

**“It’s About the People”: An Exploration of the
Constructions and Lived Experiences of Association
Members in Sister-City Relationships**

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Abstract

Purpose – Involving thousands of communities globally, sister cities form one of the world’s largest municipal networks. Initially established as a grassroots peace movement, the phenomenon has developed over time to encompass numerous aims and objectives; however, research has not kept pace with this dynamism. One overlooked area has been the role of those outside of local government who contribute to shaping and sustaining sister-city relationships. This research addresses this gap by exploring how members of sister-city associations across Aotearoa New Zealand construct and experience the phenomenon.

Design/Methodology/Approach – Adopting a constructivist approach informed by grounded theory and interpretive phenomenology, this research provides contextually grounded insights. Data were collected across three case studies through multiple in-depth, unstructured, and semi-structured interviews over a one-year period and analysed using the constant comparison method and interpretive phenomenological analysis.

Findings – Members navigated various *enablers*, *constraints*, *vulnerabilities*, and *uses* tied to their sister-city relationships. These themes, consistent across all case studies, were shaped by broader sociological and technological shifts, reflecting past decisions, present demands, and future possibilities. For members, sister-city relationships represented complex socio-technical processes that accumulate over time, rather than being flexible and iterative tools.

Research Limitations/Implications – COVID-19 pandemic restrictions limited access to exchange programmes and confined the study’s scope to Aotearoa New Zealand. While this allowed for a deeper focus on local contexts, future research could compare perspectives across different geopolitical and cultural settings. The thesis also highlights the need for longitudinal research, providing theoretical and methodological grounding to support such efforts.

Practical Implications – Insights from this research underscore the need for a collective, holistic approach to sustaining sister cities, one that empowers those involved to innovate, strengthen discourse, and develop effective practices. An adaptable formula that consolidates resources to create systematic solutions could help alleviate existing burdens, enhance accessibility, and sustain the movement’s viability.

Originality/Value/Contribution – By foregrounding association members’ constructions and lived experiences, this research provides a reframing of how sister cities can be viewed. It highlights the pre-eminence of ambiguity and indefiniteness in sister-city relationships and provides means by which these may be addressed and navigated. The importance of embracing both factors is illustrated through the proposition of a conceptual framework that positions the phenomenon as accumulative and considers the risks of *hollowness*. Finally, this research sets a possible trajectory for future research, emphasising the role of reflexivity and the ‘fit’ of constructivist/interpretivist methodologies.

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Abbreviations

SC	Sister city(ies)
SCR	Sister-city relationship(s)
SCM	Sister-city movement
SCI	Sister Cities International
SCA	Sister-city association(s)
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
DDC	Decentralised development cooperation
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
IEA	International exchange association
GETs	Group Experiential Themes
RMT	Resource Mobilisation Theory
SCP	Sister-city process(es)

Attestation of Authorship

“I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person (except where explicitly defined in the acknowledgements), nor used artificial intelligence tools or generative artificial intelligence tools (unless it is clearly stated, and referenced, along with the purpose of use), nor material which to a substantial extent has been submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institution of higher learning.”

Signed:

Taylor James Marston

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In this thesis, generative artificial intelligence, specifically ChatGPT and Grammarly, was utilised to enhance grammar, sentence structure, and word choice. Additionally, ChatGPT was occasionally used to help summarise research articles to determine whether they warranted further reading. Generative artificial intelligence was not used in any manner beyond this.

CHAPTER ONE

Peering Beyond the Curtain

The real crucial link in international exchange is the last three feet, which is bridged by personal contact, one person talking to another.

— Edward Murrow

What does it mean for cities and towns to have sisters? This perhaps peculiar question is one that, I argue in this thesis, requires greater scrutiny. The phenomenon of sister cities (SCs)—the joining of often distant communities through enduring sisterly ties—has occupied an obscure position within academia, media, and public discourse across the last two decades.¹ Cremer et al. (2001), in one of the leading studies on the topic, noted a “paucity of academic literature, although thousands of such relationships exist between cities across the world” (p. 37), a sentiment that has been consistently echoed since (De Villiers et al., 2007; Franco & Marmelo, 2014; Gavankar, 2024; Liu & Hu, 2018; Mascitelli & Chung, 2008). Recent media discourse in New Zealand reflects this ambiguity; for example, one article has questioned public awareness of SC relationships (SCRs) (Mathias, 2023), while another raised concerns about their strategic motivations (Akoorie, 2024). In the former article, the Mayor of Palmerston North, Grant Smith, gave a blunt assessment of these circumstances, expressing, “Sister cities don’t have a lot of profile here – they’re run on the smell of an oily rag” (para. 11).

Considering this trajectory, one could presume that the age of SCs has faded, relegated instead to a relic of the past. Circumstantial evidence suggests that the phenomenon has plateaued, with Japan, one of the largest adopters of the movement, reporting a gradual decline in the number of new relationships formed each year since its peak in the early 1990s (Council of Local Authorities for International Relations, 2025). In other cases, such as Thailand, many SCRs are dormant or discontinued (Prasittisopin et al., 2024). Elsewhere, “fewer British local

¹ This research does not distinguish SCs from other forms of intermunicipal-partnerships, such as town-twinning or friendship cities. The reasoning for this is provided later in this chapter.

authorities are taking up new twinnings and some have even been involved in a process of quiet ‘untwinning’” (H. Ryan & Mazzilli, 2021, p. 450). Nonetheless, as Cremer et al. (2001) highlighted, this does not detract from the tens of thousands of relationships that have been formed and sustained.

A 2013 study undertook the ambitious task of mapping all known SCRs worldwide (Kaltenbrunner et al., 2013). Using data taken from English Wikipedia pages, which they describe as perhaps “the most extensive but certainly not complete collection of this kind of relationship” (p. 1), 15,225 pairs of SCs involving 11,483 cities were identified. However, a recent report from the Deutsch-Französisches Institut estimated that there are approximately 20,000 partnerships within Europe alone, suggesting that the total number globally is likely much larger (Keller, 2018).

In numerical terms, it is probable that SCs represent the most extensive network of formal municipal ties to date. Yet, our understanding of the phenomenon leaves much to the imagination (Gavankar, 2024; H. Ryan & Mazzilli, 2021). To let such a widespread system of ties slowly drift into obscurity without fully grasping or realising its impact and potential would, in the words of Mascitelli and Chung (2008), equate to a “lost opportunity” (p. 204) and a significant underutilisation of expended time and resources (Cross, 2010). This is especially so when considering the “role, plight, and positional ambiguity of cities in the current era of disruptive global policy challenges,” which urges “cities to develop systematic capacities for global engagement” (Kosovac et al., 2021, p. 140). This research helps to address the gaps in our knowledge by examining the constructions and lived experiences of members of SC associations (SCAs) within New Zealand, individuals and groups whose voices have historically gone unheard.

1.1 But Why Sister Cities?

Over the past four years, whenever I mentioned my research on SCs to others, it often elicited a simple yet telling response: “*Why?*” Most people appear to have a vague understanding of SCs but question their value as a topic of inquiry. I have admittedly found myself tackling this same question on multiple occasions. Accordingly, in addressing this conundrum, I will temporarily depart from academic conventions to offer a personal—yet academically rigorous—rationale for studying SCs.

My initial encounter with the topic occurred through the many hours I spent perusing Wikipedia during high school. This habit led me down a myriad rabbit holes. In particular, the pages on the countless cities of the world piqued my interest. Those who have similarly spent time in the depths of Wikipedia will have encountered the list of international partnerships at the bottom of most city pages. For years, I took note of these relationships, with a particular fascination for the seemingly arbitrary assemblage of pairings that existed. For example, Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland had relationships with cities I had never heard of, places that appeared to have nothing in common with my hometown.

As I neared the end of my undergraduate studies, I became increasingly perplexed by these cryptic connections, especially those belonging to my city. Having lived nearly my entire life in Auckland, I had never heard of any of its relationships beyond what I had read online. Google provided minimal answers, as did Auckland Council’s website. According to the council, the relationships were still active; yet, it remained unclear who they involved, what they did, and, most importantly, why they existed. They were akin to a distant cousin—out of sight and out of mind. This lack of readily available information highlighted a broader issue: the opacity surrounding SCs. Despite their official recognition, there was little scholarly or public discourse regarding their function and impact.

When I had the opportunity to pursue a master’s degree, I decided to leave my days of Wikipedia searching behind and instead seek a deeper understanding of questions that had long

evaded me. However, my findings led to even more questions. I reached the same conclusion as Lloyd (2010), who stated, “In practice, the idea of sister cities is so elastic in meaning and application as to enable it to be appropriated as ‘all things to all people’” (p. 310). SCRs appeared to have countless interpretations and minimal consensus. Faced with this realisation, I was ready to put the topic behind me. However, the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic unexpectedly created the conditions to embark on a PhD and once again tackle the elusive phenomenon of SCs to uncover the answer to the question posed at the start of this thesis.

1.1.1 So What?

During the oral defence of my master’s thesis, which explored SCs within the Japanese context, one of the examiners rightfully questioned, “So what?” The study of SCs certainly presents a plethora of intriguing lines of inquiry, but intriguing is, unfortunately, not synonymous with useful. The more pressing question, thus, is what is to be gained from the study of SCs. As I demonstrate throughout this thesis, the answer to this question is multifaceted. It reflects the changing role of cities and citizens against a backdrop of accumulative sociological and technological shifts. Here, I will briefly introduce the conditions that justify the exploration of SCs as a legitimate source of knowledge.

In *Paradiplomacy in Action: The Foreign Relations of Subnational Governments*, Keating (1999) argued that we are witnessing a “new regionalism”, in which the increasing mobility of capital has weakened governments’ capacity for territorial management, compelling cities—now subject to global market forces—to actively assert their interests as global actors:

The old dyadic exchange between the state and the regions, with the state mediating regions’ relations with the global market, has given way to a more complex set of relationships, in which regions operate within the state, but also within transnational regimes and the global economy. (p. 3)

Short et al. (2000), furthering this discussion, highlighted that cities have emerged as crucial economic hubs and transition zones, acting as gateways upon which a region’s prosperity is anchored. Lastly, Bellini and Bramanti (2008) posited that these shifts not only suggest a parallel mode of diplomatic engagement but also represent “a necessary and new response by local and

regional communities to the challenges of globalisation, in a scenario where cognitive and relational opportunities turn into key resources for growth and development” (p. 3).

With these developments in mind, cities have been given increasing attention not only as urban centres but also as global actors (Acuto et al., 2023; Kosovac et al., 2021; Leffel, 2021; Manfredi-Sánchez, 2022; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2023; United Nations Industrial Development Organisation, 2019). However, what it means for cities and their citizens to ‘act globally’ has not been fully grasped. As Keating (1999) stated, city diplomacy is an emergent phenomenon subject to trial and error, an assessment that remains relevant today. Notably, the study of city diplomacy has been described as “seriously neglected” (Calder & de Freytas, 2009, p. 79) and historically overlooked (Creutz, 2023). SCRs, in particular, have largely evaded academic scrutiny. Consequently, Acuto et al. (2023) suggested that the formal role of cities within the international system remains “murky at best, when not unspecified or lumped into civil society” (p. 519).

Within city diplomacy, two trends can be observed: the formation of city-to-city (inter-municipal) partnerships and, more recently, the introduction of formal, membership-based city networks (Acuto et al., 2021). Understanding the future of city and citizen diplomacy and their implications for international relations and beyond arguably requires that these two modes of engagement be viewed more critically. This is especially so considering that, by 2030, cities will house 60% of the world’s population (United Nations Industrial Development Organisation, 2019) and are expected to play a prominent role in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (OECD, 2023).

The last decade has seen the topic of city networks garner increasing attention, especially within academia (see Acuto et al., 2017, 2024; Acuto & Leffel, 2021; Acuto & Rayner, 2016; Lee & Jung, 2018; Mejía-Dugand et al., 2016). City-to-city partnerships, however, appear to trail behind, evidenced by the lack of established frameworks and practices:

Many city-to-city partnerships face challenges, which range from the lack of data and reporting, weak co-ordination across levels of government, actors and departments due to the lack of clarity regarding the competency for DDC

[decentralised development co-operation] between local, regional and national levels, the lack of accountability and transparency due to weak M&E [monitoring and evaluation] through to insufficient local capacities, which affects project management, that can result in the delivery of predominantly small-scale projects, and in turn, missed opportunities to create economies of scale, and ultimately negatively impact their effectiveness. (OECD, 2023, p. 12)

Thus, the study of SCRs is not merely a personal interest but a necessary exploration of an understudied phenomenon (De Villiers et al., 2007; Franco & Marmelo, 2014; Gavankar, 2024; Liu & Hu, 2018; Mascitelli & Chung, 2008), with implications yet to be fully understood.

1.2 The Historical Significance of Sister Cities

An understanding of the complicated origins of SCs is needed to better situate the topic within its historical significance and relevance. The movement, which emerged from the United States in the mid-1950s, was not the first inter-municipal relationship of its kind, nor was it necessarily unique in its approach. Rather, as the following historical recount suggests, the movement borrowed much from its predecessors, most notably, the European-centric phenomenon of twinning. Accordingly, to understand SCs, one must also understand twinning, which Zion (2002) asserted “cannot be studied without a profound knowledge of the French political scene” (p. 623). This section briefly outlines how twinning was developed and its probable influence on the SC movement (SCM).

The notion of shared ties between two communities is far from modern. The earliest known, albeit largely symbolic, partnership of this kind, between Paderborn in Germany and Le Mans in France, dates back to 836 (Sister Cities International, 2019). Furthermore, before the introduction of twinning, clusters of mayors had established webs of international relationships, as had other, often elite groups (Zelinsky, 1991). Indeed, the transnational efforts of Rotarians, which gained prominence in the first half of the 20th century, constitute many such relationships. Where twinning departed from these earlier practices, however, was its intentional involvement of municipal institutions, creating what Zion (2002) described as an *invented tradition*: “a set of ritual and/or symbolic practices, normally governed by openly or tacitly accepted rules and

designed to inculcate certain values and codes of behaviour by dint of repetition, automatically suggesting the idea of continuity with the past” (p. 628).

1.2.1 The Twinning Wars

Zion (2002) argued that the tradition of twinning did not naturally develop; instead, it was an orchestrated, or “invented”, effort to manifest a sense of tradition. This was achieved by gathering fragments of a more or less imaginary past for social, cultural, and political innovation or, in the case of twinning, to foster mutual understanding. Initial efforts to rekindle ties between cities across the French–German border following the First World War bore witness to some of the first examples of this tradition (Joenniemi & Sergunin, 2017). However, it was not until the aftermath of the Second World War that the phenomenon was institutionalised, leading to widespread adoption (Joenniemi & Sergunin, 2017; Zelinsky, 1991; Zion, 2002).

Within France, twinning was initially “invented”, to borrow Zion’s (2002) words, by two opposing associations: La Fédération and Monde Bilingue. The former sought to utilise twinning as a form of oath-taking to strengthen European unity and promote municipal autonomy. This drew from the historical practices of Carolingian Europe, in which oath-swearing was deemed instrumental in ensuring peace and freedom. Conversely, Monde Bilingue, translated as ‘The Bilingual World’, had different intentions for twinning: “Its founders had no great interest in municipalities as organic communities; their ideal was rather the furtherance of global understanding” (p. 632). Each association achieved early success in forming twinning arrangements, with Monde Bilingue establishing the first Franco-American twinning arrangement between Arles and York in 1953, notably three years before the introduction of the SCM. However, Monde Bilingue’s insistence on simultaneously pursuing Franco-Soviet ties and mounting Cold War anxieties contributed to its eventual downfall (Zion, 2002).

By the end of 1955, the diverging intentions of each association resulted in a “twinning war” between La Fédération, with its numerous twinnings within Europe, and Monde Bilingue with its growing number of twinnings in England and the United States:

Although the ultimate aim of twinning to bring about a lasting peace by political means was not in dispute, different approaches to it envisaged very different world orders. The federalists and their friends saw twinning as a way of bringing European municipalities together in order to ensure a final political union. The bilingualists saw it as a way to further universal mutual understanding and safeguard the future of the French language. (Zion, 2002, p. 636)

Amongst these disagreements emerged a debate regarding which countries France should be open to engaging with. Le Fédération, with the support of the Council of European Municipalities, targeted Monde Bilingue's interest in the Eastern Bloc. Unfortunately for Monde Bilingue, these concerns were not isolated, and their American partners, with whom they had strived to engage in twinning, were also suspicious of their intentions. This culminated in the United States State Department warning its nationals to refrain from further engagement. At this time, twinning within the United States was also reorganised as part of Eisenhower's *People-to-People Programme* (Zion, 2002).

1.2.2 The Birth of the People-to-People Programme

Zion (2002) suggested that the chronological order of events cannot conclusively prove a causal link between the Americans' withdrawal and the launch of the People-to-People Programme. However, to argue that there was no influence would be untenable. Eisenhower's SC model was practically identical to prior forms of twinning (Zelinsky, 1991) and departed only in its organisational structure and purpose. What was originally an attempt to "reorder international politics based on municipal institutions" had been reimaged as a nationwide initiative supported by the United States State Department (Zion, 2002, p. 640).

This is likely one reason why the People-to-People programme has been regarded as politically motivated (Jain, 2005; Joenniemi & Sergunin, 2017; Lloyd, 2010; Zelinsky, 1991). In particular, Zelinsky writes, "Although heavily festooned with altruistic objectives, there can be little doubt that the project was, in effect, a product of the Administration's overall Cold War strategy, albeit one of its less malevolent components" (p. 7). Eisenhower's own words present the programme as an intentional effort to address Cold War hostilities and to bring others into the American way of life:

In short, what we must do is to widen every possible chink in the Iron Curtain and bring the family of Russia, or of any other country behind that Iron Curtain, that is laboring to better the lot of their children—as humans do the world over closer into our circle, to show how we do it, and then to sit down between us to say, “Now, how do we improve the lot of both of us?” (Eisenhower, 1956, para. 15)

Accordingly, Lloyd (2010) asserted that the programme relied on the assumption that, above all, “opposition to United States policies is due to misinformation and misunderstanding” (p. 35).

Notwithstanding these apparent governmental and political undertones, in introducing the programme, Eisenhower was adamant about the power of grassroots people-to-people connections in sustaining world peace, stating: “Today, we have this problem that I have stated: that of creating understanding between peoples. ... Governments can do no more than point the way and cooperate and assist in mechanical details” (Eisenhower, 1956, para. 13). The movement has thus been tied to the “the Eisenhower story”: the belief in the ability of American non-elites to make a personal difference in defending the American people and the world from the growing threat of “dangerously misguided communist ideologies and a possible nuclear war” (Lloyd, 2010, p. 34).

Despite this initial enthusiasm, Eisenhower quickly detached himself from the movement after instigating its formation. Lloyd (2010) suggested that this move was driven by a desire to present the movement as free of political propaganda:

What Eisenhower had managed to set in motion was a popular movement that was inherently political, in that it was an invention and tool of the state aimed at strengthening foreign policy objectives, but which would be understood by participants as essentially apolitical and therefore free from partisan interests and the taint of conflict. (pp. 34-35)

Before departing, the Eisenhower administration established 42 committees to manage the movement in its place (Zelinsky, 1991). However, Zelinsky noted that “this quickly degenerated into a fiasco” (p. 8) due to inter-agency rivalries, suspicions, and disputes over jurisdictional turf. By 1967, only one committee remained, now known as Sister Cities International (SCI).

Despite these setbacks, the SCM, as it has come to be known, quickly spread across the United States, and by 1988, 1,859 relationships had been formed, encompassing partners from

96 different countries (Zelinsky, 1991). Given this scope, it is not difficult to see how the programme rapidly evolved into a global movement with diverse actors, political intentions, and contexts. This development coincided with a shift towards independent modes of engagement, in which SCs were recognised more as tools for local intent than national interests (Cremer et al., 2001; Cross, 2010; De Villiers et al., 2007; Mascitelli & Chung, 2008; O'Toole, 2001; Tham & Shim, 2025).

The movement's decoupling from its original geopolitical objectives, along with its subsequent localised instrumentalisation, likely led to the multitude of divergent interpretations seen today, which are commonly categorised as economic, cultural, and political (Clarke, 2009; Cross, 2010; De Villiers et al., 2007; Jain, 2005; O'Toole, 2001). Nonetheless, as Zelinsky (1991) stated, "A minority of the world's citizens too large to ignore are sipping the heady wine of local autonomy and perhaps rediscovering the meaning of community by joining hands with distant people, with ultimate consequences no one can foresee" (p. 28). The interest of this research lies in these consequences, told through the constructions and lived experiences of association members.

1.3 Terminological Turmoil

Although the SCM and town twinning have historically carried different intentions and scopes, the lines between them have become increasingly blurred. They have joined the ranks of a growing list of terms that are interchangeably used to describe a form of inter-municipal partnership. How these terms are used has been noted to lack both consensus and consistency (Clarke, 2009; Cross, 2010; De Villiers et al., 2007). This is best exemplified in the following explanation provided by Clarke (2009):

There exists a variety of interurban partnerships that are more or less formal, long-term, and recognised by local authorities, and a variety of labels attached to these partnerships, including 'town twinning', 'sister cities', 'friendships', 'North-South links', and 'technical assistance', 'best practice', or 'good practice' partnerships. *There is, in addition, little consistency in the relationships between these labels and forms of partnership* [emphasis added]. Some relatively formal, long-term, and officially recognised arrangements are termed 'town twinning partnerships' (e.g. Sherborne and Granville). Other such

arrangements may be termed ‘friendship partnerships’ (e.g. Bradford and Mirpur) or ‘sister city partnerships’ (e.g. Portsmouth and Maizuru). *There is also little consistency in the way that local authorities conceive of their partnerships* [emphasis added]. (pp. 497-498)

Commenting on these circumstances, Cross (2010) further added that “the nomenclature itself underlines a diverse range of understandings of and intentions for relationships formed” (p. 106). Therefore, any study on SCs or twinning must wrestle with the variability of their terminological usage and connotations.

What often results from this confusion is a single relationship that is given multiple labels, as was the case for those examined in this research. Notably, the affiliation between Cambridge (New Zealand) and Le Quesnoy (France) has been referred to as both a twin town and an SCR (Embassy of France in Wellington, 2017; Waipā District Council, n.d.). The same can be said for the relationship between Christchurch (United Kingdom) and Christchurch (New Zealand) (Christchurch City Council, n.d.; Christchurch Town Council, n.d.). Accordingly, few tools are available to prospective researchers to discern whether what they are studying is objectively an SCR and is not interpreted as something else.

While different terms may carry distinct meanings, these distinctions are arguably moot if those using the terms do not actively recognise or apply them in practice. One can only presume that few involved in SCRs within New Zealand today trace their efforts back to the People-to-People programme of the 1950s, or at least that was the experience of association members in this research who were unaware of the programme’s existence. As Cross (2010) suggested, the use of different terminology has been reduced to regional preference, a categorisation that does not indicate any meaningful difference in approach or application. Given this ambiguity, I follow the convention established by prior researchers and adopt the term most commonly used in the New Zealand context: *sister city relationships*.

1.3.1 Defining Sister City Relationships

Assigning a definition to the term SCR is a delicate endeavour. One must consider that SCs are a global phenomenon, spanning thousands of communities, pursued through numerous languages, under a multitude of cultural parameters, and social norms. It would be untenable to suggest that any singular definition can adequately account for this brevity. Nonetheless, some principles or commonalities must be identified to distinguish the practice from similar forms of long-distance social ties. To this effect, I will briefly offer my interpretation of the existing debate on the matter. However, in doing so, I by no means insinuate that these understandings are universal, nor that participants in this research subscribed to them.

Zelinsky (1991) presented a set of characteristics that they deemed fundamental to SCRs, which Cremer et al. (2001) later simplified. Firstly, SCRs are formal bilateral agreements, signed by city or district mayors, brought into being primarily through the efforts of local officials and ad-hoc citizen groups. The decision of who to pair with, or even whether to pair at all, is made at a local level and does not require the patronage of central governments. The resulting relationships are open to all people within the coupled communities and driven primarily by unpaid volunteers. While not a guarantee, these ties are intended to last indefinitely with no prescribed end date. It is expected that they will involve a myriad of activities, which, at the time, Zelinsky (1991) presumed served “the overall objective of advancing mutual understanding and friendship” (p. 3). There is no set or determined formula; “each pair of sister cities must experiment constantly to realise whatever ensemble of activities ideally suits their peculiar resources and objectives” (Zelinsky, 1991, p. 4). That being said, it is customary for exchanges, whether cultural, educational, political, or otherwise, to occur on a regular basis. And finally, in what Zelinsky described as an “unspoken understanding”, SCRs are based on mutual reciprocity both in terms of effort and benefit.

Decades later, it is evident that while many of these characters remain stable, some exhibit questionable continuity and limited universal applicability. SCRs are indeed a local endeavour; however, the degree of autonomy afforded in the pursuit of these connections will differ based

on the governmental structures under which local governments must operate. This is exemplified by Prasittisopin et al. (2024), who demonstrate how Thai communities engaging in SCRs can be constrained by deconcentration systems where there is a prevailing expectation of accountability to higher levels of government. The notion that SCRs are driven primarily by mutual understanding and friendship must also be brought into question, as the demand for economic returns has moulded their feasibility and intended outcomes (Cross, 2010; Hogan, 2019; Mascitelli & Chung, 2008; Mpanza et al., 2022; O'Toole, 2000, 2001).

In reality, all of the characteristics outlined by Zelinsky (1991) and Cremer et al. (2001), barring the first, are arguably relative. They depend on the local governments and communities involved, as well as the interplay of their respective views and intentions. To again quote Lloyd (2010), "In practice, the idea of sister cities is so elastic in meaning and application as to enable it to be appropriated as 'all things to all people', and imposes a similar role on local authorities. (p. 310). Perhaps the only definition that can be given with any degree of certainty is that provided by SCI: "A sister city, county, or state relationship is a broad-based, long-term partnership between two communities in two countries" (para. 1). Anything beyond this is open to interpretation. This malleability is one reason for the interpretative approach taken in this research, which is outlined in Chapter Three.

1.4 Minding the Gap

This research was born out of curiosity about what lies behind the curtain of the SC phenomenon. As is alluded to in the preceding discussion on terminology, the parameters of SCs remain ambiguous and highly susceptible to interpretation. Attempts to address this confusion have focused on the phenomenon itself, its effectiveness and overall relevance. These studies have predominantly utilised surveys targeting local government officials and, where applicable, employed one-off interviews. The findings of these studies have contributed to slowly pulling away the curtain, but arguably, we have yet to peer fully inside. This can be linked to three gaps.

Firstly, while local officials offer a unique insight, their positions and perspectives are inherently shaped by governmental structures, systems and dynamics. As Hogan (2019) suggested, local councils in New Zealand are prone to flip-flopping, with support for SCs fluctuating in response to electoral cycles. These shifts are not exclusive to SCs; rather, they reflect a broader challenge faced by councils, which must navigate the uncertainty and unintended consequences of frequent central government reforms (Leung et al., 2024; Local Government New Zealand, 2024). Moreover, many cities globally lack a dedicated strategy for city diplomacy or a rigid organisational structure, instead relying on the intentions of individuals, which can impede continuity and consistency (Cross, 2010; Gooding et al., 2015; Kosovac et al., 2021; Prasittisopin et al., 2024). The orientation of a given local government can change frequently, as can its position on SCs. This issue is further exacerbated by the common use of one-off surveys and interviews, which cannot adequately account for such fluidity and fluctuations or the possibility that perspectives are not static nor entirely preconceived and instead develop in real time.

The limited shelf life of findings derived from SC research is unavoidable, given the highly social nature of the phenomenon (Lloyd, 2010; H. Ryan & Mazzilli, 2021). However, the erratic manner in which local governments must conduct themselves further accentuates the transience of findings, at least in the context of New Zealand. By relying primarily on such data, studies risk building upon knowledge that may provide questionable applicability to contemporary circumstances, experiences and views. I posit in this thesis that the perspectives of local governments, while fundamental to understanding SCs, must be considered alongside those of local associations, committees and community groups, whose involvement can help navigate the “shorter-term political drivers that can affect local government” (Hogan, 2019, p. 15). This is particularly evident in light of D. Smith’s (1990) finding that SCRs managed exclusively by local governments tend to be less successful than those that actively involve volunteer committees.

However, understanding the perspectives of these community groups and committees is challenging, as their views and experiences have seldom been explored. This is despite past scholarship frequently highlighting the role and significance of community within SCRs (Cremer et al., 2001; Cross, 2010; De Villiers et al., 2007; Eray, 2022; Fan, Huang, et al., 2019; Hogan, 2019; Lloyd, 2010; Mascitelli & Chung, 2008; Mori, 2023; Mpanza et al., 2022; O'Toole, 2000; Prasittisopin et al., 2024; Putra et al., 2021; D. Smith, 1990). Moreover, recent studies have linked the involvement of local associations and organisations to higher activity and success, yet the role and the position of these entities remain unclear (Mori, 2023; Prasittisopin et al., 2024). Accordingly, this first gap pertains to an overemphasis on the perspectives of local governments and an apparent disregard for those outside local government.

Secondly, building on the first gap, SC research lacks a unified theoretical or conceptual foundation. Notably, the study of inter-municipal partnerships has yet to develop into a fully-fledged, self-sufficient academic discipline or be situated within other established fields. Those who delve into the phenomenon often do so on transitory terms, offering timely insights before returning to their respective areas of study. This transience contributes to a scarcity of longitudinal research or follow-ups, limiting the ability to track the development, impact, and sustainability of SCRs over time.

As a result, there is minimal continuity between studies and an insufficient basis for assessing the transferability of findings across different contexts or time periods. Our understanding of the SC phenomenon can thus be characterised as an interdisciplinary assemblage of isolated case studies, each shaped by the perspectives of different local governments surveyed at different times and under varying intentions. While interdisciplinary perspectives can be valuable, the absence of theoretical and conceptual continuity hinders cumulative knowledge development, making it difficult to systematically, comparatively, and collectively build upon prior findings (Abbott, 2010).

The third gap pertains to how the topic has been studied and, indeed, the target of inquiry. Over the past three decades, scholars have frequently highlighted a myriad of external factors,

including, amongst others, financial pressures (Cross, 2010; Fan, Huang et al., 2019; Gooding et al., 2015; Tham & Shim, 2025), public and media scrutiny (Gooding et al., 2015; Mascitelli & Chung, 2008), council capacity (Fan, Huang et al., 2019; Hogan, 2019; Prasittisopin et al., 2024), community involvement and awareness (Cremer et al., 2001; De Villiers et al., 2007; Fan, Huang, et al., 2019; Gooding et al., 2015; Hogan, 2019; Mori, 2023; Prasittisopin et al., 2024), geopolitical shifts (Baycan-Levent et al., 2010; Cremer et al., 2001; O'Toole, 2001; H. Ryan & Mazzilli, 2021; Tham & Shim, 2025), and political systems and structures (Cross, 2010; Hogan, 2019; Prasittisopin et al., 2024; United Nations Industrial Development Organisation, 2019), that collectively shape how SCs are both interpreted and approached. These same studies have predominantly sought to examine the impact of such factors on SCs to uncover how the phenomenon itself has changed or is changing. What has not been explored with similar impetus, however, is how these factors impact those who imbue SCs with meaning through their physical and discursive engagement.

To borrow the words of Lloyd (2010), SCRs are “sustained through the exchange of symbolic meaning” and “apart from the limited amount of time spent in interactions between embodied officials, citizen volunteers and students, sister city relationships exist primarily in discursive space, in the form of mediated images, texts and spoken words” (p. 60). That is to say, the meaning and the significance of SCs are actively negotiated as opposed to being intrinsically tangible. Therefore, it is arguably not SCs themselves that are susceptible to externalities, but rather the individuals and groups who maintain their existence; any impact on an SCR is mediated *through* people. Metaphorically, SCs can be likened to musical instruments—they do not play themselves. Accordingly, this research argues that to understand SCs, one must first understand those who ‘play’ them.

Previous studies do not necessarily disagree with this position, as they have routinely sought out the perspectives of involved parties, albeit with a stark focus on local governments. The issue I wish to highlight is one of depth. The literature has so far identified probable influential factors. However, the other gaps discussed in this chapter have limited efforts to pursue such avenues in

detail, especially at the micro level. Accordingly, while our knowledge of the phenomenon is growing, it is questionable whether the same can be said about our understanding of contemporary experiences and perspectives. If, as Zelinsky (1991) suggested, “the great majority of persons involved in such nonlocal altruism are unpaid volunteers” (p. 3), then it seems imperative that the stories of such individuals do not go unheard.

Considering these three gaps, this research proposes an alternative approach to studying SCs, one that explores the constructions and experiences of SCA members in a prolonged manner. It does this by starting with a blank slate, seeking to understand the intricacies of the phenomenon without imposing prior assumptions. By taking this approach, I do not claim to exhaustively or conclusively address the highlighted gaps; instead, this research offers provisional interpretations to help navigate the current confusion. I intend this research to be utilised as a heuristic stepping stone towards a more holistic and integrated solution to the problem of studying SCs and, to an extent, city diplomacy.

1.4.1 Sister City Associations

This research targets members of SCAs across New Zealand. In the absence of a formal definition, in this thesis, SCAs are defined as locally based, community-driven groups tasked with overseeing specific aspects of an SCR. They represent one segment of what Bui (2024) conceptualises as a *sister city regime*, an interconnected group of actors, notably local government, public institutions, and non-governmental bodies, whose combined engagement determines the set of norms and protocols “that govern behaviors and decision-making among sister cities” (p. 13). Nonetheless, one might rightfully question where in this equation SCAs sit, as they are non-governmental bodies that often sit awkwardly on the periphery of local government influence, neither fully separate nor detached.

This confusion also extends to the membership of SCAs. In this research, most members joined their SCA voluntarily. However, a few were invited to participate due to their role within the respective local council. Additionally, while it may be expected that members reside within

the city or town to which the SCR belongs, this is not a strict rule or requirement. The possibility that members can reside elsewhere, as evidenced in this research, complicates the role of place in SCRs, a contributing factor to the ambiguity that is discussed throughout this thesis.

As Chapters Four through Six demonstrate, an SCA's degree of responsibility can vary and depend on its structure and relationship with the local government. It is common for these groups within New Zealand to label themselves as associations. However, a few are also conceived as committees. This research examined two associations and one committee, but no consistent distinction could be identified between the different labels. Accordingly, the term SCA is used to refer to all three groups. Furthermore, for simplicity, this thesis uses the term 'member' when referring to the individuals involved in each SCA.

1.5 Research Objectives

This research carries a simple-sounding yet, in reality, complex objective: to explore the constructions and lived experiences of association members engaged in SCRs within New Zealand. This is reflected in the two primary research questions:

- I. How are sister city relationships constructed?
- II. How are sister city relationships experienced?

These questions were designed to be intentionally open, allowing for a range of potential interpretations to be examined. Using constructivist inquiry, drawing from interpretivist phenomenology and grounded theory, the research questions did not seek to provide conclusive answers or to suggest broad sweeping generalisations. Instead, they ask members to pull back the curtain and share what they see. The outcome of this research is thus a co-construction of the intricacies of the SC phenomenon, a collection of provisional yet probable interpretations.

The research questions were explored through a combination of in-depth, unstructured, and semi-structured interviews conducted over one year across three case studies, each representing an SCA within New Zealand. Participants included 14 members, spread across the three case studies, each of whom was interviewed three times, barring a few exceptions. Analysis occurred

simultaneously with data collection and was informed by the constant comparison method and interpretive phenomenological analysis.

In comparing the interpretations generated from these research questions, this thesis provides several working hypotheses and proposes a conceptual framework derived from them. This framework, discussed at the end of Chapter Seven, offers a potential means by which the ambiguity and indefiniteness of the SC phenomenon can be embraced and, where possible, navigated. Lastly, this thesis presents theoretical, conceptual and methodological considerations for the study of SCs and provides insights into how the phenomenon may be better approached as a topic of inquiry.

1.6 Thesis Outline

This thesis is separated into three sections: A – Laying the Groundwork; B – The Stories of Association Members; and C – Deriving Meaning. Beyond distinguishing the different parts of the thesis, these sections are used to group relevant chapters that are closely linked and should be viewed accordingly. The purpose of these groupings is explained at the onset of each part, but I also briefly address them here.

Section A consists of two chapters. **Chapter Two** introduces existing knowledge on the SC phenomenon through a narrative literature review. **Chapter Three** follows, which provides and explains the rationale for the methodological decisions made. Many of these decisions were informed by the trajectory of the literature and the key ideas that have emerged over time. Positioning these two chapters together allows this connection to be more clearly illustrated.

Section B comprises Chapters **Four**, **Five**, and **Six**, each dedicated to a different case study report. The depth and complexity of these reports necessitated their separation, ensuring that their findings could be introduced more effectively while minimising potential confusion. Each chapter presents a rich and detailed account of members' experiences within the respective case study, followed by the findings generated from them. Together, these chapters form the core findings of this research, which is also the reasoning for their grouping.

The thesis ends with **Section C**, which contains the final two chapters. **Chapter Seven** discusses the findings, introducing the generated working hypotheses and the proposed conceptual framework. **Chapter Eight** then offers reflections and insights gathered from these discussions, providing potential considerations and trajectories for future research before addressing the study's limitations. While the chapters are distinct, some discussions naturally extend into the conclusions, creating a degree of overlap. The chapters are separated to highlight their differing purposes, yet grouped within the same section to acknowledge their interconnectedness. Together, they present the discussions and conclusions derived from this research.

SECTION A

Laying the Groundwork

No study can be embarked on without understanding the ‘groundwork’—how the topic of inquiry has been viewed, approached, and studied, as well as how these factors have developed over time. Without this, researchers risk repeating past mistakes, adopting unsuitable methodologies, or merely reiterating existing knowledge with little novelty. In essence, “the synthesis of cumulated knowledge is an essential condition for any field to grow and develop” (Templier & Paré, 2015, p. 112).

SCRs, however, present a dilemma in the face of this demand. As a topic of study, SCs have yet to be imbued with theoretical and methodological rigour. Instead, the phenomenon has historically been undermined by what has been described as a “sheer lack of academic and theoretical debate” (Mascitelli & Chung, 2008, p. 204) and a “great lack of research” (Franco & Marmelo, 2014, p. 75). That is to say, the groundwork is scarce and, I might add, scattered. The majority of scholarship on the phenomenon has come in the form of journal articles, which, by design, do not possess the length required to address such theoretical and methodological concerns in depth. Moreover, there are currently no studies that explicitly target and consolidate existing literature or methodology on SCs, arguably for good reason.

As I noted in Chapter One, there is neither consensus nor consistency on what constitutes an SCR (Clarke, 2009; Cross, 2010), making it an extensive task to consolidate the breadth of diverging perceptions, which is beyond the scope of most journal articles. The same can be said for existing methodological approaches to studying SCs, which have yet to be substantiated and require greater experimentation. Studying SCRs thus demands, as so to speak, a leap of faith.

With these considerations in mind, this section begins with Chapter Two, a narrative literature review on SC, mapping key themes in their development and associated understandings. This review provides a foundation for the methodological decisions outlined in Chapter Three. In other words, Chapter Two illustrates the challenges and opportunities of studying the

phenomenon, while Chapter Three presents a logically grounded methodological approach to overcoming these complexities. Accordingly, this research contributes to theoretical and methodological knowledge on the phenomenon without being tied down by its uncertainties.

CHAPTER TWO

A Movement in Motion

2.1 Finding the Middle Ground

In this research, as the researcher, I held prior knowledge of the literature on SCs, having already written a master's thesis on the topic. This may appear at odds with grounded theory as conceptualised by Glaser and Strauss (1967), and later Glaser (1998), who argued against preliminary engagement with literature within the specific subject of inquiry. However, this stance has given rise to substantial debate (Charmaz, 2014; Dunne, 2011). Glaser and Strauss's (1967) position was that early engagement with the literature may cloud one's ability to generate *grounded* theory by imposing extant theories with questionable applicability. Explaining this further, Charmaz (2014) noted that, in principle, delaying the literature review encourages the researcher to articulate their ideas without relying on those provided by others.

Opposition to this stance often centres on the impracticalities of its implementation (Charmaz, 2014; Dunne, 2011). While Dunne (2011) acknowledged the potential value of delaying engagement with the literature, he questions whether researchers can ever entirely distance themselves from prior knowledge. The notion that inquiry begins with no preconceptions, or that such knowledge can simply be set aside, is, as he puts it, "unrealistic" and "unfeasible" (p. 17). Similarly, Charmaz (2014) cautioned that postponing literature engagement risks "rehashing old empirical problems and minimising the literature" (p. 306). Building on this, Urquhart and Fernandez (2006) challenged the notion of the researcher as a blank slate. Instead, they draw on Walsham's (1995) argument that researchers can engage with existing knowledge "without being trapped in the view that it represents the final truth in that area" (Urquhart & Fernandez, 2006, p. 460).

With these considerations in mind, engagement with literature within this research followed Dunne's (2011) proposition of a middle ground. Dunne's solution involves conducting an initial

yet extensive literature review to identify potential gaps and inform and justify the research questions and objectives. “Detailed engagement with extant theoretical concepts” (p. 121), especially those beyond one’s subject area, is then pursued at later stages of data analysis or until emerging ideas and themes prompt theoretical engagement. This approach also helps address the requirements of PhD proposals and alleviate concerns that the student may “not [be] fully aware of the context within which their study resides” (p. 119), while still aligning with the principles of grounded theory (Charmaz, 2014; Dunne, 2011) and those of constructivist inquiry, in which themes and patterns emerge from the data rather than being constrained by prior theories or assumptions (Erlandson et al., 1993; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Accordingly, this chapter examines existing literature on SCs, reserving a more detailed analysis of relevant theoretical ideas for Chapter Seven.

In structuring and presenting this chapter, I have drawn on the recommendations made by Charmaz (2014). Charmaz advocated for integrating literature throughout one’s work rather than isolating it in a discrete section. The literature review, she argues, should provide a foundation for such engagement and be both “pertinent and focused” (p. 310), with its final form tailored to the overarching argument and purpose of the research. This approach does not imply that the literature is selectively curated to validate the findings. Instead, regardless of when it was reviewed, the literature is presented in a way that supports, rather than disrupts, the logical flow of the thesis. As Charmaz noted, “The literature review gives you an opportunity to set the stage for what *you* do in subsequent sections or chapters” (p. 309). She suggested that a literature review serves as a “sophisticated conversation” (p. 309) that critically analyses key themes and influential works while drawing attention to convergence and divergence areas. The aim is to engage the reader in a dialogue and to demonstrate how the research aligns with, challenges, or extends existing bodies of knowledge.

In line with Charmaz’s (2014) guidance, this literature review is structured to serve the thesis’s overarching purpose: to foster a deeper theoretical and conceptual engagement with the SC phenomenon. Accordingly, the reviewed literature is presented chronologically within

interconnected thematic strands, tracing how our understanding of SCs has developed over time while remaining contested and, in many respects, obscured. This structure foregrounds key conceptual debates and points of scholarly divergence, highlighting the complexity and multiplicity of interpretations that have shaped existing knowledge.

Given these aims, a narrative review was adopted instead of a systematic one, which typically imposes a more rigid and prescriptive format. Ferrari (2015) explains that tracking the development of ideas or concepts over time demands the wider scoping of a historical narrative review as “the narrative thread could be lost in the restrictive rules of a SR [systematic review]” (p. 231). While the SC phenomenon is neither clinical nor a scientific principle, the same logic applies: SCs are dynamic, socially constructed phenomena that derive their meaning from how they are discussed and interpreted (Lloyd, 2010; H. Ryan & Mazzilli, 2021). Any comprehensive understanding of SCs—if indeed attainable—cannot be confined to a singular time frame or depiction. A systematic review, dependent on narrowly defined search terms and predetermined selection criteria, may therefore be ill-equipped to capture this conceptual complexity (Ferrari, 2015).

2.2 The Social Invention of Sister Cities

In one of the first studies on the SC phenomenon, notably over three decades following its inception, D. Smith (1990) described SCs as a “new social invention” (p. 178), highlighting the merger of private and municipal resources at the local level to address international understanding, friendship, and world peace. To uncover the root of the success of SCRs in the United States, 11 researchers conducted nearly 2,000 interviews with relevant stakeholders, representing the most extensive study on the topic to date. While numerous findings were noted, D. Smith concluded, “The majority of affiliations studied were not extremely successful as well-balanced, community-wide exchange programs” (p. 189). Several pitfalls were identified here, including inactivity, indifference, and oligarchy.

Many relationships were found to be operated by a select few, serving as ‘pet projects’. In contrast, others failed to inspire emotional and psychological investment, leading to indifference towards the movement’s goals. D. Smith (1990) estimated that most relationships in the United States did little to address the underlying ideal of world peace. Partnerships with cities or regions in third-world countries, especially those with ongoing hostilities, were particularly prone to failure, requiring far greater sustained commitment than those of relative proximity and perceived safety. D. Smith described this outcome as “disheartening” given that it is with such regions and countries that “greater friendship and mutual understanding are most needed” (p. 186). There was an unavoidable social dimension to SCs that had been neglected and/or unanticipated. Thus, for D. Smith, relationships could be successful and enduring only through the sharing of influence, participation, meaning, and genuine commitment between all parties. Accordingly, where SCRs functioned well, they included the involvement of volunteer-driven committees on both sides of the relationship.

One year later, Zelinsky (1991) approached the topic from a geographical and historical perspective. He saw promise in the concept of twinning, using the words “new and remarkable, if not necessarily revolutionary” (p. 1). In examining all twinning arrangements globally using numerical data, Zelinsky identified several trends, including where relationships had been formed and where they had not. Based on his findings, Zelinsky inferred that strained relationships and hostilities at a national level, including ancient grudges, hindered the development of twinning. Conversely, historical ties, long-lasting cultural sentiments, shared political ideologies, and shared identity, whether in a name or in a geographical feature, encouraged twinning. These trends supported D. Smith’s (1990) assertion that successful SCRs seldom occur between countries and regions that would presumably benefit most from the movement’s ideals.

According to Zelinsky (1991), twinning arrangements, given their propensity to favour pre-existing bonds, have “helped extend, solidify, and humanize the entrenched political and economic programs of participating states that are, in turn, increasingly interdependent members

of a world system” (p. 28). On the other hand, echoing D. Smith’s (1990) notion of a ‘social invention’, Zelinsky (1991) suggested that the phenomenon can also be a “double-edged instrument” as a “growing number of twinnings seek to promote social ideals that transcend national borders and/or constitute controversial enterprises that challenge statist interests and are a rebuke to the idea of the unbridled sovereignty and omnipotence of nation-states” (p. 28). Zelinsky concluded that regardless of either approach, twinning presents a rediscovery of the meaning of community “with ultimate consequences no one can foresee” (p. 28). To explore these consequences, Zelinsky identified several areas for future research, including the evolution of attitudes and perceptions.

Ramasamy and Cremer’s (1998) study of SCRs in New Zealand tackled these topics. In examining the 128 SCRs within New Zealand at the time, Ramasamy and Cremer initially noted a similar propensity for geographical or cultural proximity: Of the 128 relationships, 83 were with Western, English-speaking cities, 38 of which were within Australia. Nonetheless, 20 of the 22 relationships formed between 1990 and 1998 were with cities in Asia, predominantly in Japan and China. For Ramasamy and Cremer, this reflected the increasing role of Asia, which at the time occupied six of the top 10 export markets for New Zealand goods. Moreover, it also suggested a shift in the perception of the role of SCRs.

The study’s survey results targeting New Zealand local governments indicated that while SCs have long been commended for their ability to reduce cultural distances, there was a growing appreciation for the economic opportunities made possible by such efforts. Notably, close to half of the participants placed significance on the role of economic objectives within their SCs and acted accordingly. However, this shift in perception had not been universal, with some dismissing economic intentions entirely. Commenting on this, Ramasamy and Cremer (1998) wrote:

The difference in purpose, hence, is in fact a difference in scope and perspective. Many New Zealand cities understand the relationship between cultural and commercial objectives, and make the latter part of their strategy. Others may not see or understand the relationship, or may even resent it. (p. 452)

Participants were again at odds in assessing the perceived impact of SCs within the local community. While most emphasised greater international understanding, there were discrepancies regarding increased outbound tourism, research opportunities, trade and investment, global prestige and cultural events. This suggested that, beyond pursuing different approaches, local governments and communities also derived varied benefits. It appeared that perceptions were shifting, but not universally or in tandem, a trend later affirmed by O'Toole (2001).

O'Toole (2001), in exploring SCR between cities in Japan and Australia, also found that perceptions play a significant role in shaping their management. O'Toole was concerned with how these perceptions manifested across different countries and between partner cities, especially in response to localised factors and the influence of public policy. After surveying local governments in Australia and Japan, O'Toole identified that both sides prioritised friendship and mutual understanding. However, the results also suggested that local interests and ambitions, although well-intentioned, often came at the expense of mutual reciprocity:

While the associative principles of international understanding and cultural awareness are given pride of place in both countries they are usually surrounded by more instrumental objectives. In Australia this has meant an attempt to redefine SCTR[s] [sister city type relationships] as instruments of local economic development. For the Japanese it is more a concern with English language development and broadening cultural exchange. Both countries seek to exploit each other's resources and the different perceptions of the opportunities available may lead to frustrated expectations between SCTR[s] in the two countries. (p. 418)

O'Toole inferred that differing contextual factors between the two countries led to diverging conceptualisations of the SC model. Even where the meaning and significance of the relationships were shared within cities, they were evidently not shared to the same degree between cities. O'Toole expressed the view that, as inventions or tools, SCs are susceptible to the whims of their users, who are predominantly local governments and communities. Therefore, any influence exerted on either entity can be expected to extend to their partnerships:

Local government's place in international relations has had to be reconsidered within the framework of economic outcomes and sister cities have not been immune from this reconsideration. The reconstruction of sister cities as an

economic tool in the armoury of many local governments is now proceeding apace. (p. 406)

The result is a constantly shifting phenomenon that, if not handled with care, can lead to a mismatch in expectations.

The preceding studies present a conundrum for contemporary twinning arrangements. Specifically, D. Smith (1990) highlights the importance of shared understanding and participation, while Zelinsky (1991) stresses that SCs operate on the basis of “genuine reciprocity of effort and benefit, with neither community profiting at the expense of the other” (p. 4). However, factors emerging from local and national circumstances have been shown to make such ideals unattainable. There is an apparent catch-22 where reciprocity, shared understanding, and mutual sentiment are the intended outcomes of twinning but also the necessary conditions for attaining said outcomes. It has, therefore, been argued by Lloyd (2010) that the impact of twinning on world peace will be negligible if ties are only successful between already cordial and aligned partners.

Lloyd (2010) defined SCs as “social constructions that are brought into existence and sustained through the exchange of symbolic meaning” (p. 60). Echoing previous studies (see Cremer et al., 2001; O’Toole, 2001), Lloyd argued that SCs are interpreted through the lens of local and national conditions and moulded to meet their needs. In examining the success and failure of different SC proposals, Lloyd found that potentially contentious requests, such as one proposal to link Olympia (United States) with Rafah (Palestine), were seldom accepted. Perceived risks and public pushback proved to be insurmountable, except in cases where ties aligned with national-level foreign policy. Consequently, most partnerships were successful only when involved parties viewed each other as comparatively safe, leading Lloyd to conclude that it is “unrealistic and unreasonable to expect local authorities to address issues of serious, ongoing international conflict by means of locally contested sister city relationships” (pp. 309-310).

Lloyd (2010) explained that local governments face an increasing imperative to manage risks. Additionally, in the wake of globalisation and growing immigration, many must also contend

with the “incompatible demands of culturally and politically diverse urban populations” (p. 310). Such incompatibilities impede efforts to form SCRs that may be favoured by some but opposed by others. According to Lloyd, local governments, being expected to represent the entire population of their cities, are likely to interpret contentious SC proposals as an untenable liability.

This social construction is, however, Lloyd (2010) argued, far from clear-cut. Instead, it is the very ambiguity of the concept that precludes attempts to alleviate concerns and navigate risks:

The high semantic plasticity of the sister cities model means that neither councils nor citizens have recourse to any consistent definitions that could clarify the boundaries of sister city relationships, or their mutual obligations in relation to them. In practice, the idea of sister cities is so elastic in meaning and application as to enable it to be appropriated as ‘all things to all people’, and imposes a similar role on local authorities. (p. 310)

Like O’Toole (2001), Lloyd (2010) highlighted that SCs are susceptible to interpretations, perceptions, and change. These conditions shroud twinning in an uncertainty that, for many communities, presents an unstable and fragile foundation from which to address issues of conflict. In response to these challenges, Lloyd observed a shift toward perceptually safer and quantifiable economic objectives: “The desired model for its proponents is the purely strategic economic relationship, for which peace building is not an issue” (p. 315). This was notably the same trend highlighted earlier by both Ramasamy and Cremer (1998) and O’Toole (2001), a trend that would later garner considerable attention within academia.

2.3 The Shift in the Sister City Movement

The inclusion of economic ideals within SCRs has seen a sharp uptake since the 1990s (Cremer et al., 2001; Mascitelli & Chung, 2008; O’Toole, 2000, 2001; Ramasamy & Cremer, 1998), encouraged in part by the growing influence of global forces and heightened local autonomy (Hocking, 1999; Keating, 1999; O’Toole, 2001; Ritzer, 2003). This shift is often presented as complementary to the original motives of SCs rather than actively detrimental or opposed (Cremer et al., 2001; Hogan, 2019; Ramasamy & Cremer, 1998). However, as Ramasamy and Cremer (1998) and O’Toole (2001) observed, there has been resistance towards

this trajectory, and several scholars have raised concerns that an emphasis on economic outcomes may lead to less commercially viable activities being undermined (Cross, 2010; Lloyd, 2010; H. Ryan & Mazzilli, 2021). Notwithstanding this criticism, it has also been argued that the shift towards economic objectives is inevitable, resulting in part from a broader trend towards instrumentalising SCs to meet local needs (Cremer et al., 2001; Hogan, 2019; Mascitelli & Chung, 2008; O'Toole, 2000, 2001; Ramasamy & Cremer, 1998). Understanding this shift is thus pivotal to grasping the contemporary SC movement.

2.3.1 Economic Opportunities

Ramasamy and Cremer (1998) posited that all SCRs inherently provide economic benefits, intentional or otherwise. This rested on the belief that “the relationship between commerce and culture is a two-way relationship: cultural understanding is conducive to trade and investment, and business provides cultural understanding with a reliable and lasting base” (p. 450). Given the ability of SCs to act as gateways between geographically and often culturally distant communities, it is assumed that, over time, cultural barriers that would otherwise impede economic opportunities will gradually decline. The study’s survey results supported this, with greater international understanding being the most recognised impact of SCs.

O'Toole (2000) documented a similar shift within Australia, describing what they deemed a three-stage development process. Initial SCRs in Australia were characterised as *associative* and pursued the original ideals of the movement outlined by Eisenhower, notably international friendship and mutual understanding. The influx of educational exchange programmes that followed helped broaden these ideals by engaging schools, local organisations, and local families, ushering in what O'Toole calls the *reciprocal* phase. Lastly, economic globalisation, which began to take root in the mid-1970s, led to a shift in the functionality of local governments: “Where parochialism had previously focused local governments’ gaze inward, now that same parochialism was refocused outward for economic development opportunities” (p. 45). Such conditions ushered in the third phase, *commercial*, in which more economically minded initiatives supplement the cultural and educational aims of SCs.

O'Toole (2000), mirroring Ramasamy and Cremer (1998), noted that this shift was not universal, and numerous SCRs within Australia remained associative and reciprocative in focus. Survey results also indicated that the intangible notions of mutual understanding and friendship remained central tenets of the SCM. However, these same results showed that for many local governments in Australia, such benefits alone were no longer deemed sufficient to sustain SCRs, especially in the face of growing scrutiny from local ratepayers. Consequently, O'Toole (2000) suggested, "In many instances, the SCTR is transformed into a commodity for local governments to use in their quest to be seen as economic developers" (p. 54).

O'Toole (2001) extended this discussion from a cross-cultural perspective. As previously discussed, O'Toole suggested that the transition towards economic objectives may lead to mismatched expectations unless such intentions are mutually reciprocated. In pursuing economic prosperity, SCRs must contend with divergent public policy directions and local and national dynamics. Although humanitarian motives remain pivotal, O'Toole argued that the rising necessity of economic growth and the shift towards localised ideals complicates their design's otherwise bilateral and reciprocal nature. Nonetheless, O'Toole's study also raised the question of the extent to which SCs were bilateral or reciprocal in the past, given the evident presence of culturally divergent interpretations.

Cremer et al. (2001) further explored the relationship between culture and commerce within SCRs. In a similar fashion to O'Toole (2001), they proposed that SCs had to be interpreted and framed within the context of local dynamics:

An examination of sister-cities must begin with the politics of locality and a recognition of the individualized operations of specific cities, then move on to an examination of how these particularities are used as a basis for forging city to city links across the globe. (p. 378)

They explained that local governments were becoming increasingly autonomous, particularly in economic development. With the shift from managerialism to entrepreneurialism, proactive efforts to promote and attract economic and social activity locally grew, with SCs becoming a potential conduit for such initiatives. Yet, according to Cremer et al. (2001), these efforts are

only effective to the extent that they balance cultural and commercial objectives, which they refer to as an “integrated approach”. In their words, “The successful operation of sister-city programs will not occur when the individuals involved act with nothing more than economic self interest” (p. 384). At the same time, they stressed that a failure to recognise the economic aspect of SCs can quickly descend into “expensive romanticism”.

On the topic of management in SCs, Cremer et al. (2001) again emphasised an integrated approach in which local governments and local communities engage in a mutually beneficial manner. They referred to this as an example of “Municipal-Community Entrepreneurship”, where both sides consolidate efforts to capitalise on agglomeration economies to pursue local prosperity. The following snippet illustrates the applicability of this concept:

While the setting up of the overall institutional framework for the twinning pact is an initial first step, to carry the agreement forward requires commitment and proactive nurturing by local government officials to build trust, cooperation and tangible yield as well as less tangible and measurable economic and social benefits. The distinguishing feature for the viability and success of the arrangement, however, is that it also requires significant community activism. It is this mix of community and municipal level action to tap into the opportunities that the sister-city arrangement presents for the mutual advantage of economic and social actors in both cities that we conceive as a hybrid entrepreneurialism. (p. 388)

Here, the shift towards economic opportunities is part of a broader trend as local ideals clash with global pressures. Under such circumstances, SCs present themselves as a useful and perhaps convenient instrument, especially when considerable time and resources have already been invested in establishing friendship and goodwill. Cremer et al. (2001) used the relationship between Hastings (New Zealand) and Guilin (China), formed in 1978, as a successful example of these efforts, noting: an initial person-to-person link; strong involvement from both city officials and the local community; a well-developed strategic plan; a highly organised governance structure; and adequate funding. Not all relationships, however, have been afforded the same leeway.

Mascitelli and Chung (2008) examined the potential for SCs to act as vessels for economic activity, highlighting practitioners’ struggles and the need for a more robust discussion. They

explained that SCRs often bear the brunt of what is deemed unfounded ridicule, highlighting in particular “the annoying and shallow approach with which sister cities are represented in the world media” (p. 208). They added that, in the context of Australia, “The media in tabloid fashion has often utilized the failure to achieve commercial outcomes as the cause celebre to declare Sister City arrangements as failures” (p. 208). The culmination of these factors makes the pursuit of SCs increasingly challenging for local governments to justify. Accordingly, Mascitelli and Chung argued that the instrumentalisation of SCs has emerged as a response to both local economic growth and political pressures, as well as criticism of wasteful spending. They thus concluded:

This kind of ridiculing treatment along with the very desolate level of academic attention and research requires that not only Sister City relationships be restored but that they also be re-directed. For this reason, this paper seeks to shift the discussion on these relationships and propose that they become stronger tools of sustainable trade and economic promotion. (p. 212)

However, Mascitelli and Chung (2008) acknowledged that there is only anecdotal evidence to suggest that SCs can be commercially viable, and therefore stress the need for further research and properly measured tests.

Cross (2010), building on these studies, offered a comparative analysis of the hurdles that may prevent SCs from attaining commercial success. Like Cremer et al. (2001), Cross (2010) noted that local governments are playing an increasing role within their communities, extending to SCRs. While SCs of the past may have been more volunteer-driven, he suggested that they were primarily influenced by local government policy development and managerial oversight. This has led to what Cross described as a “justifiable debate over the optimum balance between council and community involvement, as well as the roles and inputs of different departments within the local authorities themselves” (p. 106). In examining how different local government systems translated to management in SCs, Cross found that this balance is seldom complementary. Instead, SC partners often adopted conflicting management structures, which raised questions about the bilateral and reciprocal ideals of SCs.

Addressing this issue further, Cross (2010) noted that there are imbalances not only in governance structures but also in the intended purpose of SCs. With local governments in New Zealand placing greater weight on economic objectives, Cross shared O'Toole's (2001) concerns that mismatched expectations are likely to emerge, especially with cities in Japan, which remain steadfast in their commitment to cultural and educational exchanges. Responding to Cremer et al. (2001), Cross noted that a balanced approach may help alleviate these issues but maintained that "confusion over clarity of roles and purpose will inevitably hinder progress towards an acceptable return on the considerable public investment made" (p. 107). Consequently, while acknowledging the potential for SCs to "provide significant macroeconomic benefits" (p. 115), Cross stressed that this will only prevail if local governments take a professional approach by clarifying their role and purpose.

Hogan (2019) similarly explored the economics of SCs, primarily through interviews with relevant stakeholders in New Zealand. The interview results identified several pitfalls highlighted by Cross (2010) and reaffirmed the importance of intentionality and strategy. Interviewees reinforced the notion of an integrated approach, emphasising the interaction between cultural and trade outputs. Similarly, their experiences suggested that commercially successful relationships rely on a joint effort among local government, local businesses, and community groups. Above all, interviewees stressed the "fundamental and paramount importance of keeping the relationships between cities alive" (p. 16) through frequent contact and communication.

Hogan (2019) suggested that while SCs have the potential to achieve economic benefits, these efforts are often hindered by external factors beyond the control of the involved parties. Most notable was the inadequate council bandwidth (capacity). For example, it was suggested that opportunities to create new commercially focused relationships were available yet often overlooked. Additionally, most local businesses in New Zealand cannot scale to meet the market demands in China or Japan. However, it is precisely in the trust-building mechanisms of SCs that, Hogan argued, local businesses can overcome some of these hurdles or present themselves

as a viable alternative. Nonetheless, as Mascitelli and Chung (2008) explained, the evidence to support this potential remains circumstantial.

2.3.1.1 Are Sister Cities Commercially Viable?

Since the shift towards economic objectives within SCs, several studies have sought to quantify and measure the resulting benefits. Of note, empirical research has found that SCs help reduce CAGE (cultural, administrative, geographical, and economic) distances, which in turn “reduce adverse selection risks and uncertainties involved in economic enterprises” (Dai, 2008, p. 177); foster export growth (Zhou & Cao, 2024); promote inward and outward foreign direct investment (Yameng Zhang & Liu, 2024; Zhong & Huang, 2024); and cultivate trust, leading to reduced transaction costs (Hogan, 2019). Perhaps most notably, a report published by SCI in 2015 estimated that SC programmes contribute over US\$525 million to the United States economy annually (SCI, 2015).

However, not all cities have been able to replicate this success. A series of case studies within Australia reported that most efforts to repurpose relationships for economic gain have seen limited success (Gooding et al., 2015). Additionally, case studies on the City of uMhlathuze (South Africa) and Newcastle Local Municipality (South Africa) found that their SCRs had “not yielded any economic value” and “did not bring any trade or investment.” (Mpanza et al., 2022, p. 28). On the other hand, it has been argued that the concept is inherently difficult to measure. In seeking to quantify the economic benefits of SCs, Ramasamy and Cremer (1998) observed that:

There are many cases in which a closer link between two individuals or organizations was mooted out of a sister-city activity. But to put a monetary value on this, or to formulate a model which explains quantitatively economic success of a city as a result of a sister-city affiliation, is difficult from the outset. (p. 456)

They equated this to the innate complexity of the phenomenon, an inability to attribute any benefit solely to an SCR, and the fact that economic benefits can occur outside the cities in question. Furthermore, Cremer et al. (2001) argued that “too many factors are involved, and too

few data exist” (p. 396). It has also been highlighted that many councils do not evaluate their SCRs, reducing any perceived benefits to speculative approximations (Gooding et al., 2015; Mori, 2023; Prasittisopin et al., 2024). Finally, H. Ryan and Mazzilli (2021) argued that we have not yet fully grasped the value of twinning, commercial or otherwise.

2.3.2 Cooperative Sisters

Against this backdrop, notwithstanding the growing emphasis on economic opportunities, a potential fourth development phase has emerged, where collaboration and knowledge sharing have gained popularity. These developments continue the trend of adapting SCs to address issues of local relevance, but on the grounds of environmental and societal issues.

Gooding et al. (2015) examined the changing dynamics of SCs in Australia. Consistent with previous studies, their online survey of 161 local councils revealed that while education and cultural activities remained the predominant modes of engagement, trade and business-related activities had risen. This trend was most noticeable in new relationships, which coincided with a significant increase in partnerships with cities in China. They also highlighted a recent rise in relationships built around community development and capacity building, predominantly with councils in Timor-Leste and Papua New Guinea, some of which “have become more equal partnerships between councils in neighbouring countries facing similar challenges, with an operational focus on networking, interorganisational engagement and knowledge exchange” (p. 43).

These relationships, while seemingly one-way modes of aid and development, have come to be viewed as equally beneficial for participating Australian councils and communities. In contrast to the potentially mismatched expectations between Japanese and Australian partners observed by O’Toole (2001), these relationships present a scenario in which both sides reap rewards despite divergent intentions or perhaps because of them. This suggests a potential win-win scenario, provided a mutually beneficial arrangement can be reached.

Nonetheless, as Gooding et al. (2015) remarked, “It is difficult to discuss the question of value without considering the attitudes of the wider community” (p. 47). These attitudes, however, appeared ambiguous. Echoing Mascitelli and Chung (2008), Gooding et al. (2015) found that some councils were heavily influenced by “strongly negative media treatments” (p. 47), which were then viewed as representative of community sentiment. This highlighted an ongoing dearth of understanding of community perceptions and awareness, first noted by Cremer et al. (2001).

Al Syahrin et al. (2020) made a similar observation, expressing the view that “Sister city cooperation has emphasised the role of the state and local government. However, the role of the community is also essential although, has been relegated to a second place” (p. 143). Seeking to address this gap, the authors explored bottom-up approaches to SC cooperation in the context of flood mitigation. Commenting on the broader phenomenon of SCs, they explained that local and regional councils face many problems that are not easily overcome when tackled alone. SCs, thus, present a means for cities and towns to combine their strengths in the pursuit of synergistic solutions to local issues. This approach, they argued, is characteristic of local and regional engagement in international relations, which contrasts with that witnessed at a central government level: “A country's foreign policy tends to be implemented taking into account long-term national interests and the country's strategic interests. In the foreign policy of the regional government (city), these interests are driven by the short-term needs of the area's problems” (p. 146).

In examining SC cooperation, Al Syahrin et al. (2020) noted two distinct models: a top-down model orchestrated by local government; and a bottom-up model initiated by community groups, including academics, professional groups, and non-governmental organisations. After examining three case studies of urban villages affected by flooding in East Kalimantan (Indonesia), the researchers found that the latter approach, although overlooked, held more potential. This was primarily due to the utilisation of local wisdom and community activism, which was deemed instrumental in addressing issues of local relevance. That being said, they

also found that the three villages conceptualised community involvement differently, resulting in divergent modes of engagement. Accordingly, while highlighting the potential for a bottom-up approach to SC cooperation, the study also identified the inherent difficulty of interpreting how ‘community’ is involved in such endeavours.

Fan, Mori, et al.'s (2023) study on SCRs between cities in Australia and Japan explored the trend towards knowledge sharing and collaboration. While accentuating the potential for initiatives targeting sustainable development, their survey results indicate that this remains a niche focus. Nonetheless, the survey also showed that Australian and Japanese local councils had much to offer in enhancing sustainable practices, particularly in disaster prevention and response, waste management, health management, and environmental sustainability. Regarding the latter, Fan, Mori, et al. wrote:

Economic collaboration is only one, but not the only potential area for collaboration. Our research has also identified environment protection-related initiatives and exchange as fruitful and worthy of additional attention. ... It is also an area that generates public attention and can be developed into multi-faceted projects connecting to existing education exchange, which can include environmental education and conservation initiatives. (p. 44)

However, several barriers local governments and communities faced in pursuing these initiatives included human resource and funding pressures. These factors impacted every facet of the relationships examined, placing perhaps idealistic propositions of joint sustainable development beyond reach. Nevertheless, several examples where such efforts had prevailed were identified, including a joint project between the City of Narashino (Japan) and Brisbane City (Australia) to help protect migratory shorebirds. In considering these circumstances, Fan, Mori, et al. proposed that certain collaborative efforts may be better served beyond the traditional SC framework, adopting instead a short-term project-based approach. Concluding their study, they stated: “While there are many benefits of local governments and communities engaging with sister cities, there is also the need to continue to strengthen and resource such relationships and in partnership explore unrealized opportunities” (Fan, Mori, et al., 2023, p. 46).

That same year, the OECD (2023) published a report titled *City-to-City Partnerships to Localise the Sustainable Development Goals*. The report states that city partnerships, acting as a form of DDC, “play a key role in advancing global agendas, preparing for global megatrends, and adapting to a wide range of crises and shocks” (p. 11). Additionally, since the United Nations General Assembly formally recognised city partnerships as an international cooperation mechanism in 1971, most partnerships are said to have evolved from bilateral twinning to comprehensive multi-stakeholder partnerships involving civil society, academia, and the private sector. The report proposes that this position enables these partnerships to serve as effective vessels for localised efforts towards the SDGs.

Despite this potential, the report, mirroring Fan, Mori, et al. (2023), highlighted several barriers that cities face in utilising these partnerships effectively. These included a lack of data and reporting, clarity, accountability and transparency, which “result in the delivery of predominantly small-scale projects, and in turn, missed opportunities to create economies of scale, and ultimately negatively impact their effectiveness” (p. 12). This was further compounded by the absence of quantitative means to measure the contributions of city-to-city partnerships towards sustainable development outcomes, which aligns with previous attempts to quantify the benefits of SCs.

While much of this discussion has pertained to large urban centres, Atanga et al. (2024) argued that SCs can also be utilised for sustainable development in emerging cities, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa. Using the partnerships between Toledo (United States) and Tanga (Tanzania), and between Ieper (Belgium) and Wa (Ghana), as case studies, Atanga et al. explored how North-South partnerships contribute towards sustainable development and how power dynamics manifest in such efforts. They first offered a critique of the literature, noting that while the frameworks proposed by O’Toole (2001) and Cremer (2001) had presented significant starting points, there remained a need to acknowledge “that sister city partnerships, particularly those between cities in the Global North and South, are embedded within broader structures of global inequality and uneven power relations” (p. 2). Accordingly, Atanga et al. suggested that,

in pursuing sustainable development, “there is a risk of partnerships becoming vehicles for imposing external ‘best practices’ rather than co-creating contextually relevant solutions” (p. 3).

The study found that both relationships directly contribute towards SDG targets in the Southern city. Regarding SDG 6 (Clean Water and Sanitation), Ieper helped fund the construction of mechanised and hand-pump borehole systems in Wa, and Toledo funded three public toilet facilities in high-traffic areas of Tanga City. Additionally, Wa and Ieper launched the *Wa-Ieper Plastic Waste Management Project*, which, based on interview reports, “has yielded positive results, leading to a reduction in flood incidents due to clearer gutters and a decrease in sanitation-related diseases such as malaria, cholera, and diarrhoea” (p. 9). Atanga et al. (2024) noted numerous examples of sustainable development resulting from relationships spanning local economic development, education, healthcare, and community welfare. Simultaneously, these relationships continue to foster enhanced cultural integration and understanding between partner cities, reflecting an integrated approach akin to that proposed by Cremer et al. (2001).

Atanga et al. (2024) equated the success of these initiatives with the strength of the SCRs, engagement with local stakeholders, and the emphasis on sustainability. Adding to this, they explained:

The Ieper and Toledo partners have provided critical financial and technical support, while the Wa and Tanga partners have taken ownership of the projects and ensured their alignment with local priorities. The partnerships have also prioritized community engagement, awareness-raising, and capacity building to foster behavioral change and ensure the long-term viability of the interventions. (p. 9)

Despite the apparent effectiveness of these partnerships, the study’s results also accentuated their asymmetrical nature, where partner selection and project funding are determined primarily by the northern city. This asymmetry was equally evident in the benefits received by northern cities, which were largely intangible, such as international visibility and cultural integration. Accordingly, consistent with Al Syahrin et al.’s (2020) emphasis on local wisdom, Atanga et al.

(2024) argued that selecting and prioritising local needs requires greater scrutiny to ensure the voices of southern partners are given equal footing.

Atanga et al.'s (2024) study provided a promising insight into the potential for North-South SCRs to “serve as vehicles for localizing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and translating global targets into context-specific actions” (p. 13). However, it also reveals the same hurdles noted in the 2023 report published by the OECD, namely that due to the myriad of compounding factors involved, it is difficult to determine to what degree any SCR contributes towards SDG targets. Additionally, as Atanga et al. acknowledged, there is an absence of longitudinal data, which obfuscates attempts at providing a holistic outlook on potential benefits. Nevertheless, the results support the notion that sustainable development is likely to play a significant role in the future of sister cities:

In respect of the SDGs, this developmental trend represents a new era of paradiplomacy which focuses on realizing concrete and tangible outcomes instead of the pursuit of normative goals. The SDGs implicitly constitute the new normative framework for guiding the development and implementation of sister city partnerships. (p. 13)

2.3.3 Contemporary Conundrums and Future Prospects

The preceding studies in this review summarise historical trends within the SCM and the broader phenomenon of twinning. There may, of course, be developments that are not noted here, but the absence of systematic reporting, documentation, and evaluation practices (Cross, 2010; Mori, 2023; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2023; Prasittisopin et al., 2024) hinders attempts to identify these. The chronological approach employed in this review does not necessarily imply that historical trends have followed a linear progression, as “All sister city relationships are different and take on board the unique circumstances of participating cities and their people as they develop innovative and flexible partnerships often not limited to the sister city framework” (Fan, Mori, et al., 2023, p. 46). However, these developments over time indicate that SCRs are susceptible to global shifts and the manifestation of such pressures at a local level.

In light of recent changes and emerging trends, we appear to be at a critical juncture in SCs, with significant implications for city diplomacy. Increasingly, scholars and institutions assert that cities will play a pivotal role in addressing global challenges and shaping future international engagement (Acuto, 2013; Barber, 2013; Curtis, 2011; Keating, 1999; Kosovac et al., 2021; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2023; H. Ryan & Mazzilli, 2021; Short et al., 2000). However, if SCs are a microcosm of how this might unfold, our grasp of the future trajectory and those behind it remains obscured.

This chapter has so far highlighted the frequent characterisation of SCs as intangible, dynamic, complex phenomena. They encompass the involvement of both local governments and community actors, yet the interests and roles of these groups are fluid and ill-defined (Al Syahrin et al., 2020; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2023; O'Toole, 2001; Prasittisopin et al., 2024). Moreover, within the context of an SCR, questions arise regarding the very constitution of 'place': Who is considered local, and who is not? To whom do these relationships belong, and whose intentions should guide them? While scholarly attention has typically centred on the institutional and historical development of SCs, comparatively little focus has been directed toward those personally engaged in SCRs and the shifting conditions under which this engagement occurs. Without this understanding, our attempts to engage theoretically and conceptually with the phenomenon are, arguably, constrained.

2.3.4 Peering Beyond the Curtain

In addressing this gap, this research has taken on the endeavour of *peering beyond the curtain* to develop a tentative foundation from which a more robust understanding can be reached. Nonetheless, in taking this path, I do not intend to insinuate that I am alone in these efforts, or that others have not applied a critical lens to the SC phenomenon or focused on those involved. To the contrary, this research extends recent efforts amongst scholars who have also sought to understand the inner workings of SCs while building on the work of those before them. In this final section, I introduce three such studies that provide insights into the phenomenon's functionality and help situate the rationale for this research.

H. Ryan and Mazzilli's (2021) research into the value of twinning was one of the first studies since D. Smith (1990) to directly interview volunteers outside local government. Echoing the trends highlighted in this chapter, H. Ryan and Mazzilli (2021) stated that twinning "has evolved into a more inclusive and amorphous practice through which local and intermediary levels of government, as well as a wide array of civil society groups have been able to pursue their own agendas and passions" (p. 451). SCs find themselves in a complex position within this intersection of different stakeholders: "On the one hand it sits, sometimes uneasily, at the intersections of state and civic/voluntary action. Conversely, it bridges cultural policy with other agendas such as economic development and trade, peace-building and global education" (p. 451). H. Ryan and Mazzilli explained that this confusion, coupled with a recent trend towards austerity, has led many councils to question the value of their SCs. On this basis, H. Ryan and Mazzilli address the following questions in their study: "*just what is of value of twinning? And, how should this value be conceptualised?*" (p. 452).

Data collection took place over three years, exploring the experiences of those involved in twinning associations, auxiliary organisations, and local authorities within the United Kingdom. Their findings again point to the growing impact of austerity, in which twinning is often the first target of financial cuts. They observed a "dramatic rollback" of "cultural and leisure-based activities" (H. Ryan & Mazzilli, 2021, p. 457), with attention instead shifting towards commercial opportunities. These rollbacks usually resulted in the loss of twinning officers—employed council staff with institutional knowledge. Without the support of such individuals, increased expectations on volunteer-run twinning associations to provide economic returns led to "high rates of overstretch and 'burnout'" (p. 458). To this effect, H. Ryan and Mazzilli questioned "what might be—or has been—lost with the recent set of manoeuvres aimed at streamlining, rationalising and reducing costs" (p. 458).

In considering these developments, H. Ryan and Mazzilli (2021) proposed that the issue may lie in how we think about the value of twinning, and suggested four dimensions in which this value might be better conceptualised: *instrumental*, *intrinsic*, *cumulative*, and *generative*—

productive. Instrumental value is derived from activities undertaken with a specific goal in mind. H. Ryan and Mazzilli (2021) noted that almost all twinings are formed initially to meet an instrumental need or purpose. Intrinsic value relates to the idea that there is an innate benefit to engaging in cross-cultural activities and exchanges, tied to friendship, goodwill, and mutual understanding. This value enhances other forms of value, as shared trust, care, and affection can provide the foundation for moral, political and commercial action.

Cumulative value challenges the temporality within which local governments often conduct twinning, notably via set budgets and contractual obligations, delivered within set time-frames, within the bounds of the ‘work week’. H. Ryan and Mazzilli (2021) argued that, conversely, twinning, when engaged as a volunteer activity by community groups, cuts across work and leisure time, “pervading everyday life and routines in a more organic way” (p. 463), and does not stop when the local council does. Accordingly, reframing how value is understood, H. Ryan and Mazzilli suggested: “More often than not, the value of twinning does not emerge in the continuous and easily quantifiable manner anticipated by the narrow accounting schedules and growing audit culture of contemporary British local authorities” (p. 464). Instead, the experiences of those interviewed suggest that the value of twinning can be cumulative—a gradual shift inspired by the opportunity to connect intimately with another culture.

The final value is generative-productive. This value ties into how twinning can open the door to new opportunities that would otherwise be beyond reach. H. Ryan and Mazzilli (2021) noted that this value usually emerges through networking, as cities and communities work together and identify areas for collaboration. In some cases, initiatives can develop outside of the twinning relationships, continuing to provide indirect value. A further aspect of this value is that it allows for ‘productive power’. By combining their efforts, cities and communities are imbued with greater capacity to resist “the prevailing order of things” (p. 465). Twinning can enable involved parties to challenge the status quo, generating new opportunities.

In concluding their study, H. Ryan and Mazzilli (2021) noted that no single value should be viewed in isolation, as “they continuously overlap and reinforce one another” (p. 467). They

suggested that a recent emphasis on the instrumental value of twinning may undermine other dimensions, as “the manifold synergies between trade creation and civic, social or cultural activities are themselves missed” (p. 466). Lastly, despite a recent decline in attention, they posited that in reframing the value of twinning, its implications for contemporary society may be better understood:

Not only does the value of this increasingly maligned vernacular practice push well beyond the current economic doxa, but its overlapping instrumental, intrinsic, cumulative and generative-productive forms of worth make it uniquely rich as a site and subject of research. (p. 467)

Mori (2023) highlighted the potential value of SCs and positioned local associations as integral to providing an intermediary structure through which this value can be realised. While acknowledging the recent attention on paradiplomacy in addressing global issues, Mori noted a lack of attention to how individual cities operate within SCRs, particularly concerning public administration. To bring attention to this gap, the study measured the activeness of SCRs within Japan against several variables, including “IEA [international exchange association] involvement, budget size, staff resource availability dedicated to sister-city agreements, effects of personnel rotation systems in local governments, evaluation availability, and municipal amalgamation” (p. 514).

Mori (2023) found that, alongside budget size, IEA involvement significantly contributed to active SC programmes. Other variables were less influential, for example, despite only 31% of surveyed local governments having a regular review process, this lack of evaluation did not impact activeness. Still, no explanation was provided for this, and it may reflect the ineffectiveness of evaluation practices, rather than the importance of evaluations themselves. Returning to the contributing factors, although budget size has long been seen as a key success factor, the role of IEAs has been largely overlooked. Mori described IEAs as “auxiliary organisations aided by the governmental sector” (p. 520), emphasising their intermediary function in mobilising local support. Their involvement enhances SC programmes by “furnishing in-kind resources such as English proficiency” (p. 521), enabled through financial

backing from local governments. IEAs also proved crucial in sustaining SCRs during the COVID-19 pandemic and facilitating recovery.

Mori (2023) concluded that, in urban contexts, where it can be burdensome to legitimise the role and significance of SCRs, the involvement of IEAs is likely to be pivotal. He argued that the internal capacity of cities, rooted in their citizens' time, energy, and commitment, is indispensable to city diplomacy efforts. On this basis, Mori recommended that "municipal managers need to ensure the robust involvement of an integrated network arrangement in international activities with a supportive political will" (p. 522), highlighting the importance of institutional coordination and political backing in sustaining meaningful international engagement at the local level. It is through an intermediary structure, provided by IEAs, that Mori argued this coordination can be achieved.

Prasittisopin et al. (2024) explored how SCRs are implemented within Thailand, giving attention to the interconnected role of governmental and non-governmental stakeholders. Despite growing scholarly interest, they noted this has primarily been directed towards those within decentralised systems instead of *deconcentrated* systems. This gap is significant, they posited, because "the effectiveness of the sister city model in decentralised contexts does not necessarily translate to deconcentrated systems" (p. 3). Further compounding this is the scarcity of research on the potential of SCRs to pursue urban development, a pressing concern for low-to-middle-income countries. Within Thailand's top-down, deconcentrated governance framework, local governments and local organisations thus encounter a range of structural and operational challenges.

The arrival of the SC model in Thailand differed significantly from that seen in Australia or New Zealand, having been introduced through a dedicated *Sister City Cooperation Policy* initiated by the Ministry of Interior in 1989. This policy is implemented by provincial governments, who oversee the initiation, planning, and execution of SC activities with support from the central government and local organisations. Despite the decades-long history of the policy, Prasittisopin et al. (2024) reported limited success, with many SCRs becoming inactive

or discontinued, prompting some government bodies to view the policy as “inefficient or even wasteful due to its lack of measurable outcomes and impacts” (p. 8).

Prasittisopin et al. (2024) surveyed local governments in Thailand, followed by in-depth interviews with key stakeholders within both central and provincial governments to examine these challenges. Their findings suggest that Thailand’s government structure complicates SCR implementation, involving multiple stakeholders with distinct but poorly defined roles. According to the study, the primary issue is that these responsibilities “remain ambiguous and demand better coordination” (p. 8). Regarding local organisations, they noted that while some find the policy useful, its implementation remains inconsistent across provinces, lacking a shared direction or standardised procedures.

Beyond issues of clarity, Prasittisopin et al. (2024) identified several additional constraints, including insufficient budgets, personnel challenges, communication gaps, and leadership deficiencies. Exacerbating these further was the absence of systematic monitoring or evaluation processes at all levels of governance. Notably, only 10% of provincial governments had any form of evaluation. However, in contrast to Mori (2023), Prasittisopin et al.’s (2024) results suggest that this absence does have a detrimental effect, as those involved lack “the means to assess the policy’s success or failure” (p. 12). Consequently, some SCRs were symbolic, with minimal local relevance, while others were disrupted by frequent leadership changes that undermined continuity. Ambiguity around governance roles also contributed to communication breakdowns, especially between local organisations and the provincial government. In some cases, these constraints led to an inability to produce positive sentiments towards cooperation. Unable to adequately fund exchanges or host visitors, “most of the cooperations are short-lived and turn inactive” (p. 12).

Prasittisopin et al.’s (2024) study extended Mori’s (2023) emphasis on the role of local organisations and associations in implementing SCRs, a point also made earlier by D. Smith (1990). However, echoing Cross (2010), Prasittisopin et al. (2024) added that this role cannot be fully appreciated unless it is first clarified vis-à-vis the provincial and central government. The

study accentuated the need for provincial governments and local organisations operating within deconcentrated systems to be afforded greater autonomy and imbued with the means to evaluate their efforts. At the same time, Prasittisopin et al. concluded that the implementation of SCs is likely “too intricate for a single entity” (p. 13), and greater coordination across different stakeholders is required.

Together, these three studies provide insights into the contemporary struggles faced by those pursuing SCRs, which, past scholarship would suggest, has remained a constant (Handley, 2006; O’Toole, 2001; D. Smith, 1990). Mori (2023) and Prasittisopin et al. (2024) argued that a more collaborative approach may alleviate some of these hurdles, while H. Ryan and Mazzilli (2021) proposed that the phenomenon’s value must first be reconceptualised. All three studies also highlight the importance of local community associations and organisations in realising the potential of SCs. Still, H. Ryan and Mazzilli’s (2021) study was the only one to directly interview members of these groups. As noted earlier, the voices of these groups have largely gone unheard. This is despite D. Smith’s (1990) observation three decades prior that “In essence, SCPs [sister city programmes] are bi-national volunteer groups. When they are functioning well there is a Sister City Committee running the program on each end of the affiliation” (p. 181).

With this gap in mind, H. Ryan and Mazzilli (2021) exemplified how the perspectives of local community groups can contribute to developing much-needed knowledge on what is described as a “dynamic and amorphous cultural and social practice” (p. 466). Further, Mori (2023) and Prasittisopin et al. (2024) both presented a precedent for why these perspectives need to be explored. This research has built on these ideas to further efforts to peer beyond the curtain.

CHAPTER THREE

Bridging Methodological Gaps

3.1 Constructivist Inquiry

As noted in Chapter One, SCs and similar twinning arrangements today likely number in the tens of thousands, involving numerous cities, local governments, communities, policies, directives, and intentions. Moreover, as Lloyd (2010) noted, “sister city relationships as a collective object of study are ill-defined, highly flexible, and contestable in meaning, and variable in application” (p. 76). It is indisputable that SCs, conceptually, do not conform to any singular ‘reality’ or interpretation but instead reflect an amalgamation of often contradictory and constantly shifting constructions. This uncertainty and unpredictability, evident throughout the literature, requires an explorative and descriptive approach to the phenomenon, allowing for its intricacies to be explicated and, in a sense, ‘made real’ through the lens of those who legitimise its existence. This approach is reflected in the aim of this research to explore the constructions and lived experiences of association members engaged in SCRs within New Zealand. Accordingly, constructivist inquiry, previously called “naturalistic inquiry” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), was deemed the most suitable approach for this endeavour.

According to Schwandt (1998), constructivist inquiry is a “wide-ranging eclectic framework” (p. 242), while Moschkovich and Brenner (2000) defined it as a “theoretical stance and a set of research principles” (p. 460). As the name suggests, constructivist inquiry is situated within the constructivist paradigm (Appleton & King, 1997; Erlandson et al., 1993; Guba, 1981; Lincoln & Guba, 2016; McInnes et al., 2017). Lincoln and Guba (2016) stated that this approach combines the ontological position of relativism with the epistemological position of transactional subjectivism. The former pertains to the notion that individuals operate within their own constructed realities instead of a joint objective reality. The latter then posits that “The ‘realities’ taken to exist depend on a transaction between the knower and the ‘to-be-known’ in the particular context in which the encounter between them takes place” (p. 40). Lastly, in

considering axiology, knowledge is viewed as co-created between the researcher and the research participant.

In following these presumptions, constructivist inquiry presents numerous axioms, most notable of which is the presence of multiple realities (Erlandson et al., 1993; Guba, 1981; Lincoln & Guba, 2016). This axiom aligns with the socially constructed nature of SCs, which again do not conform to any singular conceptualisation but instead reflect the perspectives and realities of those involved, which are multiple (see Fan, Huang, et al., 2019, Fan, Mori, et al., 2023; Gooding et al., 2015; Jain, 2005; Lloyd, 2010; O'Toole, 2001; Ramasamy & Cremer, 1998; J. Smith & Ballingall, 2003). Constructivism posits that each person operates within the bounds of their own constructions that constitute *a* 'reality'. Lincoln and Guba (2016) described the concept of a construction as a "mental realization—'a making real'—of an apparently singular, unitary entity or relationship" (p. 47).

Constructions are primarily the result of individual sense-making efforts and are thus inherently subjective. Nonetheless, some constructions also emerge from collective efforts at sense-making and are thus shared:

Many aspects of constructions are frequently shared between individuals who hold similar values or beliefs, or who, for a variety of reasons (think again of class, race, gender, sexual orientation, political leanings, religious upbringing, and the like), "see" the world in the same way. (p. 47)

According to Erlandson et al. (1993), the greater the totality of shared constructions between people, the greater the understanding and communication. Constructivist researchers thus attempt to share the constructions of those whose lens frames the phenomenon under investigation (Erlandson et al., 1993). However, it should be noted that this axiom does not reject the existence of a physical reality:

While constructivists would never deny that each of us must navigate a physical reality, constructivists recognize that it is rarely the raw physical reality which shapes our behavior and our response to the physical environment. It is, rather, the meanings we associate with any given tangible reality or social interaction which determines how we respond. (Lincoln & Guba, 2016, pp. 11-12)

Another axiom is that researchers themselves are the main data-gathering instrument, for the intricacies of differing realities and mutual simultaneous shaping can only be comprehended by the human instrument (Erlandson et al., 1993; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This further aligns with the study of SCs, which “exist primarily in discursive space, in the form of mediated images, texts and spoken words” (Lloyd, 2010, p. 60). There are arguably few tools beyond the human instrument that can effectively extract meaning from spoken words, especially when such words are not readily available for analysis and must first be drawn out and discussed.

Mutual simultaneous shaping, a key facet of this axiom, refers to the notion that “all elements in a situation are in mutual and continual interaction” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 155). Elements in an interaction are viewed as a web, net or pattern; in any given action, many elements are implicated. Each element interacts with another, which the outside observer views as an outcome or effect. However, as Lincoln and Guba explained, these interactions have no directionality. In other words, interactions possess “no need to produce that particular outcome ... it simply ‘happened’ as a product of the interaction – the mutual shaping” (pp. 151-152).

Finally, within constructivist inquiry, knowledge is viewed as being created rather than discovered, and is context and time-specific (Lincoln & Guba, 2016). Consequently, objectivity is dismissed, as constructions are inherently subjective, and no methodology is entirely independent of those who develop and employ it (Erlandson et al., 1993). Erlandson et al. stated that the constructivist inquirer does not distance themselves from the setting; instead, they seek to work collaboratively with participants to develop a deep and contextual understanding and explication of social phenomena. This endeavour necessitates avoiding generalisations and, instead, favouring contextual interpretations (Erlandson et al., 1993). For this reason, constructivist inquiry is best suited to hermeneutic and dialectical approaches, which depict a two-way process where constructions are disclosed, explored, confronted, compared and contrasted (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Lincoln & Guba, 2016). Given this research’s focus on constructions, lived experiences, and discursively situated knowledge, a hermeneutic and dialectical approach was warranted.

Several measures achieve the above. Firstly, these axioms are satisfied by conducting research within a ‘natural’ setting, for constructions cannot be isolated from their context (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Secondly, they are achieved through the utilisation of grounded theory as no priori theories can adequately account for the multitude of realities that may be encountered during the inquiry process and because “a priori theory is likely to be based on a priori generalization, which, while they may make nomothetic sense, may nevertheless provide a poor idiographic fit to the situation encountered” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 41). Lastly, thick description is used to detail the context and intricacies of constructions (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Erlandson et al., 1993). The obligation to demonstrate transferability rests with the reader, who then applies the findings to a receiving context. Thick description, therefore, aims to put the reader vicariously into the context and enable them to determine transferability (Erlandson et al., 1993).

Guba and Lincoln (1989) outlined five applications of constructivist inquiry, three of which were adopted in this research. The first application is *exploration*: “to explore areas that are initially impossible to conceptualise and so lay the basis for a more rigorous investigation later” (p. 160). The second is *description*, which represents an effort to provide rich contextual information. The third application is *realisation*: by providing depth, realism, anecdotal materials, and or vicarious experiences, constructivist inquiry can “help audiences realize – in the sense of ‘make real’ – both the particulars of a case and the construction of those particulars entertained by each of the several audiences” (p. 161). The remaining applications, *illustration* and *testing*, did not suit this research as they rely on moderate levels of pre-existing theoretical and conceptual understanding of the phenomenon in question, which is lacking in the case of SCs.

3.1.1 A Constructivist/Interpretivist Approach

While constructivist inquiry guided the research process in this research, an interpretivist lens, specifically interpretive phenomenology, was employed to explore and analyse the meaning of participants' lived experiences. Accordingly, the approach taken can be best described as constructivist/interpretivist. Schwandt (1998) described constructivist and interpretivist approaches as "general descriptors for a loosely coupled family of methodological and philosophical persuasions" (p. 221). Proponents of these persuasions subscribe to the notion that "to understand this world of meaning, one must interpret it" (p. 222).

This undertaking calls on the inquirer to "elucidate the process of meaning construction and clarify what and how meanings are embodied in the language and actions of social actors" (Schwandt, 1998, p. 222). Here, constructivist and interpretivist approaches overlap: "To prepare an interpretation is itself to construct a reading of these meanings; it is to offer the inquirer's construction of the constructions of the actors one studies" (p. 222). The blending of constructivist and interpretivist principles aims to illuminate the meaning of a phenomenon through the experiences of those who encounter it, while accentuating "the contextual nature of qualitative research findings, which are elicited through a co-construction between the participant and researcher" (Frechette et al., 2020, p. 4).

3.1.1.1 Phenomenology

Interpretive phenomenology is situated within the broader lexicon of interpretivist approaches, but as the name suggests, its roots lie in phenomenology. Edmund Husserl's original conceptualisation of phenomenology was intended to be a "pure, presuppositionless science of consciousness" (Moran, 2002, p. 126) that demanded a return to phenomena as what appears or is directly given in experience. This stance posits that knowledge is constituted through the conscious awareness of phenomena (Lock & Strong, 2010). For Husserl, this foundational element was the reality of conscious experience, which he believed could be analysed to reveal the fundamental conditions that make knowledge possible. In other words, I experience the

world first, and then I question it second. To analyse this experience in its pure form, Husserl proposed the method of epoché (bracketing), which temporarily suspends presuppositions to allow the researcher to focus on how things are given in experience (Lock & Strong, 2010; Wojnar & Swanson, 2007).

3.1.1.2 Interpretive Phenomenology

While Husserl's phenomenology sought to describe experience as it appears, later developments shifted toward an interpretive stance. Jackson et al. (2018) explained that Husserl's intentions were epistemological, aiming to provide a foundation for knowledge through the study of the *Lebenswelt* (lifeworld). However, later phenomenologists, most notably Martin Heidegger, argued that human experience is always already embedded in meaning, history, and context, making pure description inaccessible (Heidegger, 1962). This shift gave rise to interpretive (hermeneutic) phenomenology, which views the subject as inextricably intertwined with phenomena; there is no neutral, presuppositionless access to experience because all experience is interpreted through one's prior understanding:

But if interpretation must in any case already operate in that which is understood, and if it must draw its nurture from this, how is it to bring any scientific results to maturity without moving in a circle, especially if, moreover, the understanding which is presupposed still operates within our common information about man [sic] and the world? (Heidegger, 1962, p. 153)

On this basis, Heidegger conceptualises interpretation as a “hermeneutic circle”, a process explained by Wojnar and Swanson (2007) as “moving back-and-forth between the whole and its parts and between the investigator's forestructure of understanding and what was learned through the investigation” (p. 175). This process also considers the modes of existence in which both experiences and interpretations are framed (Conroy, 2003; Crist & Tanner, 2003; Wojnar & Swanson, 2007), leading to a joint effort in which any resulting knowledge is co-created (Frechette et al., 2020). Therefore, hermeneutic inquiry aims “to identify the participants' meanings from the blend of the researcher's understanding of the phenomenon, participant-generated information, and data obtained from other relevant sources” (Wojnar & Swanson, 2007, p. 175).

3.1.1.3 Situating Interpretive Phenomenology within Constructivist Inquiry

Interpretation, especially idiographic interpretation, is fundamental to attaining data within constructivist inquiry (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, 2016). However, beyond an emphasis on hermeneutic and dialectical methodologies, the approach to interpretation is not explicitly defined. Instead, the constructivist inquirer is encouraged to select a methodology appropriate to the topic of study while remaining willing to adapt and accommodate as the research progresses (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

This research examined the constructions and lived experiences of members involved in SCRs, a phenomenon that has received limited attention and lacks theoretical and conceptual foundations. Given this, there was no prescribed means to collect or analyse data, no guide to follow, no expectations to be met, or assumptions to be made. Moreover, as I quickly found, members seldom discussed or contemplated the phenomenon in detail. Interpretation thus represented a constant negotiation as members navigated their sense-making efforts. These efforts did not follow a linear path but frequently shifted back and forth, often cyclically—our conversations generated new understandings, reframing prior interpretations. The hermeneutic circle held relevance. On this basis, interpretive phenomenology was employed to complement the dynamic and co-constructed view of knowledge within constructivist inquiry.

This combination is by no means novel, as numerous studies have mixed interpretive phenomenology with constructivist approaches (see Bush et al., 2019; A. Foster et al., 2015; Frechette et al., 2020; McNamer, 2018; Ritchie et al., 2020; Schoenhofer, 2002). Unlike descriptive phenomenology, which seeks to bracket external influences, interpretive phenomenology acknowledges that pre-existing understandings, language and social context always mediate experiences. It aligns more closely with the axioms and principles of constructivist inquiry, making it a suitable methodology for examining how people experience phenomena.

3.1.1.4 *Grounded Theory*

Alongside interpretive phenomenology, this research also drew on grounded theory due to its alignment with constructivist inquiry, particularly its support for an emergent design (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Grounded theory is ideal for constructivist research because it avoids reliance on a priori theories, which may not be suitable or applicable to specific contexts. Its associated analytical methods, such as Glaser and Strauss' (1967/2017) constant comparative method, also allow for an adaptive and iterative approach responsive to the research setting (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Glaser and Strauss (1967/2017) defined grounded theory as “the discovery of theory from data systematically obtained from social research” (p. 3). Charmaz (2014) noted that this approach aims to move qualitative inquiry beyond description and provide abstract, conceptual understandings of phenomena. Unlike theories deduced a priori, grounded theory involves early and continuous engagement with data through iterative comparison and analysis.

Lincoln and Guba (1985) acknowledged challenges in defining a ‘grounded’ theory, emphasising that Glaser and Strauss relied on the notions of ‘fit’ and ‘work’. Lincoln and Guba further noted that grounded theory has been likened to ‘local’ theory, used to systematise tacit understandings, and as patterned: “It is open-ended and can be extended indefinitely; and it is discovered empirically rather than expounded a priori” (p. 206). While differing from nomological approaches, grounded theory can inform working hypotheses and serve as a foundation for future research. However, Lincoln and Guba (1985) stressed that such theories are ultimately the theorist’s *constructions*.

3.1.1.5 *Constructivist Grounded Theory*

After publishing *Discovery of Grounded Theory* in 1967, Glaser and Strauss diverged in their interpretations, with Strauss turning towards constructionist thinking, while Glaser remained aligned with positivist functionalist sociology in what has been regarded as ‘objectivist’ grounded theory (Bryant & Charmaz, 2019). Nonetheless, it has also been noted that Straussian

grounded theory, although relativist and subjectivist in approach, relies on objectivity and is influenced by positivist assumptions (Burns et al., 2022). Subsequently, seeking to challenge such assumptions, a third approach has emerged, regarded as constructivist grounded theory.

Given this research's philosophical position, the latter approach to grounded theory was adopted, specifically that introduced by Charmaz (2014). One of Charmaz's primary critiques pertained to how her peers treated social research in the 1980s and early 1990s:

Sociologists who conducted social constructionist research often produced impressive analyses of the constructions of the worlds they studied. But they treated their analyses as accurate renderings of these worlds rather than as constructions of them. Nor did they take into account *their* processes of construction of the research and the structural and situational encroachments upon it. In keeping with the conventions of the times, researchers erased the subjectivity they brought to their studies rather than acknowledging it and engaging in reflexivity. (p. 14)

Charmaz's turn was to accentuate the researcher's involvement in the construction and interpretation of data and to argue, like Lincoln and Guba (1985), that grounded theory results from "an interpretive portrayal of the studied world, not an exact picture of it" (Charmaz, 2014, p. 17). This approach emphasises reflexivity, theory development as a co-constructed process, and coding as flexible, iterative and interpretative.

3.1.1.6 Combining Methodological Approaches

Interpretive phenomenology and constructivist grounded theory both follow similar epistemological and ontological positions, and, over time, the boundaries between them have become blurred: "Within the backdrop of shifting paradigms, grounded theory and phenomenology have co-evolved to result in the overlapping yet distinct methodologies of CGT [constructivist grounded theory] and interpretive phenomenology" (Burns et al., 2022, p. 10). Nonetheless, Burns et al. emphasised the different intentions and applications each encapsulates, where the former focuses on the meaning embedded within lived experiences of phenomena, and the latter targets how individuals cope with, navigate, and adapt to phenomena. This does not, however, suggest that the two methodologies are mutually exclusive. On the contrary, Burns et al. explained that the two methodologies can complement each other: "We posit that

constructivist grounded theory, informed through the findings of an interpretive phenomenological inquiry of the many possible meanings of human experience, may more accurately identify and name the core category or process within a grounded theory inquiry” (p. 10).

It should be noted that, in following constructivist inquiry, the intent of this research has not been to develop theory or to understand lived experiences in isolation. Instead, alongside exploring experiences, this research sought to generate constructions and extrapolate from these potential working hypotheses. Consequently, interpretive phenomenology was employed in conjunction with the principles of constructivist grounded theory to provide a rich interpretation of members’ lived experiences while also considering how these were mutually shaped by constructions. The two methodologies were thus contributory, synergistically addressing constructivist inquiry’s hermeneutic and dialectic needs.

This simultaneous approach differs from the sequential order proposed by Burns et al. (2022). Given the unpredictability of an emergent design, it was found that a predetermined sequential pattern was not always applicable or necessarily useful. Furthermore, constructivist inquiry adheres to the notion of mutual simultaneous shaping, in which experiences and constructions are interdependent and co-evolving—experiences shape constructions, just as constructions actively mediate and frame new experiences (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This is also supported by Schutz's (1967) proposition that meaning is intersubjectively constructed through a continual process of interpretation, where shared typifications and stocks of knowledge shape and are reshaped by lived experiences.

Accordingly, the concurrent integration of interpretive phenomenology and constructivist grounded theory provided a more holistic understanding of participants’ experiences and constructions without presupposing the direction of their influence. Interpretive phenomenology primarily guided the interpretation of participants’ lived experiences, while constructivist grounded theory facilitated the generation of constructions and underlying patterns. Their

integration enabled a dialectical engagement with both meaning and adaptation, ensuring that interpretations remained open to emergent complexities.

3.1.1.7 Multiple Case Study Approach

Although this research explores the constructions and lived experiences of association members, data collection and analysis took place within three distinct *cases*, each representing an SCA in New Zealand. These cases provided a bounded context that could be used to identify potential participants, while also acting as a point of contrast, enabling analysis of how constructions and experiences compared both within and across associations. This approach also responds to Zelinsky's (1991) appeal for in-depth research on individual pairings.

Reflecting the interests of local communities, SCAs provide an alternative perspective on SCs, which have historically been studied through the lens of local government officials (De Villiers et al., 2007; Fan, Huang, et al., 2019; Fan, Mori, et al., 2023; Gooding et al., 2015; O'Toole, 2000, 2001; Ramasamy & Cremer, 1998; J. Smith & Ballingall, 2003; Walker et al., 2024). Additionally, participation in SCAs is not determined by electoral outcomes or employment obligations, allowing for a broader range of involvement and, by extension, a more diverse array of constructions and experiences.

Case studies are the primary means of research within constructivist inquiry, as they emphasise the context within which constructions are shaped, thereby improving the effectiveness of thick description and facilitating the study of multiple realities (Erlandson et al., 1993; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Bhattacharjee (2012) explained that the case study method is useful for exploratory studies seeking to discover "relevant constructs in areas where theory building is in its formative stage ... where the experiences of participants and the context of their actions are critical, and those aimed at understanding complex, temporal processes" (p. 94). Additionally, George and Bennett (2005) stated that drawing inferences from case studies can be best achieved through cross-case comparisons. The use of multiple case studies further enhances efforts to understand numerous constructed realities and their contextual relevance

(Erlandson et al., 1993; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Hence, three different cases (SCAs) were chosen and comparatively analysed.

3.2 Research Design

Lincoln and Guba (1985) noted that, unlike ‘conventional’ inquiry, constructivist inquiry often involves a scenario in which the inquirer “*does not know* what he or she doesn’t know” (p. 209). Therefore, the inquirer equally does not know *how* to best discover what they do not know. On this basis, constructivist inquiry calls for an emergent design that is fluid, unfolding, and iterative (Erlandson et al., 1993; Guba, 1981; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Adding to this further, Lincoln and Guba (1985) wrote, “the focus of the naturalist [constructivist] should forever be on adaption and accommodation. Review, recycling, and change must be central postures” (p. 249). Given an emphasis on context, a priori decisions regarding design are not easily relied upon, as these may be unapplicable or inappropriate to the specific context. It is implausible that an inquirer can fully anticipate the myriad of constructions (realities) they may encounter in the field, making it difficult to devise an appropriate research design in advance.

Any attempt to adhere to a rigid, pre-determined design risks imposing artificial constraints on the inquiry, shaping findings in ways that may overlook emergent meanings or contextual nuances. Instead, through the inquiry process, a contextually relevant design is unravelled: “The naturalistic [constructivist] researcher will need to plan for anticipated circumstances, but decisions as to how one will deal with them must be left until the context of time, place, and human interactions is better understood” (Erlandson et al., 1993, p. 67). With these conditions in mind, the following outlines the initially proposed design and how this developed throughout the inquiry process.

3.2.1 Setting

Fundamental to any constructivist inquiry is the setting in which research is conducted. ‘Naturalistic’ inquiry, as it was initially coined, got its name from strict adherence to a natural setting as “naturalistic ontology suggests that realities are wholes that cannot be understood in

isolation from their contexts, nor can they be fragmented for separate study of the parts (the whole is more than the sum of the parts)” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 39). This axiom requires that inquiry be directed towards a setting where phenomena can be observed in context, rather than being isolated and manipulated in a controlled manner. This adherence does not imply that all things have a natural setting, nor that claims to a setting’s naturalness can be substantiated. Rather, a natural setting is any place where a phenomenon occurs naturally, without external intervention or influence, for example, a routine activity versus an orchestrated trial (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

A natural setting is deemed necessary to grasp the intricacies of the multiple constructions of a given phenomenon. However, socio-technological shifts have slowly obscured the role of place (Rainie & Wellman, 2012; Wellman, 2001) and, with it, the relevance of ‘natural’ as a qualifier. To use the previous example, a class can now be conducted entirely online, involving students from various countries in different locations. One student could be in their room while another is in a library or a café. In this case, any one of these locations, including cyberspace itself, may constitute a natural setting. Moreover, an emergent design precludes the ability to assess which setting to pursue. If the inquirer indeed “*does not know* what he or she doesn’t know” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 209), they will arguably not know precisely where to look.

Lincoln and Guba (1985) offered some guidance on addressing this dilemma, including preliminary fieldwork and the engagement of gatekeepers and informants who can assist in identifying and gaining access to natural settings. Additionally, Erlandson et al. (1993) recommended using survey questionnaires and engaging in dialogue with subject matter experts to assess the suitability of a setting. They noted that the intended outcome of these efforts is to identify an ideal setting, rather than an elusive, perfect utopian setting. To this point, Marshall and Rossman (2006) observed, “Unless a study is quite narrowly construed, researchers cannot study all relevant circumstances, events, or people intensively and in depth” (p. 61). Accordingly, in the pursuit of an ideal setting, Marshall and Rossman emphasised the importance of being realistic:

A realistic site is where (a) entry is possible; (b) there is a high probability that a rich mix of the processes, people, programs, interactions, and structures of interest is present; (c) the researcher is likely to be able to build trusting relations with the participants of the study; (d) the study can be conducted and reported ethically; and (e) data quality and credibility of the study are reasonably assured. (p. 62)

These aforementioned strategies can help determine a suitable research setting. However, some phenomena are more obvious than others. When researching SCRs, one must first determine what a typical SC activity entails and where it occurs. It has consistently been shown that exchanges are the most prominent activity within an SCR and are perhaps befitting of the qualifier ‘typical’ (Fan, Huang, et al., 2019, Fan, Mori, et al., 2023; Gooding et al., 2015; O’Toole, 2000, 2001; Ramasamy & Cremer, 1998). Still, Chapter Two shows that SCs are prone to change and interpretation. Furthermore, my initial conversations with association presidents revealed that exchanges could be an ideal as opposed to the norm; none of the three SCRs selected had a routinely operated exchange programme. In reality, the activities pursued by each association were categorically amorphous. This aligned with Zelinsky’s (1991) suggestion that SCs do not follow a set formula and Lloyd’s (2010) assertion that: “In practice, the idea of sister cities is so elastic in meaning and application as to enable it to be appropriated as ‘all things to all people’” (p. 310). Consequently, what constitutes an SC-related activity is often ambiguous, as are the locations of said activities.

Although I do not doubt that observing an SC exchange would yield rich data, following Marshall and Rossman’s (2006) advice, I deemed such an endeavour to be unrealistic, given the infrequency of delegations and exchanges, as well as the fact that most members do not participate in these visits themselves. Due to the focus of this research and the inherently subjective and personal nature of SC activities, I elected to focus primarily on interviews, allowing members to determine the location of these interviews. The exception to this was the first interview, which, for most members, took place remotely. Even then, members were given the choice of which digital medium they wished to use.

3.2.2 Case Selection

Building on the preceding discussion, cases were selected using purposive sampling, targeting maximum variation (Erlandson et al., 1993; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Preference was given to cases with an availability of willing members who were likely to possess a range of constructions and experiences. Accordingly, the cases needed to involve an active SCA with a public profile. Although people engage in SCRs outside of an explicit entity, without the assistance of a recognised group, accessing these individuals and determining their level of involvement is an arduous affair, one that Marshall and Rossman (2006) would likely deem unrealistic. SCAs also possess an organisational history that allows for historical analysis.

These criteria alone severely limited the pool of potential cases. While there are approximately 131 SCRs across New Zealand, no official data exists on the number of SCAs or their whereabouts. After conducting an online search of all SCRs nationwide, only 17 were revealed to have an active SCA with publicly available information. Of these, six were in Christchurch, three were in Dunedin, and three were in Wellington.

With maximum variation in mind, considering age, location, size, and recent activity, the first case study was selected due to its high probability of yielding rich data. This ‘high probability’ was determined by the historical significance of the SCR in question, the large membership of the SCA itself, and the consistency of their activities. These activities are detailed through the story of each member in Section B, where their contextual relevance is most clearly understood. By an emergent design, the second and third case studies were selected sequentially based on the initial data from the first. This ensured that each case did not overlap and that there were sufficient points of contrast, notably in terms of each SCA’s activeness, structure, size and capacity, further enhancing comparative analysis (George & Bennett, 2005). As shown in Table 1, the three SCAs explored were also connected to three separate SCRs, notably between Cambridge and Le Quesnoy (France), Wellington and Sakai (Japan), and Christchurch (NZ) and Christchurch (UK).

Table 1: Summary of Case Studies

Association	Sister City Relationship	Year Established	Membership Size	Participant Numbers
Association A	Cambridge (NZ) and Le Quesnoy (France)	2000	Between 100 and 150	7
Association B	Wellington (NZ) and Sakai (Japan)	1995	Between 20 and 30	4
Association C	Christchurch (NZ) and Christchurch (UK)	1972	Around 10	3

3.2.3 Participant Selection

This research examined a niche phenomenon that is not readily accessible, as evidenced by the limited public information available on SCs, particularly in New Zealand. Therefore, locating individuals with relevant experiences of SCR presented a challenging endeavour. To overcome this hurdle, snowball sampling was used in conjunction with purposive sampling. Parker et al. (2019) explained that while snowball sampling is criticised for its selection bias and lack of external validity and generalisability, these concerns carry little weight within qualitative studies that do not pursue such conditions. For qualitative research, snowball sampling is thus viewed as an efficient and cost-effective means to access people who would otherwise be difficult to find (Naderifar et al., 2017).

A further factor that had to be considered was the level of commitment required to participate in this research. Participant attrition in longitudinal research is a well-documented hurdle that can adversely impact the quality of findings (Gustavson et al., 2012; Seals, 2017; Young et al., 2006). This research was relatively short compared to other longitudinal research, at just under a year; however, the decision to conduct three interviews per participant meant that the risk of

attrition could not be ignored. Beyond these concerns, there was also the potential that not enough members would join from a specific SCA, rendering it an unsuitable case study. Accordingly, members needed to be able to make an informed decision regarding their commitment. At the same time, as the researcher, I also required the ability to select SCAs purposively based on the availability of willing members, which could not be immediately ascertained due to snowball sampling.

To address these issues, the first set of interviews within each case study was approached as ‘selection’ interviews. The benefits of this were twofold. Firstly, it allowed members to experience the research and gain a deeper understanding of its purpose, enabling them to decide whether they would like to participate further. This did not eliminate the possibility of attrition, but ensured members had a greater awareness of the required commitment (Neale, 2019). Secondly, the selection interviews helped determine whether there was sufficient interest before each SCA was finalised as a case study.

All members were asked to consent before the selection interview and again before the second interview if they agreed to participate further. Despite this distinction, data collected from the selection interviews were analysed similarly to subsequent interviews and included in the findings. All three SCAs approached in this research were selected, and out of the 15 members who attended the selection interview, only one chose not to proceed further. An outline of the participants is shown in Table 2. With confidentiality in mind, a pseudonym is used for the names of each participant.

Snowball sampling commenced with the presidents of each association, who were initially contacted via email using publicly available contact information. After explaining the study, presidents were asked to discuss the opportunity with other members and, if it was deemed acceptable, invite them to participate. This process then continued, with each successive member being asked to invite others to the study, until a degree of saturation was reached, mainly due to the exhaustion of willing participants. The target number of members per case study was five. This sample size was informed by the needs of interpretive phenomenological analysis, which

benefits “from a concentrated focus on a small number of cases” (J. A. Smith et al., 2021, p. 46). Furthermore, it was determined that a minimum of three members would be required in each case study to facilitate meaningful comparisons. Aiming for five members meant that sufficient numbers would still exist even if some withdrew from the study.

Table 2. Summary of Participants

Member Pseudonym	Association	Gender	Age	Length of Involvement	Has worked in Local Government
Bernadette	A	Female	Over 65	Over 20 years	No
Philippe	A	Male	Over 65	Under 5 years	No
Clara	A	Female	30 to 45	Under 5 years	Yes
Josephine	A	Female	Over 65	Under 5 years	No
Chrissy	A	Female	Over 65	Under 5 years	No
Claude	A	Male	Over 65	15 to 20 years	No
Chloé	A	Female	46 to 65	Over 20 years	Yes
Marsia	B	Female	30 to 45	5 to 9 years	No
Lafcadio	B	Male	45 to 65	Under 5 years	No
Evelyn	B	Female	46 to 65	Under 5 years	Yes
Penny	B	Female	46 to 65	5 to 9 years	No
Otis	C	Male	46 to 65	5 to 9 years	No
Crockett	C	Male	Over 65	10 to 14 years	Yes
Oliver	C	Male	Over 65	Over 20 years	No

Following participant selection, a notable contrast in gender balance was evident in certain case studies, as shown in Table 2. This was not intentional, but instead reflected the specific membership bases of each association and the availability of potential participants, both factors

that were beyond the control of this research. Any effort to proactively attain a gender balance would have interfered with the snowball selection process. Moreover, there are currently no grounds to suggest that gender plays a role in how people construct or experience SCRs. Determining this would constitute a study in itself.

3.3 Data Collection

According to Erlandson et al. (1993), “the primary purpose of gathering data in naturalistic [constructivist] inquiry is to gain the ability to construct reality in ways that are consistent and compatible with the constructions of a setting’s inhabitants” (p. 81). To achieve this, constructivist inquiry employs various methods, emphasising the researcher as the primary instrument and data-gathering tool. On this point, Lincoln and Guba (1985) explained that no non-human instrument devised a priori has sufficient adaptability to encompass and adjust to the multitude of constructions that may be encountered, nor the intricacies of mutual simultaneous shaping. Therefore, methods involving the researcher are preferred. These include interviews, observations, and, where applicable, data analysis derived from documents and artefacts.

Observation within the context of SCs is difficult to pursue, as anything can feasibly constitute an SC activity (Fan, Mori, et al., 2023; Lloyd, 2010; Zelinsky, 1991). While not inherently detrimental, these circumstances complicate determining how much of a given interaction can be attributed to the phenomenon versus external factors. Exchanges and delegations arguably present the most applicable expression of an SCR; yet again, the infrequency of these and the travel required can make observation an unrealistic endeavour.

Regarding documents and artefacts, it was quickly found that very little documentation on SCRs exists within New Zealand, which also applied to the three SCAs examined. Artefacts, primarily in the form of cultural gifts, could provide insightful analysis; yet, gaining access to these proved difficult. Members noted the importance of cultural gifts but explained that these were often stored away and not readily available. In considering both constraints, this research relied on interviews and the interpretation of spoken words. This approach aligned with Lloyd’s

(2010) assertion that SCRs “exist primarily in discursive space, in the form of mediated images, texts and spoken words” (p. 60).

3.3.1 Interviews

Lincoln and Guba (1985) wrote that the purpose of interviews is to obtain a here-and-now construction of entities experienced in the past, whether that be persons, events, activities, organisations, feelings, motivations, claims or concerns. Additionally, interviews represent “*projections* of such entities as they are expected to be experienced in the future” (p. 268). Seidman (2019) further explained that at the core of in-depth interviews lies a belief in the importance of stories and “an interest in understanding the lived experience of other people and the meaning they make of that experience” (p. 9). Accordingly, interviews are an effective means of collecting rich data on both constructions and lived experiences.

In constructivist inquiry, it is common for the researcher not to know what they do not know, a situation faced in this research. Such a position initially places structured interviews beyond reach, as there is a limited basis or reasoning to frame or direct appropriate questioning. In contrast, unstructured interviews rely on participants to dictate what they share. Through unstructured interviews, researchers are expected to gain a more holistic and contextual understanding of the different constructions at play and subsequently better direct future questioning (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

With this in mind, the three interviews conducted with each member were distinguished by their degree of structure. The first interview was unstructured, allowing members to share their experiences freely. This was then followed by a second, semi-structured interview, which built upon the findings of the first but still allowed members some agency to direct the discussion. The third and final interview was then more structured to address the emerging findings further. That said, within constructivist inquiry, “interviews take more of the form of a dialogue or an interaction” (Erlandson et al., 1993, p. 85). Accordingly, all three interviews still erred on the side of informality.

This approach meant that the process was more reciprocative than one-directional, better encompassing a co-constructed view of knowledge. As Collins (1998) argued, “because interviews are epistemologically ambiguous, morally ambivalent and emotionally charged they cannot be seen simply as repositories of ‘objective facts’ but should also be understood as *mutually constructed* [emphasis added] social events with an existential quality sui generis” (p. 70).

3.3.1.1 *Multiple Interview Approach*

The decision to conduct multiple interviews with each member followed the principle of prolonged engagement and its implications for credibility. According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), prolonged engagement “is the investment of sufficient time to achieve certain purposes” (p. 301), notably to develop an in-depth understanding of the relevant contexts, build rapport and trust with participants, and address any potential distortions that the researcher may introduce into the inquiry. Here, trust is viewed as a developmental process in which researchers:

demonstrate to the respondents that their confidences will not be used against them; that pledges of anonymity will be honoured; that hidden agendas, whether those of the investigator or of other local figures to whom the investigator may be beholden are not being served; that the interests of the respondents will be honoured as much as those of the investigator, and that the respondents will have input into, and actually influence the inquiry process. (p. 303)

This trust also acts to alleviate the risk of participant attrition (Given et al., 1990).

Each interview was not an isolated one-off occurrence but instead part of an ongoing dialectical process where members were actively involved in confirming the accuracy of constructions through recurring member checks. Within constructivist inquiry, member checks are an additional means of establishing credibility (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). As the study progressed, members were provided with a summary of the key ideas, findings, and interpretations that had been generated. These summaries were not simply a reiteration of each interview but a synthesis of what I learned from the inquiry process. These learnings were discussed at the start of each interview and, where necessary, reflected upon, amended, and further developed (Thorne, 2016).

Beyond credibility considerations, multiple interviews enabled synchronous data collection and analysis, ensuring that findings guided the inquiry as it progressed. Fontana and Prokos (2007) argued that this approach is well-suited to grounded theory, as it allows inquiry to unfold in an emergent fashion, where arising issues can be pursued freely. This also provided ample data to aid in developing what Schwandt (1998) described as the “inquirer’s construction of the constructions of the actors one studies” (p. 222), a process that was itself continuous and informed by frequent member checks.

3.3.1.2 *Unstructured Interviews*

The first set of interviews were unstructured. Unstructured interviews are often described as informal “conversations”, albeit with some embedded questions, that seek to draw out participants’ experiences and stories without imposing prior assumptions and or categorisations (Fontana & Prokos, 2007). Furthermore, a conversational approach provides greater authenticity as its unrestrained and open structure, in which greater control is surrendered to the participant, alleviates the likelihood of performativity (Swain & Spire, 2020). Therefore, advocates of unstructured interviews often adhere to a constructivist point of view and employ interpretive research techniques (Yan Zhang & Wildemuth, 2016).

It should be noted that although unstructured interviews do not use predefined questions, they are not necessarily random and non-directive. On the contrary, Yan Zhang and Wildemuth (2016) argued that for unstructured interviews to be effective, prior detailed knowledge, preparation, and conscious consideration of the study’s overall purpose and general scope are required. Accordingly, my tacit knowledge of the phenomenon shaped how the interviews were approached and progressed. On this topic, Lincoln and Guba (1985) stated that “tacit knowledge must not only be admitted but is in fact an indispensable part of the research process; it will be influential whether its influence is recognised or not” (p. 198).

In this research, my tacit knowledge was also drawn upon to prepare what Yan Zhang and Wildemuth (2016) called an aide-mémoire, which served as a broad guide to issues that might be covered in the interview rather than distinct questions. This helped ensure a degree of

consistency while also maintaining the flexibility inherent in an unstructured approach. These issues included, but were not limited to, members' awareness and perceptions of SCs before joining their associations, the development of these perceptions over time, and any predictions for the future.

Each unstructured interview, which also served as the selection interview, lasted approximately 30 minutes. This length was intentionally kept short to minimise the required commitment from members, while providing enough time to explore surface-level constructions and experiences. Still, this was not a strict rule, and the length was adjusted as needed to accommodate members' interests.

3.3.1.3 *Semi-structured Interviews*

The second set of interviews was semi-structured. Like an aide-mémoire, semi-structured interviews also employ an interview guide; however, this guide includes a list of specific questions tailored to the research aims (Yan Zhang & Wildemuth, 2016). Yet, as Yan Zhang and Wildemuth explained, being semi-structured, the researcher does not need to follow the wording of questions exactly or in a specific order. Instead, the researcher is encouraged to determine how closely the interview guide is followed based on the responses received. An interview guide contains a collection of *essential*, *extra*, and *throw-away* questions which, as their names suggest, differ in their degree of importance. The questions for this research were primarily based on initial findings collected from the prior, unstructured interviews, in conjunction with my tacit knowledge of the phenomenon.

The key themes generated from the first set of interviews, which informed the interview guide, included isolation, strategy, uncertainty, human connectivity, resource constraints, public awareness, volunteering, and youth engagement. The formation of these different themes into questions varied across each case and with each member, relative to the specific contexts of their constructions and experiences. Nonetheless, two examples that were consistent across all interviews were the following:

- How would you describe your awareness of other sister city relationships or sister city associations within New Zealand?
- What does success look like in your SCR, and how does your association contribute to this?

The first question pertained to isolation, while the latter addressed strategy and uncertainty. The exact wording of these questions was not critical, with the emphasis instead being on the ideas they represented.

The semi-structured interviews were approximately one hour in length. This allowed each question, topic, and idea to be explored more thoroughly than in the shorter previous interview. Additionally, members better understood the study and its required commitment, reducing the likelihood of unexpected burdens.

3.3.1.4 *Depth Interviewing*

As trust and rapport were built with members over time, each interview progressively delved deeper into underlying constructions and experiences. This approach was influenced by Seidman (2019), who encouraged primarily open-ended questions that seek to have participants reconstruct their experiences through storytelling. However, I did depart slightly from Seidman's approach, which suggests that researchers should limit their interaction during interviews. According to Seidman, excessive interaction can negatively impact participants' responses. In contrast, constructivist inquiry posits that the researcher's influence cannot and should not be ignored; the researcher and participant are viewed as peers engaged in a mutual interaction that is free-flowing, as opposed to premeditated (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

The final set of interviews thus represented what Jones (2004) described as depth interviewing. Within this approach, the interview is viewed as a "complicated, shifting, social *process* occurring between two individual human beings, which can never be exactly replicated" (p. 259). Jones argued that there cannot be definitive rules regarding the interview process, as such choices will depend on the understanding and relationship between the researcher and the

participant. This aligns with an emergent design, where the researcher cannot determine beforehand how social interactions, including interviews, will unfold.

To decide in advance the degree of interaction the researcher will pursue within an interview is to undermine the social complexities of said interactions in a manner that is, to some degree, orchestrated. On this point, Jones (2004) stated:

Some relationships may allow, without destroying trust and comfort, much more of the to-and-fro of debate and discussion between two human beings than others. What is crucial is that researchers choose their actions with a self-conscious awareness of why they are making them, what the effects are likely to be upon that relationship – and indeed whether their own theories and values are getting in the way of understanding those of the respondents. (p. 259)

This approach requires a greater emphasis on reflexivity, where researchers actively consider their role and influence within a given social interaction and adjust their actions accordingly. This reflexivity may lead the researcher to adopt a more passive approach, as Seidman (2019) suggested; the difference in Jones' (2004) approach is that this decision is made on a case-by-case basis in response to the circumstances of each social interaction (interview).

Given the depth of this final interview, the questions posed were directly targeted at each member depending on our previous conversations. Nonetheless, these questions were still tied into the general themes generated through synchronous data analysis and sought to explore members' constructions and experiences about them. Accordingly, variations of questions like "What is your interpretation of the word isolated?" were common.

This final set of interviews was the longest of the three, lasting approximately two hours. This length followed the same logic as the preceding set of interviews, this time extended further to allow for the richness of members' constructions and experiences to be appreciated in even greater depth.

3.3.2 Reflexive Journaling

A key element throughout the inquiry process was the use of reflexive journaling. Described as "critical, introspective analytic processes that lead to a deeper understanding of experiences"

(Meyer & Willis, 2018), reflexive practices entail reflection on past experiences and the embedded social and intersubjective processes. Reflexive journaling, as the name suggests, represents an iterative and intentional effort to achieve this via journaling. As Meyer and Willis noted, the practice of journaling does not itself result in reflexivity but can help facilitate it: “The opportunity for researchers to recall field experiences that might otherwise be dismissed can encourage iterative attempts to understand and contextualize intersubjective aspects of research encounters” (p. 579). Reflexive journaling also produces strategies to overcome challenges encountered during the inquiry process.

In this research, reflexive journaling was used following each interview. This included reflections on my interviewing techniques, responses, use of questions, the role and influence of my position, and my initial thoughts on emerging ideas and issues. As the interviews progressed, I also reflected on how the findings compared across different participants and case studies, as well as my own perceptions and the existing literature (see Appendix C for an example). This enhanced the study’s emergent design while ensuring that each interview built upon the last and that underlying issues related to my role as the researcher and the study itself were actively addressed.

3.4 Data Analysis

Data analysis reflected a blend of the constant comparison method (Boeije, 2002; Glaser, 1965; Glaser & Strauss, 1967/2017) and interpretive phenomenological analysis (Eatough & J. A. Smith, 2017; J. A. Smith et al., 2021). This approach aligned with the constructivist/interpretivist framework employed in this research and the principles of constructivist grounded theory and interpretive phenomenology drawn upon. The combination of the constant comparison method and interpretive phenomenological analysis was deemed necessary to address the two research questions which, although similar, targeted different elements, constructions and experiences. The two modes of data analysis were thus chosen for their applicability in exploring constructions and experiences, respectively.

3.4.1 Constant Comparative Method

The constant comparative method addressed the first research question: *How are sister city relationships constructed?* Glaser (1965) introduced the method as an alternative to dominant qualitative approaches. At the time, these either coded data sequentially or avoided coding entirely to derive theoretical insights from existing categories. The constant comparative method merged these strategies to support theory generation without limiting its development. The method emphasises discovery and hypothesis formation over testing by linking coding and analysis.

While the method is well established within grounded theory, including constructivist grounded theory, there is debate regarding how the process should be approached most effectively. Contention has arisen around the appropriate degree of rigidity and prescriptiveness, the role of the researcher, and the objectivity of the generated theories (Charmaz, 2014). As this research is first and foremost situated within constructivist inquiry, when deciding where to land on this scale, emphasis was placed on the guidance outlined by Lincoln and Guba (1985) and their subsequent works.

Lincoln and Guba (1985) encouraged the use of the constant comparative method within constructivist inquiry, going as far as to give their “enthusiastic endorsement of the notion of a 'continuously developing process' in which each stage provides guidance for the next throughout the inquiry” (p. 340). They were concerned not with method as a means of deriving theory, but with its utility as a means of processing data. They viewed this process as an analytical tool, not as rigid or prescriptive, but as fluid and cascading, one that could be refined over time. Their main critique, if anything, was in Glaser and Strauss’s (1967) oversimplification of the effort required to assign incidents and generate categories. To combat this, Lincoln and Guba (1985) emphasised the role of tacit knowledge, creativity, and ingenuity, as well as the importance of successive reviews.

Given that constructivist inquiry adheres to relativism and transactional subjectivism, Lincoln and Guba (1985) shared Charmaz's (2014) view that the outcome of the constant comparative method, or any analytical method for that matter, is not an objective depiction of reality, but a subjective interpretation—a construction. For Lincoln and Guba (1985), however, this stance did not constitute a substantive deviation from Glaser and Strauss's (1967) original conceptualisation, at least not a priori. A core principle of constructivist inquiry is its commitment to emergent design: the assumption that the inquirer, as the human instrument, cannot know in advance which methodological or analytical tools will prove most appropriate for the contexts encountered or the nature of the data collected. Accordingly, Lincoln and Guba (1985) regarded design choices, including the use of the constant comparative method, as provisional blueprints, recommending that any modifications or adaptations be made only after engagement with the field, thereby ensuring a better 'fit' between the method, context, and data.

In line with this suggestion, I adopted Glaser and Strauss's (1967) constant comparative method as a means of processing data, while remaining prepared to make adjustments as the inquiry progressed and my understanding of the context deepened. One such adaptation was the incorporation of Boeije's (2002) 'purposeful' approach, which argues that the steps and points of comparison in the analysis should be intentionally designed relative to the inquiry's focus, rather than assuming that prescribed procedures will automatically fit. In this study, this did not represent a departure from the underlying principles of the constant comparative method, but rather a recalibration of the specific steps and the manner in which incidents were compared.

3.4.1.1 A Purposeful Approach to the Constant Comparative Method

As the name suggests, one of the defining principles of the constant comparative method, as conceptualised by Glaser and Strauss (1967/2017), is to constantly compare incidents or units of information arising in the data. Throughout this process, the theoretical properties of categories are more adequately defined and then further elaborated by comparing incidents to the rules of the category. Once categories and their properties are established, relationships between categories become clearer, category sets are detailed, and theories emerge

Still, Boeije (2002) noted that the literature provides little clarity on conducting constant comparison or determining relevant data. Echoing Lincoln and Guba (1985), they state, “Making the right choices in this process depends on the creativity, experience, knowledge, talents, support and sensitivity of the researcher” (Boeiji, 2002, p. 409). Boeiji’s purposeful approach addresses this gap by introducing four criteria that systematically guide constant comparison. These criteria include describing the data to be analysed, outlining the aim of the comparison, determining important questions that address this aim, and recording the results. They further encourage comparisons to be conducted in steps relative to the inquiry topic. In their study on couples coping with the effects of multiple sclerosis, a five-step analysis procedure was developed:

1. Comparison within a single interview.
2. Comparison between interviews within the same group.
3. Comparison of interviews from different groups.
4. Comparison in pairs at the level of the couple.
5. Comparing couples.

Boeiji emphasises that the various steps in this process are often cyclical and do not need to be linear. Additionally, they acknowledge that no procedure can precisely determine which comparisons will be fruitful for developing categories but maintain that “comparisons go hand-in-hand with interpretation, and it is our opinion that purposeful comparison makes the valuable task of interpreting social phenomena a much easier proposition” (p. 409).

In adapting Boeiji’s five-step analysis procedure, this research conducted comparisons within each individual interview, then between interviews within the same case study, and finally between interviews from different case studies. This process was then repeated for each set of interviews, allowing for comparisons across different sets. The process continued throughout the inquiry in a cyclical fashion until the categories were refined and there was sufficient analysis upon which to write the constructions. Given this process directly involved reconstructing the

constructions of participants (Schwandt, 1998), the generated constructions were mutually shaped and co-created (Erlandson et al., 1993; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

3.4.2 Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis

Interpretive phenomenological analysis addressed the second research question: *How are sister city relationships experienced?* According to Eatough and J. A. Smith (2017), the method “is concerned with the detailed examination of personal lived experience” (p. 1). Like the constant comparison method, interpretive phenomenological analysis shares an interest in clarifying and elucidating phenomena but places more emphasis on how individuals experience them and “the sense they make of their experience, rather than the structure of the phenomenon itself” (p. 3). As its name suggests, interpretive phenomenological analysis is situated within hermeneutics and phenomenology. It engages in the hermeneutic circle by analysing data in an inductive, iterative, dynamic, and nonlinear manner (Eatough & J. A. Smith, 2017).

Building on their earlier work, J. A. Smith et al. (2021) presented seven steps to interpretive phenomenological analysis. These are: (1) reading and re-reading, (2) exploratory noting, (3) constructing experiential statements, (4) searching for connections across experiential statements, (5) naming the personal experiential themes and consolidating and organising them in a table, (6) continuing the individual analysis of other cases, and (7) working with personal experiential themes to develop group experiential themes (GETs) across cases. As this process suggests, interpretive phenomenological analysis moves from the particular to the holistic and from the descriptive to the interpretative. Furthermore, the dynamic nature of the method allows for frequent shifts in the direction and level of analysis, accommodating “the possibility of a creative, insightful, and novel outcome” (p. 77). This outcome includes generating key experiential themes at both the personal and group levels. Regarding the latter, J. A. Smith et al. noted that GETs highlight aspects of experience shared across participants, as opposed to ‘group norms’ or ‘averages’.

Once key themes have been generated, the researcher may be led to re-read their data, or even the entire transcript, in a new light, adopting an iterative approach that aligns with the principles of the hermeneutic circle. This shifting between the whole and the parts can allow for a deeper analysis of lived experience and help generate new ideas, thoughts, and interpretations while strengthening confidence in the accuracy of said elements (J. A. Smith et al., 2021).

In utilising interpretive phenomenological analysis within this research, the seven steps outlined by J. A. Smith et al. (2021) were followed. However, since data collection and analysis centred on case studies and their comparison, emphasis was placed on generating GETs within the context of each association and its respective SCR.² This aimed to explore how participants experienced their SCRs, individually and collectively, while also considering potential explanations for the similarities and differences observed across cases. In this approach, one might rightly question whether the nuanced and individualistic intent of interpretive phenomenological analysis was compromised. It is precisely this concern that led me to adopt a combined approach.

3.4.3 Combining Analytical Approaches

A core principle that drove the design of this research is that experiences and constructions are intrinsically linked; one cannot be understood without at least some appreciation for the other. Erlandson et al. (1993) illustrated this point in the context of language:

In the same way that language constructs experience, it enables constructions to build on other constructions (what Piaget would identify as formal operations). As this occurs, the human mind devises ways of shaping experience that enable individuals to better adapt to it. *Shared constructions provide the basis for communication between people, and shared experiences and communication about them generate additional shared constructions* [emphasis added]. The totality of shared constructions among a human group is the foundation of their language and their culture. (pp. 23-24)

² To better align with the terminology within constructivist inquiry, GETs are referred to as ‘shared constructions’ in others sections of this thesis.

Based on this logic, one could expect that shared constructions of SCs shape shared experiences, which in turn reframe constructions in an ongoing process. I argue that dissecting the phenomenon into an experience and a construction to be studied independently would obscure inquiry and prevent the generation of meaningful inferences that can adequately account for the intricacies involved. This is notably Lincoln and Guba's (1985) stance and is central to the notion of mutual simultaneous shaping.

The preceding point does not suggest that interpretive phenomenological analysis or the constant comparative method are concerned solely with experiences or constructions. However, as analytical tools, the former favours the "detailed examination of personal lived experience" (Eatough & J. A. Smith, 2017, p. 1), while the latter favours "generating and plausibly suggesting (but not provisionally testing) many categories, properties, and hypotheses about general problems" (Glaser & Strauss, 2017, p. 104). Neither of the two methods alone fully addresses both experiences and constructions. Attempting to stretch either method beyond its intended scope may risk methodological inefficiency, akin to using a saw to hammer a nail — possible, yet not ideal. Thus, in recognising the interplay between experiences and constructions, I viewed combining interpretive phenomenological analysis and the constant comparative method as a complementary choice and a logical necessity for the research objectives. This approach could, therefore, be understood as a form of methodological pragmatism (C. Foster, 2024).

Although the two methods were used jointly, this was not in a rigid or predesignated manner. "Since the form of the data that will ultimately be produced by the human instrument is unknown in advance" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 224), I could not determine beforehand the type of data I would collect, the complexities of this data, nor how it would be presented to me. Accordingly, I also could not predetermine the exact manner in which data analysis ought to be approached. In such circumstances, Lincoln and Guba suggested that attention be placed instead on selecting the "best means to 'make sense' of data in ways that will, first, facilitate the continuing unfolding of the inquiry, and second, lead to maximal understanding (in the sense of *verstehen*) of the phenomenon being studied in its context" (pp. 224-225).

Practically, this meant utilising interpretive phenomenological analysis and the constant comparative method simultaneously to pursue lines of inquiry as they arose. For example, early interpretive phenomenological analyses often highlighted key incidents, which warranted comparative categorisation through the constant comparison method. These comparisons refined experiential statements and themes, illustrating the iterative interplay between the two methods. Together, these methods enhanced adaptability while supporting the progression of inquiry in an inductive and emergent manner. Moreover, this combined approach encapsulated the flexible thinking, creativity, innovation, and sensitivity encouraged by Lincoln and Guba (1985), Boeije (2002), and J. A. Smith et al. (2021).

3.5 Does Constructivist Inquiry ‘Fit’?

To conclude this chapter, I would like to return to the topic of constructivist inquiry. As would have been evident throughout this chapter, many of the design decisions made relied on principles and reasoning derived from constructivist inquiry. Consequently, the credibility of this research equally depends on the fit of said principles to the study of SCs. Were this alignment shown to be misguided, many of the findings would rightfully be brought into question. Determining the fit of constructivist inquiry thus occupied considerable contemplation.

In the study of SCs, outside of the few doctoral theses on the topic, such as Lloyd (2010) and Bui (2024), methodological decisions are seldom explained in detail or reflected upon. Instead, likely due to the shorter length of journal articles, varying qualitative and quantitative methods are employed, with minimal justification for their applicability or effectiveness. Consequently, while our knowledge of the phenomenon may have grown, our understanding of how to study it, or perhaps even why to study it, remains comparatively underdeveloped. This is arguably one contributing factor to Jayne et al.'s (2013) claim that most studies “ultimately fail to make a case for just what theoretical work it is that studying city twinning achieves” (p. 241).

Currently, the phenomenon provides no basis for determining whether a given methodological approach will fit. Therefore, studying SCs means diving into uncharted waters

with little more than the clothes on one's back. If SCs and similar forms of inter-municipal partnerships are to occupy a more prominent and permanent position within academic discourse, then we must begin by making the 'plunge'. As Jayne et al. (2013) suggested, this necessitates exploring the phenomenon's implications beyond the narrow framing within which it is often presented. Given the absence of established methodological frameworks in SC research, constructivist inquiry provides an approach that does not impose artificial constraints on what is, ironically, still a developing field. Instead, it embraces the fluid, emergent nature of meaning-making. It is against such a backdrop of uncertainty and the demand for exploratory measures that constructivist inquiry 'fits'.

Lincoln and Guba (1985) claimed that constructivist inquiry is suited to "inquiry that is ongoing at the forefront of disciplines" (p. 50). It is geared towards formulating probable yet tentative understandings and interpretations of unexplored phenomena primarily through the lens of those who construct and experience them. This is reflected in its key principles, which I have expanded on throughout this chapter—notably, the utilisation of tacit knowledge, emergent design, grounded theory, hermeneutical and dialectical thinking, inductive data analysis, ideographic interpretation, and the generation of negotiated outcomes. Constructivist inquiry is not the only methodological approach that can claim such principles, yet it is distinguished by the adaptability and fluidity of its application. To again quote Schwandt (1998), constructivist inquiry is a "wide-ranging eclectic framework" (p. 242). It represents a blank slate that is underpinned by a "theoretical stance and a set of research principles" (Moschkovich & Brenner, 2000, p. 460). The researcher is afforded relative freedom to adopt specific methods and approaches as required through the inquiry process.

3.5.1 Limitations of Constructivist Inquiry

Notwithstanding the applicability of constructivist inquiry to SCs, it would be remiss of me not to acknowledge the shortcomings that emerged throughout the inquiry process. Most notably, as I have previously expressed, constructivist inquiry emphasises the significance of conducting research within a setting that is both 'natural' and, to an extent, 'local' (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

However, as the inquiry process progressed, it became evident that such notions hold questionable relevance within the context of SCs as there is limited basis to determine what is natural or local. Accordingly, in following an emergent design, some leniency was employed when it came to the research setting as, without this, other aspects of the inquiry would have been impacted. In other words, determining a specific setting would have necessitated imposing my interpretation of the phenomenon, affecting the credibility of the findings.

Credibility is an issue that must constantly be contended with in constructivist inquiry. One may question how a co-construction of phenomena interpreted through the subjective sense-making efforts of groups and individuals can be deemed credible. While the pursuit of objectivity is ideal, a constructivist inquirer would argue that there is no objective depiction of social phenomena. All social phenomena are in some way shaped by human interpretation and understanding, which are inherently subjective factors (P. L. Berger & Luckmann, 1966). The inquirer, instead, strives to depict social phenomena in a manner that, while subjective, remains accurate to the individuals and groups whose experiences and views construct them. Lincoln and Guba (1985) provide means by which this can be achieved, including prolonged engagement, persistent observation, triangulation, peer debriefing, negative case analysis, referential adequacy, and member checks.

In this research, prolonged engagement and member checks were the primary means of ensuring credibility, which were supplemented by triangulation and negative case analysis. Peer debriefing was considered but ultimately deemed unsuitable due to the complexity and depth of the study and the obscurity of the phenomenon under investigation, which could not readily be appreciated by a “disinterested peer” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 308). Persistent observation was not applicable due to the absence of observation in this research. Lastly, referential adequacy, where the inquiry purposely archives pieces of data for later review, in order to test the validity of the conclusions, was also deemed unsuitable, for this would demand that segments of members’ stories be intentionally ignored.

The use of prolonged engagement, explained briefly earlier in this chapter, ensured that I, as the inquirer, spent sufficient time engaging with participants to build rapport and alleviate the risk of undue distortions. To this latter point, prolonged engagement provided those involved in the study, including myself, with the opportunity to reflect on their interpretations and, where needed, make adjustments. Member checks then allowed participants to clarify their stories and address any miscommunications or misunderstandings. As a supplement to these strategies, triangulation was also utilised as the study involved three case studies and 14 participants who were interviewed using multiple interview techniques. Additionally, negative case analysis, where hypotheses are continuously refined until they can account for all known cases, was employed indirectly in data analysis as a part of the constant comparison method. Together, these strategies helped establish credibility in the findings and how they have been interpreted (Erlandson et al., 1993; Guba & Lincoln, 1989).

SECTION B

The Stories of Association Members

This section presents the stories shared by each member and the corresponding findings generated. It is structured into three chapters, each dedicated to one of the three case studies and organised as a case study report. These reports begin with an overview of the case and its setting, followed by a thick description of each member's constructions and lived experiences. In this context, thick description refers to "an empirically rich narrative that is presented with both a *verstehende* and an explanatory ambition in mind" (Beuving & de Vries, 2014, p. 174). The narratives are presented chronologically, following the sequence of each interview, to preserve the contextual relevance of time and reflect the extended span over which the inquiry unfolded. I elaborate on the rationale for this approach below.

Members' sense-making efforts did not develop independently of time or the inquiry process. Their constructions did not spontaneously emerge out of thin air; they resulted from cumulative discussions over a prolonged period. As shown throughout this section, members constructed their experiences in real-time; as each interview progressed, their constructions changed and developed. For many, our interviews were the first time they had been prompted to articulate their thoughts. Consequently, everything discussed, every idea raised, and the order in which these occurred were all factors in how members made sense of their experiences and vice versa. My role as an inquirer can also not be ignored, as the questions I posed and the order in which I asked them, among other factors, contributed to this construction process. Without understanding how members developed their thoughts, ideas, and constructions chronologically throughout the inquiry, any findings generated become meaningless, akin to an unexplained conclusion—a punchline without a joke. Here, it is also important to reiterate that the research questions explored *how* SCRs are experienced and constructed as opposed to *what*.

One may argue that an easy solution might have been to include the transcripts in full in the appendices. However, this would arguably remove the 'human' aspect of these conversations,

instead regulating them to static words on a page, especially given the need to include numerous redactions. Thick description has, therefore, been chosen as an alternative that also satisfies the conditions of transferability by providing a rich account of the context of inquiry: “If phenomena not only take their meaning from but actually depend for their existence on their contexts, it is essential that the reader receive an adequate grasp of what that context is like” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 360).

As you read through these thick descriptions, you will likely notice several themes that are shared across different stories, what could be referred to as ‘shared constructions’: the collection of signs and symbols and associated meanings held in common by two or more individuals that make possible the conditions of shared experience (Erlandson et al., 1993; Lincoln & Guba, 2016). My interpretations of these shared constructions and shared experiences comprise the bulk of the findings and are included at the end of each case study report. In this manner, the stories and thick descriptions are not findings in and of themselves; instead, they “specify everything that a reader may need to know in order to understand the findings” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 125).

The thick descriptions aim to elicit a vicarious experience that enables judgements of transferability. When making such judgements, it should be noted that the findings generated are but one possible interpretation of the data (van Manen, 1990). They reflect what Gadamer (1975/2011) described as a ‘fusion of horizons’, the merging of different historical and cultural perspectives between the inquirer and the participant. Whether these findings have relevance for others, including you, the reader, will depend on your understanding of both the sending and receiving contexts and their suitability.

CHAPTER FOUR

Cambridge and Le Quesnoy

4.1 Introduction

Historical bonds are not a rarity in SCRs; SC partners often share a resemblance or sentiment of joint history, some more obvious than others (Zelinsky, 1991). For many SCRs, their formation represents a deliberate effort to repair the fractures of war and conflict, a testimonial departure from prior differences (Jain, 2005). However, for some relationships, ties have been forged not as an attempt to mend past wounds but rather on the primary basis of remembrance and commemoration (Zion, 2002). This first case study is one such example. Through the shared constructions of members, this chapter explores the unique (members' own words) bonds between two towns, Cambridge (New Zealand) and Le Quesnoy (France), that have endured over a century and have since been cemented as an SCR. The stories of those interviewed are encapsulated in a century-spanning journey of how people “*from the uttermost ends of the earth*” (Chrissy) came to regard one another as friends.

4.2 100 Years of Friendship

To understand this SCR, one must first understand the events that led to its inception, the significance of which is described by Chrissy:

The villagers were just so impressed that our soldiers came from so far away to spare the town and free its citizens ... people have never forgotten, and they really drill into their children, the stories, their friendship, the association, the connection. And you ask any child about New Zealand, they'll break out in a Māori song or something. They can sing our national anthem in English. ... So, the children will carry on that connection because they're taught it. You know. They walk down the streets; their school is named after the Kiwis and that kind of thing.

The historical event referenced here is the liberation of Le Quesnoy, achieved solely by New Zealand troops near the conclusion of the First World War. The infantry division of the New Zealand Expeditionary Force faced the dilemma of either bombarding the town to weaken

German defences, inadvertently leading to collateral damage, or opting for a direct assault without such preparatory measures. As is likely deductible, they elected to undertake the latter. Consequently, in a “medieval-like assault” (Manatū Taonga — Ministry for Culture and Heritage, 2018, para. 6), troops used ladders to scale the 13-meter-tall walls and ramparts around the town.

Approximately 2,000 German troops surrendered shortly after the New Zealand Division entered and subsequently recaptured the town without a single civilian casualty. The liberation has since been regarded as “the New Zealander’s most successful day of the whole campaign on the Western Front” (Manatū Taonga — Ministry for Culture and Heritage, 2018, para. 2). The liberation of Le Quesnoy transpired on the 4th of November 1918, but the preparations and ensuing small advances spanned seven days. While numbers vary, it is estimated that the liberation cost the lives of around 140 New Zealand soldiers (Manatū Taonga — Ministry for Culture and Heritage, 2018). The events of that day created the foundation for a relationship spanning over 100 years between people from the uttermost ends of the earth.

Numerous veterans, including one who resided in Cambridge, would return from Le Quesnoy to share their stories. Clive Mortimer-Jones was a chaplain for the New Zealand Rifle Brigade that liberated Le Quesnoy, but he was also the vicar of Cambridge’s Saint Andrew’s Anglican Church. After the war, he returned to his parish but endeavoured to maintain connections with Le Quesnoy. His efforts eventually led to the installation of stained-glass window panels at Saint Andrew’s in 1923, with one such panel depicting soldiers scaling the walls of Le Quesnoy on the 4th of November 1918.

As a reverend, Mortimer-Jones shared the significance of the liberation with his congregation, which, in combination with the stained-glass panels, helped build an affiliation between Cambridge and the French town. Around this time, Walter Averill, brother to Leslie Averill, the first soldier to climb the ladder onto the ramparts, moved to Cambridge to complete a curacy at Saint Andrew’s, further strengthening the connection. Later, the efforts of Mortimer-Jones and Averill were continued by Margaret Blyth, the daughter of the late Lieutenant Colonel Lawrence ‘Curly’ Blyth, a Le Quesnoy veteran whose ashes are now buried at Saint Andrew’s. These

events culminated in Cambridge and Le Quesnoy officially becoming SCs in 2000, 82 years after the liberation.

4.3 Association A

This case study follows seven members of an association (hereafter referred to as Association A) that supports the SCR between Cambridge and Le Quesnoy. The association was formed in conjunction with the official establishment of SC ties in 2000, driven by the late Peter Lee, then-deputy mayor of the Waipā District Council. Lee helped launch the association and was instrumental in forming the SCR. He was the association's first chairperson and led the group until his untimely passing in 2011.

As a constitutional requirement, an elected community board member chairs the association. This helps provide accountability for any fiscal expenditure and a more direct line of communication to the local council, which allocates an annual budget of \$10,000. This budget covers all SC-related expenses across both of Cambridge's SCRs. It is unclear how much of the budget is allocated to the association, but members' experiences suggest they receive very little. Association members organise promotional activities and events to raise awareness for the SCR and the historic significance of Le Quesnoy. The wider group, I was told, acts as a social club, within which an informal smaller group engages on a more pragmatic level.

The association comprises descendants of past service personnel, genealogists, historians, French enthusiasts, and elected council officials, all of whom predominantly volunteer. Their involvement spans a year to two decades. There is no formal membership; instead, anyone who is interested is welcome to join. The association meets informally regularly but sometimes ad hoc (around once every two months). Meetings will occasionally have guest speakers but otherwise serve as social gatherings for members to share stories and promote personal discoveries and achievements relating to Le Quesnoy.

4.4 Setting

Identifying a ‘natural’ setting’ within an SCR is an arduous task, as Chapter Three details. In this case, no setting was tied to the relationship that could unequivocally be attributed to the word ‘natural’. Association members did not collectively participate in a single uniform activity. Even the association’s gatherings only saw regular attendance from about a third of the membership. Their actions were instead varied and personalised, occurring online, outside and inside, at cafés, pubs, on fields, at churches, at people’s houses, at event centres, in different cities and towns, and, in some cases, in other countries. This list was constantly growing and categorically fluid. With this logic in mind, emphasis was placed not on adhering to a preconceived notion of a utopian natural setting, but instead on the preferences of members, who arguably hold precedence over the designation of ‘natural’.

The setting of each interview, except for the first, which was held remotely, was determined by each member. Where interviews were held remotely, members had agency over the medium used. Most opted to be interviewed over the phone, some via mobile, and others via landline. The location of in-person interviews included members’ homes, cafés, and even a pub. One member also opted to have all meetings online. While most interviews took place within or near Cambridge, one member met me at a café in an entirely different city, as they were visiting at the time.

4.5 Bernadette

“Bernadette” described herself as a “*very, very active young 81-year-old*”. In her own words: “*I grew up in the Marlborough Sounds. I was a schoolteacher, as my mother was. My father was a farmer. Yes. And I’ve had a good life. Yes, very good life.*” From the minute we began speaking, Bernadette displayed an air of optimism that rarely faltered. Bernadette retired in Cambridge, where she has lived for over 25 years. She joined Association A shortly after the SCR was formalised in 2000 and has been active since. Bernadette is an ardent volunteer and, I might add, a committed archivist. The sheer number of photos, posters, books, and articles on Le Quesnoy

Bernadette collected in the past two decades would rival most museums. I would be inundated with different things to see and record during our interviews, while Bernadette effortlessly recounted each photograph's history. One picture often would lead to another, each with its own story to be told and each a testament to Bernadette's dedication to a history she holds dear. This is Bernadette's story.

4.5.1 Interview One

I'm just a volunteer, you know, on the volunteer committee.

When I contemplated the design of this research, perhaps clouded by my "youth", I neglected to consider the possibility that members might, in fact, prefer communicating over the phone; Bernadette was one such member and was certainly not the last. As someone who relies heavily on facial expressions to supplement verbal communication, phone calls are not exactly my forte. For many of the members in this case study, however, calling was the norm, and most still possessed a landline. When I suggested we hold the interview via Zoom or Microsoft Teams, Bernadette responded, "*It will have to be landline or cell phone, as I have not heard of the other methods.*"

Like most members, Bernadette began by explaining her connection to Le Quesnoy, which, in her case, comes through her father. She is one of the few people alive today whose father fought at Le Quesnoy, a fact that is not lost on her:

I haven't found anybody else around here whose father was there. It's very hard to find people whose father is. Yes, because my brother and sister and I, of course, it's all still very much alive, but we're fairly young to be [children of] First World War soldiers, so I haven't found anybody else in Cambridge at all whose father was there. So, I sort of feel that, you know. But that's the connection, obviously. Yes, that's why I'm so interested.

Throughout her lengthy involvement, Bernadette has come to know many of the relationship's original instigators, or at least their children. Here, I learned about Clive Mortimer-Jones, his son John Mortimer, Carly Blyth and his daughter Margaret Blyth. Bernadette noted, "*I knew all these people, but of course, they've died in the meantime because they were a bit older than me.*"

Bernadette described the relationship as a changing one. She expressed that the SCR launched with ample energy and was driven by the local information centre and a dedicated deputy mayor. In contrast, when I asked about the momentum as of late, she responded:

You know, it's sort of flattening off a bit now, actually. But we, we still have get-togethers every now and again. But we used to have monthly meetings. We had a deputy mayor here in Cambridge, Peter Lee. He died a few years ago, too, but he was very involved and very enthusiastic. ... He and his wife and Sue and Tom Pickering used to go every year to Le Quesnoy, always around Anzac weekend, and that's when we went in 2005; we met up there. ... So, we've always had a sort of a delegation going every year in that respect. I don't know if they're still keeping it up or not. Maybe not as much as it was in the earlier days.

Bernadette later addressed her comments, saying they in no way reflected the quality of those involved and that any changes she observed were a natural progression: *"I mean, you can be enthusiastic at the very beginning, but this is over 20 years. And very few of those people from 20-odd years ago are still involved or are still alive."*

One of the first questions I asked each member was to describe, in their words, the concept of an SCR. In her response, Bernadette expressed, *"That's a difficult one because I really do not know that much about sister cities."* To Bernadette, her involvement was adjacent to the SCR: *"I'm sort of not involved on the sort of sister city side of it."* She had divided the relationship into two halves: a volunteer half, which promoted the connection with Le Quesnoy, and an official SC half, reserved for the local council and community board. As a member of neither, Bernadette viewed the SC aspect as something beyond her: *"I'm just a volunteer, you know, on the volunteer committee."* I recall thinking this was peculiar for someone with over 20 years of experience, the longest of all members. Nonetheless, she appeared content with this arrangement, stating, *"I'm a person that's always done a lot of volunteer work, and I love it, you know, just helping people out in every way."*

4.5.2 Interview Two

I'm sorry; I'm a survivor.

Bernadette elected to welcome me to her home, where our second interview took place. After we sat down at her dinner table, I could see that Bernadette had prepared an array of photos and books before her. She was holding a piece of paper with an assortment of handwritten notes. Gesturing to the paper, Bernadette proudly informed me that following our last discussion, she had done research and now had a better grasp of the SC concept. Admittedly, I was quite pleased to hear our previous interview had motivated such action but was equally puzzled by Bernadette's sudden inquisitiveness that had lain dormant for over two decades.

As Bernadette shuffled through the photographs in front of her, she lifted one and, with a chuckle, announced, *"I've got to skite about my father."* The photograph showed a group of men operating a 4.5-inch howitzer near the outskirts of Le Quesnoy; her father could be seen clearly in the back; she told me he was the layer. Speaking to the photo, she noted, *"It's in just about every book you look in. And my son would say, 'Mum, there's your father again', because that photograph, because it's a very good picture of a 4.5 howitzer."*

Bernadette showed me a second photograph of a group from Cambridge she travelled with to Le Quesnoy. She told me the stories of a few individuals but then followed with, *"Everyone else has died off, unfortunately. And a lot of the people that were helping us out as well."* One such individual was the past president of the Le Quesnoy Cambridge Association (the Le Quesnoy equivalent of Association A), who guided them around the town. Bernadette recalled her experience at Le Quesnoy, saying, *"They treated you like royalty."* According to Bernadette, this kind of trip used to be common. Past deputy mayor Peter Lee would organise small groups to visit around Anzac Day each year, usually involving several recurring figures. Furthermore, the association would meet monthly at Peter's office, where they would also learn a bit of French from another member, while indulging in French wines and cheeses.

Bernadette explained how she, Peter, and “John” used to set up a display at the Town Hall during the annual Cambridge Armistice celebrations: *“Peter used to have these big boards, and he would love to take them out from his office room that he had. And we’d get them all set up, and we’d have great fun over there. But that’s years ago.”* Since Peter’s passing, Bernadette has continued to put up a display each year for over a decade. The display contains photographs reflecting Le Quesnoy’s liberation, the town and the famous ramparts. She also includes a map of the Western Front showing the location of Le Quesnoy and Compiègne, near where the Armistice was signed, alongside a sign reading ‘Do you know about Armistice?’ She told me, *“It’s important to know where these places are.”*

Bernadette shared story upon story of various individuals like Peter, who had since passed; no less than 13 in total. Bernadette’s experience was that of a survivor, a sentiment she herself shared. When we were discussing a book containing the letters sent by Clive Mortimer-Jones during the First World War, Bernadette explained, *“And I knew his son, actually. I always know, I always know the children of all these people. But he’s died, and his wife. I’m sorry; I’m a survivor.”* Bernadette’s predicament did not appear to bother her. If anything, she was poking fun at herself, as the last sentence was given in a playful tone, a cheerfulness I had become accustomed to. Speaking about one group who visited from Le Quesnoy, she stated, *“And now three or four of them have died; Gerard [a member of the group] has just died. Oh dear. But I mean, they were sort of late eighties, so I mean, what do you expect? And they’ve had a good life.”* While many of those involved have passed, she felt the connection was continuing to flourish: *“There’s more people now going that know about Le Quesnoy. I mean, after 20-odd years, you’d expect it. But there’s lots of people going for all sorts of reasons.”*

4.5.3 Interview Three

I’ve been involved right from the start ... why shouldn’t I help out and have some bright ideas?

Our third interview was also at Bernadette’s house. She had again prepared an assortment of material relating to Le Quesnoy on the table. But this was just the beginning; as the interview progressed, she would pull out more albums, photographs, posters, and books from various

locations in her house. Eventually, she covered both tables in her living room. Bernadette's interest in Le Quesnoy appeared to transcend much more than just volunteering; for all I could see, it was a hobby and a passion project. This passion also meant that Bernadette had many stories to share, often leading us in various directions.

I shared a summary of my thoughts thus far with Bernadette, including the seemingly isolated fashion in which the association operated. I found that members had limited knowledge of SCs beyond their own and, consequently, collaboration and communication were rare. Upon hearing this, Bernadette responded, *"True,"* and shortly followed with *"Well, you see, we don't really know."* She then mentioned that Bihoro, the other SC of Cambridge, would be visiting shortly but remarked, *"Well, I've got nothing to do with that group."* The notion that collaboration and shared learning were not pursued with more impetus was a shock to Bernadette:

You'd think New Zealanders, as we are in the way we think. You'd think that would be the very first thing we'd think of because that's the sort of people we are, as compared with characteristics of other countries ... we really should, being New Zealanders and the way we think, we really should be connecting up with these other towns that have sister relationships with faces of wartime.

Hearing this last line, I mentioned several historic SCRs I knew of, including Çanakkale (Turkey) and Wellington (New Zealand), and Ypres (Belgium) and Hamilton (New Zealand). The latter surprised Bernadette as her father fought at Ypres in the First World War. Thus, upon hearing this, she exclaimed, *"Well, do they? Now you see, that's so silly because I've been to all those places."* Bernadette's experience was very telling; she had a strong connection to Ypres through her father and had travelled there several times. However, she never once encountered that Ypres has a relationship with a city less than 30 minutes from where she lives and would frequently visit.

I mentioned another relationship between Christchurch (New Zealand) and Christchurch (United Kingdom). Christchurch in the United Kingdom is near a small village known as

Brockenhurst.³ I was about to explain the significance of this village before Bernadette beat me to it: “*Ah yes, I’ve got the book of all the graves there.*” Sure enough, Bernadette knew about Brockenhurst and its historic connection to New Zealand. How did Bernadette come to own such a book? She tells me the key is to talk to people. Bernadette struck up a conversation with an English couple while visiting the beaches at Normandy, who happened to know someone in New Zealand who wrote a book about Brockenhurst. Then several months later, “*Blow me down, this book arrives.*” Bernadette had been sent a signed copy of the book from the author. While this is just one of Bernadette’s many stories, it highlights a disposition that may explain her long-time involvement in the relationship: being friendly and inquisitive:

This is something I will teach you: talk to people, talk to strangers when you’re in a strange country, and things like that, even around New Zealand. And you’ll be surprised how, all of a sudden, things just happen. That was just amazing. Talking to that guy for about 10 minutes overlooking the Normandy landing beaches. And he says he knows this lady. He sent out the book that was just brilliant.... And then he sends it to me, no cost or anything. And most sort of things happen when you talk to people.

Such was her passion that Bernadette volunteered considerable time towards the SCR. She explained that in her day, if your husband had a job, he had a job for life, which meant the wife did not need to work. Instead, “*We did voluntary work, didn’t we? We brought our children up, and I did a lot of voluntary work.*” Bernadette continued to volunteer through the displays she puts up during the Armistice commemorations. I asked if she gets any help, and she responded with a dejected “*No, I just do it myself.*” She then took a deep breath and said:

In fact, I, I have a bone to pick with the Cambridge people and the people that have been involved with the organisation. And a lot of them are councillors and people like that, and they don’t come anywhere near it in the [Armistice] weekend. And I thought, you are not showing any interest. And that’s sad. They’re on the council or the community board. ... And I thought, why aren’t you interested?

This was the first time I heard Bernadette divert from her usually cheerful demeanour. Intrigued, I asked her to describe the relationship between the association and the local council and

³ Brockenhurst was the site of the No.1 New Zealand General Hospital during the First World War: 93 New Zealanders who died in the war are buried at a nearby Churchyard (Commonwealth War Graves Commission, n.d.).

community board, to which she laughed and jokingly remarked, “*Well, oh yes, well, they’ll come to the meetings, especially if they’re paid to come.*” Suddenly, Bernadette returned to her animated self. Nonetheless, it seemed that at the centre of her experiences was the construction of a disinterested council and community board, an issue that she would touch on several more times throughout the interview. Bernadette attributed this disinterest in part to the transient nature of council involvement:

They [the community board] were putting in people that were supposed to be, well, were chairing our meetings and things, but as soon as those people weren’t there, they don’t come to anything. ... As you say, with changing of committees and presidents and chairpeople, they disappear, and then they don’t seem to want the interest, which is a pity.

While Bernadette had several concerns regarding the management of the relationship, it appeared she had seldom raised these with the council or community board:

I’m not on the council and because we just retired here, and so, therefore, we were not involved at that level here. We are just involved as volunteers. ... Although I’m, I did volunteer work at the information centre, and that was great. And what I say, the Citizen Advice Bureau, volunteer places like that, which sort of put my foot in the door as to what was going on. But on a volunteer level and never at any other level.

Bernadette’s recurring view of herself as “*just a volunteer*” or “*just*” a retiree seemingly precluded her from utilising civic channels to engage with the council to help rectify the concerns she harboured. Consequently, her years of wisdom and experience remain untapped. That being said, Bernadette expressed the view that the association was to soon undertake a review of sorts, which she noted had never before occurred in her over 20 years of involvement:

They said at our meeting on Monday, you know, ‘better have a debrief’. And I sort of thought it’s the first time they’ve actually said that. And it’s a good idea to have a debrief because even just the question you’re asking me today and it’s making me think that there are a lot of things that we can get more involved with, even though we have the French group that comes out and we’ve got a lot this year actually, which is good. But a debrief and sort of say, well, how did that go or how it didn’t go?

Then, in an almost 180° turn from her previous comments, Bernadette staunchly declared:

And as you say, innovations and things like that, it’s got me thinking about maybe I could suggest a few things. Who knows? Seeing I’ve been involved right from the start here because of my father being there, and therefore, why shouldn’t I help out and have some bright ideas?

4.6 Philippe

“Philippe” is a recently retired solicitor who moved to Cambridge from Te Awamutu about a year before our first interview. A self-described historian, Philippe is keenly interested in First World War history, inspired by his grandfather’s presence at Le Quesnoy. Philippe is a relatively new member of Association A and thus brought a fresh perspective that, in some respects, contrasted with his peers. Having previously lived in Te Awamutu, Philippe also knew about the town’s bygone relationship with Moree, which formed the basis for many of his constructions and experiences. This is Philippe’s story.

4.6.1 Interview One

It’s dependent on the amount of council commitment, and I think that’s a weakness.

My first interview with Philippe took place over the phone via landline. He reassured me that *“as a retired solicitor, I am used to long and potentially detailed phone conversations,”* and he certainly wasn’t lying. Philippe was very articulate and could eloquently present his thoughts with seemingly little effort, a skill I had yet to master.

Like Bernadette, Phillippe first explained his connection to Le Quesnoy through his grandfather, a fact he had only recently learnt. It was this discovery that encouraged him to join Association A. He noted his limited prior knowledge of SCs *“except in a very general sense”*. Most of the knowledge he possessed came from a relationship previously held by Te Awamutu:

Te Awamutu had a twin-town relationship with a town in Australia, which was very active at one stage but pretty much died out 10 years ago. Again, it relied heavily on council involvement and interest by councillors, and I think that was the reason it died out.

From the get-go, Philippe demonstrated a curiosity for the inner workings of SCs and had much to say about the concept despite his self-described limited knowledge. He expressed that the concept was difficult to define: *“It’s a very elastic concept.”* Again, recalling the unfortunate demise of Te Awamutu’s relationship, he remarked, *“The sister city concept is probably not as strong as it once was.”* When I asked what an active relationship would look like, he proposed

two fundamental factors: “*a council being committed long term*” and “*volunteers promoting that relationship*”. To Philippe, if either side is removed, the relationship ceases to function. He also noted that councillors “*come and go*”, which he felt was a vulnerability: “*The weakness of the concept at the moment is that it depends entirely on the energy that individual councillors are prepared to contribute.*” Philippe’s experience seemingly mirrored Bernadette’s.

The volunteer side of Philippe’s proposed equation within Cambridge is Association A. According to Philippe, the association has excellent leadership and meets informally about four times yearly. But he also remarked that “*it’s become very low-key, and I was personally worried that it might wither away*”. In describing his overall perception of the relationship’s activeness, Philippe stated, “*Out of a hundred per cent, I’d give it about 50 at most, but I’m optimistic of that improving. It’s partly a function of COVID-19, of course.*” His reasoning related to his earlier statements, “*It’s dependent on the amount of council commitment, and I think that’s a weakness.*” He then emphasised, “*This is not a criticism of any one individual or the council. It just seems dependent on how much time and energy the council puts into it.*”

4.6.2 Interview Two

It was quite unique; it will stay in our minds for the rest of our lives.

Our second interview was held at Philippe’s house. I remember Philippe opening his front door and greeting me with a wide grin as he ushered me inside. As we began to chat, Philippe held a printed version of the summary I had sent him from our previous interview. I asked if he had anything he wanted to add or address, to which he replied, “*No. ... Really nothing to add from what I’ve already told you.*” This, in retrospect, is quite ironic, as Philippe had more to ‘add’ than any other person I spoke to.

Given Philippe felt he had little else to share, I decided to probe, beginning with his grandfather. He informed me that he became aware of his grandfather’s involvement in 2017. Philippe had long known his grandfather fought in the First World War, partly due to family mythology and an old war helmet that had been passed down, but he did not learn of his

involvement in Le Quesnoy until quite recently. Through his own efforts, Phillippe discovered his grandfather's battalion and that he was injured on the 3rd of November, the day before the liberation. This discovery led Philippe to receive an invitation to attend the official commemoration at Le Quesnoy on the 4th of November 2018. He explained that the invitation "*produced a flurry of war inquiry*" throughout his family, resulting in a trip to Le Quesnoy to attend the commemorations.

In recounting his experience at Le Quesnoy, Philippe spoke of the town as flooded with other Kiwis who all shared similar stories, experiences, and passions, to the extent that Philippe recalls frequently bumping into people he knew. The presence of the New Zealand Defence Force, in particular, was so strong that Philippe suggested that "*the area around the walls became part of New Zealand for a couple of days*". The shops along the streets were decorated with red poppies, small cut-out kiwis, and welcoming signs, an atmosphere described by Philippe as "*absolutely amazing*". He told me residents would instantly recognise him as a Kiwi due to the red poppy he wore. On one occasion, Philippe was stopped by a local family who noticed his grandfather's helmet on his hip and asked about the story behind it, leading to a short conversation in English and French. The interaction, while seemingly fleeting, left a mark on Philippe. It would seem that, for these few days, Le Quesnoy becomes a home away from home for New Zealanders. This experience, in Philippe's words, "*was quite unique; it will stay in our minds the rest of our lives.*"

I asked Phillippe to elaborate on his comments from the first interview regarding the relationship's reliance on key individuals, especially within the council. Here, he again referenced the now-lapsed relationship held by Te Awamutu:

I commented because Te Awamutu had a twin town arrangement with a place in Australia called Moree; I think that was driven by a brass band connection, possibly. That was very strong until about 20 years ago. But you never hear of it now. And again, these tend to be driven by councils or council staff who are enthusiastic. All of a sudden, people lose interest, and the whole thing just dies. But certainly, I think that's a vulnerability in Cambridge as well that you have to involve people who are not necessarily descendants of service personnel who served there. It's got to grow outside that particular battle narrative.

Philippe felt Cambridge and Le Quesnoy could avoid a similar fate by alleviating their reliance on specific individuals and by broadening the scope of interest. Philippe suggested that the new Liberation Museum in Le Quesnoy presents an opportunity to achieve this due to its off-the-beaten-track appeal.⁴ The museum could capitalise on a “*huge untapped potential for World War I tourism*”, especially in terms of the Western Front, by enticing Europe-bound New Zealand travellers.

By this point in the interview, Philippe’s ideas were flowing readily. One factor that caught his attention was the management structure of the SCR. Currently, the local council delegates the relationship’s management to the community board, which is then informally supported by Association A. Philippe felt that the relationship may see greater continuity if a more “*self-generating*” entity was behind it:

If it was up to me, I would try and build up something a little more permanent that wasn't dependent upon councillors coming and going. Because if your role in the friendship [or] relationship depends on you being elected to something and having a job with the council, then things are going to go up and down. ... So, in one sense, although that mayor-to-mayor relationship is very important, one way around that particular vulnerability, I think, would be to perhaps give the relationship; I'm thinking very much on my feet here, give the relationship-building responsibility to another organisation that was a little bit, permanent is not the right word, but self-generating ... there are other community organisations with a very long track record who could be part of a slightly larger promotion organisation ... What I'm really saying is you can grab a whole lot of local organisations who are perhaps more robust than a particular group of councillors who are only there for what, three years.

Philippe identified several groups that he felt might suffice, including the Royal New Zealand Returned and Services Association (RSA), Federated Farmers, and local genealogical societies. He also suggested that association members could try to organise something themselves as a substitute for council support. “*There's nothing to stop us saying 'to hell with the council; we're*

⁴ The Liberation Museum was opened in Le Quesnoy in late 2023 to act as New Zealand’s first dedicated War Museum in Europe. Its primary purpose is to highlight the efforts of New Zealand soldiers in liberating Le Quesnoy on November 4, 1918.

going to do this ourselves'. Ring up the band, ring up the schools, ring up the isite, and just make something happen.”⁵

While optimistic about what Cambridge and Le Quesnoy could offer each other, Philippe remained anxious about the connection’s resilience. He was adamant that the sporadic nature of local councils renders them ill-suited to managing SCRs. As he explained, this was not a critique of local councils but rather a reflection on the shortcomings of their electoral structure:

I’d just like it to be a little bit more independent of a three-year council cycle. And I’m not criticising anybody, individuals, it’s just the way councils operate. They tend to revert to what they call their core business and go back to putting potholes, filling potholes, which is what we want them to do.

To Philippe, as long as the relationship remained solely at the whim of the council, resilience and continuity were unattainable. Thus, his response was a metaphorically ‘rebellious’ bottom-up collective approach.

4.6.3 Interview Three

It’s not just a group for history nerds or genealogy nerds. I think it is a genuine sister city relationship as well.

Our third interview was again at Philippe’s house. I had sent Philippe another summary and a list of questions I wished to ask. His initial comment was, “*It brought to the surface all sorts of subconscious things that your previous interviews had stirred up in me. Plus, I’ve just been to another meeting, and I was thinking all sorts of thoughts about how this actually works.*” This led me to wonder what would have become of Philippe’s subconscious thoughts and ideas had he not been prompted.

By this point, I was intrigued by whether the association’s structure correlated with the issues previously identified. According to Philippe, the association involves three overlapping interest groups: descendants of service personnel, military historians, and those interested in the SC

⁵ An isite is an official visitor information centre that can be found in most cities and towns across New Zealand.

aspect. He felt that all three groups were incorporated well. Still, he highlighted the importance of providing space for those without personal connections or an interest in military history: *“There’s something in it for both communities ... it’s certainly about more than just the military history.”*

The association is *“dependent on having something to look forward to”*, which, on a larger scale, includes trips to and from Le Quesnoy and annual events but can also encompass the association’s social gatherings. These gatherings, described by Philippe as *“very relaxed”*, involve anywhere from 5 to 20 people and provide an opportunity to interact with others who share similar interests and to build connections. He hopes that the social gatherings will eventually culminate into a group trip to Le Quesnoy, something that is a *“little bit less council-driven and more volunteer-driven”*. Philippe also pointed out that *“there’s a huge informal network of people who have been [to Le Quesnoy]”* who continue to encourage others. The social gatherings bring these people together and, in Philippe’s words, *“strengthen our networks enormously”*.

Philippe portrayed the association as laid-back and harmonious but simultaneously informal and unstructured. While this seemed to serve the association well, I questioned whether it fostered sufficient discourse regarding what it does, how, or why. Philippe’s comments at the outset of this interview reinforce this sentiment, as did many of Bernadette’s. Our interviews appeared to be Philippe’s first opportunity to speak openly on the topic in-depth, a reality that did not escape him:

The people who turn up don’t perhaps feel that they can seize the initiative at all, we, I’m as much to the blame as anybody else ... we find it convenient just to sit and drink coffee and let Clara do all the work. Whereas I think that we should be reversing that and saying these are our core values, these are our key objectives. Those values and the objectives are independent of council, not for any negative reason, but because again, councillors may be relieved not to have to drag the same thing along all the time.

Philippe implied that the association may be becoming somewhat complacent when it came to intentionality. He had a myriad of ideas, but these first needed a space to be shared, developed, and negotiated, a space Philippe was seemingly lacking.

Based on our previous conversations, I suggested the association may benefit from implementing a review process, which I learned from Bernadette seldom takes place. Although Philippe could see the benefit of a review, especially for the association itself, he was cautious about how this should be approached: *“I think I would be reluctant to see a review come too often because if there were people who wanted to downsize this project, that’s their opportunity.”* He noted that the local council often comes under financial pressure, in which case projects deemed non-essential succumb to being fodder for political football:

If I had any concerns, it would be that we are totally reliant on the political tides in councils. Just as I think this whole thing was founded by a particular councillor, it could just as easily be attacked by another councillor who could say, ‘We don’t have the money or the energy. This is not part of our core business. We can’t even afford to maintain the drains. What are we doing sending people to Le Quesnoy?’

While the relationship between Cambridge and Le Quesnoy was stable, Philippe questioned how long this would last: *“I think it’s been accepted up until now as a legitimate business of councillors, but I think that’s going to be challenged before too long.”* He later added, *“I just wonder whether it’s sustainable, and if it is, what’s going to sustain it?”*

Of Philippe’s concerns, the association’s isolation held prominence. In explaining this, he told me: *“We’re completely in a silo.”* According to Philippe, the association did not interact with other SCAs or similar groups. A further concern related to this was publicity. He admitted that he was only recently made aware that Cambridge has a second SCR: *“You see, I didn’t know that before. And to the best of my knowledge, we don’t talk to them if there is a them or if this is just another council initiative.”* Philippe felt that there was limited awareness of the SC concept, and, in reflecting again on Te Awamutu’s bygone relations with Moree, pondered whether relevancy played a role:

I’m not quite sure whether Moree just looked like Te Awamutu; I don’t know, but that died, and I think because people couldn’t see any point in it — that’s my memory anyway — that it was almost like, well, why Moree, why not somewhere else?

Whatever the solutions to the relationship’s hurdles were, Philippe suggested it likely involved being innovative. He defined innovation as *“taking risks and doing things that hadn’t*

been done before". He told me, "*Most of us are fascinated by an event that happened over a couple of days. So, it's a magnet for military historians and people whose grandparents were there.*" But as he said previously, "*it's certainly about more than just the military history,*" and thus, he wondered whether further strides could be made in other areas like agriculture and tourism.

Philippe's story speaks to two interacting experiences, one conspicuous, the other less so. His fears derived in part from witnessing the demise of Te Awamutu's SCR with Moree, which led him to construct their affiliation with Le Quesnoy as something that needed to be, and I use the word loosely, 'rescued' from the grip of the local council. Underneath this more glaring construction was the experience of someone with many ideas but few avenues to explore or develop them.

While Philippe hoped to see the association take on a more independent role, the association did not cultivate the level of discussion or discourse required to engender this, leaving many ideas dormant. Consequently, although the council might be ill-suited to providing relationship resilience, it is questionable whether the association could offer this. Ultimately, as Philippe highlighted, the solution could simply begin with more communication and collaboration:

I would quite like, I'm contradicting myself because I'm saying we should strive to be independent of the council, but I'd really like the mayor to come and talk to us or at least talk to Clara and get Clara to tell us what she thinks about how she thinks this will play out.

Despite his concerns, Philippe remained confident in the relationship's potential, stating that if it were managed well, it would only stand to grow:

I think people are probably more aware of France than they possibly were before. I think if the thing is managed well and if its visibility is maintained that it can only go from strength to strength. Like I said, it's not just a group for history nerds or genealogy nerds. I think it is a genuine sister-city relationship as well, which is why I think other groups like the Chamber of Commerce or Federated Farmers should get involved as well.

4.7 Clara

“Clara” is originally from Auckland but moved to Cambridge at a young age, where she has lived since. Having previously worked in hospitality and event management, Clara has long been involved with the community in Cambridge. This extended to Association A and the town’s SC committees, with Clara serving as the president of both. For several years, anything that has transpired in the SCR has likely involved Clara. Consequently, Clara is usually the sole intermediary between the council and the association and, in many respects, fulfils the position of an international relations manager. This is Clara’s story.

4.7.1 Interview One

So I guess I’m really passionate about it. It’s keeping a group of people around me that are passionate about it and can hopefully keep pushing it along.

Being the president, Clara was the first person I contacted within the association. She was happy to be interviewed via any medium, but we eventually settled for a phone call. As a new mother, she told me, “*I might have to move around with the baby.*” Clara and I had previously met at an anniversary event for Cambridge’s other SCR with Bihoro (Japan), which Clara also oversaw. However, this was the first time we talked about the relationship with Le Quesnoy, a connection that I quickly learnt differed significantly from its counterpart.

I first asked Clara to define the SC concept in her own words, to which she replied:

I guess the basis of it is grassroots diplomacy, really. It’s making connections with people from another town or city somewhere else in the world and forging friendships. It can be as simple as that. It can be based in arts and culture, or it can be business-based, trade, tourism, any of those things. It really just depends on the two groups, cities or towns involved in the relationship and what they want to get out of it.

For Cambridge and Le Quesnoy, it was clear that their ‘wants’ revolved heavily around the historical significance of the relationship. Nonetheless, Clara noted that, recently, there had been an influx of people with a general interest in France. She suggested this was a “*natural transition*” as descendants of past service personnel move on, but also maintained that the history would likely remain an entry point.

According to Clara, the association comprises two sides: *“There’s a very military involved, remembrance kind of side of thing. And then there’s the people that are just really into the French culture and keeping those personal friendships alive.”* Many of the association’s members travel to Le Quesnoy for personal trips, which provides an external stimulus to the relationship. This has partly been spurred on by the opening of the New Zealand Liberation Museum in Le Quesnoy. Clara told me visitors from Le Quesnoy also make their way to Cambridge and are commonly hosted by association members: *“It kind of works both ways. Someone from either town shows up in the other, they get quite a warm welcome and get accommodated if need be. And, yeah, it’s a really nice way to be.”* The relationships had an innate tourism appeal. Like Philippe, Clara highlighted that there is an incentive for nearby travellers to stop in Le Quesnoy or Cambridge when given the chance.

Regarding barriers, Clara explained that funding remains a central challenge: *“small town, small budget”*. Furthermore, the community board and association do not see much engagement from the local council: *“They leave it to us, really.”* This was not unusual as the local council is expected to have a broader focus, given it governs several different towns. In contrast, the community board can prioritise local needs and act as a link between the council and the community. For Clara, however, perhaps the most significant barrier, or rather a necessity, was passion.

You need the people on the community board and in the community to be passionate about it and to see good value in it, to carry it forward. I think it’s quite easy, if you get a bunch of people that aren’t so interested, for things to fall by the wayside. I know that Cambridge previously had, I think, three other sister-city relationships, one in America and, I think, possibly two in Australia, that just ran out of steam at some point. So, if you don’t have the right people pushing it forward, then it puts that in jeopardy. So, I guess I’m really passionate about it. It’s keeping a group of people around me that are passionate about it and can hopefully keep pushing it along, which is why we try to do things like getting kids involved.

4.7.2 Interview Two

If you don't have people putting the effort in, they pretty quickly disappear.

Our second interview was at a local bar in Cambridge just down the road from Saint Andrew's Church and a sculpture that commemorates the SCR.⁶ We were meeting on a Saturday in the late afternoon, and as Clara informed me, "*I think all the cafes will be closed by then!*" As we sat in the seemingly popular venue, I remember thinking Cambridge was quite lively for a small town.

We initially discussed Clara's comments at the end of our last interview. She mentioned that Te Awamutu used to have their own SCs but that these had "*fallen by the wayside because those relationships weren't maintained*". Some of Cambridge's previous relationships had met similar fates:

If you don't have people putting the effort in, they pretty quickly disappear ... One of them was in Australia, and I think there was somewhere in Arizona, and one more might have been in another place in Australia, but they probably died out in the eighties or early nineties.

I asked whether any of the past relationships had community associations. The answer was no. Clara pointed out that Le Quesnoy and Cambridge are the only relationship with a separate association, another factor that she feels contributes to their success.

Clara often spoke about the various elements she viewed as requisites to longevity in SCRs. Visibility was one such element and an area she felt could be improved:

One of our more recent members, he was in France at the time, and someone there mentioned, oh, you should go to Le Quesnoy; you know they've got this great New Zealand kind of connection, and he didn't even realise, he's a Cambridge guy, he didn't realise it was a Cambridge connection. So, you know, it happens. I mean, he hadn't been living here that long, but it's still a bit disappointing when you hear things like that.

As one potential solution, Clara feels that the council and community board could better display the gifts they have received from Le Quesnoy. Currently, they are tucked away in a cabinet in

⁶ In 2019 the local council had a sculpture erected in Cambridge to commemorate the relationship shared between Le Quesnoy and Cambridge.

one of the council buildings, but Clara argued, *“I think those things belong to the community. So they should be somewhere that they can be enjoyed by the community.”* She would prefer to have them displayed in a more visible and accessible location as, without visibility, people forget: *“I think anything like that, anything visual, helps connect in people’s minds or remind them of these things. So yeah, it would be really great if we could have them somewhere that’s not the back room.”*

Clara spoke heavily about engaging youth but noted that attracting enthusiastic teachers remained an obstacle. From her experience, teachers were often too busy to commit. Nonetheless, Clara maintained that youth engagement and awareness are pivotal to the relationship’s future. While the relationships currently had a strong cohort of support in people like Philippe, she feared this would be unsustainable without new members to carry on the momentum.

Yeah, it certainly is a concern because the bulk of those people are getting on. They really are. Some of them have their children or their grandchildren that are kind of involved in the periphery. They might be on a mailing list or those kinds of things, but they’re not living in Cambridge. So, that kind of familial connection is disappearing a bit. So yeah, I don’t know how we do that. I mean, more and more, I guess the community board’s just going to have to drive it. ... And I guess it’s how we reach those people and how we promote it to them with the very limited budget.

As Clara ended this last line, she laughed. I began to notice that this was a common habit. Whenever she mentioned an inconvenience or obstacle, she would mask it with laughter, almost as if laughing at her predicament, feeling that the circumstances themselves were laughable.

Clara said the association had started several initiatives to raise awareness, especially amongst youth, including colouring competitions and scavenger hunts. However, these efforts have struggled to garner long-term support:

So getting people involved more like that and getting them thinking about it is great. But people only have so much time, too, so they might like to come along for something like dinner or something casual. But actually, getting them to commit to being involved in the long term is a challenge.

Clara was all too aware that keeping the connection alive required a steady flow of ‘new blood’ who could help maintain interest, especially during times of drought. Simultaneously, she remarked that this requires a commitment many people cannot give, and some residents may not

understand the significance of the connection: *“If they [Cambridge residents] don’t know the background, then they probably would struggle to understand it. So yeah, it comes back to trying to promote it and increase the awareness, which is, it is a constant. But...”* She paused momentarily and then candidly followed up with, *“I’m not quite sure how much else we could be doing. Given the resources that are allocated to it.”* Her serious tone was then abruptly cut as she let out another laugh.

4.7.3 Interview Three

*We try to push that public interest and public engagement as much as possible.
But it’s always, it’s a challenge.*

Our last interview was at a café in the centre of Cambridge. Clara brought along her toddler, who sat on her lap for most of the interview. I recall he had a love-hate relationship with a particular spoon that he would regularly throw on the floor and then instantly beg to have returned. Despite this, Clara seemingly had no issues answering my questions as she negotiated peace between her son and the spoon.

We first discussed the summary I had sent through. Clara notably shared Philippe’s apprehension about the utility of reviews outside of the committee, a topic I had mentioned. She was aware of some councillors who were not too keen on SCs and, in her words, she *“wouldn’t want to poke that beast any further”*. As an alternative, she noted that the association would look to do a debrief after the upcoming delegation and that my research had played a small part in this:

I think it has been really helpful for the other members of the committee and stuff that are going through this with you as well because it’s bringing up a lot of things for them, a lot of ideas and ‘oh, why don’t we do that?’ or ‘Why haven’t we been doing that?’ or...

The unfortunate consequence of these questions, however, was that someone would need to pursue them. Clara was already operating at max capacity. The responsibility for most aspects of the relationship appeared to rest on Clara’s shoulders. What Clara could then achieve was at the whim of the local council, which has little involvement and, as several members suggested,

little interest. Clara herself mentioned that when it comes to Te Awamutu councillors, *“they’re not interested. Because it’s not Te Awamutu, and generally, the push from that side of the district is get rid of sister cities.”* Clara occasionally gets support from the council’s governance officer, but in her words, *“it’s pretty minimal”*. Clara was doing well keeping everything together, but the situation seemed unsustainable.

I was puzzled as to why the association was not more involved in the relationship’s day-to-day operations. In response, Clara explained that the association, by design, sits on the periphery, providing auxiliary and informal support where needed:

So, officially, it’s the community board’s job, and there’s a subcommittee of the community board that has members of the association and myself and a few other people. So, we are the ones pulling everything together. The association provides a lot of the hosts, kind of accommodation, that kind of thing, and they’ll be looking to attend events and meet the delegates and those kinds of things. So it’s a less formal way of being involved, and a part of that’s, I guess, budgetary constraints. We’d love to have them all invited to everything that the delegates are doing, but we’re running it on a shoestring. It’s not possible.

In utilising this *“shoestring”* budget, the community board is incentivised to be frugal in stomachaching the costs of delegations when these occur, leaving little left over for the association. On the year of our interview there were two delegations, and as a result, the SC budget was *“completely cleaned out”*.

Speaking on public awareness, Clara expressed that Cambridge is seeing a lot of change due to a growing population. She remarked that while most residents should hopefully be aware of the connection with Le Quesnoy, she admitted that this is likely more prevalent amongst what she called *“old Cambridge”* or long-term residents. New residents, however, would presumably not be as aware. She expressed that the association is trying to promote the connection to this audience but again emphasised that *“it’s really hard to capture new people”* and that *“it’s always, it’s a challenge”*.

We discussed how the association might overcome some of these challenges. I asked Clara about the potential of connecting with other SC associations, committees, or even councils within the wider region, which may face similar struggles. Clara’s initial response was, *“I would*

think if I had time,” followed by a laugh and a pause, “then yes, there would be positives in it”.

She further stated:

I really don't know what state those other organisations are in and who's involved with them. But it's always good to get together and throw around some ideas, and maybe if there was a group coming from one of them, it would be good to get along and meet them as well and just try to broaden those relationships and the reach of it. So I think there's definitely potential there.

Clara also saw potential in utilising existing avenues within Cambridge, including social and sports clubs, schools, and local businesses. However, regarding the latter, she added, “*Businesses really have to see the value in that before they put any time or resource to it.*” Lastly, she again mentioned the need to create more permanent references to the relationship within the town.

We ended the interview again on the topic of reviews. I asked if she had ever been involved in a review, to which she replied, “*I wouldn't think that there's ever been one done.*” When it came to whether the council conducted reviews, the answer was much the same: “*No, that I'm aware of, no. No, I think it's just put it over there and leave it.*” Given this, I questioned what a potential review may look like. In her words:

I think it would be something that is probably a value doing, maybe on a smaller scale on an annual basis and potentially a bigger one, like three-yearly, to fit in with the council. There's always risks there in terms of the changeover in elected members and the changeover of staff and what gets lost. It did take me a while to get up to speed, and luckily, with Le Quesnoy, I was already quite aware of what happened, and it had been involved in stuff with “Janet” before, so I was able to hit the ground running on that a bit more, but the Bihoro one I didn't know much about. So, continuing to run it at the same level when things change is a challenge.

Clara's story can be characterised by two words: challenge and passion. She used the former eleven times across the three interviews, as well as ‘hard’ nineteen times and ‘difficult’ eight times. On the other hand, Clara often highlighted the importance of passion and the need to cultivate it. Clara's story is thus the personification of passion juxtaposed with challenge. Like Philippe and Bernadette, Clara wishes to do more but is limited by forces outside her control. Given her prominence in the relationship, I asked what might happen if she were to leave. She responded: “*At the moment, there's not really anyone who would take over what I do. So I'd say it could have quite a big impact.*”

4.8 Josephine

Like her peers, “Josephine” is an avid volunteer and an active member of numerous communities, including women’s advocacy groups and underwater heritage: *“I am involved with quite a bit of stuff; it’s always been in the community.”* She had lived in Cambridge for four years and, before retiring, worked in administration, fundraising, and event coordination. Although she does not personally have family connections to the liberation of Le Quesnoy, she has long been fascinated by war and military history, partly due to her father’s involvement in the Navy during and after the Second World War. This is Josephine’s story.

4.8.1 Interview One

I think as people get older and the distance between events that might may have caused the sister city to come together fades into the past, it’ll be harder to maintain interest.

At our first interview, which took place over Zoom, Josephine explained that her involvement in Association A birthed from a chance meeting at Le Quesnoy during a tour of the Western Front. This encounter was with a historian who happened to be part of the association and would go on to be a good friend of Josephine. Josephine knew of SCs before this but noted that it was not a topic that garnered much attention within her social circles. By her description, SCs are a *“learning thing really, to appreciate each other, you know, a bigger, wider community than our local community”*.

Josephine found that most long-term residents of Cambridge were aware of the connection with Le Quesnoy but had observed this awareness drop off among those new to the town, especially youth. She felt that those who were unaware were still interested in learning. Part of the purpose of the relationship and the association, in Josephine’s mind, was thus to promote the history of the connection: *“It’s about raising the profile, really.”* Nonetheless, Josephine acknowledged her limited involvement with Cambridge’s other SCR, highlighting the importance of personal interests and connections in inspiring participation. Josephine’s primary

interest was in sharing and celebrating military stories, and the SCR with Le Quesnoy provided an avenue to achieve this.

Looking to the future, Josephine suspected that the SCR would change, but she hoped otherwise. She remarked that the ease of communication of technology has impacted the novelty of SCs. Still, she expressed that this could not replace face-to-face interactions—“*I think being in a culture, you learn far more*”—and saw promise in the SC model. For Josephine, if anything was to change the relationship, it was the decline in support:

I see our council, our, our community board, we had a lot of support in the past. Um, having meetings and, you know, secretary sending out notifications and things. And now, now we don't get the support from the local council. ... As much as we used to. They're happy for us to do it, but they don't wanna spend any money.

Funding was thus viewed as the most significant constraint. Yet, Josephine also pondered whether the COVID-19 pandemic had led people to hunker down and engage less with the outside world beyond the safety and seclusion of New Zealand.

Josephine shared concerns that the history of the SCR was becoming distant and that people with direct connections were now few and far between.

I think actually one of the reasons I think that the, the sister city thing might go is because as people get older, and if, unless younger people are involved, like a lot of organisations, you won't have the, the personal, they, they won't worry so much about whether great Uncle Jim or great granddad was involved in something. Whereas, like for me, I, I guess 'cause my father was in the military as well, I remember that the stories he told and the stuff he did. So I think as people get older and the distance between events that might may have caused the sister city to come together fades into the past, it'll be harder to maintain interest.

The issue of youth engagement again came back to funding constraints. Josephine had several ideas of where to improve; however, funds tended to be reserved for high-profile activities such as mayoral visits, whereas informal community-focused events struggled to obtain funding. Josephine thus wanted to see more of a balanced approach to funding that could help “*capture people's willingness to be involved*”.

4.8.2 Interview Two

It's just keeping an open mind, isn't it? And we're always learning, and there are so many fabulous people in the world. You know people are very generous when you get out there... I think we can become too insular if we don't look outward.

I met Josephine for our second interview at a local café. I began by asking about her interest in military history. She explained that her father's involvement in the Navy sparked her curiosity from a young age: "*I've always had a military interest.*" As she grew older, she took to writing as a medium and would record the life stories of past soldiers and their families during the war. In some cases, Josephine would contribute work to historical books, often in support of her friend, who was herself an avid writer and military historian. It was this same friend that invited Josephine to join the association.

Josephine, like many others I had spoken to, was captivated by the story of Le Quesnoy, which she too described as unique:

I think because the story of Le Quesnoy is a bit unique, New Zealanders' involvement at the end of World War, liberating it, climbing it, the walls on ladders, that sort of thing that's captured people's imagination. Especially when we live in a town where the church has got a very strong connection to Le Quesnoy with the windows and French garden. And one of the men who fought there is buried there. So I think there is quite a connection that makes people feel they can be included, 'cause it's sort of part of our town.

The difficulty lay in promoting this story. Unlike in Le Quesnoy, where the history was unavoidable, the visibility within Cambridge was comparatively much lower. Cambridge did have physical representations of the historical connection, notably the church's stained-glass windows and the commemorative sculpture, but Josephine queried how many people understood the significance behind these. In her view, this understanding was not something you would just stumble across; you would have to actively search for it.

As a result of these circumstances, Josephine speculated that the relationship was far more prominent in Le Quesnoy than in Cambridge:

The school children always celebrate Anzac Day over there, and they know the national anthem in Māori better than we do. And they do the haka and all of this. So yeah, I think they, they'd live it 'cause they are in it every day where

*they live, and they've got the names, the street names. They've got the history in front of them all the time.*⁷

As those in Cambridge did not “live it” to the same extent as their counterparts in Le Quesnoy, it was easy for things to become lopsided. Accordingly, Josephine explained, “*I think they honour us more than we honour that connection back,*” and recalled an experience that spoke to this:

So, when I went, I met with the new [president of the Le Quesnoy Cambridge Association], and he took me around. It was great. And they're so excited. They're so excited. We went to the memorial on the wall, and two young American guys came up as we were there, and he said, 'Right, just realise you are now on New Zealand ground. This is hallowed ground in New Zealand.' So, you see, would we say that about the sculpture in Cambridge? I don't think so. But they really value it.

Cambridge would likely never compete with Le Quesnoy, which has a history embedded within its walls, architecture, and surrounding cemeteries. Still, to Josephine, it was not about trying to match Le Quesnoy but rather about inspiring people to discover their own connections and see Le Quesnoy for themselves, but also to encourage people to be curious about the world around them:

It's just keeping an open mind, isn't it? And we're always learning, and there are so many fabulous people in the world. You know people are very generous when you get out there... I think we can become too insular if we don't look outward and a variety's good, but in this case, it happens to be France.

Thus, Josephine strove to capture people's imagination by promoting the relationship's historical significance, particularly around the Armistice and Anzac commemorations, through public displays, including storyboards.

Josephine noted that her efforts have not been without challenges. Like her peers, she questioned the level of council support, which she feels has recently dropped. Moreover, she had observed a general decline in momentum since the centennial commemoration in 2018:

⁷ Numerous street and place names are named after New Zealand places and people. For example: Avenue des Néo-Zélandais (New Zealanders Avenue), Rue de la Nouvelle Zélande (New Zealand Street), Rue d'Averill (Averill Street – named after Leslie Averill), Rue Aotearoa (Aotearoa Street), Rue Hélène Clark (Helen Clark Street), Des All Blacks (All Blacks Street), Du Waikato (Waikato Place), and De Cambridge (Cambridge Place).

People lost impetus, really ... often the comment is it's about the money. So, we can't do that because there's no money in the budget. ... I guess it's a natural progression, but it's also, I think it's about funds. Funds have got tighter.

Given the financial restraints, I asked why the association did not pursue external funding sources. Josephine replied, “*We can't.*” The association was officially under the local council, which precluded the ability to apply for external funding: “*It's a bit tricky. You can't do much of big stuff, any big stuff really.*”

4.8.3 Interview Three

I think because it's always also about the people, and I think that's what sister cities has. It's about the people. You can go to all the fabulous places in the world, but if you don't make a connection on a local level, to me, it doesn't mean that much. Well, as much.

Youth engagement took up the majority of our final interview. Josephine was adamant that the future of the association relied on an influx of young people joining and providing their perspective and insight. At the same time, she had observed differences in how younger generations volunteered their time, noting greater emphasis on personal benefits. She suggested that growing time and fiscal constraints had limited the commitment younger people and families could provide, leading them to be more selective. Josephine herself admitted a similar struggle: “*I actually, I haven't really got time, but someone's got to do these things.*”

We discussed the importance of role models, with Josephine explaining that the value of volunteering was modelled to her from a young age. Nowadays, however, she wondered whether this culture of volunteering had been preserved or if people simply didn't have the time: “*People perceive they don't have time for it.*” She also questioned if young people are now more influenced by what they see online and whether this promotes a similar culture. Nonetheless, she maintained that some people will be interested and willing to commit; it is just a matter of finding them and “*getting the little hook for them to be encouraged and enthused*”.

Most of Josephine's concerns stemmed from the future sustainability of the SCR. She listed all the work within the association, the countless connections that had been formed, and the variety of information collected. Still, she did not know how these would be passed on: “*It's a*

very personal thing when you're one on one, which is, I think, very important ... how do you continue that on? It's all very people dependent." She further questioned what was currently written down for future generations regarding the history of the relationship and operational and practical guidance on how to manage it. Recent experiences led her to believe the answer would be less than ideal. Accordingly, if the relationship is to be sustainable, she expressed the need to *"have it documented, not just fall off the perch and it's all gone"*.

Any effort at attracting youth requires resources, particularly funding. As was characteristic of other members' experiences, Josephine was aware of the changes that needed to be made but had limited means to enact these. Attaining funds also demanded a strenuous bureaucratic process: *"We've got a big sign done for Bastille Day, and it would cost \$300, and it was like pulling teeth."* Additionally, budget constraints had limited the number of formal committee meetings: *"It got less and less. And because it's the cost out of the budget."* There was a sense of being so close, yet too far.

Josephine often oscillated between confidence and doubt. At one point, reflecting on ways to preserve the history, she remarked, *"So, I don't know that there's one kind of obvious way. Maybe forgetting is a bit more obvious."* She spoke with a slight chuckle but simultaneously carried a degree of concern. She was passionate but recognised that her efforts could only go so far. She often commented that it is getting harder to attract and reach people as their lives become busier, and the personal connections SCs engender get overshadowed by technological advancements. Nonetheless, she was confident that improvements could be made, but this would require much more structure and guidance than the association had previously been provided with:

I think structure is important. I think that I'm a person, I'd like to see some way of there being an example of how, maybe not a rule, this is how you set up an organisation, but here are the suggestions of how you do it. And you can link into your region, you can come to the conference and then steer it away from a bit more from just councils. Then maybe when you've got more people who are linking, maybe doing Zooms and all of that kind of stuff, that makes it more accessible for younger people.

4.9 Chrissy

“Chrissy” has a passion for history and genealogy that dates back to when she was 17. Initially uninterested in the topic during school, it was not until she made the connection to her ancestry that Chrissy became hooked. Chrissy has since embarked on a journey to explore her ancestry. When I admitted that I knew little of my own, Chrissy quickly remarked, “*You take that little machine [referring to my voice recorder], you go to your grandparents, and you ask them questions.*” Unsurprisingly, Chrissy has extensive knowledge of her family history, especially regarding her grandfather, who fought at Le Quesnoy, and his involvement is a large inspiration to her. This is Chrissy’s story.

4.9.1 Interview One

I would say there would be no [relationship]. I think if the committee didn’t exist, I don’t think the public would be aware of it because they’re the ones who encourage it.

Our first interview took place over the phone. I began by asking Chrissy about her involvement with Association A. She explained that while she has had a long interest in military history and genealogy, it was not until recently that she found out about the association—“*It took me a long time to connect with them, actually*”—a connection that happened by chance. As was common amongst members, Chrissy knew little about SCs before joining the association. In her words, an SCR is a “*connection between two cities that have some history or some recent history or current history in common*” involving “*a supportive group that meets regularly in both countries*” to keep “*a connection alive between two different places*”.

Chrissy viewed the relationship as active, attributing this vitality to the dedication of association members: “*They’re the ones who keep it alive.*” She emphasised the irreplaceable efforts of those who promote the connection and speculated that the relationship would likely fade without their support: “*I would say there would be no [relationship]. I think if the committee didn’t exist, I don’t think the public would be aware of it because they’re the ones who encourage it.*” Despite the relatively small size of the association, Chrissy believed interest would persist,

noting that, as people age, they tend to grow more curious about their ancestry, something she saw as a source of ongoing engagement.

4.9.2 Interview Two

It's about the learning from experiences and promoting goodwill and friendship between countries and people, which hopefully will make a big difference.

Our second interview was held at Chrissy's house. I quickly learned that, like her peers, Chrissy had amassed an impressive collection of material and written work on Le Quesnoy, which was spread out before me. As we began to chat, Chrissy again reiterated the uniqueness of the SCR, expressing, *"I think this must be one of the few towns in New Zealand with a historical connection, which is, is the thing that ties us together and makes it so important."* She thus felt that the relationship was *"different to any other sister city"*. She further noted that the connection has existed since 1918, dating far back before the SCR was established: *"We've had like a sister city relationship since very early."* In this manner, the connection between the two towns, while galvanised by the SC connection, was strong regardless.

Like Josephine, Chrissy explained that the connection is very prominent within Le Quesnoy and, in many ways, is embedded within the town: *"People have never forgotten, and they really drill into their children, the stories, their friendship, the association, the connection."* The connection within Cambridge, however, was driven primarily by Association A: *"It is a small group of us that keep our connections going."* The association acted as a sort of *"tea club"* where people would get together to share stories, reminisce about past trips to Le Quesnoy, plan future visits, and pass on the history of loved ones. The association also has a Facebook page that helps to keep the two sides connected. Nevertheless, in recalling her experience joining the association, Chrissy explained that capturing people's attention can be a hurdle: *"I just fell upon it. I think that kind of thing needs to be better advertised. I don't know how you do it to capture people."* Consequently, advertising and promotion were pivotal to the association's longevity.

Chrissy was confident that the recently established New Zealand Liberation Museum would help captivate a new generation: *"The whole purpose of this museum is to have young Kiwis go*

there and keep that connection alive.” Interest, for Chrissy, was fundamental; the more people who are interested, the easier it is to keep the history alive. Conversely, if people are not interested, that history could quickly fade. The relationship was, therefore, partly susceptible to the whims of individuals:

I think it comes down to just personal preferences or people or having an interest. If you’ve got a connection as I have, of course it makes you more enthusiastic. So I think, yeah, it’s different probably every time a new mayor comes in, whether it’s a mayor in France or the mayor in Waipā, it depends on personalities.

Regardless of this fact, the strength and nature of the connection lead Chrissy to believe that it is “*well and truly cemented for the future. ... I don’t think that they, no matter who changes in the political arena, I think that [it] will continue on.*”

4.9.3 Interview Three

I find that, yeah, just somehow finding people out there who have the interest, they’ll be there somewhere, but they don’t know they need us, and we don’t know that we need them.

Our final interview was again at Chrissy’s house. We spoke first about the association’s counterpart in Le Quesnoy, a small group of individuals who promote Cambridge and the SC connection. Chrissy only found out about the association by chance after she visited the town during a commemorative celebration in 2022. This sort of happenstance was characteristic of many of Chrissy’s experiences. She explained the association in Le Quesnoy provided a direct affiliation, which made it easier to form friendships with local residents: “*I think that’s really the only way you can make relationships.*” This seemed to suggest that, despite the strength of the town connection, individual relationships can still require time and effort, especially when considering cultural and language barriers. However, the association in Le Quesnoy provided an avenue to alleviate these hurdles.

The importance of these friendships was evident for Chrissy. I asked whether her commitment had increased after forming these bonds in Le Quesnoy. Her response was a resounding “*Absolutely*”. She explained that before learning about the association, she had not thought to try to communicate or reach out. Now, having formed these connections, however,

her experience in Le Quesnoy had seen a significant change. On a more recent trip, the president of the association in Le Quesnoy contacted Chrissy when she arrived and offered his help: *“We were staying a few kilometres out of town. There was virtually no accommodation in town. And he became our taxi driver, him and the treasurer, they came and picked us up back forth, back forth.”*

Chrissy commented that these individual and personal ties are *“absolutely essential”* to the relationship’s success. She added that the council side of the relationship provides the formal protocols and structure, but it is again the association members, through their connections and efforts, that keep it alive. As we discussed this, Chrissy quoted a line from the association’s website that resonated with her: *“The Cambridge and Le Quesnoy Friendship Association keeps the bond strong between the twin towns of Cambridge and Le Quesnoy.”* To achieve this, association members dedicate their time and effort to running events, organising visits and welcoming delegations. In Chrissy’s case, a lot of her time went towards research.

One of Chrissy’s many commitments was researching soldiers who survived Le Quesnoy’s liberation and recording their details. This was part of a broader project that Chrissy had worked towards for several years. She informed me that while there are often historical records left behind of those who died or were injured during the war, information about those who survived unscathed is not as easily attainable. Consequently, it can be challenging to determine where certain people ended up: *“The personnel files say, ‘out to the front,’ and there’s no indication. So, you have to go through the regimental history of their regiment.”* To help rectify this, for several years, alongside other volunteers, Chrissy has been collating information on the various regiments and recently produced a list of around 23,000 soldiers who are believed to have been at or around Le Quesnoy during the liberation. This list has since been passed on for use in the New Zealand Liberation Museum in Le Quesnoy.

Chrissy estimates that she has put around a year of her life into this project, a feat she believes was made possible by her retirement: *“The advantage of being retired is you can actually put a lot into it. So, you’ll find a lot of these associations and outfits have older people.”* That being

said, volunteering is not new to Chrissy, as she has volunteered with the New Zealand Genealogical Society since 1987. She explained that volunteering was more normalised then. In contrast, she suggested that today, *“the face of volunteering is changing”* and that *“people are either less able or less interested in volunteering”*. She shared Josephine’s concern that this has resulted from increasing time constraints on the working population and a shift towards online mediums for socialisation, especially amongst youth. Accordingly, Chrissy explained, *“I think associations and volunteer groups have got to think out of the box and have something that appeals to the working population, i.e., the younger population as well.”*

While Chrissy was confident in the relationship’s future, she also acknowledged the need to involve others, especially future generations, and the challenges this brought. To achieve longevity, she noted the importance of *“having a strong focus, knowing what your focus is”* and ensuring it is easy for people to join. To this effect, she also highlighted the role of social media in advertising what is happening and how others can get involved. Chrissy believed that if these factors can be maintained, then it was just a matter of finding those with similar interests:

We get an odd new member off it [Facebook] who happens to fall upon it and think, ‘Oh, there’s a group of nutters like me out there; I’ll go and join them.’ So I find that, yeah, just somehow finding people out there who have the interest, they’ll be there somewhere, but they don’t know they need us, and we don’t know that we need them.

Chrissy’s perspective seemingly mirrored the famous line from the movie *Field of Dreams*: “If you build it, he will come”. The question was whether the association had the ability to ‘build it’. Chrissy erred on the side of hope and optimism.

4.10 Claude

“Claude” is a farmer who has lived most of his life on the outskirts of Cambridge. His family has a strong connection with both World Wars: His grandfather fought in the First World War and *“was there from Gallipoli right through to the last battle,”* and his father in the Second. Claude grew up hearing stories from his grandfather about the war; he told me, *“I’m very proud that my grandfather was there.”* One such story was about a French town. However, Claude did

not realise he was speaking about Le Quesnoy until several decades later, as his grandfather would anglicise the pronunciation of the town's name. Shortly after making this distinction, Claude joined Association A and has been a member for over 15 years. This is Claude's story.

4.10.1 Interview One

I believe of all the sister cities, Cambridge would probably be way ahead of anybody as far, because we, we do the job right.

I first spoke to Claude over the phone. He began by detailing his family connection to Le Quesnoy, noting that his grandfather was very open and would often share stories, which captivated Claude's interest. Claude explained that the affiliation between the two towns has been a "*long one*". He recalled a time in 1968 when his grandfather returned to Le Quesnoy alongside fellow servicemen to attend the 50th anniversary. Claude has yet to visit the town himself but noted that it is on his bucket list.

Like Chrissy, Claude found Cambridge's relationship with Le Quesnoy to be "*slightly different to a normal sister city relationship*". While Claude knew of other SCs, in his mind, these did not possess the same historical connection. I asked whether he thought most people in Cambridge knew about this connection, to which he remarked, "*They can't help it.*" Claude explained, "*We have a day, a Bastille Day. The whole town becomes part of France. And people get dressed up, and the restaurants put on French meals. ... And you have your croissants in the morning.*" He expressed pride in the association's work: "*I believe of all the sister cities, Cambridge would probably be way ahead of anybody as far, because we, we do the job right.*" To Claude, "*The people, the enthusiasm of the people who are on the committee and involved*" made the relationship successful, as did the calibre of those individuals: "*We've been very lucky. We've had some pretty good people.*"

Claude viewed the relationship as active but noted that things had slowed down following the 2018 centennial commemorations, a sentiment he shared with Josephine. Nonetheless, following a pause during the COVID-19 pandemic, Claude felt things were starting to get going again. He explained that numerous people in both towns had formed enduring friendships,

suggesting that the number of connections totalled in the hundreds. According to Claude, these friendships help sustain the connection, especially during downtimes. He had also witnessed several younger people getting involved, even those with no familial connections, which indicated a degree of staying power. Nonetheless, Claude was aware that his generation would be the last who knew or talked to people who fought at Le Quesnoy: *“You know, we’re running out.”* Consequently, he hoped that *“it continues. The story continues.”*

4.10.2 Interview Two

You can’t let the connection, as I said at one of the meetings, it doesn’t matter whether you just go for a social and have a cup of tea and talk about it; you’re keeping the thing going.

Our second interview was at Claude’s house. I was welcomed with various treats on the dining table and promptly asked if I liked tea. This was a seemingly customary experience across most of my interviews, a sense of hospitality to which I found myself drawn. As I sat down, Claude brought out a printed summary of our last interview, and we quickly began.

One of the first things I asked Claude was whether he knew of Cambridge’s other SCR with Bihoro in Japan, to which he responded, *“I only heard about it a relatively short time ago. I’d never heard of it. You never hear talk. ... Yeah. I don’t know. Have people come and meet?”* As we spoke about the publicity of SCs, Claude remarked that they do not always have the best reputation, and he himself was critical of SCRs that served to be little more than *“paid jollies”* for councillors. Nonetheless, Claude felt Cambridge had yet to suffer from this critique because *“Most people don’t know about it.”*

On publicity, Claude also pondered how interested future generations will be in the SC model. He gave the example of ‘Young Farmers’, which, although once prominent, he suggested had since fallen by the wayside, *“That was good. But that died too.”*⁸ Claude, like Chrissy, expressed the idea that whether people are interested and want to get involved partly depends on their life

⁸ Claude’s assessment of Young Farmers as ‘dead’ is likely an exaggeration as they still operate today. However, this perception does speak to the fragility of public consciousness, which can easily diminish.

stage and available time. He told me about his two sons, now in their 40s, who only had shown interest in their family history within the last several years, having previously been busy with other life commitments.

The council-association dynamic of the relationships was an issue Claude spoke to at length. Claude respected and appreciated the support the council provided the relationship with, but he was also, by his admission, critical and cynical of some of their management of it. He explained that in his over 15 years of involvement, the council has only ever funded trips for councillors, while many long-term community members, especially those with direct family ties, have not been afforded the same opportunity. He was also bewildered as to why interest seemed to drop off suddenly after the centennial celebrations in 2018 and questioned the motives of some of those involved:

It was very strong. Very strong up until the hundredth year. And then the council fellas had their jollies, and all of a sudden, they didn't want to be involved anymore. ... And then we had COVID, and of course, nothing happened for quite a period of time.

This shift appeared to seep into other areas of the relationship, with Claude adding, “*We are technically part of our council group, and we used to have our meetings in the council room. No trouble at all. As soon as they've been to the hundredth, oh no, no room for you here now.*”

Claude noted that they have been fortunate to have had several committed councillors involved in the relationship, but they come and go, hindering efforts to remain consistent. Consistency, for Claude, was a necessity. He felt that no matter what was happening or who was involved, that association needed to continue to convene and interact: “*You can't let the connection, as I said at one of the meetings, it doesn't matter whether you just go for a social and have a cup of tea and talk about it; you're keeping the thing going.*” Claude added that even if small, such efforts prevented the history and connection from drifting away.

4.10.3 Interview Three

There is a void from Clara. There's Clara, and then there's the council, and it sits in Te Awamutu, which we really have no connection with ... there's no, there's no connection.

For our last interview, Claude again invited me to his house, and I was met once more with an assortment of treats. Claude had been dwelling on the relationship's management and reiterated his concerns about its shortcomings. Given his grandfather's involvement, Claude was passionate about what the connection represented and wished to have the connection honoured. Accordingly, he expressed disappointment in what he saw to be a drop in interest, especially among councillors:

When I joined years ago, there was a strong commitment from what I thought were really interested people from the community board. But as time went on ... we don't see them anymore. ... It is a real concern.

A lot of Claude's worries stemmed from the top-down structure, which he thought minimised the efforts and voices of association members:

I'm not sure that this is the same in the other groups you work with, but we've really got two groups. We've got the people who have the connection, the French connection, the, just the historic connection. And then we've got the council. The council never asks us or comes to us and says, well, what do you reckon? And another thing I talked to Bernadette about, I'm very disappointed that when they have their trip off to things that it's all council members, they never think, well, I wonder there's some special person within this group maybe could come along too.

He then laughed and said, "No, they don't do that." Claude said he did not want to put anyone down but emphasised that this had been his experience.

Similar to Bernadette, Claude had come to construct the council as distant. Specifically, he stated, "There is a void from Clara. There's Clara, and then there's the council, and it sits in Te Awamutu, which we really have no connection with ... there's no, there's no connection." I asked Claude about the association's relationship with the community board, which, in his eyes, did not fare much better:

There used to be a very good connection; I dunno why. And I've got to say there was a couple on the community board that were very good and genuine, but they had their time and one's stood down as a counsellor after many years. So that's understandable. Yeah. There is that disconnect.

To start addressing this disconnect, Claude highlighted the need for reviews, but he insisted that the council needs to be present: "We want the people, the council people, we want them there." Claude knew that reviews are not popular as people do not like being critiqued or told

what to do. However, he maintained that “*successful organisations, very successful organisations, are based on reviewing.*” While other members had expressed concerns that a review with the council may open Pandora’s box, Claude did not share these concerns: “*Our review will be our group, and we are expecting the council to be there. And I know it will be respectful because there’s no desire to fall out with council, even though we might not agree with everything they do.*”

For Claude, the path forward relied on communication, which he hoped would alleviate the void between the entities involved, a sentiment similar to that shared by Philippe. Despite what happens, Claude said, “*There’ll always be that strong connection from Le Quesnoy itself.*” The multitude of friendships that had been formed gave Claude confidence that this connection would endure.

4.11 Chloé

“Chloé” describes herself as someone “*fascinated by the story [of Le Quesnoy]*”. Her journey with the SCR dates back to its inception in 2000. Initially, Chloé worked as the manager of the Cambridge isite, which led to her involvement in the SCR when, in 2002, she was selected to visit Le Quesnoy on a cultural exchange supported by the New Zealand France Friendship Fund, where she connected with their equivalent local tourism manager, a bond she maintains today.⁹ In her experience, Chloé explained, “*In Le Quesnoy, when you walk through, you simply feel made to feel welcome.*” For several years following the trip, Chloé helped organise exchanges between the two towns and, more recently, has promoted the relationship through her position as an elected official. My interviews with Chloé all took place online over Zoom, as we unfortunately struggled to find a time to meet. This is Chloé’s story.

⁹ The New Zealand France Friendship Fund was established in 1991 following the sinking of the *Rainbow Warrior* in 1985. As of 2019, the fund had provided \$5 million in grants to “projects which promote friendship and understanding between the people of France and New Zealand” (New Zealand Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2019, p. 1).

4.11.1 Interview One

So that, for me, is what a sister city relationship is. It's, it's not, it's not being a stranger in that town. It's actually having a meaningful relationship.

As we began to converse, Chloé explained her connection to Le Quesnoy and highlighted her early experiences. She was incredibly proud of the connection, describing it as “very, very active”. According to Chloé, there was an intentionality to bring the French connection into numerous aspects of Cambridge, which helped keep it relevant: “We just try and keep that flavour and that kind of enthusiasm for our sister-city relationship alive through other events throughout the year. So our community board is very active in this space, and they’ve been supporting it.” She also commented that when it comes to taking advantage of opportunities, “we do not miss out”.

One such opportunity, which Chloé was involved in, saw the town erect a 12-meter-high stainless-steel sculpture to acknowledge the relationship. Chloé told me, “It took about three years to build the bloody thing, staying in my life at the time, and I think I’ll never ever do a sculpture again. But when I look at it now, I think I’m very proud of it. But, yeah, things are hard work. You’re volunteering.” She emphasised the importance of association members, stating that they help keep relationships and friendships alive.

Chloé felt that the relationship was continuing to grow and retain relevancy. She acknowledged that it may be easy to find out about Le Quesnoy by googling it and visiting yourself, but the friendships and the SC connection cultivated over time allowed it to stand on its own two feet. The affiliation between the two towns provided an inroad that would be absent otherwise, a sentiment that reflected her depiction of SCs:

Well, it's people to people; it's person to person. So when we, when we know in Cambridge that we've got people going wanting to visit Le Quesnoy, I'll send an e-mail from the mayor's office with a letter of instruction so that when they get to the other end, they can actually person to person and have, you know, an opportunity to be properly welcomed. So that, for me, is what a sister city relationship is. It's, it's not, it's not being a stranger in that town. It's actually having a meaningful relationship. I think you can only do that face-to-face.

Although the COVID-19 pandemic did limit face-to-face connections, technology such as Zoom allowed for the perception of distance to be mitigated. Chloé speculated that most people with friendships in Le Quesnoy continued to maintain those connections through online mediums. Chloé herself had four close friends with whom she remained in touch over the downtime, friendships that would never have been formed without the SCR. These connections were now being passed on to her children.

I asked if any barriers may hinder the relationship from meeting its full potential. Chloé noted that the bond relied on interested individuals, but like other members, pondered what would happen once those with close family connections pass on:

I guess that's as long as people are interested in the story. I suppose over time, we've got a lot of people still in Cambridge who have relatives who were at, you know, in the battle. But potentially, you know, as those people die out, that's not the right word. But pass on, you know, that, that the strength of the relationship might deteriorate because we've certainly got a number of people who've got, you know, who have, you know, feel a real connection, I suppose, to Le Quesnoy because they were they are related. So that might be the only thing.

Nonetheless, Chloé was confident that the SCR would only continue to strive: *“I think we're still going to ... continue quite strongly going forward.”*

4.11.2 Interview Two

It's kind of like potluck, really. If you've got zero interest in history, then that relationship could easily start to diminish. ... Yeah, it's all about the people of the day, and, yeah, who's got the time to put the energy into it, I guess?

Following our last interview, I raised the topic of city diplomacy and the role of local governments in international relations. Chloé felt that inter-municipal partnerships were meaningful, but they required a clear purpose and a distinct connection in order to maintain relevancy and resilience, *“you have to have a purpose, but you have to have a connection in some way, otherwise they're never long-lasting, right?”* In the context of Le Quesnoy, Chloé explained that the military history enabled the relationship to endure. The shared connection between the two towns embodied the phrase ‘Lest we forget’ but also provided broader

significance in its ability to bring people closer: *“I think it is important just to break down barriers. The world is getting a smaller place with communications and things like that.”*

Chloé mentioned that numerous cities had approached Cambridge to form new SCRs, suggesting that the model is still prevalent. I asked what she would consider prerequisites to creating new connections, and in reply she again emphasised the necessity of a clear purpose, *“something that will make this thing stick”*. Chloé noted that requests often come from large Chinese cities, which dwarf Cambridge in size. Consequently, Chloé felt a smaller town would be better suited. Lastly, Chloé highlighted the role of a core group who are *“prepared to commit to a relationship and put the energy into it”*. Still, she reiterated that if there was no explicit reason for the connection, then it would be unlikely to last:

It's got to be about purpose. It's got to be about how we can endure this and keep it enduring. 'Cause a lot of effort and a lot of cost and a lot of time goes into establishing. So there has to just be some really good connections first. ... I don't know what it is, but there feels like there should be something that could maybe keep the glue together. Otherwise, I know that so many sister relationships just come and go.

Managing SCRs was a topic we spoke about at length. Chloé was adamant that SCRs require mutual involvement from the local government and community. Regarding the former, she explained that SCRs need to be resourced and require a formal entity that can provide status and reliability. She reasoned that *“People will come and go from friendship associations, and they're strong one minute and then weak the next.”* This was noteworthy, as other members had raised a similar concern towards the council. For Chloé, the issue was not exclusive to SCs or any particular group; it was instead an inevitable vulnerability that came with time:

[It's dependent] on the environment at the time, who's got the time and energy to put into this kind of thing, what's fashionable, what's not ... it's all about the interests of and passions of people coming through. ... It's kind of like potluck, really. If you've got zero interest in history, then that relationship could easily start to diminish. ... Yeah, it's all about the people of the day, and yeah, who's got the time to put the energy into it, I guess?

It appeared that the relationship was fortunate to have a group of people who were willing to put time and energy into it. The question was, thus, why, and for how long would this be sustained?

For Chloé, as a New Zealander, there was an indescribable connection to the town of Le Quesnoy, a connection that all members had expressed. There was a shared communal sentiment that, as Chloé mentioned earlier, broke down cultural barriers:

In Le Quesnoy, when you walk through, you're not a stranger ... you're simply feel made to feel welcome. I have no idea who half of the people are, but you know, as a New Zealander, that you've got this massive connection, and all the place names tell you that. The gardens tell you that. The monuments tell you that. And when I was walking there at Christmas, I was smiling and making eye contact with every person I walked past because, you know, you just feel like you can.

In accordance with Chloé's description, the relationship with Le Quesnoy resembled a sort of 'imagined community'; she felt a strong affiliation to the town despite only knowing a handful of people there. The 'why' for Chloé was, thus, relatively simple: there was a deep connection that any New Zealander, given the opportunity, could resonate with. This then left the latter question of longevity.

Although the significance of the connection was apparent, passing on this connection had been shown to be complicated. Chloé noted her experience with her children who, despite her efforts, were disinterested in the story of Le Quesnoy—that is, up until they went themselves. Such exchanges and personal visits, however, are not always accessible. Given that other members had raised the lack of funds as an impediment to engagement, I asked whether online mediums had been considered an alternative. Chloé replied that it was a possibility that they had yet to consider: “No one's really thought of doing it. Actually. We probably should. But you mean, yeah, it could absolutely happen like that if we chose to.” The reason why such developments had not transpired, in Chloé's view, was because “at the moment, people's lives are just so incredibly busy.” Nonetheless, she saw potential in online means of connectivity, especially for older generations suffering from isolation and loneliness. The growing time constraints on people's lives were a point Chloé uttered often, again bringing to question who would carry on the history.

Digging into Chloé's motivation, I asked what had sustained her commitment over the past few decades. She highlighted her friendships, which remained strong and provided a sense of connection. However, it was also Chloé's life situation that reinforced the connection:

I guess the other part of it is just the way life goes I suppose. I've just been constantly re-reminded of that and my roles at council. And so that's the other thing. When it's put in front of you, it's a reminder that the relationship is there.

It seemed that the relationship's success was, to some degree, a matter of fortunate circumstances or, as Chloé earlier remarked, *"It's kind of like potluck, really. If you've got zero interest in history, then that relationship could easily start to diminish."* She acknowledged that her involvement in the council opened the doors for the relationship that would have otherwise been out of reach: *"If you've got a couple of people who've got strong, who have got a strong association, that definitely helps."* The issue was, by her own accord, that the relationship was seldom discussed within the council, with most responsibilities left instead to the community board. Yet, whether community board members were interested was a matter of luck, a 'potluck'.

The significance of the relationship was apparent, but so was the lack of means to attract interest. According to Chloé, this made it difficult for the local council to increase its investment in the relationship, as they were beholden to ratepayers who, while understanding of the relationship, may not be prepared to cover any associated costs: *"I don't think people are necessarily prepared to pay for it unless they have a direct connection."* This presented a dilemma: attracting interest would likely require funds, but these funds could not be procured without first raising interest.

4.11.3 Interview Three

You can't manage what you can't measure.

My final interview with Chloé was one of the last interviews I conducted. I could share most of my findings and hear her thoughts. One finding of note was the trend towards isolation in the management of each SCR. Chloé echoed these concerns and highlighted limited reporting structures regarding what transpires within their SCRs and outside. For example, Cambridge

often sends someone to the national conference on SCs, but any knowledge gained is seldom passed on. Adding further, she remarked that limited information makes its way to the council: *“I don’t hear anything at all about how the sister cities is going. I’m lucky to even know that they’re turning up, that there’s a delegation turning up, actually.”* Chloé’s experiences resembled Claude’s; communication was lacking, and things were easily lost.

The problem mentioned in our earlier discussions is that people have less time to give. In the case of Association A, it appeared that communication was handled by a single person who operated on a budget that, according to Chloé, had not been reviewed for over a decade. An increase in communication required either hiring additional support, which was deemed unfeasible, or placing a greater load on association members. Regarding the latter, Chloé acknowledged, *“The commitment is a difficult one for people going forward.”* Neither the community board nor the association seemed to be able to increase their current input. Chloé recognised the struggle groups like the association faced and stated:

It’s a hard, it’s a real hard one. Things are evolving, and then, you know, you get a couple of pandemics shoved in there for a few years, and really, it’s just very disruptive, isn’t it? And I think we’ve got a new world around, potentially, it’s a brand new world, and we’re still trying to navigate our ways to how we might support our support services, all our supporting nonprofit organisations.

We discussed the opportunities the relationship provided that justified the investment. Like her peers, Chloé was adamant that there were benefits to be reaped, but again remarked that circumstances played a significant role: *“It’s connecting the dots. It’s having someone who can, who just connects the dots.”* When I explained that some relationships in the past had seen long-term benefits from soft ties, Chloé responded, *“That’s a luck thing, right? This is based on luck.”* There was also the issue of time; Chloé was aware that the relationship primarily attracted those passionate with direct family links to the liberation, links that were slowly becoming distant: *“As time goes on, we’re going to lose more and more of that. Yeah. So it’ll be interesting to see where this goes.”* Consequently, demonstrating potential and worth rested on a shrinking group of individuals.

Chloé shared her shock that many of these issues had gone unnoticed for decades. She put it down to the fact that nothing was measured and, as she told me several times, “*you can’t manage what you can’t measure.*” Chloé pondered whether the council’s strategy aligned with the association’s, then stopped herself and remarked, “*We don’t have a strategy. The council doesn’t have one.*” For this reason, Chloé felt a timely review was in order:

It’s about checking in. Is this still fit for purpose? What else should we, could we be doing? How can we make it better? Is it still relevant? You know, is this still, are we getting value? Even though we can’t measure it. Yeah. It’s, it’s something we really need to consider given the current environment as well.

4.12 Case Findings

The following represents what Beuving and de Vries (2014) describe as the “explanation” segment of the arc of constructivist inquiry, “an analysis of meaningful action through the eyes of the social scientist” (p. 180). In this case study, 21 interviews were conducted over nine months, totalling around 25 hours of audio recordings. The extent and depth of the raw data collected present the potential for a wide range of findings or saliences across various topics. Given the word limit of a doctoral thesis, I have elected to focus on findings that best address the research questions, including findings that provide contextual relevancy.

4.12.1 Shared Constructions

Each story in this case study reflects a different context and background. Some members had been involved with Association A for decades; others had just joined. Some knew a lot about SCs, and some knew little. Despite the myriad of variables present, there was uniformity in members’ experiences and constructions. Across all members, four shared constructions were generated: (1) having interest, (2) being vulnerable/at risk, (3) being restricted, and (4) being unique. While the prominence of each construction varied, their presence was consistent. In other words, members shared enough context and circumstances to constitute similar sense-making efforts and experiences (Erlandson et al., 1993; Lincoln & Guba, 2016).

There was an evident divide between what may be construed as negative and positive constructions, a dichotomy that characterised how members framed their experiences. This does not suggest that because a construction was seemingly negative or positive, it was explicitly so. The generated constructions did not exist in isolation and were not mutually exclusive. Instead, constructions were linked, collectively informing members' lived experiences and their attempts to make sense of them. Accordingly, while each construction is explained individually below, this by no means implies independence.

The constructions generated were not the only nor necessarily the most significant ones. Countless constructions can be inferred from members' sense-making efforts, many of which may have gone unnoticed. Consequently, the constructions that are explored should be viewed as one possible interpretation of the data (van Manen, 1990).

4.12.2 Having Interest

The first shared construction is *having interest*, which also encapsulates similar factors such as passion and enthusiasm. The construction is twofold; members viewed themselves as interested, passionate and enthusiastic, but also constructed the relationship as dependent on these qualities (see Appendix D: D1, D2, D3, D4, D5, D6, and E7). The implication of this shared construction is straightforward, yet the concepts themselves are not. One must consider that there was no objective measure of 'interest' in the SCR, as this would require a prior understanding or agreement that has yet to be established. Instead, interest was determined by the members themselves and was thus subjective.

Given their perceived importance, the absence of interest, passion, or enthusiasm was viewed as a risk (see Appendix D: D8). To avoid this risk, all members displayed a self-determined responsibility or duty to help promote the relationship, capture public interest, and keep the connection and history alive. Accordingly, members dedicated considerable time and effort to the cause. Their efforts ranged from consistent to intermittent, conspicuous to unseen, and small to large scale. Regardless of where members fell on this spectrum, they would, nonetheless,

construct themselves as interested. The point of focus was, therefore, not how members perceived their interests but instead how they perceived the interests of others; it was the latter that led to concerns.

4.12.2.1 The Perception of Interest

For many members, interest was viewed as synonymous with action, which may be referred to as a ‘common sense’ interpretation. If someone stopped being actively involved, they were perceived to have lost interest. The person in question may have still been interested; however, this interest was no longer recognised. This led to a Schrodinger’s cat-like scenario where people could be viewed as simultaneously interested or uninterested, depending on the definition of interest employed by the perceiving individual. The issue was that members had limited avenues to verify their perceptions.

The most common recipient of members’ perceptions was the local council. Members afforded the council significance due to their role in the SCR. There was a prevalent expectation that elected officials, as local community representatives, should display an interest in the relationship. Consequently, when this was not observed, the perception was that the council and community board were uninterested. However, members’ perceptions were based not on an objective or mutually agreed-upon measure of interest but on what they experienced and observed, individually and as a group. Arguably, an objective view of interest was unattainable. The SCR had no planning, guidelines, principles, or specific metrics from which any consistent agreement could be reached. Instead, for most members, the SCR was split into two: how the association perceived the relationship and how the council was *perceived* to have perceived the relationship (see Appendix D: D9). Limited communication further contributed to this divide (see Appendix D: D10). In many respects, there was, as Claude suggested, “*a void*” between the two groups. Consequently, how either side viewed the other was primarily based on assumptions.

This division was also confounded by the local council’s electoral design. The council was more prone to frequent changes than members would have desired. When changes occurred, those involved in the SCR often shifted or were rotated out. Members tended to perceive such

changes as a loss of interest (see Appendix D: D11, D12, and D13). In periods of prolonged drought, this perception contributed to the void identified by Claude, adversely impacting members' experiences. Specifically, experiences were shown to differ depending on the perceived interest displayed by others, especially by elected officials (see Appendix D: D14)

Members expressed apprehension towards their SCR when they perceived others to have little interest (see Appendix D: D15). For some members, the mere potential that elected officials may lose interest was a cause for concern (see Appendix D: D16). These perceptions, or concerns, had two noticeable consequences. For some, it galvanised their passion and led them to seek solutions and alternatives, but it left others disheartened, shaped their experiences, and created a negative feedback loop.

4.12.2.2 Interest, Subjectivity and Discourse

Members mutually agreed on the importance of interest and who they needed interest from; however, it appeared they seldom discussed what constituted interest. What it looked like to be interested in and supportive of the SCR was ambiguous and seldom discussed. Members could speak endlessly on Le Quesnoy and its historical significance, but when it came to the inner workings of the relationship, they were puzzled. Although individual members had some ideas, it was clear that these had not been shared with the wider group. Philippe suggested the need for more robust discussions, especially regarding values and objectives (see Appendix D: D17). However, developing such practices was tricky, for this had not been modelled previously.

For many members, our interviews appeared to be the first time they had been prompted to consider the fundamental underpinnings and implications of their SCR (see Appendix D: D18, D19, D20, and D21). Consequently, while members shared a rough picture of what the relationship needed and what barriers it faced, there were discrepancies in how these were conceptualised. Interest was a common suggestion, with interpretations varying greatly. This was partly a function of the association's isolation; members had no connection or communication with other SCAs (see Appendix D: D22). Accordingly, one of the only opportunities to develop discourse came from the association's meetings and social gatherings.

However, not everyone agreed on the purpose of these meetings (see Appendix D: D23 and D24). This meant that some people, although interested in the relationship, did not attend any meetings. Such individuals were then often perceived as uninterested.

All of these factors together contributed towards an overreliance on subjectivity. The lack of discussion or discourse meant that members had little to base their perceptions on or ways to verify the validity of their assumptions. Consequently, they were led to speculate, often to the detriment of their experiences. Although it could not be known whether others were interested, the perception that interest had been lost was a constant vulnerability. If enough members believed that interest, and by extension, momentum, was beginning to falter, there was the risk that these perceptions would become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

4.12.3 Being Vulnerable/at Risk

Philippe first mentioned the concept of vulnerability in our second interview: “*All of a sudden, people lose interest, and the whole thing just dies. But certainly, I think that’s a vulnerability in Cambridge as well.*” As interviews progressed, the notion of being at risk or vulnerable became a recurring theme in members’ constructions and experiences. To help describe this shared construction, I have adopted the three risk components outlined by Chiffi and Chiodo (2020). These components include “the potential danger (hazard), the exposed value (or exposure), and the vulnerability, which can be defined as the susceptibility of the exposed elements” (p. 3). This does not suggest that members adhered to the definitions ascribed to each component. Instead, the three components are utilised primarily as a descriptive tool rather than an explanatory theory.

4.12.3.1 The Exposure of Momentum

SCRs exist primarily in discursive space; they are social constructs, a collection of shared ideas (Lloyd, 2010). Accordingly, unlike a house or a road, intangible concepts like SCRs do not face the same physical hazards. Members implied that their affiliation with Le Quesnoy could only be ‘harmed’, figuratively, if people stopped thinking about it and forgot. Members regularly

equated such an outcome with a loss of interest and activity, or what I have interpreted as a loss of momentum. Thus, for the SCR, the primary ‘exposure’ can be viewed as momentum itself.

Here, momentum refers to the mobilising (and immobilising) forces of interest, passion, and enthusiasm experienced and perceived by members (see Appendix D: D25, D26, and D27). In reflecting on past relationships, members noted a domino effect: when people lose interest for one reason or another, others soon follow suit, and momentum can crawl to a halt. This can be a gradual decline or an abrupt shift arising from an untimely passing or role change. Regardless of the time taken, previous relationships within Cambridge and Te Awamutu could not recover from losing momentum; they were vulnerable to loss.

Nonetheless, a risk is only a risk until realised, just as an exposure is only ‘exposed’ after a hazard occurs. You could live your whole life next to a volcano that never erupts. Similarly, an SCR may be at risk of losing momentum but never succumb to it. Members routinely noted the strength of the relationship and the unique bond the two towns share (see Appendix D: D28, D29, D30, D31, D32, D33, and D34). Considering this, one might assume that momentum will never be exposed if those involved remain committed and interested, and the risks will be avoided. Yet, in juxtaposition to their optimism, members also expressed apprehension about the relationship’s future. They were cognisant of an unavoidable hazard that would inevitably expose the relationship’s momentum: time.

4.12.3.2 The Hazard of Time

The hazards members faced could all be linked to time. Members were all too aware that those involved today would one day no longer be with us. They understood that the connection would inevitably be in the hands of a completely different cohort. This is an implausible scenario for most human relationships, yet for SCRs, it is an intentional facet of their design.

SCRs, by their original doctrine for world peace, were designed to last indefinitely so their bonds would endure for generations to come. If successful, this would represent a feat that has historically evaded most international relationships: the evasion of time itself. However, as

members shared, there was some scepticism about what the future might hold (see Appendix D: D35 and D36). The concern revolved around the notion that time causes change to shift from probable to inevitable. They were aware that, with enough time, the SCR would face losses, namely a loss of interest, a loss of personnel, and potentially a loss of momentum (see Appendix D: D37, D38, and D39). Moreover, for long-term members, the relationship was still recovering from prior loss (see Appendix D: D40, D41, D42, and D43). These circumstances were not exclusive to Cambridge and also impacted the Le Quesnoy side of the relationship (see Appendix D: D44). Nonetheless, as far as loss was concerned, the SCR had managed to endure relatively unscathed. Still, having observed other SCRs succumb to loss, members were determined to escape a similar fate. There was thus an emphasis placed on attracting new people, especially younger generations (see Appendix D: D45). However, the association's ability to prepare for these future losses, or recover from them, was finite.

4.12.3.3 The Vulnerability of Momentum

If time is the hazard and momentum is the form of exposure, then vulnerability reflects the relationship's susceptibility to disruptions in that momentum. Put differently, vulnerability can be understood as the relationship's capacity to recover from a loss of momentum. When this capacity is weak, the relationship is considered highly vulnerable. As participants revealed, this capacity lies largely outside the association's control.

The relationship has a niche focus, catering to those passionate about military history (see Appendix D: D46). This narrow focus limits the pool of potentially interested individuals. There are only so many military historians and relatives of past service personnel, especially within Cambridge, a town of around 20,000 people. This issue intersects with what Chrissy viewed as the changing face of volunteering. There was a consensus that people had less time and less capacity to engage in volunteer activities, with younger generations being viewed as particularly time-starved. Consequently, attracting new members requires finding individuals who initially have an interest in history, or at least France, and second, who can effectively exercise that interest (see Appendix D: D47). In considering both of these factors, Chloé likened maintaining

momentum to a potluck (see Appendix D: D48). The association's ability to recover from a temporal loss of momentum appeared to rely on chance and the hope that interested individuals will present themselves.

The inevitable risk for the association and its SCRs is that, with time, momentum will be exposed. The susceptibility of this exposure depends on context and time-bound circumstances that are primarily outside of the association's control. If several vital individuals were to depart, and the association was unlucky in its attempts to compensate for the loss of momentum, the relationship could collapse. Accordingly, the association's capacity to prepare for or mitigate this risk is restricted. To quote Philippe again, "*All of a sudden, people lose interest, and the whole thing just dies. But certainly, I think that's a vulnerability in Cambridge as well.*"

4.12.4 Being Restricted

Members were aware of the tightrope they walked. The SCR was successful in their eyes, but there was scepticism regarding how long this would last (see Appendix D: D48 and D49). The longevity of the connection rested on future generations, and captivating these generations rested on members. Thus, Chrissy noted that without the association, the relationship likely would not exist (see Appendix D: D50). To remain relevant and achieve some level of continuity, the association had to consistently attract new members, a feat Clara described as both a "*constant*" and a "*challenge*". Part of this challenge stemmed from the unique nature of the relationship, but it also reflected the association's financial and volunteer constraints.

4.12.4.1 Monetary Restraints

Many members deemed the funding available to them to be restrictive. It was shared that the amount did not reflect the scope of what it was required to cover. The budget itself had remained unchanged for over 20 years, resulting in a reduction of around 35% when accounting for inflation. This budget covered all SC-related expenses incurred by the community board and, to some extent, the council, including costs for delegations, which were often prioritised as a result.

In seeking to increase their funding, the association faced a catch-22. They needed to raise awareness to keep the relationship alive; raising awareness required funds, and acquiring funds necessitated public awareness and endorsement (see Appendix D: D51). Josephine regularly commented on this issue, claiming that “*Funds have got tighter.*” She felt the association was limited in what it could achieve and that any large-scale projects or promotional efforts were out of reach (see Appendix D: D52). Josephine also explained how monetary restraints had begun to seep into other areas of the association (see Appendix D: D53). In saving funds for future delegations, the community board seemed to have less to spare for operational costs and even less to support the association.

4.12.4.2 *Volunteer Restraints*

Funding, however, was not the only restraint members identified. Volunteering, or more acutely, the capacity of volunteers, was another concern. It was emphasised that if people do not actively promote the relationship and encourage others to consider it, interest may be lost, leading to irreversible consequences. Promotion of this kind, however, requires time and effort, which are primarily provided by members.

Members feared that finding people with the capacity to commit long-term would become increasingly difficult without external support. This was equated to both generational shifts and growing economic strains (see Appendix D: D54, D55, D56, D57, and D58). A frequent comment was again about time. While they may be no less interested in volunteering than past generations, younger generations were viewed as time-starved and thus more selective, favouring personal benefits above altruistic ideals. Members were also no strangers to time constraints, with Josephine and Clara sharing similar experiences (see Appendix D: D59 and D60). Regardless of how they perceived volunteering, the issue for members was thus one of capacity.

The SCR’s prolonged existence necessitated enduring commitment, for any lapse in momentum could be fatal. Therefore, according to Clara, “*Time and willing volunteers*” were fundamental to the relationship’s success. However, people were seen to have increasingly less

time to give. This was reflected in Clara's efforts to get others involved (see Appendix D: D61 and D62). To Chrissy, these challenges meant that groups, such as the association, would have to "*think outside the box*" and appeal to the working population, especially young people. Nevertheless, what this means for an indefinite connection is unknown. Metaphorically, the SCR could be likened to a car battery. While the relationship is actively engaged, momentum can be sustained. However, if the relationship is left idle, its 'battery' will eventually be exhausted. Much like jump-starting a car, the SCR would then require external support to be restarted. However, as members' experiences suggest, external support is not readily available. An SCR with a 'dead battery' could remain dormant for years or even decades before it is restarted, if it is restarted at all. The restraint on members was thus twofold, on both their capacity and the longevity of their SCR.

4.12.5 Being Unique

The final shared construction was *being unique*. Given the difficulties faced in the relationship and the effort required to maintain it, one may ponder what keeps people motivated. Where other relationships have fallen by the wayside, the connection between Le Quesnoy and Cambridge has endured. The answer was simple for members: The bonds shared with Le Quesnoy were unique (see Appendix D: D63). There was a prevalent view that the relationship's uniqueness has enabled it to sustain itself where others would have perhaps faltered. Phillippe noted this, highlighting the shortcomings of Te Awamutu's past relationship with Moree (see Appendix D: D64). Additionally, members emphasised how the unique history surrounding Le Quesnoy helps captivate interest and provides impetus (see Appendix D: D65 and D66). Thus, the relationship was constructed as unique but deemed equally dependent on this very uniqueness.

4.12.5.1 The Restrictions of Uniqueness

Uniqueness can be a double-edged sword, providing impetus to captivated individuals while also narrowing the pool of interest. I can view something as unique, but that same quality may

preclude my interest in it. This was one aspect of the vulnerability of the relationship's momentum, which Philippe referred to regularly (see Appendix D: D67). The implication is that unless the relationship widens its scope, it may risk exhausting its pool of potentially interested individuals. However, this warrants the question: Can the relationship be simultaneously broad *and* unique, or would such an extension erode this uniqueness?

The SCR between Cambridge and Le Quesnoy appears to have an inevitable saturation point. The dilemma of the relationship's uniqueness is that it enables *and* curtails growth. The history has captured the imaginations of a dedicated group. However, that same historical focus limits the number of people who might be captivated. The stories members shared suggest that the relationship will eventually plateau, reaching a point where the association and relationship can no longer recruit more people than they lose. As the population grows, the potential pool may increase, allowing a degree of growth. However, as Clara explained, those new to Cambridge are likely to be unfamiliar with the significance of the history (see Appendix D: D68).

Despite this, members noted that the association was still succeeding in attracting new people. However, these newer members tended to have a greater interest in France than in the history of Le Quesnoy (see Appendix D: D69). This suggests that a shift towards a broader focus may occur naturally. For some, like Philippe, this was a welcome opportunity. He felt that there was "*more than enough room*" to cater to both groups and that this broader interest could help bolster what he described as a "*very small community*" of military historians.

4.13 Case Summary

This case has shown how being interested, vulnerable/at risk, restricted, and unique together inform how members experienced and constructed their SCR. The relationship's intangible, discursive, and ambiguous nature, combined with a lack of discourse and visibility, led members to rely heavily on unverifiable perceptions and assumptions. Consequently, the relationship's perceived momentum, vulnerability, and uniqueness at any given point depended not on any objective measure but on the group's subjective and intersubjective sense-making efforts. In sum,

the relationship itself was beholden to the collective thoughts of its advocates. Those involved were both a source of risk and momentum; their very constructions shaped the relationship. These constructions, however, were not without constraints. Both monetary and volunteer restraints were shown to shape members' experiences, which, in turn, shaped their constructions.

Ultimately, the SCR was stuck between a rock and a hard place. It could broaden its scope to attract a wider range of interest, potentially at the cost of uniqueness, or maintain its historic focus, risking the exhaustion of the available pool of advocates. That being said, members had limited capacity to influence either result. One of the few avenues available to them is to keep negative perceptions at bay and maintain momentum for as long as possible in the hope that interested individuals will eventually join the cause. As Chloé declared, "*It's kind of like potluck really.*"

CHAPTER FIVE

Wellington and Sakai

5.1 Introduction

The second case study featured Wellington (New Zealand) and Sakai (Japan). Much like Cambridge and Le Quesnoy, ties between the two cities were initially spearheaded by an individual—in this case, a past Japanese Ambassador to New Zealand (Wellington City Council, 2024). Wellington is understood to have approached Sakai due to its proximity to Kansai International Airport, where direct flights from New Zealand were to be launched for the first time. However, Wellington and Sakai did not share any joint history. Instead, the connection was based on appreciation for Sakai's rich history and the similarities between the two cities. Notably, both cities are key ports in their respective countries. Outside of this, information on the relationship's formation is limited. Members speculated as to the relationship's origins, but there was an air of ambiguity around the events that led to the relationship's inception in 1994.

5.2 Association B

This case study followed four members on the board of an SCA, hereafter referred to as Association B. Association B was launched in 1995 with the aim being “to support the Council in the development of the sister city relationship with Sakai” (Wellington City Council, 2024, para. 5). The association receives annual funding from the city council and works directly with the council's international relations team. The board comprises a range of individuals who all share a general interest and or background in Japan. They meet formally each month and help plan and coordinate several events and activities promoting Japan and Sakai within Wellington.

5.3 Setting

As argued earlier, when it comes to SCRs, there is no setting to which one can unequivocally attribute the word ‘natural’ as this depends on the subjective definitions employed by each individual. Instead, an effort was made to conduct interviews in a setting selected by the member in question. The first set of interviews was again by distance. This case study had no phone interviews; members opted for online mediums like Microsoft Teams or Zoom. Members gravitated towards public spaces for in-person interviews, with only two choosing to be interviewed elsewhere. The second and third sets of interviews were held primarily at cafés in Wellington, while a few were conducted on a university campus. Two interviews were also held in Auckland, which one member visited frequently.

5.4 Marsia

“Marsia” has long been interested in Japan. At age five, she was first exposed to Japanese culture when her family hosted a Japanese exchange student. This initial curiosity was later galvanised after she lived in Japan. Since returning to New Zealand, Marsia joined various Japan-related groups, with Association B being one of many. She often joked that when it came to Japan and volunteering, she had bitten off more than she could chew. Marsia’s involvement with Association B started in 2015, and she officially joined the board in 2019. However, Marsia had previously engaged with SCs in Auckland; her total involvement in SCs has spanned over a decade. This is Marsia’s story.

5.4.1 Interview One

It kind of does, does provide you with a certain landing point, if you know about it. ... It does provide the opportunity to make wins if you are looking for them.

Marsia and I first talked online. She initially spoke about her upbringing and noted several experiences that helped shape her worldview and cultivate a curiosity for Japan and internationalism. This included learning Japanese in school from a fellow student’s mother.

These opportunities would create a domino effect from which Marsia has not looked back: *“The ball kept rolling with internationalism.”*

Marsia viewed SCs as an opportunity for different peoples and cultures to *“learn from each other”*. She emphasised the *“people-to-people connections, people learning about each other’s cultures and having a way to connect when you go there”*. Marsia had personal experiences in Sakai, where the SCR had provided opportunities that would have otherwise been unattainable. She had also observed these opportunities materialise for others and explained how a Sakai-based infrastructure company was contracted to supply earthquake-resilient pipes to Wellington’s neighbouring city of Porirua. Reflecting on the relationship, she told me, *“It kind of does, does provide you with a certain landing point, if you know about it. ... It does provide the opportunity to make wins if you are looking for them.”*

The SCR had not been without its hurdles. According to Marsia, a particular event led to a fallout with the local Japanese community and, in her words, *“shattered”* the association’s reputation. Harboured concerns about the association’s future, she officially joined the board. I asked whether things have improved since, to which she responded, *“I think we’re well on our way back,”* and later added, *“We’re in a rebuild phase.”* Marsia remarked that, as with any organisation or association, *“there’s always politics”* but, in this instance, *“the politics is largely fallen away.”*

In outlining the purpose of the SCR, Marsia raised the importance of people-to-people connections and opening doors. She added that economic benefits were being given increasingly greater weight, especially by the local council, *“I think New Zealand councils, in general, would like to see more economic benefit, would like to see more bang for their buck.”* Despite scepticism as to whether Sakai reciprocated these intentions, Association B had begun exploring this potential. This was fuelled by a growing need to show what the relationship was achieving for Wellington: *“I think being able to take something back to council to say this is what we’ve achieved, and these are the economic connections that have been made, would be really beneficial.”*

Looking to the future, Marsia hoped to see connections across a broader range of organisations and businesses and saw research and development, film, and artisanship as areas for collaboration: *“I can see opportunities with Weta and the craftsmen over in Sakai that make knives and swords and all the things.”* Most significantly, she hoped to see more exchanges between the two cities and to *“see the connection between the peoples to deepen”*. Still, she acknowledged that Association B faced an uphill battle; it had seemingly lost the unique niche it once filled:

I think [Association B], in terms of being the only way to get in touch with Sakai, like it would have been in the eighties, nineties, early two thousands. I think that’s fallen away. I think [Association B] as a broker is sweet. ... But beyond that, I really don’t know what, what purpose we serve.

The enigma that was the association’s purpose was at the forefront of Marsia’s thoughts.

5.4.2 Interview Two

It’s a very interesting world we find ourselves in with sister cities at the moment because I know that they do something, I know that they achieve stuff, and I know deep down that they’re good for society. But how do they work, and how do we make them more effective going forward? That’s been on my mind.

Our second interview took place at a local café in Wellington. From the second we sat down, it was clear that Marsia had much on her mind. With little hesitation, she quickly began to verbally reflect on our last conversation. She had continued to mull over the purpose of the association or, as she put it, *“that whole why do we exist thing”*. She pondered, *“Why would somebody come to us over another organisation?”* Her initial conclusion was that the association could help build connections where the council could not *“because council could only go so far”*. Still, she remained uncertain, and her attempts to engage other organisations had done little to inspire confidence. Although Marsia believed in what the SCR could achieve and what it stood for, she admitted her struggles to justify the time she committed to it: *“I believe in the kaupapa. I believe in the connections you can make through it, but I don’t know, why am I volunteering?”*¹⁰

¹⁰ ‘Kaupapa’ is a Māori word which, in this context, can be loosely translated to ‘cause’ or ‘purpose’.

The convenience of the internet has replaced many of the functions the association once filled: *“With social media the way it is, it’s just so easy to connect with people.”* To counteract this, the association had begun prioritising events unavailable elsewhere, such as tea ceremonies that paid homage to Sakai’s ties with the cultural practice. Despite this, the ‘why’ behind these efforts remained ambiguous. Association B had sought to identify and develop a value proposition but had yet to nail anything down: *“I still think we haven’t landed it.”* Accordingly, Marsia pondered, *“What really is it that we do?”* She considered this question pivotal *“because that informs who we devote our energy to and who devotes the energy towards them too”*.

One problem was the crowded space in which Association B operated, with several organisations vying to promote Japan within Wellington. Thus, Association B needed to differentiate itself: *“You have to go: what does the city, what is different about the sister city group that only the sister city group can do? Or that leans into the sister city relationship versus the other Japan groups?”* She explained that this could be achieved by identifying and capitalising on commonalities between the two cities, which included their shared interest in the arts, extensive food culture, and even their joint emphasis on cycling. There were clear avenues that the association could explore, but they all required some public awareness: *“It kind of relies on the community knowing about the relationships. It relies on information being passed on, ... [on] relationships being kept alive just by the sheer volume of people that have been and done these things.”*

A further topical question for Marsia was, *“How do you get locals, things that get locals aware of it?”* In her ideal world, *“There would be almost like a Sakai overlay or a sister cities element in everything that Wellington did.”* She wished to see different events pay homage to the city’s relationships to help promote the relationship: *“This is our sister city, and this is why we are doing this.”* She also presented the idea of a *“Festival of Cities”* in which all of Wellington’s SCRs could be promoted at a single event. Such an event had been in the works but was cut due to budget restraints, a frequent hurdle the association and relationship faced.

Even if money were not an issue, people still had to want to engage with others, especially those from different cultural backgrounds. Marsia expressed the view that when it comes to cross-cultural social interactions, “*you can’t force it*”. Explaining further, she told me:

Everybody’s afraid of what’s different. Everybody’s afraid of that first interaction with a stranger ... we have this natural instinct to distance ourselves from the outgroup. How do you break through that? I’ve always been exposed to it because that’s just the way my family’s always worked. But how do you foster that in people for whom they might be shy, they might be an introvert, they might be an extrovert, but they prefer to be introduced before they have a chat or something. How do you foster that?

She also speculated whether this was a result of growing reliance on online mediums for communication:

Because we exist online so much now, being able to go into a room and, whether that be an online room or a physical room, and just have a chat with a random stranger, I wonder if that’s become harder.

This potential shift presented a dilemma for SCRs, which traditionally connect strangers from different cultures. Marsia suggested that when SCs work, they cultivate numerous benefits, but the glaring question was how to make them work, especially within contemporary society:

It’s a very interesting world we find ourselves in with sister cities at the moment because I know that they do something, I know that they achieve stuff, and I know deep down that they’re good for society. But how do they work, and how do we make them more effective going forward? That’s been on my mind.

5.4.3 Interview Three

If you reduce it to the most simplest form, for me, it’s just two brains are better than one. Everybody needs a friend.

The third interview took place at another local café. Again, Marsia arrived full of thoughts and ideas. She first reflected on some of the initial findings I had sent her. Marsia affirmed my speculation regarding the relationship between the association and the local council: “*I think there’s probably that whole disconnect between the purpose and between what council wants and what we are there to do. I think there’s probably gaps in how things have been set up.*” She noted that Association B was unaware of the council’s intentions and aims or if such notions had been articulated. Coming from a policy background, Marsia was used to dealing with tangible

time-based outcomes that could be readily assessed. However, she was stumped regarding the SCR: *“How do you measure it? You can’t manage what you don’t measure.”* This line would characterise the interview.

Marsia could not shake the reality that the relationship’s benefits were immeasurable. Moreover, the public perception of these benefits was unknown. She pondered, *“What do residents know about their relationship? Do they even give a hoot?”* To raise awareness, the association relied on cultural events and activities as, according to Marsia, *“that’s literally all we’ve got”*. However, such efforts sometimes clashed with other organisations with similar intentions. Marsia maintained that their niche was the connection to Sakai, but she struggled to decipher how it could be leveraged:

How do we lean into that? How do we encourage those business connections? What other business connections do we have? ... It’s like, how do we pull all those threads together, and then how do we measure that? Which, that’s the tricky bit.

She repeated, *“You can’t manage what you don’t measure.”*

Marsia expressed the need to celebrate success stories like that of the Sakai-based infrastructure company working with Porirua: *“That’s the sort of thing that’s missing in the sister cities space.”* Yet, she noted the challenges in keeping track of these successes due to how easily things are lost. This also extended to the many connections and friendships fostered:

How do you find those people, though? It’s impossible, and people get cut all the time, and it only takes a changeover in committee and a poor handover of relationships or a non-existent handover of relationships for things to get lost.

Loss was a concern that Marsia often discussed:

We’ve got people who have relationships one-on-one with people that are useful, but actually, the whole committee needs to know those people. Say, for example, heaven forbid, I don’t know, you lost contact with me, which means you lost contact with two of the last three, of the last five presidents. What happens? And without those relationships, what do you do?

Marsia felt this issue was not exclusive to their association or SCR but was a burden most SCs faced, *“I would say it would be representative of 90 per cent.”*

Another topic that piqued Marsia's interest was volunteering. There was an awareness that the association needed to change its approach to attract younger people; however, such a change was often at odds with the expectations of their Sakai counterparts, who wanted "*something that we would've given them 20 years ago, and we don't want to do that because that's not going to engage our demographic*". She further explained:

We want to engage young people in the sister city relationships so we may get longevity in this relationship and ultimately, we're going to need new and energetic people to come into the committee to be able to keep the committee going. I'm probably coming up on that six-year point where I'm just going, ah yeah, can I really be, do I really want to keep doing this sort of thing? ... you kind of reach a point where you go, there's got to be some new blood coming into the committee. There's got to be new volunteers out there that we can get.

Marsia felt that attracting younger volunteers was becoming increasingly complex: "*I think volunteerism as a place and the societal value is falling away because we're so focused on getting a good education to get a good job to afford all the things that Instagram and TikTok say we should want.*" She added that this might also reflect a difference in upbringing. Marsia's parents "*were always volunteering with something*" and volunteerism had been instilled in her from a young age. In contrast, she questioned whether this was modelled the same way to newer generations: "*I don't know, there's been a societal shift.*"

Raising youth awareness and engagement was a focal point for Marsia. She noted the need to be innovative and adopt new technologies:

I think, in a way, innovation even just looks like having a social media strategy. It looks like using tech in new and different ways. It looks like connecting via the internet. And I know it seems like this should have happened 20, 30 years ago, but it hasn't. So, to me, it's coming up with new ways of interacting online. But I also think it's new events and new ways of connecting with the community.

Innovation for Marsia was about finding new ways of doing things, which was made possible by introducing new tools and technology. However, she highlighted the need to involve younger generations who knew how to utilise these tools best: "*I think with innovation, it's actually the next generation just coming in with new tools and going, this is how we use the tools, let's try it.*" Later, in a rather profound statement, she added: "*Innovation and evolution and sister cities are one and the same, and passing on to the next generation is evolution. And then through that*

will come the innovation.” It was unclear at the time whether Marsia was aware of the evident catch-22 scenario she had envisioned. While new tools were needed to attract younger members, their use paradoxically relied on having them already involved.

Many of the points Marsia raised related to strategy, which she acknowledged could be improved. We discussed the local council’s international relations policy, which Marsia revealed she had only recently been made aware of. She was surprised that neither she nor anyone else on the board had considered the council’s intentions or strategy. Nonetheless, after reading the strategy document, she found many of the council’s goals “*nebulous*.” The council’s aims were deemed immeasurable. Accordingly, she exclaimed, “*I keep coming back to that. You can’t manage what you don’t measure thing.*” Association B’s efforts to rectify this had proven difficult:

We tried to have a strategy session, which was led by me, and we haven’t really moved beyond that first session ... then we had a second one where we were trying to do some stakeholder mapping, but that didn’t land either.

The burden of measuring benefits has been a consistent thorn in the association’s attempts to innovate and branch out. Marsia explained that the association recently collaborated with local iwi, and despite their eventual success, they were initially met with apprehension regarding what they could provide. Marsia herself pondered, “*What’s the benefit to them? We don’t even know what the benefit is to our members. How do we know what the benefit is to iwi?*”

Marsia expressed her doubts about what the future held: “*It’s a really hard space to be in, I think. And as you know, I’m not sure of the future of it.*” Yet, despite this, she remained steadfast in her belief in the SC “*kaupapa*”. This is best reflected in her closing statement:

If you reduce it to the most simplest form, for me, it’s just two brains are better than one. Everybody needs a friend. If you have a reason to come together, your cities are friends, or your cities are sister cities, and therefore, you have some sort of connection because your sisters, your cities understand each other or have a friendship, then you have something to build that friendship. You have a common interest. And you might not ever encounter that person otherwise. ... I probably never would’ve gone to Sakai if it weren’t for the fact that Wellington and Sakai were related ... also because we’re sister cities, I know I’m going to get looked after, and I know that people aren’t going to just be like, oh, you’re just another tourist. No, I’ve come here because my city and your city know each other. And then, from there, you build friendships.

Marsia hoped to see the relationship and the SC movement thrive; however, the glaring question was *how*.

5.5 Lafcadio

“Lafcadio” is a public servant born and raised in Wellington. Like his peers, he is passionate about Japan. This emerged from an opportunity to teach in Japan following his undergraduate studies. He has continued to be fascinated with all things Japan since, describing himself as a “*Japanophile*”. Having recently returned from another short stint living in Japan, Lafcadio sought out Wellington’s relationship with Sakai. As for his motivation, Lafcadio shared two potential stimuli: “*Am I giving back by doing it? Being involved in a global cities initiative, but I’m not quite sure myself. Am I self-interested, or am I contributing to international relations? I’ll just work on both hypotheses.*” Lafcadio officially joined Association B in 2023. This is Lafcadio’s story.

5.5.1 Interview One

I’d just really love to bring my interest in Japan together with actually connecting people. And then, if that supports prosperity for someone on either side of the Pacific, then that would be great. I suppose that’s why we do it.

Our first interview was held online. Like Marsia, Lafcadio developed a love for Japan while teaching there during his twenties. Wishing to continue this connection back in Wellington, upon his return in 2003, Lafcadio engaged with the local Japanese community and became aware of the SCR through this. Yet, his involvement would not be sparked until two decades later. Upon returning from a recent trip to Japan, he became curious to see how the SCR was faring. However, his inquiry efforts bore little fruit, for there was a dearth of available information “*except for the webpage and then a very old or some, you know, one article per year that’s, you know, tangentially related or something*”. Consequently, from the outside, it did not appear that the relationship was “*going on all the cylinders*”. He wondered what was happening behind the crumbling exterior and held a particular curiosity for the cogs and mechanisms of the relationship. As an analytical individual, he explained that “*my mind can’t help thinking about it*

in those kind of terms as soon as I get involved, rather than about Sakai itself. But just how can you, what's the systemic enablers of this activity?" This curiosity led Lafcadio to join the association's board early in 2023.

Of his many queries, Lafcadio regularly pondered what he referred to as the "*amorphous value proposition*" of SCRs. Lafcadio could see the potential for mutual trust to provide a "*unique market and proposition*" that would be absent otherwise and wished to demonstrate this functionality through Wellington and Sakai. Lafcadio told me Sakai held many opportunities: "*If you know about Sakai's history, it's just ludicrously commercial.*" He metaphorically described an innate desire to make and sell things as "*the beating pancreas of society*" for Sakai. The association just needed to help combine one and two and test the hypothesis.

In his short involvement, Lafcadio had identified several barriers that could hinder the proposition above. Most of these barriers pertained to admin-related inefficiencies, which took "*up all the oxygen of the meetings*". The barriers, while not overly complex, were deemed crippling if left untouched. Lafcadio suggested that "*the group itself doesn't really have governance experience,*" which was compounded by an unclear purpose. The only listed purpose for the relationship that Lafcadio could find was on the council's website. However, this led to more questions than answers, as it lacked an "*actual plan or strategy*". I asked Lafcadio how he would describe the relationship's purpose. He replied, "*[to] connect residents to residents ... yeah, just to connect them, just to experience each other's culture would be it*". I remember thinking this was indeed rather ambiguous.

Like Marsia, Lafcadio viewed the internet and new technology as the key to the relationship's future. Referring to the online medium where our interview took place, he remarked, "*This technology ... should be viewed as a game changer and should be investigated.*" There was a potential to connect people in new and innovative ways previously out of reach: "*I think if you throw away old models of how you linked people to people and just thought about how technology works, I think there's heaps of opportunities in there.*" In the way Lafcadio spoke, there was a divergence of passion, hope, and rationale. He envisioned a future "*where people*

are meeting each other all the time” and businesses from Sakai and Wellington interact habitually. He joked that this could all be a reality if only others could “*see my logic, the brilliance of my logic*”. In closing, he stated:

I'd just really love to bring my interest in Japan together with actually connecting people. And then, if that supports prosperity for someone on either side of the Pacific, then that would be great. I suppose that's why we do it. I see all these untapped [opportunities] ... they're very exciting. Just literally. That's just literally the kind of the emotional response to thinking about what would Sakai people find interesting and Wellington interesting and valuable in Wellington and vice versa. I think of all these connections that I think are exciting. They just kind of need the people to fill them up, fill up those connection ideas.

5.5.2 Interview Two

If you take those capabilities away, you just get this fragile bubbling of pre-existing interest realisation and annual patterns where an external request has managed to land.

Our second interview was at a local café in Wellington. Shortly after we started, Lafcadio said he had been dwelling on my question about the relationship's future. He informed me that after consideration, he wanted to change his answer to be broader. He explained that in an ideal scenario, “*[the] people that are involved are clear about what the impact they're seeking is and how to go about getting it. ... And that I suppose in that they're supported to do that.*” Thus, for Lafcadio, the future revolved around clarity and capacity, knowing what you're doing and being empowered to do it. These two notions were recurring themes throughout the interview.

On clarity, Lafcadio expressed that while he understood the importance of the SCR, he struggled to articulate how the association contributed towards this and to what end. When we discussed mayoral exchanges, for example, Lafcadio commented:

But I mean that's the council's business kind of, you know, I'm not sure what role the residents or it's not clear how the resident's associations on both sides kind of support it or take advantage, enable it or support the thing itself or take advantage of that.

This confusion extended to business exchanges. Despite Lafcadio's belief in the potential of these exchanges, the association did not know how they transpired nor what they involved. They were, seemingly, kept in the dark.

One of the more successful activities, by Lafcadio's account, is the children's art exhibition, which showcases art from children in Sakai and Wellington:

So that's probably the leading example of what, what's working well and what links through to a strategy and objectives and the logic of activities that doesn't actually exist, but, oh, it only exists in people's intuitions kind of thing rather than explicitly.

This last comment was thought-provoking. Lafcadio implied there was no clear or explicit logic regarding what activities the SCR pursued. Instead, this was based on intuition and speculation. In the case of the exhibition, Lafcadio explained, "*It's a happenstance to do with one person's particular, you know, skills and energy.*" He noted that there were a few similar activities that, despite their success, were difficult to sustain. They pertained to individual impetus and logic, vulnerable to change and fluctuation. Lafcadio thus pondered, "*How do you support more of those things to happen?*"

According to Lafcadio, this lack of a clear, consistent direction created a barrier to entry. Potential members would not know what they were getting involved in or why. To guarantee continuity, the relationship's purpose and logic needed to be externalised, "*To give the whole thing an existence that's independent of, that's independent of that good person or that bad person*". Part of Lafcadio's proposed solution was to build a strong membership that understood the rationale behind what the association was trying to do and what it needed to be sustainable:

The more people that are all going, 'Tick, tick, tick, I get all that, and I'm invested in that', then ... the more likely it's that someone steps in because it's easy to step in because 'Okay, I can take the reins, I know what the course is'.

By giving the logic or purpose an external existence, the focus could shift from individual intuition to collective agreement, affording greater resilience and consistency. Nonetheless, Lafcadio acknowledged that increasing the membership was no easy matter.

Lafcadio likened attracting new members to a "*wicked cycle*". He explained that incentivising others requires time and effort, which small volunteer-run groups generally lack. For example, the association discussed the potential of a newsletter but ran into logistical obstacles:

You need time and energy to make a newsletter that no one's got because the committee's not big enough. Or you don't have enough, just don't have enough critical mass to produce engaging material for the newsletter to give membership value so that one member says to someone else, 'Hey, join this. You get a newsletter. It's interesting, and I went to this event, and I enjoyed it' kind of thing.

Lafcadio insisted that the relationships needed more accessibility, especially for those without a pre-existing interest. He suggested that the association could develop a system or infrastructure to simplify the process over time: *"That's that bridge-building idea that I mean if you build a bridge that you could then start to find people that will cross the bridge who don't necessarily, aren't already drawn there, because they've got great curiosity."* Unfortunately, however, even metaphorical bridges do not build themselves.

The association needed help to build the bridge; they needed resources. On this, Lafcadio remarked, *"The resources exist at the top, but the possibilities exist at the bottom."* Without a clear purpose or strategy, the ability to tap into these resources was often happenstance, or indeed a numbers game:

Even though you can see the connection there, you can have all those ideas all the time of seeing these potential connections, and it's more like what's the mechanisms to investigate them and obviously have a hit rate is whatever it is. ... so you just need time and to keep plugging away.

Nonetheless, the association still needed the capacity to pursue and capitalise on potential opportunities: *"If you take those capabilities away, you just get this fragile bubbling of pre-existing interest realisation and annual patterns where an external request has managed to land."*

Lafcadio's concern was that without the right skills and expertise, there was little the association could do to create opportunities and to grow, instead of becoming trapped in a repeating cycle.

Considering all these hurdles, I asked Lafcadio what the current motivation would be for getting involved. His response is worth reading in full:

I can see that you just might want to be involved for kind of two different reasons. One is to just to taste satisfaction from being, indulging an interest in the other culture. And that seems to me that's the default or the underlying ... I think it's hard for [a] sister city ... to convert that into something more energetic that has an impact, you know, that makes change or is more about achieving a goal ... it's quite hard to describe how kind of resident activity ... supports kind of the changes that happen to make a stronger relationship or create interactions that

have the outcome that the city council probably wants. That somehow the citizens thrive more by virtue of the existence of the residents' association.

So it's hard to express, it's hard to express the intervention logic if you want. And then it's also hard for any small voluntary body of people to be effective, even if it knew what that was ... but you kind of need to answer the first part so that you can work out how why you want to be effective and what you need to be effective. And then you can work on those other bits.

To Lafcadio, Association B comprised a group of interested individuals tasked with transforming their interests into tangible outcomes. To achieve this, they first needed to determine their purpose and then have the capacity to give effect to that purpose, all while juggling the risk of things fizzling out. There was a need to do more, but this in itself was a further risk: “*Because as soon as you start saying, ‘Let’s do more everyone,’ it’s easy to say you can’t or we can’t because, you know, we’re small. So it’s kind of like a self-fulfilling prophecy.*” Lafcadio had seen this very scenario play out in the neighbouring city of Porirua:

All that I would know about in terms of comparisons would be the Porirua one [SCR] is very, has gone into hibernation, so that’s that kind of thing where that bubbling along at that personal kind of relying on a couple of people’s interest to just do things level can easily fall to nothing.

According to Lafcadio, the association had discussed these issues but was unsure what they could realistically achieve given the circumstances.

5.5.3 Interview Three

It kind of just has to be the start of something more. It’s not an end in itself kind of thing. Maybe it’s a base. I’m not even sure it’s a necessary base condition for connecting. It’s, it’s almost a nice to have. Yeah, so it’s all about the intervention logic of this thing and the capacity to spend time doing it and finite resources.

Our third interview was at a local bakery near Lafcadio’s work. I shared some of my initial thoughts following our past interviews. I explained that, by my interpretation, each of the three associations was isolated, seldom engaging in external communication and collaboration.

Lafcadio’s response again raised the importance of purposeful and clear reasoning. He argued:

But it’s not as simple as saying that it’s good to connect with other sister cities. So, it is, like, why? ... If you just went out and said you should connect across, you kind of just add another layer of activity to the already squashed timeframe. So, yeah, it has to have the efficiency ... people will do things and invest time in things ‘cause it just sounds like the right thing to do. But this is where the impact

of activities starts to get disabled because they're not put against a 'Here's the reason that I'm doing this activity.' It never gets considered because the mind of the organisation is [a] volunteer, time-poor, diverse, brittle, shared understanding of what you're trying to do.

Lafcadio rightfully suggested that external communication and collaboration, if pursued without reason, could create a time sink and distraction that detracts from the association's overall efficiency.

The significance of purpose and reasoning in the relationship was plain to see. However, it was not lost on Lafcadio that these factors have remained undefined and unclear for some 30 years following the relationship's inception. As others had shared, part of this issue was the difficulty of measurement. The relationship appeared to have launched with what Lafcadio previously called an “*amorphous value proposition*”. In seeking to rectify this, the association had few points of reference or comparison. Lafcadio described this scenario as path dependence:

There's path dependency here because the councils are at the start, and that strategy statement's not really ... whether or not it provides a quality story frame or guardrails or something for the sister city activity, it would be good if you could say 'Yes it does,' or 'No it doesn't' kind of thing. But to do that, to start off with, you need to have an idea of 'good', and then you need to have a capability to compare that.

Lafcadio implied that the decisions, or rather indecisions, made at the relationship's inception had culminated into a burden of deficiency that had gone unchecked and was now rearing its ugly head.

For Lafcadio, several things needed to be considered or, ideally, should have been considered long ago. These included a set of outcomes, indicators, measurable objectives, a decision-making framework, and a performance assessment framework. However, more than anything, “*To start off with, it's just getting people agreeing on what we're doing. If that doesn't happen, yeah, it's not going to be surprising if you don't see coherent activity leading this.*” Lafcadio reiterated that everyone involved was passionate and eager to help, but “*there's no kind of agreed way or values or anything about how that happens. ... It's a bit random what decides to get done.*” A contributing factor was “*admin burden*”. According to Lafcadio, communication both inside and outside of meetings was consumed by admin-related issues. There was limited time or

capacity to address questions like ‘why?’ or ‘how?’ Lafcadio thus went as far as to suggest that “*There’s no shared understanding. There’s nothing to understand. There’s no understanding to share.*”

Lafcadio admitted that he could not fully grasp the purpose of the association or the SCR. Although he understood the logic of connecting Wellington and Sakai residents and the benefits this could incur, the end goal remained obscure:

I struggle a bit with the, so if the Wellingtonian is aware or knows about Sakai ... it kind of just has to be the start of something more. It’s not an end in itself kind of thing. Maybe it’s a base. I’m not even sure it’s a necessary base condition for connecting. It’s almost nice to have. Yeah, so it’s all about the intervention logic of this thing and the capacity to spend time doing it and finite resources.

Lafcadio alluded to the issue that awareness does not automatically lead to action. The key lay in what became of this awareness. Like his peers, Lafcadio was confident in the relationship’s potential. He could see it becoming the leading way of connecting Wellington residents, businesses, and communities with Sakai and, potentially, Japan: “*My mind can go to all these possibilities.*” However, he frequently found his thoughts meeting the same roadblock — reaching a uniform agreement and understanding required careful deliberation and planning. Still, it is difficult to consolidate the time and energy for this without first having clarity.

The association struggled to rectify its predicament under culminating burdens and inefficiencies. Lafcadio gave the example of innovation. Echoing Marsia, he saw innovation as adopting new technology to streamline the association’s administrative efficiency. Communication was a further example:

Well, if you think about that, the [Association B] of 30 years ago and of today, probably the use of technology in the administration would be very different. It would’ve been all paper-based, but the use of technology to connect with Sakai people is probably still at emailing level. It just kind of seems if the point of the association is to make connection and the internet enables connection, why isn’t there something more interesting or innovative than emailing? And that might be, you know, there’s mention of the average age of the Sakai Wellington Association member and things like that. But that’s probably, that’s just a thing to work through.

There was likely a better alternative than emailing and a way to convince the older counterparts in Sakai, but as Lafcadio acknowledged, someone still had to put in the time and effort and have

the know-how. This was a constant conundrum. The opportunities, potential, and logic seemed sound, but putting them together was arduous.

Lafcadio felt that there needed to be a sort of reset for everyone to come together to decide what this was all about:

First of all, you need to get some idea of what a local authority is trying to do. Maybe it's like all local authorities in New Zealand. Step one is each local authority, and then take that context; step two is then how the citizen kind of activity fits within that slightly wider activity. And then they will have their ideas of good added to them. And then you could finally start to think about comparing. But you'd have to embed the idea of getting buy-in to that good idea and working towards it before you could assess.

He then closed by again referring back to his emphasis on clarity: “*You have to have that accessible, simple statement, and you need to kind of articulate it out so that people can use the statements, engage with the simple statement, but act using the detail of the explanation behind this statement.*” Lafcadio hoped that this clarity would allow the association a point of reference against which its capacity could be assessed and, with that in mind, steps towards progress, even if small, could be pursued.

5.6 Evelyn

“Evelyn” is originally from Japan but moved to Wellington in 1999 and has lived there since. When we first spoke, I was surprised to find that we had studied at the same university in Japan. Evelyn had studied law but was now an established artist in Wellington. She explained how she was involved in many volunteer-run groups, with Association B being her most recent commitment. Evelyn was shoulder-tapped by a local council official and invited to join to help organise the annual children’s art exhibition. Evelyn has now run this art exhibition since 2016. This is Evelyn’s story.

5.6.1 Interview One

I think very few people are interested this kind of volunteer. Yeah, quite a heavy volunteer responsibility as well because we invite mayors and then dignitaries to the event so, which meaning we don't get paid, but we have a huge responsibility.

Our first interview was online. Evelyn told me about her life, all the places she had lived, and how she had come to call Wellington home. Like other association members, Evelyn was globally minded and curious about the world around her. I first asked Evelyn to describe her understanding of an SCR. She responded that “*it depends on the group*”. Her experience was that each relationship differed depending on those involved. In the case of Wellington and Sakai, Evelyn felt that Association B was a “*good team*” and perhaps different from other groups. She viewed the relationship as active within Wellington and praised the efforts of the members. She explained the various events the association had organised but noted that exchanges were comparatively scarce.

It was evident that exchanges were less frequent than Evelyn would have liked. This could be equated to the purpose she ascribed to the relationship: “*to open the door for as many people as possible in Wellington*”. According to Evelyn, the association had started exploring potential options, but these efforts were not without struggles. They were limited in communicating directly with their counterparts in Sakai due to the expectation that all communication goes through official channels. Communicating about simple matters was consequently laborious. A further constraint was the size of the association itself.

Evelyn was briefly involved with Association B for a year when she first arrived in Wellington over 20 years ago. She noted that the association was comparatively large at the time, but many had since left. “*I think it's all group have some things happen, and then some people didn't have the same view as others. All those things going on, we lost many members.*” However, this was not the only reason numbers had dropped. In her view, the commitment required was a barrier to entry:

I think very few people are interested this kind of volunteer. Yeah, quite a heavy volunteer responsibility as well because we invite mayors and then dignitaries

to the event so, which meaning we don't get paid, but we have a huge responsibility

A further contributing factor for Evelyn was the presence of “grey zones”. There was growing emphasis on the economic aspect of the SCR, which brought with it complications:

When I hear that, then where is the ... How you do that? ... Like, many grey zones exist because we are volunteer organisations, so we are not really promoting somebody's business, but also, when you involved personally, you get to like some product, and then you want to tell other people, so what, is that is our job? ... We had twice some conversations one of the new members interested some open up relationship association between association relationship about business side but how do we do it? We don't know where to step forward.

Evelyn explained that while the association was not necessarily opposed to promoting business connections, they lacked the means, expertise, or guidance to meet these expectations. She emphasised that expectations should be tailored to members' schedules, which were those of “normal people” with “normal lives”. More than anything, she felt that members needed to enjoy themselves.

In discussing the future, Evelyn said that she was “hopeful”. However, her voice carried a degree of doubt. She told me, “*I can't tell right now.*” She highlighted the role of exchanges: “*We want to see more faces, you know, of people; at the moment, we don't see them,*” but added that these needed to include not just officials but everyday residents. Moreover, while events like the Japanese festival attract large crowds, it is the personal relationships that make a difference:

I think human relationship and experience is probably more stronger memory ... I think not just doing the event, and then people come and then Japanese event. They enjoy that. But it's just for trip to somewhere. You know, same things you just 'Ah, I ate food. Yummy'. They never want to make it or want to know about food, who made it. But it's the people who have a relationship; they get to know each other, their background and then if you make something together. Yeah. It's in individual people's relationship, they become deeper connection. That's what we hope to be. Yeah. That's what I'd like to achieve.

For Evelyn, the SCR was less about accommodating short-lived tasters of Japan and more about cultivating enduring connections.

5.6.2 Interview Two

New Zealand is more and more people, more and more different background people who come in to live here. So, which means you got to be understand everyone not from the 'you follow us', you know, [instead] we building together. I want, I like to do that kind of country in the New Zealand.

We held our second interview at a café in Auckland. Following her comments at the end of our last interview, I asked Evelyn to expand on what she would like to see changed. She replied that although events were important, they could not replace exchanges; balance was needed. The association used to organise regular student exchanges that have since stopped. Attempts to restart these programmes faced hurdles:

School is, they have a board as well. So everything making decision is a long time, long, long, long time to make decision. I think from my perspective, once started, it's going to be fine. But we try to approach them and then build the negotiation or conversation. I think it's volunteer of time of how much we have a volunteer time. I think it's some people get to too exhausted and then, you know, it's a big wall. You can't break the wall, to the next step.

Her explanation could be likened to an airline loyalty programme; reaching a specific tier can be difficult, but maintaining that tier becomes easier once you have reached it. Many of the exchange programmes within the SCR faced this dilemma, with fewer members to implement them, hence a “wall”.

A further issue for Evelyn was the audience events attracted. She felt that perceptions towards Japan had shifted since the 1990s, and there was a greater appreciation for Japan than when the relationship began 30 years ago. Nonetheless, having lived in New Zealand for the past two decades as a Japanese person, Evelyn had experienced first-hand that misunderstandings and miscommunications still occur: “*Customs is different, the language is different, how we think is different.*” To Evelyn, the SCR was thus a “*really nice way for people to understand each other*”. Local events were one way of achieving this but, as Evelyn raised, they often appealed to those with a pre-existing interest in Japan. It was not easy to ascertain whether these events were helping to foster understanding or if they were just catering to those who already held an understanding. Evelyn’s concerns were thus that the association’s efforts were not reaching the

right people. It seemed likely that a more intentional and innovative approach was needed. However, growth in this manner was slow.

Evelyn informed me that there was insufficient information, support, or guidance to help members like herself “*break the wall, to the next step*”. This also appeared to be an issue of discourse. She expressed that the discussions she and I were having were the “*kind of conversation I always wanted to have when I joined*”. She added:

First time I joined into the associations, I felt this; I want to learn about how it works and then what we can do. But we didn't get many information through the committee easily because everyone do same things every year. That's the most easiest. But if, like me, want to do something, new things, I can't get any information.

It was not the case that such conversations were avoided or that information was withheld. Instead, Evelyn shared Lafcadio's concern that the association lacked the time needed to address these fundamental discussions: “*Our association is very, number is very small, and the committee member is small, number five or six at the moment. You know, you saw our meeting; just so many things we have to talk about in one hour.*” Their current efforts alone occupied their total capacity.

Due to time and resource limitations, Evelyn highlighted the importance of examples or guidelines. Whether or not such examples existed, Evelyn did not have access to them and was unsure where to look or whom to consult; there was no established process or system. When I shared an example of a teacher exchange programme run by a neighbouring city, Evelyn remarked, “*I didn't know until today, if I knew, you know, three years ago, I might be already meet and then have done something.*” Evelyn felt such examples could bridge the association's knowledge gap, allowing them to start several rungs up the ladder instead of reinventing the wheel. The association, she remarked, was not a professional entity but a volunteer-run group interested in Sakai and Japan and thus could not be expected to operate at a high level without adequate external support.

This gap in support led Evelyn to speculate about how the association could promote economic outcomes. In her eyes, the relationship was “*definitely set up*” with “*friendship or*

education” as the primary goal. Consequently, she suggested, “*If you shift to that direction, definitely you guys have to give us some kind of guideline or something or a workshop or whatever you can help them to think outside of the box.*” Evelyn further explained that more members, especially those with business expertise, would be needed. However, attracting new members was, in Evelyn’s words, “*the difficult part*”.

Evelyn echoed the same barrier to entry expressed by other members. Accordingly, I asked what had motivated her to join. Her response pertained primarily to her lived experience in New Zealand as an immigrant of Asian descent, the importance of diversity and cultural understanding, and her desire to make things better for others:

I think it's most motivated to me to do this current job. And at the moment I'm working on children's art exhibition. Also, they're really, really difficult to get through about ethnic diversity part. It's very hard. Almost become zero last year. Nothing to do. They don't want to; they're not interested talking about Japan or they don't want to explain about sister city relationship or they kind of dropped the interest in children's art and then dropped the all those interests. And then I try to explain to them; I get really exhausted and tired, and I wonder why those things happening. And because of education, because of what society tell you what is important, what is not important. And probably we are not important area. That's why I like to enhance a little bit to how important it is to understand the different culture, different language. And then we are New Zealand is more and more people, more and more different background people who come in to live here. So, which means you got to be understand everyone not from the 'you follow us', you know, [instead] we building together. I want, I like to do that kind of country in the New Zealand.

For Evelyn, the relationship presented an avenue to address these issues. When I asked whether she believed SCs could achieve this, she laughed and replied, “*Good question.*” Like her peers, Evelyn identified the need and potential, but the ‘how’ was unclear. Evelyn liked meeting ambitious people. It was through hearing the visions and passions of others that Evelyn found motivation. But she implied that such ambition was challenging to come by:

Four years, I'm learning every time. But business one, no idea. I just find it's very ... because you might be do same things. I use my brain to like chess. 'If you do this, what happen? if you do that, what happen? If you do this, that happen' I'm thinking a lot. And then I can't really see the vision at all.

5.6.3 Interview Three

How I can walk if I don't have any arm or leg?

Our last interview took place on a local university campus. Volunteering was a focal point of this interview, a topic Evelyn spoke about passionately. We first addressed the issue of youth engagement in volunteer programmes. She explained that, when it comes to volunteering, “*young people want to have a kind of a reward*”, a tangible incentive that can make it worthwhile. For Evelyn, this was a mindset of newer generations that she was adamant would not change. Therefore, she proposed, “*We should use their way of looking at the world. You might be thinking that volunteers should be more from the inside of the heart, but we can't really change their mind.*” She also raised the issue of managing intergenerational relationships and the balance between those who wish to maintain tradition and those eager to change it. Evelyn had observed a recent trend in volunteering that was altering this balance: “*You could say is volunteer style is changed.*” She felt that younger generations still “*want to make a better world*” but are less interested in the more formal approach that requires meetings and administrative load.

To get young people involved, they first needed to be aware of the SCR. In Evelyn's view, a lack of resources restricted efforts to raise this awareness, “*So, that part is, I think for me, it's badly organised, that area for the sister cities, because you don't give you any money, you don't give any resources, and then people to get to know, it's not possible.*” She gave the art exhibition as an example. As one of the main public events the association organises, it presents a key opportunity to promote publicity. However, Evelyn expressed that she does not receive enough support from the local council, which amplifies her volunteer load:

It's always 'talk to so and so, talk to so and so' ... always I have to find out I have to call them, I have to make appointment, I talk to them. Those people pass on to there that time of the things. It's a lot of time. And the actual useful event to the community is only this much [gesturing a small amount with her hands]. Probably like 60-70%, I'm spending for the meetings. Try to catching the peoples, try to explain about what we're doing, and then that's the volunteer's job? I don't think it's our, you know, that's not our job. I think that it's a city council job to sorting out for us.

Evelyn hoped to increase the exhibition's size but struggled to get funding approved. She had been asked to use a council-owned building for future exhibitions to save costs. Still, she had been unable to find a suitable location: *"We don't have anywhere we can do proper exhibitions."* It was then suggested that she use a small library, which would require downsizing. She described the whole ordeal as *"odd"*. Evelyn could not understand why the council were not more interested; *"I think it's not that important for their eye."*

Given the amount of work she puts in, I asked Evelyn what would become of the exhibition if she departed from it. She stated it would likely end: *"That's the nature of things. I think my work is so much work; no one wants to do this much amount of the job just for love."* As an artist and someone who regularly organises exhibitions, Evelyn learns a great deal from the experience. In contrast, she could not see why anyone else would be committed to putting in the same time and effort. I asked how she felt this issue could be rectified. She simply smirked and answered, *"Don't rely on volunteer."*

Evelyn was passionate about volunteering and saw its value, but she had also observed the negative impacts of overreliance on volunteers. Notably, maintaining consistency proved difficult within a predominantly volunteer-run structure. This was exemplified through the association's past. The association had endured a period of drought where little had occurred or been passed on: *"I'm looking at history of the past. We had many things happening, but we are missing that like last 10 years."* Previous activities, events, and connections proved unsustainable:

Of course, Covid happened as well. But we had a little bit happening. But we didn't carry on anything or we didn't carry on any of member or strong group connected. We kind of, like, lost to only 20 people, almost like 10 people, regular peoples from there. So I don't know what happened that time, but that's my mystery, I don't want to investigate it because past is a past, but I know we're quite active in the past.

Evelyn attributed this struggle, in part, to the nature of volunteer-run groups. Association B was like a family and thus susceptible to internal disputes; any conflict could quickly escalate, culminating in a rift. Additionally, she highlighted the laborious task of finding new members.

The association appeared to be operating on thin ice; any misstep could lead to its collapse. Additionally, as the association's past suggests, recovery can be a long and strenuous journey. Still, Evelyn noted that the association was again active despite this.

Evelyn explained that the family-like dynamic added an extra layer of complexity. There was a concerted effort to maintain a harmonious state of affairs, which meant issues were seldom addressed head-on: "*We can't really tell that person ... our relationship is not like that. It's more family.*" There was a need to ensure each member was adequately cared for and respected. This is, of course, not exclusive to volunteer-run groups. However, Evelyn warned that volunteers require more attentiveness, for their departure can have irreversible consequences.

Evelyn and I shared various ideas about how her role as a volunteer could be made easier. In most cases, the answer was more members. This, however, presented further issues. Attracting more members required extra work. To this point, she laughed and commented, "*But then you are asking me to do the job.*" She followed up on this point:

I'm doing enough. I'm doing probably 200% of the job. 100% is enough, and I'm doing 200%. And you are asking more to me to do the more job to finding the people for the organisations, for the Wellington City Council ... I'm working for you. So, it's like this area. Why don't you do for me?

Her experience was that the workload and expectations were disproportionally placed on the lower levels of the governance scale:

Conversation is always like that and then never be 'Okay, so let's do together' [but instead they] say, 'Oh, you do the job. You do the job' to us. We are most smallest volunteer group, right? And then you guys are bigger than us, powerful than us. Definitely higher. You guys higher up than us. But you're basically asking those smaller people to do a new job for this bigger company's responsibility. We hear. That's the kind of way I felt.

Evelyn thus hoped to see larger entities cover areas or tasks that a small volunteer-run group like Association B was not set up to achieve effectively or efficiently.

Increasing membership seemed like a simple solution. However, like Lafcadio, Evelyn later highlighted that more is not always better. Part of the issue was not numbers but expertise and connections. Echoing her comments from the previous interview, Evelyn again explained that

the association did not have access to the knowledge or connections necessary to generate or capitalise on opportunities. Unlike a business or company, the association could not hire the right people.

For Evelyn, all of these issues amalgamated into a debilitating force. Describing her experience, she stressed the feeling of being confined:

Almost like a very narrow space only [that] I can work. So your world is so big, and then, 'Oh, you can't do this because not city council', 'Oh, you can't spend this one', 'You can't do this because of the blah, blah, blah', you know like, almost like, okay, so how I can walk if I don't have any arm or leg that kind of I was feeling and I thought this.

In previous interviews, Evelyn emphasised the importance of people from different cultures and backgrounds understanding and working together. She held a vision of how the SCR might fit into this equation. However, it was clear that the hurdles in her path were slowly eroding this vision. Like her peers, Evelyn could imagine numerous possibilities if only she could break through the metaphorical wall to the next step. Nonetheless, one must certainly be able to walk before breaking any walls.

Evelyn concluded by stating that Association B did not lack vision, energy, or commitment. She exclaimed that they were doing everything within their power. Still, these efforts could only go so far without external support: *"Vision is great. And then I want people to know about that. Actually, we already have a plan. We were tried to do things. But we are stopping by somebody else, not us."* She thus concluded, *"We try our best."*

5.7 Penny

"Penny" is a clinical psychologist originally from Australia. She moved to New Zealand in 2000 and eventually settled in Wellington in 2008. New Zealand is just one of the many countries Penny has called home. As a child, Penny's family was involved in the student exchange programme known as AFS. The opportunities this provided, including a one-year exchange in Thailand, sparked Penny's curiosity about the world beyond. Penny's family also hosted a Japanese student, cultivating Penny's interest in Japan and leading to various visits. Penny

maintains a strong interest in Japan to this day. Due to scheduling conflicts, I had two interviews with Penny instead of the usual three. This is Penny's story.

5.7.1 Penny Interview One

I think it will just kind of bumble along. I think there'll be times when we can get more members together, they'll be people more interested, but until we grow it from connections with younger people who can expand across the years, it'll just be hit and miss.

Unlike previous members, my first interview with Penny was in person at a local university campus. I first asked Penny about her view of SCRs. Before joining Association B, Penny had limited knowledge of SCs, stating, *"I didn't really have any sort of understanding of who was who."* Penny first heard of the association and the relationship about five years ago through a Japanese friend and has been a member since. In explaining SCRs, she noted their dependence on the countries, history, the age of the connection, and how well they are maintained. In the case of Wellington and Sakai, the relationship's activeness derived from the inertia of those involved, which ebbed and flowed: *"It's the main players, really. That's kept it going, which is why I think it fell apart for a while for our association."* Penny explained that, following a period of stagnation, the association was traversing its recovery: *"We have a limited number of members, and we're trying to reignite things."*

Penny felt the association was heading in the right direction and hoped to see more connections and communication, especially online. However, progress was reliant on members' capacity and the local council's support. Regarding the former, she observed that maintaining the association required consistent time and energy, which can be challenging to come by in a volunteer setting: *"I mean, we're voluntary, so it's like, who is prepared to keep on doing things?"* Penny highlighted the toll of her commitment to the association: *"You know, for me, it's a big cost. I can't earn the money that I would normally earn because I'm doing this."* She could foresee an active future for the association but maintained a degree of apprehension:

I think it will just kind of bumble along. I think there'll be times when we can get more members together, they'll be people more interested, but until we grow it from connections with younger people who can expand across the years, it'll just be hit and miss.

Penny felt that more could be done to attract a wider audience. The association had limited promotional avenues, and there were few opportunities for them to present, and few things to present. Thus, Penny stated: *“We don’t do anything like that. But we could. But the thing is. Yeah. Then we need sort of more city council support involved to create those avenues.”* According to Penny, the local council supported the association and the relationship. Still, her comments raised speculation about whether the association received adequate support.

5.7.2 Interview Two

... I mean, loneliness is one of the biggest things, and it’s massive within the Japanese population. It’s big here, too. How do you help to connect people? you know. So, for me, it’s about relationships, and it’s about however you can try and create connection.

Our second interview was held at her practice. Being one of the last interviews I conducted, I could share everything I learned from the three case studies. I highlighted the fragility of the associations, the lack of clear processes or systems, and the isolation faced. In response, Penny echoed a similar sentiment:

Absolutely, and it just kind of speaks to the wider Aotearoa culture, really, doesn’t it, in terms of everybody does their own things. There’s no consistency between city councils, and so the associations are related to the city councils. ... I mean, it’s taken me a long time to get to understand how the Japan side, Sakai side of things works. Yeah, it’s complicated.

We briefly touched on the issue of consistency. Penny believed that consistency was unattainable for many aspects of the relationship. Like Lafcadio, Penny saw the relationship as revolving around happenstance opportunities. Most activities or events resulted from *“people’s own interests and engagements, and because it’s voluntary, it has to be where someone really wants to put their effort”*. For this reason, she said, *“It’s never going to be consistent. It’s always going to be who’s there at the time, who the personalities might be, how that works or doesn’t work. And yeah, it’s a complex ever-changing scenario.”*

Like other members, Penny emphasised technology and innovation. However, innovation, or simply doing things differently, often came at the expense of tradition. The association had little difficulty generating new ideas, but implementing them was another story. As I had often heard,

the Sakai side of the relationship did not share the same enthusiasm for change. Thus, the association's efforts to innovate were *"complicated ... because you want to keep the good relations, but you don't want to take the same course of history that's been there for so long."* Ideally, Penny hoped to see a greater adoption of online modes of communication. With all the world's challenges, she viewed the ability to communicate online as *"perhaps our most fundamental asset"*:

I think people want to go back to the old ways of exchange and people movement, and maybe that's okay at some level, but I don't think it's sustainable. So innovation, to me, is making it work somehow without having to add to the sustainability woes.

This change likely required a lengthy process. However, Penny commented that the association did not have the luxury of waiting, for the need to cater to younger audiences was ever-present.

For Penny, a further factor was the human element of the relationships, which could not be ignored:

Different personalities, different neurodiversities, different skill levels, different time, different stage of life, different family structures. And that's just on the personal level. And you have, you know, financial capacity. There's so many different elements to it that, you know, it's global, so it's all intertwined.

Any decision required that these interconnecting variables were accounted for. Consequently, much time was spent managing relationships internally and externally. With the growing shift towards economic outcomes, Penny struggled to see how it would all play out: *"It's really hard, and it's all about human-to-human interaction. And I think there's quite a push to somehow make it fit a business model, and it's just not going to do that."* She laughed and repeated, *"It's not going to do it."* Economic outcomes were not necessarily impossible, but they would require specific skills or expertise, which *"normally you would pay for"*.

I asked how reviews might fit into this picture. Penny was unaware of any reviews and seemed apprehensive about their long-term effectiveness due to a limited shelf-life: *"because of change of government, things change all the time, so you can't have any consistency"*. Penny explained that the association had attempted to do a goal-setting session to little avail: *"We had lots of post-it notes, and then, you know, nothing was documented and brought back to the team."*

So, complicated because everybody has their own way of doing things, but it didn't actually go anywhere." According to Penny, the association did not measure anything. Instead, their goal was simply to *"increase our membership numbers. That's what we'd like to do."* She reiterated that the association used to be bigger, *"but politics and personalities changed that"*. Penny was eager to attract others to the cause, but like Lafcadio and Marsia, she wrestled with the association's value proposition: *"What are we offering people if they join? So I joined, then what?"*

The association needed to determine their why and raise awareness, but it lacked the capability or capacity to tackle both issues simultaneously. Moreover, as volunteers, they were gambling with their time; efforts that were uneventful resulted in a loss of time for minimal gain. A recent example was a promotional event that was cancelled by the local council due to budget restraints. Recalling this, Penny stressed:

That's all our time, our free time, our unpaid time of going in and participating and trying to make something work, you know. And it's hard enough for the people who were there who worked for the city council, but it's like, 'Here we go. Okay, nothing.' But they're still getting paid for their time. We're putting our time into something that just falls away. So it's hard, 'cause you know, time is hard to come by.

There was an implicit risk factor in the association's endeavours; members had to be willing to commit their time and energy, knowing this might not amount to anything. Therefore, as Penny explained, *"There's lots of different things [we could do], but it depends on who's got the motivation, energy, the time, and how much support there is."* Consequently, the direction of the association was at the whim of each member's interest, for they were unlikely to put their efforts elsewhere, *"because it's voluntary, it has to be where someone really wants to put their effort"*.

For Penny, all roads led to time. Time was both a catalyst and a throttle, but it was the latter which Penny contended with: *"It really takes a lot of my time, which I would otherwise be earning money doing, which I need."* Penny held that people had less time to give: *"People are stretched. ... But it's like protecting time when you're doing things, got a busy life. Most people don't have that. Only maybe the older people."* She emphasised that the association did not lack

talent and listed all the skills and experience each member provided; from the outside, there was no shortage of quality volunteers: *“People have their own particular areas of interest that they bring, but time’s limited.”*

Penny maintained that the association and the relationship were a source of joy. She explained that loneliness was a growing issue, and the need for connections would only increase. Although the future remained cloudy, she hoped that the association’s ability to provide joy and cultivate connections would continue to develop:

I guess, kind of, everybody’s stretched, and everybody’s poorer, and it’s only going to get more like that. So how do you create those connections, give a bit of joy and help people to feel like they’re engaging? Because you, just on the radio today, and also, I mean, loneliness is one of the biggest things, and it’s massive within the Japanese population. It’s big here, too. How do you help to connect people? you know. So, for me, it’s about relationships, and it’s about however you can try and create connection.

Penny emphasised how they could achieve this: *“It’s creativity, and it’s young people; to me, that’s where we start.”*

5.8 Case Findings

A total of 11 interviews were conducted in this case study. The stories shared were multifaceted, contextual, and complex, yet each seemingly resembled the other. Like Association A, the members of Association B shared a uniformity in their experiences, and there were several constructions where these contexts overlapped. The following highlights the findings that have been generated from these experiences, with emphasis given to four shared constructions: (1) having potential, (2) being restricted, (3) being vulnerable/at risk, and (4) having clarity.

5.8.1 Having Potential

Doubt and apprehension were common themes across all members. There was prevalent speculation about the future, and some questioned whether there would be a future. Nonetheless, despite a myriad of issues, perceived or otherwise, members remained hopeful; in their eyes, the relationship had potential (see Appendix E: E1, E2, E3, E4, E5, and E6).

Members often referred to a metaphorical wall or barrier behind which this potential lay dormant. It was close enough to perceive yet too far to materialise. If only this wall could be breached, the barrier surmounted, then the potential could be realised (see Appendix E: E7 and E8). ‘Potential’ thus took on an intangible and enigmatic nature to which members could freely ascribe whatever ideal they saw fit. When coupled with the malleable concept of the SCR, there were few to no restrictions on how far these ideals could reach.

As exemplified by their stories, members viewed the SC concept with confusion and intrigue. Collectively, they struggled to articulate the purpose or value of the relationship, but this same ambiguity allowed their ideals a freedom that would escape more rigid concepts. Take marriage as an example. Within defined cultural groups, the parameters of marriage are comparatively fixed. One’s view of marriage arguably reflects the established norms of one’s culture, and any effort to deviate from this would likely be met with social repercussions. No such norm existed for the SCR between Wellington and Sakai; it was a blank canvas. Consequently, anything was within the realm of possibility. For members, the SCR could bring together entire communities, connect people and businesses in new and unforeseen ways, tackle loneliness, and bridge cultural divides (see Appendix E: E9, E10, E11, and E12).

Considering this potential, there was a consensus that the relationship had yet to be fully grasped (see Appendix E: E13, E14, E15). A greater understanding may have existed in the past, but this has since been lost (see Appendix E: E16). Currently, how to tap into this latent potential remains unknown (see Appendix E: E17). The relationship found itself in what Marsia described as an “*interesting world*”; members frequently highlighted the need for and relevance of the relationship (see Appendix E: E11, E18, and E19), but they were seemingly unable to capitalise on those things. Members did not appear to lack ideas or vision (see Appendix E: E20 and E21), but this did little to alleviate their concerns.

Clarity was a focal point of this shared construction. Without an established consensus or understanding regarding the fundamentals of the association and the relationship, potential became a matter of speculation, a vague mixture of hope and logic. The path to reaching this

potential was obscured; members often did not know how to progress or even where to start, resulting in stagnation (see Appendix E: E22 and E23). For some members, like Marsia, this led to despondency and questions like “*Why do we bother?*” Members were adamant that this was not due to a lack of effort but rather that the odds were stacked against them; the conditions the association needed to flourish were not in place.

5.8.2 Being Restricted

Like those involved in Association A, members from Association B shared the construction of being restricted. Deficiencies in expertise, resources, and time contributed to overarching limitations preventing the association from fulfilling basic functions. These restrictions were multifaceted and incurred both voluntarily and involuntarily. Being involved in Association B carried a heavy burden, and members frequently acknowledged the limits they placed on themselves by being involved (see Appendix E: E24, E25, and E26). Simultaneously, there were numerous restraints beyond the members’ control.

Evelyn and Penny highlighted the expertise held by board members but remained doubtful about whether this was sufficient for the changing dynamics of the relationship. Part of this issue was the size of the association (see Appendix E: E27 and E28). An external shift towards economic outcomes, changes in volunteerism, and the increasing importance of social media and online mediums had left the association with a widening gap. Given their small size, filling this gap had proven difficult, and attempts to recruit new members, while hopeful, were unsuccessful (see Appendix E: E29).

Recruitment required time and resources, which were scarce. Most resources were provided by the local council, including funding (see Appendix E: E30), which came in limited supply (see Appendix E: E31, E32, and E33). Evelyn went so far as to liken the deficit to not having arms or legs. There was also the issue of consistency. The local council could alter and pull the budget at any moment, which members had experienced first-hand (see Appendix E: E34 and

E35). In place of adequate resourcing or funding, members often sacrificed time, a finite commodity.

Time was arguably the most prominent restriction members faced. Everything members engaged in had an inherent unrecoverable time cost. When expertise and resources were insufficient, this time cost would increase (see Appendix E: E36, E37, and E38). A common complaint was that otherwise simple tasks took too much effort and time. This dissuaded members from undertaking anything overly ambitious; outcomes were often unpredictable, as was the potential time sink. There was no guarantee that any time expended would result in tangible outcomes—or anything, for that matter. Consequently, until recently, the association had revolved around the same activities with little variation (see Appendix E: E39). The association was stuck in a pattern where most activities relied on pre-existing interests and growth on external opportunities, both factors over which the association had little control (see Appendix E: E22 and E23).

The association had recently embarked on new endeavours that sought to upend this pattern. One such endeavour was the creation of their own yuru-chara.¹¹ According to Penny, the project, which members viewed as a resounding success, required “*a truck tonne of work*” that often went unnoticed. The association also recently organised a Tea Ceremony that attracted local politicians and members of the Japanese diplomatic core. The event was again considered a success, but the planning and eventual implementation were strenuous enough to leave some members questioning their commitment. The association appeared to be turning a new leaf, but it walked a fine line that could easily lead to its collapse (see Appendix E: E40).

More needed to be done to attract attention and create impetus, especially regarding youth engagement. Yet, members were reluctant to increase their commitment as they either had no more time to give or prior experiences had seeded doubt as to the value or meaning of their

¹¹ A yuru-chara (yuru kyara) is a type of Japanese mascot character known for its cuteness and simplistic design.

efforts (see Appendix E: E24, E41, and E42). Lafcadio likened this scenario to a self-fulfilling prophecy (see Appendix E: E43). Mirroring those involved in Association A, members from Association B identified the issues they faced, but seemed paralysed and unable to enact change. They constructed themselves as increasingly restricted, which influenced their actions and put the association and the future of the relationship at risk.

5.8.3 Being Vulnerable/at Risk

Members had developed a construction and fear that the association, and by extension, the relationship, was at risk and/or vulnerable. Although the construction was not identical to that observed in Association A, it shared similar concerns regarding sustainability and resilience. The stories shared depicted the association as fragile and easily toppled (see Appendix E: F41, F42 and F43). Members were divided on what outcomes this would have; to some, the end of the association would mean the end of the relationship, while others hoped it would be more enduring. However, given the lack of clarity discussed earlier, no one could likely know for sure what would happen, which is arguably a vulnerability in itself.

The association relied on happenstance opportunities revolving around the interests of individual members (see Appendix E: E42, E47, and E48). Consequently, the shelf life of any activity or project was tied to the member whose interest had evoked it. Penny explained that this was an unfortunate yet unavoidable scenario. Volunteering incurred a steep responsibility and burden; thus, people were unlikely to commit their time to an area outside their interests. Even then, from her own experience with the children's art exhibition, Evelyn questioned whether passion alone provided adequate impetus to outweigh the burdens (see Appendix E: E49). The concern was thus that many of the association's efforts were unsustainable, which Penny alluded to when she exclaimed, "*It's never going to be consistent.*" Were an unfavourable set of circumstances to occur, as the association had experienced in the past, the association could easily collapse (see Appendix E: E50). This risk played a significant role in members' constructions; they played a game of chance.

Like members of Association A, those from Association B faced the hazard of time. Time presented more opportunities to roll a bad die. However, for members in Association B, time had a further influence. Association B was launched in 1995, almost three decades ago, before the widespread use of the Internet, social media, and the Local Government Act 2002.¹² Since then, technology has accelerated, significant local government reform has occurred, and society has undergone numerous changes. While aware of these changes and the need to adapt, members constructed themselves as incapacitated and at risk of becoming obsolete.

Marsia expressed the view that the relationship had lost its niche, and the association had yet to establish its purpose in today's ever-changing climate. The shifts Marsia alluded to would have occurred many years ago, yet the association and the relationship had seemingly been left behind. Members highlighted issues in their use of social media and communication (see Appendix E: E38, E51 and E52), in governance (see Appendix E: E32, E53, E54 and E55), economics and business (see Appendix E: E56, E57, E58 and E59), strategy and planning (see Appendix E: E60 and E61), volunteerism (see Appendix E: E29, E62, E63 and E64), exchanges and events (see Appendix E: E31, E65, E66) and even psychology (see Appendix E: E67). The association was depicted as a "*small voluntary body*" (Lafcadio) seeking to tackle contemporary issues with outdated equipment, frozen in time.

The association was vulnerable to future changes, as it could not adopt new practices and tools or adapt. The inconsistency and unpredictability outlined above further heightened this vulnerability. It appeared the only way this would be rectified was if more people joined or the local council increased their support, both of which were unlikely unless the association clarified its purpose.

¹² The Local Government Act 2002, amongst many changes, saw the introduction of Chief Executive Officers and encouraged local authorities to more actively "promote the social, economic, environmental, and cultural well-being of communities in the present and for the future" (Department of Internal Affairs, 2002, p. 37).

5.8.4 Having Clarity

The last shared construction was having clarity. As each story highlighted, members joined the association due to a passion for or close connection to Japan. These connections were many and varied; one of the members was Japanese, while the remaining three had all lived and taught in Japan. Three members spoke Japanese to some degree, and the families of two members had hosted Japanese exchange students in their childhood. Association B encapsulated a group of individuals all shaped in one way or another by their experiences in and of Japan. Their commitment to the SCR appeared to stem from a desire to provide similar experiences, help promote internationalism, foster connections and friendships, and spread joy (see Appendix E: E11, E12, E68, and E69). Members were clear in their reasons for joining individually; however, they struggled to determine their collective role and, for some, understand why they stayed.

Referring back to the shared construction of having potential, although members could see what the relationship was capable of, they could not grasp how they contributed. Metaphorically, the circumstances faced could be likened to asking a group of architects to erect a house. The architects may know what the house should look like, but that does not mean they know how to build it. Without proper support or guidance, any effort made by the architects would likely be time-consuming, tedious, and disorganised. Lafcadio made a similar comparison between the realities of the association and the expectations placed upon them (see Appendix E: F70).

Evelyn raised concerns in highlighting that, when it came to managing global partnerships, they were not professionals—they were volunteer residents (see Appendix E: E71). Additionally, Marsia suggested there was a disconnect between the council's intentions and the association's capabilities (see Appendix E: E53). Members did their best to overcome this deficit but encountered the same question: How?

In retelling their stories, members pondered how to best progress (see Appendix E: E11, E17, E20, E31, E56, E57, E67, E72, E73, and E74). They sought to establish a more precise, robust, and collective way forward. However, their efforts to attain clarity had been largely ineffective.

This is partly derived from the restrictions and vulnerabilities described earlier. The association had one singular purpose: “to support the Council in the development of the sister city relationship with Sakai” (Wellington City Council, 2024, para. 5). ‘Support’ in this case became an almost ethereal notion with little meaning, as it was revealed the association was not aware of the council’s intentions nor its international relations policy. Consequently, members were unsure what they supported, or why or how. Nonetheless, after discussing the policy, members indicated that it provided no greater clarity, with Marsia describing the outlined goals as “*nebulous*”. Beyond this purpose and policy document, there was little to no established rationale or guidelines. Instead, each member brought their own logic to the association and pursued it individually, often at the expense of consistency and mutual understanding (see Appendix E: E75).

In dissecting the stories shared by members, I, too, found myself questioning how one attains clarity from a position of ambiguity. Members understood the importance of identifying their purpose, but the path to clarity was littered with obstacles, the most notable of which again was time. The association required deliberate discussion and discourse, not just once but habitually. Yet, members lacked the necessary time to engage in such practices and adjust their trajectory (see Appendix E: E7, E36, E38, E41, E44, E76). They had to contend with a myriad of complexities that required constant care (see Appendix E: E77). Putting in more time was also out of the question (see Appendix E: E25 and E26). Finally, as Lafcadio suggested, even if the association did determine its purpose, there were no guarantees that it would be able to achieve it, which only made the endeavour that much more daunting.

5.9 Case Summary

This case has shown how having potential and clarity, and being restricted and vulnerable, mutually shaped members’ experiences and constructions. In retelling their stories, members grappled with the positions they found themselves in. They each joined the association with visions and hopes for how they could support others through their love of Japan. Collectively, they committed considerable time and effort towards making these hopes a reality and, in some

cases, they were successful. However, this success came at a high cost. Faced with growing external pressures and constant changes, members had come to view their circumstances as unsustainable. Their efforts, although well-intentioned, were often ad hoc with little clarity or consistency. While aware of these issues, members lacked the capabilities needed to remedy their situation. Over time, they began to fear that the relationship was becoming obsolete and questioned the association's future. Yet, despite all this, they remained hopeful. As Marsia put it:

It's a very interesting world we find ourselves in with sister cities at the moment because I know that they do something, I know that they achieve stuff, and I know deep down that they're good for society, but how do they work, and how do we make them more effective going forward?

CHAPTER SIX

Christchurch and Christchurch

6.1 Introduction

The last case study featured a city and a town of the same name, Christchurch. The former is a New Zealand city, and the latter is a town in Dorset, United Kingdom. To avoid confusion, Christchurch (NZ) and Christchurch (UK) will be distinguished thus. The relationship is one of the oldest held by a New Zealand municipality, dating back to 1973. While the similarity in name is believed to be one reason for the relationship's formation, Christchurch in New Zealand was named after Christ Church College at Oxford University, not the Dorset town. A pivotal figure in the relationship was the late Brigadier John H. Gray, known for his book *From the Uttermost Ends of The Earth*. Gray was a former Town Clerk/City Manager of Christchurch (NZ) and an Honorary Citizen of Christchurch (UK) (Christchurch City Council, n.d.).

Outside of a shared name, Christchurch (NZ) shares military history with Brockenhurst, a small village to the northeast of Christchurch (UK), which housed the No.1 New Zealand General Hospital during the First World War. Ninety-three New Zealand soldiers who served with the New Zealand Expeditionary Force on the Western Front are buried in a nearby cemetery. This historical connection has catalysed numerous exchanges supported by Christchurch's (NZ) respective SC committee, hereafter referred to as Association C.

6.2 Association C

Like the other associations in this research, Association C was formed near the onset of the SCR, presumably to provide community input. Little information was available on the association's inception over 50 years ago. Moreover, information, in general, was difficult to locate; the only thing written online about the group was a small blurb on the local council's website. Lastly, any knowledge held by members did not extend beyond the last two decades.

Although formally recognised as a committee, the group is referred to here as an association. In practice, this distinction had little bearing, as its functions closely mirrored those of the other associations in this research. Association C comprises community volunteers collaborating with their local council to support the SCR. It coordinated inbound and outbound exchanges, including the Brockenhurst Scholarship, a programme established in 2017 that funds travel and accommodation for students and scholars researching aspects of New Zealand's First World War military history in the United Kingdom. The association also supports visiting Oxford scholars and European dignitaries in Christchurch.

6.3 Setting

The setting of this case study followed similar patterns to the previous two. The first interviews were conducted online via Microsoft Teams or Zoom; the second was in person. The third interview, however, was undertaken again online. This was primarily due to the logistics of travelling to Christchurch (NZ). Depending on their preference, in-person interviews were conducted at a public area, such as a café, or at the member's home.

6.4 Otis

"Otis" is a chartered accountant born and bred in Christchurch. After graduating from university, he moved to the United Kingdom for what was intended to be a two-year working holiday but turned out to be 12 years. Otis would become very fond of the United Kingdom, regarding London as a second home. Through his career in auditing, Otis came to build connections across numerous organisations in both New Zealand and the United Kingdom, and was often called on for governance roles. Association C was just one of the long list of boards that Otis sat on. Otis was the epitome of having one's fingers in many pies. Perhaps the most noteworthy 'pie' was his connection to the New Zealand Navy, which had appointed Otis as an honorary Captain, making him the highest-ranking individual in Canterbury. Otis's involvement with the SCR between Christchurch (NZ) and Christchurch (UK) was one of the many ways he exercised his interest in the United Kingdom. This is Otis's story.

6.4.1 Interview One

I suppose I came to it with a real sort of, this is public money, what's the value proposition? Because otherwise, why do we? Why do we exist? You know, I suppose, what's our purpose?

Otis and I had met briefly at an SC forum, but this interview was the first time we had spoken at length. He initially described his life and how he had come to admire the United Kingdom, particularly London. Despite growing up in Christchurch (NZ), Otis had never heard of any of the city's relationships. It wasn't until he joined Association C around seven years ago that he learned about the connection. The manner in which Otis joined the committee was rather peculiar. He stumbled across a newspaper article advertising the committee and inviting people to be involved. Intrigued by the concept, Otis “took the bait” and contacted the then-chairperson. In retrospect, Otis said the article was a “bit of a trap”, as he was promptly asked to be the new chair after making contact.

Otis explained that his initial interest in getting involved came from his appreciation for the people-to-people links the concept encapsulated. Having a strong connection to the United Kingdom himself, Otis saw the relationship as an opportunity to strengthen ties between the country and Christchurch (NZ). He explained that, on a more basic level, “I’ve always enjoyed other cultures and other countries, you know. ... Yeah, that was sort of piqued my interest.”

Otis joined the committee with a strategic mindset. Since the group was taxpayer-funded, he emphasised the need to identify their value proposition. He was critical of some of the committee's past activities and suggested that they provided limited benefits to residents:

I suppose I came to it with a real sort of, this is public money, what's the value proposition? Because otherwise, why do we? Why do we exist? You know, I suppose, what's our purpose? It's that kind of governance strategies sort of stuff, which is my mindset, where it's all very well, you know, getting the committee to pay for your train tickets down to see family members from London down to Bournemouth or Christchurch. But what's the use of that other than you having tea and scones with your relatives?

Otis felt there was untapped potential with opportunities beyond the small town in Dorset. He referred to how Christchurch (NZ) got its name: “The city of Christchurch in New Zealand was named after the Oxford college, not the Dorset town. So, well, why don't we have a relationship

with Oxford, the university?” The committee has since begun cultivating a relationship with Oxford University, including hosting Oxford scholars. This was just one example of how the committee broadened its focus to encapsulate the entire United Kingdom and Europe.

Otis, who helped spearhead this change, says he faced considerable resistance, as long-term members were reluctant to deviate from what had been the status quo for decades. Regardless, Otis described the change as necessary: *“Change isn’t always comfortable for some people, and that’s certainly been the case with this, but it needed to happen; otherwise, actually, the council wouldn’t have funded us.”* Otis was adamant that for the committee and the relationship to be sustainable, it needed to prove its worth and create value independent of the disposition of any mayor or council. Council support was not guaranteed, so the committee’s value proposition needed to be clearer.

In attempting to identify its value proposition, the committee had devised several pillars central to its mission. The first pillar was remembrance and promoting documentation and research on Brockenhurst and other significant New Zealand military sites across Europe. The second pillar was education, which included supporting exchanges and educational tours to Christchurch (UK) and Brockenhurst, and welcoming Oxford scholars. The third pillar broadly pertained to helping to host foreign dignitaries and established guests from the United Kingdom and vice versa. As evident from these pillars, the overarching appeal of the relationship was people-to-people connections.

6.4.2 Interview Two

But actually, what sort of town do you want to be in?

Our second interview was in Christchurch at the Canterbury Club. When we last spoke, I was intrigued to hear how the committee had begun to broaden its scope and cast a wider net. With this in mind, I first asked Otis for his thoughts on the traditional bilateral SC model. In response, he again referred back to having a value proposition. He speculated that residents, faced with rising rates, had become critical of any spending that did not deliver tangible benefits, which

pressured local councils to be more selective. Thus, the importance of a compelling value proposition was pivotal. He also emphasised that SCRs rely on mutual investment from both sides, which is not assured: *“You need enthusiastic people at both ends, and if one end drops off or whatever, it is difficult.”* Accordingly, while Otis had no issues with the SC model, he explained, *“We’ve sort of had to evolve out of necessity.”* A wider net provided a higher potential ceiling in terms of value while alleviating reliance on a single city or town’s impetus: *“So it’s where are the fish hooks? And if they’re not actually in that city, well, you kind of got to make it work.”* Finally, he added that the decision to broaden their focus was not entirely their own and that the local council had also been pushing in that direction, *“otherwise, they were going to pull the plug”*.

Otis maintained that the relationship had much to offer; they just needed to look in the right place or have more places to look. In terms of the ‘right’ places, Otis made a comparison to the SCR Christchurch (NZ) has with Seattle, which he viewed as having a clear value proposition:

There you can see that value proposition taking high-tech businesses from here to Seattle. Whereas that’s the industry there. They’ve got a great relationship between the universities and there. So it’s not just a people-to-people kind of, pen-pally sort of thing. There is a commercial value proposition. I keep coming back to that element. ... But they can articulate that it’s not just a bunch of people getting together for tea and scones, which is what it became in Christchurch, Dorset.

Nonetheless, for Otis, part of the value proposition was having a good story to tell and telling it well. To this point, he suggested that the value may already be there; it needed to be better articulated.

Otis expressed the view that SCRs should be portrayed more positively. He likened SCRs to art galleries and museums; they are not necessary, but they contribute to the overall feel of the city or town, and without them, *“a place becomes pretty dreary”*. He argued that cities should invest in SCRs for the same reason they invest in public institutions. They might not contribute physically, like a park or a museum, but they can contribute to the social fabric of a place:

But actually, what sort of town do you want to be in? An insular Christchurch, that’s, you know, all white, Anglo-Saxon, and okay, rebuild has changed that a little bit, but surely that’s got to be a good thing. We actually have, and actually,

you see the Oxford scholars that come here, and they're not all old Etonians ... There'll be some hijabs, there'll be people of colour, it's male, female, and probably every other gender these days. ... But it's a, that's a good thing having the opportunity for us to send our kids from here over there to learn about the history of Brockenhurst and other battlefields. Well, that's the sort of thing that [if] we don't capture that history now, and I've probably said this before as well, we've got that same challenge as, is it Waipā? that we are losing that connection.

To Otis, there was an inherent good in encouraging people, especially youth, to show interest in other countries and in the future and the past. While SCRs were far from the only way of achieving this, they were a unique lever that only cities and towns could pull. In considering this potential, Otis stated, *“This whole sister city thing is, it's actually got to have some sort of renewal.”* Part of this renewal was learning to evolve, as *“if you don't evolve, you die”*.

Otis viewed education as the future of the relationship. He explained that the committee could not get into industries and connect businesses, so trade was out of the picture. Education, on the other hand, was a *“low-hanging fruit”*. While there was little happening with Christchurch (UK), Otis saw the relationship as a gateway to the various other connections Christchurch (NZ) held across the United Kingdom. The committee promoted exchanges with Oxford University, but to Otis, this was just the beginning. Being from the field himself, he hoped to see exchanges in the financial services sector. In this sense, the committee could act as a promotional entity, leveraging its connections to provide people with opportunities that would otherwise be difficult to orchestrate: *“It's about bringing stuff to people, whether they want to pick the ball up and run with it or not is, it's up to them.”*

Near the end of the interview, we discussed the importance of the committee and local council relationship. Otis remarked: *“I think council has got to be open to using these committees.”* While Otis acknowledged the council's support, he questioned their confidence in the relationship's future. When I asked whether he was aware if the council had outlined their intentions, he replied, *“No. Well, I don't know, but I suspect not. But that would be valuable for everyone, both for them and us.”* He added that the council had developed an International Relations Policy Framework, which highlighted three priority SCRs. Unfortunately, the relationship with Christchurch (UK) did not make the cut. Otis was thus of the mind that *“if I*

went in and said I recommend we fold, 'Yeah, that's fine'. That'd be fine with that." However, he argued that if the relationship were to end, they would be "missing a massive opportunity".

6.4.3 Interview Three

You get a bit of local engagement, and they feel good, we feel good. Well, how do you put a price on that?

My final interview with Otis took place online. Since we had last talked, Otis had unfortunately decided to leave the committee. Nonetheless, given his departure, I felt he could offer a unique perspective. The majority of this interview thus surrounded his retrospective view of the relationship and overarching thoughts on the movement's future.

I began by sharing a summary of my findings thus far. In particular, I noted that the three associations had been slow to adapt despite their best efforts, a point Otis had also made. In my explanation, I likened SCRs to old cruise ships; no matter how often you redecorate them, they are still old. In response, Otis highlighted the older demographic behind SCRs. He had attended several conferences and heard the repeated calls for more youth engagement, but most efforts were seemingly missing the mark. From his experience in Association C, previous members were "very resistant to change as well because that's the way they've always done it, and that was their idea". In retrospect, he speculated that he might have been seen as "quite insensitive" because of his perhaps blunt delivery. But Otis maintained, "If you don't evolve, you die."

For Otis, time was the axe grinding away at SCRs: "This is the challenge that a lot of these sister cities have got because, you know, you have these passionate individuals that have started it up, and now they're in their golden years at best." He likened the predicament to Rotary Clubs, suggesting they faced similar challenges: "There's a lot of traditions that need to be maintained, but also it's, yeah, you've got to evolve, and you've got to be modern." In terms of being modern, Otis raised the use of technology. He questioned, "What sister city committee has actually, you know, picked up the ability to meet with their counterparts overseas by Zoom?" Then, speaking in broader terms, he echoed my previous analogy and remarked:

They just haven't embraced technology because they all just want to be on their cruise ship where actually, you know, the people coming through, they want to go out of space on a spacecraft, they're not interested in the cruise ships.

One reason why Otis felt SCRs had yet to evolve was due to a lack of investment. He compared our local governments to those of China and Japan, highlighting, “*Local government works a lot bigger over there. They're a lot more important, and there is a mismatch at that level.*” He had observed this contrast in how mayoral delegations are treated in either country. From his experience, Chinese and Japanese cities welcome delegations with great fanfare, whereas New Zealand cities are reluctant to pick up the bill. Noting the importance of hospitality in some cultures, Otis expressed, “*Well, you know, if you don't want to invest in those relationships, don't think you're going to get the big commercial deal at the end of it.*” Otis suggested that, here in New Zealand, we are not prepared to put in the long-term, continual commitment required to attain the level of economic outcomes local councils have come to expect.

Otis felt that SCRs need more scrutiny from local councils to be taken seriously. This need for scrutiny, however, clashed with the heavily volunteer nature of many SCRs. It is difficult to be critical of volunteers, for nothing is stopping them from leaving:

The problem is you're dealing with volunteers. 'You said you were going to do a Zoom call every month with your counterparts. Well, you haven't done it so well, you know. Well, we're not going to give you the funding.' 'Well, we're volunteers anyway. We'll go and join a Rotary club or something else.'

Speaking on volunteering, Otis also noted that SCRs can be volunteer-unfriendly due to heavy and sometimes unexpected time burdens:

You know, even conversations that need to take five minutes would take an hour, and, you know, when you're busy trying to, you know, trying to earn your keep, and you're taking half an hour or an hour out of your day ... it's pretty frustrating.

Nonetheless, he again emphasised that volunteer-run committees had to be able to articulate their value proposition; otherwise, it would become increasingly challenging for councils to cough up the money. On the other hand, councils also needed to be prepared to invest time and resources

when opportunities arise. More than anything, they needed to get more people on board who could help adapt and develop the relationship:

So I think, I suppose, it starts with them [SCAs] proving their value proposition to the council. Council being on board with that and, you know, understanding what the value is and, you know, moving with the times of actually attracting some new blood that are engaged and embracing technology.

At the very end, Otis reinforced his belief in the concept and the value he sees in it, if only this could be better articulated and captured:

I really think there's value in it. You know, some of these things are different, they're difficult to put a price on. Yeah, okay, I'm an accountant by background, but you know, how do you value an orchestra tour going wherever? ... If we said the, I think, the Addington Brass Band were heading to the UK, and for them to be hosted down at Christchurch and Dorset, you know, because of Brockenhurst, because there's a connection there, well, you know, you get a bit of local engagement and they feel good, we feel good. Well, how do you put a price on that?

6.5 Crockett

“Crockett” has over 20 years of involvement in local government, first as a city councillor and now as a regional councillor. His community engagement extended far beyond the local council; he is a member of numerous civic groups, sports clubs, and other local organisations and foundations. Crockett was far from the first member of his family to be involved in local government. He explained: “*One of my grandparents was on the new Brighton Borough Council many years ago, and a great-great-grandfather was also the same.*” Crockett thus jokingly suggested that he had a “*genetic disposition*” for civic and community engagement. Crockett became aware of the relationship with Christchurch (UK) after being elected to the local council in 2013 and has been involved with Association C since. This is Crockett’s story.

6.5.1 Interview One

There's a lot of potential there still yet to be realised.

I first talked to Crockett online. He told me about his lengthy involvement with the local council and the Christchurch community. He explained that, through this engagement, he had long possessed a fringe understanding of SCRs, but it was not until he became a local councillor that he ventured further. He described the concept as:

An association between two cities that may look to foster relationships in particular fields. Some of them might do business, education, sporting to a degree, but primarily I think business and education have been the things that have been a focus while I've been involved.

From his long-term involvement, Crockett had concluded that each relationship depends on the alignment of the cities or towns in question. In contrast to Christchurch's (NZ) other SCRs, Crockett felt the connection with Christchurch (UK) was the weakest, partly due to a mismatch in size and capacity. The relationship with Christchurch (UK) arose from a similar name, but they shared few commonalities outside of this. Instead, Christchurch (NZ) had a closer history with Oxford and Brockenhurst, where Crockett saw more potential.

From Crockett's experience, for an SCR to succeed, there has to be a clear link: *"You've actually got to have some tangible project or potential business link or educational link or something to actually really cement a relationship. Otherwise, it does descend to sort of cordialities."* In seeking to avoid the latter scenario, Crockett was one of the members who called for an expansion in scope, which has already started to see progress. He highlighted their efforts to form links with Oxford University, the educational exchanges, and the scholars they have sent to Brockenhurst. As Crockett explained, this was not a departure from Christchurch (UK) but rather a supplement to the existing connection *"Whilst we're maintaining a link with Christchurch UK, we're trying to expand a little bit."*

A further piece of the puzzle for Crockett was the inclusion of motivated individuals. Getting people involved, however, required a degree of public awareness, which the relationship lacked. When I asked Crockett to rank the publicity of the relationship on a scale of 1 to 10, he responded,

“I would probably be looking at one or two. ... I would say that it would be very, I’d be very surprised if too many people knew about that relationship outside of council.” He explained that there is little to no advertising, and people are unlikely to stumble across the relationship by chance. However, to get publicity, the committee first needed something to publicise. This is where their efforts to expand saw promise:

I’ve been trying to foster an atmosphere of expansion, and it’s, most of us now on that group are looking beyond Christchurch, UK and probably using the sister city concept as a platform to launch things into the UK and Western Europe. ... So there’s a lot of potential there still yet to be realised. We’ve come close with a couple of educational things, but I’d certainly like to sort of look at some of the technological expertise that’s coming out of Christchurch and see if we can make some connections for that somewhere in the UK.

Crockett was confident that opportunities were out there and, by casting a wider net, they were more likely to encounter them.

6.5.2 Interview Two

What have we learned? How beneficial has it been? Should we continue? And if not, where should we be directing our energies? And that’s an analysis that our guys haven’t done.

Our second interview was at Crockett’s house. In our previous conversation, Crockett briefly noted his involvement with an SCR Christchurch (NZ) shared with Adelaide. At the onset of our interview, I asked him to expand on his experience. Crockett spoke of the relationship very highly, emphasising the many accolades and initiatives engendered between the two cities. In contrast, the relationship with Christchurch (UK) appeared comparatively dormant. In explaining this disparity, Crockett again raised the issue of size. Christchurch (UK), which Crockett described as a small, picturesque coastal town, could not provide the opportunities a city of Christchurch’s (NZ) size would desire:

In the first place, it was just the name Christchurch in New Zealand, Christchurch and UK, which established a connection if you like. But beyond that, there hasn’t been a lot of material connection between the two at the moment. And as I say, Christchurch is a little coastal—it’s got quite a nice marina and it’s a picturesque little place. But in terms of forging any economic or socio-economic connections with Christchurch in the UK, the opportunities have been fairly small because of the size of Christchurch in the UK.

Crockett again stressed the importance of having a unified cause or goal, and asked, “*What synergies can we find that would lead to a greater connection?*” In Crockett’s words, the connection with Christchurch (UK) was “*a nice to have sort of connection with the motherland, if you like the, old country. But it’s never really evolved past that.*” Like Otis, Crockett saw the need to adapt and felt there was little reason not to explore opportunities beyond Christchurch (UK): “*The time is right to look at what else we can engender as a connection between Christchurch here and the UK.*” Christchurch (UK) was also the only relationship Christchurch (NZ) held in Europe and could be a gateway to the continent.

Crockett highlighted the potential for exchanges in technology and innovation. He described Christchurch (NZ) as a technological hub with much to share. In his mind, collaboration in this area could range from “*sharing ideas to the other end of the scale and attracting investment into the city.*” Crockett also believed they could forge a bond through joint research. There was a plethora of ideas, but they all culminated in the view that, to adapt the relationship, the committee had to try something different: “*So, going into today’s meeting and beyond, that’s the sort of philosophy and concept that I want to see the group do. Otherwise, we really just exist as a connection by name from history.*”

Like Otis, Crockett still believed in the contemporary SC model. He had observed success in other relationships that had provided tangible benefits. The issue lay with their relationship with Christchurch (UK) and how an otherwise obscure connection could be transformed into something innovative and rewarding. In achieving this, Crockett did not view council support as a hurdle. He noted that support for the relationship has been consistent, and despite not being high on the priority list, the committee still received a “*reasonable allocation most years*”. However, he explained that the amount of monetary funding received depended more on the economic potential of the committee’s efforts than on the volume of said efforts. The committee was thus incentivised to pursue economic opportunities that could be measured.

The council’s ambitions aligned with Crockett’s “*philosophy of finding something that has benefit to Christchurch here both in an economic and social connection.*” He frequently

commented on the peculiarity of the relationship with Christchurch (UK), which he said is “*arguably one of the least beneficial in terms of economy and connection*”. He again emphasised that the relationship did not lack potential; it needed greater impetus and motivation to move forward. Nonetheless, Crockett had reservations regarding what their small committee could logistically achieve.

We talked briefly about Crockett’s experience with volunteering. He told me he had been a local Surf Lifesaving Club member for over 50 years. He spoke of how successful his club had been but highlighted the importance of motivated individuals:

It does come down to who’s driving the ship. And then we’ve got, fortunately, a younger group of people in the club now, and they’re all my elder son’s age, and they’re all sort of late thirties, early forties, and they are quite passionate and quite motivated in their work. But take one or two of those movers and shakers out of the club, there’s two or three of them I could think of. It would be a struggle. You’d have to find someone else to step up to the plate.

Crockett felt this vulnerability also applied to their SCR; they needed passionate people. I asked if anyone from the Christchurch (UK) side helped provide this impetus. Crockett responded that he had never known such a person existed. He speculated that some key figures were likely involved in the past, “*But I think as you’ve rightly identified, age and the longevity of the group has meant that a lot of the people that were driving it 20 years ago are either well retired or dead.*” This reality did not escape Association C:

And even our membership of the committee has changed reasonably dramatically in the last five to 10 years. It was driven by individuals that had their own passion at the time. Two things have happened. One, I think they’ve got older and have moved on. The passion for that particular thing has dwindled. Or thirdly, you’ve had some new blood.

Crockett, like Otis, hoped to see more of the latter.

Crockett felt there needed to be a mix of short- and long-term outcomes for future opportunities. Finding this balance was the challenge. The relationship naturally lent itself more to the long-term, but the short-term benefits had become increasingly sought after: “*Most investors will be looking for some immediate return.*” That said, the committee couldn’t focus solely on the short-term, as this would result in what Crockett likened to a “*roller coaster ride*”.

His on-the-spot solution was a long-term, enduring relationship that continued to provide minor financial benefits, which would then branch off into more significant and perhaps short-term opportunities: *“from small seeds, mighty trees grow”*.

The last thing we discussed was the importance of selling a story externally and internally. Crockett emphasised the need to record what the committee does, *“the good, the bad and the ugly”*, and to pass this down to future members. It was not enough to share these stories; people also needed to learn from and act on them. Echoing Otis, Crockett stated, *“There doesn’t appear to be a great accountability process”*:

In terms of an in-depth analysis of projects that have been raised, some are still yet to be progressed; what were the benefits out of the ones we have progressed and lessons learned? And this is where I probably want to come to with the sort of educational, historical connections with Christchurch we’ve invested in, in three or four overseas tours and research. What have we learned? How beneficial has it been? Should we continue? And if not, where should we be directing our energies? And that’s an analysis that our guys haven’t done.

While Crockett held many hopes for the future, they relied on the committee first working out these essential functions.

6.5.3 Interview Three

I don’t want to just sit on the laurels of historical connection. I’d like to move it forward a bit to give it a bit more relevance in today’s environment. And to me, that’s the big challenge at the moment.

Our final interview was online. Having heard Crockett’s hopes and visions for the future, I delved deeper into how this might be implemented. Crockett explained that the first step was brainstorming ideas: *“We need to spend some time and say, well, you know, what is our long-term goal and our aspirations?”* One question in particular was etched in Crockett’s mind:

Are we happy just to be a historical connection with Christchurch and the occasional sort of educational visit? Or do we want to branch out and look at some activities that may have a mutual benefit to ourselves and our connections overseas?

Crockett noted that while occasionally discussing these topics, the committee rarely engaged in intentional strategy, planning, goal setting, or reviews. Furthermore, their discussions were

limited to an annual cycle: “*We haven’t had forecast any further than 12 months in the time that I’ve been there*”. He wished to rectify this and promote a mindset that looked beyond the present.

All things considered, Crockett said that the committee’s current activities and scope did not *require* this level of attentiveness. The relationship’s historical connection provided a degree of security and longevity not afforded to other connections; it was the city’s oldest SCR and was unlikely to ever be scrapped. For Crockett, however, there was a distinction between existing and excelling. As he had made clear throughout our discussions, his focus was on the latter. For the relationship to excel, Crockett acknowledged the need for more intentionality and structural rigour:

I’d like to see it being a little more prominent in its activities and perhaps being able to get to a stage where it does have a positive link to the city’s well-being. But that in itself requires quite a bit of brainstorming, a think tank, what you want, but it may well be that we need some broader involvement in that strategic planning and directional setting than just a handful of us that are currently on the committee. And we may, for example, we talk about getting into some sort of relationship that has an economic benefit. Well, we may need to bring in some expertise in that field to give us a, give us a steer on where we might perhaps look to track.

He reaffirmed his belief in the relationship’s potential, expressing that if these systems and processes could be implemented, “*There’s some opportunities, some exciting opportunities. We just gotta get the, probably in the first instance, develop the structure that we can bring these things forth. And that’s what I say is my objective.*” The committee seemed geared to begin this endeavour, but as Crockett suggested, they were a group of volunteers who could benefit from some guidance to point them in the right direction.

Crockett again resonated with the topic of volunteering. Having over 50 years of volunteer experience, he had observed how changes in volunteerism were impacting the committee and the SCR:

We are an ageing volunteer structure. I’m in my seventies, and I’ve been brought up in an era and I came from a family where community service and values that were strong in my family. I’ve tried to instil them in my kids into a degree with one of them on reasonably successful, but not sure about the other two. But getting younger people to commit to a long-term volunteer, volunteering programme is becoming increasingly harder.

He was concerned that young people were less interested in the type of long-term commitment committees like Association C required. Instead, he felt younger generations emphasised the perceived benefits of volunteering, which the committee had struggled to articulate. He contrasted this to volunteering in the past, which was perhaps more altruistic, and volunteers were easier to come by. There was, in his eyes, a shift in volunteerism that the committee had yet to adapt to:

I think we're sort of at a stage now where there needs to be quite a mindset change in how some of these activities operate that makes them a little more attractive to the younger generation and to volunteering in general.

How the committee would approach this issue depended on Crockett's earlier question: "*Are we just content to continue as a historical connection with some educational tours, occasionally visit, and that be it, or are we looking for a broader connection?*"

Crockett intended to continue to steer the committee in a new direction more attractive to a broader audience and adaptable to today's changing needs. Having been involved with the relationship for over a decade, he had come to appreciate the opportunities that lay beyond the horizon. Reaching this horizon, however, required what Crockett likened to a new mindset that could reorient SCRs within a contemporary context:

I sort of go back to the Christchurch example again and, rightly or wrongly, I think it will continue to endure because just of the historical significance and the fact that it was the first and it's now the oldest connection for Christchurch city. But I don't want to just sit on the laurels of historical connection. I'd like to move it forward a bit to give it a bit more relevance in today's environment. And to me that's the big challenge at the moment. There are other things that are going to make it more appealing and more attractive to the next generation and more.

To Crockett, this could start with knowing what's out there, what other people are doing in this space, and learning from them. Association C was pushing the boundaries of the fundamentals of an SCR and, as Crockett's vision suggests, this may only be the beginning.

6.6 Oliver

“Oliver” is a travel and tourism teacher who has taught at various high schools across Christchurch for over three decades. Oliver’s connection to the SCR with Christchurch (UK) was deeply interwoven with his teaching career. In 1998, he was approached to help organise a student exchange through the SCR, which he accepted and has continued since. This was also Oliver’s motivation to join Association C. Out of everyone I interviewed for this research, Oliver had the most prolonged and consistent involvement in an SCR, spanning over 26 years. He had been the backbone of the relationship’s educational exchanges and had taken hundreds of students to Europe. Oliver joined later in the study, and we only had time for two interviews instead of the usual three. This is Oliver’s story.

6.6.1 Interview One

Unless someone actually puts their hand up and does it, nothing really happens.

Both of my interviews with Oliver were online. We first spoke about his lengthy journey with the SCR. In the 1990s, Oliver worked at a decile two high school in Christchurch (NZ), where he received an out-of-the-blue request from a teacher in Christchurch (UK) to help organise a student exchange.¹³ Oliver explained that other schools had been reluctant to get involved, and the request eventually made its way to him. Oliver’s school accepted the request and welcomed 16 students from Christchurch (UK) in 1998. In return, Oliver took a group of 20 students over to the United Kingdom in 2000.

This first exchange trip was a milestone for the SCR, as prior exchanges revolved around an older demographic, and youth were seldom involved. The exchange was also a significant achievement for the school, which surprised many. Being a low-decile school, most students did

¹³ Before it was scrapped in 2023, the decile system was used to measure the average socio-economic status of students in a particular school, with 10 being the highest.

not have the financial means to travel to Europe. Nevertheless, students collectively raised around \$200,000 to fund the trip. In retrospect, Oliver commented:

When you look back, it was crazy that you could raise that amount of money, but we managed to do it, got a few community grants as well and everything else because everyone saw a low-decile school doing this sort of; how can you possibly do that? But we did it, which was good.

The trip, organised by Oliver, took students to several First and Second World War sites, many of which had historic significance to New Zealand. Oliver carried on this exchange biannually until he left the school in 2012.

Unfortunately, no one was prepared to take on the reins following his departure, leaving the exchange in limbo. Oliver observed that when it comes to “*working with sister city stuff, unless someone actually puts their hand up and does it, nothing really happens*”. Still, Oliver, determined to keep the programme running, reached out to the principal of his new school and proposed that they carry it on. Oliver has since continued to run the exchange programme, often involving students from several schools. However, about six years ago, they stopped receiving students from Christchurch (UK), causing the exchange to become one-sided: “*They find that they just basically don’t have anyone there who actually wants to bring a group out here or is not prepared to organise it.*” Consequently, Oliver noted that their 25-year-old relationship with Twynham School in Christchurch (UK) would likely die, an unfortunate end to what had otherwise been a fruitful connection. Ensuring longevity was thus a vital issue that played on Oliver’s mind.

Upon hearing Oliver’s story, I shared insights from the other case studies. In each relationship, success seemed dependent on having the right person at the right time; these individuals kept things afloat, but their eventual departure often led their relationships into a downward spiral. In response, Oliver exclaimed, “*That’s exactly it. You’ve got the whole thing in a nutshell, basically.*” The question was then, how do you get more of the right people involved? Here, Oliver raised the issue of publicity.

Surprisingly, Oliver had never heard of the SCR before receiving the initial request in 1998. This was despite living in London for four years and visiting Christchurch (UK). In his words, the relationship's public profile was "*not great*". I asked whether this was improving and if his students had much of an awareness. The answer was no: "*Still the same now, yeah. When you mention sister cities and that sort of stuff, they've got no idea what that means.*" The relationship's profile within the council also appeared to be in decline, as the committee did not receive the same input they did in the past:

Originally when I first joined the committee, that was compulsory for two counsellors to be on the actual committee that we had. So they were allocated. And again, like you said, it depended on the quality of the person and the interest of the person, whether they actually turned up.

Oliver speculated that it had been four years since a councillor had attended a meeting.

For Oliver, the relationship relied heavily on luck. The committee could attempt to orchestrate success, but opportunities often arose purely by chance. The 'right' person was then required to capitalise on these fleeting moments. As an example, Oliver explained that their connection to Brockenhurst was only explored after an incidental conversation he had with a local historian in Christchurch (UK):

There was no relationship with Brockenhurst until I sat in a café in Christchurch in England, and a local historian who I got to know came, had coffee with me and said, 'You do know about Brockenhurst down the road?' We're talking seven or eight miles from Christchurch. And I went, 'What do you mean?' He said, 'There's 93 Kiwis in the cemetery there and that was the hospital in World War I.' I went, 'What the hell?' I mean, that's an interest of mine anyway. So the first thing we did was the next day we actually went to Brockenhurst and met the people in the church and everything else like that. And it's the most amazing place because of the huge volume, and they think Kiwis are amazing too.

Oliver, being a history buff and a teacher who organised educational trips, happened to be the right person to utilise this information. Since learning of the connection, he has included Brockenhurst in the itinerary of all his educational tours and exchanges, and it has also become the stimulus for the Brockenhurst Scholarship. Students on the trip conduct research on New Zealanders buried in the cemetery, and their work is then displayed on the church walls. According to Oliver, because of these efforts, "*The awareness of Brockenhurst has increased in*

the last 20 years, was probably 15 years, hugely. So much so that Lianne Dalziel went there and did a proper formal mayoral visit.”¹⁴

While this recent expansion into Brockenhurst had breathed new life into the relationship, Oliver was aware of the tightrope they walked. When I asked what would become of the student exchange programme if he left, he laughed nervously and said, “*It’ll stop*”. The time and effort required were simply too great an obstacle for most people: “*No one would be prepared to put in the time, right? ... [It] takes away too much time to organise those sort of things.*” Hearing this, I asked what had kept Oliver motivated all this time. His answer was the people, connections, and friendships:

I think friendships and relationships you make, I’ve seen loads and loads of those relationships flourish. We’ve had one wedding. two long-term relationships, one of which is still going. We’ve got two Christchurch, England, people, students living in Christchurch here who came on exchange. For me personally, I’ve made really good friends in that area and that’s probably stronger networks I’ve got there as I’ve got here because they appreciate it and they come back over to New Zealand as individuals as well. But student-wise they are really close relationships. One was the best man at someone else’s wedding as well, those sort of things.

Oliver had also witnessed the impact of the stories students had unveiled through their research. He told me of a recent case where the mother of a student had thanked him for helping their daughter tell the story of a past relative who fought in the Second World War:

That’s where I get my biggest kick out of it. I can think of heaps and heaps of examples where suddenly these people that had really interesting war histories or travel histories with people that went overseas but hadn’t documented, hadn’t collected, didn’t have an essential place, hadn’t told the story, and then everybody now their family’s got it for however long they want it.

There seemed to be countless stories to be told, both of the students’ accolades and what they were uncovering, but sharing and promoting these stories was another matter.

¹⁴ Lianne Dalziel is a former mayor of Christchurch (NZ).

Oliver explained that they struggled to garner coverage or publicity for their efforts. Again, there appeared to be no shortage of compelling stories, but someone needed to be interested in telling them:

If I do press releases when we go away, which I do, and photos and things of, say, this year, they never end up on the council website ... it's almost impossible to get that sort of coverage. And, I mean, we were the guests of honour on Anzac Day at Brockenhurst; the students went out and put stuff on the graves and put a wreath on behalf of the city, and we send all those photos through. Nothing appeared. To me, if they were really, really interested, they'd be publicising it then.

One educational visit got publicity on national television about 10 years ago, following the students' visit to Brockenhurst and the trenches in France. This proved to be a success and helped garner considerable attention and awareness. But as Oliver speculated, "*How long does that last?*" To Oliver, publicity was not a one-and-done scenario but a continual requirement. They had managed to get a feature in the local Hampshire Press for their most recent trip, "*but nothing in Christchurch here, no matter what you provide ... it's virtually impossible to get council interest.*"

It seemed that publicity would be easier if the different associations worked together. However, as I learned throughout this research, collaboration was often the exception, not the rule. I shared with Oliver the example of Hamilton and Cambridge, who each had relationships with Ypres and Le Quesnoy, respectively, yet there had been no attempt to merge their efforts.¹⁵ His initial response was "*What the hell? They should be working together, those two. ... That's crazy, but that doesn't surprise me.*" Oliver felt that the situation in Christchurch bore a resemblance: "*People have got their own agendas ... there's no broader vision outside of that. We have that within the sister city groups within Christchurch as well. They're all moving in different directions, doing different things.*" Nonetheless, Oliver acknowledged that they are all volunteers and "*Most people do voluntary stuff for a reason, not just because they want to be volunteers, but because they've got certain interests or certain things they want to do.*" Like Otis,

¹⁵ Ypres and Le Quesnoy were both significant battlegrounds on the Western Front for New Zealand soldiers in the First World War.

Oliver suggested there was minimal transferability regarding SCRs; those interested in one relationship were unlikely to share the same impetus for another.

Oliver constantly returned to the underlying issue that “*you’ve got to have the right person at the right time*”. He mentioned that the committee was often a hit-and-miss regarding the type of people it attracted. After the council stopped providing free lunches at meetings, several members left, on which Oliver remarked, “*That’s how shallow it can be.*” There was then the issue of age. When Oliver first joined the committee, the average age was about 70, which has yet to change. Oliver thus expressed a rather grim concern that the relationship “*may well die out, like the people on the committees*”. They struggled to attract new members as “*People are busy; people are perceived to be more busy now than ever. You only really get people who are my age and older unless there’s a reason that you want to be on it for whatever specific reason.*” The situation in Christchurch (UK) appeared even worse: “*The Christchurch end for us is going to die for sure. They don’t have any succession plan at all. So, the youngest on that group would be late sixties, early seventies.*” Consequently, Oliver suggested that the relationship was on a trajectory for a prolonged and drawn-out death.

Juxtaposed with this sombre reality was Oliver’s journey, which started with one fateful decision many years ago:

I always think back, if I hadn’t said yes in 1998, my life would’ve been completely different between then and now. The opportunities I’ve got through, yes, it’s taken a lot of work and yes, there’s a lot of unpaid hours and all those things, but you know all the satisfaction and the things I’ve done and the connections I’ve made, that would never have happened without it.

If I sat back and looked at the network from say 1998 to now, it’s phenomenal. And I’ve never sort of thought about it until you talked about the people-to-people, but if you look at who’s connected to, you know, there’s three historians who work in, that I know in that Hampshire area who are all connected and know, I’ve met, I’ve shared beers with, I’ve had coffees with and stuff like that. Got information from, helped me.

As Oliver’s story illustrates, when the stars align and you have the right person for the job, the result can be something “*phenomenal*”. In closing, I asked Oliver to share his hopes for the future:

Ideally, there's still student relationships going on. Ideally there's a school over there that's committed to bringing groups back here. So you get that two-way relationship, which works better. The scholarship has got stronger and stronger. So you end up with, I've always had visions since I first suggested it to make it a national thing so you could open it up to filmmakers, authors, and those sort of things where you end up with much better quality research and better products and things like that. You have a whole group of young people on the committee, but I suppose in 10 years' time, I'm sitting here, and hopefully, I'm still involved; the relationship's still going.

6.6.2 Interview Two

It's just. It's an outdated model, which I think is a major conclusion. And no one seems to have the inclination to change the model very much. Because at the moment, it's going to die with the participants that are involved.

The first topic of our second interview was governance. Association C had a close connection to its local council, at least in principle. Oliver explained that two councillors were selected each election cycle to sit on the committee, providing the council a direct line of contact. However, there has been a recent drought, and no councillor has shown up for some time. Oliver speculated that in most instances, they simply were not interested: “*Unless you've got a personal interest, you're not going to come.*” Consequently, Oliver opted to communicate with the international relations managers as “*You wouldn't bother going to the representatives that are on your committee.*” The international relations team supported and encouraged Oliver's work and were happy to leave him to it, but this also meant that some issues went under the radar.

Publicity was again the committee's main hurdle. According to Oliver, the local council seldom publicised the SCR; the only promotion available was a small blurb on their website, which Oliver found odd:

The council don't use their website properly; they don't use social media properly, they don't publicise the sort of things that are being done, which they should do because the community, if they did look at it, they would probably get some kudos for the fact they support all the different things that we're doing.

The committee wished to promote the SCR themselves, but lacked the skills or know-how. Oliver insisted that without a dedicated social media person, their efforts would gain little traction. To help fill these gaps, the committee tried to involve past scholarship and exchange participants, but to little avail:

That's happened once the whole time I've been doing it. ... There's no way because if you're taking year 13s, which I am, they come back and they go to university, they may not even be in the same city. They've been affected by the trip in most cases, but they're not going to give something back immediately. They might come back, and you might get them in 20 years because of what they've done and because it's opened their eyes and they've got more international experience, but you're not going to get them straight back.

As Oliver's story suggests, there was doubt about whether the relationship would survive 20 more years to see the fruits of their labour.

Oliver touched on collaboration as one potential solution, for they were not the only group encountering these hurdles. He highlighted an experience at a recent SCs conference where he sat next to a member of another committee in Christchurch (NZ), whom he had never met before. Oliver was shocked that the other committee lacked the knowledge and expertise he could provide, and pondered why no one had connected the dots: *"That department should be going well. Actually, we've got Oliver over here. He's running student tours. Why don't you talk to him and he might help you organise and do something."* Oliver speculated that the committee likely had a lot they could learn from other SCRs and SC groups—that is, if they could escape their isolation: *"It's like you said, you operate in a silo."*

As we continued to talk and discuss the various obstacles, Oliver eventually concluded:

It's just, it's an outdated model, which I think is your major conclusion, and no one seems to have the inclination to change the model very much. Because at the moment, it's going to die with the participants that are involved. And that's what's happened in the UK. That's definitely the situation there, where it's a generational thing, and there is not, because there's no funding coming from councils over there; it just dies ... the people.

Like many I interviewed in this research, Oliver shared the concern that they were running on borrowed time. He implied that each SCR was tied to a specific generation, and as that generation passes, so does the relationship and any benefit it provides. Speaking on the educational tours he leads, Oliver raised the hypothetical:

But if I walk away tomorrow and don't do it anymore, well, [it] just won't be done anymore. End of story, you know, lots of people have benefited from it. But actually, in the end, does it really matter?

In response, I raised the issue that no one discusses: how to end an SCR. And, consequently, instead of a dignified death, relationships are doomed to drift into obscurity. Association C, however, had presented a more optimistic alternative, where instead of divorcing their SC, they opted to look beyond it. Like Otis, Oliver expressed that this change was out of necessity: *“If we’d stayed with Christchurch (UK), of that original committee twinning association that I knew 20 years ago, there’s only two still alive”*. This again illustrated Oliver’s suggestion that the relationship was tied to a dwindling generation: *“It’s just. It’s just sad. So, therefore, you’ve got to find a different way of doing it, don’t you?”*

The final topic we discussed was how to change the model, and more importantly, who can execute it. The committee’s attempt to re-envision their SCR had seen early success. Oliver thought that the relationship could be a gateway to the United Kingdom and Western Europe, and shared how the committee could capitalise on this. Yet, despite this promise, there was a glaring issue: *“But who’s going to do all this? Where do you start? Who’s, and who’s gonna pay for and who’s gonna give you the thanks for it?”* Oliver again highlighted that time was running out; the pool of committed members was slowly draining. Although he hoped to be involved for a further 10 years, like all members, he knew his time would eventually come:

I still wonder what’s going to happen to it long-term. I just think you’ve got these long-term volunteers like myself, who will just walk away in the next 10 years. Is it likely the whole thing, just people just go, oh, it’s not relevant anymore, and just forget about it?

In Oliver’s eye, the future of SCs was to rethink the model, perhaps entirely and *“just chuck sister cities out completely and just go, actually, we’d quite like a relationship with X and go hunting for it.”* What this would entail is unknown, but it was one alternative to a movement Oliver deemed out of time.

6.7 Case Findings

This case study was the smallest of the three, containing eight interviews. This, however, did not detract from the depth of each member's story. Like the previous cases, each story highlights various themes that together informed the constructions and lived experiences of members: (1) facing change, (2) having publicity, (3) being vulnerable/at risk, and (4) having value. As is evident, the latter two themes bore similarities to other case studies. Themes one and two also shared several factors, but were more distinct in this case study.

6.7.1 Facing Change

Members constructed the relationship and committee as changing and emphasised the need to evolve. Their experiences indicated that nearly every facet of the relationship, its composition, governance, relevance, purpose and, perhaps most importantly, its proponents had changed over time. As members highlighted, the founders on both sides of the relationship had long passed, and, without sounding bleak, their successors were not far behind (see Appendix F: F1, F2, and F2). Oliver described the relationship as a "*generational thing*". His peers shared his fear that the relationship would die with the generation that engendered it, or shortly after. However, not only had members changed, but so had their communities. One can imagine how today's Christchurch (NZ) must compare to that in the 1970s.

Members' stories raised the fundamental question: if people in an SCR change, what becomes of the connection? For Otis, the answer was simple: "*If you don't evolve, you die.*" Members emphasised that, despite being formed in the 1970s, the relationship's function and scope had remained untouched (see Appendix F: F4, F5, and F6). Consequently, there was concern that the relationship no longer met the needs of those it was designed to benefit (see Appendix F: F7). To borrow Otis's analogy, they found themselves at the helm of a cruise ship while others were building spacecraft. Try as they may, their efforts to entice people on board had borne little fruit. The world around them continued shifting while the relationship was suspended in time. This situation drove members to look for greener grass (see Appendix F: F8, and F9, F10).

Another change that forced the committee's hand was the gradual decline of Christchurch's (UK) ability to reciprocate. Oliver stated that their counterpart association in Christchurch (UK) was heading towards an inevitable collapse; there was no one to take on the reins, nor funding to go around (see Appendix F: F11 and F12). Otis argued that mutual commitment was indispensable for any SCR to function. Given Christchurch's (UK) trajectory, it was only too long before Association C succumbed to a similar fate. Therefore, the committee had to search elsewhere to find the "*fish hooks*" (see Appendix F: F13). Faced with the threat of becoming obsolete and metaphorically widowed, members sought a two-pronged re-envisioning of the relationship's purpose and scope. There was a consensus that the relationship should do more than "*just sit on the laurels of historical connection*" (Crockett) and, instead, evolve. The process and aftermath of this evolution were core functions in members' constructions and experiences.

In an unprecedented move for an SCR in NZ, the committee chose to supplement their bilateral partnership with Christchurch (UK) by widening its scope to the entire United Kingdom and Western Europe (see Appendix F: F14). The connection forged with Brockenhurst was viewed as a saving grace, as was the revitalised relationship with Oxford University (see Appendix F: F15). This shift towards a multilateral partnership informed members' constructions by providing an alternative to a foreseen death. As discussed under the corresponding theme, members instilled a sense of potential value in the relationship. Nonetheless, this potential still lay in the hands of a small volunteer-run committee, with a public profile Oliver politely described as "*not great*".

The committee's change of focus exacerbated many of the relationship's flaws. For the past several decades, the relationship was kept afloat by a few key activities, and the strain on the committee as a whole was relatively low (see Appendix F: F16). Nonetheless, the committee, now with a reinvigorated purpose, had several avenues it could pursue and a desire to better realise and articulate its value (see Appendix F: F17 and F18). However, members discovered, or rather reaffirmed, that the committee was not well set up to fully embrace its recent shift.

Outside of time and money, many of the systems and processes needed to capitalise on opportunities were not in place.

Members acknowledged that they were a small group that was sustained by a dedicated few who could leave at any moment (see Appendix F: F19, F20, and F21). They lacked the size, consistency or capacity to give effect to their ambitions. As members revealed, up until recently, strategy and planning were a rare occurrence (see Appendix F: F22 and F23). They had since attempted to articulate their value proposition, but little had stuck. Crockett suggested that going forward, the committee would require external support for strategic planning, direction and governance (see Appendix F: F24).

Members expressed several areas where the committee could improve and become more resilient and future-proof, but each required substantial administration, time and effort. This ultimately led Oliver to question *“But who’s going to do all this? Where do you start? Who’s, and who’s gonna pay for and who’s gonna give you the thanks for it?”* The committee’s attempts to adapt and evolve had breathed new life into the relationship, but also highlighted the height of the wall members had to climb. This incited members to speculate with excitement about what was on the other side while also sowing doubt as to whether the wall could be surmounted.

6.7.2 Having Publicity

Of all the hurdles members faced, publicity was conveyed as one of the most detrimental (see Appendix F: F25, F26 and F27). As exemplified in their stories, despite being born and raised in Christchurch (NZ), no member had heard of the SCR before joining the committee. Even after living in the United Kingdom, the relationship still evaded Otis and Oliver. Very few people in Christchurch (UK) appeared to know the relationship existed, and from his experience, Crockett rated the relationship’s publicity as 1 or 2 out of 10. Moreover, Otis noted that the concept itself had limited brand awareness (see Appendix F: F28).

While this lack of public awareness had long plagued the committee, previously, the only thing available to publicise were the educational tours and exchanges that happened at most once

a year. But now, as the relationship was beginning to adapt, there were more stories to be shared, but few ways to share them. There was also a dire need for new members, who could not easily be attracted without publicity. The committee had been caught flat-footed; they needed an online presence backed by a robust social media strategy, which would take years to develop and, ideally, should have started long ago.

Otis and Oliver emphasised that part of their evolution was adopting new technologies like social media. However, no members on the committee possessed the right knack. As a result, tasks like posting on Instagram were viewed as foreign (see Appendix F: F29). Association C held out for younger members who could lead the way. Still, as Oliver explained, even those who partook in the educational tours were unlikely to get involved, at least not immediately. The committee would have to either pay someone (for which they lacked the funds), cross their fingers and wait, or rely on their local council.

Getting coverage through the local council's website or social media accounts was, to Oliver, "*almost impossible*". Members were critical of the limited attention the relationship was afforded (see Appendix F: F30, F31, F32). Although the committee had a strong relationship with the council's international relations team, social media was under a different department's jurisdiction. Oliver explained that there was a unique story to be told, and although photos and material had been submitted, the council had yet to bite (see Appendix F: F33). Consequently, the responsibility rested with volunteers who lacked the necessary skills. Otis was adamant that, for the relationship to survive, it needed to move "*with the times of actually attracting some new blood that are engaged and embracing technology*". Still, how the committee could go about this was unknown. While their scope and purpose may have grown, their capacity had not.

Crockett suggested that it was unlikely anyone would stumble across the relationship by chance (see Appendix F: F34). The committee meetings were not publicly advertised, and the only people who would know about them were the committee members themselves (see Appendix F: F35). Consequently, over the last decade, Crockett could only recall two or three

occasions where someone out of the blue had contacted the committee. Most people who joined were either from the council or, like Otis and Oliver, had encountered it by luck.

Members constructed publicity as fundamental, while their experiences highlighted its inaccessibility. There was a realisation that, without advertising, the committee would be unlikely attract the people it needed to excel, nor would it gain the traction that would entice more significant council input. With few levers left to pull, there was again little that members could do but wait and hope. Simultaneously, however, members feared the relationship did not have the luxury of waiting (see Appendix F: F1, F2, F2, F36 and F37). Without external support, the relationship was vulnerable to collapse, a vulnerability exacerbated by time.

6.7.3 Being Vulnerable/at Risk

Members constructed the committee and the SCR as vulnerable (see Appendix F: F6, F21, and F38). They feared the SCR would become obsolete and collapse. The committee had a new direction and a rough idea of how to get there. Yet, they operated on a fast-approaching deadline. It was speculated that most current members would leave within the next 10 years (see Appendix F: F20). Oliver frequently compared the committee to their counterpart in Christchurch (UK), which was deemed to have suffered a metaphorical death as no one was left to take on the mantle (see Appendix F: F12). Similarly, the gambit for Association C was to turn things around and garner traction and attention before the passionate few departed. This was, to Otis, a challenge all SCRs faced (see Appendix F: F1).

The hazard was again time. Being over 50 years old, the SCR and committee had endured several changes, most of which were a direct result of the passing of time (see Appendix F: F39). Members were aware that time was not on their side. If the relationship were, as Oliver suggested, a “*generational thing*”, the committee would have to find a way to attract a younger audience before their generation passed. In other words, longevity necessitated a sufficient generational changeover. However, for the committee, no such process or system existed. Instead, the passing of responsibility seemingly happened by chance, exemplified by Otis’s story. Over time, the

severity of this issue had been exposed, and members were scrambling for a solution (see Appendix F: F40 and F41).

Although the committee members had found themselves in a vulnerable position, they suggested that the issue reflected a broader societal shift rather than an isolated anomaly (see Appendix F: F42 and F43). According to Otis, *“People don’t join things anymore.”* The implication was that younger generations engaged with their local communities in a way that was foreign to how the committee operated, and adapting to this had not proven easy (see Appendix F4, F6, F44). Otis acknowledged that some traditions need to be maintained but, to survive, *“you’ve got to evolve, and you’ve got to be modern”*.

The committee was forced to evolve to alleviate the growing risks it faced (see Appendix F: F8 and F10). Members recognised the need to change the way they operated to better cater to and attract a younger audience (see Appendix F: F30, F41 and F45). However, the fear was whether they were too late. Time had exposed the committee’s lack of a succession plan, which had left the relationship vulnerable to inevitable member departures (see Appendix F: F46). There was no one to pass the responsibility to. Otis considered this struggle the unravelling of a poor foundation (see Appendix F: F47). The committee’s circumstances were partly the result of past indecision, which members were now seeking to rectify with a fraction of the capabilities the committee once possessed.

6.7.4 Having Value

What members lacked in capacity, they substituted with belief. Members were adamant that that relationship had or could have value (see Appendix F: F48, F49 and F50). This belief, even if faltering at times, pushed members to persevere despite the circumstances. Part of this belief derived from the relationship’s recent changes, which brought to the surface new opportunities, each evoking speculation and intrigue. Members could see a path that would lead them out of their position of obscurity, and plotting this path occupied many of their constructions and

experiences. The relationship's perceived value, which members endeavoured to articulate, could loosely be ascribed to building, utilising, and celebrating connections.

One of the relationship's recent connections was with Brockenhurst. Since forging ties with the town that previously harboured the No. 1 New Zealand General Hospital, the relationship has become an avenue for preservation and remembrance. The connection linked Christchurch (NZ) to a piece of New Zealand history, inspiring inquiry and breathing new life into the committee (see Appendix F: F51 and F52). To Crockett, the connection was the committee's "*only claim to fame in recent years*". Through the efforts of exchange students and scholarship recipients, forgotten histories and stories were being retold and celebrated (see Appendix F: F53). Otis raised the importance of capturing this history before it was lost, especially by allowing youth to see and learn for themselves (see Appendix F: F54). Looking to the future, Oliver envisioned opening the Brockenhurst Scholarship up to filmmakers and authors who could produce high-quality research, providing further value (see Appendix F: F55).

Another significant connection was with Oxford University. Members persisted in explaining that Christchurch (NZ) was named not after the town in Dorset but after Christ Church College at Oxford University. Efforts to reinvigorate ties with the university, while still in their infancy, were showing promise. Notably, in 2017, the committee helped welcome and host Reverend Professor Martyn Percy, the past Dean of Christ Church College. This was followed by a visit by a group of Oxford University students in 2019. To members, this was just the beginning. Otis saw value in closer ties between the University of Canterbury and Oxford (see Appendix F: F56) and Crockett envisioned the two universities embarking on joint research (see Appendix F: F57). Given the size and significance of Oxford University, any effort that would further solidify this bond was believed to benefit the city of Christchurch (NZ).

On a personal level, members saw value in the countless relationships and friendships the SCR had engendered over its 50-year history. Oliver witnessed these friendships first-hand and had created many himself (see Appendix F: F58 and F59). However, the value of these connections was largely intangible; how friendship contributes to the city's well-being was not

easily articulated in monetary terms. Nonetheless, Otis suggested that the value should not be considered by fiscal measures alone. He argued that the friendships and opportunities the SCR fostered helped contribute to a more diverse Christchurch (NZ), where people were encouraged to learn and connect with others beyond their immediate surroundings (see Appendix F: F60), which you could not put a price on (see Appendix F: F61). Part of the relationship's value was that it simply made people "*feel good*" (Otis), an otherwise amorphous measure of social well-being. The question was whether this value aligned with the local council's intentions.

As the members' stories have shown, value is arguably subjective, depending on one's priorities. However, these priorities were unknown when it came to the local council. Although members often highlighted the strength of their relationship with the council, they were unaware of its intentions or expectations (see Appendix F: F62). In attempting to prove their worth, members instead relied on assumptions. While these assumptions were likely well-informed, they were not exact substitutes. The committee thus had the delicate task of articulating its value without fully knowing the priorities of the entity to which it needed to prove itself. Moreover, Otis suggested that the council had not identified its priorities (see Appendix F: F63).

6.7.5 Case Summary

The stories of members of Association C highlight the impact of time, the importance of publicity and evolution, and the indefiniteness of value. Members constructed the SCR as simultaneously on the brink of death and the periphery of growth. They knew that decisions made in the next 5 to 10 years would determine whether the relationship would sink or swim. Their experiences led them to believe that the latter was within reach; there was value to be had, if not already achieved. The struggle was articulating this value and having it understood. However, as a small volunteer-run group, they lacked the publicity, time and expertise required to tell their story effectively and efficiently. Raising awareness was thus a laborious task that did not come with any guarantee. Therefore, a duality of hope and despair characterised members' constructions and experiences.

Despite all this, the committee's decision to adapt and evolve helped reignite their cause. They had a new destination, or rather destinations, in sight and were determined to use whatever time they had left to get there. In Crockett's words, there was long-term potential, and it may start small, but eventually, it could blossom into something phenomenal:

I think people can see, long-term, an enduring relationship, and there's going to be continuing benefit, hopefully financially, which then itself can branch out into other opportunities and sort of mushroom a little bit, from small seeds, mighty trees grow.

SECTION C

Deriving Meaning

The preceding chapters have presented the stories of each member, followed by my interpretation of their significance. This final section addresses these interpretations' theoretical, conceptual and methodological implications, and offers insights and reflections on their potential utility for future research. Chapter Seven details the discussion of the four key themes through the use of four conceptual lenses, all of which were grounded in the constructions and lived experiences of members. The resulting working hypotheses generated from this discussion are also presented, before introducing a conceptual framework that consolidates their key ideas. This section then concludes the thesis with Chapter Eight, which details the three main contributions of this research, outlines potential areas for future research, and reflects on the study's limitations.

These two chapters have been placed together in this section to indicate their interconnectedness. Notably, to better situate the insights provided in Chapter Eight and ground them further in the constructions and lived experiences of members, some degree of discussion was deemed necessary. Accordingly, while contained primarily within Chapter Seven, the discussion extends slightly into Chapter Eight. This also helped elevate the final chapter from purely reiterative, allowing detailed reflexive contemplations. While distinguished by their intended purpose, the two chapters should therefore not be viewed as entirely separate—Chapter Eight builds on and synthesises the ideas presented in Chapter Seven.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Reframing Sister Cities

7.1 Introduction

When I began this academic journey, the notion of SCs was intriguing yet elusive. They can involve millions of people separated by vast distances, symbolically linked through formal agreements anchored in little more than an imagined sense of sisterhood. Understanding the functionality and significance of such relationships presents a complex intellectual challenge, especially due to the lack of theoretical and conceptual discourse, an absence that this research has sought to address.

Despite growing academic attention, efforts to tackle the fundamental being of SCs have been limited (Jayne et al., 2011), with suggestions that a comprehensive understanding may be unattainable (Grosspietsch, 2009). Given that SCRs are socially constructed (Lloyd, 2010; H. Ryan & Mazzilli, 2021), any understanding is inherently fluid, and time- and context-bound. Commenting on the terminology itself, Lloyd noted, “Of mixed benefit to the communicative value of the ‘sister’ metaphor, however, is the fact that cultural perceptions regarding the appropriate role of sisters vary widely between societies and, over time, within societies as well” (p. 64).

The phenomenon of SCs may be seen as a moving horizon: an ever-changing amalgamation of interpretations subject to constant renegotiation. The findings highlight the indefinite and fluctuating nature of the relationships explored, a feature that resists static definitions and demands a more dynamic conceptualisation. Consequently, in addressing the aim noted above and the following research questions, this chapter argues that SCs, when explored through the lens of SCAs, may be better understood as processes.

The two primary research questions are:

- I. How are sister city relationships constructed?

II. How are sister city relationships experienced?

To contextualise this chapter, it is essential to reiterate that SCRs are social connections. As the preceding chapters have demonstrated, SCRs are created, pursued, and maintained by and between people. It is through their collective experiences and constructions that SCRs are legitimised and imbued with meaning. While people indeed operate within and are constrained by existing systems, structures, and institutions, some of which will be covered in this chapter, these mechanisms alone do not sustain the enduring ties upon which SCRs depend. Accordingly, the categories, concepts, and ideas discussed in this chapter all draw from members' experiences and constructions to better understand the role of people in SCs. This is also reflected in the working hypothesis and conceptual framework presented in this chapter.

7.1.1 Shared Constructions and Experiences

Across the shared constructions and experiences generated from the findings, several patterns emerged. These have been categorised into *enablers*, *constraints*, *vulnerabilities*, and *uses* as summarised in Table 3. *Uses* represent current and potential capabilities, while *vulnerabilities* refer to concerns and risks associated with the absence or erosion of such uses. *Enablers* facilitate the conditions necessary to use the relationships, whereas *constraints* impose adverse conditions that limit their use. These categories are simplifications adopted for explorative purposes; they serve as approximations rather than precise reflections of members' individual and shared realities.

Table 3. Categorisation of Shared Constructions/Experiences

	Enablers	Constraints	Vulnerabilities	Uses
Association A	<i>Having interest</i>	<i>Being restricted</i>	<i>Being vulnerable/at risk</i>	<i>Being unique</i>
Association B	<i>Having clarity</i>	<i>Being restricted</i>	<i>Being vulnerable/at risk</i>	<i>Having potential</i>

Association C	<i>Having publicity</i>	<i>Facing change</i>	<i>Being vulnerable/at risk</i>	<i>Having value</i>
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7.1.2 Conceptual Lenses

In perhaps ironic circumstances, this research was not exempt from the gaps it aimed to confront. The absence of conceptual and theoretical grounding for SCs hindered efforts to provide such grounding. Interpreting the findings proved challenging, given the limited referential context with which to compare and situate them. While constructivist grounded theory is well-suited to addressing these conundrums, as is constructivist inquiry, Charmaz (2014) noted:

The constant comparison method in grounded theory does not end with completion of your data analysis ... through comparing other scholars' evidence and ideas with your grounded theory, you may show where and how their ideas illuminate your theoretical categories and how your theory extends, transcends, or challenges dominant ideas in your field. (p. 305)

However, what becomes of such comparisons when one's field harbours minimal, if any, established or dominant ideas? To determine whether findings converge or diverge from existing knowledge, that knowledge must first exist.

The generated categories shown in Table 3 represent members' shared constructions and experiences, elements of SCRs that past scholarship has largely overlooked, leaving little room for comparison. Notwithstanding this hurdle, drawing meaningful inferences still demands some engagement with extant theories and concepts (Charmaz, 2014; Dunne, 2011). In seeking viable alternatives, I broadened the scope of consideration to include ideas that, while implicitly woven through the stories shared by members, have yet to be explicitly addressed or linked to SCs. This choice was grounded in the view that established bodies of knowledge elsewhere, particularly those with rich theoretical and conceptual thinking, may offer insight into SCs. Attempting to develop such thinking for SCs from scratch would have risked reinventing the wheel.

Through the inquiry process, four key concepts emerged that I interpret as having shaped *how* members constructed and experienced their SCs. These concepts, shown in Table 4 alongside their corresponding category, include *social movements*, *communities*, *memories*, and *tools*. Each draws from an established body of theoretical and conceptual work, which, as argued in this chapter, offers valuable insight when applied to the context of SCs. In addressing the research questions and aims, each concept has been utilised to enhance the analysis of the four generated categories.

As with any interpretive study, the concepts generated from the inquiry are neither exhaustive nor necessarily the most significant (van Manen, 1990). Indeed, some may have been overlooked. However, the intention has not been to provide conclusive theoretical or conceptual backing to SCs, which may be beyond reach (Grosspietsch, 2009), but to propose plausible interpretations that can be employed to bridge the gap to a more robust understanding.

As I expressed at the outset of this thesis, studying SCs demands a leap of faith. Still, this leap was not made blindly. Three of the concepts discussed in this chapter—social movements, communities, and tools—are frequently mentioned within the literature, yet there have been limited attempts to consider their implications. Therefore, their application in this chapter represents an informed leap that bridges between members’ constructions and lived experiences, on the one side, and established concepts on the other. The only exception here is memories; its absence from the literature can be tied to the limited attention afforded to indefiniteness in SCRs. It is a concept that warrants further discussion based on the findings of this research, hence its inclusion.

Table 4. Conceptual Lenses

Theme	<i>Enablers</i>	<i>Constraints</i>	<i>Vulnerabilities</i>	<i>Uses</i>
Conceptual Lens	<i>Social movements</i>	<i>Communities</i>	<i>Memories</i>	<i>Tools</i>

7.1.3 Chapter Structure

This chapter is organised into six parts, with the first four addressing one of the generated categories. After examining each of the categories, a working hypothesis is presented. This follows Cronbach's (1975) assertion, "When we give proper weight to local conditions, any generalization is a working hypothesis, not a conclusion" (p. 125). These working hypotheses outline the key inferences from the findings and collectively provide potential answers to the research questions. The final two parts of the chapter include an illustrative example of SCs as a process and a subsequent conceptual framework that builds on this idea.

7.2 The Enablers of Sister Cities

The first category to be examined is that of *enablers*. The category encapsulates the themes of having interest, clarity, and publicity, measures which members ascribed to success, or rather, longevity. Success in SCs is a complex topic, especially regarding a definition (De Villiers et al., 2007). For example, Mori (2023) linked success to activeness; however, as D. Smith (1990) earlier asserted, "Even if inactivity is equivalent to non-existence in a SCP, this does not imply activity *per se* is success" (p. 190). Depending on the interpretation employed, an SCR may be inactive, yet still framed as successful. Accordingly, a case-by-case definition of success has previously been adopted (De Villiers et al., 2007).

The obstacle in measuring success in SCs is that interpretations will likely be subjective. As Lloyd (2010) asserted, "In practice, the idea of sister cities is so elastic in meaning and application as to enable it to be appropriated as 'all things to all people'" (p. 310). The flexibility of SCs, while in many respects a virtue, leaves the concept susceptible to change. SCRs are a "dynamic and amorphous cultural and social practice" (H. Ryan & Mazzilli, 2021, p. 467); success and value, as defined at one time, cannot be easily transposed to another. Furthermore, some relationships have been found to stumble across success spontaneously (De Villiers, 2009), as was the case for members in the present study, who often posited success as a matter of happenstance.

Despite these challenges, attempts have been made in the literature to address the elusiveness of SCs by proposing potential success factors. D. Smith (1990) wrote that, in successful SCRs, “leaders and participants ... genuinely understand and affirm the ideals of cross-national friendships, mutual understanding and inter-cultural awareness” (p. 190). De Villiers et al. (2007) echoed the importance of mutual understanding, but extended this list to include cultural sensitivity, community awareness, a business plan, quality management, active marketing, and partner alignment. Regarding the latter, Baycan-Levent et al. (2010) found that successful partnerships often shared pre-existing bonds and faced similar urban problems. Relevant to this research, however, is the growing scholarship that accentuates the role of local associations and organisations in attaining success (Gooding et al., 2015; Hogan, 2019; Mori, 2023; Prasittisopin et al., 2024; H. Ryan & Mazzilli, 2021; D. Smith, 1990). Accordingly, the theme of *enablers* contemplates what such groups require to be successful.

In each association, success took on a pragmatic quality geared towards survival. The need to foster interest, clarity, and publicity emerged due to waning momentum and a desire for longevity. While perhaps not a standard measure of success, a focus on survival has been suggested as cultivating the necessary conditions: “By prioritizing survival, organizations can better navigate environmental complexities, adapt to changes and thrive amidst challenges, ensuring their long-term viability and success” (Eapen & Finkenstadt, 2024, p. 9). In this manner, although longevity alone may not bring about tangible benefits, it was a prerequisite or, indeed, an *enabler* of future success as it afforded time.

Members remained resolute in preserving the significance of their partnerships. Longevity became an increasingly strained pursuit, consuming much of the limited time and energy they could offer. Insufficient resources hindered the ability to maintain the momentum that their SCRs demanded, prompting some members to compensate by committing further. This aligns with broader trends in volunteerism, where resource deficits and time constraints have emerged as critical issues (Go et al., 2024; United Nations Volunteers, 2018).

Members emphasised the need for greater interest, clarity of purpose, and increased publicity in response to these constraints. The search for, acquisition of, and maintenance of such resources featured prominently in their constructions and lived experiences. Still, how does a small volunteer body accomplish this? This section draws on past scholarship's recurring characterisation of SCs as a social movement to explore this notion. Although members did not explicitly frame their efforts this way, their stories reflect the collective action of interest-based groups working to enact social change within their communities, whether by enhancing historical remembrance and appreciation or advancing cross-cultural understanding and collaboration. Accordingly, the enablers of their SCRs can be interpreted as the mobilisation of resources oriented towards collective action: a grassroots social movement.

7.2.1 Sister Cities as a Social Movement

SCs have long been labelled as a social movement and continue to be framed accordingly (see Baycan-Levent et al., 2010; Cremer et al., 2001; Cross, 2010; Eray, 2022; Erdem, 2023; Grosspietsch, 2009; Liu & Hu, 2018; Lloyd, 2010; Mpanza et al., 2022; O'Toole, 2000; Zelinsky, 1991). This movement can be viewed from two perspectives: the twinning movement, which originated in Europe and sought to foster European unity (Zion, 2002), and the sister city movement (SCM), initiated by the Eisenhower administration in the United States, grounded in the doctrine of world peace (Zion, 2002). Speaking on the latter, Cross (2010) remarked that initially, "The post-war influence of the USA on international affairs gave the movement a particularly American flavour, based solidly around grass-roots, community, people-to-people exchange and understanding, and the ideal of world peace" (p. 105). It has since been argued that the contemporary SCM has evolved from its humanitarian roots (Baycan-Levent et al., 2010) and is now driven primarily by urban entrepreneurialism (Liu & Hu, 2018) repurposed as a tool in the armoury of local governments (De Villiers et al., 2007; O'Toole, 2000). Nonetheless, the implications of SCs as a social movement have seldom been considered, nor the apparent fragmentation of the movement itself.

Movements and social movements, like SCs, have been met with terminological turmoil. Some scholars have lamented their overuse, suggesting “so loose and slipshod has the employment of these words become that they seem capable nowadays of application to any kind of group activity whatsoever” (Banks, 1972, p. 7). This perhaps liberal application has led others to describe the terms as “convenient fiction for a generally varied and diverse collection of activities” (Wiltfang & McAdam, 1991, p. 989). More recently, it has been suggested that the phenomenon’s “complexity precludes itself from getting encapsulated into a definition” (Saeed, 2009, p. 1). Nonetheless, definitions are by no means in short supply. For example, Snow et al. (2004) stated:

Although the various definitions of movements may differ in terms of what is emphasised or accented, most are based on three or more of the following axes: collective or joint action; change-oriented goals or claims; some extra- or non-institutional collective action; some degree of organization; and some degree of temporal continuity. (p. 6)

In considering the principles of SCR outlined by Zelinsky (1991) and later built on by Cremer et al. (2001), the SCM satisfies most, if not all, of these axes. Nonetheless, what does such a categorisation entail? Either the likening of SCs to a social movement has been little more than a convenient fiction, or it has tangible implications for the functionality of the phenomenon. The stories shared by members suggest the latter; the indefinite nature of each SCR examined, their social focus, and the constant need to procure resources to maintain momentum were not coincidental.

7.2.2 Resource Mobilisation Theory

The stories shared by members indicate that their associations and, by extension, their SCRs, could not be sustained without sufficient resources. Several studies have previously made similar links, highlighting the importance of consistent funding (see Gooding et al., 2015; Kosovac et al., 2021; Mori, 2023; O’Toole, 2001; Prasittisopin et al., 2024; H. Ryan & Mazzilli, 2021). Notably, H. Ryan and Mazzilli (2021) explained:

In the last decade, cuts to local government funding [within the United Kingdom] have had a significant effect in terms of support available to twinning

associations. ... Moreover, reporting demands on volunteer-led twinning associations have increased and there is a heightened pressure to justify any spend on twinning activity in terms of future economic returns to councils. The administrative burden linked to fundraising, organising international exchanges (and more) with partner communities can weigh heavily on volunteers who, when interviewed, reported high rates of overstretch and ‘burnout’. (pp. 457-458)

Consequently, it can be interpreted that resources, including interest, clarity and publicity, enable longevity. However, current knowledge surrounding SCs offers little advice for how a relationship should procure said resources. On the other hand, social movements have long contended with this topic, and numerous theories have been produced, notably resource mobilisation theory (RMT).

RMT was developed by McCarthy and Zald (1977) to emphasise the role of organisations in aggregating and mobilising resources for social movements. They distinguished between social movements (SMS) and social movement organisations (SMOs). The former represent “preference structures [sets of opinions and beliefs held within a population] directed towards social change” (p. 1218), while the latter identify the goals embedded within these structures and seek to achieve them. A contemporary example would be the environmental movement and Greenpeace. The three associations in this research can be likened to SMOs, as they, too, reflect organised efforts to pursue objectives within their SCRs (which loosely resemble social movements).

McCarthy and Zald (1977) explained that, to achieve their objectives, SMOs require resources, namely legitimacy, money, facilities, and labour, that must be controlled or mobilised before action can be achieved. This process primarily concerns turning *nonadherents* into *adherents* (those who support the movement), converting *adherents* into *constituents* (those who contribute towards the movement), and maintaining constituent involvement. These different groups can be further distinguished based on the pool of resources they control (*mass* and *elite*) and whether they stand to benefit from the accomplishments of a SMO’s goals (*conscience*, *beneficiary*, and *potential beneficiary*). Lastly, there are those who oppose a movement (*opponents*) and those who are not currently involved or affected (*bystander public*). The

overarching theory proposes that, to be successful, SMOs need to mobilise these different groups and their resources relative to their circumstances.

In the context of each SCR, the hurdles associations faced could be equated to the blurred lines between these different groups. After all, an SCR involves “not only the local government or municipality but the whole community, including civil society, the business community, and the education sector” (Mpanza et al., 2022, p. 29), and is “open to and professes to include as active participants the entire non-infant population of the coupled communities regardless of age, gender, occupation, social status, religion, or ideology, not just officialdom or special-interest groups” (Zelinsky, 1991, p. 3). It is, therefore, feasible that anyone within the wider local community could be a potential beneficiary. At the same time, these communities also contain opponents and the bystander public. There is no defining factor to determine who is more likely to support an SCR and provide resources, and who might oppose it. Resource mobilisation thus becomes a swing in the dark.

7.2.2.1 *Origins of the Sister City Movement*

McCarthy and Zald (1977) proposed 10 hypotheses that explain how resource mobilisation functions within social movements. Several of these can be applied to the findings. The first is hypothesis 2: “*The greater the absolute amount of resources available to the SMS [social movements sector] the greater the likelihood that new SMIs [social movement industries] and SMOs will develop to compete for these resources*” (p. 1225). To understand the applicability of this proposition, we must first consider the historical origins of the SCM.

The SCM was born out of a growing fear of future global conflict and the belief of local communities and governments in forming an enduring foundation of world peace (Cremer et al., 2001; Cross, 2010; Lloyd, 2010; O’Toole, 2000; Zelinsky, 1991). These collective interests could be viewed as preference structures directed towards social change. Having witnessed the atrocities of the Second World War, the relevancy of this social change amongst the general public would have been heightened, enabling the global expansion of the SCM (Zelinsky, 1991). However, it cannot be ignored that the second half of the 20th century also presented the

necessary conditions, demands, and incentives for local governments to become global actors (Hocking, 1999; Jain, 2005; Keating, 1999; Ritzer, 2003; Short et al., 2000; Zelinsky, 1991). Consequently, while the SCM can be recognised for its altruistic, although political, motives geared towards world peace (Lloyd, 2010; Zelinsky, 1991), it also allowed local governments to procure an indispensable resource: influence.

The rapid expansion of globalisation left an irreversible mark on localities, exposing them to a myriad of global forces (Hocking, 1999; Keating, 1999; Ritzer, 2003). Until the rise of city diplomacy, or paradiplomacy as it is sometimes called, local governments had limited means to react or respond. However, the arrival of the SCM alongside the twinning movement provided such an opportunity. Although initial adopters of the SCM were likely driven by a concern for world peace, by the 1980s, the movement was increasingly recognised as a means of achieving local prosperity (Cremer et al., 2001; Jain, 2005; O'Toole, 2001). In particular, Jain (2005) noted, "Sister-city relations are important tools of soft diplomacy and some SNGs [subnational governments] use these judiciously to serve local ends" (p. 69).

With these circumstances in mind, McCarthy and Zald's (1977) second hypothesis has relevance. Before the development of the SCM, few local governments had tapped into the rich pool of resources the global arena could provide, including influence, recognition, and representation. Accordingly, the birth of the SCM, among similar movements, metaphorically opened the floodgates. The rapid growth of inter-municipal partnerships followed shortly after, with the total number of relationships across the globe likely exceeding 7,000 by 1988 (Zelinsky, 1991). In this manner, local governments competing for available resources could also be viewed as SMOs, pursuing the overarching objective of world peace (the preference structures directed towards social change) while simultaneously piggybacking the movement in the interest of regional goals. However, this had the unintended consequence of diluting the movement.

7.2.2.2 *The Isolation of Constituents*

Although arguably beneficial to the movement, which relied on isolated constituents to survive, the rapid expansion of SCs also created distance. The countless constituents who joined the cause were fragmented, each responding to different SMOs with diverging intentions. Certainly, Niigata City's attempts to form ties with cities in North Korea in the 1970s would have been at odds with early proponents within the United States, who utilised the SCM as a means to draw others away from communist ideologies (Eisenhower, 1956; Jain, 2005; Lloyd, 2010; Zelinsky, 1991). The resulting aftermath could be described as an amalgamation of contrasting motives, with many imposing their ideals on the movement (Jain, 2005; O'Toole, 2000; Ramasamy & Cremer, 1998; Zelinsky, 1991). Over time, as constituents became increasingly isolated, the SCM fragmented into a diverse array of activities, "all presumably serving the overall objective of advancing mutual understanding and friendship" (Zelinsky, 1991, p. 3). Whether this presumption remained consistent is questionable.

Members, too, could be described as isolated constituents of the SCM, providing resources in the form of time and effort. However, the word *isolated* cannot be understated. Members believed in the potential and value of friendship and mutual understanding, but they were completely detached from the broader social movement, and left directionless. Their local councils did not appear to fare better, as successive electoral cycles had equally eroded this connection. This isolation inevitably led each SCR to transition into independent forms of local expression; without any overarching policy, directive, or motive, the associations responded instead to local needs. This shift has been observed elsewhere, with O'Toole (2001) writing that, for Australian SCRs:

Increasing pressure upon local government to act as economic developers has led some to redefine their SCTR[sister city type relationships] in a commercial direction. This does not mean abandoning the relationships' earlier 'associative' and 'reciprocative' aspects. Rather, it is an attempt to take advantage of the process to further their local economic aims. (p. 405)

For each association, however, social needs were emphasised over commercial, creating what some referred to as a disconnect from local council intentions.

While this shift has often been attributed to the growing fiscal constraints faced by local governments (Cross, 2010; O'Toole, 2000; Ramasamy & Cremer, 1998), the experiences of members suggest that the fragmentation of the SCM may be an additional contributing factor. Here, McCarthy and Zald's (1977) fourth hypothesis is of note: "*The more a SMO is dependent upon isolated constituents, the less stable will be the flow of resources to the SMO*" (p. 1228). The movement's constituents are dispersed globally, with few mechanisms for any SMO to consolidate their efforts and resources. This extends not only to national organisations but also to individual local governments and associations. For the latter, members were closely tied to their associations, but any resources they could provide were shown to be constrained. These circumstances birthed an imperative to convert the bystander public into adherents and adherents into constituents, hence a heightened focus on interest, clarity and publicity. However, these potential constituents were themselves highly isolated, further compounding this burden.

If the fragmentation of the SCM led members to become detached, it could be assumed that the bystander public, too, had grown further disconnected. Each association's connection to its wider community had weakened, limiting opportunities to recruit constituents and channel resources toward each association's objectives. In response to these challenges, members sought to clarify their mission, publicise it and, ideally, generate interest, a process that could be seen as advertising. The importance of these efforts has been highlighted by De Villiers et al. (2007): "A successful twinning involves the cooperation of many role-players on both sides of the relationship and it is expected that extensive communication would be necessary to obtain their support and active participation" (p. 9).

In addition to their fourth hypothesis, McCarthy and Zald (1977) provided two subsidiary hypotheses, 4a and 4b, that build on this notion: "*The more dependent a SMO is upon isolated constituents, the greater the share of its resources which will be allocated to advertising*" and "*The more a SMO depends upon isolated constituents to maintain a resource flow the more its shifts in resource flow resemble the patterns of consumer expenditures for expendable and marginal goods*" (p. 1230). They propose that, disconnected from the movements they support,

isolated constituents have limited means to evaluate the objectives to which they commit their resources and the value of any funds expended. The onus thus falls on SMOs to advertise what goals they are accomplishing and how resources are helping to achieve these. Isolated constituents are also said to determine their contributions based on several consumer factors, including the time of year, the state of the bank account, and their mood. Consequently, to convert isolated adherents into isolated constituents and maintain their support, SMOs “must resort to slick packaging and convoluted appeal to self-interest in order to make their products [objectives] more attractive” (p. 1231).

Although each association examined recognised the importance of advertising, their efforts were notably outdated. The online presence of each association was limited, as was any form of formal promotion. They struggled, therefore, to convert the bystander public into constituents, isolated or otherwise. Members pondered whether the rising cost of living further hindered their attempts, as isolated adherents had less to give and were unlikely to be converted. Still, from members’ stories, one consistent aspect could arguably be attributed to their shortcomings: the lack of a definitive objective.

7.2.2.3 Preference Structures

According to McCarthy and Zald (1977), an SMO aims to identify goals rooted in preference structures (collective interests) and mobilise resources to achieve them. For each association, however, these preference structures were largely undefined, and any objectives derived from them remained vague. While the SCM initially emerged from a preference structure centred on world peace, the now-independent associations and their SCs could no longer rely on such broad interests to sustain momentum, or at least this was the perception. Instead, each association reoriented itself to align with the specific interests of its local communities, which had become its primary beneficiaries.

The obstacle for members was that they had limited means to identify the interests of their local communities, which reflected incohesive groupings of diverging intentions. Instead of drawing goals from established preference structures, the associations were compelled to

construct them based on assumptions and intuition. Even then, members' confidence in these objectives often wavered, accentuating the critical importance of clarity. Success thus came down to what some members described as a numbers game. It hinged on the hope that they would eventually strike a chord that resonated with enough people to generate interest and momentum, converting the bystander public into adherents and, ultimately, constituents.

7.2.3 Working Hypothesis 1

While it is inconclusive whether contemporary SCs can be defined as social movements, at the very least they originated from one and have inherited certain functionalities. However, if there is any point at which SCs depart from other social movements, it is in their indefinite length. Where most social movements dissolve upon reaching their goal, SCs continue. The three relationships examined in this research had no end date and could feasibly last indefinitely, given the right conditions. Success was not confined to any singular objective; as Zelinsky (1991) explained, indefiniteness "opens the way for a variety of shared objectives, all presumably serving the overall objective of advancing mutual understanding and friendship" (p. 3). Each member, therefore, viewed success as synonymous with survival. They operated on the assumption that if their SCR continued to be sustained and celebrated, then opportunities would arise. Impetus was thus placed on ensuring sufficient handover from one generation to the next. Members then constructed the means of achieving this as *enablers*.

Although members were aware of what these enablers entailed, practically, they could not pursue or implement them. In drawing on social movement theory, this section has discussed the potential reasoning behind this while pointing to plausible solutions informed by RMT. For each association, resource mobilisation represented a means of maintaining longevity, not as a one-off or short-term effort, but a constant requirement. Indefiniteness in SCRs demands consistent constituent support over decades, necessitating that objectives remain distinct yet malleable and adaptable to societal changes and needs. What mobilised support in one period may not be effective in another. World peace may have once fulfilled this role but, as members' stories

highlight, there is an evident need for a replacement that better encapsulates the interests and lives of local communities. From this, the first working hypothesis can be generated:

Working Hypothesis 1: *Success in sister cities is underpinned by longevity, which relies on resource mobilisation driven by a relevant and clearly defined objective.*

7.3 The Constraints of Sister Cities

Members' desire for longevity was contrasted with a perceived inability to ensure it; they collectively constructed and experienced themselves as *constrained*. This category included the themes of *being restricted* and *facing change*. Members depicted the future in uncertain terms, imaginable yet out of reach. These constraints could thus be equated to deficiencies in resource mobilisation and societal shifts.

Many of the constraints members experienced emerged from an inability to adapt to the constantly changing world around them, exacerbated by resource inadequacies. The long-term, consistent commitment SCs required was seemingly at odds with the short-term, sporadic modes of engagement that members had come to expect from younger generations. Moreover, each association's connection to and position with regard to its local community had become obscured. Communities, much like SCs, are fluid and dynamic, responding to social and technological developments (Fernback, 2007; Hampton & Wellman, 2018; Hillery, 1955; Walsh & High, 1999; Wellman, 1979; White & Guest, 2003). It is apparent that each SCR examined was designed around a conceptualisation of community tied to place. However, members questioned whether the relationships continued to meet the changing realities of how people today socialise, gather and connect.

As community awareness and input wavered, the demands on members saw a steep increase. Any support they received had not grown to match this, resulting in a deficit that made many feel overburdened. This is consistent with a similar observation made by H. Ryan and Mazzilli (2021). For each association in this research, a sustainable means of maintaining consistent public engagement was not reached. The preceding discussion on social movements and the

difficulties of converting the bystander public into constituents provides one probable interpretation. However, another reason may lie in the targets of these efforts: local communities, entities often taken for granted in the context of SCs.

7.3.1 Sister Cities as Communities

Arguably, the most prevalent concept utilised in past scholarship is that of community (see Cremer et al., 2001; Cross, 2010; De Villiers et al., 2007; Eray, 2022; Fan, Huang, et al., 2019; Hogan, 2019; Lloyd, 2010; Mascitelli & Chung, 2008; Mpanza et al., 2022; O'Toole, 2000; Putra et al., 2021; SCI, n.d.). Some use community as a descriptive tool, while others, like Mpanza et al. (2022), deem the concept essential:

In the concept of a sister city or a twinning of communities, “town” and “city” refer not only to the local government or municipality but the whole community, including civil society, the business community, and the education sector. The local government plays a very important facilitating role in setting up and maintaining the relationship, but the primary bond is forged between communities and not only between local governments. (p. 29)

However, this research found no examples of prior efforts to define or explore community conceptually within the context of SCs. Instead, it is presented as simply *there*, warranting little thought. Metaphorically, this is akin to a car and an engine: while a car cannot function without its engine, the engine is of little concern while driving; this is, of course, until the car breaks down.

By SCI's definition, SCRs are “a broad-based, long-term partnership between two communities in two countries” (SCI, n.d., para. 1). On this basis, the health or condition of involved communities would logically be one of the first things to inspect when an SCR faces challenges — like an engine in a car. Members were aware that their communities were changing, yet the implications of these changes remained ambiguous. Even if members did identify potential consequences, they were ill-equipped to address them. Their associations had become passive receptors of external shifts in their communities, instead of responsive and adaptive entities. It is in this *staticness* that members experienced constraints. Accordingly, to understand

these constraints, one must first understand the significance of community within contemporary SCRs.

7.3.1.1 *But What is Community?*

Community within any context is difficult to define. Most common-sense interpretations rely on meaning derived from the “etymology of the word and its stability as a linguistic tool” (Walsh & High, 1999, p. 256). However, the normative applicability of community as a concept has been queried. After analysing 94 different definitions of community within the literature, Hillery (1955) concluded that “when all of the definitions are viewed, beyond the concept that people are involved in the community, there is no complete agreement as to the nature of community” (p. 119). Walsh and High (1999) also argued that common-sense definitions of community often verge on tautology. This has led to the concept being referred to as diluted and “increasingly hollow as it evolves into a pastiche of elements that ostensibly ‘signify’ community” (Fernback, 2007, p. 53). Fernback suggested that community bears a high level of heterogeneity, evident through the contrast of its usage:

Community is descriptive and prescriptive, local and global, spatially bound or boundaryless, public or private, organic or mechanical, intentional or accidental, purposive or aimless, oppressive or liberating, functional or dysfunctional. It can be a shared interest, shared kinship or shared space. It can be physical locality or collective interests or collective memory or crisis constituencies or marketing devices. (p. 52)

Although common-sense definitions may be detrimental, alternatives are equally problematic, for the concept lacks consistent, definitive principles. The fundamental nature of community has changed over time in response to both social and technological shifts (Hampton & Wellman, 2018; Wellman & Leighton, 1979). The Industrial Revolution, subsequent urbanisation, and ensuing technological developments culminating in the rapid advancement of the internet have all contributed to diverging conceptualisations (Anderson, 2006; Durkheim, 1964; Rainie & Wellman, 2019; Tönnies, 1887/2001). Accordingly, what constitutes a community is relative and contested (Hampton & Wellman, 2018; Hillery, 1955).

If we look to SCs, local communities are a good example. The concept is straightforward; it reflects a solidarity group based around a locality or place. However, societal changes, most notably urbanisation, have caused *local* to be torn asunder (Ritzer, 2003). In urbanised countries like New Zealand, local populations shift often as people move (Swerdloff, 2023). Moreover, while local communities would, historically, have been contained within designated territorial areas, the same cannot be said today (Rainie & Wellman, 2012; Wellman, 1979, 2001).

Technological advancements have allowed people to shed the shackles of distance, redefining the parameters of local (Rainie & Wellman, 2012). In the context of a modern city, one might ask where “local” starts and ends and, more importantly, who is local and who is not. The concept of community harbours similar questions. Rectifying this ambiguity requires decisions and cut-offs that, beyond cultural considerations such as the Māori concept of whakapapa, are arguably arbitrary.¹⁶

The growing ease of domestic and international migration that has engendered these circumstances is one of many global shifts that localities must contend with. It has, therefore, been argued that local has buckled under the weight of global forces:

Little of the local remains that has been untouched by the global. Thus, much of what we often think of as the local is, in reality, the glocal. As the global penetrates the local, less and less of the latter will remain free of global influences. That which does will be relegated to the peripheries and interstices of the local community. The bulk of that which remains is much better described as glocal than local. (Ritzer, 2003, p. 207)

According to Ritzer, the “imperialistic ambitions” of nations, corporations, and organisations to grow their influence across the globe have come at the expense of the local, which has subsequently been reshaped into an amalgamation known as *glocal* (a depiction of local that emphasises global influences). If this is the case, then what has become of local communities within the context of SCs?

¹⁶ Whakapapa represents one’s genealogy, which in te ao Māori (a Māori worldview) is tied closely to one’s land of origin.

7.3.1.2 *The Shift from Communities of Place*

When it comes to SCRs, the concept of local is unavoidable; they represent connections between two places (Zelinsky, 1991). Community, in this context, therefore, inherits a heavy local and geographical undertone. When members engaged in their SCRs, their place of residence determined what relationships were readily accessible. Their involvement appeared transitory, existing only insofar as they resided close to where the ties belonged. The emphasis here is on 'close'. Several members resided slightly outside the town or city in question, further adding to the complexities of 'local'. Nonetheless, members' focus remained confined to their localities. This strict adherence to place may have provided a point of difference in the past; however, it now presents several constraints.

For members, there was an apparent concern that their local communities were either uninterested or oblivious to their cause. Any effort members dedicated to community outreach had been able to garner limited support, evidenced by the dearth of local constituents. These circumstances align with the view that place may no longer be the primary form of community (Rainie & Wellman, 2012; Schiefloe, 1990; Wellman, 1979; Wellman & Leighton, 1979). In particular, technological advancements have freed communities from spatial constraints, allowing the possibility of community beyond place (Wellman, 1979). Such communities are said to be more individualised and dispersed, to the detriment of densely knit solidarity groups, such as neighbourhoods, clubs and volunteer organisations, which have seen a decline (Oldenburg, 1999; Putnam, 1995; L. Ryan et al., 2008; T. W. Smith, 1999; Wellman, 1979; White & Guest, 2003).

Wellman (2001) stated that community has become detached from physical context, leading to a rise in person-to-person connectivity. When someone makes a phone call to another, the caller's whereabouts are likely to be of little relevance to the interaction. Moreover, with the introduction of the internet, one can form a social connection without ever knowing where the other party is located. Wellman concluded, "Although physical place continues to be important, cyberspace has become cyberplace, affecting the ways in which people find and maintain

community” (p. 247). Of these changes, he noted an emphasis on individual autonomy and agency, the rise of communities of shared interest, increased connectivity between communities, and a trend towards spatial dispersion, all of which he equates to the onset of “networked individualism”—the view that individuals are inclined to form personalised clusters of social networks that fit specific needs and interests (Wellman, 2001).

Much of Wellman’s (2001) argument has relevance when examining the constructions and lived experiences of members in the present study. Although each association was tied to a specific city or town, they functioned more as sparsely knit communities of interest than as close-knit communities of place. A shared place of residence may have initially drawn members to their respective associations, but it was their mutual interests that sustained their bonds and ongoing commitment. Moreover, their shared ties were dispersed, as few members socialised outside of SC activities.

This pattern extended to public engagement within each SCR. Members observed that most participants in SC activities had a pre-existing interest and were driven by personal connections. Additionally, most connections people formed through their engagement did not appear to be shared with others, which is consistent with networked individualism (Wellman, 2001). As such, the three SCRs could be understood less as a mechanism for fostering geographically rooted connections and more as a platform for cultivating personal networks based on shared interests.

D. Smith (1990) reached a similar conclusion more than 30 years ago:

The essence of the Sister City movement is people getting to know, understand, appreciate and care for each other as individuals. Therefore, the community (let alone national) level impact is not likely, almost by definition, to be as great as the individual level impact. (p. 188)

If anything, the introduction of the internet has only furthered the potential of SCs to act as conduits for personal connections. The issue, however, highlighted throughout members’ stories, is that personal connections and networks alone do not provide sufficient resources to sustain an SCR. Nor do they provide the means to attract a vast pool of constituents.

7.3.2 Working Hypothesis 2

In considering the preceding debate, a timely assessment of the role of communities in SCs is much needed. If the phenomenon is designed around a place-based conceptualisation of community, yet constituents are driven primarily by shared interests irrespective of place, any effort to engage the former without acknowledging the latter will likely bear little fruit, as was the members' experience.

Assuming Working Hypothesis 1 holds, the sustained ability to identify and tap into collective interests is paramount. However, what happens when these interests are not neatly confined to a specific locality but are spread across loose and geographically dispersed social networks? Considering, again, the motivation of members, their place of residence was a determining factor in the relationships or associations they had access to, but it was not, in itself, why they joined. For example, those in Association B were involved primarily out of a passion for Japan; any connection to Wellington as a place was secondary. This aligns with Wellman's (2001) conclusion that "If 'community' is defined socially rather than spatially, then it is clear that contemporary communities rarely are limited to neighbourhoods. *They are communities of shared interest rather than communities of shared kinship or locality* [emphasis added]" (pp. 12-13).

This notion complicates the role of community in SCs. Namely, SCRs are tied to place; however, communities of interest do not share this requirement. To give another example, Association A attracted those interested in military history and genealogy who happened to live in or near Cambridge. Most members who joined held this interest prior to moving to Cambridge and likely would continue to do so even if they were to leave. They were part of a wider community of interest that extended beyond Cambridge, exemplified by the New Zealand Military Historical Society and the New Zealand Memorial Museum Trust, of which many SCA members were also members. Cambridge's military connection with its SC Le Quesnoy provided a means to explore this interest, but did not hold a monopoly on it.

If SCRs primarily attract communities of interest, then logically, those willing to provide support and potentially reap benefits from the relationships are not confined to any particular place. This is again evidenced by members who dedicated time and effort to an SCR despite residing outside the locality involved. As D. Smith (1990) noted, the community benefits of SCs likely pale in comparison to the benefits experienced by individuals. Local communities, while fundamental to the place-based design of SCs, are nonetheless amorphous entities that arguably have little intrinsic reason to participate outside of an undefined connection to place. There was a mismatch between the community structures (place-based) that associations pursued and the social realities of their relationships (interest-based). Consequently, it can be said that effective resource mobilisation efforts must contend with shifting forms of community or risk becoming obsolete and *constrained*. This presents the second working hypothesis:

Working Hypothesis 2: *Resource mobilisation in sister cities depends on the ability to adapt to dynamic forms of community and human connectivity.*

7.4 The Vulnerabilities of Sister City Relationships

SCs cannot escape their intangible nature; they are, after all, “social constructions that are brought into existence and sustained through the exchange of symbolic meaning” (Lloyd, 2010, p. 6). The phenomenon’s very existence is shaped by the collective thoughts that legitimise it. While resource mobilisation and community support are plausible predictors of longevity in SCs, a further predictor is the presence and prevalence of discussion, debate and discourse. As the members interviewed in this research explained, when relationships fail to garner attention, they can quickly fade from people’s thoughts and conversations, eventually withering away. This points to the third experience and construction shared by members: *being vulnerable/at risk*.

While scarce, discussions on vulnerabilities and risks within the context of SCs paint a consistent picture. D. Smith (1990) provided a sobering analysis of SCs in the United States, revealing that a quarter of all relationships failed to develop while another quarter remained dormant or, as he described them, dead. In many cases, dormancy occurred following the

departure of a relationship's initiator, where attempts to attract a broad base of constituents did not eventuate:

But perhaps the biggest “trap” of all is one that threatens every volunteer group or organization. This is the complex pitfall of inactivity, indifference and oligarchy. Often there is not even oligarchy—for this implies at least a few people taking charge and really doing something. Volunteer groups generally cannot accomplish their ideals and goals, however laudable, without generating and sharing enthusiasm and relevant activity. Without participation by a variety of people in *each* community, no SCP [sister-city programme] can really begin to live up to its potential. (p. 190)

D. Smith observed a systematic failure amongst SCs to engage the wider communities on both sides of the relationship, with participation instead confined to small groups, often within council chambers.

The vulnerability identified by D. Smith has continued to remain a thorn in the side of SCs. For example, a case study of the SCR between Marion (Australia) and Kokubunji (Japan) revealed a similar susceptibility to loss:

The relationship got off to a promising start with a number of exchanges occurring in the first few years ... but over time these dropped off and the level of engagement generally began to decline. This was due in part to changes in the elected representatives of both councils, which meant that those who had initiated the relationship were no longer involved. (Gooding et al., 2015, p. 92)

Further to this, Kosovac et al. (2021) found that city diplomacy efforts often depend on the influence of a single individual or small group. They argued that, for city diplomacy to be effective, engagement and operations need to shift from the individual to the organisational level, so that “the departure of a powerful individual or leader does not compromise a city’s ability to continue engaging effectively” (Kosovac et al., 2021, p.140). Still, Mori (2023) noted that long-term community support is not easily sustained: “After signing a sister-city agreement, community awareness is very high for a while. However, it gradually fades, and accordingly exchange activities become stagnant” (p. 516). These vulnerabilities are then heightened in the presence of austerity, which can lead to the loss of institutional knowledge, leaving relationships at risk of collapse (H. Ryan & Mazzilli, 2021).

These same factors were evident through members' constructions and experience. Each association's main vulnerability resulted from an inability to bring others into the fold, inspire curiosity, and engender active stakeholder engagement. These reflect several questions posed by Zelinsky (1991), including "How has consciousness been raised?" and "How have attitudes and perceptions evolved?" (p. 28). While an answer has yet to emerge, several studies have consistently observed a general lack of awareness and community engagement, and a subsequent need for better communication, marketing and promotion (Cremer et al., 2001; De Villiers et al., 2007; Fan, Huang, et al., 2019; Gooding et al., 2015; Hogan, 2019; Mori, 2023). Therefore, it could be said that in many cases, consciousness has not been raised—or perhaps has been forgotten—and as Kosovac et al. (2021) suggested, global efforts have instead become idiosyncratic, reliant on the personalities of mayors, councillors, and other individuals.

The three SCRs examined in the present study were managed by a dedicated few, many of whom lacked the necessary expertise and could only undertake a limited range of activities as their numbers dwindled. Members felt that their relationships were not being utilised to their full potential, consequently constructing them as stagnant, unable to adapt to emerging needs. The memory of their relationships, preserved within select circles, had struggled to penetrate their wider communities. Therefore, there was a lingering vulnerability expressed in the concern that parts of this shared memory would inevitably be lost, or that it could be entirely forgotten, leading to an inevitable downfall. This is reflected in Oliver's conclusion that "*at the moment, it's going to die with the participants that are involved*". If SCRs are to be sustained indefinitely, their memory must also be preserved.

7.4.1 Sister Cities as Memory

Members shared the concern that people would lose interest in their respective SCRs, stop engaging in dialogue and discussion, and eventually forget. As the age-old question goes, if a tree falls in a forest and no one is around to hear it, does it make a sound? Take, for instance, the once-thriving relationship between Te Awamutu (New Zealand) and Moree (Australia), which began in 1972 (one of the first SCRs in New Zealand). Decades since its inception, the latest

available information is from a 2018 *Cambridge News* article noting that “Te Awamutu has one sister city on its books — Moree in New South Wales — but that is understood to have lapsed many years ago, with no expenditure on it by council in the past 12 years” (Robson, 2018, December 1, para. 3). I ponder how many people today remember this relationship, what it represented, and what it once meant to those involved. To quote Jan Assmann (2015, p. 115): “The past exists only insofar as it is remembered”.

SCs are far from temporary endeavours; they are intended to last indefinitely (Cremer et al., 2001; Zelinsky, 1991). Each relationship in this research encapsulated countless stories and narratives accumulated by past and present participants spanning decades. In this way, SCs can be seen as a shared memory, sustained through generations by the exchange of symbolic meaning—through the stories, photographs, videos, gifts, artefacts, and connections passed from one person to another (Lloyd, 2010). Consequently, the vulnerability members constructed and experienced lay in the challenge or, indeed, the struggle to maintain this memory and ensure it is remembered and celebrated.

Of the four concepts considered in this chapter, memory is the only one yet to be discussed in the literature, an absence that I find peculiar given the indefiniteness of SCRs. The closest example is a doctoral thesis by Bui (2024) that explores how SCRs can influence and reconstruct a *place-of-memory*. Still, the memory of SCRs themselves, their development and their preservation remains ambiguous. The stories members share raise doubt whether any relationship will endure for another 20 years, let alone 50. Despite this, past scholarship offers little knowledge on how the phenomenon will be sustained as its indefinite design intends. If SCs are to endure, *who* will remember them, *why* will they remember, *how* will they remember, and *what* will they remember?

7.4.1.1 *Communicative and Cultural Memory*

Memory as a function of social life has been studied extensively through the concept of “collective memory”. Halbwachs (1925/1992) argued that memory draws heavily from social contexts. The meaning we ascribe to past experiences is seen as selective, an active

reconstruction informed by norms and values derived from social groups. These social groups create and sustain a shared history in the form of a joint memory that is both fluid and evolving.

Building on this, Assmann (1995) introduced the concept of “cultural memory”. He proposed that collective memory is embedded in cultural frames, as well as social frames, and accordingly defined cultural memory as “a collective concept for all knowledge that directs behavior and experience in the interactive framework of a society and one that obtains through generations in repeated societal practice and initiation” (p. 126). Unlike everyday memory, cultural memory is fixed, tied to historical points, and preserved through cultural forms (texts, rites, monuments) and institutional practices (recitation, observance). Externalised symbolically, cultural memory is capable of intergenerational transmission through re-embodiment and circulation.

Assmann (1995) proposed that some collective memories are more communicative than cultural. Based on everyday communication, communicative memory possesses a “limited temporal horizon” (p. 127). Categorically noninstitutional, informal, and lacking material symbolism, communicative memory is unstable and eventually fades or is replaced. The concept can, therefore, be understood as collective knowledge based on the here and now, sustained within small social groups—“The short-term memory of a society” (Welzer, 2008, p. 285). Welzer (2008) noted that communicative and cultural memory exist on the same spectrum and “can only be strictly separated in a theoretical context; in the actual memory practice of individuals and social groups, their forms and methods are linked together” (p. 285).

In the New Zealand context, Te Tiriti o Waitangi (the Treaty of Waitangi) could be viewed as part of cultural memory. The memory is cultivated by specialists and experts, redistributed through formal educational institutions, celebrated as a national holiday, embedded within our political system, and symbolised by written documents and artefacts. Moreover, the meaning and relevance of this cultural memory continue to be reconstructed within contemporary society. In contrast, I propose that the three SCRs examined in the present study are part of a communicative memory; they are embedded within the contemporary reality and susceptible to societal shifts. As Welzer (2008) noted, “Communicative memory devalues certain aspects while

placing more value on others, and also adds new elements” (p. 285). Based on the stories shared by members, it can be said that each SC had seemingly been devalued within their respective localities and, perhaps, New Zealand society as a whole.

7.4.1.2 The Communicative Memory of Sister Cities

The grandeur envisioned in the original SCM hoped to penetrate deep into the social fabric of participating localities, engineering a cultural shift that would fundamentally change how people view each other and ensure an enduring foundation of world peace (Eisenhower, 1956). However, the constructions and experiences of members suggest that this aim has fallen short. This was also the conclusion of Lloyd’s (2010) doctoral thesis, which found that an overarching imperative to manage risk precluded attempts by local governments to engender a meaningful dent in global conflicts. Perhaps then, unsurprisingly, the movement has since seen a widespread departure from its earnest humanitarian roots in favour of commercial opportunities (Cremer et al., 2001; Cross, 2010; Fan, Huang, et al., 2019; Hogan, 2019; Mascitelli & Chung, 2008; Mpanza et al., 2022; O’Toole, 2000; Ramasamy & Cremer, 1998; H. Ryan & Mazzilli, 2021).

This shift, often described as one of necessity rather than choice, has arguably transformed an embodied collective undertaking into a constrained, individualised tool. Lloyd (2010) critiqued this trend, stating: “These urban extravaganzas are benign inventions which bring considerable pleasure to participants and promote local economic development, but it is difficult to justify claims that such staged and superficial interactions address the current political imperative for international peace building” (p. 315). Similarly, Cross (2010) noted that an overemphasis on economic motives risks undermining long-term sustainability by prioritising pragmatic, short-term goals over relationship building. He observed this shift in practice, remarking: “Recent trends suggest a plateau has been reached in the movement’s level of activity and effectiveness, coinciding with more emphasis on economic development as a key driver” (p. 116).

As local governments struggle to quantify their relationships, H. Ryan and Mazzilli (2021) noted that, within the United Kingdom, some have begun the process of silent untwinning,

“whereby the resources, officers and institutional knowledge required to maintain international relationships are repurposed and/or lost amid wider processes of restructuring and slimlining” (p. 452). Additionally, they argued that in prioritising economic opportunities, there is a risk that “a wide array of ‘pro-social’ community-based pursuits become waysided in favour of courting business leaders but also that the manifold synergies between trade creation and civic, social or cultural activities are themselves missed” (p. 465).

These observations can be applied almost one-to-one to the stories shared by members. Their SCRs faced a gradual decline in support, and their activities, which were primarily social, were afforded lesser relative importance. Members acknowledged the need to pursue economic outcomes, but this priority paled compared to the looming threat of irrelevancy alluded to by Cross (2010). Efforts to disseminate information about their relationships had produced minimal returns, in part due to a lack of clarity and publicity, causing members to construct themselves as vulnerable to loss, especially a loss of people. If Te Awamutu and Moree are any indication, the collective memory of an SCR can quickly dissipate when such losses accumulate, replaced with intimate recollections that are more communicative than cultural.

The significance and meaning members ascribed to their relationships were not externalised or disembodied; instead, they were held intuitively in the minds of individuals, sustained through limited dialogue and discourse. Their collective histories were not recorded, and there was often no one who could be called upon to recite the stories of their past. Although they were celebrated via key anniversaries, these only attracted a minute subsection of the communities the relationships represented. As people departed, the carriers of the collective memory slowly dwindled, and the phenomenon’s position in the communicative memories of each city or town was constantly under threat.

Welzer (2008) explained that communicative memory “is bound to the existence of living bearers of memory and to the communicators of experience” (p. 285). From this perspective, it can be said that for each SCR, longevity also depended on the sum of living bearers capable of sustaining and sharing the memory. Attracting those who could fulfil this role was pivotal yet

dejectedly strenuous. Members lacked the means and resources to attract others, especially younger generations; their appeal to community was often misplaced and bore little fruit, and their attempts to repurpose their relationships created more hurdles than they solved. As I have noted, these issues were not novel. In 2006, a handbook on twinning highlighted the importance of engaging youth:

For those established more than a decade ago, particularly those set up in the years immediately after World War II, the people responsible for setting up the link may no longer be able to drive the link and create new interest. Encouraging young people to become involved is also a challenge, but very important if the link is to survive. (Handley, 2006, p. 23)

The difficulties in repurposing SCRs have also been observed previously, with a 2015 report conducted in Australia finding that many such efforts saw limited success (Gooding et al., 2015). How is it, then, that the communicative memory of SCs can be sustained?

7.4.2 Working Hypothesis 3

The vulnerabilities presented here are the culmination of the issues highlighted in this chapter. Consistent with Kosovac et al.'s (2021) findings on the importance of organisational support, members suffered greatly from the absence of eclectic awareness and engagement. Most members had inherited their relationships from instigators who had long moved on. As members, too, looked to pass on their relationships, they found that successors were few and far between. Associations could not replace support faster than they lost it. Without widespread understanding of and appreciation for the SC doctrine, succession became a game of luck, and any loss incurred had irreversible consequences. Each relationship was at risk of slowly dissipating, being devalued, or being replaced.

While most SCRs start from passionate individuals (Gooding et al., 2015; D. Smith, 1990), the findings support the notion that individuals alone cannot sustain SCs, which are argued to rely instead on community support (Al Syahrin et al., 2020; Fan, Huang, et al., 2019; Hogan, 2019; Mascitelli & Chung, 2008; Mori, 2023; Mpanza et al., 2022; Prasittisopin et al., 2024). However, this presents a dilemma when considering D. Smith's (1990) assertion that SCs

primarily benefit individuals, an observation also made in this research. It, therefore, seems that the SCM has hit an impasse (Cross, 2010; O'Toole, 2001): the benefits are experienced individually but require collective support to be sustainable.

Considering the findings and the literature, two issues can be presented: the limited dispersal of connections fostered within SCs and the lack of broader relevance. In SCs, it is expected that, through exposing people to different cultures, they will develop a greater understanding and appreciation and be better positioned as global citizens (Cremer et al., 2001). However, member accounts suggest that these benefits, while considerable, can fail to reach the majority of residents. This reflects Zelinsky's (1991) emphasis on the often-overlooked factor of population size: "The larger the place, the less likely the average inhabitant will participate in sister city activities or even be aware that the relationship exists" (p. 24). Addressing these issues is thus paramount to the longevity of the phenomenon.

If SCs are to remain part of the communicative memories of cities and towns, they need to cultivate an interconnected network of connections that permeates both localities. To again quote D. Smith (1990): "Without participation by a variety of people in *each* community, no SCP can really begin to live up to its potential" (p. 190). Achieving a web of ties of this magnitude likely necessitates that the objectives of SCs extend beyond vague notions of culture, education or commerce and encapsulate tangible issues of broad relevance. This presents the third working hypothesis:

Working Hypothesis 3: *Longevity in sister cities requires a robust network of connections directed towards a shared contemporary cause.*

7.5 The Uses of Sister Cities

The vulnerabilities members faced were rivalled only by their determination. Consistent with recent literature on volunteer motives (Ganzevoort & van den Born, 2020; Mitchell & Clark, 2021; Same et al., 2020), members were driven by personal interests and goals and a desire to support others. These motivations were underpinned by a belief and hope in the usefulness of

SCs, which encapsulated vague notions of *uniqueness*, *potential*, and *value*. Their hopes were grand, reflecting ideals characterised by speculation; their speculations were hypothetical yet simultaneously substantive and derivative, informing their beliefs and motivations.

Despite their beliefs, ambiguity was reflected in each SCR's purpose. Few members could definitively articulate what they were using their relationships for or why. Responses were often broad, focusing on historical, cultural, and educational outcomes. To the best of their knowledge, the exact intentions and purpose behind their SCs had not formally been conferred or documented, which made it difficult to discern what benefits the relationships could provide. Moreover, collective discussions pertaining to the functionality of their relationships were scarce.

The ambiguity members faced also transferred to their individual roles. Even where goals or uses were identified, members were uncertain as to how they contributed towards these. This can be referred to as role ambiguity, defined by Van Sell et al. (1981) as “the degree to which clear information is lacking regarding (a) the expectations associated with a role, (b) methods for fulfilling known role expectations, and/or (c) the consequence of role performance” (p. 44). In volunteer-run groups and organisations, role ambiguity has been shown to lead to volunteer burnout (Allen & Mueller, 2013) and organisational dissatisfaction (Cox et al., 2010). In contrast, role clarity has been linked to an increased likelihood of repeat volunteering (Koutrou & Berber, 2021). The despondency experienced by some members is consistent with these studies. However, it has also been argued that ambiguity in a volunteer context is unavoidable and should be acknowledged and, where possible, mitigated (Merrell, 2000). Here, Merrell highlighted the importance of written guidelines, training, and volunteer coordinators in alleviating ambiguity. Members in this research notably lacked all three.

Members had little to frame their constructions and experiences regarding potential and value. The usefulness of their relationships consequently took on an elusive quality. It was something *out there* that was not immediately tangible. The implication of this ambiguity was twofold; members could agree on their SCRs' near limitless potential and value, for there was minimal conflicting evidence or discourse to suggest otherwise. The absence of a gold standard obscured

expectations, which, ironically, removed the metaphorical cap on what was possible. At the same time, however, the ambiguity faced did little to inspire confidence. Members could not ascertain whether their use of SCs was the most effective or efficient, and their isolation only exacerbated this issue. This predicament could be likened to trying to build a Lego set without instructions or pictures; an endless possibility of different creations may present itself, but there is no telling what was intended.

While the above scenario appears daunting, over time each association found a use that aligned with their circumstances. Development in this manner was envisioned by Zelinsky (1991): “The formula for interaction is that there is no set formula. Each pair of sister cities must experiment constantly to realize whatever ensemble of activities ideally suits their peculiar resources and objectives” (p. 3). For much of their history, the various uses adopted by each association proved successful. Between them, they conducted and welcomed numerous exchanges and delegations, helped forge countless friendships and connections, fostered mutual understanding, preserved history, and inspired curiosity. During these periods of prosperity, it mattered not whether such uses were necessarily the most effective or efficient, especially for members whose efforts were voluntary. They had taken their ‘Lego sets’ and created something unique and valuable in their own right.

The difficulties members faced arose more recently. The uses they had grown accustomed to were becoming increasingly burdensome, drawing less attention, support, and appreciation. This instability, as discussed, led members to prioritise longevity and reconsider the usefulness of their SCs. They needed to find new, innovative ways to use their relationships to attract constituents, or risk becoming obsolete. In this regard, SCRs could be likened to amorphous tools, which members employed to meet the dynamic needs of their circumstances.

7.5.1 Sister Cities as Tools

The depiction of SCs as tools is far from a novel concept. Much like social movements, SCs have often been regarded as tools or instruments utilised in the pursuit of local needs (see Baycan-Levent et al., 2010; De Villiers et al., 2007; Huang et al., 2024; Jain, 2005; Kézai & Páthy, 2023; Liu & Hu, 2018; Lloyd, 2010; O'Toole, 2000; Zelinsky, 1991). These “tools” have numerous uses, be they bridging cultural divides, knowledge sharing, facilitating exchanges, generating trust, promoting trade, or forging friendships (Cremer et al., 2001; Cross, 2010; Fan, Huang, et al., 2019; Hogan, 2019; Huang et al., 2024; Jain, 2005; O'Toole, 2000, 2001; J. Smith & Ballingall, 2003). These uses are not fixed; they respond to changes within their referential context.

As local governments have become more commercial and entrepreneurial, so too has the use of SCs (Cremer et al., 2001; Cross, 2010; Hogan, 2019; Jain, 2005; Mascitelli & Chung, 2008; O'Toole, 2000, 2001). In their paper “From Mates to Markets”, O'Toole (2000) highlighted this shift, stating, “The reconstruction of sister cities as an economic *tool* [emphasis added] in the armoury of many local governments is now proceeding apace” (p. 54). Jain (2005) added that: “Sister-city relations are important *tools* [emphasis added] of soft diplomacy and some SNGs [subnational governments] use these judiciously to serve local ends” (p. 69). Furthermore, De Villiers et al. (2007) argued, “The twinning of cities has evolved from an international *instrument* [emphasis added] of friendship and cultural exchange to a powerful *tool* [emphasis added] for capacity building and economic development” (p. 1). In some cases, the specific use of this tool may not have changed, but the value attached to it has:

As in other parts of the world, Australian cities began to feel the effects of economic globalisation as the twentieth century drew to a close, and more prosaic economic concerns began to preoccupy Australian local authorities. As a consequence, cultural sister city projects began to be valued more for their *instrumental role* [emphasis added] in boosting economic development. (Lloyd, 2010, p. 42)

In this sense, it could be argued that SCRs do not have an inherent use, and instead, as Zelinsky (1991) suggested, each pairing develops its own use that is both time- and context-bound.

Without sounding like a broken record, although the categorisation of SCs as tools is prevalent across the literature, the implications have been afforded little discussion. The categorisation is, again, arguably not just a convenient fiction and does imply certain connotations, or at least it did for SCA members in the present study. To understand these connotations, I have employed Heidegger's concept of *handiness*.

7.5.1.1 *Handiness*

Handiness was one of many ideas and theories Heidegger (1962) proposed in his seminal book *Being and Time*. Heidegger argued that useful things do not exist; rather, nothing is inherently useful. It is only through human interaction within a referential structure that things are given a usefulness. In essence, we experience things as useful through practical application, which cannot be substituted by theoretical contemplation alone:

The less we just stare at the thing called a hammer, the more actively we use it, the more original our relation to it becomes, and the more undisguisedly it is encountered as what it is, as a useful thing. The act of hammering itself discovers the specific "handiness" of the hammer. (p. 70)

Essentially, the more I sit and stare at a tool and contemplate its being, the less useful it becomes.

To further this notion, Heidegger (1962) introduced the concepts of *ready-to-hand* (*Zuhandenheit*) and *present-at-hand* (*Vorhandenheit*), representing two modes of interaction. While we are consumed with work, our attention withdraws from the tool at hand (ready-to-hand); for example, when telling the time, the clock's objective presence is of little concern. However, should this work be disrupted, say due to the clock malfunctioning, what was previously taken for granted does now present itself as conspicuous (present-at-hand): "In its conspicuousness, obtrusiveness, and obstinacy, what is at hand loses its character of handiness" (p. 74).

Harman (2010) explained ready-to-hand and present-at-hand as two separate modes between which entities oscillate. We either consciously perceive the object at hand as an objective presence, or we take it for granted as a thing that is part of work:

When humans are smoothly coping with entities ready-to-hand, they see through their tools to focus on the task they are using those tools to complete. When a temporary malfunction, humans can no longer see through the malfunctioning tool and experience it as unready-to-hand. (Dotov et al., 2010, p. 8)

According to Heidegger's (1962) theory, we do not first perceive an entity or phenomenon and then ascribe value or purpose to it. Instead, this process occurs in reverse: we discover handiness through interaction and use, with any conscious perception being secondary. Moreover, our primary concern in everyday life lies in practical engagement with things, not contemplation of their being (Harman, 2010).

7.5.1.2 Tools, Discourse, and Knowledge

For members, SCs functioned as ready-to-hand, remaining inconspicuous as long as they operated as expected. However, member accounts reveal that their SCRs gradually lost usefulness. Previously taken for granted, these relationships now presented themselves as an objective presence, demanding immediate attention. For some, SCs became obtrusive, and for others, they became obstinate—they lacked fundamental elements and imposed time constraints that hindered engagement in other activities.

The relationships did not necessarily stop working; rather, their function was not afforded the same value by adherents and constituents as in the past, a similar observation to that made by H. Ryan and Mazzilli (2021). This is reflected in the growing number of New Zealand and Australian local governments that have sought to repurpose their SCRs for commercial goals (Cremer et al., 2001; Cross, 2010; Fan, Huang, et al., 2019; Gooding et al., 2015; Hogan, 2019; Lloyd, 2010; Mascitelli & Chung, 2008; O'Toole, 2000, 2001; Ramasamy & Cremer, 1998; J. Smith & Ballingall, 2003). The findings show that this change heavily impacted the constructions and experiences of members. While members did not necessarily disagree with the change, they did struggle to comprehend it. After all, most members were not economists or business experts.

As members sought to reframe their relationships in economic terms, they were often left uncertain, resulting in relationships that felt conspicuous and obtrusive. Despite this confusion, many members acknowledged the growing emphasis on commercial outcomes as an unavoidable consequence of broader societal shifts. However, the intensity of this pressure varied between associations, with Association A experiencing less scrutiny than its counterparts. In response to these challenges, members endeavoured to redefine the usefulness of their SCs, though these efforts often proved unproductive. Zelinsky (1991) suggested that SCs initially found their purpose through iterative processes of trial and error, presumably facilitated by greater resources and flexibility. In contrast, each association lacked this leeway, further constraining member initiatives.

To secure much-needed resources and support, members were required to demonstrate the value of SC activities before engaging in them. However, in line with Heidegger's (1962) theory, this usefulness could not be discerned through theoretical deliberation alone, creating a catch-22. Metaphorically, members had inherited an obsolete tool and were tasked with rediscovering its use without an efficient means of practical application. Experimentation was largely beyond reach, rendering any strategic planning redundant. Consequently, most efforts were confined to a narrow range of previously proven activities, stifling innovation. As Lafcadio described, they relied on a *“fragile bubbling of pre-existing interest realisation and annual patterns where an external request has managed to land”*.

Another significant challenge was the lack of discourse surrounding SCs. Again, considering handiness, members required a referential structure or context that would allow them to ascribe usefulness to their SCs. However, the findings suggest such discourse was scarce. Despite their long history, SCs remained largely uncharted academic territory, particularly in New Zealand. Scholarly attention to SCs in the New Zealand context began in the late 1990s (see Ramasamy & Cremer, 1998). Since then, only a handful of studies have been published. Aside from a few strategy documents and meeting minutes, government publications are equally limited. Members' stories indicate that their SCRs developed with minimal structural guidance or defined

parameters, a limitation that became problematic when these relationships stopped “working”. Revitalising their usefulness in today’s complex socio-economic context required knowledge and frameworks that had never been established or articulated.

This knowledge gap is not unexpected. Zelinsky (1991) posed fundamental questions for future research, such as: who participates in twinning, in what ways, to what extent, and who does not? What impact does twinning have on communities and individuals? How is consciousness raised, and how do attitudes and perceptions evolve? Two decades later, Jayne et al. (2011) observed that many of these questions remained unanswered:

Zelinsky (1991) offers a tantalising glimpse into the ways in which studying city twinning can contribute to the advancement of urban theory, although the majority of research questions outlined were left unanswered. Yet his approach also set the precedent for research into city twinning: with subsequent studies continually alluding to the importance of the topic but failing to develop understanding of what it is that city twinning actually does. (p. 29)

While Jayne et al. made progress in addressing these gaps, they acknowledged that their work raised more questions than answers, a challenge that continues to preclude attempts at a definitive understanding. As Mascitelli and Chung (2008) highlighted, there is a “sheer lack of academic and theoretical debate” (p. 204), a critique echoed by numerous scholars (Baycan-Levent et al., 2010; Cross, 2010; Franco & Marmelo, 2014; Grosspietsch, 2009; Liu & Hu, 2018; Lloyd, 2010; Mpanza et al., 2022; H. Ryan & Mazzilli, 2021). Consequently, Grosspietsch (2009) suggested that the rapid evolution of twinning itself may outpace our efforts to understand it:

The question ‘what is town twinning?’ is difficult to answer. What started off as a confined, central European movement for reconciliation after World War II has developed into somewhat of a ductile, global framework that is filled by local authorities and citizens alike with diverse activities, ranging from ‘traditional’ citizen exchanges to urban cooperations and the comprehension of cultural peculiarities, experiences, best practices, solutions for urban challenges, etc. Moreover, with the involvement of the supranational EU in this originally local project, it seems that 61 years after the first twinning partnerships between British and German towns, a comprehensive definition of this increasingly complex phenomenon has moved beyond reach. (pp. 1298–1299)

Against such circumstances, it is unsurprising that each association struggled to address these questions, given that they have eluded academia for decades.

When addressing this knowledge gap, there were few entities members could turn to for guidance. A lack of public discourse stifled available knowledge, and there were few means to extract any knowledge that did exist. Moreover, there were also the previously discussed complexities surrounding community. Zelinsky (1991) suggested that SCRs are “open to and professes to include as active participants the entire non-infant population of the coupled communities regardless of age, gender, occupation, social status, religion, or ideology, not just officialdom or special-interest groups” (p. 3). Discerning the views of such a diverse and ever-changing group would require means beyond those available to members. Moreover, local government election cycles, inconsistent decision-making, and increased austerity risk place a short lifespan on any developed institutional knowledge (Hogan, 2019; H. Ryan & Mazzilli, 2021). Accordingly, for members, deciding how to best use their SCRs became a haphazard estimation.

7.5.2 Working Hypothesis 4

The compounding issues discussed here led members to speculate as to the uses of their relationships. Their SCRs, which once worked seamlessly, were now a conspicuous presence. In seeking to return these tools to their useful state, members contemplated various plausible uses. However, their inability to engage in trial and error and a lack of discourse and guidance stifled any explicit or substantive solutions.

In applying Heidegger’s (1962) theory of handiness, it can be interpreted that most members experienced their relationships as constantly oscillating between ready-to-hand and present-at-hand. During activities, events, and exchanges, their SCs were deemed useful and, therefore, unproblematic. However, this usefulness would dissipate during the periods of inactivity in between. Moreover, as activities became scarcer due to resource deficits, these periods of

drought increased in length, prolonging the likelihood of conspicuousness, obtrusiveness, and obstinacy.

The indefinite length of SCRs adds another layer of complexity. I may only need to use a saw once in a blue moon, but it costs me nothing to store it away until this time comes. Additionally, even if I do not use the saw often, that does not make it un-useful per se, nor does its usefulness necessarily degrade over time. In contrast, SCs cannot simply be stored away until an opportunity presents itself. Even if viewed as tools, SCs are, first and foremost, connections between people and require an adequate degree of care. Members feared that if their relationships were not maintained and consistently invested in, they would succumb to dormancy, a fate that, for other relationships, had proven fatal. Studies have also highlighted this importance, especially regarding signalling trust, reciprocity and commitment (Cremer et al., 2001; Cross, 2010; Dai, 2008; De Villiers et al., 2007; Hogan, 2019).

For each SCR and its respective association, it was not enough to be useful sometimes; they needed to be useful consistently and with minimal hiatus. Furthermore, increased scrutiny of local government spending meant members had to jump through several hoops to get support and approval to maintain consistent activity. Members were consuming more time conducting administrative tasks than using the relationships. This created a vicious cycle: The less time members spent actively engaging, the less useful the relationships became. As a result, activities were often less experimental and increasingly risk-averse. Members could either gamble their limited time and resources to try something new without guaranteeing success or stick to their proven activities, which required lower effort. Only the latter ensured a degree of stability. However, sustaining longevity requires more than frequent activity alone. As Zelinsky (1991) suggested, each pairing must constantly experiment to discover a usefulness that works for them.

Members recognised that longevity could not be ensured by doing what they had always done; something needed to change. Nonetheless, change requires time, effort, and resources, all of which were in short supply. There was a juxtaposition between the need for innovation and entrepreneurialism and the resources afforded to these efforts. Therefore, taking risks was almost

always out of the picture, for the potential fallout could not be justified. Consequently, as the findings showed, each association's ensemble of activities had seen little change. Association B's yuru-chara (mascot) project and Association C's Brockenhurst Scholarship were both examples of innovation, but they also took a heavy toll that curtailed further experimentation. Again, it was not enough to try something new every so often for, as the findings suggest, societal change is constant. Therefore, the associations needed to be able to readily adapt, which sporadic experimentation did not allow. This presents the fourth and final working hypothesis:

Working Hypothesis 4: *The usefulness of sister cities relies on ongoing experimentation, risk-taking, and innovation.*

7.6 Sister Cities as a Social-Technical Process

The concepts of social movements, communities, memories and tools each provide a different insight into members' shared constructions and experiences while highlighting the complexity of SCs. The applicability of each concept suggests that the phenomenon is highly flexible in meaning, echoing Lloyd's (2010) sentiment that SCs can be construed as all things to all people. This adaptability, coupled with the amorphous quality of the phenomenon, leads me to believe that SCRs may be better understood as a process.

In applying the four conceptual lenses to the categories of *enablers*, *constraints*, *vulnerabilities*, and *uses*, four working hypotheses have been produced, as shown in Table 5. The defining characteristic of the working hypotheses is their reflection of contemporary shifts and patterns, both within the broader realm of SCs and within society. The same research conducted in the past would have garnered vastly different results. During their initial prosperity, longevity likely garnered less attention. Equally, the invested interest of passionate mayors, acting as instigators, may have compensated for any lack of community support. If we look to the future, similar speculations can be made. Indeed, as technology advances, how we connect and socialise will inevitably change, further complicating the SC phenomenon for both better

and worse. Accordingly, while the working hypotheses have been worded to have broader relevancy, they are still interpretive in nature and ultimately grounded in time.

The working hypotheses support Grosspietsch's (2009) suggestion that "a comprehensive definition of this increasingly complex phenomenon has moved beyond reach" (p. 1299). As time passes, it can be expected that the SC phenomenon will continue to change. Any inferences will, therefore, be time-gated, temporal windows that offer brief glimpses but never the complete picture. In Lloyd's (2010) words, "As socially constructed entities, they [SCs] change and adapt to historical circumstances" (p. 36); they are "a dynamic and amorphous cultural and social practice" (H. Ryan & Mazzilli, 2021, p. 466). For members, the *how* behind their constructions and experiences can be explained by this very factor: change.

Table 5. Working Hypotheses

Category	Working Hypotheses
<i>Enablers</i>	<i>1. Success in sister cities is underpinned by longevity, which relies on resource mobilisation driven by a relevant and clearly defined objective.</i>
<i>Constraints</i>	<i>2. Resource mobilisation in sister cities depends on the ability to adapt to dynamic forms of community and human connectivity.</i>
<i>Vulnerabilities</i>	<i>3. Longevity in sister cities requires a robust network of connections directed towards a shared contemporary cause.</i>
<i>Uses</i>	<i>4. The usefulness of sister cities relies on ongoing experimentation, risk-taking, and innovation.</i>

In the past, SCs represented the frontier of localised efforts to engage globally, driven by a desire for world peace while simultaneously imbued with local expression (Cremer et al., 2001; Cross, 2010; Jain, 2005; O'Toole, 2000). Before the internet age, connecting people from different cultures across great distances, especially from an isolated island country like New Zealand, likely stood at the periphery of human connectivity. According to Zelinsky (1991), however, by the 1990s, this was already beginning to change as SCs grappled to maintain

relevancy in large urban centres. With the internet now fully entangled in the fabric of society, the role and purpose of SCs have become more uncertain, and their value unclear (H. Ryan & Mazzilli, 2021), a reality that played heavily on members' minds.

As the findings have shown, accumulative changes deprived the three SCs of novelty. Perhaps the biggest culprit, consistent across all four of the generated categories, has been the duality of technological advancements in combination with interconnected societal shifts. The enablers of interest, clarity and publicity were constructed as necessary to mobilise resources within a highly crowded and contested market for human attention. The constraints members experienced similarly emerged from shifts in community sentiment and structure, which had obscured the significance of place. The use of their relationships was constructed and experienced as amorphous and undetermined, resulting from shifts in the capacity of their local councils and dwindling public discourse. Finally, these preceding points limited the role of SCs in the communicative memory of their cities and towns, leaving them vulnerable to loss.

The overarching inference derived from the findings is that SCs revolve around human connectivity. Furthermore, the working hypotheses indicate that as human connectivity evolves, the requirements imposed on SCs can be expected to change in turn. The question for members and their associations was whether they could adapt and acclimatise to dynamic forms of human connectivity ushered by societal and technological shifts while forestalling the onset of irrelevancy and dormancy. It should again be noted that this is but one interpretation of the shared constructions and experiences of members. This interpretation, nonetheless, raises numerous questions for the future of SCs. Here, I would like to return to my assertion that SCs may be better understood as a process, specifically a socio-technical process that is dynamic and indefinite. This draws from Brocke et al.'s (2024) proposition that:

To study the emergence and development of contemporary phenomena, we need to embrace that contemporary processes are socio-technical. They comprises [sic] actions and events that involve humans (individuals or collectives) and digital technologies (e.g., mobile devices, organizational systems, AI). Socio-technical phenomena unfold, evolve and wane, they occur at macro, meso and micro levels and continually incorporate an ever-evolving frontier of

technological innovation. Further, a process view sees the world primarily as flowing as opposed to being in a stable state. (p. 1)

The concepts examined in this chapter show that SCs can simultaneously be interpreted as many things. While SCs are relationships, they can also be viewed as social movements, communities, tools, and communicative memory. The frequent use of these terms within the literature, barring memory, supports this notion, as do the stories shared by members. By viewing SCs as a dynamic and indefinite process, their role and significance can be understood through interconnected conceptualisations. Such an undertaking also prompts SCs to be viewed as greater than the sum of their parts, with the past, present, and future constituting a continuous and integrated whole.

Past events and developments, present trends and circumstances, and future possibilities and changes collectively informed members' constructions and experiences; to isolate any single period would render these meaningless. Equally, to value SCs only as relationships neglects their socially constructed nature (Lloyd, 2010). For members, SCs provide the means to form friendships, pursue hobbies, remember loved ones, relive old memories, reconnect with places and countries held dear, promote history, educate others, foster connections, and support their communities. They constructed and experienced their relationships as ambiguous and amorphous, qualities acting as both a deterrent and a catalyst. Viewing SCs as a socio-technical process necessitates embracing these qualities, for continual and indefinite change precludes certainty. Therefore, in learning from members, it could be said that the future of SCs relies on the ability to take advantage of the dynamism and ambiguity of their process while mitigating the inherent constraints of such qualities. The working hypotheses present potential ways such a feat could be achieved. These are, however, time- and context-bound and should be considered accordingly.

7.6.1 An Illustrative Example

Here, I present an illustrative example of SCs as a socio-technical process, drawing attention to the implications of such a framing. Members' constructions and lived experiences underscore the enduring influence of the past. While some studies have explored historical implications (see Jain, 2005; Lloyd, 2010; O'Toole, 2000; Zelinsky, 1991; Zion, 2002), most have prioritised the immediate and observable present. Members, too, perceived their SCs as contemporary realities. Yet, these realities were shaped by accumulative shifts over time, suggesting that many of the challenges members encountered were inherited. History, therefore, did not merely inform the present; it imposed persistent constraints and opportunities.

These dynamics are best understood through the lens of socio-technical change. For example, the internet has irreversibly reshaped human connectivity (Cave et al., 2009; Rainie & Wellman, 2012, 2019; Vanden Abeele et al., 2018), and its effects permeate the *enablers*, *constraints*, *vulnerabilities* and *uses*, reflected in members' stories. Additionally, Robert Putnam's (1995) essay "Bowling Alone: America's Declining Social Capital" and Oldenburg's (1999) book *The Great Good Place* identify broader societal and technological developments, including the introduction of the television, and a decline in public socialisation and communal engagement, that may have further eroded participation in activities like SCs.

The three associations examined were established in 1972, 1994, and 2000, respectively. One might expect those formed later to have adapted more readily to emerging challenges. Yet the findings suggest otherwise. Despite their differing origins, the constraints and vulnerabilities they faced were remarkably similar. A temporal lens centred on the present cannot fully account for this. Instead, these findings necessitate an account of the past and its implications for the future.

These insights are not without precedent. The turn of the century saw several scholars highlight the need for more pragmatic and entrepreneurial approaches to SCs, especially given the changing realities faced by local governments (Cremer et al., 2001; O'Toole, 2000, 2001;

Ramasamy & Cremer, 1998). In particular, O'Toole (2000) noted that "there is a growing debate about the nature of SCTRs [sister city type relationships] in the changing global environment and no doubt different emphases will emerge in the policy directions of the SCTR movement in the future" (p. 55).

These issues were later addressed in the *Local Authority Handbook on International Partnerships*, published in 2006. The handbook emphasised the gravity of "re-educating the masses", stating that "for some people, the concept of twinning is either unknown or completely misunderstood" (Handley, 2006, p. 23). It asserted that relationships should "reflect current trends and priorities" (p. 23) while maintaining the foundational values of friendship and culture. Finally, it stressed the significance of targeted outreach and broad publicity, recommending the dissemination of information in public areas.

Still, scepticism remained. Mascitelli and Chung (2008) questioned the efficacy and future of SCs, emphasising that they suffer from "a fear of investment and equally hysterical attitude of the 'financial return'" (p. 28). They highlighted growing political pressures on local governments, concluding that a sustainable future would require the phenomenon to be reimagined:

In part the evolution of Sister City relationships has been influenced by the growing world globalisation and making the world smaller. Where Sister City relationships were quite stable and established they also sought to meet the specific needs of the respective business communities in the Sister City countries. This kind of ridiculing treatment along with the very desolate level of academic attention and research requires that not only Sister City relationships be restored but that they also be re-directed. (p. 212)

Although written nearly two decades ago, these studies remain salient. The issues they identify have not lessened; if anything, they have intensified. The internet has accelerated many of these developments, but neither the internet alone, nor any other change in isolation, can be attributed sole responsibility. Each SC examined was constrained by a future trajectory that clung to the past, reflecting a form of path dependence.

7.6.1.1 *The Foundations of the Sister City Movement*

In viewing SCRs as an indefinite process, one must ask what conditions existed 70 years ago that inspired their design and what implications these have today. Of the myriad potential factors, three can potentially be linked to the SCM's initial success: growing opposition to global conflict, post-war suburban expansion, and the beginning of the Jet Age.

In his 1956 address on citizen diplomacy, Eisenhower imbued the movement with a cause deemed paramount to human existence:

There is no problem before the American people — indeed, before the world — that so colors everything we do, so colors our thinking, our actions as does the problem of preserving the peace and providing for our own security. Whether it be the Suez problem of today or another one of tomorrow, there is nothing else that so affects our daily lives. It dictates, almost, the level of our taxes. It colors every problem with which we deal at home. (Eisenhower, 1956, para. 19-20)

This was, of course, during a time of public angst across the United States stemming from tensions with the Soviet Union. As Zelinsky (1991) wrote, “If the social and technological preconditions for widespread twinning were in place by the 1940s, the one event that finally catalyzed the movement was obviously World War II” (p. 5). The 1950s also saw the post-war expansion of suburbia and, with it, the proliferation of close-knit neighbourhood communities (Gans, 1962; Gans, 1965/2017; Schiefloe, 1990; Wellman, 1979). Such communities proved to be a breeding ground for voluntary associations, with service clubs, veterans' groups, and social clubs competing to take advantage of this urban invention (Gans, 1965/2017). The evolution of suburban living brought about a revitalised belief in solidarity communities organised around place (Schiefloe, 1990; Wellman, 1979), something that had previously been deemed lost (Tönnies, 1887/2001).

While this is an oversimplification of what was a complex series of urban developments, together with Eisenhower's doctrine for world peace, these conditions provided local communities in the United States with the mandate and structural support to tackle the threat of “dangerously misguided communist ideologies and a possible nuclear war” (Lloyd, 2010, p. 34)

with a distinctly grassroots approach. As a result, by 1989, 834 cities spanning all 50 states had joined the cause, collectively forming 1420 affiliations (Zelinsky, 1991).

If we look at New Zealand, similar patterns can be observed. Notably, the ‘60s and ‘70s saw the rise of the counter-culture marches, as widespread anti-nuclear protests gripped the New Zealand political scene, with nuclear testing in the Pacific acting as a catalyst (Manatū Taonga — Ministry for Culture and Heritage, 2023; Schrader, 2012). This was shortly followed by growing opposition to the Vietnam War. Additionally, New Zealand adopted the post-war suburban model, as returning soldiers flocked from rural towns to urban centres, turning New Zealand into one of the most urbanised countries in the world (Derby, 2010). These conditions likely contributed to the expansion of the SCM within New Zealand, again providing a novel means for local communities and groups to address issues of global importance, and by 1989, 89 relationships had been created (Zelinsky, 1991). At the time, this was one relationship per 37,000 people.

These two factors provided the conditions to spark the initial flame, but advancements in commercial air travel induced the movement’s effectiveness. The introduction of the Boeing 707 in 1958, followed by the Boeing 747 in 1970, revolutionised commercial air travel, ushering in what is known as the Jet Age. The Jet Age significantly reduced the cost of air travel and saw passenger numbers more than quadruple between 1955 and 1972 (National Air and Space Museum, n.d.). Early SCRs, alongside other twinning programmes, took advantage of this to develop extensive exchange networks. To borrow Zelinsky’s (1991) words, “Unquestionably, the personal traffic engendered by twinning is substantial” (p. 23). Zelinsky conservatively estimated that, in 1991, the annual number of individuals involved in exchanges globally totalled between one and two million. At the time, the SCM likely represented the largest exchange programme to have ever existed, a feat made possible through cutting-edge advancements in travel.

Lastly, this deluge of human connectivity helped inspire innovation in citizen and city diplomacy. For example, in describing the efforts of cities in Japan, Jain (2005) noted:

From the late 1970s, more and more ordinary citizens began to participate in diverse international programmes involving education, sport and other cultural events. Some of these programmes were the key means for establishing direct links with places such as the Soviet Union where formal diplomacy was highly restricted under Cold War conditions. (p. 68)

Cities in New Zealand similarly looked to their SCs to explore various opportunities. In 1983, to celebrate their 10th anniversary with Kurashiki in Japan, Christchurch held an exhibition from a Kurashiki-based photographer, hosted a delegation of around 30 Kurashiki Jaycees (United States Junior Chamber), and sent a local high school soccer team to play in Kurashiki ("Sisters Have Led Others", 1982, p. 24). Two years later, in 1985, Manukau City held the inaugural Sister Cities Festival of Sport, which spanned 10 days and attracted 300 visitors from eight overseas communities ("Sister Cities Festival Huge Success", 1985, p. 16).

Considering these conditions, it can be said that the SCM's initial prosperity drew from a core social issue, a means to attract widespread support, and the utilisation of new technology to connect people in unprecedented numbers. Although Zelinsky (1991) suggested there is no formula for SCs, when comparing the movement's past to the experiences and constructions of members, it is my interpretation that the phenomenon does indeed have a formula. This formula, I argue, has long been overlooked. In other words, while SCs may be categorically ambiguous, this ambiguity may be imposed rather than inherent.

7.6.1.2 Contemporary Sister Cities

From the stories shared by members, it is clear that their SCs did not have an explicit or overarching cause with which they aligned. Instead, they reflected personal interests and a general emphasis on friendship and reciprocity. However, these aims were vague and disorganised. Furthermore, efforts to garner support and resources were ineffective, primarily as members lacked adequate means. Finally, each association's use of technology was severely dated, and a lack of support and resourcing hindered attempts to keep up.

The issues were not recent and had built up over decades. Increasing financial constraints and public scrutiny have limited the resources local councils can provide (Lloyd, 2010;

Mascitelli & Chung, 2008; Miyazaki, 2021; O'Toole, 2000, 2001). Concurrently, technological trends have disrupted the cohesion of place-based communities (Cave et al., 2009; Rainie & Wellman, 2012, 2019; Vanden Abeele et al., 2018), challenging the role and significance of local volunteer-run groups (Go et al., 2024; Kanemura et al., 2023; Rochester et al., 2010).

However, the pertinence of global conflict has remained and, by several metrics, intensified. For instance, in 2024, one hundred countries had been involved in some form of external conflict within the past five years, a significant jump from 59 in 2008 (Institute for Economics & Peace, 2024). Furthermore, 2024 recorded the highest number of countries experiencing a decline in peacefulness since the inception of the Global Peace Index. Nonetheless, it has been found that local governments may be ill-equipped to address such issues, as they juggle diverse local populations, growing financial strain, and an imperative to manage risk (Kosovac et al., 2021; Lloyd, 2010; Mascitelli & Chung, 2008; Miyazaki, 2021).

In the present study, members' constructions and lived experiences support the notion that, over time, world peace has seemingly lost its relevancy as an intentional goal of cities and towns, at least in New Zealand. Consequently, none of the associations included world peace as an explicit goal. The issue, however, is that this core goal has never been replaced. Albeit speculative, this may be one reason for the SCM's eventual decline. Members' stories highlight a reduction in public interest, strained capacity, a lack of youth engagement, increased bureaucracy and administrative load, operational deficiencies, uncertainty in direction, and an overall drop in support. These issues were, again, highlighted decades earlier (see Handley, 2006; Mascitelli & Chung, 2008; O'Toole, 2000; D. Smith, 1990; Zelinsky, 1991). The trajectory of the SC phenomenon observed 20 years ago had continued with minimal deviation. As this research exemplifies, the associations still found themselves trying to revitalise and repurpose their SCs to limited success while their relevancy and resilience slowly dwindled.

Members inherited SCRs that neither they nor their local councils could sustain. This is illustrated in Christchurch City Council's (2020) *International Relations Policy Framework*, which reads: "Due to the city's limited resources and the importance of resourcing these

partnerships appropriately, a very small number of them will be pursued at any one time” (p. 4). Additionally, a fear of investment (Mascitelli & Chung, 2008) and an “ever-present imperative to manage risk” (Lloyd, 2010, p. 310) provide minimal leeway for experimentation. The conditions that allowed the SCM to prosper had long since passed, and members struggled to find a new formula to replicate this success. However, as I have noted, the answer to this elusive formula arguably lies in the past and present, which can only be understood if SCs are viewed as a process and not fragmented depictions of time- and context-bound relationships.

7.7 A Conceptual Framework for Sister Cities

Considering the ambiguities discussed in this chapter, the following introduces a provisional conceptual framework for how enduring SCRs and similar long-term inter-municipal partnerships develop over time. It is rooted in the findings of this research and provides a potential formula, to use the word loosely, for attaining longevity in SCRs. It achieves this by using the analogy of a tree, especially tree growth, to reflect the phenomenon’s dynamic, indefinite, accumulative process.

7.7.1 Sister Cities as Trees

All trees start small, beginning with a thin trunk. This trunk represents the tree’s foundation and will stand as its core throughout its growth. Over time, the trunk expands in width, not through evolution, but through accumulation, as it adds successive layers. Each of these layers becomes an integral part of the tree, contributing to its strength and resilience, enabling it to withstand various environmental challenges. As the tree matures, only the outermost layer is visible to the outside observer. Yet the older internal layers remain critical to the tree’s continued growth and stability. A hollow tree, for example, may sustain itself for a time, but it is far more vulnerable to external pressures and adverse conditions. Finally, a tree is not static; it is a living organism capable of adapting to its environment. If necessary, it might alter the way or direction it grows, perhaps to reach more sunlight. While its core remains intact, the tree may shift in its growth trajectory, especially in response to changing external conditions. It is also of note that,

given sufficient conditions, a tree can feasibly live indefinitely. Methuselah, deemed to be one of, if not the oldest, tree in the world, is estimated to be 4,856 years old (Bauza, 2023).

Based on members' stories, this analogy presents my interpretation of how SCs grow and are sustained. It exemplifies the point that SCs are not immutable time-gated phenomena but a continually expanding process that adapts to its surroundings. This reflects Baycan-Levent et al.'s (2010) assertion that "the sister city movement is very sensitive to the general world development system and reflects the socio-economic and political milestones" (p. 1204). Any layer of an SCR, be that of a past function, purpose, or conceptualisation, remains a part of this ongoing process. Changes that occur do not replace or invalidate the past; like a tree, SCs do not evolve, they accumulate. The ongoing sustainability and resilience of SCs necessitate maintaining their various layers. SCs that neglect their core will likely find themselves succumbing to external factors. Lastly, SCs can adapt where needed, which is a tenet of their durability.

There are likely discrepancies in how each SC develops and grows; however, I propose that, like trees, a fundamental pattern is followed. Notably, in combining the working hypotheses, which depict the present and the future, with the phenomenon's past, four potential factors or layers can be generated, which lead to longevity and opportunities. These are:

- A relevant core social issue;
- A contemporary means to engage the public and mobilise resources;
- A novel method of connecting large numbers of people; and
- Innovation and creativity

Each layer corresponds to working hypotheses 1 to 4, respectively. These layers are interconnected, acting on a continuum and exerting mutual influence. As depicted in Figure 1, a *social issue* stands at the core of an SC process (SCP), and over time, additional layers accumulate in the form of *resource mobilisation*, *human connectivity*, and *innovation*. Assuming these four layers are nurtured and maintained, the SCP can produce opportunities that similarly accumulate, forming the outer layer.

Figure 1. Accumulative Layers of a Sister City Process



7.7.1.1 Social Issue

One of the biggest hurdles faced by members was the indefinite nature of their SCs. Ensuring longevity was a heavy burden and required consistent input and support. Yet, it has been found that many local governments are ill-equipped to provide this support, lacking the necessary resources, expertise, training and strategic direction (Cross, 2010; Fan, Huang, et al., 2019; Kosovac et al., 2021; Lloyd, 2010; Mascitelli & Chung, 2008; Miyazaki, 2021; Mori, 2023; O'Toole, 2000). Without sufficient local government backing, associations had limited avenues for growth. Despite two decades having passed, the consistency of the hurdles highlighted by O'Toole (2000) and Kosovac et al. (2021) suggests that the problem is unlikely to be solved

anytime soon. It can be concluded that sustainability in SCs requires substantial external support to supplement the constrained resources of local governments.

According to RMT, attracting and maintaining a large pool of adherents and constituents requires tapping into collective interests—preference structures directed towards social change (McCarthy & Zald, 1977). Therefore, it can be said that for SCs to remain relevant and resilient, they need to adopt a core social issue that can draw from these preference structures to mobilise resources. This is where each of the three SCs in this research fell short. Those who joined the associations often did so by chance. There were minimal intrinsic reasons to get involved outside of a general interest or connection to Japan, France, or the United Kingdom. Moreover, compared to the past, local community sentiment did not appear to provide a pipeline of consistent members.

This layer builds on Zelinsky's (1991) suggestion that a "relationship does not limit itself to carrying out a single project, but rather opens the way for a variety of shared activities, all presumably serving the *overall objective of advancing mutual understanding and friendship* [emphasis added]" (p. 3). However, this objective has seemingly been too vague and, in some regard, outdated, to maintain interest and justify expenditure (Lloyd, 2010; Mascitelli & Chung, 2008; Miyazaki, 2021). Accordingly, it is not enough to have a social cause; it also needs to be relevant and to have a degree of urgency. This can explain the outlier of Association A, which struggled to attract broader interest despite loosely clinging to the objective of historical remembrance.

The role and function of this core layer are no coincidence and can be traced back to the origins of the SCM. Initially imbued with the timely objective of world peace and unification, the movement quickly engulfed many of the world's cities and towns (Zelinsky, 1991; Zion, 2002). The SC model was designed around this very objective—achieving an enduring foundation of peace, which required that partnerships be bilateral and indefinite. Considering the findings and the literature, it seems that when local governments began repurposing their SCs, most neglected identifying a new social cause. As members' stories emphasised, their SCRs

had become *hollow trees* and were highly susceptible to external conditions. This is not to say that SCs are confined to a single core social issue for perpetuity, but rather, when change is found to be necessary, a new social issue is chosen to fulfil a similar function.

7.7.1.2 *Resource Mobilisation*

A timely social issue can help local governments and associations attract a passionate pool of members who can mobilise resources. This research indicates that for SCs to attain longevity, steady and consistent resourcing is indispensable; a factor of their indefinite nature. Each association had periods of prosperity in which resources were seemingly ample, but temporal achievements did not guarantee sustained success. Consequently, associations found themselves constantly needing to procure resources, not only in monetary terms but also in time, publicity, legitimacy, and expertise. Yet they notably lacked a compelling means to bring others into the fold.

When comparing the constructions and experience of members with the phenomenon's past, it is evident that resource mobilisation efforts need to respond to contemporary conditions and changes to attract attention and procure support. Early SCs were able to take advantage of suburban expansion, which provided convenient access to large numbers of people who relied on voluntary associations to satisfy their social needs (Gans, 1962; Gans, 1965/2017). The associations in this research had struggled to keep up with socio-technical shifts, and the current members could not repeat the earlier success of their predecessors. Given the prevalence of loneliness and social isolation, especially among adolescents (Ministry of Social Development, 2016; Office of the Surgeon General, 2023; Surkalim et al., 2022; Twenge et al., 2021), there is still a need to fill, but it requires a targeted approach.

Younger generations are increasingly turning to online modes of socialisation (Lenhart, 2015; Westcott et al., 2023), indicating that SCs, too, will have to make a move online. However, few members had the skills or knowledge to utilise these new tools. While two of the three associations had begun to dabble in social media, they had only touched the surface of technology's opportunities. Their attempts to garner attention and attract interest were

consequently ineffective. As Zelinsky (1991) noted over 30 years ago, “twinning activities must compete, often unsuccessfully, with all manner of multiple distractions” (p. 24). Accordingly, if SCs are to compete with the conflux of entities vying for people’s time and resources, they will likely need to adopt new and creative modes of engagement and address a need as they did in the past. This also requires that practitioners (encompassing SCA members, local government officials, and other involved individuals) be aware of how different groups socialise, connect, and gather, and have the means to meet these needs.

7.7.1.3 Human Connectivity

Building on the previous layer, a core social issue and a contemporary means of resource mobilisation may attract initial support. Still, it is arguably the ability to connect people innovatively that gives SCs a point of difference. During the 1970s and 1980s, the multitude of exchange programmes developed by SCs across the globe scratched this itch, cultivating a new yet safe means to connect vast numbers of people irrespective of distance (O’Toole, 2000). Indeed, in the past, travelling to an unknown country to stay with a family of a different culture presented a novel experience. While still a noteworthy opportunity, this novelty has arguably declined.

Today, if I want to learn about another country’s culture, this information is readily available at my fingertips. Better yet, travelling to other countries is now an accessible option. Each association had helped cultivate numerous connections, many of which members had benefited from personally. However, it was apparent that they had not found a new way to connect people beyond the tried-and-true exchange model. This has remained consistent for most SCs across Australia and New Zealand over the past two decades (Fan, Huang, et al., 2019, Fan, Mori, et al., 2023; O’Toole, 2000; Ramasamy & Cremer, 1998). The SCM seemingly struck gold with educational exchanges (O’Toole, 2000) but has continued to rest on the laurels of this success since, seldom venturing into different means of bringing people together.

This research suggests that for contemporary SCs to attain enduring relevancy, they need to engage in contemporary and innovative forms of human connectivity, which is defined here as

the varying dynamic means by which people connect and are connected. If human connectivity is informed by technological developments and trends (Rainie & Wellman, 2012, 2019; L. Ryan et al., 2008; Vanden Abeele et al., 2018), then SCs arguably need to utilise these advancements as earlier SCs did during the Jet Era. As we find ourselves in the era of generative artificial intelligence and perhaps soon the era of augmented and virtual reality (Cipresso et al., 2018), one must ponder how SCs are taking advantage of these developments. Certainly, the Vilnius–Lublin Portal, a virtual window connecting residents of the two cities via a continuous video feed, is one example of what innovation in human connectivity could look like for SCs (Lyons, 2021).

7.7.1.4 Innovation

Although a layer in itself, innovation seeps through every aspect of an SCP. The decision of which social issue to adopt, how to publicise this issue, mobilise resources, and connect people all require some degree of innovation. The stories shared by members, the hurdles they faced and the vulnerabilities they experienced suggest that their SCs were suspended in time. The associations could not experiment and adapt, and instead clung to measures previously deemed successful, which were now, in many ways, obsolete. The associations had not, or rather, could not respond to the changing needs or indirect feedback of their adherents and constituents.

Kline and Rosenberg (2009) noted that “Attention to and prompt action on ‘feedback signals’ from users are an important, often critical, part of innovation” (p. 277). They proposed that all innovation depends to some degree on market demand and social factors. A new invention that does not meet a prospective need is unlikely to see widespread adoption, as is an invention that disrupts social norms and organisational practices. Growth within an SCP may similarly depend on public demand and interest. If SCs are indeed tools, people are their users and should be viewed accordingly. If people stop using SCs, then if anything, this implies that they are no longer fit for purpose—what Heidegger would describe as a conspicuous object.

In explaining this interplay of factors, Kline and Rosenberg (2009) expressed the view that innovation cannot rely solely on technological prowess:

The operating systems of concern in innovation are not purely technical in nature; they are rather strongly intertwined combinations of the social and the technical—"sociotechnical systems" is a useful descriptor and a useful way to think about such institutions. Both points are important. Technological sophistication is not something that is intrinsically valued in the marketplace. Major sources of cost reduction are so valued, regardless of their technical source or degree of sophistication. And one ignores the social aspects of the operating systems at no less peril than the technical. (p. 278)

The same can also be said for innovation in SCs. The exchange programmes developed by SCs, while utilising technological advancements in travel, were not themselves particularly sophisticated; they took an already existing form of cross-cultural interaction and made it more accessible while simultaneously meeting a need. According to members, this is where the potential of SCs lies: in the ability to connect people across cultures, which is made easier through the accumulation of trust and prolonged ties (Hogan, 2019).

7.7.1.5 *Opportunities*

The outer layer of any SCP can be described as *opportunities*. These opportunities are characteristically amorphous, tangible and intangible, direct and indirect, intended and unintended. As members emphasised, SCRs can, if sufficiently supported, act as gateways, connecting people between cultures in unforeseen and unprecedented ways. Although I have often painted the indefinite length of SCRs as a burden, this facet arguably provides the greatest strength: fellowship.

If I were to try to form a connection with someone in Japan, say for a cultural event, a business venture, or to share knowledge and collaborate, I would be limited by my social network. If I do not know anyone who can act as a bridging tie to my prospective Japanese counterpart, I am but an outsider. In considering Bourdieu's (1986) 'The Forms of Capital', SCs can feasibly alleviate this issue by imbuing their participants with a degree of social capital:

Social capital is the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition—or in other words, to membership in a group—which provides each of its members with the backing of the collectively owned capital, a "credential" which entitles them to credit, in the various senses of the word. (pp. 248-249)

Through an SC connection, I am not merely a stranger but someone who shares a joint fellowship. Although the origins of this fellowship may be questionable, its longevity, which in many cases has endured over decades, is by no means inconsequential. Opportunities can, therefore, be viewed as the by-product of these human connections made possible by the fellowship SCs provide.

By identifying a core social issue, generating and committing sufficient resources to it, and connecting people from diverse backgrounds to devise innovative solutions, SCs can theoretically inspire several beneficial outcomes. As Lafcadio highlighted, this is the intervention logic of the SC model—by connecting otherwise isolated groups and individuals, future possibilities will blossom, be that economic, cultural, or educational.

7.7.2 Hollow Sister Cities

I have so far presented a provisional conceptual framework for the development of SCs. This framework, however, assumes ideal conditions and circumstances. If the different layers are not maintained, for whatever reason, SCs can become *hollow*. As shown in Figure 2, hollow SCs are characterised by the absence of an underlying structure or foundation. They overemphasise opportunities (the observable outer layer) while neglecting the concealed core that affords the necessary conditions for said opportunities. Hollow SCs might endure, but as this research exemplifies, they can become highly susceptible to external changes without an effective means to attract others, mobilise resources, connect people, and innovate. Consequently, over time, a hollow SC may find its ability to create and pursue opportunities recede.

Hollowness is the evident trajectory of the three SCs examined, and I speculate that it is the majority of long-term inter-municipal partnerships within New Zealand. The shifts in the SCM over the past few decades, as observed in this research, have seemingly forced those involved to prioritise tangible opportunities (Cremer et al., 2001; Cross, 2010; Fan, Huang, et al., 2019; Fan, Mori, et al., 2023; Gooding et al., 2015; Hogan, 2019; Mascitelli & Chung, 2008; O'Toole, 2000, 2001; Ramasamy & Cremer, 1998). The electoral cycles of local governments are a likely

driven input, which, as Hogan (2019) notes, “puts the relationship’s enduring success into a 3-year election cycle with only a limited certainty that cultural relationships will endure between cities” (p. 14).

I do not wish to imply that SCs should avoid economic opportunities or necessarily focus on educational or cultural outcomes. The crux of this framework is to show that SCs are, again, greater than the sum of their parts. Opportunities cannot be pursued in isolation, nor can resource mobilisation, human connectivity, or innovation. To borrow Cross’s (2010) words: “Without a strategy that encompasses all aspects of a fully-rounded sister city exchange portfolio, opportunities for realising the very sought-after returns are being restricted” (p. 115). Regardless of its focus, an enduring SCP necessitates acknowledging the reality of indefiniteness and taking precautions to ensure ongoing support, relevance, resilience, and potential. The conceptual framework provides one means by which this may be attainable.

7.7.3 But is it Practical?

In presenting the proposed conceptual framework, I acknowledge that questions regarding its practicality will likely arise. The framework reflects an aspirational vision of a potential formula for enduring SCRs. However, it is not intended as a universally or entirely feasible solution. Rather, it represents a provisional response to the ambiguities that surfaced through this research, not to resolve them but to provide a means of navigating them.

The findings demonstrate that each association expended considerable resources in relative isolation to craft locally contextualised formulas for their SCs. While this approach may provide for heightened applicability and relevance, it also came at a high cost, which neither the associations nor their local councils could afford. Extrapolating from these findings, it is plausible that similar processes are unfolding elsewhere, creating inefficiencies at a broader scale as local governments and communities individually strive for an elusive formula. Given socio-technical trends, the sustainability of SCs arguably requires collaborative efforts among

practitioners, both nationally and globally, to develop adaptable frameworks that inspire localised strategies without demanding a heavy toll.

This proposed framework can be understood as one potential interpretation of such a formula. It is not intended to be implemented as is, but acts as a heuristic stepping stone to a more robust and credible solution. The depiction of SCs as a process similarly demonstrates a more holistic view of the phenomenon, offering insight into how the past may contribute to the present and extend into the future.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Embracing Ambiguity and Indefiniteness

8.1 Introduction

This research has sought to address the lack of theoretical and conceptual engagement with the SC phenomenon by examining SCA members' constructions and lived experiences. Yet, as this journey unfolded, it quickly became apparent that, beyond the gaps in our knowledge of SCs, an equally pressing issue is the limited understanding of how to study the phenomenon. The stories shared by members have highlighted numerous potential avenues for inquiry, including volunteerism, transnationalism, city and citizen diplomacy, collective memory, civic engagement, community development, global citizenship, urban resilience, urban identity, tourism, and social cohesion. Each of these topics presents a myriad of methodological considerations and possibilities. Discerning what approach to take, or indeed where to start, is hindered by the inherent ambiguity surrounding the phenomenon, placing decisions of 'fit' beyond reach. There is thus an evident need to develop means by which this ambiguity can be first embraced and, where possible, navigated.

In response, this research has waded into uncharted waters. It has provided an explorative and experimental attempt to illuminate areas previously overlooked. The inquiry process generated multiple interpretations, as discussed in Chapter Seven. In this final chapter, I offer concluding reflections on the implications of these interpretations and their theoretical, conceptual and methodological contributions, both as the inquirer and as the human instrument of this research. Each of these contributions acts as a navigational tool, providing means to address the phenomenon's ambiguity and its indefinite design. These insights remain tentative—provocations rather than final declarations—intended to spark further discussion and invite deeper scrutiny of the SC phenomenon. Finally, I acknowledge the study's limitations and propose directions for future research.

8.2 Ambiguity

Central to this research has been members' consistent efforts to navigate the ambiguity, uncertainty, and obscurity of their SCRs. While the diverse range of dynamic perspectives, approaches, and uses pertaining to the phenomenon have previously been noted (Cremer et al., 2001; Cross, 2010; Fan, Huang, et al., 2019, Fan, Mori, et al., 2023; Gooding et al., 2015; Jain, 2005; Lloyd, 2010; O'Toole, 2001), this research has further extended the discussion by emphasising that ambiguity is not only present in how we interpret SCs but also stands as a hurdle for those seeking to pursue them.

The sense-making efforts of members were fraught with difficulty as they lacked the necessary discourse to situate or contextualise their SCs. Despite 70 years of history, there existed no established understanding of the *being* of SCs beyond a human connection shared across geographical barriers. Consequently, each SCR examined represented a blank slate, susceptible to individual interpretation and the broad influences of society and technology. Lloyd's (2010) assertion that the phenomenon is socially constructed has seemingly held consistent.

This research has provided insights into how members involved in SCs addressed this ambiguity. Four explanatory categories/shared constructions were generated — *enablers*, *constraints*, *uses*, and *vulnerabilities*—birthing four interconnected working hypotheses. These working hypotheses offer a time- and context-bound depiction of the functionality of SCs within contemporary society which, in combination with the generated categories, detail a potential interpretation of how members constructed and experienced their SCRs, notably as a dynamic and indefinite socio-technical process that accumulates over time.

As I have argued throughout Chapter Seven, SCs are greater than the sum of their parts; a comprehensive understanding, if indeed attainable, cannot be achieved through any singular time frame or depiction. The four concepts examined have demonstrated how SCs can potentially be many things simultaneously, made possible by the phenomenon's conceptual

malleability. While a definite conclusion is beyond reach, it can be inferred that the three SCs emerged from a global movement, drawing on a timely objective and community solidarity for support. Over time, however, each SC was seemingly repurposed as a localised tool, and sustained as a communicative memory held within select groups.

This trend has been frequently noted in the literature, with globalisation at the forefront of change (Cross, 2010; Fan, Huang, et al., 2019; Gooding et al., 2015; Liu & Hu, 2018; Mascitelli & Chung, 2008; Miyazaki, 2021; O'Toole, 2000, 2001). Where this research diverges is its proposition that SCs develop on a continuum. That is to say, SCs do not evolve, as previous studies imply; instead, they accumulate. This is best illustrated through the principle of indefiniteness, which, as Zelinsky (1991) and Cremer et al. (2001) have noted, is central to SCRs. It is in the interplay between ambiguity and indefiniteness that greater attention is required. Only through such an understanding, I argue, can efforts be made to explore the possibilities and implications of the phenomenon.

8.3 Indefiniteness

Members' constructions and experiences exemplified how the past continued to influence the contemporary state of their SCs, imposing certain parameters. Notably, one must consider why SCs are bilateral and indefinite. While these principles are often mentioned, few have scrutinised the utility of this design and why SCs continue to adhere to it. If SCs are becoming more commercial and localised (Cremer et al., 2001; Cross, 2010; Gooding et al., 2015; Hogan, 2019; Mascitelli & Chung, 2008; O'Toole, 2000, 2001; Ramasamy & Cremer, 1998), then an indefinite design may provide more hurdles than benefits. I am not suggesting that SCs should lose this facet, but rather that it be considered and embraced so the phenomenon's ambiguity might be navigated.

Logically, anything that lasts indefinitely involves a process, for indefiniteness necessitates change over time, and change, by definition, is a process. However, the assertion made in this thesis is not that SCs themselves change but that they are *changed*. In comparing the past

conditions of the SCM to those examined in this research, it is apparent that significant changes have occurred, including in how people gather, socialise, communicate, travel, share knowledge, and even volunteer. These changes can be linked to socio-technical shifts that permeated the *enablers, constraints, vulnerabilities, and uses* with which members contended. The burdens members carried emerged from an inability to address these shifts, exacerbating the ambiguity that clouded their relationships. By my interpretation, the fault lay not with the members, who were time- and resource-starved, but with a fundamental absence of an underlying structure or foundation. Their SCRs had seemingly become hollow.

Based on the findings, it can be concluded that indefiniteness presented both a burden and an opportunity. However, without adequate means to capitalise on this opportunity, the burden became all-encompassing. Indefiniteness demanded a continuous flow of resources and effort against inevitable change. Yet, members lacked the necessary guidance, structure, or referential context to navigate these changes effectively or efficiently—they were given seeds but no soil in which to plant them. Viewing SCs as an indefinite socio-technical process underscores the role of time and its changes as fundamental aspects of the phenomenon, which cannot be addressed haphazardly. Accordingly, this research's core theoretical contribution is the proposition of a joint formula, a collective and holistic approach to systematically traversing and embracing the ambiguity and indefiniteness of SCs.

8.4 A Formula for Sister City Relationships

For the SC phenomenon to have endured for over 70 years, it is reasonable to expect that certain patterns have emerged. The experiences and constructions of members highlight several possibilities, including the presence of a clear social objective, resource mobilisation, human connectivity, and innovation. While these may not be universal, dismissing the existence of patterns altogether would imply that SCs have endured purely by chance, which is unlikely given the phenomenon's longevity. An alternative perspective, as suggested by Zelinsky (1991), is that each pairing discovers its own formula and acts accordingly. While I do not dispute this potential,

the findings raise questions about its practicality and accessibility. In this concluding chapter, this research instead argues for a collective and integrated approach.

Firstly, the experiences and constructions of members were shaped by the broader connotations tied to the phenomenon itself, over which they had little control. Even where relationships were successful, they could not, on their own, elevate the movement from its relative ambiguity, just as a thriving local newspaper is unlikely to single-handedly revitalise public interest in traditional print media. This scenario presents challenges for the SCM, given its inconsistent success rate. Although somewhat outdated, findings from D. Smith (1990) and Ramasamy and Cremer (1998) suggest that for every pairing that flourishes, one or two fall short, existing only on paper. In this sense, the phenomenon can be viewed as stratified, distinguishing those who develop suitable formulas and practices promptly from those who do not.

The findings discussed in Chapter Seven indicate that changing trajectory becomes impractical once a relationship falls into the latter category. This can be understood as a consequence of ambiguity and a form of path dependence, where the absence of effective systems or structures early on creates a knock-on effect, leading to inefficiencies that impose lasting constraints. For members, the continual need to navigate these accumulative systemic burdens precluded efforts to enact more sustainable and long-term solutions. However, the SCM is not a zero-sum game. On the contrary, the more successful relationships there are, the easier it arguably becomes for others to flourish.

This notion ties into the conceptualisation of SCs as a tool. If SCs appear ineffective or ill-suited to their given purpose, however defined, people will logically be less inclined to engage with them. To illustrate this, consider the example of marriage. In 2023, there were 7.6 divorces for every 1,000 existing marriages in New Zealand (Statistics New Zealand, 2024). If this number were to increase dramatically to 100 or 200 divorces per 1,000 marriages, societal confidence in the institution of marriage would likely decline. ‘Successful’ marriages might come under scrutiny, and some may start to view marriage as an outdated or unnecessary commitment. Others might disengage from the concept altogether.

SCRs, or rather their practitioners, appear to face a similar hurdle. Members struggled to counteract the dwindling attention and legitimacy surrounding their relationships. As Palmerston North Mayor Grant Smith put it: “Sister cities don’t have a lot of profile here – they’re run on the smell of an oily rag” (Mathias, 2023, para. 11). This research has supported the view that SCs are sustained primarily through the exchange and proliferation of shared meaning, making the greatest threat to their longevity a reduction in discursive engagement. Accordingly, even if a pairing develops an effective formula, it may ultimately succumb to the broader systemic challenges of the movement itself, not least of which is its ambiguity. In this manner, the whole is again greater than the sum of its parts. As more SCs, such as Te Awamutu and Moree, fall by the wayside, the movement risks fading further into obscurity.

A second key issue highlighted in this research is the considerable time, effort, and experimentation required to generate an effective formula. SCs may have initially benefited from their novelty, allowing for greater experimentation and access to resources, but this no longer appears to be the case. For members, pursuing a workable formula, particularly during periods of uncertainty, became an increasingly burdensome task that was difficult to justify. Consequently, as evidenced throughout this thesis, all three relationships examined lacked dedicated structures or processes. Resource and time constraints forced members to approach their relationships in an ad-hoc manner, often leaving them underprepared and vulnerable to external shifts and pressures, a state I have described as being *hollow*.

Although these findings are contextual, their consistency across all three cases suggests that the issue may be more widespread, at least within New Zealand. This is supported by similar studies that emphasise the importance of strategy and evaluation while simultaneously noting the widespread lack of such practices (Cross, 2010; Fan, Huang, et al., 2019; Gooding et al., 2015). This raises an important question: how many SCRs have succeeded in developing a formula and consistently followed and adapted it over time? Moreover, for those who have, what has been the toll?

The final point that must be considered is the efficacy and accessibility of the movement itself. Research on SCs has repeatedly highlighted resource limitations as one of the most significant barriers to success (Cross, 2010; De Villiers, 2009; De Villiers et al., 2007; Fan, Huang, et al., 2019; Hogan, 2019; Mori, 2023; United Nations Industrial Development Organisation, 2019). At the same time, however, resources are scarce. Surveys conducted by Fan, Huang, et al. (2019) and Fan, Mori, et al. (2023) reveal that most SCRs in Australia operate on an annual budget of less than \$A5,000 and lack dedicated support staff. The findings of this research further reinforce this, showing that members across all three cases felt severely under-resourced.

Still, these results are not definitive. Fan, Huang, et al. (2019) and Fan, Mori, et al.'s (2023) findings indicate that some SCRs are well-resourced, with dedicated annual budgets of over \$A20,000. Mori (2023) also noted a large discrepancy in the budgets afforded to SCRs by municipalities in Japan, ranging from ¥140,000 to ¥101,308,000 annually. This further highlights a clear stratification between those with capacity and those without. While under-resourced relationships can achieve temporary success, there is limited empirical evidence to suggest that such achievements can be sustained in the long term. For the movement to be sustainable, SCs need to be more accessible to a wide range of cities, towns, and communities, regardless of fiscal capacity or the prevalence of social capital. Otherwise, as this research highlights, relationships risk becoming idiosyncratic and confined to those with the means and incentive to engage in them. This is a recurring issue in city diplomacy initiatives (Kosovac et al., 2021) and one noted by D. Smith (1990).

For each association examined in this research, the notion of a bespoke formula remained out of reach—an inaccessible ideal. These challenges will likely persist without external intervention, resulting in hollow structural foundations that hinder efforts to navigate ambiguity. If these findings are transferable, even partially, to other contexts, then it is probable that few SCs have a dedicated, sustainable formula, a reality supported by the lack of documented examples. This suggests that more relationships may ultimately collapse under the weight of

accumulative inefficiencies, further diminishing confidence in the movement and, by extension, the legitimacy of cities and communities as global actors. Such a trajectory would reinforce the stratification of the phenomenon to the detriment of all involved.

One possible response to this challenge is a collective and integrated approach in which SC advocates collaborate to develop a holistic and flexible formula that any pairing can adopt and, where needed, adapt. This would mark a departure from the isolated and fragmented practices observed in this research, instead consolidating resources toward a shared objective: strengthening SCs as social practice. Theoretically, such an approach could help lower barriers to entry for new relationships, reduce the resource burden on those involved, and improve the overall efficacy, accessibility, and resilience of the movement by enabling practitioners to operate not only in the present but also prepare for the future.

As a constructivist, it would be remiss of me not to acknowledge the potential weakening of local suitability that such an approach entails. However, members' experiences highlight that local suitability is often a secondary concern for those facing significant operational constraints. While pursuing a contextually optimal and locally derived solution is ideal, attempting to do so from a position of adversity is akin to trying to sew a parachute while in freefall—one is unlikely to succeed before hitting the ground. In this analogy, the necessary course of action would be to seek support from those with a working parachute, allowing them to descend together in a more controlled manner. While this approach may not be perfectly tailored to individual circumstances, it can significantly reduce the risk of failure.

The conceptual framework presented in this thesis, derived from the experiences and constructions of members, provides one possible interpretation of what a holistic formula, or indeed a hypothetical parachute, might entail. However, as I have emphasised, this framework is not an exhaustive solution. Instead, it is an interpretative co-construction, contextual and meant to be viewed as such. Its purpose is to illustrate and provoke thought—a prototype of what is, hopefully, a more collegial creation. It invites others to consider the functionality of SCs as an accumulative socio-technical process, to build on the ideas it proposes, and collectively

derive an effective means to embrace and traverse the ambiguity and indefiniteness of the phenomenon.

8.5 Hollowness

A further theoretical contribution of this research is the concept of hollowness, which ties into the proposed framework and captures how neglect and underinvestment in core structures and systems can render SCRs vulnerable. Hollowness represents a set of conditions in which accumulative systemic burdens confine attention to the present and limit opportunities for developing discourse and shared understanding. As SCs are “social constructions that are brought into existence and sustained through the exchange of symbolic meaning” (Lloyd, 2010, p. 60), hollowness can be positioned as the antithesis of such efforts.

Hollowness aligns with members’ experience of SCRs as an accumulative process, where past decisions and socio-technical shifts compound over time, shaping present and future opportunities and constraints. By foregrounding these dynamics, this research challenges dominant narratives that frame SCRs as independent, flexible tools that can easily adapt to external pressures. Members, too, idealised this potential for SCs, but hollowness placed such visions out of reach, a scenario presented in Chapter Seven, in Figure 2.

As Chapter Two outlines, the SC phenomenon has undergone a notable shift, with relationships now expected to deliver tangible, often commercial, outcomes. Prior studies have positioned these transformations as part of an evolving trajectory (Atanga et al., 2024; De Villiers, 2009; De Villiers et al., 2007; Gooding et al., 2015; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2023; H. Ryan & Mazzilli, 2021; J. Smith & Ballingall, 2003; Wu et al., 2024), a shift that can be described as a form of instrumentalisation. The frequent classification of SCs as tools supports this notion (Baycan-Levent et al., 2010; De Villiers et al., 2007; Huang et al., 2024; Jain, 2005; Kézai & Páthy, 2023; Liu & Hu, 2018; Lloyd, 2010; O’Toole, 2000; Zelinsky, 1991). However, while SCs have undoubtedly been reshaped over time, the prevailing tendency to frame these changes in terms of present utility risks overlooking the

demands of indefiniteness—the outer layer of SCRs has been prioritised over the underlying structures and systems that cultivate opportunities.

Echoing past scholarship, this research illustrates how SCRs are actively negotiated in response to shifting pressures, yet rarely in ways that ensure longevity. As Tham and Shim (2025) observed, “sister-city partnerships are becoming more commercially oriented, flexible, and practical, with a strong emphasis on demonstrating tangible benefits” (p. 2). However, this framing can also be deemed problematic. Despite their best efforts, members could not escape the inefficiencies of the past or the weight of the future, which imposed lasting constraints. These accumulated burdens prevented associations from operating effectively, which, in turn, undermined their SCRs. As the saying goes, a tool is only as good as its user. Thus, the question is not whether SCRs have become flexible and practical but whether those who sustain them have been empowered to do so. As demonstrated in this research, when this is neglected, relationships risk becoming hollow, their practitioners stripped of the capacity to navigate ambiguity or indefiniteness.

In theory, an iterative process would allow such missteps to be corrected and forgotten; a faulty tool can simply be replaced, its flaws eliminated. Yet, this research finds that SCRs do not operate in such a manner. Rather than being iterative, they exist on a continuum, where past constraints and inefficiencies remain embedded within institutional structures unless actively addressed. Consequently, members lacked the means and the resources to generate interest, improve publicity, or attain clarity. These underlying structural deficiencies had been overlooked in favour of short-term, reactive measures driven by immediate necessities, fixes that did not engender sustainability or alleviate mounting burdens. In essence, members had not been engaged in the reconstruction or reframing of their SCRs; instead, they had become beholden to them.

The concept of hollowness, in conjunction with the proposed conceptual framework, highlights the need for a comprehensive approach to SCs that acknowledges their inherent ambiguity and indefiniteness and empowers those involved to address them effectively.

Hollowness thus serves as both a cautionary tale and an analytical lens, illustrating the risks of presentist framing. It suggests that SCs are not inherently flexible mechanisms that can be adapted at will. Instead, they function as accumulative processes, shaped by the interwoven forces of society and technology, past decisions, present demands, and future possibilities. Finally, the concept of hollowness furthers theoretical and conceptual debate on the categorisation of SCs as tools, noting its applicability but highlighting the importance of a nuanced interpretation that looks beyond immediate utility and acknowledges the demands of indefiniteness.

8.5.1 Situating Hollowness

Although an in-depth conceptual discussion is beyond the scope of this research, I would like to briefly situate hollowness within existing knowledge. It is likely apparent that hollowness resembles other concepts, such as institutional inertia and path dependence. Hollowness exhibits similar outcomes to these concepts and can be partially tied to them. However, it differs in its significance and implications.

Institutional theory proposes that, over time, in the absence of external change or turbulence, organisations are expected to become increasingly institutionalised due to socially constructed pressures for conformity and stability (Aksom, 2022). As institutionalised practices and norms are entrenched, they can also become ‘sticky’ and resistant to change (Samadi et al., 2024). This stickiness is often described as institutional inertia. Path dependence, on the other hand, is broadly understood to mean “that current and future states, actions, or decisions depend on the path of previous states, actions, or decisions” (Page, 2006, p. 88). It posits that once an organisation or other entity takes a certain path, it can become increasingly difficult to change direction (Levi, 1997). This can result from increasing returns but also from negative externalities that exclude alternative paths (Page, 2006).

Hollowness also denotes a set of conditions that confine organisations to potentially inefficient practices while precluding meaningful attempts at course correction. However, the

distinction lies in the source of these conditions and where emphasis is placed. To offer a simplified interpretation, institutional inertia focuses on the rigidity of institutional practices and norms, whereas path dependence emphasises the persistence of past decisions. Hollowness, although resulting in a comparable resistance or inability to change, emerges instead from accelerated systemic shifts that do not allow organisations sufficient time to adapt or to develop effective coping mechanisms, which, over time, renders them hollow.

As this research has demonstrated, each association faced both persistent socio-technical shifts and wide-sweeping changes within the SCM. The literature suggests that the explicit instrumentalisation of SCs, beginning in the late 1990s, took place over, roughly, a decade (Cremer et al., 2001; Cross, 2010; De Villiers et al., 2007; Mascitelli & Chung, 2008; O'Toole, 2000, 2001; Ramasamy & Cremer, 1998; J. Smith & Ballingall, 2003) and has continued in earnest since (Al Syahrin et al., 2020; Atanga et al., 2024; Hogan, 2019; Huang et al., 2024; Mahyuni & Al Syahrin, 2021; Mpanza et al., 2022; OECD, 2023; Siregar & Rizquallah, 2022; Tham & Shim, 2025). In the words of De Villiers et al. (2007), "The twinning of cities has evolved from an international instrument of friendship and cultural exchange to a powerful tool for capacity building and economic development" (p. 1).

The speed and relentlessness of these shifts demanded that associations direct their attention predominantly to immediate needs, birthing an inclination towards reactive and haphazard decision-making. These conditions prevented members from developing strategies, systems, or structures to better prepare and capacitate their associations. Over time, their practices became increasingly obsolete and ineffective, directly impacting their SCRs, hindering their flexibility and practicality, and ultimately imposing resistance to change. In the words of Oliver, from Association C: *"It's an outdated model, which I think is a major conclusion. And no one seems to have the inclination to change the model very much. Because at the moment, it's going to die with the participants that are involved."*

Whereas institutional inertia denotes that practices "become institutionalized and taken-for-granted routines" which "accumulate institutional effects and act as carriers of institutional

pressures” (Aksom, 2022, p. 473), hollowness proposes that taken-for-granted practices, when not allowed to develop, become insufficient and eventually cease to function, creating an accumulative burden. Accordingly, organisations do not become hollow overnight but gradually over time. Hollowness can thus be a potential precursor to institutional inertia and path dependence.

It is worth noting that the concept of hollowness has been developed in response to the constructions and experiences of members involved in SCAs within New Zealand. Therefore, its current applicability and relevance are tied to these contexts and the phenomenon of SCs. Whether the concept can be applied to other phenomena or different types of organisations will require further research. Nonetheless, given that SCAs share similarities with other community-driven, persistent place-based institutions, namely religious institutions and social and sports clubs, there is the potential that the implications of hollowness extend beyond just SCs.

8.6 The Habitualisation of Sister Cities

A collective, holistic formula is one potential navigational tool in overcoming hollowness and traversing ambiguity and indefiniteness in SCRs. However, this research has also highlighted an underlying complexity in generating the required knowledge to substantiate such a formula. For members, SCs represented a malleable concept, shaped and negotiated through an ongoing process of development and refinement. In seeking to retell their experiences and articulate their constructions, each member followed a divergent non-linear path. Their engagement with SCs had not required deeper contemplation beyond the practicalities of their involvement. SCs seemingly existed within what P. L. Berger and Luckmann (1966) described as the *unproblematic sector* of everyday life.

This observation highlights what I interpret as the habitualisation of SCs, a notion that carries both theoretical and methodological implications. P. L. Berger and Luckman’s (1996) own analogy explains this well:

Suppose that I am an automobile mechanic who is highly knowledgeable about all American-made cars. Everything that pertains to the latter is a routine, unproblematic facet of my everyday life. But one day someone appears in the garage and asks me to repair his Volkswagen. I am now compelled to enter the problematic world of foreign-made cars. I may do so reluctantly or with professional curiosity, but in either case I am now faced with problems that I have not yet routinized. At the same time, of course, I do not leave the reality of everyday life. Indeed, the latter becomes enriched as I begin to incorporate into it the knowledge and skills required for the repair of foreign-made cars. (p. 24)

This analogy can be applied directly to this research. Prior to my intrusion as a researcher, SCs remained embedded within the habitual and unquestioned rhythms of members' lives, surfacing for critical reflection only when disrupted. Few members had previously been asked to give meaning to their involvement. By prompting them to do so, I introduced a new problem to be integrated, one that required their conscious attention.

This research proposes that the very act of studying how people construct and experience SCRs inevitably alters their engagement with and understanding of the phenomenon. Metaphorically, this has parallels with Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle, wherein the act of observation alters the observed reality. In this case, an in-depth examination of members' sense-making was inseparable from its influence on that process. As P. L. Berger and Luckmann (1966) stated, the reality of everyday life assimilates disruptions by reconfiguring them to fit within the unproblematic sector of lived experience. In this research, I was that disruption; my emphasis on SCs introduced an anomaly that members sought to assimilate.

Inviting members to participate in this research inadvertently seeded the idea that SCs might hold deeper significance or mean something more. It was here that a disruption emerged. To illustrate, if someone arrived at your home asking to dig up your yard, even if you refused, you would likely begin to question why—what do they know that you don't, and why had you never considered it before? Suddenly, your previously unremarkable yard now demands conscious attention. Members appeared to experience a similar shift. By drawing attention to the phenomenon, I had prompted them to do the same. Once this shift in awareness occurred, it could not be reversed. It was evident that by the start of the first interview, members had already begun re-evaluating their SCRs, a process that intensified as the study progressed.

Many of these ideas are not new, as the researcher's influence in qualitative research is well established (R. Berger, 2015; Holstein & Gubrium, 1995; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Sword, 1999). However, the notion presented here moves beyond positionality to consider the implications of studying a phenomenon that has received little academic or public attention. The findings of this research suggest that the more obscure a social phenomenon, the greater the transformative effect of studying it. In this case, the impact of inquiry was twofold: some members, initially disheartened by the lack of recognition their relationships received, felt renewed validation, while others became disillusioned as they confronted aspects of their SCs they had not previously considered. Some oscillated between the two, experiencing both a sense of renewed purpose and a sharper critical awareness.

This research demonstrates that when research illuminates an otherwise overlooked social phenomenon, it may do more than serve an exploratory function—it can also actively reconfigure participants' perceptions, unsettling what was once taken for granted and, in turn, shaping the phenomenon itself. These insights carry particular significance for the study of SCs, a domain that has largely remained outside the scope of critical academic scrutiny and public discourse (Cremer et al., 2001; De Villiers et al., 2007; Franco & Marmelo, 2014; Gavankar, 2024; Liu & Hu, 2018; Mascitelli & Chung, 2008; Mathias, 2023; D. Smith, 1990). If the very act of studying SCs can transform how people engage with them, then methodological approaches must account for this reflexive dynamic.

8.6.1 A Reflexive Approach

Building on the preceding points, a core methodological contribution of this research is to present an alternative approach to studying SCs that prioritises in-depth, negotiated outcomes derived from lived experiences and sense-making through a prolonged inquiry process. As I have demonstrated in this thesis, such an approach enables both researchers and participants to engage reflexively with the complexities and dynamism of the phenomenon. It achieves this by allowing involved parties to renegotiate and reconfigure their perspectives over time—an aspect that a single-point data collection method may overlook (R. Berger, 2015; Dado et al., 2023; Scott,

2022). It also acknowledges the possibility that SCs are not pre-constructed, cognitively defined phenomena readily available for examination, but habitual activities embedded within the rhythms of everyday life.

This approach is guided by three key principles: (1) inquiry follows an emergent and inductive design, (2) data is collected at multiple points over an extended period, and (3) outcomes are actively negotiated between the inquirer and the participant. These principles align closely with constructivist inquiry, as conceptualised by Lincoln and Guba (1985) and later elaborated upon by Erlandson et al. (1993). This approach is suited for studies targeting individuals or groups who are unlikely to have discussed their involvement in depth and who may, as a result, rely heavily on the wording and framing of a question and the person asking it in their sense-making efforts.

In presenting this alternative, I do not seek to displace the importance of quantitative inquiry, which remains essential for capturing broad trends across SCs. Instead, the principles outlined here address the phenomenon's lack of theoretical and methodological grounding while improving the alignment of qualitative efforts to explore it. By acknowledging this complexity, a diverse range of perspectives can be explored, synthesised, and applied, especially in the pursuit of a more collegial approach to SCs. As Cremer et al. (2001) stated—and as I have reiterated in this chapter—attempts to grasp the intricacies of SCs need to be holistic. Accordingly, a reflexive approach serves as a valuable complement to existing SC research, offering deeper insights into how association members construct and make sense of the phenomenon. However, its application would benefit from continued refinement in future studies, particularly through integration with other methodological approaches.

8.7 Limitations and Future Research Directions

Like any study, this research was subject to certain limitations and constraints that influenced the scope and interpretation of its findings. These limitations, outlined here, were actively addressed, mitigated where possible, and, in some cases, embraced. Nonetheless, they also provide important context for understanding the implications highlighted in this chapter and present potential areas for future research. These areas encompass both those that expand on the findings and those that offer alternative perspectives on the phenomenon, including through the lens of culture and emotions.

8.7.1 Extending the Research

This research has centred explicitly on the lived experiences and constructions of groups of individuals who have shared their own stories. These stories were not representative or reflective of the views held by local governments, even where members were involved in such institutions. It is precisely this attention that has both focused and limited the scope of inquiry. This limitation in scope was by design, allowing the voices of those previously overlooked to be given prominence. The findings and insights provided in this research should thus be interpreted as sets of differing perspectives, but not exhaustive or conclusive depictions. Where possible, efforts should be made to consider these perspectives alongside other practitioners within SCRs and their stakeholders.

The study began in 2021, which meant it could not evade the realities of the COVID-19 pandemic. As I noted in Chapter Two, observing an SC exchange would have presented an ideal opportunity to study the phenomenon in a ‘natural’ setting. However, widespread lockdowns precluded this line of inquiry, ultimately confining the study’s scope to within New Zealand, limiting what could be observed. Nevertheless, this did not impact the quality or credibility of the study. On the contrary, it provided a heightened focus, allowing contextual factors to be better appreciated and analysed. Moreover, this approach also opened the study to less active or less well-resourced SCRs for which frequent exchanges are impractical.

Looking forward, exploring how the constructions and experiences detailed in this research differ or perhaps converge with those of association members in different countries would be valuable. In particular, conducting similar research into each SCA's counterpart in Le Quesnoy, Sakai, and, if possible, Christchurch (UK), would likely yield valuable insights into the bilateral nature of SCRs. Additionally, there is potential for transnational research that could bring people from different communities together to explore how they collectively construct and experience their SCRs. Both of these areas could build on and enhance the holistic understanding that this research has sought to develop.

Equally, such studies could benefit from targeting members engaged in active exchanges to determine whether such experiences lead to different conceptualisations. Indeed, as this research has shown, members' constructions and experiences varied depending on the perceived activeness of their relationships. It is, therefore, possible that perceptions shift accordingly during an exchange where involvement is heightened. By incorporating these comparative perspectives, this research's findings can be further extended, offering a more robust assessment of their transferability.

Like Atanga et al. (2024), I acknowledge the merits of longitudinal research. However, time constraints, particularly those of a PhD programme, limited the inquiry duration. Fully addressing Zelinsky's (1991) question—"How have attitudes and perceptions evolved?" (p. 28)—and examining the ongoing influence of socio-technical shifts would likely require a multi-year, multi-case longitudinal study. While this research falls short of that ideal, it demonstrates the value of a prolonged approach and establishes a theoretical and methodological foundation for future longitudinal research.

Beyond these constraints, one may question the credibility and applicability of the methodological approach taken. While such concerns are not unwarranted, I have addressed these issues throughout this research and taken steps to ensure credibility, including prolonged engagement, reflexivity, and frequent member checks (Dado et al., 2023; Erlandson et al., 1993; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Moreover, as discussed in Chapter Two, methodology has received

limited attention within the domain of SCs, making definitive claims of applicability largely unattainable. There is little basis to argue conclusively for or against any given approach. This research has helped bridge this gap by demonstrating the potential of a constructivist/interpretivist approach, which aligns with the amorphous and socially constituted realities of SCs. This stance has also helped lay the groundwork for future studies to debate and refine methodological approaches, ultimately enhancing our understanding of the phenomenon.

8.7.2 The Influence of Culture

A fascinating insight arising from the research was the limited attention members afforded to the concept of SCs. I have tied this to the absence of established discourse and the lack of opportunity for discussion. However, despite this absence, there is much to be said about the potential cultural implications of how people interpret the meaning of SCs. As I have argued in this thesis, the words we use to describe SCs, be that social movements, communities, or tools, are not simply convenient fictions, but hold meaning. It is, therefore, not a stretch to suggest that the terminology itself—sister cities—also has meaning. This point was previously made by Lloyd (2010): “Of mixed benefit to the communicative value of the ‘sister’ metaphor, however, is the fact that cultural perceptions regarding the appropriate role of sisters vary widely between societies and, over time, within societies as well” (p. 64).

While such cultural considerations were not explicit in members’ constructions and experiences, this does not suggest that the cultural meaning attached to the word ‘sister’ or indeed to sibling relationships carries no weight. Accordingly, there are grounds to explore how these interpretations may impact the implementation of SCs. This research provides a theoretical and conceptual basis for launching such explorations.

8.7.3 Engaging Emotions

Lastly, I would like to draw inspiration from Lloyd (2010) and comment on my personal experiences within the study and their implications. Lloyd aptly noted that “Delving deeply into the subjective perceptions of participants in the course of qualitative research can have an

emotional impact on researchers” (p. 317). This point has been frequently discussed within academia, with past studies noting the risks and benefits of embracing emotions within research, highlighting how the former often overshadow the latter (Bondi, 2006; Holland, 2007; Hubbard et al., 2001; Johnson, 2009; Lustick et al., 2024; Scott, 2022).

Within this research, I was no stranger to the emotional impacts embedded in inquiry. In exploring members’ constructions and experiences, I encountered optimism and disillusionment. Regarding the latter, it was, at times, confronting to acknowledge the shortcomings of the SCM within New Zealand and the lingering possibility of its collapse. Simultaneously, I could not help but be inspired by members’ efforts to overcome these hurdles and their belief in the phenomenon. Accordingly, it would be disingenuous to suggest that my emotional responses had no bearing on the inquiry process.

While acknowledging emotions in research carries risks, such as over-empathising or bias, ignoring them entirely can present an even greater limitation. For example, Hubbard et al. (2001) explained that emotions have epistemological significance: “Being emotional is a way of knowing about, and acting in, the social world and is just as significant for how we make sense of our respondents’ experiences as our cognitive skills” (p. 135). Additionally, reflecting on Archimedes’ exclamation of “Eureka”, Bondi (2006) wrote, “the common assumption that emotions are antithetical to, and have no place within, science, is easily contradicted: scientific research is also popularly imagined to depend upon moments of inspiration and creative thinking, which are understood to entail intense emotions” (p. 233).

If one positions research as value-bound, as is the case within constructivist inquiry (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), then the role of emotions in values cannot be ignored. A PhD programme is not embarked on without some emotional investment in the research topic. One needs look no further than the acknowledgements written in doctoral theses to see these emotions on display. Regardless of attempts to mitigate them, these emotions remain an inextricable part of the inquiry process. Heidegger’s notion of *Befindlichkeit* (state of mind) suggests that we are always already attuned to the world through moods, shaping how we interpret and engage with our

experiences (Heidegger, 1962). In qualitative research, this attunement conditions how emotions emerge, making them an integral part of meaning-making and inquiry rather than an external influence.

With these considerations in mind, reflexive journaling was used throughout the inquiry to engage with my emotional responses and examine how they shaped my interpretations and the overall research direction. Where necessary, steps were taken to mitigate any undue influence on members, primarily through member checks. However, the phenomenon's ambiguity and unexplored nature, and my attachment to it, were integral to sustaining my commitment and curiosity. Had it not been for this attunement—this desire to peer beyond the curtain—I may not have fully embraced the creativity, ingenuity, and sensitivity that qualitative research consistently demands (Boeije, 2002; Hunter et al., 2002; Konecki, 2019; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; J. A. Smith et al., 2021). As Hubbard et al. (2001) concluded: “unless emotion in research is acknowledged, not only will researchers be left vulnerable, but also our understandings of the social world will remain impoverished” (p. 119).

8.8 So What?

To conclude this research, I would like to return to the question posed at the beginning of this thesis, “So what?” All things considered, we still do not know enough about the intricacies of SCs to determine their lasting implications. Zelinsky's (1991) claim that “a minority of the world's citizens too large to ignore are sipping the heady wine of local autonomy and perhaps rediscovering the meaning of community by joining hands with distant people, with consequences no one can foresee” (p. 28) remains relevant to this day. While this research has shed light on areas previously taken for granted, it represents but one step towards a more holistic and integrated understanding. That being said, the constructions and experiences of members highlight a latent potential that has yet to be realised.

Beyond their practical applications, SCs open up multiple research avenues due to their breadth and complexity. Few initiatives share their longevity, conceptual fluidity, and ability to

engage a wide cross-section of society, including local government, community groups, and other organisations. The phenomenon is, as H. Ryan and Mazzilli (2021) stated, “uniquely rich as a site and subject of research” (p. 467). With the world facing what has been described as a “confluence of crises that threaten the very survival of humanity” (United Nations, 2022, p. 3), SCs present a means to explore how different groups use available means to directly and indirectly address these issues while contending with socio-technical shifts.

Still, before SCs can be effectively evaluated and these potential avenues pursued, practitioners must first be empowered and resourced to innovate, strengthen discourse, and develop effective practices. This research argues that this also necessitates embracing and traversing the ambiguities and indefiniteness of the phenomenon. The contributions noted in this chapter present means by which these issues may be collectively and systematically addressed. They represent navigational tools that aim to alleviate the barrier to entry for both engaging in and studying SCRs.

If I were to offer a final conclusion—a personal reflection, if you will—it would be that, for SCs, there is more than meets the eye. Having momentarily stepped into the lives of numerous SCA members and being given a glimpse into what may lie behind the curtain, it is apparent that there is much to be seen. As members’ stories have demonstrated, while SCRs are ambiguous, they nonetheless hold meaning for people, *meaning* which warrants contemplation, especially in today's increasingly connected world. Therefore, the answer to “So what?” is simply “*it’s about the people*”.

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Appendices

Appendix A – Ethics Approval



Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee (AUTEC)

Auckland University of Technology
D-88, Private Bag 92006, Auckland 1142, NZ
T: +64 9 921 9999 ext. 8316
E: ethics@aut.ac.nz
www.aut.ac.nz/researchethics

18 October 2022

Love Chile
Faculty of Culture and Society

Dear Love

Re Ethics Application: **22/255 The constructions and lived experiences of volunteer participants in sister city relationships**

Thank you for providing evidence as requested, which satisfies the points raised by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee (AUTEC).

Your ethics application has been approved for three years until 18 October 2025.

Standard Conditions of Approval

1. The research is to be undertaken in accordance with the [Auckland University of Technology Code of Conduct for Research](#) and as approved by AUTEC in this application.
2. A progress report is due annually on the anniversary of the approval date, using the EA2 form.
3. A final report is due at the expiration of the approval period, or, upon completion of project, using the EA3 form.
4. Any amendments to the project must be approved by AUTEC prior to being implemented. Amendments can be requested using the EA2 form.
5. Any serious or unexpected adverse events must be reported to AUTEC Secretariat as a matter of priority.
6. Any unforeseen events that might affect continued ethical acceptability of the project should also be reported to the AUTEC Secretariat as a matter of priority.
7. It is your responsibility to ensure that the spelling and grammar of documents being provided to participants or external organisations is of a high standard and that all the dates on the documents are updated.
8. AUTEC grants ethical approval only. You are responsible for obtaining management approval for access for your research from any institution or organisation at which your research is being conducted and you need to meet all ethical, legal, public health, and locality obligations or requirements for the jurisdictions in which the research is being undertaken.

Please quote the application number and title on all future correspondence related to this project.

For any enquiries please contact ethics@aut.ac.nz. The forms mentioned above are available online through <http://www.aut.ac.nz/research/researchethics>

(This is a computer-generated letter for which no signature is required)

The AUTEC Secretariat
Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee

Cc: taylor.marston@aut.ac.nz; Brielle Gillovic

Appendix B – Tools

B1. Participant Information Sheet (selection interviews)


TE WĀNANGA ARONUI
O TĀMAKI MAKĀU RAU

Participant Information Sheet

Note: For selection interviews (participants from member associations)

Date Information Sheet Produced:
06/09/2022

Project Title
The constructions and lived experiences of volunteer participants in sister city relationships

Invitation
Kia ora, my name is Taylor Marston. I am a current PhD student in the School of Social Sciences and Public Policy at AUT, supervised by Dr Love Chile, Dr Brielle Gillovic and Dr Perseville Mendoza. I am conducting research as a part of my doctoral thesis on sister city relationships and would like to invite you to participate in a selection interview. For clarity, I am on the board for Global Cities New Zealand, however, this study is not linked to the organisation, and is completely independent.

What is the purpose of this research?
This research aims to contribute toward a deeper understanding of contemporary sister city relationships including how individuals and communities engage in local-global relations and to what effect, while also providing a foundation for further discussion.
The outcome of this research will be a doctoral thesis which will go towards the completion of my PhD. The research findings may be presented at a Global Cities New Zealand conference and distributed via their website. The results may also be used for other academic publications and presentations.

How was I identified and why am I being invited to participate in this research?
You have been identified as possessing relevant experiences in a sister city relationship in connection to {insert name of sister city association}, and I would like to invite you to participate in a selection interview.
The purpose of this selection interview is to help inform the selection of participants for future interviews. Through this selection interview, I will seek to gain a surface-level understanding of your perspectives and experiences of your sister city relationship.

How do I agree to participate in this research?
If you are interested in participating, please let me know via email within 2 weeks.
Your participation in this research is voluntary (it is your choice) and whether or not you choose to participate will neither advantage nor disadvantage you. You are able to withdraw from the study at any time. If you choose to withdraw from the study, then you will be offered the choice between having any data that is identifiable as belonging to you removed or allowing it to continue to be used. However, once the findings have been produced, removal of your data may not be possible.
Please note that while I am on the board for Global Cities New Zealand, this study is completely independent from the organisation; your decision of whether to participate or not will have no impact on your relationship with the organisation. Furthermore, if you do choose to participate, your participation will be kept confidential.

What will happen in this research?

- The selection interview will be about 30 minutes in length, be unstructured and informal, and take place online via an online platform such as Microsoft Teams or Zoom. The selection interview may also be in person if deemed plausible, in which case, it will take place at a location convenient to you.
- The selection interview will be audio recorded, and a transcript may also be written.
- After the selection interview, you will be asked to recommend further individuals who you feel possess relevant experiences and or perspectives on the topic. These individuals will be asked to contact me if interested.
- Following the selection interviews, I will select a minimum of 5 participants that will represent a variety and range of different perspectives and experiences reflective of your sister city association.

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- It is possible that your association will not be finalised as a case study and/or that you may not be selected for future interviews. Regardless of which, your participation is greatly valued and any data collected will still be used in the research findings unless directed otherwise.

What are the discomforts and risks?

As the interviews are centred around your own experiences, you will have the autonomy to express yourself as you like and will not be expected to disclose or discuss anything you are uncomfortable with. Therefore, it is not expected that you will experience any discomforts or risks.

How will these discomforts and risks be alleviated?

There are no expected discomforts or risks.

What are the benefits?

This research is being conducted as a part of my thesis, which will go towards completing my PhD.

The benefit to you is the opportunity to share your experiences and have your voice heard. By participating in this research, you are contributing toward a greater understanding of contemporary sister city relationships, which considers those directly involved at a community level. The research findings will be shared with relevant stakeholders in the sister city space, including other sister city associations, to create an opportunity for shared learning. The research findings will also serve as a groundwork for future studies on sister city relationships, a field that has seen limited attention.

How will my privacy be protected?

Your confidentiality will be maintained throughout the study. In the reporting of the findings, your name will not be disclosed; I will instead use pseudonyms. Any reference to your respective sister city association will also be replaced with a generic label such as "sister city association A".

Due to the large number of sister city associations and related individuals within Aotearoa New Zealand, the risk that you will be identifiable, while not zero, is minimal.

What are the costs of participating in this research?

The expected time commitment for participating in this selection interview is about 30 minutes.

What opportunity do I have to consider this invitation?

Two weeks

Will I receive feedback on the results of this research?

Yes, you will receive a summary of the results of the research findings when the study is completed.

What do I do if I have concerns about this research?

Any concerns regarding the nature of this project should be notified in the first instance to the Project Supervisor: Dr Love Chile, love.chile@aut.ac.nz, 021-340-557.

Concerns regarding the conduct of the research should be notified to the Executive Secretary of AUTC, ethics@aut.ac.nz, (+649) 921 9999 ext 6038.

Whom do I contact for further information about this research?

Please keep this Information Sheet and a copy of the Consent Form for your future reference. You are also able to contact the research team as follows:

Researcher Contact Details:

Taylor Marston, taylor.marston@aut.ac.nz, 027-368-6353

Project Supervisor Contact Details:

Dr Love Chile, love.chile@aut.ac.nz, 021-340-557

Approved by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee on *type the date final ethics approval was granted*, AUTC Reference number *type the reference number*.

B2. Participant Information Sheet

 TE WĀNANGA ARONUI O TĀMAKI MAKĀU RAU	
Participant Information Sheet <i>Note: For interviews (participants from member associations)</i> Date Information Sheet Produced: 06/09/2022 Project Title The constructions and lived experiences of volunteer participants in sister city relationships Invitation Kia ora, my name is Taylor Marston. I am a current PhD student in the School of Social Sciences and Public Policy at AUT, supervised by Dr Love Chile, Dr Brielle Gillovic and Dr Perseville Mendoza. I am conducting research as a part of my doctoral thesis on sister city relationships and would like to invite you to participate in a selection interview. For clarity, I am on the board for Global Cities New Zealand, however, this study is not linked to the organisation, and is completely independent. What is the purpose of this research? This research aims to contribute toward a deeper understanding of contemporary sister city relationships including how individuals and communities engage in local-global relations and to what effect, while also providing a foundation for further discussion. The outcome of this research will be a doctoral thesis which will go towards the completion of my PhD. The research findings will be presented at a Global Cities New Zealand conference and distributed via their website. The results may also be used for other academic publications and presentations. How was I identified and why am I being invited to participate in this research? Following your participation in a selection interview, you have been selected to participate in the interview process. In these interviews, I will seek to explore in more depth your perspectives and experiences in relation to your sister city relationship. How do I agree to participate in this research? If you are interested in participating, please let me know via email within 2 weeks. If you accept to participate please sign the attached consent form. Your participation in this research is voluntary (it is your choice) and whether or not you choose to participate will neither advantage nor disadvantage you. You are able to withdraw from the study at any time. If you choose to withdraw from the study, then you will be offered the choice between having any data that is identifiable as belonging to you removed or allowing it to continue to be used. However, once the findings have been produced, removal of your data may not be possible. Please note that while I am on the board for Global Cities New Zealand, this study is completely independent from the organisation; your decision of whether to participate or not will have no impact on your relationship with the organisation. Furthermore, if you do choose to participate, your participation will be kept confidential. What will happen in this research? • The interview process will be split into three different interviews. • Interviews one and two will be informal and unstructured, between 30 minutes and 1 hour in length, and will either be via an online platform such as Microsoft Teams or Zoom or in-person at a location of your convenience. • Interview three will be formal and semi-structured, between 1 hour and 2 hours in length, and in-person at a location of your convenience. This interview may also be online via Microsoft Teams or Zoom if required. • The three interviews will be spread over a one-year period. • Each interview within this process will seek to build upon the last and develop a rich understanding of your experiences and perspectives. • Additionally, the three interviews and the one-year period is designed to allow both yourself and myself to reflect on our understanding of sister city relationships, and for me to reach an as accurate depiction as possible of your perspectives and experiences. 6 September 2022 page 1 of 2 This version was edited in November 2019	

- Accordingly, between interviews, you will be asked to check and provide feedback on a summary of the findings to date which will be shared with you. This will help ensure that I we are both on the same page, and that you feel your thoughts and experiences are being depicted accurately.
- All three interviews will be audio recorded and may also be transcribed. You may be asked to check transcripts where applicable.

What are the discomforts and risks?

As the interviews are centred around your own experiences, you will have the autonomy to express yourself as you like and will not be expected to disclose or discuss anything you are uncomfortable with. Therefore, it is not expected that you will experience any discomforts or risks.

How will these discomforts and risks be alleviated?

There are no expected discomforts or risks.

What are the benefits?

This research is being conducted as a part of my thesis, which will go towards completing my PhD.

The benefit to you is the opportunity to share your experiences and have your voice heard. By participating in this research, you are contributing toward a greater understanding of contemporary sister city relationships, which considers those directly involved at a community level. The research findings will be shared with relevant stakeholders in the sister city space, including other sister city associations, to create an opportunity for shared learning. The research findings will also serve as a groundwork for future studies on sister city relationships, a field that has seen limited attention.

How will my privacy be protected?

Your confidentiality will be maintained throughout the study. In the reporting of the findings, your name will not be disclosed; I will instead use pseudonyms. Any reference to your respective sister city association will also be replaced with a generic label such as "sister city association A". To further ensure your confidentiality, you will be asked not to disclose your involvement in this research to any third parties.

Due to the large number of sister city associations and related individuals within Aotearoa New Zealand, the risk that you will be identifiable, while not zero, is minimal.

What are the costs of participating in this research?

The expected time commitment for participating is between 2 to 4 hours for the actual interviews and around 2 hours to provide feedback. However, please note that this is just a rough estimate and may fluctuate.

What opportunity do I have to consider this invitation?

Two weeks

Will I receive feedback on the results of this research?

Yes, you will receive a summary of the results of the research findings when the study is completed.

What do I do if I have concerns about this research?

Any concerns regarding the nature of this project should be notified in the first instance to the Project Supervisor: Dr Love Chile, love.chile@aut.ac.nz, 021-340-557.

Concerns regarding the conduct of the research should be notified to the Executive Secretary of AUTC, ethics@aut.ac.nz, (+649) 921 9999 ext 6038.

Whom do I contact for further information about this research?

Please keep this Information Sheet and a copy of the Consent Form for your future reference. You are also able to contact the research team as follows:

Researcher Contact Details:

Taylor Marston, taylor.marston@aut.ac.nz, 027-368-6353

Project Supervisor Contact Details:

Dr Love Chile, love.chile@aut.ac.nz, 021-340-557

Approved by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee on type the date final ethics approval was granted, AUTC Reference number type the reference number.

B3. Consent Form



Consent Form

Project title:
The constructions and lived experiences of volunteer participants in sister city relationships

Project Supervisor:
Dr Love Chile

Researcher:
Taylor Marston

- ☐ I have read and understood the information provided about this research project in the Information Sheet dated 20/03/2023.
- ☐ I have had an opportunity to ask questions and to have them answered.
- ☐ I understand that notes will be taken during interviews and that interviews will be audio-recorded and may also be transcribed.
- ☐ I understand that taking part in this study is voluntary (my choice) and that I may withdraw from the study at any time without being disadvantaged in any way.
- ☐ I understand that if I withdraw from the study then I will be offered the choice between having any data that is identifiable as belonging to me removed or allowing it to continue to be used. However, once findings have been produced, removal of my data may not be possible.
- ☐ I understand that any identifiable information about me will not be included in the research outputs and I consent to a pseudonym being used.
- ☐ I agree to take part in this research.
- ☐ I wish to receive a summary of the research findings (please tick one): Yes ☐ No ☐

Participant's signature:

Participant's name:

Participant's Contact Details (if appropriate):
.....
.....
.....
.....

Date:

Approved by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee on type the date on which the final approval was granted AUTEK Reference number type the AUTEK reference number

Note: The Participant should retain a copy of this form

B4. Oral Consent Protocol


TE WĀNANGA ARONUI
O TĀMAKI MAKAU RAU

Oral Consent Protocol

Project title:
The constructions and lived experiences of volunteer participants in sister city relationships

Project Supervisor:
Dr Love Chile

Researcher:
Taylor Marston

The participant joins the videoconference

☐ Do you agree to my recording your consent to participate?

If they agree, then the record function will be activated and they will be asked the following:

☐ Have you read and understood the information provided about this research project in the Information Sheet dated 06/09/2022?

☐ Do you have any questions about the research?

☐ Do you understand that notes will be taken during the interview and that the interview will also be audio-recorded may be transcribed?

☐ Do you understand that you will be asked to check data collected on yourself and to provide feedback throughout the research process?

☐ Do you understand that taking part in this study is voluntary (your choice) and that you may withdraw from the study at any time without being disadvantaged in any way?

☐ Do you understand that if you withdraw from the study then you will be offered the choice between having any data that is identifiable as belonging to you removed or allowing it to continue to be used? However, once the findings have been produced, removal of your data may not be possible.

☐ Do you understand that any identifiable information about yourself will not be included in the research outputs and do you consent to a pseudonym being used?

☐ Do you agree to take part in this research?

☐ Do you wish to receive a summary of the research findings? (please tick one): Yes ☐ No ☐

☐ Do you want me to send you a copy of the audio recording for this consent? Yes ☐ No ☐

☐ Please confirm you name and contact details

Participant's name:

Participant's Contact Details (if appropriate):
.....
.....
.....
.....

I will now turn off the recording of the Consent and then will start a separate recording for the interview.

Approved by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee on type the date on which the final approval was granted AUTEK Reference number type the AUTEK reference number

Note: The Participant should retain a copy of this form.

Appendix C – Reflexive Journaling Example

6/07/2023 – Written during the first set of interviews with members of Association A

The first set of interviews is going well, and all participants have been very engaged and responsive. Some participants are rather passionate about sharing their history, which has made it difficult to focus the interviews at times. Still, the stories they share with me are all relevant to their experiences. The question that arises, however, is whether these experiences are of a sister city relationship or of a pre-existing historical connection that happens to be a sister city. As has been noted in prior research, it can be difficult to definitively equate any one's outcome or, in this case, experience to the sister city relationship itself. In reality, it could be linked to something independent of the sister city relationship. Nonetheless, one may argue that the sister city relationship between Le Quesnoy and Cambridge is simply an extension of the historical connection, and neither can be separated from the other. This brings up conceptual and theoretical questions as to where a sister city connection starts and ends. Does this connection apply retroactively to everything that came before, or does it only apply to that which comes after?

Appendix D – Association A Member Quotes

- D1. *I mean, you can be enthusiastic at the very beginning, but this is over 20 years. And very few of those people from 20 odd years ago are still involved or are still alive.*
(Bernadette)
- D2. *All of a sudden, people lose interest, and the whole thing just dies.* (Philippe)
- D3. *I guess I'm really passionate about it. It's keeping a group of people around me that are passionate about it and can hopefully keep pushing it along.* (Clara)
- D4. *I think it comes down to just personal preferences or people or having an interest. If you've got a connection as I have, of course, it makes you more enthusiastic.*
(Chrissy)
- D5. *I suppose, in a way, it's like any family history; if you don't keep talking about it, it's two things. If you don't keep talking about it, on the other side, you're not interested. Yeah, [it] can just stop.* (Josephine)
- D6. *The enthusiasm of the people who are on the committee and involved, and we've been very lucky. We've had some pretty good people.* (Claude)
- D7. *So it's all about the interests of and passions of people coming through.* (Chloé)
- D8. *You need the people on the community board and in the community to be passionate about it and to see good value in it, to carry it forward. I think it's quite easy, if you get a bunch of people that aren't so interested, for things to fall by the wayside. I know that Cambridge previously had, I think, three other sister city relationships, one in America and, I think, possibly two in Australia, that just ran out of steam at some point. So, if you don't have the right people pushing it forward, then it puts that in jeopardy. So I guess I'm really passionate about it. It's keeping a group of people around me that are passionate about it and can hopefully keep pushing it along, which is why we try to do things like getting kids involved.* (Clara)
- D9. *We've really got two groups. We've got the people who have the connection, the French connection, the just the historic connection. And then we've got the council. The council never asks us or comes to us and says, well, what do you reckon?*
(Claude)
- D10. *I think as councillors, I don't hear anything at all about how the sister city is going.*
(Chloé)
- D11. *As you say, with changing of committees and presidents and chairpeople, they disappear, and then they don't seem to want the interest, which is a pity.* (Bernadette)
- D12. *If your role in the friendship, relationship depends on you being elected to something and having a job with the council, then things are going to go up and down.* (Philippe)
- D13. *When I joined years ago, there was a strong commitment from what I thought were really interested people from the community board. But as time went on, I realised that the hundred-year ceremony was coming up, and they were really in it for a free*

ride. And when they'd done the hundred years and been to Le Quesnoy and all that sort, we don't see them anymore ... it is a real concern. (Claude)

D14. *We used to have groups when Peter Lee, Peter and Judy Lee. We used to have all sorts of interesting things that we used to do. We used to have, for Armistice weekends, we used to have a dance and parade, street parade. We just had heaps of things. (Bernadette)*

D15. *It was very strong. Very strong up until the hundredth year. And then the council fellas had their jollies, and all of a sudden, they didn't want to be involved anymore. (Claude)*

D16. *I think it's been accepted up until now as a legitimate business of councillors, but I think that's going to be challenged before too long. (Philippe)*

D17. *Because I think if we are ... the people who turn up don't perhaps feel that they can seize the initiative at all, we, I'm as much to the blame as anybody else ... we find it convenient just to sit and drink coffee and let Clara do all the work. Whereas I think that we should be reversing that and saying these are our core values, these are our key objectives. (Philippe)*

D18. *Because they said at our meeting on Monday, you know, 'better have a debrief'. And I sort of thought it's the first time they've actually said that. And it's a good idea to have a debrief because even just the question you're asking me today and it's making me think that there are a lot of things that we can get more involved with, even though we have the French group that comes out and we've got a lot this year actually, which is good. But a debrief and sort of say, well, how did that go or how it didn't go? And as you say, innovations and things like that, it's got me thinking about maybe I could suggest a few things. Who knows? Seeing I've been involved right from the start here because of my father being there, and therefore, why shouldn't I help out and have some bright ideas? (Bernadette)*

D19. *It brought to the surface all sorts of subconscious things that your previous interviews had stirred up in me. Plus, I've just been to another meeting, and I was thinking all sorts of thoughts about how this actually works. (Philippe)*

D20. *I think it has been really helpful for the other members of the committee and stuff that are going through this with you as well because it's bringing up a lot of things for them, a lot of ideas and 'oh, why don't we do that?' or 'Why haven't we been doing that?' (Clara)*

D21. *It's really highlighting some gaps right, in our thinking about how this relationship works for us. (Chloé)*

D22. *In my head, I thought we're completely in a silo, particularly as ours is a specialised relationship. And so, to the best of my knowledge, we don't talk to any other sister city organisations, and it's only just come to my attention in the last couple of weeks that Cambridge has a relationship with a Japanese [town], you see I didn't know that before. And to the best of my knowledge, we don't talk to them if there is a them or if this is just another council initiative. (Philippe)*

- D23. *The trouble is you get some people who want to say, my father or grandfather fought here, and tell them our story. And they've all heard it so many times. We actually don't need to [hear it again]; we could probably tell them. But, unfortunately, that puts some people off. They don't want to go to meetings and hear the same story again and again. But it's very tricky. How do you manage that? (Josephine)*
- D24. *There's certainly people that go on about what used to happen and why can't we do that. But then there's a lot of other people who are like, we don't want meetings just for the sake of meetings. There needs to be a reason. (Clara)*
- D25. *It's all about the interests of and passions of people coming through... It's kind of like potluck, really. If you've got zero interest in history, then that relationship could easily start to diminish ... Yeah, it's all about the people of the day, and yeah, who's got the time to put the energy into it, I guess? (Chloé)*
- D26. *Te Awamutu had a twin-town relationship with a town in Australia, which was very active at one stage but pretty much died out ten years ago. Again, it relied heavily on council involvement and interest by councillors, and I think that was the reason it died out. (Philippe)*
- D27. *I think it's quite easy, if you get a bunch of people that aren't so interested, for things to fall by the wayside. I know that Cambridge previously had, I think, three other sister city relationships, one in America and, I think, possibly two in Australia, that just ran out of steam at some point. (Clara)*
- D28. *It's such a strong connection. Very, very strong connection. (Chrissy).*
- D29. *I think if the thing is managed well and if its visibility is maintained that it can only go from strength to strength. Like I said, it's not just a group for history nerds, or genealogy nerds. I think it is a genuine sister city relationship as well. (Philippe)*
- D30. *I think we're still getting the interest. We're still getting the interest, which is good. (Bernadette)*
- D31. *There's definitely a sense of community across the ocean there... once you make that connection, they become family. (Clara)*
- D32. *I believe of all the sister cities, Cambridge, would probably be way ahead of anybody as far as, because we, we do the job right. (Claude)*
- D33. *So I think there is quite a connection that makes people feel they can be included cause it's sort of part of our town. (Josephine)*
- D34. *I think we're going to, you know, continue quite strongly going forward. (Chloé)*
- D35. *A lot of the people that are involved are still the older crowd with that real interest. I think as we get younger people involved, it may change a bit, though. I guess there was also a bit of a revival in things and amidst recently, so I'd be interested to see whether that continues and whether that passion for military history continues or not. (Clara)*
- D36. *It's a very, very personal thing that history. But once the, the relatives, you know, there's some strong connections in our uncles and great uncles. But as time goes on,*

we're going to lose more and more of that. Yeah. So it'll be interesting to see where this goes. (Chloé)

D37. *And I think if I had any concerns, it would be that we are totally reliant on the political tides in councils. Just as I think this whole thing was founded by a particular counsellor. It could just as easily be attacked by another counsellor who could say, 'We don't have the money or the energy. This is not part of our core business. We can't even afford to maintain the drains. What are we doing sending people to the Le Quesnoy?' ... I think it's been accepted up until now as a legitimate business of councillors, but I think that's going to be challenged before too long. (Philippe)*

D38. *It certainly is a concern because the bulk of those people are getting on. They really are. Some of them have their children or their grandchildren that are kind of involved in the periphery. They might be on a mailing list or those kind of things, but they're not living in Cambridge. So, that kind of familial connection is disappearing a bit. So yeah, I don't know how we do that. I mean more and more, I guess the community board's just going to have to drive it. (Clara)*

D39. *As people get older and the distance between events that might have caused the sister city to come together fades into the past, it'll be harder to maintain interest. (Josephine)*

D40. *I think we did more when we had those meetings with Peter Lee and Sue and Tom Pickering, and I mean, all those people have died now, and you sort of think, oh gosh, I must be getting old or something. (Bernadette)*

D41. *You can be enthusiastic at the beginning, but this is over 20 years. Yes. And very few of those people from 20-odd years ago are still involved or are still alive. (Bernadette)*

D42. *There used to be [a] very good connection... there was a couple on the community board that were very good and genuine, but they had their time and one's stood down as a counsellor after many years. So that's understandable. Yeah. There is that disconnect. (Claude)*

D43. *And she ended up resigning from the role, and we lost a lot when we lost "Laura" ... And of course, a lot of the people that were on the association for a long period of time, they kind of lament the loss of her and "why can't we do this" and "why can't we do that?" Well, we've kind of lost that resource. So yeah, it's hard. So it's a shame. (Clara)*

D44. *We've been lucky in that we've had one guy there for a long, long time that's been involved. It's been a little bit harder this past six months or so because he was quite, he'd got seconded to work on the local body election. So his counterpart that took over was a lot less communicative and obviously didn't have the background, didn't have any personal relationship so that it kind of stalled a bit in that respect. (Clara)*

D45. *It would be great to have more school involvement, just more younger people in general would be really good to both increase the awareness and to safeguard for the future. (Clara)*

- D46. *Most of us are fascinated by an event that happened over a couple of days. So it's a magnet for military historians and people whose grandparents were there (Philippe)*
- D47. *So getting people involved more like that and getting them thinking about it is great. But people only have so much time too, so they might like to come along to something like a dinner or something casual. But actually getting them to commit to being involved in the long term is a challenge. (Clara)*
- D48. *It's all about the interests of and passions of people coming through... It's kind of like potluck, really. If you've got zero interest in history, then that relationship could easily start to diminish ... Yeah, it's all about the people of the day, and yeah, who's got the time to put the energy into it, I guess? (Chloé)*
- D49. *I just wonder whether it's sustainable, and if it is, what's going to sustain it? (Philippe).*
- D50. *They're the ones who keep it alive ... I think if the committee didn't exist, I don't think the public would be aware of it because they're the ones who encourage it. (Chloé)*
- D51. *Yeah, if they [Cambridge residents] don't know the background, then they probably would struggle to understand it. So yeah, it comes back to trying to promote it and increase the awareness, which is, it is a constant. But yeah, I'm not quite sure how much else we could be doing. Giving the resources that are allocated to it. (Clara)*
- D52. *It's a bit tricky. You can't do much of big stuff, any big stuff really. (Josephine)*
- D53. *So, we started to not have meetings, actual committee meetings. I mean, I'm not officially on the committee. I think the committee is just the whole group, but there's about four or five of us who do the stuff. And so we used to have, even before I came, they used to have a big meeting with the whole group every so often. And you'd have the council admin person come along and take the minutes and put out the information, the minutes that she took, notice of meetings and all that stuff. And then it got less and less. And because it's the cost out of the budget. (Josephine)*
- D54. *I've always done voluntary work. As I say, if your husband had a full-time job in our day, he had a job for life. So we did voluntary work, didn't we? Yes. We brought our children up, and I did a lot of voluntary work. (Bernadette)*
- D55. *You're not going to have the volunteers because probably the economic situation of families now is not like it was in our day, when mothers didn't really go back to work a lot. (Bernadette)*
- D56. *I think when you're young, and you're working, and you've got a family and all of that, you don't have that much time. (Josephine)*
- D57. *The advantage of being retired is you can actually put a lot into it. So you'll find a lot of these associations and outfits have older people. (Chrissy)*
- D58. *I think people are either less able or less interested in volunteering. (Chrissy)*
- D59. *So I actually, I've haven't really got time, but someone's got to do these things (Josephine)*

- D60. *I don't think it would be too difficult. It would just be a time thing more than anything else ... I would think if I had time, then yes, there would be positives on it. (Clara)*
- D61. *We've tried to get more people in to help with that kind of stuff, but it's really hard to get people to volunteer their time to assist with things. (Clara)*
- D62. *But people only have so much time too, so they might like to come along to something like a dinner or something casual. But actually getting them to commit to being involved in the long term is a challenge. (Clara)*
- D63. *I think our sister city with Cambridge is different to any other sister city because of our NZEF, our World War I soldiers who were there being the last battle of World War I, of all of the British troops, in that wee fortified village. I think that makes it significant because the people of that village were just so relieved to be freed after four years. And they remember those men who came right from the other side of the world on the 4th of November 1918. So our sister city relationship is quite unique, I feel. (Chrissy)*
- D64. *In Te Awamutu we had this kind of, I'm not sure how it started, but there was a relationship with the town called Moree and that was pushed by the council and the Chamber of Commerce and that for quite a long time. I'm not quite sure whether Moree just looked like Te Awamutu, I don't know, but that died, and I think because people couldn't see any point in it, that's my memory anyway, that it was almost like, well, why Moree, why not somewhere else? (Philippe)*
- D65. *I think because the story of Le Quesnoy is a bit unique, New Zealander's involvement at the end of World War, liberating it, climbing it, the walls on ladders, that sort of thing, that's captured people's imagination. (Josephine)*
- D66. *You have to have a connection in some way. Otherwise, they're never long-lasting, right? So this particular, I guess, relationship with Le Quesnoy was brought together because of the military history and I guess that's endured it. So along the way, so many relationships have been formed, but they've all been friendships. So there hasn't been a huge amount of trade or economic activity between the two towns, between this particular one. So I think in terms of why it's endured is because of the, and how important it is in terms of the international relations. It's simply because of the historical connection. And many people who've got a relative who were part of the contingent that went over the wall have kind of have really been, I guess, yeah, they've been brought into that friendship society and really brought into the sister city relationship. So the importance now, because that whole saying, Les, we forget. Right? That's really why I think we're still able to see a strong relationship. (Chloé)*
- D67. *All of a sudden, people lose interest, and the whole thing just dies. But certainly I think that's a vulnerability in Cambridge as well that you have to involve people who are not necessarily descendants of service personnel who served there. It's got to grow outside that particular battle narrative. (Philippe)*

D68. *I'd say old Cambridge knows more about it than new Cambridge. There's so many new people moving in, it's really hard to capture new people. (Clara)*

D69. *I think there's definitely more of the general culture and love of France coming through the military history side of things. I guess as the older people pass on, there's less of that, less people that are interested because they had family serve there. So, I guess that's a bit of a natural transition. But when people in Cambridge learn about the relationship, that's generally where it starts, with that history. (Clara)*

Appendix E – Association B Member Quotes

- E1. *I believe in the kaupapa. I believe in the connections you can make through it.*
(Marsia)
- E2. *I can see opportunities with Weta and the craftsmen over in Sakai that make knives and swords and all the things.* (Marsia)
- E3. *I think if you throw away old models of how you linked people to people and just thought about how technology works, I think there's heaps of opportunities in there.*
(Lafcadio)
- E4. *I see all these untapped, you know, you look up knives or whatever, but when you just think about all those, they're very exciting. Just literally. That's just literally the kind of the emotional response to thinking about what would Sakai people find interesting and Wellington interesting and valuable in Wellington and vice versa. I think of all these connections that I think are exciting.* (Lafcadio)
- E5. *But it's the people who have a relationship; they get to know each other, their background and then if you make something together. Yeah. It's in individual people's relationship, they become deeper connection. That's what we hope to be. Yeah. That's what I'd like to achieve.* (Evelyn)
- E6. *Think doing the Yurikara was amazing. Yeah, that was really cool because that was really bringing something Japanese here ... So I think that was a really cool thing that was really innovative. And I think it's possible for that to continue on and continue to create that happiness really for people.* (Penny)
- E7. *I think it's volunteer of time of how much we have a volunteer time. I think it's some people get to too exhausted and then, you know, it's a big wall. You can't break the wall, to the next step.* (Evelyn)
- E8. *I think of all these connections that I think are exciting. They just kind of need the people to fill them up, fill up those connection ideas. See the logic? See my logic? The brilliance of my logic.* (Lafcadio)
- E9. *I see the role of the association as potentially as facilitate creating an infrastructure that enables that enough kind of a trust system, you know a make it easy system, so that someone who's never thought about it before, but all of a sudden is told that, 'Hey, do you know that there's this towel company, Sakai makes these fantastic towels you know, and you are the Wellington Hospitality Hotel Association or something like that. And you could actually, we've just got a way that we hook people up on teams or Zoom and you can have a chat to them if you want'. And we've got a package of key messages about how that would enhance the sister city relationship and potentially tourism or something like that. But that's that bridge building idea that, I mean, if you build a bridge that you could then start to find people that cross the bridge.* (Lafcadio)
- E10. *If money was no issue ... There would be almost like a Sakai overlay or a Sister Cities element in everything that Wellington did.* (Marsia)

- E11. *I guess, kind of, everybody's stretched, and everybody's poorer, and it's only going to get more like that. So how do you create those connections, give a bit of joy and help people to feel like they're engaging? Because you just on the radio today, and also, I mean, loneliness is one of the biggest things, and it's massive within the Japanese population. It's big here too. How do you help to connect people? you know. So, for me, it's about relationships and it's about however you can try and create connection.* (Penny)
- E12. *We are, you know, we are, we are different cultural background but we have some similarity, we have, and also understanding each other, our culture. So, more understanding about what's going on or conflict. You know, you see the news and this stuff; you see the conflict between two cultures. Then you understand more from the human's point, you know, the friend's point of view, to understand that. We want to open the door for as many people as possible in Wellington.* (Evelyn)
- E13. *There's no shared understanding; there's nothing to understand.* (Lafcadio)
- E14. *What really is it that we do?* (Marsia)
- E15. *What are we offering people if they join? So I joined, then what?* (Penny)
- E16. *But we didn't carry on anything or we didn't carry on any of member or strong group connected. We kind of like lost to only 20 people, almost like ten people, regular peoples from there. So I don't know what happened that time, but that's my mystery, I don't want to investigate it because past is a past, but I know we're quite active in the past.* (Evelyn)
- E17. *It's a very interesting world we find ourselves in with sister cities at the moment because I know that they do something, I know that they achieve stuff, and I know deep down that they're good for society. But how do they work, and how do we make them more effective going forward?* (Marsia)
- E18. *If you reduce it to the most simplest forms, for me, it's just two brains are better than one. Everybody needs a friend.* (Marsia)
- E19. *New Zealand is more and more people, more and more different background people who come in to live here. So, which means you got to be understand everyone not from the 'you follow us', you know, [instead] we building together. I want, I like to do that kind of country in the New Zealand.* (Evelyn)
- E20. *The thing with Wellington, though, is, so we were sitting down just spitballing some events for the 30th, and I was like, all right, so we have a tea ceremony, so we'll do that. Sakai has knives; we have a huge food culture. Let's see what we can maybe do in terms of connecting with some local chefs or whatever ... Sakai is a UNESCO Heritage City. We are a UNESCO city of film, so how do you connect that up? And then we are a city that likes to cycle; Sakai makes bike paths. And then you go down to the Sakai has a famous poet, female poet that was born there. Wellington has a famous short story writer that was born here. Can we do something with that?* (Marsia)

- E21. *Vision is great. And then I want people to know about that. Actually, we already have a plan. We were tried to do things. But we are stopping by somebody else, not us.* (Evelyn)
- E22. *I think it will just kind of bumble along. I think there'll be times when we can get more members together; they'll be people more interested, but until we grow it from connections with younger people who can expand across the years, it'll just be hit and miss.* (Penny)
- E23. *If you take those capabilities away, you just get this fragile bubbling of pre-existing interest realisation and annual patterns where an external request has managed to land.* (Lafcadio)
- E24. *That's, I think, where my brains kind of started going; why are you bothering? You already have your Taiko team that you give a lot of time to, and you don't do enough Taiko practice because your brain's mulling over [Association B] stuff where you're doing [Association B] stuff. So, and this is causing you unnecessary stress. Why are you doing this? And that's where I've started thinking particularly as we've done a lot more online since; Why do we bother? Yeah. Yeah. So it's just something that I've been mulling for a while I think.* (Marsia)
- E25. *You know, for me, it's a big cost. I can't earn the money that I would normally earn because I'm doing this.* (Penny)
- E26. *I'm doing enough. I'm doing probably 200% of the job. 100% is enough, and I'm doing 200%.* (Evelyn)
- E27. *We have a limited number of members, and we're trying to reignite things.* (Penny)
- E28. *Our association is very, number is very small, and the committee member is small, number five or six at the moment. You know, you saw our meeting; just so many things we have to talk about in one hour.* (Evelyn)
- E29. *We want to engage young people in the sister city relationships so we may get longevity in this relationship and ultimately, we're going to need new and energetic people to come into the committee to be able to keep the committee going. I'm probably coming up on that six-year point where I'm just going, ah yeah, can I really be, do I really want to keep doing this sort of thing? ... you kind of reach a point where you go, there's got to be some new blood coming into the committee. There's got to be new volunteers out there that we can get.* (Marsia)
- E30. *The resources exist at the top, but the possibilities exist at the bottom.* (Lafcadio)
- E31. *Almost like a very narrow space only [that] I can work. Right. So your world is so big, and then, 'Oh, you can't do this because not city council', 'Oh, you can't spend this one', 'You can't do this because of the blah, blah, blah', you know like, almost like, okay, so how I can walk if I don't have any arm or leg that kind of I was feeling and I thought this.* (Evelyn)
- E32. *So, that part is, I think for me, it's badly organised, that area for the sister cities, because you don't give you any money, you don't give any resources, and then people to get to know, it's not possible.* (Evelyn)

- E33. *We don't do anything like that. But we could. But the thing is. Yeah. Then we need sort of more city council support involved to create those avenues. (Penny)*
- E34. *So I want to do next exhibition is make us slightly bigger. We are having the money issues even though we have money in the account. But [the local council] doesn't want to pay for that much money for the locations, for the room. And then 'you should use city council's own building' but doesn't have available; we approach Te Papa [they] said no, we don't have any space for you. And then city gallery won't do any community exhibition event ... We don't have anywhere we can do proper exhibitions. And then you will say, 'oh yes, and how about that? It's a library'. No, that library is so small. And then you just have a side, you want to have a bringing the Sakai's artworks and then you want to be nice gathering and then inviting lots of many people. I find that it's very odd.' (Evelyn)*
- E35. *That's all our time, our free time, our unpaid time of going in and participating and trying to make something work, you know. And it's hard enough for the people who were there who worked for the city council, but it's like, 'here we go. Okay, nothing'. But they're still getting paid for their time. We're putting our time into something that just falls away. So it's hard, cause you know, time is hard to come by. (Penny)*
- E36. *It's always 'talk to so and so, talk to so and so' ... always I have to find out I have to call them, I have to make appointment, I talk to them. Those people pass on to there that time of the things. It's a lot of time. And the actual useful event to the community is only this much [gesturing a small amount with her hands]. Probably like 60-70%, I'm spending for the meetings. Try to catching the peoples, try to explain about what we're doing.' (Evelyn)*
- E37. *It affects the relationship or the ability of, I suppose what I was talking about before was the ability of the association to be effective. Is that kind of what we've already talked about, just to do everything, to do an admin of a group, to have a good little website to have a good way of people joining, to have a good way of contacting your stakeholders ... So it seems that takes up all the oxygen of the meetings. (Lafcadio)*
- E38. *You need time and energy to make a newsletter that no one's got because the committee's not big enough. Or you don't have enough, just don't have enough critical mass to produce engaging material for the newsletter to give membership value so that one member says to someone else, 'hey, join this. You get a newsletter. It's interesting, and I went to this event, and I enjoyed it' kind of thing. (Lafcadio)*
- E39. *We lean into that cultural aspect because that's literally all we've got. (Marsia)*
- E40. *All that I would know about in terms of comparisons would be the Porirua one is very, has gone into hibernation, so that's that kind of thing where that bubbling along at that personal kind of relying on a couple of people's interest to just do things level can easily fall to nothing. (Lafcadio)*
- E41. *People are stretched ... But it's like protecting time when you're doing things, got a busy life. Most people don't have that. Only maybe the older people. (Penny)*

- E42. *People have is their own particular areas of interest that they bring, but time's limited. (Penny)*
- E43. *People get wary of, because they instantly go, but we can't, haven't got much time. We can't do that much of a thing. So you've got to kind of calibrate, call ambition for this few hours of a month that each person collectively has. Because as soon as you start saying, let's do more everyone, it's easy to say you can't or we can't because, you know, we're small. So it's kind of like a self-fulfilling prophecy. (Lafcadio)*
- E44. *The mind of the organisation is volunteer, time-poor, diverse, brittle, shared understanding of what you're trying to do. (Lafcadio)*
- E45. *It's a really hard space to be in, I think. And as you know, I'm not sure of the future of it. (Marsia)*
- E46. *It's never going to be consistent. It's always going to be who's there at the time, who the personalities might be, how that works or doesn't work. And yeah, it's a complex, ever-changing scenario. (Penny)*
- E47. *It's a happenstance to do with one person's particular, you know, skills and energy. (Lafcadio)*
- E48. *But I don't think you can have that because it's people's own interests and engagements and because it's voluntary, it has to be where someone really puts their effort. (Penny)*
- E49. *That's the nature of things yes I think my work is so much work yes no one wants to do this much amount of the job just for love. (Evelyn)*
- E50. *That bubbling along at that personal kind of relying on a couple of people's interest to just do things level can easily fall to nothing. (Lafcadio)*
- E51. *Well if you think about that, the [Association B] of 30 years ago and of today, probably the use of technology in the administration would be very different. It would've been all paper-based, but the use of technology to connect with Sakai people is probably still at emailing level. It just kind of seems if the point of the association is to make connection and the internet enables connection, why isn't there something more interesting or innovative than emailing? (Lafcadio)*
- E52. *I think, in a way, innovation even just looks like having a social media strategy. It looks like using tech in new and different ways. It looks like connecting via the internet. And I know it seems like this should have happened 20, 30 years ago, but it hasn't. So, to me, it's coming up with new ways of interacting online. But I also think it's new events and new ways of connecting with the community. (Marsia)*
- E53. *I think there's probably that whole disconnect between the purpose and between what council wants and what we are there to do. I think there's probably gaps in how things have been set up. (Marsia)*
- E54. *The group itself doesn't really have governance experience. (Lafcadio)*
- E55. *There's path dependency here because the councils are at the start, and that strategy statement's not really ... whether or not it provides a quality story frame or guardrails or something for the sister city activity, it would be good if you could say yes it does,*

- or no it doesn't kind of thing. But to do that, to start off with, you need to have an idea of 'good', and then you need to have a capability to compare that. (Lafcadio).
- E56. *How do we lean into that? How do we encourage those business connections? What other business connections do we have? ... It's like, how do we pull all those threads together, and then how do we measure that? Which that's the tricky bit. (Marsia)*
- E57. *When I hear that, then where is the ... How you do that? ... like many grey zones exist because we are volunteer organisations, so we are not really promoting somebody's business, but also, when you involved personally, you get to like some product, and then you want to tell other people, so what is that is our job ... We had twice some conversations one of the new members interested some open up relationship association between association relationship about business side but how do we do it? We don't know where to step forward. (Evelyn)*
- E58. *Four years, I'm learning every time. But business one, no idea. I just find it's very ... because you might be do same things. I use my brain to like chess. 'If you do this, what happen? if you do that, what happen? If you do this that happen' I'm thinking a lot. And then I can't really see the vision at all. (Evelyn)*
- E59. *It's really hard, and it's all about human-to-human interaction. And I think there's quite a push to somehow make it fit a business model, and it's just not going to do that. (Penny)*
- E60. *We tried to have a strategy session, which was led by me, and we haven't really moved beyond that first session ... And then we had a second one where we were trying to do some stakeholder back, but that didn't land either. (Marsia)*
- E61. *We had a goal setting, planning meeting. I think it was probably, I don't know, last year, unless it was early this year, all everything's just kind of crumpled in together ... And we had lots of post-it notes and then, you know, nothing was documented and brought back to the team. So, complicated because everybody has their own way of doing things, but it didn't actually go anywhere. (Penny)*
- E62. *I think volunteerism as a place and the societal value is falling away because we're so focused on getting a good education to get a good job to afford all the things that Instagram and TikTok say we should want. (Marsia)*
- E63. *So you could say is volunteer style is changed. Yes, their attitude is still same, they want to make a better world. So I think a little bit that area of way of thinking needed to be shaped on. (Evelyn)*
- E64. *I think very few people are interested this kind of volunteer. Yeah, quite a heavy volunteer responsibility as well because we invite mayors and then dignitaries to the event so, which meaning we don't get paid, but we have a huge responsibility. (Evelyn)*
- E65. *First time I joined into the associations, I felt this; I want to learn about how it works and then what we can do. But we didn't get many information through the committee easily because everyone do same things every year. That's the most easiest. But if, like me, want to do something, new things, I can't get any information. (Evelyn)*

- E66. *I think people want to go back to the old ways of exchange and people movement, and maybe that's okay at some level, but I don't think it's sustainable. So innovation, to me, is making it work somehow without having to add to the sustainability woes. (Penny)*
- E67. *Do sister cities community relationships need to have a human behaviourist involved to be like, hey, that ain't going to work? Because 'human', because everybody's afraid of what's different. Everybody's afraid of that first interaction with a stranger because evolutionarily stranger equals coming here to steal my shit or to steal my person or to steal my children or to like steal my food. And so we have this natural instinct to distance ourselves from the outgroup. How do you break through that? I've always been exposed to it because that's just the way my family's always worked. But how do you foster that in people for whom they might be shy, they might be an introvert, they might be an extrovert, but they prefer to be introduced before they have a chat or something. How do you foster that? (Marsia)*
- E68. *I'd just really love to bring my interest in Japan together with actually connecting people. And then, if that supports prosperity for someone on either side of the Pacific, then that would be great. I suppose that's why we do it. (Lafcadio)*
- E69. *If you reduce it to the most simplest form, for me, it's just two brains are better than one. Everybody needs a friend. If you have a reason to come together, your cities are friends, or your cities are sister cities, and therefore, you have some sort of connection because your sisters, your cities understand each other or have a friendship, then you have something to build that friendship. You have a common interest. And you might not ever encounter that person otherwise ... I probably never would've gone to Sakai if it weren't for the fact that Wellington and Sakai were related ... also because we're sister cities, I know I'm going to get looked after, and I know that people aren't going to just be like, oh, you're just another tourist. No, I've come here because my city and your city know each other. And then, from there, you build friendships. (Marsia)*
- E70. *So it's hard to express, it's hard to express the intervention logic if you want. And then it's also hard for any small voluntary body of people to be an effective to, even if it knew what that was, it would be hard for them to do that because it's always hard for small volunteer organisations to be effective in doing that ... but you kind of need to answer the first part so that you can work out how why you want to be effective and what you need to be effective. And then you can work on those other bits. But when you just stay in the mode of, I just like organising tea ceremonies and maintaining connection with JET AA and stuff like that. It's just always done that, then yeah, it'll just bubble along at that kind of level. Or, as it seems to me, as I hear stories, things actually go wrong, and it fails ... So it would either just not work or actually be unpleasant, but just people have different ideas about why they're there. And that sounds like it actually bizarre enough causes tension and trouble in something that's supposed to be pure goodness. (Lafcadio)*
- E71. *They're not professional, you know, they just love Japan. (Evelyn)*

- E72. *But I mean that's the council's business kind of, you know, I'm not sure what role the residents or it's not clear how the resident's associations on both sides kind of support it or take advantage, enable it or support the thing itself or take advantage of that. (Lafcadio)*
- E73. *Wellington is more kind of focused on that cultural and international relations and sort of things that Japan likes to get out of these relationships, which is citizens being good citizens ultimately. And how do you take that forward? And some of the cultural aspects of bringing things that are different to the city that the city can get involved with. (Marsia)*
- E74. *Because its volunteer, you can't, there's a very low threshold for not being able to do kind of what you want to do kind of thing, unless you've got some weird civic, I don't know some kind of pure value that you're doing good, but I don't know how you do that if you've got a blank of outcome, objective kind of space. (Lafcadio)*
- E75. *There's no kind of agreed way or values or anything about how that happens ... It's a bit random what decides to get done. (Lafcadio)*
- E76. *It's all about the intervention logic of this thing and the capacity to spend time doing it and finite resources. (Lafcadio)*
- E77. *Different personalities, different neurodiversities, different skill levels, different time, different stage of life, different family structures. And that's just on the personal level. And you have, you know, financial capacity. There's so many different elements to it that, you know, it's global, so it's all intertwined. (Penny)*

Appendix F – Association C Member Quotes

- F1. *This is the challenge that a lot of these sister cities have got because, you know, you have these passionate individuals that have started it up, and now they're in their golden years at best. (Otis)*
- F2. *But I think as you've rightly identified, age and the longevity of the group has meant that a lot of the people that were driving it 20 years ago are either well retired or dead. (Crockett)*
- F3. *That original committee twinning association that I knew 20 years ago theres only two still alive. (Oliver)*
- F4. *They just haven't embraced technology because they all just want to be on their cruise ship where actually, you know, the people coming through, they want to go out of space on a spacecraft, they're not interested in the cruise ships. (Otis)*
- F5. *A nice to have sort of connection with the motherland, if you like the old country. But it's never really evolved past that. (Crockett)*
- F6. *It's just. It's an outdated model, which I think is a major conclusion. And no one seems to have the inclination to change the model very much. (Oliver)*
- F7. *I suppose I came to it with a real sort of, this is public money, what's the value proposition? Because otherwise, why do we? Why do we exist? You know, I suppose, what's our purpose? It's that kind of governance strategies sort of stuff, which is my mindset, where it's all very well, you know, getting the committee to pay for your train tickets down to see family members from London down to Bournemouth or Christchurch. But what's the use of that other than you having tea and scones with your relatives? (Otis)*
- F8. *We've sort of had to evolve out of necessity. (Otis)*
- F9. *Are we happy just to be a historical connection with Christchurch and the occasional sort of educational visit? Or do we want to branch out and look at some activities that may have a mutual benefit to ourselves and our connections overseas? (Crockett)*
- F10. *It's just. It's just sad. So, therefore, you've got to find a different way of doing it, don't you? (Oliver)*
- F11. *The Christchurch end for us is going to die for sure. They don't have any succession plan at all. So, the youngest on that group would be late sixties, early seventies. (Oliver)*
- F12. *Because at the moment, it's going to die with the participants that are involved. And that's what's happened in the UK. That's definitely the situation there where it's a generational thing, and there is not, because there's no funding coming from councils over there; it just dies ... the people. (Oliver)*
- F13. *So it's where are the fish hooks? And if they're not actually in that city, well, you kind of got to make it work. (Otis)*

- F14. *In my time in the group, I've been trying to foster an atmosphere of expansion, and it's. Most of us now on that group are looking beyond Christchurch, UK and probably using the sister city concept as a platform to launch things into the UK and Western Europe. (Crockett)*
- F15. *Well, why don't we have a relationship with Oxford, the university? And then, you know, we've done some stuff like that. We have Oxford scholars come out to us and. Yeah, there's a lot more value in that sort of thing. (Otis)*
- F16. *The sister city committee could just continue on and be doing the odd little bits and pieces and connections here and there and still be functioning. I think it's. In terms of its security and longevity, it's largely linked to the fact that it is the oldest connection, it is a historical connection, and to choke down or whatever would probably be, create a fair amount of angst amongst the council community. From that point of view, I think it's reasonably secure in its tenure. (Crockett)*
- F17. *I suppose I came to it with a real sort of, this is public money, what's the value proposition? Because otherwise, why do we? Why do we exist? You know, I suppose, what's our purpose? It's that kind of governance strategies sort of stuff, which is my mindset, where it's all very well, you know, getting the committee to pay for your train tickets down to see family members from London down to Bournemouth or Christchurch. But what's the use of that other than you having tea and scones with your relatives? (Otis)*
- F18. *From my point of view, I'd like to see it being a little more prominent in its activities and perhaps being able to get to a stage where it does have a positive link to the city's wellbeing. (Crockett)*
- F19. *The problem is you're dealing with volunteers. 'You said you were going to do a Zoom call every month with your counterparts. Well, you haven't done it so well, you know. Well, we're not going to give you the funding. 'Well, we're volunteers anyway. We'll go and join a Rotary club or something else. (Otis)*
- F20. *I just think you've got these long-term volunteers like myself, who will just walk away in the next ten years. (Oliver)*
- F21. *And we are an ageing volunteer structure. I'm in my seventies, and I've been brought up in an era and I came from a family where community service and values that were strong in my family. I've tried to instil them in my kids into a degree with one of them on reasonably successful, but not sure about the other two. But getting younger people to commit to a long-term volunteer, volunteering programme is becoming increasingly harder. (Crockett)*
- F22. *I don't think we've done, it's not like we've done a strategy session. We've got on the same page. (Otis)*

- F23. *I've been on it a few years now and we've had a couple of conversations but I wouldn't. I wouldn't say we've got too involved in what you might loosely call a strategic plan and looking, setting some goals forward saying, in the next three years we want to do this, this and that. That hasn't happened. We probably focus more on an annual basis. What do we want to do? We haven't had forecast any further than twelve months in the time that I've been there. (Crockett)*
- F24. *But that in itself requires quite a bit of brainstorming a think tank what you want, but it may well be that we need some broader involvement in that strategic planning and directional setting than just a handful of us that are currently on the committee. And we may, for example, we talk about getting into some sort of relationship that has an economic benefit. Well, we may need to bring in some expertise in that field to give us a, give us a stare on where we might perhaps look to track. I think it sort of goes back to your earlier comments about our committee and the other two you're talking about, being largely volunteers, or pretty much wholly volunteers, with a bit of governance guidance, even offset or directly on the committee as to what could be done. (Crockett)*
- F25. *But if we don't tell people they're not going to know what we're doing. (Otis)*
- F26. *Yeah, I would say that it would be very. I'd be very surprised if too many people knew about that relationship outside of council. (Crockett)*
- F27. *I mean, the biggest problem is publicity. (Oliver)*
- F28. *You know, people don't show up saying, 'Oh, oh, I'm really interested in sister cities. Which committee can I join?' They go, 'Oh, you know, my wife is Japanese', or 'I once worked in Adelaide', or 'I'm from Adelaide', or whatever. (Otis)*
- F29. *And the idea of when we do the Brockenhurst Scholarship of actually putting things on Instagram or just sending messages around is way beyond what we've got. (Oliver)*
- F30. *But actually, if we're going to build up that value and show what we're doing, whether it's around remembrance or education or not, if we could do trade, that'd be great. Or visiting dignitaries. Well, actually it should be on the council website and it should be on the Facebook page or social media. Sorry, I'm am boomer so I'm talking about Facebook all the time. But there should be an Instagram thing and hey, this is what this sister city thing is doing. So I think as we evolve that whole telling the story better on channels. (Otis)*
- F31. *There's not a lot of. If any, sort of external publicity or advertising you might find something on a council website. Well, you would do, but you'd have to go looking. (Crockett)*
- F32. *The council don't use their website properly, they don't use social media properly, they don't publicise the sort of things that are being done. (Oliver)*

- F33. *If I do press releases when we go away, which I do and photos and things of say this year; they never end up on the council website ... it's almost impossible to get that sort of coverage. And, I mean, we were the guests of honour on Anzac Day at Brockenhurst; the students went out and put stuff on the graves and put a wreath on behalf of the city, and we send all those photos through. Nothing appeared. To me, if they were really, really interested, they'd be publicising it then. (Oliver)*
- F34. *There's not a lot of. If any, sort of external publicity or advertising you might find something on a council website. Well, you would do, but you'd have to go looking. It's not out there in your face. (Crockett)*
- F35. *And then have a meeting, it's not publicly advertised and certainly no sort of real publicity of the fact that is any meeting on the only people that we know are the people that are going to come to the meeting that are actually on the committee. (Crockett)*
- F36. *And even our membership of the committee has changed reasonably dramatically in the last five to 10 years. It was driven by individuals that had their own passion at the time. Two things have happened. One, I think they've got older and have moved on. The passion for that particular thing has dwindled. Or thirdly, you've had some new blood. (Crockett)*
- F37. *That's definitely the situation there where it's a generational thing, and there is not, because there's no funding coming from councils over there; it just dies ... the people. (Oliver)*
- F38. *You know, if I went in and said I recommend we fold, 'Yeah, that's fine'. That'd be fine with that. (Otis)*
- F39. *And even our membership of the committee has changed reasonably dramatically in the last five to 10 years. It was driven by individuals that had their own passion at the time. Two things have happened. One, I think they've got older and have moved on. The passion for that particular thing has dwindled. Or thirdly, you've had some new blood. (Crockett)*
- F40. *This whole Sister city thing is it's actually got to have some sort of renewal. (Otis)*
- F41. *I think we're sort of at a stage now where there needs to be quite a mindset change in how some of these activities operate that makes them a little more attractive to the younger generation and to volunteering in general. (Crockett)*
- F42. *Well, people don't join things anymore. And whether it's a church or it's a rotary club or it's a football committee or even volunteering and doing stuff, despite Sam Johnson's great efforts for the student volunteer army, you think, well people don't join stuff. And I mean, Rotary's a good sort of analogy, and they're struggling. (Otis)*

- F43. *But I think one of the things you've been talking about in the last couple of moments that strikes a chord is the issue of volunteers. And we are an ageing volunteer structure. I'm in my seventies, and I've been brought up in an era and I came from a family where community service and values that were strong in my family. I've tried to instil them in my kids into a degree with one of them on reasonably successful, but not sure about the other two. But getting younger people to commit to a long-term volunteer, volunteering programme is becoming increasingly harder. (Crockett)*
- F44. *They're very resistant to change as well because that's the way they've always done it, and that was their idea. (Otis)*
- F45. *You need somebody on the committee who's bit younger and a bit more tech-savvy. (Oliver)*
- F46. *But if I walk away tomorrow and don't do it anymore, well, just won't be done anymore. End of story, you know, lots of people have benefited from it. But actually, in the end, does it really matter? (Oliver)*
- F47. *I think probably the people that set these things up thought they would carry on into the future, but actually, they didn't do anything to future-proof it or have any sustainability or renewal. (Otis)*
- F48. *I really think there's value in it. (Otis)*
- F49. *There's a lot of potential there still yet to be realised. (Crockett)*
- F50. *I always think back, If I hadn't said yes in 1998. My life would've been completely different between then and now. The opportunities I've got through, yes, it's taken a lot of work, and yes, there's a lot of unpaid hours and all those things, but you know all the satisfaction and the things I've done and the connections I've made, that would never have happened without it. (Oliver)*
- F51. *I think our only claim to fame in recent years has been that educational slash historical connection with Brockenhurst. (Crockett)*
- F52. *The awareness of Brockenhurst has increased in the last 20 years was, probably 15 years. Hugely. So much so that Lianne Dalziel went there and did a proper formal mayoral visit. So that's been a saviour for the committee. (Oliver)*
- F53. *That's where I get my biggest kick out of it. I can think of heaps and heaps of examples where suddenly these people that had really interesting war histories or travel histories with people that went overseas but hadn't documented, hadn't collected, didn't have an essential place, hadn't told the story, and then everybody now their family's got it for however long they want it. (Oliver)*
- F54. *That's a good thing having the opportunity for us to send our kids from here over there to learn about the history of Brockenhurst and other battlefields. Well, that's the sort of thing that we don't capture that history now, and I've probably said this before as well. We've got that same challenge as is it Waipā? That we are losing that connection. (Otis)*

- F55. *I've always had visions since I first suggested it to make it a national thing so you could open it up to filmmakers, authors, and those sort of things where you end up with much better quality research and better products and things like that. (Oliver)*
- F56. *What the value could be is actually a connection between the University of Canterbury at Oxford University in the UK, particularly Christchurch College, which, you know, has value. (Otis)*
- F57. *What synergies can we find that would lead to a greater connection? And so that was where the Oxford or the Christchurch College and we were starting to look at some connections at the high end of education, tertiary education and postgraduate connections leading into similarities with research and how could we forge a bond or a connection through a particular field of research. (Crockett)*
- F58. *I think friendships and relationships you make; I've seen loads and loads of those relationships flourish. We've had one wedding, two long-term relationships, one of which is still going. We've got two Christchurch, England people, students living in Christchurch here who came on exchange. For me personally, I've made really good friends in that area and that's probably stronger networks I've got there as I've got here because they appreciate it and they come back over to New Zealand as individuals as well. But student-wise wise there's really close relationships. One was the best man and someone else's wedding as well, those sort of things. (Oliver)*
- F59. *If I sat back and looked at the network from say 1998 to now, it's phenomenal. And I've never sort of thought about it until you talked about the people to people, but if you look at who's connected to, you know, there's three historians who work in that I know in that Hampshire area who are all connected and know, I've met, I've shared beers with I've had coffees with and stuff like that. Got information from, helped me. (Oliver)*
- F60. *But actually, what sort of town do you want to be in? An insular Christchurch, that's, you know, all white, Anglo-Saxon, and okay, rebuild has changed that a little bit, but surely that's got to be a good thing. We actually have, and actually, you see the Oxford Scholars that come here, and they're not all old Etonians ... There'll be some hijabs, there'll be people of colour, it's male, female, and probably every other gender these days ... But it's a, that's a good thing having the opportunity for us to send our kids from here over there to learn about the history of Brockenhurst and other battlefields. (Otis)*
- F61. *I really think there's value in it. You know, those, some of these things are different, they're difficult to put a price on. Yeah, okay, I'm an accountant by background, but you know, how do you value an orchestra tour going wherever? But you know, these, you know, how do you value sort of having, if we said the, I think the Eddington brass band were heading to the UK, and for them to be hosted down at Christchurch and Dorset, you know, because of Brockenhurst, because there's a connection there, well, you know, you get a bit of local engagement and they feel good, we feel good. Well, how do you put a price on that? (Otis)*
- F62. *Not really. Yeah. Like in my case, I'm probably fortunate that I've been on the other side of the fence for a number of years, but I sort of know how the system works. But in terms of any particular expectation, certainly of Christchurch anyway? No. (Crockett)*

F63. *No. Well, I don't know, but I suspect not. But that would be valuable for everyone, both for them and us. (Otis)*