

# Travel through dynamic landscapes: Exploring key factors in developing visual identities for destination brands

## Utazás dinamikus tájakon: Kulcstényezők a desztinációs márkák vizuális identitásának fejlesztésében

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The competitiveness of destinations is significantly shaped by innovation and experimentation, exemplified by applying Dynamic Visual Identities (DVI) in branding practices. This study aims to define the key factors most considered in developing destination brands with dynamic visual identities. Our research analysed 53 international cases in which designers employed dynamic visual strategies. Commitment, sustainability, and complexity factors were identified in our analysis. Participation through DVI enables different stakeholder groups to be involved in the creative process, making the destination more attractive to visitors and residents also. This research offers a unique perspective in respect of the intersection of design communication (DIS:CO) and tourism.

A desztinációk versenyképességét jelentősen formálja az innováció és a kísérletezés, amelyre kiváló példát jelent a dinamikus vizuális identitások (DVI) alkalmazása a márkázási gyakorlatban. Jelen tanulmány célja, hogy felfedjen olyan kulcsfontosságú tényezőket, amelyeket leginkább figyelembe vesznek a dinamikus vizuális identitással rendelkező desztinációs márkák fejlesztése során. Kutatásunkban 53 olyan nemzetközi esetet elemeztünk, ahol a tervezők dinamikus vizuális stratégiát alkalmaztak. Az elemzés során az elkötelezettség, a fenntarthatóság és a komplexitás témaköröihez sorolható tényezőket tártuk fel. A DVI-on keresztüli részvétel lehetővé teszi, hogy az érintettek különböző csoportjai jelen lehessenek a kreatív folyamatban, így a desztináció nemcsak a látogatók, hanem a helyi lakosok számára is vonzóbbá válhat. A kutatás egyedülálló perspektívát képvisel a designkommunikáció (DIS:CO) és a turizmus metszetében.

**Keywords:** tourism planning, tourism destination image, destination branding, design communication, dynamic visual identity.

**Kulcsszavak:** turizmustervezés, turisztikai imázs, desztináció márkázás, designkommunikáció, dinamikus vizuális identitás.

### 1. Introduction

Competitiveness in tourism is inspired by innovation, as the industry is both a source of innovation and experimentation, and, partly due to economic difficulties, consumers are becoming more price-conscious, with quality becoming an important factor in their travel decisions (PISKÓTI-NAGY 2021). The characteristics of Dynamic Visual

Identities (DVI) used in destination marketing are investigated in this study. Therefore, the research question was, taking tourist destinations worldwide as examples: what are the key factors considered in the development of visuals of destination brands in the case of dynamic visual identities? To answer the research question, we first investigate the theoretical foundations of the two disciplines, tourism and design communication, and then examine the available tourism cases through an inductive analysis. We can determine the characteristics of the digital DVIs used by analysing the cases included in the sample and make practical suggestions for tourist destinations to increase their competitiveness in the age of new tourism by analysing the cases included in the sample.

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As no two destinations are alike, it is inevitably the case that there exists no universally applicable template or idea for a creative concept that can be successfully transferred to develop an optimal visual identity for a tourism brand or place. While DVIs can be classified based on their operational principles (NES 2012, FELSING 2009), all of this ideally does not affect high-quality graphic manifestations. Authentic and original brands aim for a distinctive appearance, as it contributes to the consumer perception of brand quality (TRAN-NGUYEN 2022). However, during their development, brand owners and designers may overcome similar obstacles. The main contribution of this research is the use of a combination of design communication (DIS:CO) and tourism theories. In addition to scientific contributions, our research includes practical recommendations for the future implementation of innovative destination brands.

## 2. Tourism destination image

Tourism is beneficial for the economy, but the promotion of destinations and the tourism growth in the host destination must be promoted by stakeholders in a complex way and in line with sustainability, addressing the negative impacts it entails (PULIDO-FERNÁNDEZ et al. 2019). According to the existing review of literature (JOSIASSEN et al. 2016) defining the image is a difficult challenge due to the complex nature of the phenomenon. Regardless of this, similarities can be discovered in the content elements of the findings. The tourism destination image (TDI) can be defined as a mental representation (MR) of the physical material world (BALOGLU-McCLEARY 1999, KOCK et al. 2016), according to CROMPTON (1979) the collection of beliefs, ideas and impressions that include cognitive, affective, and conative elements (GARTNER 1994, BEERLI-MARTÍN 2004). TDI is extremely complex as it involves the reflection of many phenomena. The most prominent image elements are natural and cultural attractions (ZHONG et al. 2023), but other important image elements are among other components: atmosphere, shapes, materials, social environment, services, and attitudes (AL-ANSI-HAN 2019). ZHONG and the co-authors (2023) found no significant differences between natural and cultural attractions, but there were differences between cultural and natural resource-oriented attractions and man-made venues.

Even if it is not managed, the image is constantly changing since several factors play a role in the TDI formation process (TASCI 2007). The image is generated spontaneously in this case,

and it is likely that the image messages reaching the target groups do not convey the most ideal image of the destination. Average, uncharacteristic image messages are inappropriate and may cause serious harm to the TDI. As a result, the primary task of each destination is to create and shape its own image, which is an important factor in travel decisions. PADRÓN-ÁVILA and the co-authors (2022) found a moderating effect of activities on the relationship between destination image, satisfaction and loyalty. The formation of a logo and slogan that actively contributes to the development of a positive image of the destination is an important part of the process. In practice, this could be a dynamic logo or graphic element that uses variation mechanisms to provide a fully customised user experience (MEGYERI et al. 2020, 2021). The positive TDI affects visitor loyalty, repeat purchase behaviour, satisfaction, love, trust, and positive word of mouth (HAN et al. 2019).

## 3. Dynamic visual identities and tourism destination image

When the image elements are used appropriately, they can lead to place branding based on brand positioning that relies on unique added value to differentiate the area (NORTHOVER 2010). This process can be effectively supported by digital DVIs, which help to create a dynamic and appealing image of the destination, thereby not only attracting potential visitors but also strengthening local self-awareness and pride among the local population. It is important to note that image and brand are related; the two phenomena can be interpreted in the same way in some aspects, and we can now discuss the branding process rather than image shaping. Brand image coincides with the visual identity of the brand, as it depends on an external phenomenon, such as reputation, which is not under the direct control of the “holder of the brand” (GRANDI 2015). ABRATT and KLEYN (2012) found that brand and image are closely related and that brand, including its expression such as visual identity, has an impact on the image. Image is a manifestation of consumer perception and can be directly influenced by the brand (FERREIRA et al. 2022). Visual identity is an appropriate method for this because it is the most visible aspect of the brand and is the tool that managers utilise.

In tourism marketing, place branding is primarily based on the image of the attractions and the location. A place brand represents both the image of a place as perceived by external consumers and the identity of the residents, which cannot exist independently from each other (KAVARATZIS-HATCH 2013). As

a result, in our research, we look at DVIs that appear in place branding. DVI is a special type of visual identity employed to provide direct and tangible expression of brands. In practice, this implies that within the visual identity of a destination employing a dynamic creative concept, change or variability is integrated and deliberately delivered, thereby breathing life into the brand. The beginnings of academic investigation related to DVIs can be traced back to the turn of the millennium (KREUTZ 2001, 2005, 2007). Recent years have witnessed a substantial upswing in the scholarly exploration of this distinctive phenomenon in the fields of design and marketing (FROZI-KREUTZ 2018, CHAVES et al. 2019, LÉLIS 2019, MARTINS et al. 2019, LÉLIS et al. 2020, CUNHA et al. 2021, FEKETE 2022, FEKETE-BOROS 2022, LÉLIS-KREUTZ 2022).

## 4. Research methods

### 4.1. RESEARCH DESIGN

Following the identification of the research gap, a phased design was carried out to ensure a well-organised and logical research process. First, the database was created by collecting the relevant cases. In the second step, data cleaning and filtering were carried out to produce the final dataset. The third step was to derive the attributes of the visual identities through content analysis of the dataset. The fourth step was to answer the research question based on obtained research results.

### 4.2. DATA COLLECTION AND SAMPLING

Throughout our research, we designated individual case studies showcasing DVIs as the units of observation. Data collection has been an ongoing process since Q4 of 2018, employing online keyword searches, the snowball method, and following the portfolios of already included designers. Due to the lack of consensus in literature regarding nomenclature, the use of synonyms found in the mentions was necessary: adjectives like “liquid, fluid, flexible, elastic, mutant, changing, living, dynamic” were combined with “visual identity,” while terms such as “place, city, destination, territory” were paired with “brand” and “visual identity”.

To enhance the intensity of data and the richness of information, it was not a prerequisite for inclusion in the sample that the visual identity be applied to the respective destination. The rationale behind this lies in alignment with SIMON's (1996) perspective on design, which conceives design not as dealing with what is necessary, but rather with

what is possible. Consequently, reference works, competition entries, and materials enriching designers' portfolios that showcase a broader potential of the examined phenomenon were also subjected to analysis.

### 4.3. FILTERING

The sample was tested against MARTINS and the co-authors' (2019) framework for DVI features and variation mechanisms. As the next step guided by the DIS:CO definition (COSOVAN 2009, COSOVAN-HORVÁTH 2016, COSOVAN et al. 2018), we retained instances where dynamic attributes were inherently integrated into the core creative concept, rather than emerging due to inconsistency or subsequent marketing communication. In the accepted items, the dynamism of the visual identity surpasses the mere goal of heterogeneity. The underlying creative strategy of DVIs is closely aligned with the entity they represent. From the initial pool of over 200 cases, the refined sample was distilled into a shortlist of 68 items. By excluding cases with potential plagiarism concerns, underdeveloped or data-deficient designs, as well as cases loosely related to destinations or those with questionable dynamic systems, the analysis was conducted on a total of  $n = 53$  cases.

### 4.4. ANALYSIS

Aligned with the research objectives and the posed inquiries, a qualitative research strategy was employed to unearth patterns embedded within the data. Within this framework, the systematic method of Qualitative Content Analysis (QCA) was utilised to unveil pivotal themes and connections through coding. As a subsequent step in the qualitative analysis, initial results were then juxtaposed against the triple relation system recommended by the DIS:CO development and research process guidelines (COSOVAN 2009, 2017, COSOVAN-HORVÁTH 2016, COSOVAN et al. 2018). This encompassed an evaluation of 1. Material – Immaterial qualities, 2. Permanent – Variable relations, and 3. the existence of Survival – Subsistence – Development associated patterns. As suggested by COSOVAN (2017), this method allows for achieving the creators' optimum during the design process, and conversely, these interrelationships can also be utilised to uncover the latent qualities underlying creative products. Consequently, the data converge into meaningful interpretations, which can be comprehended in the fields of design and marketing as well (FEKETE 2022).

## 5. Results

A noticeable common characteristic evident in a significant portion of the sample is the underlying assumption that a robust and nuanced visual identity has the potential to strengthen the community and positively influence the perception of the destination or tourism brand by shaping and presenting its identity. The phenomenon of DVIs emerges not merely as a communication tool, comparable to a label attached to a product – in this case, the destination – but as a sophisticated element of tourism development that requires a multifaceted approach. In addition to the economic benefits, reports emphasise the importance of promoting and supporting cultural and other social aspects.

### 5.1. ENGAGEMENT

#### 5.1.1. Beneficiary empowerment

In the case of destinations characterised by significant population and extensive area, the employed strategies of co-creation and stakeholder involvement often play a pivotal role. An intuitive manifestation of this approach involves empowering local citizenship to shape their visual environment; however, more sophisticated methodologies can also vitalise a destination's brand. Considering that the daily users of the visual system are, in practice, personnel of the destination's administration and tourism brand managers, their engagement with a design-oriented perspective also offers advantages: it can lead to more effective communication and streamlined operations. Collaborating with residents and visitors, in turn, can facilitate identifying needs and fostering deeper engagement. Consequently, beyond shaping the perception of the new DVI, audience acceptance and endorsement can be achieved, thereby contributing to the cultivation of the destination's image. By transferring control over DVI, it also opens up the possibility for utilising an open-source visual system, enabling the community or local businesses themselves to create coherent yet dynamically evolving visuals representing the area without assistance.

#### 5.1.2. Internal stakeholder participation

The potential of DVIs for destination brands to transcend mere aesthetics and shape the perception and experience of a destination goes beyond the superficial realm. In cases exemplifying high professional standards and recognised results a remarkable feature stands out: in addition to the

external target audience of the destination brand, the needs of internal stakeholders like administration employees and co-workers of the public service sector are also considered. It is a consistent pattern that the development of the most recognised destination DVIs is carried out in collaboration with these stakeholders as well, and this can lead to significant efficiency gains. The benefits can be multifaceted. The inward-facing collaborative approach may reduce the friction associated with the introduction of the renewed destination brand, and it can also bring demonstrable economic benefits, such as the reduction of brand maintenance costs or the long-term advantages of a potentially elongated lifespan of the visual identity.

#### 5.1.3. Engagement of visitors

The shaping of the destination's image can be directly influenced by the management of the destination brand's appearance. The perceptions formed by DVIs can impact visitors on emotional, cognitive, and behavioural levels. Therefore, an important point of engagement can be a DVI capable of communicating various layers of meaning regarding the destination. Through diversity, the visual identity can coherently display elements of cultural life, services, and tourist offerings (attractions, landmarks), historical monuments and heritage (architecture, nature), as well as contents of socially significant initiatives, all simultaneously. This direction empowers the brand's communication with the ability to weave multifaceted visual narratives. In this approach, the DVI is about the destination. The alternative perspective suggests that the purpose of the visual identity could be to encompass the viewpoint of visitors. In this case, noteworthy are the possibilities of mass customisation and personalisation. It's noteworthy that in both cases, significant assistance can be provided by a digital-first angle, as this enables the DVI's various applications to offer user experiences even remotely from the destination, before or after the actual travel.

### 5.2. SUSTAINABILITY

#### 5.2.1. Lifespan

Contemporary expectations enclose the consideration of global factors by economic stakeholders, factors that are equally pertinent to a sustainable future regardless of location. Accordingly, sustainable practices in resource utilisation are progressively disseminating within the realm of tourism. One facet contributing to the sustainability of destination marketing could be the integration of a visual system

conceived with a forward-looking strategy and aligned with gradual renewal. In the instances of analysed destinations, a notable trend emerges – when a visual system is applied, its utility can span over a decade (e.g. New York, Melbourne, Visit Nordkyn). In the case of Amsterdam, this timeframe has already surpassed two decades. Several from around the 2015 period (e.g. Bordeaux Métropole) are still in active use. Without a comparative control group, it cannot be definitively determined whether these facts inherently prove longer lifespans than other forms of visuals. Nevertheless, it is noteworthy that the usage of dynamism in this domain transcends transient trends.

### 5.2.2. Conservation and innovation

Within DIS:CO analysis, the third perspective of Survival – Subsistence – Development associated patterns reveals that the design of destination brand visuality necessitates a consideration of time horizon as another sustainability related pattern. The interplay of the past, present, and future is how the need to conserve inherited historical heritage aligns with contemporary requirements and the community's current interests, plans, needs, during the course of destination brand development. The necessities of future-proofing further nuance these considerations, leading to the emergence of a sustainability challenge in visual design. An optimal DVI can bridge temporality. Regions rich in history often reimagine centuries-old emblems within their DVIs. Oslo and Amsterdam both exhibit such approaches. Embracing distinctive character, a destination may evoke or paraphrase artistically significant or authentically representative architectural treasures in visual forms and hues, thereby honouring its past. Melbourne's case references its future vision, incorporating the perspectives of a growing and changing population, while aiming to create a future-focused image. The orientation toward the future also manifests in instances where the innovative digital tools are used. This is evident in a digital-first design attitude and in visual identities that employ rich media, where motion pictures, procedural design, generativity, or data-driven concepts breathe life into designs.

## 5.3. COMPLEXITY

### 5.3.1. Multidimensionality

The third set of patterns is associated with complexity. In the case of destinations – be they villages, towns, or larger administrative units – it is

characteristic that they possess multidimensional qualities. While in the context of companies, it is relatively easy to establish that the primary impact is exerted on the economy. This is a significant difference compared to destinations, as although we examine destination brands within the framework of tourism marketing, it is evident that destinations place a much greater emphasis on non-economic aspects. Territorial brands do not merely represent entities of economic significance; they are meant to represent societal and cultural realms as well. Situated at the intersection of interconnected interests, they must strike a balance between socially beneficial and economically desirable factors while remaining culturally apt and integral to the lives of citizens, simultaneously providing an experience to visitors.

### 5.3.2. Diversity

A salient feature of the studied cases is that destinations are presented as complex organisms, where beyond the intricacies of various domains, the phenomena of diversity also surface. Multicultural, multilingual audiences demand political awareness, as well as attention to social sensitivity and cultural nuances. Besides beneficiaries and external stakeholders, the fragmented operation of destinations further adds complexity to the task of visual design. A destination's visuality can have the potential to represent various-sized administrative units and the number of organisations involved in their operation can vary accordingly. It can even represent hundreds of sub-brands (e.g. Oslo, Melbourne, NYC) and this way the brand can extend beyond the scope of the tourism. Therefore, according to observations, entities implementing these do not have to compromise the competitive edge provided by recognisability and simplicity.

## 6. Conclusions

The research explored the characteristics of DVIs used in destination marketing in a non-exhaustive manner. We identified three key factors considered in the development of visuals of destination brands in the case of DVIs, which are engagement, sustainability and complexity. Stakeholder engagement in the branding process can help improve destination competitiveness, resolve conflicts, increase the balance of power and promote sustainable tourism (BERITELLI 2011, WONDIRAD et al. 2020, NGUYEN et al. 2022). Sustainability is a key topic in tourism research, with studies focusing on social, economic and environmental sustainability (BRAMWELL

2015, SHARPLEY 2020). Results are focused mainly on the economic and marketing aspects of sustainability, as DVIs that can be used in destination branding can be used over a long period of time, thus reducing the negative impacts associated with rebranding.

It becomes evident that the advantages of DVIs crafted within a solid marketing framework transcend the limitations of traditional visual identities solely transmitting unidirectional communication messages. These DVIs can be comprehended as a holistic brand management instrument capable of augmenting the value of the destination brand, not solely as a passive resource, but as a prospective avenue for proactive brand management. DVIs can function as interfaces encapsulating the layers of the soul of the destination, employing visual signs to convey not only relevant content but also the various narratives and significances associated with the specific destination. It is important to address the complex economic, social, and cultural layers since it is not only a tourist brand in the case of destinations. To ensure long-term benefits in this complexity, it is recommended that multi-dimensional post-implementation assessments be conducted to evaluate the actual impact of branding initiatives.

This research relies on data and publications available online, thus constituting a desk research approach. This method has proven suitable for conceptual exploration and for uncovering novelties with practical implications. However, these interpretations of the cases may not be exhaustive, as these were primarily placed online for communication purposes. Exploring further dimensions provides an excellent opportunity for future research through in-depth case studies and immersive fieldwork.

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