banerjee, 2008). Nevertheless, a whole system approach such as value chain analysis (VCA) and looking at the wider brandscape is important to understand what value is being created and captured, and what is absent, within rural spaces.

Scotch whisky is embedded within powerful place imaginaries that associate Scotland with heritage, quality, authenticity and purity (Durie et al., 2006; Black et al., 2015). Such imaginaries are not produced solely by destination marketing organisations or whisky firms but are co-constructed through a range of actors and practices. Research on wine regions demonstrates how dominant producers can reshape representations of rural places and influence local development trajectories (Overton and Murray, 2011; Güzel et al., 2021). At the same time, digital media platforms, online communities and influencers increasingly contribute to the social construction of place through the circulation of recommendations, experiences and narratives (Azariah, 2016; Ripoll González and Lester, 2018). Consumers and independent actors therefore play an important role in reproducing and enhancing regional whisky imaginaries, often lending a sense of authenticity that complements corporate branding efforts.

2.3. Value chains and analysis

The concept of Value Chains was first coined by Porter (1985) to more systematically understand where (and how much) value was created along the chain of activities between raw materials and the final consumed product or service. Initially the concept/analysis was mainly concerned solely with economic value, however over time it has expanded to now also examine relationships that go across places and sectors (as many value chains are geographically located across a large area) including from global north to global south (Mitchell and Coles, 2011). This has also drawn attention to the interactions between value chains and the place-based assets on which these chains depend (Crescenzi et al., 2022). Simultaneously these places depend on branding (therefore creating brandscapes with real impacts on local people and places) which we discuss in more detail in the next section. Value chain analysis assesses the activities within a value chain to understand where value is added and removed (Moretti et al., 2023; Blackstock et al., 2025). Furthermore, 'they extend our analysis beyond the 'farm gate' to the wider food (or equivalent product system (Blackstock et al.,

2025). A value chain can be understood as the system or process which resources and actors are mobilised within (and potentially beyond) territorial boundaries and sectors to generate economic, social and environmental values (both positive and negative) (Moretti et al., 2023). Often value chains can create multiple products and values, which can be marketable (e.g. food and drink products) or non-marketable (e.g. clean air, parks, beaches) goods and services (Blackstock et al., 2025). When multiple value chains interact there can be additional, and perhaps unforeseen, impacts on the actors and places (Moretti et al., 2023). The processes and outcomes of value chains can also be upgraded to improve the products, processes, or financial, social or environmental outcomes (Piao et al., 2019), however the comparative levels of upgrading/improvements across the value chain can also often be unclear or undefined. As (Blackstock et al., 2025: 3), highlight, 'there has also been an increasing interest in the social aspects of VC analyses, particularly addressing distribution of value and issues of fairness'. Thus, exploring the wider system helps to understand more than just the 'shiny consumer face' of an industry, by understanding how both ecosystems and society interact, and what changes the involvement of large-scale industry (in this case) may have on a place. As such, it is important to consider the interactions between value chains and place-based assets on which these depend. Such interactions also depend on branding. This use of branding creates brandscapes (which may or may not be imagined/stereotypical to some degree) with real material impacts on the local people and places involved.

2.4. Brands and brandscapes

It has long been recognised within geography and social science literature that place is about more than a particular geographical location (Cresswell, 2015). It might be better thought of as 'an event [rather] than as a bounded location' (Craciun, 2018; Massey, 2005). Likening places to events is especially relevant in the context of tourism, whereby visitors' direct interaction with a place is inherently time limited. However, visitors' sense of place is not limited to direct interactions, and tourism imaginaries are formed before, during, and after visiting a place (Gravari-Barbas and Graburn, 2012). Visitors often travel based on tourism imaginaries: socially transmitted representational assemblages that shape how destinations, peoples and travel experiences are perceived (Salazar, 2012). The power of a place as a destination is developed through multiple media, including imagery projected to the world through literature, films, news, education, social media, and products (Gravari-Barbas and Graburn, 2016). Furthermore, place is intertwined with, and reconstituted through, the products that are created and produced in that location (see Warner, 2007; Tashiro et al., 2019; Lee et al., 2015). These ideas connect closely to those of 'authenticity of portrayals within tourism studies. However, Rickly and Canavan (2024) would argue that 'authenticity' should be understood as an emergent process, which develops before, during and after the tourist visit/experience. Branding can play an important role in these portrayals.

According toGilstrap et al. (2021) , brandscapes co-created environments in which brands, places and consumers interact to generate meaning, attachment and value. The idea of the brandscape, can help to understand the wider system in which the brands and industries operate. Until now, often utilised within marketing literature, the notion of the brandscape has gained popularity in literature around festivals (i.e. creating a specific 'vibe' at a festival) in having year-round impact on both the festival brand and the community in which the festival is geographically located (Hudson et al., 2015). While branding research has traditionally focused on products, organisations and symbolic identities (Maurya and Mishra, 2012), the concept of the brandscape extends this focus by incorporating the wider landscape in which branded experiences are produced and consumed. Beyond marketing, the concept of the brandscape has gained prominence in festival studies (Hudson et al., 2015; Gilstrap et al., 2021; Moore et al., 2021), where experiential narratives (Sherry, 2000), authenticity and a sense of place help foster enduring relationships between consumers, brands and host communities (Arnould and Thompson, 2018).

2.5. Deriving value and benefits for local places

Important throughout all these understandings is ensuring the resilience of the places and communities under study. Community resilience, emerged as an alternative to sustainable communities, to recognise the ability of a community to withstand change, uncertainty, unpredictability and surprise, through community resources (Magis, 2010). It goes beyond the three pillars of sustainability to also understand that a community's ability to thrive can differ depending on times of shock and change for instance (Lew et al., 2016; Wilson, 2012). Resilience may also be improved when multiple opportunities for wealth generation exist (i.e. a community does not rely on one business/industry to achieve resilience/sustainability) (Magis, 2010). Another route is through Protected Geographical Indication (PGI) status, where a product has a geographical protection placed upon it (such as Scottish whisky), as it can help to ensure value and benefits can remain in a defined geographical place (Mancini, 2013).

Related is the role of reciprocity, or a reciprocity-aligned perspective (e.g. Shucksmith, 2010; Bosworth et al., 2016), which traditionally was discussed in relation to peer-to-peer and individual level symbiotic relationships within communities (drawing on Putnam's (2000) ideas of social capital). However, more recently, the concept has expanded to also consider relationships between individuals/communities and businesses (Bice, 2014). A reciprocal relationship in this context is one in which local people can reap the benefits created, and this wealth is retained locally. Communities are also able to shape and participate in decision-making relating to industry-funded local infrastructure improvements (Shucksmith, 2010; Bosworth et al., 2016). Such an understanding of reciprocity is also important in the context of sustainability in its various relevant forms (e.g. sustainability of value chains, of places, of tourism), with the aim of protecting the interdependencies of people, places and industries as a system that is mutually benefitted by care of the sum of its parts.

2.6. Conceptual framework for the brandscape: the relationship between large industries, rural community and places

This paper contributes to a relatively new but growing body of literature around the notion of the brandscape in terms of the relationships between rural communities, places and large industries. It builds on debates on/around branding and rural tourism (Escribano et al., 2020; Sandriester and Pizzera, 2024), and the impacts of large industries on rural communities (Castelló, 2021; Checchinato et al., 2024) to offer a potential new lens through which to understand the responsibilities and opportunities that large and powerful land-based brands (should) have for the rural communities that live and work within the places they are based upon/in. This paper builds on the framework (Moretti et al., 2023) and approach to VC analysis undertaken by (Blackstock et al., 2025) across mountain-based land value chains. Here we extend this framework and approach by also considering how (and where) the role of the brandscape drives who benefits, and from which values. Fig. 1 depicts our conceptual framework which situates conducive relationships between large industries, rural communities and rural places at the core of a reciprocal and beneficial brandscape. Such conducive relationships serve to enable economic, environmental and socio-cultural values that benefit all involved (and vice-versa), in a cyclical fashion.

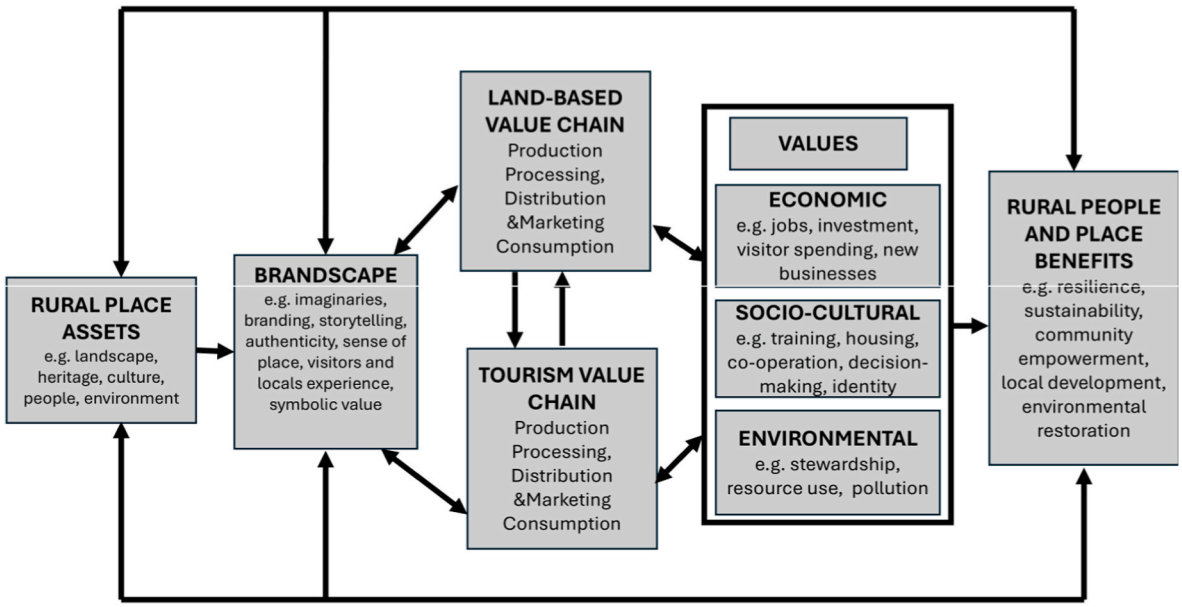


Fig. 1. Conceptual framework showing how the brandscape mediates relationships between interconnected land-based (in our case whisky) and tourism value chains and rural place outcomes.

3. Context and methodology

3.1. Case study context

Scotland has Protected Geographical Indication (PGI)[2] for its whisky. For whisky to be labelled, packaged, advertised or promoted as Scotch, the product must be distilled specifically in Scotland (UK Government, 2020), thus limiting potential supply to the market based on geographical location and conveying a mark of distinctiveness. At the national level, Scotland's food and drink industry strategy identifiedScotch whisky as the country's largest export and a global 'trail-blazer' (Scotland Food and Drink Partnership, 2023), valued at £5.6 billion. Production of 1.35bn bottles of Scotch whisky in 2023 (including malt whisky and blends) generated over £5.6bn and reached 168 markets around the world (Scotch Whisky Association, 2024a,b). While domestic consumption of whisky is highlighted in the context of experiential storytelling and destination development in the country's food tourism strategy (Scottish Tourism Alliance, 2024). Single malt whisky has historically been marketed as a niche product across the globe, one to be savoured for special occasions (Moyle, 2022), which is reflected in its premium price tag and marketing above blended whiskies and other spirits. Scotland has five main whisky producing areas (including Speyside) and each one is associated with different product characteristics.

Speyside malt whisky has become associated with a particular palate of fruity flavours, rather than the more peaty varieties associated with other regions (Moyle, 2022). Of the 151 active distilleries producing single malt and malt blend Scotch whisky in 2024 (Scotch Whisky Association, 2024a,b), more than 50 are found in Speyside (see Fig. 2), signifying its importance and contribution to one of Scotland's key export products. Historically and geographically, the location of distilleries in the Speyside region was associated with rivers and mountains, whereby the River Spey and tributaries supply large quantities of water to both process and product, and surrounding mountains are associated with the historical institution of 'illicit stills' hidden away from the view of the taxman (Reid et al., 2024). Speyside is also the home to some of the earliest distillery visitor centres, realising the combined potential of production and consumption activities on-site (Martin and Haugh, 1999). Speyside mainly sits within Scotland's largest National Park, aiding further attraction as a tourist destination, as well as a whisky destination.

Recent reports suggest that whisky destinations and marketing are evolving towards enhanced visitor experience, broadening market appeal and collaboration (Usborne, 2023)). According to Stoffelen and Vanneste (2015: 1), "the cultural Speyside boundaries are perceived to be impenetrable even though spatial extension of the trail may result in opportunities to spread gains of tourism over a larger area". Such advances have been made in recent years, for instance with: the Spirit of Speyside festival recently engaging with a younger and more gender-balanced audience than is typical for whisky tourism (Roberts, 2023); £140m was invested in the Macallan distillery and estate to better incorporate the landscape to create a more premium visitor experience (ScotchWhisky.com, 2018); inclusion of more destination-based marketing along the malt whisky trail (The Malt Whisky Trail, 2024).

Looking to how Speyside whisky is produced, through taking a value chain approach (Moretti et al., 2023) we consider the Speyside malt whisky (SMW) product in terms of four distinct stages. Fig. 3 illustrates the journey from raw ingredients through processes that convert ingredients into a consumer product for sale, as well as how the whisky value chain connects with the tourism value chain. More detailed value chain diagrams can be viewed here (Blackstock et al., 2022).

At the **production stage,** there is peatland and upland management to control water flows and the abstraction of small amounts of spring water into the distilleries. At the **processing stage,** the key practices are malting barley, creating mash, fermentation, distillation and maturation. At the **distribution and marketing stage**, the practices comprise bottling and labelling, transport to markets, brand development and visitor centre tours. Finally, at the **consumption stage,** the practices involve selling at a range of levels and locations including small specialist retail, supermarkets, hotels, restaurants, bars and distillery visitor centres. Whisky production has a long lead time, requiring a minimum of three years' maturation. To be marketed as Speyside malt whisky (SMW), key processing stage activities must take place within Speyside. The close relationship between the whisky and food and drink tourism sectors has created a distinctive *brandscape*, in which whisky-

[2] Highland, Lowland and Speyside designated as 'protected regions', Campbeltown and Islay designated as 'protected localities'.

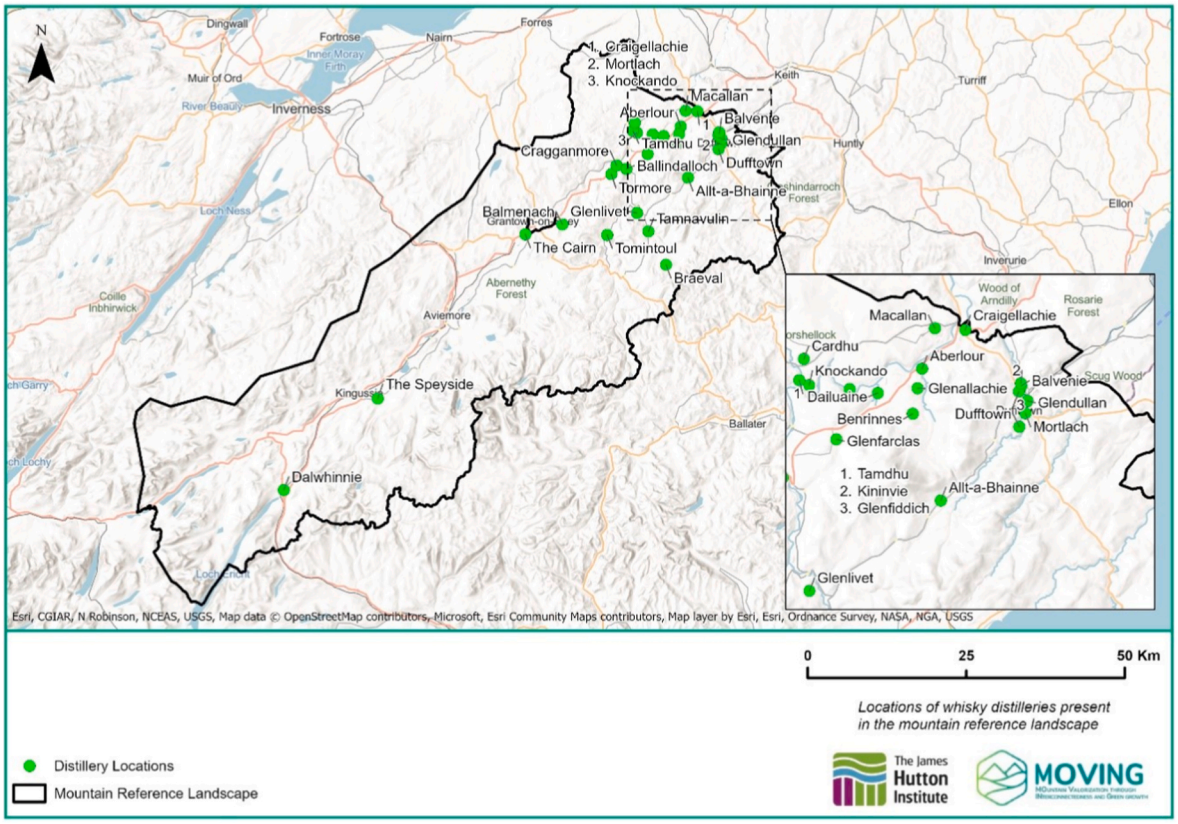


Fig. 2. Map of the key Speyside distilleries and the boundary of the case study area (credit: Dave Miller, 2023))

related cultural and symbolic associations help shape perceptions of the region. Central to this identity is the River Spey, both as a source of water for distillation and as an important part of the area's whisky heritage.

3.2. Methodology

This paper is based on extensive data collection across the malt whisky and food and drink tourism value chain in Speyside, Scotland. It formed part of a larger cross European Horizon Europe funded project (MOVING: MOuntain Valorisation through INterconnectedness and Green growth) which ran from 2020 to 2024 exploring land-based value chains and their wider values and benefits (and opportunities to improve their resilience) across Europe's mountain areas. Speyside formed the boundary for our case study. We decided on a case study methodological approach to allow for a depth of data collection and contextual richness around a single subject (Silverman, 2024); and a triangulated approach drawing on different methods of data collection within the boundaries of a single, but comparable, case study (Rashid et al., 2019). The case study allowed us to create boundaries for our VCA. As part of our value chain analysis, both primary data and secondary data were collected, between September 2021 and November 2023. Along with an extensive review of the academic and grey literature, secondary data was collected including employment figures, tax revenue and environmental indicators. This was supplemented by primary data collection across six participatory workshops and semi-structured interviews with 55 stakeholders (ST) involved in the whisky and/or food and drink tourism value chains. Many of the participants in this research were also members of our Multi-Actor Platform (MAP) who acted as the Scottish-level Stakeholder Advisory Group for the wider research project, comprising of representatives for the various levels of the SMW industry. Their role on the project included acting as research participants and a valuable group through which to co-create research activities, and check and validate our research findings. The MAP also offered the members a new forum in which to discuss wider issues relevant to the SMW value chain.

In terms of data collection, the primary data collection was undertaken through a mixture of in-person and online interactions (using Webex software). This data collection was also supplemented by participant observations from four whisky distillery tours (DT) across Scotland (specifically three tours in Speyside, one in Edinburgh) in which the researchers participated in the distillery tours to better understand and compare how different distilleries promoted their whiskies and brands, as well as how the distilleries utilised storytelling to highlight the history and sociocultural traditions to visitors. With ethical approval and consent, the interviews and workshops were recorded, and the discussions were transcribed using an approved transcriber. Transcripts were collaboratively coded and then analysed using a thematic coding framework with the help of NVivo software to help inform our analysis (see Blackstock et al., 2022). The thematic coding framework consisted of several codes identified as relevant from the research questions and wider project research (e.g. environmental, economic and social values) as well as space for new codes which emerged during the reflexive analysis phase. In addition, as part of the larger European project, each case study completed a value chain analysis which allowed for a systematic interrogation of the variety impacts of each value chain process or product (see Blackstock et al., 2022 for more information on this). Some of this VCA research has also helped to inform and shape this paper.

This Value Chain Analysis also helped us to formulate our conceptual framework (Fig. 1) through generating a better understanding of the impacts of the interconnections of the two value chains on the rural place and communities in Speyside. In terms of our positionality, the research team (and paper authors) do not live or work within the data collection area or industry, but have had substantial experience in research with rural communities, and with the interplay between industries and rural places, some of which have taken place within the



Fig. 3. Key elements of the Scotch whisky value chain and links to tourism (credit: Chloe Thompson, 2023).

research area location, allowing for prior knowledge and stakeholder connections to help to inform some of the research activities undertaken here. In terms of generalisability, this is largely a qualitative study of the values and benefits of the combination of multiple value chains and the role of branding/brandscape, of which the results could be of interest to a wider audience, interested in the concept of brandscape, the interplay of landscape and industry in rural locations, or on the impacts of a global value chain across the various stages of implementation. However, we also recognise that there may be some limitations with our study in terms of the usefulness of amore quantitative or economic assessment of the impacts of the value chain. We now move to the findings of the paper.

4. Findings: branding, values and benefits of the speyside brandscape

As discussed earlier, Speyside can be understood both as a key component of the Speyside malt whisky value chain and as a *brandscape*, shaped by its reputation for high-quality food and drink products and its strong associations with the local landscape and the River Spey. These findings are organised around three themes: (1) economic benefits associated with whisky and tourism; (2) sociocultural benefits for local communities; and (3) environmental benefits. Before examining these themes, we first consider the role of the Speyside brandscape and how it is produced and reproduced through interactions between the whisky and tourism sectors, local communities, and place.

4.1. The role of the speyside brand

> *'It's part of the story, it's the landscape in which the industry is sited, people have said that Scotch whisky is Scotland in a bottle, and it is in many respects. It's the product that's in there, it's the history, it's the heritage, it's the location.'*
>
> Interview with whisky sector experts, SH28 and SH29, March 2022

Speyside malt whisky is a powerful global brand and a PGI. As a PGI there is a requirement for it to be produced in Scotland in terms of its raw products. Individual distilleries in Speyside all draw on water from the River Spey as one of the key inputs, as well as on associated narratives, stories and scenery to create a powerful industry-level brand. The connection to, and importance placed on, the PGI was widely discussed in our interviews and workshops. With one interviewee highlighting *that 'people care more culturally about whisky here than they do say Coca-Cola'* (Interview with whisky sector expert, SH32, March 2022). Many companies involved in the production of Speyside malt whisky are large companies (e.g. Diageo, Chivas, Pernod-Ricard), with potential access to financial reserves for employment, innovations and investments, both within their distilleries and across the wider geographical areas which they are situated and draw resources from. At a national level, Scotch single malt whisky is an extremely important exporter. In 2021, it was responsible for around 25% of Scottish food and drink exports, but within Scotland (and Speyside) it is often the symbolic capital that is of greatest importance. By this we mean the role of the single-malt distilleries as tourist destinations, the associated history and storytelling within these tours and the marketing in creating economic revenue. As one tourism expert interviewee highlighted,

> '*there's a good rich story there, there's a good rich narrative, a good bit of history as well as the fact that Speyside and Moray still produce on a global market, for a global market.*'
>
> Interview with tourism expert, SH01, March 2022.

For others, there was recognition that the Speyside landscape plays a

huge role in the promotion and storytelling of the brandscape, as well as being physically important as the source of some of the raw materials necessary to create the main whisky and tourism products.

> *'The region is important for the whole Scotch whisky industry: 'I think if it wasn't for Speyside and Moray whisky production then you wouldn't have the volume, and you wouldn't have the brand, and you wouldn't have the narrative, and you wouldn't have the history. You wouldn't have the same whisky sector that Scotland has at the moment.'*
>
> Interview with whisky sector expert, SH05 March 2022

Yet, there was also a feeling that more could be done to promote the broader Scotch whisky industry.

> *'We're very much more focused on responsible tourism and we're trying to engender that through the industry, but the industry is fragmented, it's made up of thousands of businesses and I guess in many respects we're reliant on those businesses to start building that into their own social responsibility.'*
>
> Workshop participant (local tourism expert) SH24, November 2022

There is a huge amount of power and prestige in the Speyside brand, and the distilleries and other related businesses draw heavily on this branding. The distilleries and connected actors also promote this brand, or brandscape, at a global level bringing tourists and revenue to Speyside. However, a lot of this revenue does not remain in Speyside. In addition, the wider brandscape is not necessarily a realistic and authentic portrayal of the space and place of Speyside, drawing instead on tourism imaginaries (often, also at a Scottish wide level) that promote the whisky as merely a generic Scottish, or even British product. For instance, as one interviewee highlighted

> *'There's a distinction between … it's more like romantic ideals about the illicit whisky smuggler in this kind of world versus urban areas and so there was distilling activity in both but from very early on there's a distinction between the activity based on region and then as the industry developed … and as these companies like moved to London for offices and things like that, how Scotch became more British but you […] have people using the iconography of Scotland from the 19th century specifically, or from like the Jacobite rebellion specifically in imagery but then you also have other companies who are [using] British iconography.'*
>
> Interview with academic, SH32 , March 2022

There is also somewhat of a disconnect between the whisky and food and drink tourism sectors in terms of branding, with the tourism sector being more localised, and the whisky sector being more globalised. Yet, at the same time both sectors benefit from an idealised and somewhat imagined view of Speyside, which does not fully benefit the local people and place. In workshops around 'visions of the future' (held April 2023) participants called for greater sustainability and socially responsible production practices, with greater attention paid to the values and benefits on local populations. Thus, the current powerful branding of Speyside needs to be somewhat reworked to better reflect the need for greater attention on the values and benefits derived by local places and a greater sense of social responsibility from the corporations involved in the SMW value chain.

We now turn to findings relating to the economic, socio-cultural and environmental values and benefits created (for local rural place and community) by the Speyside whisky and food and drink tourism value chains.

4.2. Values and benefits from speyside whisky and tourism

4.2.1. Economic values and benefits on Speyside's rural communities and place

Table 1 summarises the main economic values and benefits (relevant to Speyside's rural communities and place) identified from the interconnections between Speyside malt whisky and food and drink tourism value chains. It is based on our primary data collection and wider secondary data collection for the value chain analysis activity.

Table 1
Main economic values and benefits from Speyside's malt whisky and tourism value chains and the impacts on Speyside's people and place.

Economic values/benefits	Effect on Speyside's people and places
Job opportunities	Key local employer. These jobs are well paid and secure at the processing stage, but often more seasonal/lower paid at the other value chain stages. And fewer jobs are filled by women/younger people.
Opportunities to start new businesses	Many connected tourism businesses have been established due to the existence of the SMW value chain.
Training and development opportunities	Some opportunities for training and development of local people, but these opportunities could be increased/better promoted.

4.2.1.1. Job opportunities. Distilleries represent 1.6% of employment in rural Scotland (around 7000 people) (Scottish Government RESAS, 2021) and are of particular significance in Speyside which contains over 50 distilleries. The distilleries and connected businesses within these value chains are an important employer in Speyside, especially at the production and processing stages. These jobs (e.g. distillers, coopers) are often considered 'jobs for life', with skills and knowledge often passed through family generations. As one whisky sector interviewee highlighted,

> *'Distillery operators are really skilled people […] what you really get in terms of the craft is that knowledge and experience, it may be passed down the generations, certainly it is passed from senior operators to new ones. It's that understanding of how the site works and it will be completely different to how the site next door works […] You can't just then walk off from Cragganmore and work in Dufftown and expect them to be the same it's not.'*
>
> Interview with whisky sector expert, SH27, March 2022

The SMW industry was viewed favourably by many of our research participants due to its role as a large local employer (especially via the wider whisky tourism ventures), and the positive knock-on benefits from increased revenue from tourism. According to one tourism expert (SH24) distilleries are *'pivotal to the local economy'* (Interview, March 2022).

However, within the SMW value chain itself, it is mostly only the processing stage jobs that are secure, well-paid and based locally. One whisky sector interviewee explained that distilleries are *'not massive employers'* employing on average 12 people per day per distillery (Interview with whisky sector expert, SH05, March 2022). They highlighted that although wider sector jobs (e.g. hospitality, packaging and processing) can also be obtained, these are not necessarily well-paid or year-round positions. For instance,

> *'there are many seasonal hospitality jobs – but many local parents don't see hospitality as a career for their kids'*
>
> Interview with local tourism expert SH23, March 2022.

Most other jobs in the SMW value chain are generally situated outwith Speyside, in e.g. Glasgow, Edinburgh or further afield. These include high paid secure roles such as in marketing, research and development and legal roles, and lower paid menial roles such as storage and bottling. The gender and age balance in the sector is relatively poor, especially at the initial stages with most workers being men aged over 60. The marketing is, however, often undertaken by those aged 40 and under (e.g. brand managers) (Interview with academic, SH32, March 2022. There also remains a gender bias in the local roles. Hospitality and 'brand ambassador' roles are mostly filled by women.

> *'I see a lot of jobs for brand ambassadors, and I also see that a lot of times those come out of these graduate programs that some of these companies*

have where they want flashy young pretty people in their early 20s to sell Scotch whisky and it isn't necessarily about an accent, or a cultural identity, it's about looks and money'.

Interview with academic, SH32, March 2022.

In terms of wages, the average hourly wages in the processing and distribution & marketing stages are in line with or above the Scotland full-time average pay (ONS, 2020). Average wages in production and consumption stage jobs are below average (ONS, 2020).

However, overall interviewees commended the varying types and quality of jobs that were available across the interconnected value chains, highlighting that similar jobs in the comparable brewing industry are less well paid.

4.2.1.2. New business opportunities. Yet, given the power of the brand, there were also increasing opportunities for new jobs and businesses to be established in Speyside, especially within the connected food and drink tourism value chain. Actors within this connected value chain draw on similar local assets and similar actors but have a much more localised outlook in terms of everyday activities, job opportunities and economic benefits, primarily promoting their ventures to and products to tourists who visit Speyside.

'I think people are aware of Speyside because of whisky but then they start to explore what they might want to do on a holiday or a break there and they actually start to realise okay there is whisky there but also wow there's fantastic beaches up on the coast, there's amazing wildlife up there as well, some lovely forest walks, some nice places to eat, you've got some really nice golf courses'.

Interview with local tourism sector expert, SH24, March 2022

As such, the SMW value chain brings some economic opportunities to Speyside especially via the connected food and drink tourism industry.

4.2.1.3. Training and development. Several interviewees spoke of the apparent lack of opportunities (or at least lack of awareness of opportunities) for local training and development in jobs connected to the SMW value chain. For instance:

'We have 2 or 3 very obvious jobs boards for example, and we see stacks of tourism jobs go up there. I have yet to see a distillery apprenticeship job advertised there so I think there are opportunities to look at what's happening and what recruitment and skills development and apprenticeships are available and make sure that they are really well publicised within the communities and the area'.

Interview with National Park representative, March 2022

In addition, local people should have good access to affordable housing, services and education as is now discussed.

4.2.2. Socio-cultural values and benefits on Speyside's rural communities and place

Table 2 summarises the main socio-cultural values and identified from the interconnections between Speyside malt whisky and food and drink tourism value chains. It is based on our primary data collection and wider secondary data collection for the value chain analysis activity.

4.2.2.1. Housing. Obtaining affordable housing is a big challenge in Speyside (The Inverness Courier, 2024), with a large proportion being utilised as second homes or short-term lets. Many participants spoke of this challenge in relation to a lack of affordable housing options, especially for families, even those with well-paid employment.

'People want to take jobs, but they can't find accommodation that they can afford so housing both for local people and people wanting to move in is an issue and take up jobs is an issue. Anecdotally, I'm aware of some organisations who do lay on transport, and they bring people in because transport is a secondary issue. Particularly with young people, or people that can't afford to … the distances are big, and the transport system is poor.'

Interview with National Park representative, SH09, March 2022

Table 2
Main socio-cultural values and benefits from Speyside's malt whisky and tourism value chains and the impacts on Speyside's people and place.

Socio-cultural values/benefits	Effects on Speyside's local people and place
Housing difficulties	Lack of affordable housing for both direct employees in the value chains and wider community – much available housing is currently used for second homes/holiday homes.
Maintenance of key transport routes and public services	Roads are somewhat well-maintained as they are used to transport whisky products, however there is room for improvement.
Opportunities for locals to be involved in decision-making	There are mostly only opportunities at the production stage.
Good overall relationships between whisky sector, tourism sector and local people	Good working relationships, however more could be done through legislation to ensure whisky/tourism sectors meet (and have) responsibilities to local people and place.

The whisky and food and drink tourism ventures examined here frequently draw on the local scenery, stories and a strong sense of place to strengthen their brandscapes. However, these ventures also depend on a local workforce that requires access to affordable housing, services, and infrastructure to enable continued living and working in Speyside. There are a high demand and low supply of housing in Speyside (Interview with SH23, March 2022) and a captive market for tourist accommodation. As such there may be little motivation for landlords to maintain housing to a high quality for local people. However, changes to the short-term let licences have recently been enacted, whereby owners need to obtain a specific licence for leasing out a property as a holiday let (Scottish Government, 2024). This may help to reduce some of the negative impacts of second homes, but it is too early to see the impacts.

4.2.2.2. Transport and services. Due to the infrastructure and service needs of the distilleries and associated tourism businesses, certain services may be better maintained than other remote rural communities without activities. But at the same time, Speyside's public transport is lacking, and some roads are extensively used.

'The A95 is not the best road and that is a road that we rely on as an industry to move products in and out of Speyside[…] So, cereals going in, we need to move our spirit out of Speyside, a lot of that is moved in tankers, road tankers, so there is an awful lot of whisky traffic which moves up and down between Craigellachie and Aviemore'.

Interview with whisky sector experts, SH28 and SH29, March 2022

Thus, there is a need for greater responsibility to be placed on the contributing user (i.e. the whisky industry) via regulation from Transport Scotland for instance, as these roads also serve as essential thoroughfares for the local people living and working in Speyside.

4.2.2.3. Local decision-making and public ownership. Although there is lots of local participation in decision-making at the production stage (e.g. resource management) (Interview with SH05, March 2022) there is little to no local decision-making at the remaining three stages (i.e. processing, distribution & marketing, consumption), where decision-making is generally carried out by the large parent companies of the distilleries (Interviews with SH28 and SH29, March 2022). Local decision making is very important in terms of creating a shared outlook on branding and brand development, particularly at the distribution and marketing stage. Similarly, there is little local ownership of the assets apart from some locally owned farms and tourist businesses. Across the

SMW value chain the assets and finances are generally owned by estates or centralised Multi-National Companies, but there is some public ownership of estates and land.

4.2.2.4. Strong cooperation. Overall, these large whisky companies may feel morally (but often not legally) obliged to ensure that their company (and wider brand) is viewed and interacts positively with the Speyside environment and people, given it heavily relies on this environment for the inputs and branding for its products. For some of our whisky sector participants, they recognised that they did consider (and mitigate for) the impacts on the local communities, however this was not a regulated, legislated activity.

> *'We would say generally we do invest back in local communities and we do add, but economies and value chains, there's always these tensions of well, we think you should be doing this, or you're just not putting enough back, you're part of a big corporation and that's a negative thing, so I think you're always going to get some of those views.'*
>
> Workshop participant (whisky sector expert), SH24, Nov 2022

There are generally strong contributions to the existing cultural landscapes, traditions, customs and symbolic capital throughout the SMW value chain (Interviews with SH24 and SH32, March 2022, Distillery Tour 3, April 2022). This is through land and water management practices, the imagery of existing distilleries (e.g. the aesthetics of the distilleries) and a symbiotic relationship between the place and the product within whisky marketing (e.g. selling both whisky and the place of Speyside), but often this marketing draws on Scotland rather than Speyside imagery in particular (Interviews with SH28 and SH29 and SH32, March 2022).

There also appeared to be good cooperation both between the actors involved (in the whisky and tourism production in Speyside) in terms of sharing knowledge about abstraction, trade secrets and the sharing of experiences amongst consumers, which strengthen the power and reach of the Speyside brand (Interviews with SH23,25, 27, March 2022). There are also good relationships with other actors in Speyside, who were not directly involved in the whisky or food and drink tourism ventures. Some examples include cooperation between estates on appropriate land and water management, distillery level cooperation with regulatory bodies, and around transportation and the processing/production of malting, as well as some cross-distillery promotion of the Speyside brand and tourism ventures.

There appears to be a degree of trust and cooperation between all those involved in working and living in Speyside as to the important role that all actors play in promoting and maintaining the 'Speyside brand/brandscape'. This trust translates into protection for the land/place.

> *'It's quite a close relationship … very much it's about the longer term and building that relationship, building that trust and that's purely because they're putting spirit in the warehouse for a minimum of 3 years, some of it might go in the warehouse and not come out for 20 plus years … So, they're very focused on quality and building relationships and making sure that the growers feel part of that supply chain and we're all pulling in the same direction to achieve that. It's not a commodity purchase.'*
>
> Interview with whisky sector expert, SH25, March 2022

4.2.3. Environmental values and benefits: reliance on place and natural resources

Table 3 summarises the main environmental values and benefits identified on the interconnections between Speyside malt whisky and food and drink tourism value chains. It is based on our primary data collection and wider secondary data collection for the value chain analysis activity.

4.2.3.1. Water usage. In general, land in Speyside is predominantly a mixture of farmland and woodland, but it is also potentially more drought-prone land (>3000m per annum) compared to other places in the Scottish Highlands (Expert opinion, 2022), which is difficult for whisky distilleries who rely on the River Spey and its water inputs. In a workshop on vulnerability and resilience (workshop, Nov 2021) participants highlighted that droughts (such as occurred in 2018), impact the nitrogen content of the barley meaning it cannot be easily used in the distillation process, creating an increase in demand (and therefore price) on any useable barley.

Table 3
Main environmental values and benefits from Speyside's malt whisky and tourism value chains and the impacts on Speyside's people and place.

Environmental values/benefits	Effects on Speyside's local people and place
Use of water in a drought prone area	Water/the River Spey is a necessary resource for whisky production and storytelling.
Impacts of pollution	Some pollution impacts from the whisky/tourism sector. However, whisky sector has implemented sustainability measures in response (e.g. a Water Stewardship Framework, industry wide net zero plan).
Environmental restoration practices by whisky businesses	There are frequent peatland and water restoration practices by the local whisky sector.
Maintenance of natural resources	Numerous existing plans to ensure natural resources are not degraded.

4.2.3.2. Pollution. There are instances of indirect pollution from the use of the raw inputs to the SMW value chain, and occasional instances of accidental spillages and discharge into the river bodies. Some pollution is also evident (but perhaps unavoidable and not necessarily unsustainable) in terms of air quality reductions from volatile organic compounds and potential fires at bonded warehouses and distilleries (SEPA, 2018). To reduce the impacts of pollution from vehicles, many businesses and organisations within the Speyside brandscape promote active travel routes (e.g. Cairngorms Connection, Moray Active Travel Network) and opportunities for green tourism (CNPA, 2022). These were promoted in several distillery visitor centres during our distillery tours throughout Speyside (DT1-DT4, April-May, 2022). Other initiatives highlighted in our workshops (workshops in Nov 2021 and Nov 2022) included more sustainable tourism in shoulder seasons, greater publicity for local heritage and history and increased community and public ownership of land in development areas.

In terms of biodiversity and habitat quality changes, there are potential impacts from the whisky abstraction process and increased water temperatures downstream from cooling water discharges. There remain some potential GHG emissions impacts, but new technologies and new fuel sources are reducing the negative impacts. These include an industry wide net zero plan (Scotch Whisky Association, 2021) and investment in new infrastructures to reduce point source pollution instances.

> *'We're using water for cooling, generally all of that stays in the catchment, it's just warmer and we're very energy intensive and as an industry we've got a road map, a plan for how we're going to get to Net Zero'*
>
> Interview with academic, SH06, March 2022

Underpinning all of this is a commitment to sustainable agriculture and land management, including more sustainable waste management practices. Examples include national plans and strategies such as the Land Use Strategy and Net Zero targets (Scottish Government, 2021, 2026), as well as the regional-level Cairngorm's National Park Partnership plan (2022-2027) (Cairngorms National Park Authority, 2022), and more joined up approaches to agriculture, land management and tourism. For instance:

> *'Speaking of tourism, we've been looking a lot at how clustering can help promote the different parts of a sustainable system, so if you can have a tourism experience that kind of links up farmers or land managers providing some aspect of that experience with perhaps restaurants and*

providers or sellers that actually market and sell the products so people can then go and try things'.

Interview with National Park representative, SH09, March 2022

4.2.3.3. Environmental restoration and management of natural resources. Some distilleries are investing in peatland and river restoration as maintaining the environment, and therefore their brand, is an important part of their story (see Scotch Whisky Association, 2023a). Meanwhile, businesses within the SMW value chain are exploring different activities to lessen the impacts of climate change on, and from, their businesses and in Speyside (i.e. increased water quantity shortages at certain times of year and rising river temperatures), including the sustainable use and management of natural resources. One example is the recent Scotch whisky water stewardship framework (2023) which recognises the need for a standardised approach to water stewardship for the whisky sector, given that *'water connects an operation to the surrounding landscape and communities'* (3), and therefore any (Scotch Whisky Association, 2023) impacts are felt across the wider place and communities too.

Maintaining, rather than reducing, levels of natural resources in Speyside are of utmost importance for all actors in Speyside, given the physical and symbolic importance that the landscape plays for these products and the wider Speyside brandscape. There are various measures in place to ensure that any use of natural resources is sustainable, and carefully monitored (Scotch Whisky Association, 2023ab). This is especially true as the popularity of Speyside malt whisky, as both a brand and a tourist attraction, continue to grow.

Our findings highlight how this powerful brandscape influences local communities and generates a range of economic, sociocultural, and environmental benefits, but also some disbenefits to local people and places.

5. Discussion: a more reciprocal rural brandscape

5.1. Connecting the brandscape, values and benefits

Our findings suggest that existing understandings of the brandscape focus primarily on firms and consumers, overlooking local residents whose culture, heritage, and environments are central to the production and maintenance of the Speyside brand.

The Speyside brandscape is a useful lensthrough which to understand the impacts of these destination imaginaries, including those held by tourists and consumers, on both visitors and local residents and the tourists. It also enables consideration of how the brandscape can be tailored to increase the benefits generated and retained within the local area. In the literature review section, we suggested that a consideration of the concepts and analytical tools of both 'value chains' and 'brandscape' may clarify the wider implications of these industries on the local people and place than either concept may do in isolation. However, through the presentation of the findings, we identified that although there are some positive effects of the Speyside whisky and tourism industry, this relationship could and should still be much more reciprocal, to allow for more benefits to be experienced by, and remain in, the community and place of Speyside.

The full value chain of the malt whisky (in this case Speyside) value chain, and its connected tourism value chain is complex (see Blackstock et al., 2022)), relying on multiple capitals, practices, values and outcomes. Although a great deal of values/outcomes remain within the Speyside area, however as we move through the value chain (i.e. towards distribution &marketing, and consumption) values and outcomes tend to be increasingly situated at the national level or beyond.

In Speyside, large whisky companies, alongside local food and drink tourism businesses, have helped construct a distinctive image of place that is communicated through a range of experiential and place-based narratives. These narratives rely on local people, landscapes, heritage, and culture to establish and sustain the authenticity of the Speyside brand. At the same time, however, they are directed not only at tourists who visit the region but also at geographically distant consumers who engage with Speyside whisky without ever travelling there. As Arnould and Thompson (2018) argue, such narratives can create temporary yet profound forms of attachment that transcend the purely commercial dimensions of consumption. In this sense, the Speyside brandscape extends beyond tourism imaginaries to encompass broader consumer imaginaries of place, whereby connections to Speyside are formed through the consumption of whisky (from any location) as well as through visitation.

However, the value generated through these place-based narratives should extend beyond consumers and visitors alone. Local communities play a central role in producing and maintaining the cultural, social, and environmental resources upon which the Speyside image depends, and should therefore share more fully in its benefits. Mancini (2013), writing on Geographical Indications in Latin America, describes similar tensions through the concept of "branding from below", highlighting how such initiatives can support rural development while simultaneously excluding more marginalised actors from their benefits (Mancini, 2013: 295). Comparable findings have been identified in the Indonesian coffee sector, where misalignment between local institutional environments and lead-firm strategies limited the distribution of benefits (Neilson et al., 2018). Our findings similarly suggest that greater attention to rural reciprocity is needed to ensure that the value generated through the Speyside brandscape is more effectively retained within local communities. This may involve fostering a shared sense of place and responsibility across both whisky and tourism value chains, such that reciprocity is embedded not only in the destination experience but also within the products and networks through which Speyside is represented and consumed globally.

5.2. Place-based brandscape

Given the growing emphasis on place-based development and policies within rural development, we propose a place-based understanding of brandscape. Previous research has shown how social media, digital platforms, and visual iconography can strengthen a sense of place through the circulation of narratives and imagery (Gilstrap et al., 2021) . In Speyside, similar processes are evident within the whisky industry, where branding, storytelling, and digital content help communicate a distinctive image of the region. These narratives extend beyond the physical destination, enabling consumers to develop attachments to Speyside through both visitation and the consumption of whisky.

In this respect, whisky tourists and consumers increasingly act as brand agents, assigning meanings, experiences, and interpretations to products and places and then sharing these through social media, online forums, and travel activities (Kim and Choi, 2019). However, existing value-chain and brandscape perspectives place greater emphasis on consumers and firms than on local communities. A place-based brandscape would instead recognise the role of local residents, whose everyday lives, cultural practices, and landscapes underpin the authenticity and attractiveness of the Speyside image. Such an approach would seek not only to enhance visitor experiences but also to strengthen the benefits for local people and place.

Central to these processes are the physical and cultural attributes of place. Scenic landscapes, cultural heritage, traditions, and local knowledge all contribute to the emotional appeal of Speyside. Indeed, Ponsonby-Mccabe and Boyle (2006) suggest that the emotional impact of scenery can be comparable to that derived from artistic or cultural experiences. Yet contemporary representations of Speyside often rely on idealised imagery of rural Scotland rather than engaging with the specific realities of the region. While branding narratives highlight environmental stewardship, distilling traditions, and connections to nature, they tend to overlook challenges identified by this research, including housing pressures, limited employment opportunities for local people, and pressures on environmental resources. In this sense, the tourism and

consumer imaginaries associated with Speyside frequently present a selective representation of place, raising questions about the authenticity of these portrayals (Crouch, 2005; Rickly and Canavan, 2024).

Consequently, a place-based brandscape requires greater reciprocity between the whisky and tourism value chains and the communities that sustain them. If local landscapes, heritage, identities, and environmental resources generate value within the Speyside brand, then a greater proportion of that value should be retained within, and contribute to, the long-term empowerment and resilience of the place itself.

5.3. Role of reciprocity

The need for improved reciprocity is also centred around a co-created dialogue (Rahman and Cherrier, 2010) between the brands (e.g. Speyside malt whisky) and the brand communities (e.g. consumers and/or Speyside residents). This enables the continuous construction and reconstruction of a brands' values through a cyclical process of brand experiences (e.g. perhaps a distillery tour) leading to discussions and reviews, and concurrently leading to more (and possibly adapted) brand experiences (e.g. another distillery tour or visit to a hotel) (Stevens et al., 2019).

By considering the wider impacts of the Speyside brandscape and value chain, this can enable the 'real and authentic' Speyside to be put at the centre of discussions and plans – signalling a rebranding of Speyside's role in the whisky industry, built on reciprocity and sustainability. Escribano et al. (2020) highlighted such an opportunity for the rebranding of the Dehesa agroforestry system as one which includes concepts such as 'sustainability' and 'socially responsible'. In the case of Speyside, this could be through diversifying the key industries, fair and just sociocultural actions (i.e. affordable housing, relocalisation of more jobs and opportunities for skills and training for people of all ages, genders, education-levels), and an environment that does not risk being degraded through the industry's reliance on the local place and landscape. By improving the impacts of this large industry on Speyside's people and place this may encourage the development of new areas for employment of entrepreneurship, over and above a predominant focus on tourism which can be risky and unpredictable in the long term (Williams and Baláž, 2015).

6. Conclusion: next steps for large rural businesses

In this paper, we have highlighted both the contributions and limitations of a land-based food and drink value chain and its associated tourism economy for the communities and environments in which they are embedded. Rather than examining these sectors in isolation, we combined value chain and brandscape perspectives to explore how powerful brands, imaginaries, products, and landscapes become interconnected. In doing so, we developed a conceptual framework for understanding, and potentially improving, the impacts of branding and rural industries on local communities and places.

Our findings were organised around the role of branding and the economic, socio-cultural, and environmental outcomes associated with the whisky-tourism nexus. The discussion subsequently considered how value chains and the wider brandscape might be reconfigured to enhance the sustainability of the communities and environments that underpin the Speyside brand. While imaginaries remain a powerful feature of both tourism and consumer marketing, idealised representations of Scotland can only go so far in supporting long-term rural development. More authentic and place-sensitive representations may offer greater opportunities for ensuring that the benefits generated through whisky and tourism are retained locally and contribute to a more reciprocal relationship between industry, place, and community.

Previous studies of branding and brandscapes have called for greater attention to how businesses, organisations, and communities co-create value through dialogue, shared experiences, and ongoing engagement. This paper responds to those calls while contributing to growing debates within *Journal of Rural Studies* on value chains and rural development. Specifically, we demonstrate the value of combining value chain and brandscape perspectives to better understand how economic, social, cultural, and environmental outcomes are distributed across rural places. Through the case of Speyside, we highlight both the opportunities and tensions that emerge where whisky production, tourism, and place-based branding intersect. Future research could usefully explore these dynamics longitudinally or compare them with similar food and drink regions, such as wine-producing areas.

We conclude with four recommendations for academia, policy, and practice. Firstly, we offer a new framework for understanding how industries, communities, and places interact within a brandscape. Secondly, we extend existing work on both brandscapes and value chains by highlighting outcomes that extend beyond economic measures alone. Thirdly, there is a need for greater legislation from government or whisky regulatory bodies to ensure that companies take responsibility for any negative outcomes experienced by the local people and place. As such we propose broadening the scope of the Scotch Whisky PGI to encourage greater consideration of distribution, marketing, and tourism promotion, ensuring that representations of place are both beneficial to, and reflective of, local communities. Fourthly and finally, we support the continued development of place-based rural policies, including the Rural Pact and Long-Term Vision for Rural Areas (LTVRA), as mechanisms for fostering locally grounded and widely supported development pathways.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Rachel Creaney: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Sharon Flanigan:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Kirsty Blackstock:** Writing – review & editing, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Funding acquisition, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Liz Dinnie:** Writing – review & editing, Project administration, Investigation. **Chloe Thompson:** Writing – review & editing, Investigation, Formal analysis.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare no known conflicts of interest in the creation and submission of this paper.

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Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

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