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Sustainability in Overtouristified Cities? A Social Media Insight into Italian Branding Responses to Covid-19 Crisis

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Abstract: The paper aims to reach insights into city branding in the Covid-19 context to discuss the projected brand propositions and their reliance on sustainable brand attributes and values. This study explores the immediate response of overtouristified cities to the post-pandemic crisis by focusing on four iconic cultural cities in Italy, which are Florence, Milan, Rome, and Venice, and the related Facebook communication in summer 2020, right after the end of the lockdown following the first wave of contagion in the country. A content analysis of the official Facebook accounts of these cities provided an explorative insight into different destination brand approaches to dealing with the pandemic threat, revealed fading urban characters of the tourism experience and an expansion of the destinations from a spatial perspective, towards city-region destinations. The findings suggest potential configurations of the sustainable destination brand whose formation, in the case of the overtouristified cities, deserves further attention throughout the evolution of the Covid-19 crisis.

Keywords: sustainability; city brand; overtourism; brand values; brand attributes; Facebook; Covid-19; Italy



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1. Introduction

The debate on sustainable tourism has witnessed the emergence of significant interest in the overtourism phenomenon especially in urban contexts [1–8]. Overtouristified cities suddenly had to face a dramatic change in the international tourism scenario, brought about by the pandemic threat [9]. Redefining city marketing and branding represents a key challenge for destinations in a context where travel restrictions and sanitary rules will have a durable impact on tourism revenues and employment [10].

Overtouristified cities need to capitalize on the lessons learned from pre-pandemic overcrowding, highlighting the urgency either to elaborate transformative responses in the face of tourism challenges [4] and even to embrace a “degrowth imperative” [5,11], while reflecting on the pandemic as an opportunity to size the social and health challenges related to tourism in certain cities [12]. On the other side, there is an evident need to deal with the shrinkage of international tourist flows, emerging tourists’ expectations and preferences, and local stakeholders’ capacity to adapt to new demands and contexts.

Tourism literature is drawing increasing attention to the pandemic impacts on tourism [13–15]. Analogies with climate crisis [10] and crisis management were proposed as analytical lens of observation [16,17]. The perceived risk associated with travel and tourism [18] is expected to impact tourists’ intention to travel [19,20] and revisit destinations in the post-covid [21], so that crisis communication is said fundamental to steer an emotional attachment with tourists [22]. Additionally, residents’ perception of risks related to post-pandemic tourism were analysed [23].

A “transformational opportunity” [24] and transformative effects on the tourism industry [25] were suggested on the way out of the crisis, with doubts raised on the capacity

of consolidated frameworks to explain current tourism phenomena [24,26], seriously questioning tourism models advocating volume growth [10]. A need to understand the impacts of recovery schemes on tourism systems was stated, drawing attention to public policy effects in terms of accompanying or, instead, constraining change and transformation [27,28] towards sustainable, ethical, and responsible forms of tourism [29].

The place branding insight proposed in this research is meant to contribute to the Covid-19 agenda on tourism, by addressing an evident research gap on city brand building in crisis contexts [16]. This study collects further evidence on the concrete response of urban destinations to the pandemic challenge. Under the impact of Covid-19, there may (or may not) be attempts to discontinue old brand propositions by initiating an open-ended process of reflection and reconfiguration towards sustainable tourism development. This study explores how overtouristified urban destinations are addressing such a multifaceted challenge. The paper aims to reach insights into city branding in the Covid-19 context to discuss the projected brand propositions and their reliance on sustainable brand attributes and values. The focus is on how four Italian cities, which are Florence, Milan, Rome, and Venice, iconic cultural cities, were communicated on social media in summer 2020, right after the end of the lockdown following the first wave of contagion in the country. Attention is drawn to destinations' social media communication in the Covid-19 crisis in the case of these four cities where awareness of the need to address overtourism was reached before the pandemic outbreak and an agreement was signed by the respective mayors to share good practices towards sustainable development. This cross-case analysis provides an explorative insight into destination branding responses to Covid-19 and opens explanatory hypotheses deserving researchers' attention in the coming years.

The paper is structured as follows. After framing place brand formation from a theoretical perspective, the analytical framework based on brand attributes and brand values is presented. The methodology section explains the relevance of analysing brand attributes and values on social media platforms for their contribution to place brand formation. Then, results from the empirical study are presented and discussed.

2. City Brand Formation

Place branding conceptualisations can be summarised into two macro-areas of scholarship, which indicate the direction of the evolution of the place branding debate. The one signals the rise of the place branding debate, focused on brand planning and communication, based on the design and projection of the competitive identity and aimed to raise interest and attract tourists and place users through differentiation and uniqueness [30,31]. Limits and challenges of this process [32], including the difficulties of capturing the essence of the destination [33], were highlighted and considered intrinsic to place brand management [32–35]. The other stream signals progressive attention to a stakeholder-based view of place brands with a focus on the analysis of open, social, and shared, multidirectional processes creating the meanings of the place brand, which is conceived as in constant change and evolution [36–42].

From an analytical perspective, brand formation and the brand notion are dissonant in these two alternative views. On one side, the selection of brand elements composing the brand identity is the core of the process [43], managed by key stakeholders in charge (e.g., destination management organization (DMO) and local authorities) which may adopt a more or less intense participative approach in the path of elements selections and elicitation [43–45]. Often through the design of a visual identity [41] and a communication plan, a brand promise is delivered into the market, as a defined and consistent message, in an attempt to impact the brand image [46–48]. On the other side, the process is intended as a cultural and social process steering interactions with many different stakeholders co-creating meanings [30], with the 'image in use' becoming a brand. This represents a process of bottom-up and decentralised discourse creation which may eventually crystallise into a system of meanings and a vocabulary of images, helping local stakeholders to become an "organizational identity" [49–51].

Contributing to frame the collective, open, and dispersed process of brand formation, the ATLAS model [43] places the facilitation of constant and open meaning-making at the core of brand management, overcoming the idea that the design and selection of a brand identity [52] is the central axis of the branding process. Ask, Think, Listen, Act, and Speak are the steps of the ATLAS process. Two observations follow and theoretically frame the empirical effort proposed in this paper. First, the process is non-linear since the steps are not necessarily consequent and are largely overlapping. Communication is not necessarily at the end of a planned process and plays the role of circulating a brand proposition aimed to trigger interactions and stakeholders' meaning production and negotiations. The brand proposition may embody a discontinuity with the past in an attempt to start a collective reflection and conversation on novel aspects of the destination, to trigger change which, however, will become the place brand once such discontinuity is widely endorsed and 'used'. A second observation concerns the fact that, although branding is interpreted as a multi-stakeholder and open-ended process, the role of an orchestrator is crucial, accompanying each step by actively playing as a facilitator and listener.

The place brand was increasingly understood as and the "elusive destination brand" [43], furthering the conceptualisation of the place brand as a relationship-builder [38], "media object" activating multi-directional communication flows and meeting point [39], frames the interactions amongst three important brand components, which are the conceived, perceived and lived place. These correspond to how the destination is intended by brand managers (conceived place), perceived (perceived place) and experienced (lived place) by tourists, residents, and tourism players. Accordingly, the "management-initiated brand proposition" (conceived place) and the brand (the integration of the conceived, perceived and lived place) are distinct and do not overlap: the brand proposition, communicated by brand managers, turns into a brand if activated, negotiated, and used by the other stakeholders, transforming it into the lived and perceived place.

3. The Projected Brand Proposition: An Analytical Framework

The analytical framework integrates the variables adopted for analysing the brand proposition projected by brand managers (i.e., the conceived place) as an immediate response to the Covid-19 crisis. A city brand insight is reached through the analysis of the communicated management-initiated proposition on social media, where the first attempts to communicate the destinations were made, even during the lockdown when travelling was not possible.

Destination branding literature has developed insight into the brand associations, converging on the identification of functional and affective components of the brand [44]. Interactions and influence between these two components were empirically tested, suggesting the need to consider them together in the projection of a destination brand proposition [53].

Functional associations consist of the attributes and attractions (i.e., brand attributes) offered by a destination, which may be tangible and intangible. Brand attributes include the built environment and public spaces as well as experiential attributes such as services and leisure opportunities [54]. The affective component refers to the personal values individuals connect with the destination and infer from the perceived benefits from it (i.e., brand values). "Modes of conduct and end-states of existence" [55], express either "instrumental values" (i.e., a way to behave) to reach an end or "terminal values" representing an end in itself (i.e., a state of mind), informing on what is preferable for the individual.

Personality traits of the destination brand represent a symbolic and abstract dimension making tourists express their values, enhance self-esteem and produce their own identity [53]. Aaker's brand personality concept, which is the "set of human characteristics associated with the brand" (1997: 347), was adopted and discussed in the destination branding literature [51,54–58]. The brand personality helps people to feel closer and familiar with the place brand [59–61]. The destination brand personality creates a set of unique and favourable associations in tourists' minds [56], impacts behaviours and intention to recommend [56], and influences tourist satisfaction and tourist-destination identification [57,60].

Aaker's Brand Personality Scale (competence, excitement, sincerity, ruggedness, and sophistication; 1997) was transferred to the study of destination brands. Several adaptations, additions and articulations followed in light of the nature of the branded object, i.e., cities and destinations [52,54,56,59–61]. The type of analysed media implies adaptations of the brand personality scale considering the specificities of tourist destinations emerging on online platforms [62]. A destination brand personality scale based on tourism websites analysis was developed [54] to analyse the projected destination brand personality, contributing to the limited research on the positioning of the destination through the brand personality [32,62,63].

4. Research Design

The empirical research focused on the brand propositions of four Italian cities, namely Venice, Rome, Florence, and Milan, projected by destination media managers through Facebook in summer 2020. It provides an analysis of marketer-generated contents on social media platforms, juxtaposing the selected four cases. The timeframe of analysis casts light on the immediate response of these destinations to the Covid-19 crisis, in a time when the lockdown, which had constrained national and international mobility for months, was over but the pandemic threat was still significant and informing tourists' choices.

The focus was on Facebook as it is one of the social network platforms mostly used by destination managers, having millions of users and a strong resonance in the tourism domain [26]. Destination managers strongly utilise social media to deliver brand propositions and establish an online brand reputation [64,65]. Social media boosted change in the way to communicate the destination [63]. Brand meaning elaborations and negotiations are triggered by media and, nowadays, social media play the strongest role in affecting destination brands, further amplifying the social and cultural nature of the brand formation process [44]. Social media is also used to build and develop brand engagement [66] that contributes to the destination brand image formation [40,67]. Because of the interactive and co-creative nature of social media, engagement can be manifested symbolically through actions such as liking, commenting, sharing, and viewing contents from a brand [68]. This allows destination managers to measure engagement through metrics and procedures as an important indicator of the destination brand's strategy success [63].

The four Italian cities were selected for the following reasons. First of all, the Italian context was one of the most significantly impacted by an early spreading of the virus outside of Asian countries, with restrictions since March 2020. In 2020 –68.6% overnight stays was estimated (January–September), with –47% arrivals in July and –26% in August (on 2019), while the reduction was more significant in the large cities [69]. Given the relevance of the tourism industry for the country, the pandemic impacts have been particularly visible in the Italian tourism system.

The selected cities were particularly impacted by the pandemic crisis (Table 1) for their dependence upon international tourist flows and for the dramatic and sudden change in visitors' preferences consequent to the contagion risks [9] which in summer 2020 pushed visitors to choose more peripheral and countryside destinations [70,71]. These urban contexts are in the frontline of the social, economic and political Covid-19 crisis and their response to the current crisis may or not accelerate their shift towards the inclusive, green and smart city paradigm [72], which necessarily integrates tourism development.

Table 1. Travel to and within Italian Cities in 2020-Baseline scenario per cent, relative to 2019 level.

	Arrivals
Venice	–71.5%
Florence	–68.7%
Rome	–63.5%
Milan	–61.1%
Total Italy	–59.7%

Source: Tourism Economics in ENIT (2020).

Secondly, the four cities are iconic cultural destinations that went through increasing widespread perception of their problematic path of development. Venice has become a global icon of the most extreme overtourism effects, including hollowing out the city of its residential functions. Florence has been characterized by a heavily congested “tourist ghetto” in the centre of the city with increasing tensions within the local community. Rome provides an example of difficult coexistence between a massive presence of tourists and its political and economic functions as capital city of the country. Milan, originally characterised by a different relation with tourism (mostly linked to business activities), has been evolving in recent decades to a more attractive destination also for leisure, thanks to some significant urban transformations and to an increasingly lively proposition of events, making tourism an increasingly important driver of the urban economy.

The realization of the overtourism threats had led the local governments of these four cities to reach an agreement for promoting and sharing good practices in addressing this pervasive phenomenon. The agreement, signed in 2017, acknowledged the central role of tourism in these cities’ paths of development but it also stressed the need to face the challenges posed by constant tourism growth on urban liveability.

For research purposes, an additional criterion for the selection of cases was the presence of institutional tourism accounts on Facebook, given the focus on marketer-generated contents and institutional communication. In this respect, it is necessary to be aware of the relatively recent development of destination management in Italy, as distinguished from mere promotional activities. Additionally, with regard to the latter, the development of marketing practices in Venice, Florence, and Rome was limited in the past, due to the already very high profile of these destinations, and only in recent years have those practices been intensified and professionalized in order to respond to the challenges of digital communication.

In Florence, the Florence Convention Bureau was put in charge of promoting quality tourism in the destination with a broader role of destination management organization (DMO) in December 2018. In Rome, the Tourism Strategic Plan was in an elaboration phase when the pandemic crisis broke out: the need to establish a DMO was sustained, to manage tourism in the city. In 2020 the Rome Council assigned the development of “some DMO functions” to an in-house company Zetema, working on cultural assets in the metropolitan area. In Venice, a municipal company in charge of mobility and city events manages the official city of Venice tourist and travel information portal (i.e., Venezia Unica). In Milan, in 2017 the Yes Milano brand was registered and in 2019 it was established as a “new generation DMO” for promoting the city as a leisure and business tourism destination, as an education and advanced studies destination and as a business and investment destination.

4.1. Data Collection

Data were retrieved from the institutional pages of city tourism boards on Facebook (Table 2), mainly providing text-based contents.

Table 2. Collected posts, engagement rate, and reference to pandemic.

City–Official Page	N. Followers	N. Facebook Posts, 2020	Engagement Rate 2020	N. Posts Mentioning Covid-19
Venice: Venezia Unica	39,674	111	0.1	9%
Rome: Turismo Roma	145,608	124	0.4	4%
Florence: Destination Florence	92,164	56	0.3	10%
Milan YES Milano	75,209	14	0.02	43%

For each page, posts were manually retrieved from July to August 2020 to create an Excel dataset. The dataset was structured as follows. For each post, information on date, language, likes and shares were collected; the reference to Covid-19 and the name of places mentioned to trace the spaces in focus are two additional variables. Then, the typology of destination experience (e.g., site visit, event, excursion, food tasting) was included. Through manual coding [73], brand attributes and brand values were identified for each dataset entry (see below).

4.2. Data Analysis

Content analysis, which is “an approach to the analysis of documents and texts that seeks to quantify content in terms of predetermined categories and in a systematic and replicable manner” [73], was developed, in line with previous studies on digital destination branding analysis and tourist behaviours on social media platforms [74–76]. It is a consolidated approach to brand meaning and brand personality analysis [26,51,52,60,61]. The content analysis is considered an appropriate research method for social media-based destination marketing for its empirical and exploratory orientation and connection with the “real phenomenon” (Krippendorf, 1980 cited in [26]), giving an opportunity to reveal communication trends [26].

The process of analysis developed through the following phases: (a) identification of the content units; (b) linking each content unit to the codes from a defined coding scheme; (c) quantitative analysis (frequency analysis) to describe the emerging communication trends in terms of brand attributes and brand values in the four analysed cases. This type of analysis provided an opportunity to explore city brands response to the Covid-19 challenges and to frame forms of sustainability in the selected overtouristified cities. However, given the descriptive scope, the analysis does not provide explanatory insights into the emerging city brand attributes and values. Moving from the results of this study, more sophisticated statistical approaches may be deployed to explain the relations between brand components. By adopting a longitudinal perspective, paths of change in the combination of brand attributes and values may be found, producing further knowledge on sustainable city brand building.

A human coding method [77] was applied by two researchers who independently coded the retrieved posts based on a predetermined coding scheme. The human coding method gave researchers an opportunity to have direct insight into the raw data, an advantage in light of the explorative nature of this study. The manual effort was feasible for the relatively small sample size resulting from the research design (timeframe of observation).

Training on the coding scheme application and intercoder reliability assessment made the two researchers’ coding outcomes consistent [77]. The posts, considered units of data, were coded using the categorization proposed by Huertas et al. [62]. This coding scheme is a classification developed for destination brand attributes (i.e., attraction factors, services, activities) and values (adapting Aaker’s brand personality scale) and it resulted from social media analysis.

The coding scheme is the following [62] (p. 300):

Brand attributes: *Nature* (nature and natural landscape, rural landscape, mountain, ecotourism); *Tangible Heritage* (sites, history, religion, works of art, museums); *Cityscape* (architecture, urban planning/landscape); *Intangible Heritage* (intangible heritage/popular culture/traditions, anthem/flag/national symbols); *Gastronomy* (food/cuisine, wine tourism); *Leisure* (urban and cultural leisure/shows, nightlife, shopping); *Sun and Beach* (sea/beach, sun, climate/weather); *Business/trade*; *Sports* (hiking, winter sports, water sports, adventure sports, other sports); *Technology* (social media/ICT, technology, innovation); *Services* (hotel/accommodation, transport, other services); *Things to Do*; *Tourist information/agenda*; *Institutional and Non-tourist information*.

Brand values:

1. *Sincerity*: Down-to-earth (family-oriented, down-to-earth, sustainable); Honest (calm, real, traditional, honest); Wholesome (original, wholesome; quality of life); Cheerful (happiness, sentimental, friendly).
2. *Excitement*: Daring (trendy, daring, exciting, exotic, fashionable); Spirited (cool, spirited, dynamic, vital, fresh, young, sensorial); Imaginative (unique/different/diverse, imaginative, creative); Up-to-date (up-to-date, independent, contemporary, modern); Cosmopolitan (cosmopolitan, tolerant, hospitable).
3. *Competence*: Reliable (reliable, hard-working, secure/safe, rigorous/responsible/pragmatic); Intelligent (intelligent, technical, corporate, innovative); Successful (successful, leader, ambitious, powerful).
4. *Sophistication*: Luxurious (glamorous, luxurious); Charming (charming/seductive, smooth, romantic, magical)
5. *Ruggedness*: Outdoorsy (outdoorsy, get-away, recreational); Tough (tough, rugged, non-conformist).

5. Findings

Similarities and differences emerged across the four cities, in terms of number of posts, achieved users' engagement and contents produced (Table 2). Typical attributes of cultural urban tourism such as Tangible heritage and Leisure (especially cultural activities) are at the core of the four city brands (Figure 1), although delivered with different approaches to communication, ranging from a more traditional and informative approach in Venice to more engaging communication in Rome and Milan. Not only Tangible heritage (monuments, museums, archaeological site), but also Nature is amongst the attributes mobilized in the four cases, especially in Rome, Milan and Florence. Attractors related to the natural environment such as outdoor sports and sun and beach emerge in the analysed cases.

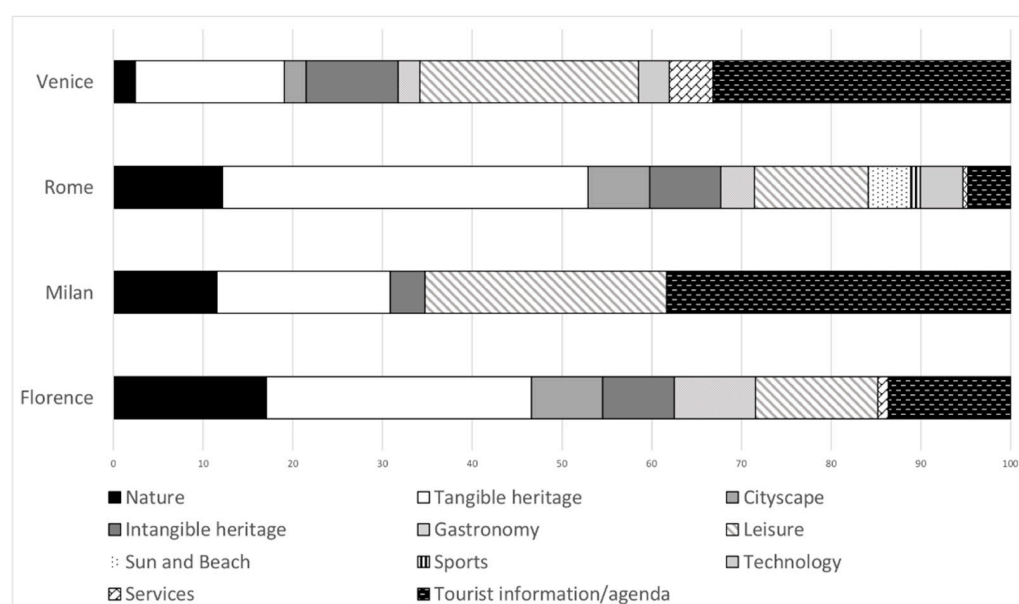


Figure 1. Brand attributes.

Nature emerged with the visualisation of urban contexts such as parks and gardens, often accompanied by pictures of deserted areas where isolation can be found, or through the several excursion proposals outside of the city. Figure 2 shows how the city brand is significantly supported by the metropolitan areas and the surrounding regions, especially in Rome and Florence, where less reputable and usually less crowded visit sites may respond to the needs of the post-pandemic traveller.



Figure 2. Maps of the four destination brands: Milan, Florence, Rome, Venice (top to right order).

Differences emerged in narrating the Covid-19 emergency. Milan referred to the pandemic in 43% of the analysed posts, not only informing but also reassuring potential visitors. A merely informative approach was adopted in Venice (9% of posts referred to Covid-19 but only to communicate health measures, visiting/opening hours, and rules). Additionally, in the cases of Florence and Rome, extremely limited reference was made to the pandemic.

The brand values suggest different brand personalities emerge for the analysed cities responding to the pandemic crisis (Figure 3a). Certainly, typical brand values of urban tourism destinations emerged such as Competence, concerning cultural site visits providing learning opportunities, especially on history and arts, Sophistication (with particular emphasis on charm and luxury), and Excitement (for the trendy, cool, and contemporary halo of these cultural capitals). Brand values more in line with non-urban and regional tourism are Outdoorsy (replacing the broader category of Ruggedness since the “Tough” code could not be used) and Sincerity that plays a role in outlining the projected brand personality of the destinations, especially in the case of Rome and, to a lesser extent, of Florence.

Figure 3b explains the composition of Sincerity which is mostly based on Honest/Traditional and Down-to-earth/Sustainable and. These values represent possible ways to engage with the narration of sustainability. On the one hand, Honest/Traditional emphasises the social dimension of sustainability which refers to the establishment of a positive relationship with local traditions and to the experience of an authentic place characterised by a “simple and healthy” lifestyle. On the other hand, Down-to-earth/Sustainable refers to a broader viewpoint on the relation between tourists, the territory and its community, also paying attention to global challenges such as environmental issues and the respect for local communities, beyond the search for an authentic destination experience.

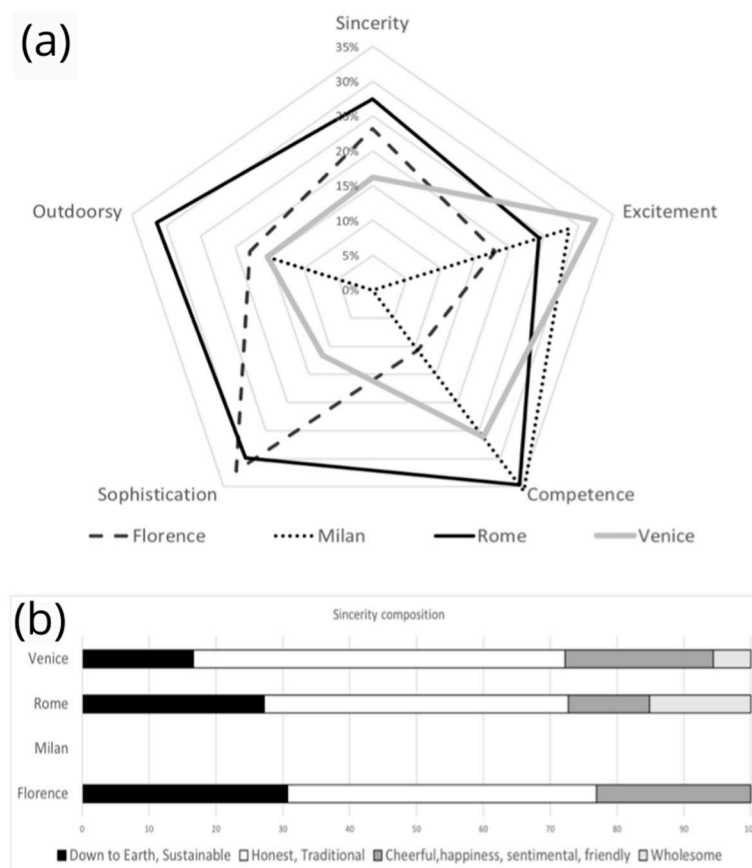


Figure 3. (a) Brand values; (b) Sincerity value articulation.

6. Discussion

The paper reached explorative insights into place brand propositions projected in summer 2020, concerning previously overtouristified cities that had to address the immediate effects of the pandemic. The analysis of Facebook posts highlighted several issues that, while responding to the pandemic challenge, may open routes to the narration of sustainability in overtouristified cities and may spring future reconfigurations towards the building of sustainable destination brands.

First, dealing with the pandemic does not necessarily imply speaking of it. Several international destinations have tried to establish a trust relationship with their audience by explicitly discussing safety measures and suggesting staying home and take care (e.g., Barcelona). The choice of limiting references to the pandemic in three of the four analysed cities can be justified by the different media exposure during the “first wave” Covid-19 emergency. In fact, it was significantly higher in the case of Milan and of the Lombardy region, unanimously identified as the main site of the epidemic in the country and tagged in the most dramatic imagery of the pandemic (overcrowded hospitals, exhausted nurses, military trucks transporting coffins, etc.). Venice, Rome, and Florence could maintain a lower profile.

Second, a remarkable common feature is a shifting towards more sustainable brand propositions. This might mirror an attempt to looking forward while building on the lessons from a recent past, trying to reduce tourism-led congestion in the overcrowded urban areas. By integrating traditional urban tourism experience, proposed by cultural city brands, with attributes and values that normally belong to non-urban tourism, brand propositions move towards sustainable brand building. Outdoor and green spaces within the city are given greater evidence than the usually crowded cultural tourism precincts and a different way to experience the city is proposed through, for instance, cycling and urban trekking.

Tightly connected with the sustainable city development, catalysing the attention outside the overtouristified iconic spots and beyond conventional city experiences represents the emerging traits of the analysed cities responding to the Covid-19 challenge. The emerging city brands suggest an urban tourism experience that is not contained in the city centre, but connects the city to a broader surrounding region, including peripheral and rural spaces. In other words, valuable links are created with less known and minor centres which, while contributing to expanding the imagined destination, may benefit from the halo of the major city brand. This opportunity is linked to the temporary substitution of international tourists with domestic (and often regional, “staycation”) ones, which makes the reference to the main urban attractors less significant and even redundant.

The emerging components of sustainable destination brands can be also due to the significant consensus among international market analysts and tourism advisors on prospective futures of tourism in the “new normality”. Emphasis on the “domestic sanctity”, wilderness, isolation, sustainability and a deeper search for wellbeing summarises such expected market trends [70]. In a time of great uncertainty, projected destination brand propositions may thus reveal a sensible alignment of the conceived destinations [30] to this consensus rather than the distinctive outcome of an original and place-specific strategic reappraisal.

7. Conclusions

This research provided an insight into the link between place brand building and the Covid-19 crisis, opening to a broader discussion on the under-researched role of brands in crisis contexts [16]. The specific challenge for overtouristified cities concerns the transition to more sustainable development, an opportunity, however, that cannot be taken for granted. Branding can provide a lens of observation for this potential turn by investigating the phases of the brand formation through circuits of communication, involvement, and action [44].

7.1. Implications for Destination Management

The above discussion suggests a potential convergence between brand adjustments aimed at the short-term response to the crisis and a long-term, sustainability-oriented brand repositioning. This may happen notwithstanding the serious challenges that originate from all the uncertainties concerning the crisis and especially those related to the timing and to the difficulty in forecasting its end and those regarding the characters of the market in the post-pandemic phase.

The cases analysed in this paper also suggest that this convergence may take place through some innovative hybridization of the urban experiences, refocusing on the outside of the overtouristified iconic spots and beyond conventional city paths. This would mark a departure from the consolidated types of experiences focused (sometimes exclusively) on the key cultural sites of the city and realizes a wider territorial spread of tourist flows, which is especially relevant to overtouristified destinations.

The destination needs to be reinvented not only through narratives that lead the tourist to follow alternative paths within the urban fabric but also by creating the necessary material and immaterial connections between the centre and the peripheries. This appears to be in line with those managerial and marketing approaches that emerged to address overtourism, particularly dispersion through persuasion and education of tourists towards a more respectful experience of the tourist city [8]. Visitors’ background knowledge and familiarity with the destination may be relevant variables to consider in sustainable city brand building and in this respect, the forced targeting of domestic tourists could provide an important window of opportunity.

This line of development cannot be assumed in a deterministic way. The main challenge may derive from the potential inconsistency between the emerging city brands and the paths of urban development. This is not a new issue and relates to the (lack of) integration of a tourism development vision in the wider picture of structural shifts in city

planning. The projection of brand values and attributes configuring sustainable city brands may be disconnected from those shifts while, in contrast, a phase of deep discontinuities could provide opportunities for local stakeholders' and community's involvement in urban reconfiguration and in reshaping the relation between tourism and city development.

Only future research will tell us to what extent the pandemic crisis has triggered learning processes leading destination managers, policymakers, and local tourism stakeholders to capitalize on the Covid-19 experience. In this sense, the response to the pandemic might leave room to transformational learning [24], finally contributing to addressing pre-Covid overtourism. On the opposite side, the socio-economic consequences of the pandemic may justify the urgency to reactivate the local tourist industry, even if this implies a resumption of pre-pandemic patterns. Overtourism may be perceived, especially by the industry's stakeholders, as a "problem of the past", that is overshadowed by the "problems of the present". Thus, the discontinuation of the "old" brand propositions [44] could end up being a temporary experiment with no durable effects. The emerging traits of sustainable city brands may vanish along with the revamping of inbound flows and the bouncing back of the tourist economy.

7.2. Limitations and Future Research

Our analysis focused on the conceived brand, as projected in summer 2020 right after the end of the first lockdown in Italy. In order to overcome the limitations of this work, further analysis is required in diverse directions. The empirical weaknesses of this study can be overcome by extending the timespan of observation and the number of observed destinations (possibly from a European perspective) and by developing more sophisticated quantitative analysis to deliver generalizable results, beyond the explorative pilot study that was the aim of this paper.

A comparative study analysing the evolution over time from pre- to post-pandemic should be developed. Our work may have been influenced by the relationship between the timing of the pandemic and the timing of the data collection. In fact, branding in summer 2020 reflected also an optimistic expectation about the evolution of the pandemic, about the progressive lifting of restrictions and even about the possibility of an extended summer season. As we know by now, the "second wave" of the pandemic wiped out these expectations. Furthermore, one needs to analyse the ongoing structural, organizational, and functional changes within destinations and how the sustainable destination brand may further articulate in coherence with these changes.

Other social media platforms deserve to be considered, with their specificities in participating to the brand formation. Not only the projected brand attributes and values (the conceived place) but also the negotiated brands (perceived and lived place) should be analysed and framed. This will be possible only in the future, by monitoring the evolution of travellers' and tourism stakeholders' engagement with the emerging post-Covid city brands.

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