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Reimagining urban destinations: Adaptive and transformative city brand attributes and values in the pandemic crisis

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ABSTRACT

This paper contributes to the post-Covid urban tourism debate. It focuses on how cities respond to the pandemic asking how and to what extent urban destination brands are leveraged by city marketers for coping with the Covid-19 crisis. It explores city brand values and attributes change as a component of the urban approach to facing the current crisis. Content analysis is carried out on pre- and post-pandemic brand communication of four Italian iconic cultural destinations (Rome, Florence, Venice and Milan) on Instagram. Findings suggest adaptive and transformative brand responses to the pandemic crisis, projecting the cities into future development scenarios. This research contributes to the recovery versus reform debate on post-Covid urban contexts and opens research on the pandemic effects on values, images and tourism stakeholders' mindsets and brand experimentation on social media platforms.

1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic represents a crisis unlike any other, generating uncertainty, disorientation, loss of control, and emotional reactions to perceived risks (Hang et al., 2020). It heavily influenced how people live and interact, how they work and spend free time, and how they use technologies integrating (or substituting) physical and virtual spaces.

Institutions, policy-makers, practitioners and academics defined the global pandemic as a potential transformative engine, challenging and changing people's values and imperatives (OECD, 2020; Sigala, 2020). Consequently, the adaptive capacity of tourism systems is crucial (Hartman, 2020). At the same time, the potential of this crisis to bring change should not be taken for granted. In the long-term, pre-Covid tourism disequilibria may be re-established (Collins-Kreiner & Ram, 2020; Higgins-Desbiolles, 2021; Ioannides & Gyimóthy, 2020), leaving little room for change.

On the frontline of the economic, social and political crisis, cities have been significantly impacted by the dramatic and sudden shrinking of the international tourism market (UNWTO, 2020). Before the pandemic, increasing urban contexts faced issues and threats related to constantly growing tourism in-flows (Cheer et al., 2019; Dodds & Butler,

2019; Novy & Colomb, 2019). This revamped scholars' interest in the synergies and conflicts between city tourism and urban development (Bellini et al., 2017).

Transformative effects on the tourism industry were argued in light of the likely long-term and potentially structural impacts of the Covid-19 crisis, steering and even imposing an adaptation of tourism systems to the global shifting context (Gössling et al., 2020). “Unforeseen trajectories” may prevail over consolidated trends, bringing a need to renew scholars' ways to frame the tourism phenomena (Sigala, 2020).

The emerging literature introduced the recovery versus reform dilemma in the post-Covid tourism debate (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2021), showing degrees of continuity with the pre-Covid discussion on conservative/reformative approaches to tourism development (Pasquinelli & Trunfio, 2021). Accordingly, the “unforeseen trajectories” out of the pandemic crisis may span from a transition towards more balanced and sustainable tourism to bouncing back routes in the race towards tourism recovery. The territorial specificity of the undertaken trajectories has relevant implications in terms of the evolutionary relationship between tourism and the city.

There is a need for theoretical insights into how, why and the extent to which the pandemic is changing tourism structurally (Kock et al., 2020). Empirical observations of tourism systems' reactions to the

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pandemic challenges are also needed, to provide a fresh look at urban tourism evolution and observe how tourism stakeholders conceive and seek concrete change.

City marketing and branding represent the tip of the iceberg of tourism policies in the pandemic context. However, the city representation and communication may anticipate change in the local mindset, preparing local stakeholders for actions.

In the pandemic, when travelling was not possible or hardly constrained, and destinations were primarily experienced online, city tourism organisations tended to remain active on social media to keep nurturing the “online brand reputation” (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010). Early reactions to crisis emerged on social media, revealing fragments of changing “structures, functions and identities” fundamental to reimagining future scenarios during a crisis (Hartman, 2020, p.2).

According to literature, social media induce meaning-making and support destination brand building and evolution (Kavaratzis & Hatch, 2019). City tourism organisations have increasingly utilised social media to deliver brand propositions (Hays et al., 2013), communicate brand image among tourists (Lalicic et al., 2020), foster online brand reputation (Inversini & Buhalis, 2009; Xiang & Gretzel, 2010) and enable tourists' engagement (Mariani et al., 2018; Trunfio & Della Lucia, 2019). However, the role of place branding in a crisis (Zenker & Kock, 2020) and the potential of social media in a tourism crisis (Sigala, 2020) remained largely untapped fields of inquiry.

This paper contributes to the post-Covid urban tourism debate. It focuses on how cities respond to the pandemic addressing the following research question: how and to what extent urban destination brands are leveraged by city marketers for coping with the Covid-19 crisis? The paper explores city brand values and attributes change as a component of the urban approach to facing the current crisis. This research analyses how and to what extent city brand attributes and values are modified by city marketers, casting light on the destination brand that projects the city into future development scenarios.

City brand communication on Instagram will be analysed, focusing on the pre- and post-pandemic projected brand propositions of the four main Italian urban destinations (Rome, Florence, Venice and Milan) to capture emerging patterns of change. A content analysis of marketer-generated contents will be presented, and the findings will lead to discussing adaptive and transformative responses to the Covid-19 crisis.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Covid-19 crisis and tourism

Literature is drawing increasing attention to the Covid-19 impacts on tourism (Karabulut et al., 2020) and to the emerging practices of crisis communication aimed at reducing risk perceptions, establishing an emotional attachment with tourists (Hang et al., 2020), and creating the intention to revisit destinations in the post-covid (Hassan & Soliman, 2021).

The focus on immediate and short-term effects is, however, producing limited theoretical insights into how, why and the extent to which the pandemic is changing tourism structurally (Kock et al., 2020).

A “transformational opportunity” (Sigala, 2020) was outlined to go out of the crisis, with doubts raised on the capacity of consolidated frameworks to explain current tourism phenomena and on tourism models advocating volume growth (Gössling et al., 2020).

Post-covid tourism literature framed the recovery versus reform dilemma, stressing how rapidity in the recovery process may be in contrast with attempts to reform tourism (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2021). Linking with the pre-covid sense of urgency for tourism change, tourism reform is understood as a process pursuing sustainability, ethical and responsible forms of tourism (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2021). A transition towards more balanced and sustainable tourism is envisioned as a possible outcome of the current crisis. However, subsidies and governments' rescue actions for tourism businesses' recovery might bias

tourism evolutions, boosting pre-Covid disequilibria (Ioannides & Gyimóthy, 2020). National strategies responding to the Covid-19 crisis revealed that, while different countries adopted impact mitigation and recovery acceleration actions, only one country out of the seven in the sample adopted actions for “preparing for tomorrow” (Collins-Kreiner & Ram, 2020).

2.2. Place branding and social media

Place branding configures a multidisciplinary research domain addressing a set of complex themes (Lucarelli & Olof Berg, 2011). Firmly rooted in tourism studies (Ruiz-Real et al., 2020), destination branding has increasingly integrated the broader and interdisciplinary field of place branding (Ashworth & Kavaratzis, 2010; Kavaratzis & Hatch, 2019). This tendency mirrors the need to functionally and symbolically conceive tourism as integrated within local systems to pursue sustainable destination development (Koens et al., 2019).

Playing the role of orchestrators, place brand managers facilitate selecting brand elements composing the brand identity (Cai, 2002) and the definition of the brand value proposition, consolidating the existing brand or rebranding the place. The brand value proposition may embody continuity with the past or a discontinuity in an attempt to start a collective reflection and conversation on novel aspects of the destination (Kavaratzis & Hatch, 2019). A discontinuity in local development and local power relations may represent a moment of opportunity for rebranding, raising awareness of the need to change. Initiators, stakeholders with the capacity to perceive such “moment of opportunity”, may trigger discourse creation which may eventually crystallise into a vocabulary of images helping local stakeholders accept and engage with the construction of new brand meanings (Pasquinelli, 2014).

“Management-initiated brand proposition” may trigger multi-stakeholder interactions, facilitating brand building (Kavaratzis & Hatch, 2019). Brand building is significantly stimulated by social media, where the management-initiated brand proposition meets and interacts with user-generated contents, inducing meaning-making and the place brand formation (Andéhn et al., 2014; Kavaratzis & Hatch, 2019; Skinner, 2018; Taecharunroj, 2019).

Most scholars drew attention to users' engagement and interactivity. In contrast, relatively less attention was drawn to the brand messages projection and even more limited were the efforts to compare projected and perceived destination images (Költringer & Dickinger, 2015).

Tourism destination managers strongly utilise social media to deliver brand propositions, establish the online brand reputation (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010), and enable tourist engagement with the destination brand (Mariani et al., 2018).

Social media changed the way to communicate the destination, with DMOs losing the role of principal information repository in the web (Lalicic et al., 2020). A lack of specificity in the vocabulary emerged, with very generic communication and minimal differences across the different platforms (Huertas & Marine-Roig, 2016).

The drivers of online communication effectiveness deserve further attention and the types of contents triggering reactions and interactivity need to be identified. Functional and cognitive components were said to prevail over emotional and affective elements in representing the destination in social media, although the affective elements are the most effective in triggering interactivity and involvement (Huertas & Marine-Roig, 2016; Stojanovic et al., 2018).

2.3. Brand attributes and personality traits

Functional and affective brand components were identified in the destination branding literature. Cai's model of destination branding (2002), one of the most significant contributions in the field, framed the Attributes component, the Affective component and the Attitude component of the destination brand, cross-fertilising the cognitive, affective and conative dimensions of the destination image (Gartner,

1993). Attributes are tangible and intangible features characterising the destination. They represent the cognitive/functional dimension of the brand and constitute the “brand infrastructure” including public spaces and the built environment, and the experiential attributes, including leisure offerings and services (Hanna & Rowley, 2011). Various studies measured the destination brand through adopting lists of attributes, including characteristics of the region (e.g., inhabitants, landscape, infrastructures and entertainment, Echtner & Ritchie, 2003), attraction factors and destination assets like tour and activities and interest sites (Huertas & Marine-Roig, 2016). These attributes appeal to the rational side of human beings elaborating inputs through cognitive learning about the destination.

The affective (or emotional) component is constituted by meanings and personal values that individuals attach to the destination brand. Personal values are deeply rooted modes of conceiving life (Rokeach, 1968 in Kotsi & Pike, 2020), which inform human ways to behave or a state of mind and, accordingly, giving a sense of orientation and shaping preferences.

The brand personality provides a conceptualisation of the affective component of the brand. This is the whole of human characteristics embodied by the brand (Aaker, 1997), a form of anthropomorphism helping people feel in line with the brand (Haigood, 1999 cited in Kaplan et al., 2010). The brand personality turns human values into brand components, allowing individuals to find a match between their values and the brand, inducing them to choose it.

Several destination management studies investigated the brand personality as a strategy to create a set of favourable and distinctive associations in consumers' minds (Hosany et al., 2006), to boost brand attachment, intention to purchase (Ekinci & Hosany, 2006; Lalicic et al., 2020), and online engagement (Lalicic et al., 2020); as a way to provide tourists with an opportunity for identification with the destination (Hultman et al., 2015; Murphy et al., 2007) and a way to self-express through their travelling choices (Vinyals-Mirabent et al., 2019). Resonating with tourists' values, the destination brand personality boosts self-esteem and personal identity-building (Vinyals-Mirabent et al., 2019).

The brand personality was operationalised through the Brand Personality Scale (BPS) by Aaker (1997), widely discussed in destination branding literature (Ekinci & Hosany, 2006; Hultman et al., 2015; Kim & Lehto, 2013; Lalicic et al., 2020; Murphy et al., 2007; Usakli & Baloglu, 2011; Vinyals-Mirabent et al., 2019). It is composed of five dimensions, namely *competence*, *excitement*, *sincerity*, *ruggedness*, and *sophistication*, which were adapted for the study of destinations (Ekinci & Hosany, 2006; Hanna & Rowley, 2019; Huertas & Marine-Roig, 2016; Kaplan et al., 2010; Lalicic et al., 2020; Usakli & Baloglu, 2011).

Kaplan et al. (2010), in their study on city brands, suggested not only positive values but also negative values may emerge as brand personality traits, such as malignancy (unreliable, arrogant, self-seeking) and conservatism (uneducated), usually neglected in the literature.

Most studies focused on the perceived destination brand personalities, while few studies addressed the projected brand personality (Hanna & Rowley, 2019; Lalicic et al., 2020). Travel and tourism communication (Henderson, 2000; Morgan & Pritchard, 2002; Santos, 2004) was analysed to reflect on the projection and positioning through the brand personality and a projected destination brand personality scale based on tourism websites analysis was developed (Hanna & Rowley, 2019). The juxtaposition between the projected and perceived brand personality may unveil a significant gap between the two (Kim & Lehto, 2013), representing the trigger for brand formation dynamics.

Brand attributes and brand values are two essential sides of the destination brand, which, analysed together, open avenues to explain the brand attitude motivating action and tourist behaviour (Cai, 2002; Llodra-Riera et al., 2015). According to Vinyals-Mirabent et al. (2019), functional associations (i.e., attributes) directly influence the personality traits individuals attach to the destination brand. The constructed discourse on the destination – through strategically including attributes –

may project the desired brand personality. If, on the one hand, brand values can be deduced from the brand attributes and the perceived benefits of experiencing them, emotional learning about the destination and affective attachment triggered by brand values prevail over rational evaluations.

3. Research design

This study analysed the projected brand propositions of the four main Italian tourism destinations, in the pre- and post-pandemic, to detect brand attributes and brand values change from 2019 to 2020. It adopted a social media-based city branding perspective, focusing on marketer-generated contents published by the cities' destination management organisations on Instagram.

To date, studies on urban destination branding and social media have mainly focused on Facebook, as the most used social network, and Twitter (Lalicic et al., 2020; Pasquinelli et al., 2021; Revilla Hernandez et al., 2016). In contrast with the limited attention it received in the academic debate, Instagram was selected for this study.

Instagram not only reinforces the destination image but may also engage tourists in destination planning and development (i Agustí, 2018), outlining a relevant co-creative space for destination brand image building (Iglesias-Sánchez et al., 2020). Owing to its visual approach and specific features, such as the geo-tagging, it encourages incorporating new spaces in the imagery of tourism destinations (i Agustí, 2018; Iglesias-Sánchez et al., 2020).

3.1. The four main Italian tourism cities

Four iconic Italian tourism cities were under scrutiny: Rome, Venice, Milan and Florence. These cities were selected for three main reasons.

Firstly, they are the first four Italian tourist destinations for overnight stays (ISTAT, 2019). They depend upon international tourist flows and mobility which were the most constrained and challenged by the contagion threat (UNWTO, 2020).

Secondly, these cities had to face the sudden shift from pre-pandemic overtourism issues (Loda et al., 2020) to a dramatic tourism shrinkage, recording in 2020 a reduction of tourist arrivals higher than Italian average (ENIT, 2020). The COVID-19 crisis occurred in a time of growing debate on the future of these cities, which had been experiencing constant tourism growth (Loda et al., 2020), raising local and national governments' attention. In 2017, the four city councils agreed with the national Ministry of Culture and Tourism to share good practices addressing and managing overtourism.

An additional criterion for selecting cases was the presence of institutional tourism accounts on Instagram, as this research focuses on marketer-generated contents and institutional communication on this social network.

Rome is the first Italian tourism destination and it is among the top three European touristic cities and the top sixteen worldwide (Euro-monitor., 2019). The city attracts diverse forms of tourism (e.g., cultural and creative tourism, religious tourism and MICE) and reached nearly 31 million of overnight stays in 2019 (Statista, 2021). The tourism sector has been a fundamental economic engine of the capital, accounting for about 15% of the city's GDP (Di Niola, 2020). Rome became an emblematic example of overtourism, affecting the urban quality of life and urging decision-makers to address and manage city tourism. Rome's overtourism was especially characterised by the problematic coexistence with the primary institutional functions of the nation's capital in its city centre.

In 2020 the in-house company of the Municipality, named Zètema, was put in charge of coordinating and managing the cultural assets of the metropolitan area, playing some destination management functions, including digital communication, social media marketing and other promotional activities.

The city of Venice has been a UNESCO World Heritage Site since

1987. Tourism is the leading urban economy (11 billion euros, [Regione Veneto, 2017](#)), with nearly 13 million of overnight stays in 2019 ([Statista, 2021](#)). It suffered the most from the impact of the pandemic (−71.5% arrivals in 2019–2020, [ENIT, 2020](#)) due to its high dependence upon international tourist flows.

Venice is the global icon of the overtourism phenomenon ([González, 2018](#)), negatively impacting the conservation of natural and cultural urban heritage, the social structure and residents' quality of life. Not only the growth of visitors but also an increase of new residents have contributed to the city's gentrification and radical transformation ([Minoia, 2017](#)). Various actions have been put in place to address and manage overtourism towards more sustainable tourism, such as entry gates to the old town, entry tickets and the awareness-raising campaign *#EnjoyRespectVenezia*.

Since 2016, the Municipality's in-house company (named Vela), established in 1998 to develop urban public transport, has been in charge of some destination management functions such as managing the city pass, city events and the official website of tourist and travel information (i.e., *Venezia Unica*).

Milan is the third Italian touristic city for overnight stays (nearly 13 million in 2019, [Statista, 2021](#)). Business tourism and the MICE sector combine with cultural tourism, creative tourism, shopping tourism and eno-gastronomy. In 2018, tourism generated more than 8 billion euros, involved over 120,000 workers and nearly 11,000 businesses ([Milano Today, 2019](#)). In Milan overtourism had emerged as a side-effect of the city's renaissance in recent years, which was characterised by the finalisation of new architectural icons, improved security and livability, and lively cultural and social life.

In response to the pandemic crisis (−61.1% of tourist arrivals in 2020; [ENIT, 2020](#)), Milan implemented diverse initiatives. The project *#Ripartire dalla cultura si può* [Restarting from culture is possible] was implemented to stimulate proximity tourism, enriching the tourist city offering new attractions in the city's outskirts, such as religious itineraries, historic sites, and villas.

Milano & Partners is the official tourism promotion agency of the city, founded by the Municipality and the local Chamber of Commerce to activate partnerships and collaborations with firms, universities, and cultural institutions. In 2017 it launched the brand “Yes Milano” to promote leisure and business tourism, talents attraction and investments.

Florence is an iconic Italian cultural destination, with 12.5 million tourists overnight stays in 2019 ([Statista, 2021](#)) and a tourism economy of over 3 billion euros a year. Like other Italian cultural cities attracting significant international tourism flows, Florence has particularly suffered the impact of the pandemic (−68.7% arrivals in 2019–2020; [ENIT, 2020](#)).

Defined as “the next Venice”, because of the increasing congestion of the relatively small-sized historic centre and the increasing tensions between tourists and residents, Florence has been at the centre of the recent national debate on overtourism. Following Venice and other overtouristified destinations, the city of Florence launched the *#EnjoyRespectFirenze* campaign in 2018, aiming at educating visitors towards a respectful visit and better experience of the city.

After the pandemic and in light of the touristification process, several projects were recently developed (e.g., *Firenze insolita* [Unusual Florence]) to diversify the tourism offering, promote sustainable urban tourism and residents' quality of life.

In 2019 the Destination Florence Convention & Visitors Bureau was established as a consortium of local private actors, expanding the destination management functions of the Florence Convention Bureau, which has been in charge of developing Florence as a MICE destination since 1995. Currently, MICE, leisure tourism (Destination Florence) and wedding tourism (Tuscany for Wedding) are the main sectors in which it is active, working in partnership with the Municipality of Florence and the Florence Metropolitan City.

3.2. Data collection

Data were manually collected from the official Instagram accounts of the four city tourism organisations. All the posts (photos or videos and the written content, [Fig. 1](#)) published by the official public institutions in July–August 2019 and July–August 2020 were included in the sample. Focus on summer 2020 allowed insight into how to communicate the city destinations in the Covid-19 context, while summer 2019 provided the basis for assessing the degree of discontinuity in the communicated brand attributes and values.

The final dataset included 540 posts, 47% in 2019 and 53% in 2020. For each post, information was collected on: publication date, geo-tag, main hashtags, mentioned city spots and other places, experience typology (e.g., event, excursion, site visit, food tasting), caption (the textual part of the post) and a short description of the visual content displayed (photo or video).

3.3. Data analysis

A content analysis ([Bryman & Bell, 2011, p. 291](#)), a consolidated method for brand meaning and brand personality analysis ([Hanna & Rowley, 2019](#); [Hays et al., 2013](#); [Huertas & Marine-Roig, 2016](#); [Lalicit et al., 2020](#); [Vinyals-Mirabent et al., 2019](#)), was carried out. The content analysis gives insights into communication trends and has an exploratory orientation to the “real phenomenon” (Krippendorff, 1980 cited in [Hays et al., 2013](#)).

The coding system adopted by [Huertas and Marine-Roig \(2016\)](#) was selected to consider the specificities of tourist destinations that emerged from social media content analysis. Posts were coded through up to three brand attributes (cognitive/function dimension) and up to three brand values (emotional/affective dimensions).

The coding system was composed as follows ([Huertas & Marine-Roig, 2016, p. 300](#)): a) brand attributes: *Nature, Tangible Heritage, Cityscape, Intangible Heritage, Gastronomy, Leisure, Sun & Beach, Business/trade, Sport, Technology, Services, Things to do, Tourist information, Institution & Non-tourist information*; and b) brand values: *Sincerity (down-to-earth, sustainable, honest, wholesome, cheerful), Excitement (daring, spirited, imaginative, up-to-date, cosmopolitan), Competence (reliable, intelligent, successful), Sophistication (luxurious, charming), Ruggedness (outdoorsy, tough)*.

The human coding method was adopted, providing insights into the raw data, an advantage considering the explorative scope of the study. The manual effort was possible for the relatively small sample size.

The results of the content analysis were elaborated through two steps. First, a frequency analysis described the brand communication in the selected cases in 2019 and 2020. The frequency was calculated for each item in the brand attributes and brand values lists. The percentages over the total collected posts (per city, per year) were reported in [Tables 1 and 2](#). These tables show the weights of the single attributes and values in the projected brand proposition and their variation rates over the analysed period (2019–2020).

Second, a cluster analysis was carried out on brand values and brand attributes to reach further insight into the city brand change, from pre- to post-pandemic. This process grouped the destination brands in 2019 and 2020 (eight brands in total, i.e., Florence 2019; Florence 2020; Milan 2019; Milan 2020; Rome 2019; Rome 2020; Venice 2019; Venice 2020). The following interpretative criterion was adopted: when for each city the 2019 and 2020 destination brand belongs to the same cluster, a continuity with the pre-pandemic was; instead, when the 2019 and 2020 destination brand resulted in different clusters, a discontinuity was identified. The results of this analysis were summarised by the Brand Values-Brand Attributes Matrix ([Fig. 2](#)).

4. Findings

The cluster analysis ([Table 1](#)) revealed overall patterns of stability



Fig. 1. An example of the collected posts.

Table 1
Brand attributes and values patterns in 2019–2020.

	Florence 19–20	Milan 19–20	Rome 19–20	Venice 19–20
Brand attributes	Stability	Change	Change	Stability
Brand values	Change	Change	Stability	Change

and change of the city destination brand attributes and values over the analysed timeframe. Change emerged in the brand values in three out of the four cities, while the brand attributes showed relatively more stability than brand values, with significant change emerging in two out of the four cities. Milan was the only city where the communicated brand attributes and values changed significantly from the pre- to the post-pandemic.

4.1. Destination brand attributes

Looking into the details of the change, the frequency analysis of the brand attributes suggested elements of continuity and elements of change in Instagram communication over the analysed timeframe (Table 2).

The *Tangible heritage* of the four Italian iconic cities continued to be stably central brand attribute during the pandemic crisis. In the case of Milan (57% posts), the emphasis on tangible heritage decreased (–12%). *Leisure* continues to represent a recurring theme in Instagram in Milan (+39%), Florence (+3%), Rome and Venice (despite a contraction in 2019–20, –8% and –20%).

The *Intangible heritage* (popular culture, traditions, local know-how) increased its importance in the communication with significant variation rates in Florence (+278%), in Milan (+406%) and Rome (+20%), except for Venice where its frequency decreased (–53%). Initiatives such as “Voices of Florence” talking about traditions and craft

workshops by involving locals and their viewpoints, and “Venetian traces, Uncommon churches” are two examples of the growing emphasis on intangible heritage. The intangible heritage as urban “living heritage”, contrarily to the mainstream tangible heritage sites, can also be found outside mass tourism itineraries.

On the opposite, the *Cityscape*, which represented one of the prevailing brand attributes in 2019, became less significant in 2020 (Milan –54%; Rome –15%; Venice –28%), except for Florence (+7%).

The weight of *Nature* increased during the pandemic in Venice (+540%) and Milan (+100%), previously overlooking this attribute in 2019. Further analysis of the posts coded with *Nature* revealed that excursions in the city outskirts, outside of the cities and visits to the natural urban spots, such as gardens and parks, achieved centrality. This finding connects with the promoted opportunities for outdoor sports activities such as walking tours, urban trekking and cycling (e.g., Florence), for peaceful and charming visits of the city (e.g., Milan) and of minor cultural and natural sites in the metropolitan area (e.g., Rome).

Gastronomy attribute, generally less relevant in terms of weight among the various attributes in 2019, reduced in relevance over the analysed period (variation rates: Florence –83%; Milan –64%; Rome –50%; absent in Venice).

In 2020, communication on *Tourist information* received increasing attention in Milan (+216%) and Venice (newly introduced attribute in 2020, 13%). Tourism information included organisational procedures for attending events and visiting sites following the Covid-19 restrictions.

Newly introduced attributes suggest the increasing variety of functional elements in post-covid communication (e.g., *Sun and Beach*, *Technology*, *Things to do* and *Sports*).

4.2. Destination brand values

The four Italian cities recorded an increasing, and in some cases significant, reliance on brand values communication (Table 3), despite

Table 2
Brand attributes.

Brand attribute	Florence			Milan		
	Freq 2019	Freq 2020	Variation rate 2019–20	Freq 2019	Freq 2020	Variation rate 2019–20
Nature	24%	20%	−16%	14%	28%	100%
Tangible heritage	49%	59%	21%	65%	57%	−12%
Cityscape	30%	32%	7%	38%	18%	−54%
Intangible heritage	5%	20%	278%	3%	18%	406%
Gastronomy	14%	2%	−83%	8%	3%	−64%
Leisure	24%	25%	3%	12%	16%	39%
Sun and Beach	0%	2%	Newly introduced	1%	3%	153%
Business/trade	0%	0%	.	0%	0%	.
Sports	3%	2%	−16%	6%	4%	−24%
Technology	3%	2%	−16%	0%	12%	Newly introduced
Services	16%	7%	−58%	9%	3%	−68%
Things to do	3%	0%	−100%	0%	3%	Newly introduced
Tourist information/agenda	5%	0%	−100%	2%	7%	216%
Institutional and nontourist information	0%	0%	.	0%	0%	.

Brand attribute	Rome			Venice		
	Freq 2019	Freq 2020	Variation rate 2019–2020	Freq 2019	Freq 2020	Variation rate 2019–2020
Nature	17%	14%	−19%	2%	15%	540%
Tangible heritage	69%	70%	2%	64%	64%	0%
Cityscape	10%	9%	−15%	43%	31%	−28%
Intangible heritage	16%	19%	20%	39%	18%	−53%
Gastronomy	6%	3%	−50%	0%	0%	.
Leisure	31%	29%	−8%	39%	31%	−20%
Sun and Beach	7%	0%	−100%	0%	0%	.
Business/trade	0%	0%	.	0%	0%	.
Sports	3%	0%	−100%	0%	2%	Newly introduced
Technology	7%	4%	−37%	0%	16%	Newly introduced
Services	0%	1%	Newly introduced	0%	0%	.
Things to do	0%	0%	.	0%	0%	.
Tourist information/agenda	12%	9%	−24%	0%	13%	Newly introduced
Institutional and non-tourist information	0%	2%	Newly introduced	0%	0%	.

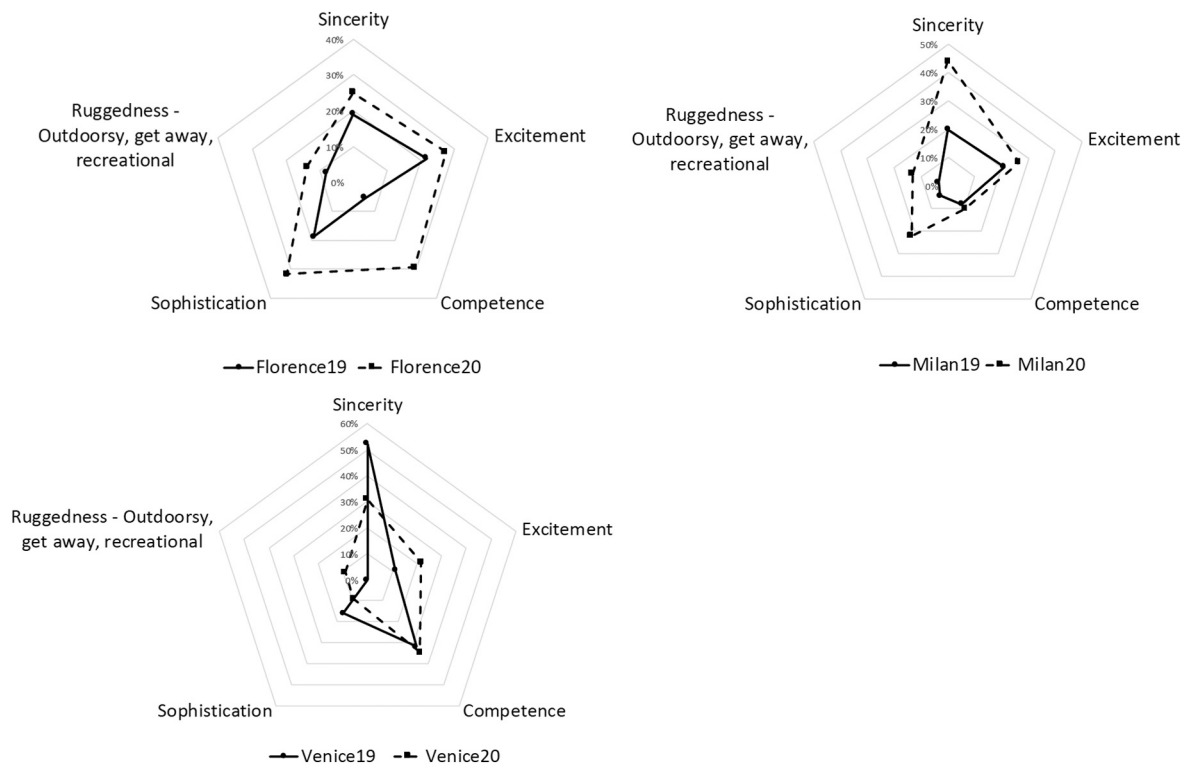


Fig. 2. Changing brand values: a) Florence, b) Milan, c) Venice.

Table 3
Brand values.

Brand values	Florence			Milan		
	Freq 2019	Freq 2020	Variation rate 2019–2020	Freq 2019	Freq 2020	Variation rate 2019–2020
<i>Sincerity</i>	19%	25%	32%	20%	44%	123%
<i>Excitement</i>	22%	27%	26%	21%	26%	26%
<i>Competence</i>	5%	30%	447%	8%	10%	26%
<i>Sophistication</i>	19%	32%	68%	5%	22%	374%
<i>Ruggedness - Outdoorsy, get away, recreational</i>	8%	14%	68%	3%	13%	279%

Brand values	Rome			Venice		
	Freq 2019	Freq 2020	Variation rate 2019–2020	Freq 2019	Freq 2020	Variation rate 2019–2020
<i>Sincerity</i>	20%	21%	1%	52%	31%	−41%
<i>Excitement</i>	21%	15%	−28%	11%	22%	92%
<i>Competence</i>	36%	44%	24%	32%	35%	9%
<i>Sophistication</i>	27%	38%	39%	16%	9%	−43%
<i>Ruggedness - Outdoorsy, get away, recreational</i>	1%	13%	1041%	0%	9%	Newly introduced

few exceptions (*Excitement* −28% in Rome; *Sincerity* −41% and *Sophistication* −43% in Venice). Also, in the case of brand values, elements of continuity and change can be highlighted.

Excitement (referring to dynamic traits of the human being, such as spirited, imaginative and cosmopolitan traits of the brand personality), *Sophistication* (referring to luxury and charm as narrated traits), *Competence* (referring to the intelligent human being and his/her desire of achievement and learning) and *Sincerity* (humanising the brand through personality traits that put the others, the local community and the planet at the centre, such as *down-to-earth, sustainable, honest*) mainly characterised the analysed Italian cultural cities both in 2019 and 2020.

Ruggedness (referring to tough, adventurous traits of individuals), and particularly *Outdoorsy* (stressing the propensity to be immersed in the nature and to value the outdoor for recreation and escape), significantly increased in relevance in 2020 (Florence +68%; Milan +279%; Rome +1041%) or was newly introduced among the communicated brand values (i.e., Venice).

Fig. 2 provides details on brand values change in Florence, Milan and Venice, which, differently from Rome, were characterised by a significant shift in 2019–2020 according to the cluster analysis (Table 1).

In Florence, the reference to brand values generally intensified, especially *Competence* (+447%) and *Ruggedness* (+68%); in Milan, *Sophistication* (+374%), *Ruggedness* (+279%) and *Sincerity* (+123%) saw the most significant increase, while in Venice, *Excitement* (+92%) recorded the highest variation rate between 2019 and 2020 and *Ruggedness* was newly introduced.

5. Discussion

The analysis of the brand attributes and values on Instagram in 2019 and 2020, provided evidence of the city brands' change, responding to the pandemic crisis.

Brand change was undertaken by leveraging brand values and/or attributes differently and with different intensities. The meaning and implications of such differences can be interpreted in light of the specificities of the analysed contexts, including the different weight, characters and socio-economic impacts of tourism in the city.

The Brand Values-Brand Attributes Matrix (Fig. 3) frames the findings and summarises four approaches to the city brand building, ranging

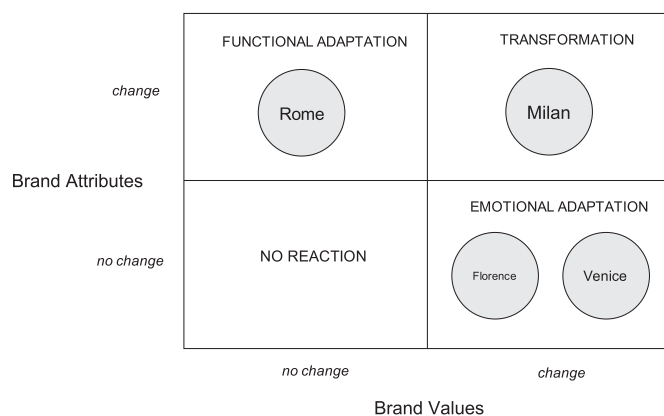


Fig. 3. Adaptive and transformative city branding.

from adaptive to transformative responses to the Covid-19 crisis. This Matrix is an analytical tool that frames city brand change, highlighting different nuances of continuity and discontinuity in the projected brand propositions. It proposes a modality to combine brand attributes and brand values change, as recommended in the literature (Cai, 2002; Llodra-Riera et al., 2015; Vinyals-Mirabent et al., 2019).

The *functional adaptation (repositioning)* signals a significant change in the brand attributes and a redefinition of the set of places and attractions mobilised by the brand. Repositioning the city brand from a cognitive perspective implies a renewed destination spatial configuration and offers.

Rome was a case of functional adaptation, characterised by a growing relevance of the intangible heritage (+20%), at the expense of typical city brand attributes such as *Cityscape*, and new city itineraries and visits, with locals' lifestyle earning centrality. The city's less popular sites and the surrounding metropolitan region with its traditions and popular culture were in focus, hinting at a dispersion of tourists in a redesigned destination.

This represents a possible approach to sustainable brand building. Visitors' dispersion strategies can address the overtourism phenomenon, which usually involves limited areas massively targeted by tourists (Pasquinelli & Trunfio, 2020).

The functional adaptation in Rome is interpreted in light of the significant congestion of the city centre hosting several co-existing urban realities, not only several forms of tourism (including religious tourism) but also primary urban functions of the country capital, including the administrative and governmental ones. The recent attribution of some destination management functions to a municipal in-house company might suggest increasing local awareness of the need to manage tourism through redesigning the destination for a more sustainable city.

The *emotional adaptation (repositioning)* implies the stability of brand attributes and the sharp change of brand values, with an evolution of the city brand personality. It aims to reshape tourists' expectations and attitude towards experiencing the destination, inspiring and educating the responsible traveller to respectful ways to live the tourist city.

According to the findings, Florence and Venice were examples of an emotional adaptation. The increasing relevance of *Competence* (+447%) and *Ruggedness* (+68%) in Florence suggested tourists' deeper engagement with the city, through forms of active learning, well beyond the traditional guided visits to cultural hotspots, including new forms of 'open air' and even adventurous urban experiences. This emphasis on the emotional adaptation of the Florence city brand was supported by the significantly growing role of the *Intangible heritage* attribute (+278%), inviting tourists to search for learning opportunities about local lived heritage and local lifestyle.

In Venice, the emotional adaptation frames the proposal of a new way to experience the city, which downplays the consolidated *Sophistication* (luxury and charming experience) in favour of *Excitement* (daring,

spirited, imaginative, up-to-date and cosmopolitan) and *Ruggedness* (outdoorsy and tough) brand values. This brand personality communicated a new attitude to the city experience combined with the emerging role of *Nature* attribute (+540%), which in Venice recorded the highest variation rate over the analysed timeframe. An emphasis on the natural assets emerged that could be interpreted in light of the city's environmental fragility, which is central to any sustainable development paths.

The emotional adaptation in Venice and Florence can be interpreted in light of the dominant tourism model in their respective development trajectories (Bellini et al., 2017). Venice and “the next Venice” (i.e., Florence) firmly rely on the tourism economy, configuring as a monoculture if looking at their old towns. In these cases, a pattern of change is projected concerning a changing tourists' attitude to the city experience, rather than concerning a radical change of the destination configuration. The invitation to “respect” the city in continuity with the pre-Covid time (i.e., #EnjoyRespectVenezia and #EnjoyRespectFirenze), combined with the invitation to engage with the ‘traditional, honest and wholesome’ city (e.g., *Venetian traces, Uncommon churches; Unusual Florence and Voices of Florence*), well summarise the projected brand change of these two urban contexts. In the face of the pandemic challenges, these cannot renounce to pursue a tourism recovery and a bouncing back to the pre-Covid numbers of tourist arrivals.

Transformation (rebranding) represents the most radical approach to responding to the pandemic crisis, highlighting significant functional and emotional adaptations. In this case, the reconfiguration of the destination brand, based on the changing attributes, combines with the projection of a renewed brand personality and a shifting attitude to experiencing the city. Milan is the only city where transformative rebranding was enacted on Instagram, reacting to the Covid-19 crisis.

In terms of brand values, a sustainable/down-to-earth, sophisticated and outdoorsy city experience emerged with the growing relevance of *Sincerity* (+123%), *Sophistication* (+374%) and *Ruggedness* (+279%). As said, this shift added to the brand attributes change: there was an evident functional reconfiguration of the projected destination with an emphasis on the natural (*Nature* +100%), the social and the cultural assets (*Intangible heritage* +406%), not only in the city but also in the surrounding region. This change occurred at the evident expense of conventional urban tourism assets (*Tangible heritage* -12%; *Cityscape* -54%).

The transformative response to the Covid-19 crisis made a holistic idea of city experience emerge in Milan, triangulating the environmental, social and cultural concerns into an emerging sustainable destination brand. Additional and novel brand attributes and personality traits of a global sustainable city frame post-Covid change.

The transformative rebranding in the case of Milan can be interpreted in light of the marginal role of tourism in the city, adding and diversifying the local economy (Bellini et al., 2017). A more radical transformative mission, hinting at expanding the tourism economy in the broader region, may significantly benefit the urban quality of life in the metropolitan area and make the city-region appealing to the proximity tourism market emerging in the pandemic time. Moreover, the transformative branding may be interpreted as part of a broader city marketing mission pursued by the organisation promoting *Yes Milano* brand, including tourism, talent and investment attractions for local and regional development.

The last quadrant of the Brand Values-Brand Attributes Matrix refers to “no reaction” to the pandemic shock, framed none of the analysed cities. It corresponds to “doing nothing” as a branding option, confirming the pre-existing brand. The sudden and dramatic shock in the tourism markets imposed cities to react to the pandemic challenge and triggered some form of brand change in all the analysed cases.

6. Conclusion and future research

The paper cast light on tourism cities' response to the pandemic, suggesting brand attributes and values change as a significant

component of the approach to face the pandemic crisis. It framed different forms of change and suggested a process of reimagination of future urban tourism scenarios, following three different routes: a) a functional adaptation, implying a reconfiguration of the destination, its spaces, attractions and activities, hinting at a redesign of the urban offering; b) an emotional adaptation, projecting a renewed attitude to the visit, appealing to novel values inspiring the visitors, their expectations and preferences and, accordingly, reshaping the destination experience sought by them; and c) transformation, implying a radical redesign of the destination, both from a functional and emotional perspective.

The city brand analysis on Instagram suggested adaptive and transformative change in two directions. First, an increasing reliance on the city brand personality emerged through an intensified communication of brand values in the post-pandemic. The pre-covid brand values, typical of the analysed cultural city destinations (e.g., *Excitement, Sophistication and Competence*) were maintained and further strengthened. In contrast, a novel brand value - *Ruggedness/Outdoorsy* – became part of the city brand personality. The cultural experience typically sought in the analysed cases (i.e., Florence, Milan, Rome and Venice) was reframed. It suggested a fairly fading notion of conventional urban tourism, in favour of a hybridized city brand: the outdoorsy, escapist, and adventurous attitude to the visit seemed to earn centrality.

The second direction of change regarded the changing weights of brand attributes. Intangible heritage, hinting at the popular culture, traditions and urban heritage, which can be lived outside of the city's mass tourism hotspots, increased in relevance, along with the natural and environmental urban assets.

These directions of change suggested that the analysed cities, which had been protagonists of a lively debate on overtourism, reshaping economic, physical and social landscapes (Dodds & Butler, 2019; Pasquinelli & Trunfio, 2020), attempted to project sustainable brand propositions as an immediate response to the pandemic. On the one hand, the sustainable destination brand was based on the redesigning of spaces and attractors; on the other, it levered the personal values of the ‘responsible tourist’, his/her attitude to experiencing the destination and style of visit.

The Covid-19 crisis represented a discontinuity in the ever-growing tourism market, opening room for change towards sustainable destination brand building. In a time of great uncertainty, city repositioning and rebranding aligned to the post-pandemic tourism market. Increasingly domestic, following the shrinkage of the international tourist flows in 2020, the post-pandemic tourism market made preferences for the “domestic sanctity”, wilderness, isolation and wellbeing emerge (Globetrender., 2020), and the urban destinations had to deal with this trend.

The findings echoed an opportunity to reform tourism towards sustainable, ethical and responsible forms of tourism (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2021). Pre-pandemic city tourism models might be left behind by transformative innovation (Sigala, 2020) and an acceleration towards the inclusive, green and smart city paradigm (OECD, 2020). On the other hand, the emerging sustainable destination brands may result from a contingent effort for tourism recovery, with no reformative ambitions. The revamping of international tourist flows might lead to reconsider present changes and resume pre-pandemic patterns in a context where the pandemic boosted the sudden evaporation of the overtourism impacts and created the priority of an economic recovery. In this case, the sustainable destination brands emerging in the pandemic crisis may not lead to definite discontinuation of the “old” brand propositions (Kavaratzis & Hatch, 2019).

This explorative study opens avenues for future research. A first research stream consists in deepening knowledge on the pandemic effects on the system of values, images and mindset informing tourism stakeholders and their actions. The distinctive focus of the present research was looking for signals of change and experimentation in the vocabulary of images mobilised by the city brand on social media during the Covid-19 crisis. The emerging vocabulary of urban images may help

local stakeholders accept and engage with change. In this regard, research is needed to further knowledge on the contribution of city brands to resetting the system of values and images towards change. This perspective would complement the one focusing on the signals of change emerging from actions, 'grand plans' and policy frameworks, not in focus in this research.

The second stream of research concerns the long-term effects of the temporary change in the face of the pandemic crisis. As discussed, the emerging sustainable destination brand may be a contingent response to assist tourism recovery, aligning to temporarily changed tourists' preferences, without any long-term perspective in terms of sustainable development. In this regard, a promising research area concerns the potential learning process leading to long-lasting effects of temporary city brand experimentation.

Finally, and concerning the previous point, social media-based city branding in the pandemic crisis deserves further attention, to frame the scope and mechanisms of potential transformational learning (Sigala, 2020). The findings suggested that Instagram was the enabling platform for city brand experimentation, promptly introducing brand values and attributes pointing towards sustainable destination brands. Research is needed to better size the role and effectiveness of social media, and the specificities of the different platforms, in shaping new urban imaginaries. These may play as a laboratory for reimagining destination brands in the crisis context, going beyond the mere communicative function and considering their contribution to destination brand building and co-creation.

This study presents limitations. It produced preliminary theoretical and explorative empirical insights based on a limited time of observation. Interpretative hypotheses were discussed, but future studies need to provide broader evidence on the evolution of the city brands, sizing scope and meaning of the emerging change and assessing the degree of consolidation of the immediate branding reactions to the pandemic crisis. More sophisticated methodologies of analysis should be adopted to consolidate further and test the adaptive and transformative brand responses to the crisis. With a broader geographical coverage, a different and wider set of cases would provide further and more nuanced insights into city brand change in post-pandemic time.

Author statement

All persons contributing to the manuscript are listed as authors, and all authors certify that they have participated sufficiently in the work to take public responsibility for the content, including participation in the concept, design, analysis, writing, or revision of the manuscript. Furthermore, each author certifies that this paper has not been and will not be submitted to or published in any other journal or publication.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Cecilia Pasquinelli: Conceptualization, Methodology, Formal analysis, Investigation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing, Visualization. **Mariapina Trunfio:** Conceptualization, Investigation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing, Supervision. **Nicola Bellini:** Conceptualization, Supervision. **Simona Rossi:** Data curation, Writing – review & editing.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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