Picturing Denver: the co-construction of destination image on Instagram

Student name: Yvonne van Wanrooij
Student number: 584496

Supervisor: N. van Es

Tourism, Culture, and Society
Erasmus School of History, Culture and
Communication
Erasmus University Rotterdam

Master Thesis
June 14th, 2021

Picturing Denver: the co-construction of destination image on Instagram

Abstract

Located on a plain sandwiched between the imposing Rocky Mountains, the city of Denver, Colorado in the United States is also referred to as the "Mile High City". This nickname, featured prominently in the city's marketing by destination management organizations (DMO's), already evokes a particular destination image (DI). The advent of web 2.0 has revolutionized how DI's are generated and shared as tourists can now upload their images to social media and co-create a destination image. This study examines the interactions and relations between DMO and tourism-generated content (TGC) through the question: *How is a destination image of Denver, Colorado co-created and conveyed on Instagram by both Destination Marketing Organizations and Tourist Generated Content, and how are potential differences between representation and experience of Denver reconciled?*

This study employed netnography to examine the co-creation and dissemination of online DI on Instagram. Both DMO and TGC content were examined to better understand the development of destination image through web 2.0 platforms and the rising influence of "prosumers". Roughly 400 posts were collected from Instagram which were subsequently thematically analyzed through a semiotic framework. The notion of "urban sophistication meets outdoor adventure", as quoted from a DMO post, outlines two distinct place narratives, who interact and intersect to form a holistic image of Denver, which underly the structure of the analysis and discussion of the results.

A destination image of Denver is co-created on Instagram as both TGC and DMO posts contribute to the DI. The line between the two becomes blurred as DMO's increasingly utilize TGC posts to convey DI. As such, the role of DMO's shifts from actively to curating a DI that is negotiated by TGC. Differences between the destination image and embodied experience are reconciled through local citizens as they actively negate the positive nature of the DI as opposed to experience by addressing socio-economic, environmental, and practical issues.

Key words: Destination Image; Place Narratives; destination marketing organization; tourism-generated content; Netnography

Table of Contents

List of Figures

1. Introduction

"Picture yourself here" reads the Instagram biography for the page @VisitDenver (https://www.instagram.com/visitdenver). The page is filled with seemingly endless photographs of rugged mountains, colorful sunsets, vibrant art,

Figure 1 Denver Tourism Logo. [Online image] Visit Denver. Denver.org

and delicious food. Located on a plain sandwiched between the imposing Rocky Mountains, the city of Denver, Colorado in the United States is also referred to as the "Mile High City", as it is located roughly one thousand miles above sea level in elevation. This nickname features prominently on the logo for the city's tourism marketing, along with a minimalistic outline of a mountain, as shown in figure 1. As such, the mere logo for tourism in the city already suggests the importance of the connection between the city and the surrounding Rocky Mountains. The addition of the "Mile High City" in the logo emphasizes a unique aspect of Denver that distinguishes it from other US cities, its elevation. This logo is also utilized as the profile image for the page @VisitDenver. The invitation to picture yourself in the city, alongside the use of the Mile High logo, evokes a particular mental image of the city of Denver, Colorado. While the accuracy and veracity of such an image may be questionable, the impact that a "destination image" has on the selection of eventual tourism destinations has been studied extensively (Gallarza et al., 2002).

While destination images used to be primarily created and disseminated by marketing organizations through campaigns, websites, and travel books, the advent of web 2.0 has revolutionized the way these images are generated and shared (Camprubi et al., 2013). Through social media, tourists can now upload their own images to the internet and, as such, are able to co-create a destination image alongside marketing agencies (Xiang& Gretzel, 2010, p.185). As such, destination image has shifted from a one-way street from marketing companies to potential tourists to a

continual negotiation between the two as the boundaries between producers and consumers become blurred (Ritzer et al., 2012, p.379).

Therefore, this study aims to examine how a destination image is co-created, negotiated, and sustained through an analysis of Instagram posts by tourists and local tourism organizations in Denver, Colorado. In 2019, over 31.9 million leisure trips were spent in the city, a considerable growth compared to the 20 million trips taken in 2010. Additionally, tourism growth in Denver has increased by 68 percent since 2006 compared to the 24 percent national average in the US. However, it is essential to note that these figures are based on both day trips and overnight stays. Furthermore, the Denver tourism industry appears to be geared towards domestic visitors, with an average overnight-trip length of three nights and the most significant number of tourists hailing from the states of California, Texas, and Florida, in the US (Longwoods International, 2019). As such, the data collected during this study is expected to be comprised of posts predominantly created by and catered to American tourists. Based on these statistics, it may be argued that the city of Denver is an emerging destination in the US and, as such, provides an opportunity to study destination image as it is actively created. Therefore, Denver as the subject of this research is relevant because studying an up-and-coming destination allows for an examination of destination image as it is actively being created, as opposed to other US cities that arguably have a well-established image and are well represented in the tourism market, like New York City.

Much of the influential research on the construction of destination image, or DI, acknowledges a divide between consumers and producers of the DI, with tourists on the demand side and destination marketing organizations (DMO's) on the supply side (Crompton,1979; Echtner & Ritchie,1993). However, the advent of Web 2.0 has revolutionized the way destination images are created, shared, and consumed (Camprubi et al., 2013). Potential visitors now have access to seemingly limitless information through social media, blogs, destination websites, and a whole host of

other web platforms. This phenomenon has been dubbed "Travel 2.0" and has necessitated the conception of the term online destination image (Hernández-Méndez et al., 2015, p. 1003). Through social media, tourists are now able to co-create destination images, which has become rather influential in the manner in which tourism information is consumed and searched for (Xiang& Gretzel, 2010, p.186). Social media posts uploaded by tourists are also known as TGC, or tourism-generated content, which may be defined as "travel-related content created and uploaded by tourists on the Internet" (Mak, 2017, p.281). Overall, other travelers' content posted to the internet is primarily received as more trustworthy than content posted by corporations and DMO's (Ayeh et al., 2013, p. 437). As such, TGC arguably plays a vital role in the formation of an online destination image.

Current research on this topic largely centers around either data from DMO's or information gathered from UGC and does not consider the interaction between both (Camprubi et al., 2013). The need for comprehensive research that considers the interaction between both contributions to the formation of online DI is demonstrated through the notion that DMO's do not only upload original content to their social media pages but also re-upload, or share, content created by tourists (Iglesias-Sánchez et al., 2020, p.16). As such, this study intends to contribute to pre-existing research by focusing on both DMO and TGC content as well as the relationship and interaction between them. Additionally, the study of DI has largely been based upon quantitative methods, primarily through either quantitative content analyses or surveys (Gallarza et al., 2002, pp. 65-66). The emphasis on quantitative research has caused a lack of qualitative insight into the formation of DI through social media. Quantitative studies have centered mainly around the way consumers form a destination image, the components that makeup DI, as well as variations in DI between people (Gallarza et al., 2002, pp. 69). As such, more qualitative insights in the way DI is created, disseminated, and negotiated between producers and consumers or even between consumers, are lacking. Therefore, this project intends to add to this gap in the

research by employing the qualitative method of netnography to study the co-creation of DI between user-generated and DMO content.

In this study, the creation of online DI of Denver is examined through the lens of the following research question: *How is a destination image of Denver, Colorado co-created and conveyed on Instagram by both Destination Marketing Organizations and Tourist Generated Content, and how are potential differences between representation and experience of Denver reconciled?* This particular research question focuses on the interaction between both DI sources while also considering the individual contributions of DMO and TGC Instagram posts, respectively. In addition, how potential differences between the expectations of Denver based upon the destination image and the experience of the actual destination by tourists are addressed is examined.

As mentioned before, this study employs the method of nethnography. Nethnography utilizes digital communities and online interactions as a source of data in order to gain an ethnographic understanding of a specific cultural phenomenon (Kozinets, 2010, p.60). Data collection took place in the first two weeks of April of 2021, during which 400 posts were gathered. In addition to the photographs, the interaction between users was also examined as the comment sections of each post were also captured and analyzed. Consequently, a semantically-oriented analysis of the gathered data was employed to describe how Instagram posts are related to their respective meanings and their relation to each other (Messaris, 1997, p.viii).

This study firstly discusses the theoretical framework upon which the research question, and, more broadly, the research project, are based. After a brief discussion on increased mobility and the rise of web 2.0 in recent years, the concepts of place narratives and place branding are considered (Campelo et al., 2014). Subsequently, the concept of destination image is examined more closely and broken down into several components through which DI may be established (MacKay& Fesenmaier, 1997; Echtner& Ritchie, 1993). Consequently, the creation of online destination image is discussed, especially as it relates to social media, e-word-of-mouth, and the

rise of the "prosumer" (Gunn, 1972; Xu & Ye, 2018), which is followed by an examination of TGC, or tourist generated content (Mak, 2017; Narangajavana et al., 2019)

The method section elaborates on netnography and its particular use in the context of this study (Kozinets, 2010). Additionally, this chapter details the analysis process through a semiotics based approach while also outlining several ethical considerations that are of importance to the study (Bell& Milic, 2002; Moreno et al., 2013)

The analysis chapter is divided into three parts that follow the core place narratives established during the data analysis process. Firstly, the narrative of Denver as a city of "urban sophistication" is discussed, followed by an examination of the place narrative of Denver as a city of "outdoor adventure". The last section discusses the intersection between the two narratives described above and examines the destination image of Denver as a city where "culture meets nature". Consequently, the research question is answered in the conclusion, where the implications of this study are discussed, and the limitations of this project are reflected upon in more depth.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 It's a Small World

As a result of advances in technology and transportation, today's world is one of increased mobility (Gale, 2009, p.2). Space becomes relativized as the global flows of goods, people, information, and money increase. As such, distance becomes essentially irrelevant in the modern world (Eriksen, 2007, p.16). Increased global connectivity has consequences for travel and tourism as advances in transportation now make even the most remote locations are now relatively easily accessible for large numbers of the global population. Simultaneously, advances in technology allow potential tourists access to information about destinations, especially with the advent of web 2.0. Web 2.0 can be defined as a collection of interactive and user-controlled online platforms, including, but not limited to, social media, forums, blogs, and online communities (Constantinides & Fountain, 2008, p.232-233). As a result of this increase in global connectivity through web 2.0, information on all destinations imaginable is just a keystroke away.

The wealth of information available through the internet, and social media, in particular, allows consumers to quickly and directly compare and contrast destinations, furthering competition between them. As such, the character of cities and countries is no longer fundamentally rooted in territoriality or local identity but rather in networks of global connections and an increasing emphasis on the difference between destinations (Massey et al., 1994). This is furthered along by the notion that the increased level of globalization also leads to an increased homogenization between destinations, particularly urban areas (Sharpley, 2018, p.77). In order to remain competitive within tourism markets, destinations must therefore focus on distinguishing themselves from others and marketing their unique selling points (Smeral, 1998, p.376). This is especially relevant in the United States, as urban centers are often quite similar in terms of layout and architecture. Such similarities may affect the attractiveness of a specific city in a negative manner (Crouch & Ritchie,

1999) and arguably stems from a desire to model themselves after successful tourism cities in the US, most notably New York City or Los Angeles. As such, making a destination attractive to potential tourists relies partly on a similarity between destinations, which underly the tourism marketing of that city, while the main narrative is focused on uniqueness and difference between cities. Therefore, to become a successful tourism destination in the US, both competition and cooperation between cities are necessary, a phenomenon that is also referred to as coopetition (Crouch & Ritchie, 1999).

The marketing of destinations creates a particular mental image in the consumer's mind, also referred to as the "destination image" (Govers et al., 2007, p.16). These images become more important than reality, as tourism services are intangible and based on experiences (Gallarza et al., 2002, p.57). The marketing of such images falls largely to DMO's or destination marketing organizations. DMO's work to create, promote, and maintain a certain image of a destination, increasingly using social media to do so (Molinillo et al., 2018, p.117). The fundamental role of DMO's in the marketing of destinations is to balance the relationship between the supply and demand sides of tourism to maximize the use of destination resources (Pike & Page, 2014, p.204). In the context of this study, the central DMO for Denver is Visit Denver. Visit Denver is a private, non-profit organization contracted by the local government as the official tourism marketing agency for the city (About Visit Denver: Visit Denver, n.d.). As the primary DMO, they actively communicate an image of Denver that displays the city's unique selling points and plays into consumer demand. This is generally achieved through the use of their website and social media accounts. While websites and online advertising have been part of the DMO toolkit for many years, the use of social media in order to market destinations is a relatively recent development (Hays et al., 2013, p.213).

Simultaneously, social media platforms provide consumers with the opportunity to share their travels. As mentioned previously, web 2.0 is characterized

as interactive and user-controlled. As such, social media platforms are driven mainly by user-generated content, or UGC (Daugherty et al., 2008, p.16). Through platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and Instagram, tourists are now able to share their tourism experiences with broad audiences and in real-time. As such, social media enables consumers to contribute to the construction of a destination image (Qu et al., 2011, p.466). As tourists themselves are able to exert more control over the image of a destination through social media, the role of the DMO inevitably becomes less prominent than it was before the rise of web 2.0 and arguably changes the way in which DMO's create and maintain destination image.

2.2 Making Place

The primary function of a destination image is to create a positive association with the city for (potential) visitors while emphasizing those aspects that make the city, region, or country unique from other destinations (Lund et al., 2018, p. 274). In order to convey a coherent image of a city or region, DMO's, governments, and other tourist organizations seek to create a distinctive place brand that relates to the culture and core values of the destination. In this sense, the tourism place is regarded as a product (Campelo et al., 2014, p.155). Consequently, the natural and built environment, culture, and atmosphere of the destination become valuable resources for promoting and consuming tourism (Lichrou et al., 2008, p. 29). These assets are represented in the DI as different place narratives. These place narratives are not only vital to the construction of a place brand, but they also structure how tourism is experienced, remembered, and distributed. The place narratives that are created and consumed are frequently negotiated through storytelling on social media platforms. As established before, DMO's make use of social media to share positive narratives experienced at a particular destination (Lund et al., 2018, p. 272-274).

The narratives detail experiences, as opposed to the more factual information that was commonplace for DMO's before the widespread popularity of the internet

and social media in particular, such as information on activities, accommodations, and transportation. Through place-narratives on social media, a story is told of experience and adventure, inviting (potential) tourists to imagine themselves at the destination (Rickly-Boyd, 2009, p. 260). If place-branding and place narratives are meant to tell a story of tourism and exploration, the destination image is the promise of such experiences at that specific destination

2.3 Destination Image

The concept of destination image has been studied across various disciplines, such as sociology, geography, and marketing, and has therefore been approached through different methodologies and theoretical lenses (Gallarza et al., 2002, p.57). This multiplicity has inevitably led to a multitude of understandings and definitions of the concept. Generally, DI is conceptualized as a person's mental image of a certain city or country (Gallarza et al., 2002, p.60). For the purposes of this research, the definition of DI is based on sociological approaches to the concept. Crompton (1979) builds upon the general idea by defining *destination image* as: "the sum of beliefs, ideas, and impressions that a person has of a destination" (Crompton, 1979, p.18). In this definition, DI comprises two distinct dimensions, tangible destination attributes, such as hotels, attractions, transportation, and more holistic impressions or images such as mood and atmosphere (Mak, 2017, p.282).

The aspects that make up the DI have also been defined as cognitive, based on what a consumer knows about the destination, and affective, which emotions the destination elicits (MacKay& Fesenmaier, 1997, p.559). These two aspects form the main components of which DI is made up. Based on these components. Echtner and Ritchie (2003) developed a framework through which DI may be measured and charted. They argue that DI may be best understood through three continuums (p.46). The first continuum is attribute-holistic, where attributes are the characteristics that the DI is based upon, the proverbial building blocks, while holistic refers to the overall

image that the attributes add up to. The second continuum is the functional-psychological continuum. Functional components are observable characteristics such as, in the case of Denver, the surrounding Rocky Mountains, as well as hotels and restaurants. The psychological component comprises more abstract concepts, such as the perceived friendliness of the local population and a sense of adventure. The last continuum is common-unique through which the aspects of the previous continuums may be considered (Echtner& Ritchie, 1993, p.3.) These three continuums make up a three-dimensional model through which the destination image can be analyzed (figure 3).
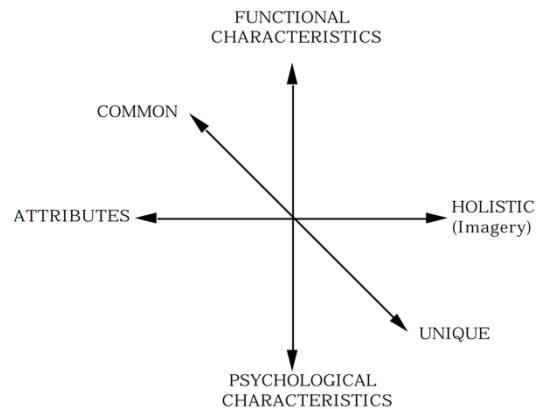
Figure 2 Components of destination Image. Echtner, C. M., & Ritchie, J. R. (2003). The meaning and measurement of destination image. Journal of tourism studies, 14(1), 37-48. [Reprinted from: Journal of tourism studies, 2(2), 1991, 2-12.

The frameworks and concepts described above serve as a foundation for the approach to DI in this study. However, it must be acknowledged that the majority of literature generated on the subject of DI is quantitative in nature (Gallarza et al., 2002, pp. 65-66). As such, while the need for holistic approaches to DI has been theorized, the emphasis still lies principally on quantifiable attributes, such as specific functional components of the DI like tourist attractions or accommodations, instead of the holistic image (Kislali et al., 2020, p.266). While DI, in theory, can be approached through a framework of continuums, most research only focuses on a section of such a framework. For example, some studies only focus on the functional-psychological continuum while others emphasize the attribute-unique spectrum, thereby not considering the relationships and interactions between the various continuums of the model.

In the context of this study, elements of Denver's overall D have been examined previously. Craft breweries and craft beer tourism have been examined as case studies of urban regeneration of industrial areas, especially in Denver's Lower Downtown

(LoDo) neighborhood (Reid & Gatrell, 2017; Weiler, 2000). Additionally, Lindsay (2018) examined how the construction of the architecturally unique building for the Denver Art Museum helped cement the place narrative of Denver as a cultural city. Lastly, marijuana tourism in the state of Colorado has been examined as the enormous rise in popularity in this form of tourism has precipitated a rise in public health concerns, as tourists are often ill-informed of the protentional health risks associated with marijuana use (Kang et al., 2016). This particular study will combine the place narratives outlined above, as well as include others, in order to examine DI holistically. Photographs that depict elements of such narratives, for example, images of beers or famous buildings, are used as a marketing tool for the city in order to either increase (potential)tourist interest in Denver or to increase the image of the city as cultured and cosmopolitan (Lindsay, 2018)

Lastly, it is crucial to address that much theory on DI has been generated before significant advances in technology, most notably web 2.0, that shape the world today. These developments necessitate a rethinking of traditional image formation processes (Choi et al., 2007, p, 120) as the way in which DI is created, sustained, consumed has been substantially altered through the use of social media by both DMO's and consumers. Subsequently, a closer examination of the concept "online destination image" is warranted.

2.4 Online Destination Image

Over the last few years, with the advent of web 2.0, a new source of information has become integral to the formation of destination images. Through social media, the phenomenon of "Travel 2.0" has been created as tourism information and content may now be shared at a quick pace and high volume (Leung et al., 2012, p.54). Subsequently, online representations of DI have become more prominent. *Online destination image* may be defined as "the online representation of the collective beliefs, knowledge, ideas, feelings and overall impressions of a destination" (Mak, 2017, 282).

A crucial aspect of this definition is that the online DI is a collective representation instead of the sum of one person's beliefs, as the definition of DI by Crompton (1979) examined earlier suggests. Through an emphasis on the collective DI, Mak (2017) focuses on the desired destination image as it is projected by DMO's instead of how (potential) visitors perceive that DI. It is here that the difference between DI, as discussed above, and online DI becomes more explicit, as the more "traditional" concept of DI emphasis the individualistic perception of destinations.

In order to examine the differences between DI and online DI further, an understanding of how DI is communicated is necessary. The communication of DI occurs through various agents, positioned along a continuum from induced to organic. (Gunn, 1972, p.110-111). The induced end of the continuum consists of images produced and shared by DMO's for marketing purposes. The organic side relies upon personal experiences where images are formed through visiting a certain destination. Other sources of information such as word-of-mouth from friends and relatives are positioned more towards organic, or such as news reports, which lean more towards induced (Gartner, 1993, 16). As tourism services are products of experience, they cannot be evaluated or tested prior to their consumption. Therefore, potential visitors tend to rely on the reviews of others. Before the internet, word of mouth from relatives or acquaintances formed one of the most important sources of such information (Hernández-Méndez et al., 2015, p. 1002).

With the development of web 2.0, the way tourism information is shared has changed drastically. Potential visitors now have access to seemingly limitless information through social media, blogs, destination websites, and a whole host of other web platforms. This phenomenon has been dubbed "Travel 2.0" and refers to the application of word-of-mouth distribution of DI to the twenty-first century, facilitated by modern-day technology (Hernández-Méndez et al., 2015, p. 1003). Also referred to as electronic word of mouth (eWOM), web 2.0, and social media platforms, in particular, allow tourists to create, share, and trade information about destinations.

As anyone is able to upload content and reviews anonymously, the credibility of eWOM is generally considered as somewhat lower than more traditional forms of WOM (Chen & Law, 2016, p. 358). However, content posted to the internet by other travelers is largely received as more trustworthy than content posted by corporations and DMO's (Ayeh et al., 2013, p. 437). Corporate entities have made use of this difference in perception by employing content generated by tourists in the marketing of destinations, a development which is extensively examined in the section about "tourism generated content" below.

Aside from variances in the manner of dissemination of DI, another difference between the concept DI as a whole and online DI is that online DI may be regarded as more dynamic. Through social media, information may be disseminated more quickly and in higher volumes. The online DI is accumulative, as new information is continuously being added, as opposed to more 'traditional' sources, like travel books, of DI are often more static (Hunter, 2016, p.222). The transitional nature of online DI means that how tourists perceive a destination is highly dependent on several dynamic factors such as time, language, and the platform on which the content is posted (Lee et al., 2014, p,241). While online DI is contingent on such dynamic factors, they do not influence all aspects of the DI at the same level (Lai & Li, 2012, p.1377). Instead, the online DI consists of several established cores that form the larger narrative of a destination, while surrounding peripheral aspects of DI are subject to factors such as time and place (Xu & Ye, 2018, p.136). As such, DI consists of relatively stable core place narratives surrounded by more marginal narratives contingent upon fluctuating factors and therefore more sensitive to change.

While travel content created by consumers forms an integral part of online DI, marketing agencies and corporations have also taken to travel 2.0 to promote destinations. In the past, the marketing of destinations largely fells to destination marketing organizations. While DMO's still work to create, promote, and maintain a certain positive image of a destination, they increasingly use social media to do so

(Molinillo et al., 2018, p.117). According to Hays et al. (2013), DMO's primarily regard social media as an extension of their promotional efforts, changing little about the content of messages across platforms. As such, the online DI created by DMO's exists somewhat separately from the DI created by consumers and is intended to merely create a positive image and differentiate from other destinations (Lim et al., 2012, p. 197). In other cases, DMO's take a more interactive approach and make use of social media's inherent social qualities to interact and converse with consumers (Hays et al., 2013, p. 222). Through interactions, such as a DMO account asking tourists, "what is your favorite…. about this destination?", an online destination image may be co-created by marketing organizations and tourists. When discussing the role of DMO's in creating online destination images, it is crucial to consider the role of paid advertising and influencers. As consumer-created content is often regarded as more credible than content created by companies, DMO's might pay consumers to review their destinations positively. These practices effectively blur the boundaries between consumer content and blatant advertising. This issue will be reflected upon more in the subsequent treatment of "tourist generated content".

In this study, the specific focus is on the online destination image. Therefore, this research will refer to the concept of online destination image as defined and discussed above when referring to DI. For this purpose, it is necessary to establish the distinction between the projected online DI and the perceived online DI.

Projected DI is primarily based on induced sources of DI, as well as some more organic sources, like word-of-mouth from family and friends. As such, projected DI is especially relevant before a trip is undertaken and serves largely as a marketing tool. On the other hand, perceived images of a destination result from the interaction between the perceived DI and personal characteristics. Previous experiences, opinions, or ideas that the (potential) visitor may hold can influence how a certain projected DI is perceived (Ferrer-Rosell & Marine-Roig, 2020, p.229). These concepts, and the dialogical relationship between them, are especially relevant when applied to

online DI, as the popularity of web 2.0 and social media, in particular, can affect both the projected and perceived DI (Choi et al., 2007, p.120).

When considering perceived and projected DI in the light of online DI, it is also important to note that online DI does not only play a role in the formation of a destination image, but it also has to capacity to direct how the destination is experienced. As online DI helps shape the perception of a certain locale, tourists then seek out those experiences that will confirm the representations and notions that they have formed before leaving their homes, forming a hermeneutic circle of representation (Caton& Santos, 2008, p.8). However, the experience of tourists may not necessarily correspond to the projected destination image as image and reality are often actively negotiated and, at times, contested during the travel experience, shaping the perceived DI of tourists. As such, the hermeneutic circle of representation is arguably not rooted in the confirmation of projected DI but instead in the sharing of perceived DI through social media. As tourists themselves are able to contribute to the DI by sharing their own images and experiences online, their perceived DI becomes part of the overall projected DI, which in turn informs other potential tourists. In the context of destination image, the desire to recreate certain images is fairly critical as it reinforces the existing DI. As a result, the similarity amongst, and the volume of TGC posts, make these images more visible across social media, strengthening existing elements of the DI while also lending credibly to them. Consequently, destination image and experience are continually negotiated through tourist experiences.

As such, the transmission of DI is no longer a one-way street from the supply side (DMO's) to the demand side (Consumers). Instead, consumers now have the ability to co-construct the DI (Mak, 2017, p. 282). As such, the lines between perceived and projected have become distorted as tourists are now able to project their perceived DI through social media. In the framework of this study, cursory examinations have revealed that DMO pages for the city of Denver feature content

made by tourists on their own respective pages, a development that both blurs the lines between perceived and projected DI as well as necessitates a closer examination of "tourism generated content".

2.5 Tourism Generated Content

As established above, tourists are now able to co-create destination images through social media, which has become rather influential in the manner in which tourism information is consumed and searched for (Xiang& Gretzel, 2010, p.186). With millions of people posting their travel experiences on blogs, Instagram, Facebook, and countless other platforms, social media has become a primary source of travel-related information (Sun et al., 2015, p.543). Social media posts created by users are referred to as "user-generated content" or UGC. *UGC* is defined as digital information uploaded by users and made available or "shared" through social media (Dioko et al., 2011, p.292). Crucial to this definition is the notion that UGC is based upon the general public or private users instead of paid professionals. As discussed before, in the context of online destination image, UGC serves as an electronic form of word-of-mouth advertising. Through the process of posting about and reviewing products and services on social media, consumers become an essential part of the development of the image associated with that product or service. The creators of UGC content are also referred to as "prosumers", where they serve simultaneously as producers and consumers, effectively obscuring the boundaries between the two (Ritzer et al., 2012, p.379).

Tourist-generated content, or TGC, can be considered a subset of UGC, focusing exclusively on travel-related content. TGC can be defined as "travel-related content created and uploaded by tourists on the Internet" (Mak, 2017, p.281). Consequently, TGC may also be considered as an example of so-called eWOM. As discussed earlier, word-of-mouth is regarded as an important 'organic' source of DI. Therefore, TGC may also be considered as a more 'organic' form of online DI. While the term "tourist generated content" clearly delineates its primary subjects as tourists,

it is vital to acknowledge that another group of people play a role in the formation of destination image outside of visitors and DMO's. Local residents form an integral part of any destination, and by extension, visitors' experiences (Freire, 2009, p.435). Locals are not only involved in the facilitation of tourist experiences, but they may also benefit from or experience adverse effects of tourism. Additionally, Zenker et al. (2017) contend that residents are jointly influenced, alongside tourists, by destination images (p.25). In addition, locals may also contribute to the creation of DI through social media. In the context of this study, it is prudent to acknowledge and include the role of local residents in the creation of online DI, as they actively participate in the negotiation of destination image and experience through social media.

While TGC thus plays a fundamental role in the creation of online DI, not all tourist-generated content contributes equably to the perceived DI. Within the induced-organic continuum, Narangajavana et al. (2019) recognize three types of contributors to online DI based on the seminal work of Granovetter (1973) on strong and weak ties. Firstly, there are "strong-tie" sources, made up of people who have a high frequency of interaction, most commonly friends and family (p. 255). These interactions often possess emotional or affective qualities, as it is supplied by people known in "real life" (Dickinson et al., 2017, p.165). Second are the "weak-tie" sources, which refer to interactions with people outside the circle of family and friends, such as acquaintances and, especially relevant to social media, strangers (Narangajavana et al., 2019, p. 256). These interactions tend to be lower in frequency and are particularly important in the case of TGC, as tourists can derive information from blogs, social media posts, or travel reviews left by strangers. Strong- and weak-tie sources are the two primary sources of online DI when it comes to TGC. The last contributor to online destination image is generally tied to DMO generated content and is referred to as "tourism-tie sources" (Narangajavana et al., 2019, p. 256). DMO pages and content are neither generated by strong or weak tie sources, as they are instead created and uploaded by companies for the purpose of advertising. Therefore,

they are referred to as tourism-tie sources. However, the lines between such classifications are arguably less unambiguous as several critical aspects of social media come into play.

One factor that blurs the lines between these TGC based ties and DMO based ties are so-called "influencers". Social media influencers are people that have established a large following on a particular platform, occasionally even multiple platforms (Francalanci & Hussain, 2015, p. 19). Not considered "celebrities" in a more traditional sense, influencers are "ordinary people" that gain a sizeable enough audience to attract interest from advertising and marketing companies (Khamis et al., 2017, p.196). While influencers could be classified as weak-ties, a high level of interaction between a general user and an influencer may also be classified as a strong tie. Additionally, Influencers may also get paid/ receive benefits to promote a certain product or destination. While such rewards can take a monetary form, often influencers are compensated with free flights, accommodations, meals, services, or any combination thereof. As TGC content is broadly regarded as more credible, DMO's attempt to take advantage of that information through the use of paid influencers (Chatzigeorgiou, 2017). In this sense, influencers are arguably the ultimate prosumers, transcending the boundary between TGC and DMO content. While such marketing schemes could be beneficial to tourism development at that specific destination, they might also create dissonance between destination image and experience, causing tourists to contest the projected DI actively.

The use of social media by DMO's to promote destinations is characterized by a predominance of visual communication through platforms such as Instagram, Flickr, and Pinterest (Palazzo et al., 2021, p.3). As discussed before, DMO's tend to generally view social media as an extension of their marketing efforts. As such, they may employ a more top-down approach, as opposed to the bottom-up method of TGC (Mariani et al., 2016, p.329). In this respect, the role of DMO's tends to be characterized as one that is analogous to the marketing firm or department behind any other type of

commercial goods or products. However, Skinner (2018) argues that DMO's encounter more severe limitations, as opposed to other brands, as the influence of TGC continues to grow in significance. As a result, a DMO is only able to manage rather than truly market the destination image (p.12).

This argument is fortified by the notion that DMO's do not only publish original photographic content but also share or re-post content created by tourists (Iglesias-Sánchez et al., 2020, p.16). The re-posting of TGC content through DMO channels exemplifies one of the ways in which DMO's can make use of TGC content in order to amplify the online DI that is desired. Another way in which this may be accomplished is through the employment of influencers, as discussed earlier. Both methods are endemic of social media across all platforms.

3. Methods

3.1 Data Collection

In this study, data was collected through netnography. Designed by Kozinets (1997), netnography is ethnographic research based upon online fieldwork. The method is regarded as less obtrusive than traditional ethnography as it relies less heavily on overt participation and interviews (Kozinets, 2002). Initially, the method served primarily as a tool for business studies researchers to understand consumer behavior. However, the importance of the method for other disciplines, such as sociology and anthropology, has since been recognized (Tavakoli & Wijesinghe, 2019, p.48) Nethnography utilizes digital communities and online interactions as a source of data in order to gain an ethnographic understanding of a specific cultural phenomenon (Kozinets, 2010, p.60). Netnographic data may be drawn from interactions between real people and researchers, or it may stem from the copious number of digital archives the internet houses (Kozinets, 2015). Consequently, the position of the researcher may vary from merely "lurking" to overtly participating. According to Kozinets (2007), netnography is best practiced in the middle-range of these two research modes, enabling the researcher to incorporate close examinations and more distant observations of digital communities.

This study focuses on content generated by both DMO's and tourists, as well as the interaction between them. Particularly, this research focuses on one type of communication in specific, photographic TGC and DMO content. MacKay and Couldwell (2004) argue that travel photos are a reliable source to draw upon in order to understand DI as they may convey multiple place narratives and meanings and are relatively quick to consume. Additionally, photographs are often easier to memorize, and as such, recreate than mere text. The consumer is often able to connect on a more emotional level with an image instead of just words about a destination (Barbe et al., 2020, p. 597). As photographs take up an essential part of the formation and reinforcement of online destination images, this study is conducted on Instagram.

Instagram is a social media platform that is primarily concerned with visual content. Users have their pages, which serve as an online photo album, accessible by other users (Fatanti & Suyadnya, 2015). With over 1 billion active users worldwide and over 500 million daily users, as of 2019, the platform enjoys great popularity (Clement, 2019).

Fatanti and Suyadnya (2015) argued that Instagram is a favored marketing tool out of all social media platforms by DMO's as it allows for the creation of emotional connections between the images and the (potential) visitors while also providing high impact, low-cost marketing (p. 1093). The decision to select Instagram as the platform for this research was based upon the arguments and figures outlined above. In addition, the intensive use by both DMO's and tourists, coupled with the visual nature of the platform, provided an ideal stage to examine online destination image.

The decision to employ netnography in this particular study followed the selection of Instagram as the research site. Subsequently, it was logical that this study should employ a method that was specifically focused on interactive online environments such as social media platforms. Nevertheless, this research subject could also have been suitably approached through a more quantitively oriented content analysis. The decision to employ nethnography instead of content analysis was two-fold. Firstly, as mentioned in the introduction, the study of DI has largely been based on more quantitative methods, producing a lack of qualitative insight into the formation of DI (Gallarza et al., 2002, pp. 65-66) As such, this study intended to add to this gap in theory by employing netnography. Secondly, as argued by Kozinets (2007), good netnography is practiced somewhere on the middle range on the axis between observation and participation. Unlike content analysis, which is based firmly on the observational side of the spectrum, nethnography has the ability to zoom in to the personal level while retaining the possibility to regard the data on a macro- or society-level as well. Therefore, netnography allows this study to consider both the content, as well as deeper meanings and connections in the collected data. Regarding

the level of researcher presence, this particular research has leaned more towards observation, as it primarily centers around Instagram posts. Various pages and feeds were "liked" and "followed" by a specific account, created for the purpose of this study, which establishes a quite overt position of the researcher. This particular process, its potential consequences, and the reasoning behind these choices are examined in more detail below.

As discussed before, netnography has its roots in more traditional forms of ethnography. As such, the method is conducted along the same steps as traditional ethnography: planning, entrée, data collection, interpretation, and representation (Kozinets, 2010, p.61). The planning stage of this project started with the selection of the destination. As mentioned previously, Denver was chosen because recent tourism statistics indicate that the city is experiencing considerable growth in its tourism sector and, as such, may be regarded as an emerging destination in the US. Tourism growth in Denver is fast outpacing the country's growth as a whole (Longwoods International, 2019). Additionally, the Denver tourism industry appears to be geared towards domestic visitors, with the most significant number of tourists hailing from within the country (Longwoods International, 2019). As such, this research expected to primarily encounter posts created by, and catered to, American tourists, an anticipation that proved correct early on in the data-gathering process. Denver as the subject of this research is relevant because studying an up-and-coming destination allows for an examination of DI as it is actively being created, as opposed to cities that arguably have a well-established DI, like New York City.

For entrée, a new Instagram account was created, @mathesisresearch, through which several pages and hashtags were "followed". Several DMO accounts, such as @visitdenver, @cityofdenver, and @realcityofdenver, were followed and formed the primary source of DMO data. The pages were selected based on the criteria that they were run by tourism organizations, had over 1 thousand followers, and had posted more than 200 times over the last few years. While the minimum amount of 200 posts

served to ensure that the page was active and contained enough useable data, the 1000 followers limit aided to ensure that the majority of the posts contained some interaction with other users in the form of comments, which could then be included in the analysis. Similarly, a selection of hashtags was also followed, under the criteria that they contained at least 200 posts over the last few years as well. Some of the hashtags that were followed were #visitdenver, #denvertravel, and #denvertrip. A complete overview of all hashtags followed may be found in appendix A.

The creation of a new account constituted a rather overt researcher presence. The decision to take a more explicit and public position within this study was founded on several practical and ethical considerations. Firstly, a dedicated account for this study has provided new sources for data through the Instagram algorithm. As accounts and posts were liked and followed, the Instagram algorithm automatically suggested other content related to tourism in Denver. This feature was quite valuable when collecting data on the platform and resulted in the discovery of more useful hashtags, which subsequently yielded valuable data. The choice to name the account @mathesisresearch was made with the intention of transparency and trust. More traditional forms of ethnography offer researchers more opportunities to present themselves, their credentials, and intentions in order to gain participant's trust. Catterall and Maclaran (2002) suggest that a dedicated web page, or in this case an Instagram page, may serve a similar function. As a result, this study was conducted quite overtly, a measure that I deemed appropriate through the reasons outlined above. Additionally, it must be noted that the extraction of data itself was less intrusive in terms of research manipulation as it did not require interviews or direct contact with others whatsoever. Therefore, my presence has arguably gone unnoticed in any case. As such, I do not fear that overtly stating my intentions has caused harm to the integrity and quality of this research project but rather provided this study with transparency and honesty.

Data collection took place during the first two weeks of April 2021, in which I spent one hour on Instagram every day and collected data that has been posted by the previously mentioned sources. While this two-week period had been explicitly reserved for online fieldwork, data gathering and analysis continued until a point of saturation was reached. By "following" the pages and hashtags, any new content posted to them appeared in one "feed", simplifying the data gathering process. A feature of Instagram that further simplified the data gathering process is the 'archive' feature, which allowed for an initial sorting of posts. Posts were saved and archived into different folders, providing a way to preliminarily sort data based on specific themes or categories. In addition to archiving posts on Instagram, screenshots were made in order to ensure access, even when the content gets deleted by the user. This study also focused on the negotiation of DI between DMO's and UGC. To this end, comments under posts were also be analyzed. Through screenshots, these comments have been collected and coded alongside the posts.

Another consideration in the data gathering process was the sheer volume of data that is available. For example, a quick Instagram search for the hashtags #Denvertravel and #VisitDenver yielded over 3.7 million results in total. In order to mitigate this quantity of posts, the pages and hashtags were followed. As such, a selection of them appeared in a singular feed, sampled randomly through the Instagram algorithm. This method ensured that all sources were roughly equally represented in accordance with the number of posts associated with each account or hashtag. While the focus on current data serves to understand the creation of DI as it is happening in real-time, some considerations were made. Looming over this study, and life, in general, was the COVID-19 pandemic. As such, it was to be reasonably expected that the consequences of the pandemic were reflected heavily in current posts about the city of Denver. As this proved the case during the early stages of data collection, I have elected to focus on the most current years of active tourism, pre-COVID-19.

The most important difference between netnography and content analysis in this stage of the research process was that the nethnographic method stresses the need for close examination of the online environment for salient cultural information, implied rules and customs, and meanings (Kozinets, 2010, p.96). To this end, observations and remarks were written down in field notes during the data collection process. Additionally, the choice for nethnography was based upon the notion that nethnographic findings may capture broader perspectives and trends through a macroscopic lens while simultaneously permitting the researcher to zoom in on the individual level when desired, a combination of observational levels that is neither available through quantitative content analyses nor traditional qualitative research (Gretzel, 2017, p.119). As such, netnography was particularly useful for the purposes of this study, as this research considers both individual posts from DMO's and TGC, as well as examines both sources of data through a more macroscopic lens.

3.2 Data Interpretation and Representation

The next phase in the research process consisted of the analysis of the collected posts and fieldnotes. The gathered data, which consisted of roughly 400 posts, were coded and analyzed through the qualitative analysis software NVivo. I elected to use this particular program because I have had numerous previous experiences with the software. The coding process was approached through a semiotic framework. Semiotics, in its most elementary definition, encompasses the study of signs. A sign, or symbol, may be anything and everything that stand for something else (Eco, 1976, p.7). Semiotics concerns itself with the study of how meanings are made and represented through signs (Chandler, 2017, p.2). While this particular analysis cannot be regarded as a 'true' semantic approach, it nevertheless borrowed heavily upon the concepts provided by the discipline. As such, data analysis was based upon three functions of, specifically visual, data within a semiotic approach. These functions are ideational, interpersonal, and textual (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2006, p.42). The

ideational function refers to the notion that semantic data is able to represent a deeper meaning beyond what is pictured. The interpersonal faction refers to the notion that semantic data represents the social relationship between producer, consumer, and objects. Lastly, the textual function positions semantic data in context to other data. That is, multiple sources of data, in this case, photographs, work together to form a greater narrative (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2006, p.44). These three functions of semantic data informed the coding process through a focus on meaning, interaction, and context.

Consequently, a semantically-oriented analysis of the gathered data described how Instagram posts were related to their respective meanings as well as their relation to each other (Messaris, 1997, p.viii). This allowed me to connect different posts and examine overarching narratives between posts, resulting in several themes through which data analysis has been structured. An excerpt of the resulting codebook is included in appendix B. The emerging themes and topics, as well as connections between them, were visualized in a thematic map, which may be found in appendix C. Additionally, the interaction between accounts and pages was analyzed through the comment sections, allowing for a closer examination of the interaction between TGC and DMO content. The addition of a semantics-oriented approach allowed for an extension of the research beyond content analysis in the analytical phase of the study. Whereas content analysis yields largely quantifiable data, the addition of semiotics allows for a richer analysis of meanings and relationships, which provided this study ability to draw upon overarching themes and narratives as well as examine posts on a more individual level (Bell& Milic, 2002, pp. 203-204).

3.3 Reflexivity and Ethics

Throughout the entire research process, reflexivity was an important step that served to elevate the quality of data collection and data analysis. The practice of reflexivity may be defined as a "deconstructive exercise for locating the intersections

of author, other, text, and world" (Macbeth, 2001, p.35). The practice necessitates a thorough consideration of not only the subject of the study but also the researchers' own assumptions, opinions, and position in the field of study as well, which is commonly accomplished through the keeping of a journal (Watt, 2007, p.82). For the purposes of this study, I have kept a research journal in which I reflected upon my role in the research process as well as reflected upon any preconceived notions and biases I may have held prior to this study. While the existence of such ideas and stereotypes is arguably unavoidable, the recognition of their existence allowed me to critically reflect upon my decision-making process during every phase of the research project.

Through the use of a research journal, I have found that I was continually comparing and contrasting Denver to other US cities. While I have never visited Denver in person, I have visited many major cities in the United States. As such, I occasionally caught myself relying upon my personal experiences to determine which aspects were important in my analysis instead of relying mainly on my data. Comprehensive continuous reflection upon the research process allowed me to recognize this pattern and make corrections in order to make sure that my decisions were primarily informed by the available data, with my prior knowledge and experience occasionally playing a supporting role.

Lastly, some ethical considerations must be taken into account. As social media is a relatively new area of research, several ethical issues are still being debated. The most prominent of these is the issue of private vs. public data. Overall, there appears to be a consensus that the public or private nature of postings are determined, to a certain extent, by the type of online platform itself and whether there is a reasonable expectation of privacy for the user of that respective platform (Moreno et al., 2013, p.709; Townsend& Wallace, 2016, p.5). This study dealt with two types of data, posts from tourists and posts from DMO's. DMO's have public accounts run by a marketing company for the purposes of advertisement and promotion. The collection of data

from this source was therefore not ethically objectionable through the standard established above. The ethical standards for collecting data from private users are a bit more complex. However, it is important to note that I could only see posts from those users who have set their accounts to public, thereby agreeing to share their content with anyone who wishes to see it. In addition, the use of certain hashtags in the posts ensured that the content is viewable when that particular hashtag is searched for on Instagram. The collection of data from users was therefore not ethically objectionable through the standard of expectation of privacy. Nevertheless, all pages and images discussed and depicted in this work were anonymized as names, faces, and profile pictures were blurred.

4. Analysis

"Denver is a city where urban sophistication meets outdoor adventure". This quote, taken from the DMO post in figure 4, summarizes the holistic destination image of Denver perfectly. The post mentions both the city and the Rocky Mountains surrounding it while also referring to Denver as the Mile High City and leisure time,
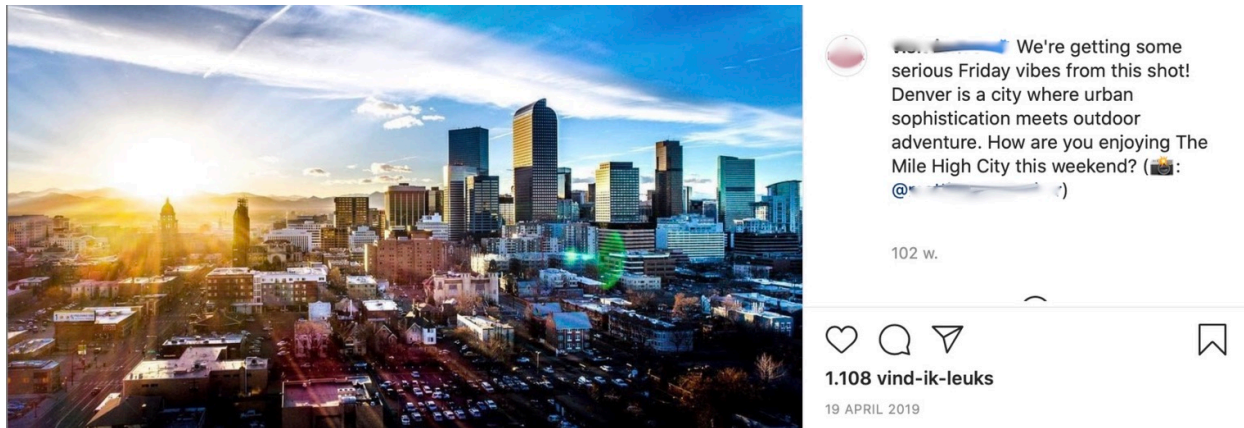

Figure 3 DMO post #13

the latter being a recurring theme throughout many DMO posts. Additionally, the image shows the Skyline of downtown Denver, showing off its unique architecture and particular "instagrammability". This term refers to images that are regarded as exceptionally well suited to the Instagram platform, as there are photogenic or otherwise aesthetically pleasing, often resulting in a high number of likes or comments. "Instagrammability, as it relates to online DI, is discussed in more depth in the subsequent section. The photograph also conveys sunshine and nice weather, another aspect that is emphasized throughout DMO content. Lastly, the hint of mountaintops peeking through the background emphasizes the city's location in the middle of the Rocky Mountains. Thus, both the caption and the accompanying photograph encompass several place narratives that are central to the DI of the city.

As such, this post serves as the foundation for the discussion of the data. This chapter consists of three sections, each of which deals with a specific place narrative. The first section examines the DI of Denver as a city of urban sophistication, focusing on the narrative of creativity, vibrancy, discovery, and gastronomy. The second section

centers around outdoor adventure and examines the narratives of Denver in relation to the surrounding Rocky Mountains as an outdoor, physically active city of exploration and adventure. The last section is titled "urban sophistication meets outdoor adventure" and discusses how those two narratives are combined and intertwined through concepts such as "urban adventure".

The three sections outlined above represent different dimensions through which the core place narratives of Denver are constructed on Instagram. It is important to note that, in practice, these dimensions at times intertwine and overlap. Nevertheless, they are separated in the analysis that follows for analytical purposes.

4.1 Urban Sophistication

4.1.1. #VisitDenver: exploring the city

Standing proudly in between the high-rises of downtown Denver is the historic State Capitol building of Colorado. Constructed in 1890, the gold-leafed dome of the Capitol shines majestically in the sun and serves as an effigy to the past amidst the onslaught of modern architecture. The impressive façade, coupled with its rich history, political significance, and the free tours offered to the public, make the building a popular site for tourists. Therefore, it is not surprising that the State Capitol is featured heavily across Instagram by both DMO and TGC accounts. However, there appears to be a disconnect between photographs and the accompanying captions and comments. While TGC photographs predominantly portray the façade or grounds of the Capitol, the captions speak of a large number of homeless people prevalent in the area. Simultaneously, homelessness is not at all brought up on DMO pages as their projected DI serves to create positive narratives and entice potential tourists to visit the destination (Lund et al., 2018, p.274). Displaying complex social issues like
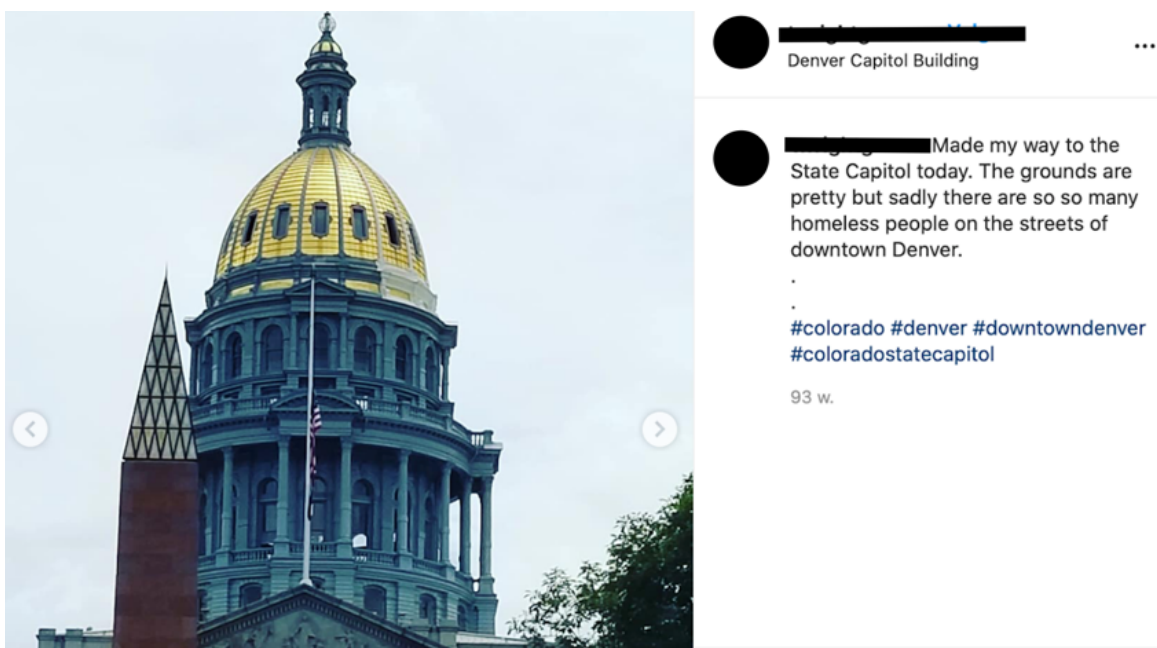

Figure 4 TGC post #200

homelessness could arguably negate the overwhelmingly positive image of Denver that is painted through DMO's.

Interestingly, the attached photographs show only beautiful gardens and the building's grand architecture, with no people in sight, as exemplified in figure 5. This same trend continues for posts about other buildings, streets, and squares in downtown Denver. The discrepancy between photos and the accompanying text indicates that while tourists experience negative aspects of Denver, they do not feel compelled to portray the city as such in their photographs. While this could point to a disconnect between destination image and the actual experience of the city, it is essential to remember that Instagram is a social platform where the aesthetic value of any photograph is judged and rewarded by likes, shares, or comments, a factor that may come into play when selecting a photograph to post. In addition, posting images without the consent of those pictured could, in many cases, violate their right to privacy, as well as the terms of use of Instagram.

Pictures of buildings and streets, primarily located in the downtown area of Denver, are often accompanied by words such as "roaming" and "wandering", implying that tourists are best able to take in the sights of Denver by exploring the various architectural and historical buildings by foot. Throughout both DMO and TGC posts, a particular emphasis is put on alleyways, which are framed as the "hidden gems" of the city that are primarily discovered by chance when visitors wander around the downtown area. These "hidden gems" represent the opportunity for tourists to dive underneath the urban façade and discover hidden parts of the city. This narrative is especially important as urban areas, especially in the US, become more homogenized (Sharpley, 2018, p.77). As such, emphasizing distinctive locations that allow tourists to feel like they are getting off the beaten path of tourism makes Denver more unique and attractive to potential visitors.

Alleys around the downtown area are filled with seating, decorative lighting, murals, art installations, and small storefront and are also known as "activated alleyways". These activated alleys are intended to surprise passerby's and simultaneously beautify the city. As a result, many tourist posts on Instagram depict

Figure 5 DMO post #15

these alleyways, along with a sense of surprise and wonder that is verbalized in the captions and hashtags, as demonstrated in figure 6. Through pictures of these alleyways, a particular atmosphere is portrayed. In this sense, this type of imagery is used to establish the affective component of the destination image based upon unique characteristics.

"Just another gorgeous 'grammable day in the Mile High City" reads the caption under a photograph of a row of pastel-colored houses posted by a DMO page. In this post, the term "grammable", or "instagrammable", refers to the fact that these pastel houses are particularly aesthetically pleasing, and as such, make for a good Instagram post. Through this caption, it becomes clear that this DMO page possesses knowledge of Instagram and the associated terminology and demonstrates an understanding of how visitors to the city might use Instagram to capture their travels. This style of photography is echoed in TGC content, with many imaginatively taken photos of buildings, streets, alleyways, and the city skyline, to name but few. The black and white "aesthetic" shot appears to permeate hashtags such as #denvertravel

and #denvertourist. "Instagrammable" shots of the city, both by DMO's and TGC, contribute to the desired impression of the city's ambiance, or "vibe", by (prospective) tourists. Artful photographs that showcase Denver's beauty are combined with specific buzzwords in captions and hashtags in order to create the image of a certain mood in the city. The most commonly used of these adjectives are "vibrant", "thriving", and "magical". These words are meant to paint a destination image of Denver as a creative, cultural city that is bustling with energy and excitement. While such keywords are predominantly a part of DMO posts, TGC posts do contain similar photographs. However, in TGC posts, the associated captions often describe Denver as beautiful, gorgeous, or even simply fun. As such, DMO posts are more directly establishing an affective and holistic destination image of Denver, while TGC posts tend to focus on the beauty of more functional attributes, such as buildings, alleys, or parks.

Lastly, what would any American city be without its professional sports teams? Throughout DMO posts, it becomes abundantly clear that Denver cares deeply about its sports teams, of which the city has seven. The most notable of these are the Denver Broncos, an American Football team; the Colorado Rockies, a baseball team; the Denver Nuggets, a basketball team; and the Colorado Avalanche, an ice-hockey team. The names of these teams already paint a specific image of the city to potential visitors, where the Avalanche and the Rockies refer to the Rocky Mountains, the Nuggets, and the Broncos refer to Denver's gold rush and wild west history. As it is, DMO pages portray Denver's sports scene as exciting, energetic, and highly passionate, with lots of good food and beer available at the stadiums. Additionally, art and sculptures surround the stadiums, while their parking lots are often used for festivals, parades, and other events. As such, the Denver professional sports scene practically serves as a microcosm of Denver's overall projected DI. It is therefore not surprising that TGC posts talk about going to any sporting event as a "must-do" while visiting the city, even if you are not a sports fan. Additionally, visiting a professional

game in Denver is differentiated from other US cities by focusing on the beauty of the scenery and the passion of the fans. In figure 7, a commenter remarks that the game

Figure 6 DMO post #280

itself is not even the most crucial thing if you are being treated to such beautiful sunsets while attending. This unique selling point is especially important as most major US cities have one or more professional sports teams whose stadiums, and experiences, all tend to be fairly homogenous.

The destination image of Denver as a vibrant, creative city is not only created through shots of buildings and architectural points of interest. A search of any hashtag or page related to Denver will undeniably yield many posts about the many murals and art installations scattered around the city. The prevalence of (street)art contributes to the DI of Denver as creative and cultural and is therefore examined in more depth in the next section.

4.1.2. Painting the Town

The massive, golden letters make it hard to miss precisely where you are as they pop against the bright, colorful background of pinks, blues, and greens. At the end of an unassuming parking lot, a mural has become an unlikely star. Spelling out 'Denver' in large, artful lettering, the wall painting has been photographed countless times, with tourist modeling in a seemingly endless variety of poses in front. This

particular piece of street art, shown in figure 8, exemplifies the popularity of Denver's street art as both photography hotspots and as a sign of the city's overall atmosphere.
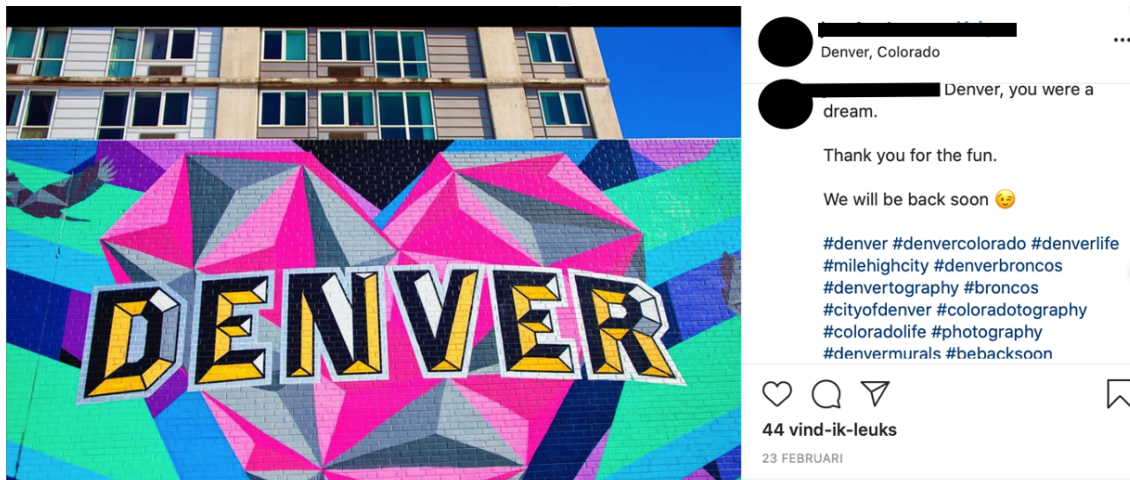

Figure 7 TGC post #320

Street art is heavily featured throughout both DMO and TGC pages. DMO's use their Instagram pages primarily to keep people comprised of the newest murals and artworks in the city, while tourists mainly upload and share their personal favorites. The significant focus on street paintings and art installations creates Denver's image as a creative hub while also turning somewhat dilapidated and neglected parts of the city into new tourist attractions. The restoration of old, sometimes abandoned buildings and entire blocks is showcased by DMO to create an urban narrative of regeneration and the idea that Denver is a young, trendy, and growing city, effectively profiling Denver as an up-and-coming city destination. This sentiment is echoed in TGC posts as they recurrently mention the "instagrammability" of the city.

While street art adorns the whole city, the bulk of artwork may be found in the RiNo (River North) neighborhood. The municipality of Denver characterizes the neighborhood as a free, open-air museum where "every wall, corner, nook, and cranny oozes with creativity". DMO posts about RiNo emphasize the notion of the neighborhood as an open-air gallery and encourage visitors to "explore" and "discover" the abundance of street art. The idea of 'adventure' is further implied by captions that emphasize the surprise and hidden nature of street art. Beautiful mural,

sculptures, or other expressions of creativity may be lurking around every corner. This sense of adventure is echoed by TGC posts as they frequently described "finding" or "stumbling upon" works of street art, parallel to the notion of "hidden gem" alleyways. The use of these specific terms implies an element of surprise and discovery as if tourists feel lucky that they happened on such unique artwork by chance. The idea of adventure and discovery is further accentuated by the fact that most artworks posted on Instagram do not provide the exact location of the artwork. Overall, neither DMO pages nor TGC pages include a physical address or include a geographical tag that links to a map of the city for a specific artwork. Commonly, the rough location is
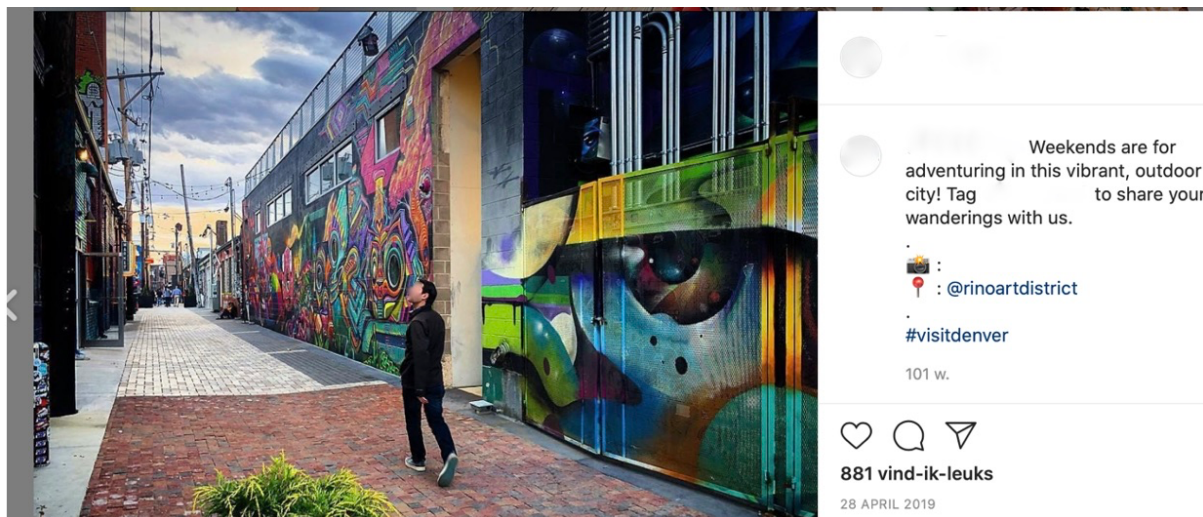

Figure 8 DMO post #315

provided, as is the case in figure 9, where the RiNo Arts district is tagged. However, the location may, in many instances, still be found in the comment sections. As such, this information is only provided should one specifically look for it, adding to the idea of discovery and surprise.

According to several posts, many tourists spend a day "strolling around" the RiNo art district, treating it as an outdoor museum. The comparison with a museum stems mainly from the fact that most street art is not merely what could be considered graffiti or otherwise illegal acts of vandalism. Instead, the city, neighborhoods, shops, restaurants, and bars have commissioned an international array of artists to create pieces on their walls and alleyways. As such, not only DMO's but also local businesses and citizens contribute to Denver's place narrative as vibrant and creative.

Interestingly, no mentions of vandalism or non-commissioned pieces are made throughout any of the examined Instagram posts or the associated comments. The presence of street art in and around bars and restaurants also aids in connecting art and creativity to the food and beverage scene of Denver, which is portrayed as equally diverse, creative, and unique.

"Have u checked out the RiNo district of Denver?? Funky, historic vs contemporary, every block and alley is full of amazing street art. There's coffee houses, delicious refineries, dive bars, small retail shops and restaurants. It's reflective of Denver's changing cityscape and culture." This quote implies that street art and the art district reflect a broader cultural shift in Denver towards a more creative and "trendy" atmosphere that aims to be unique from other urban centers in the United States. While DMO accounts overwhelmingly frame this change as inherently positive, comments and posts by locals and, to some extent, tourists also bring up more negative aspects, actively negotiating the projected DI created by DMO's. While DMO photos show striking alleyways bursting with color, the comments below the photos indicate that many alleyways are populated by homeless people and that the city is so focused on beautification that it ignores or pushes out these people. The claims go along with complaints of gentrification of these "artsy" neighborhoods, especially by local citizens. Through comments, DMO's are accused of "using" these neighborhoods to create tourist attractions. In order to create the narrative of street art and creativity, the natural and built environment, culture, and atmosphere of the neighborhood become valuable resources (Lichrou et al., 2008, p. 29). As such, existing place identities are replaced, altered, or commodified in order to facilitate new place narratives that will encourage tourism. Locals argue that the city's changing culture and neighborhoods make the city feel unfamiliar for them while also displacing many of the original residents of such neighborhoods.

While tourist and DMO content tends to focus on beauty, creativity, and a changing culture, locals negate the overpoweringly positive image of street art, and the art district, by focusing on the human toll of such changes. For example, this poignant photo (figure 10), posted by a local, displays an alley adorned with street art, where a homeless person is sleeping on the ground in the snow. It provides a stark contrast to the place narrative of

Figure 9 TGC post #330

creativity and urban renewal that is prevalent amongst both DMO and TGC content. In this case, the contribution of local citizens to the online DI is to provide a bridge between the projected DI and the actual experience of such places.

Overall, the focus on street art, both by DMO's and TGC, is part of a broader effort to create a destination image of Denver as a trendy, creative urban center. Returning to the quote above, it indicates that the "creative" culture of the arts district is not merely derived from the abundance of street art. Instead, street art is linked with the presence of coffee shops, bars, restaurants, breweries, and unique shops. The following section will take a deeper look at the role of these businesses in establishing Denver as a creative and unique city on Instagram.

4.1.3. Beers, Bites, Bars, and Buds

A tulip-shaped glass, filled with amber-colored beer, brilliantly reflects the blue sky above as the blurry background reveals a patio filled with long tables and benches. The walls are dripping with color, as they are fully covered in street art. Under strings of fairy lights, people can be spotted drinking beer, laughing and chatting, while a bicycle rests against the fence.

While this description reflects a singular photograph posted on Instagram by a DMO, it also exemplifies the broader destination image of Denver as a culinary city, with its countless restaurants, bars, coffee shops, and breweries. Through both DMO and TGC, the city is profiled as an ideal destination for those visitors that have been deemed "foodies". This common internet term refers to those who visit places specifically to try food and drinks associated with that destination. The food and drink are captured artfully and posted to social media and, in the case of Denver, accompanied by hashtags such as #denvereats and #denverfoodie. These posts primarily focus on high-quality, internationally diverse, and innovative food that sets Denver apart from other US cities. These posts, both DMO and TGC, tend to feature the same restaurants and bars, branding them as must-visit "hotspots". One such example is the Little Man ice cream company. The exterior of this ice cream store features a giant milk can, providing a very photogenic backdrop for "foodie" pictures of ice cream cones. Featured heavily in DMO posts, the ice cream shop also features in many TGC posts, with one tourist captioning their photo with the question *"Am I a stereotypical Coloradoan now?"* as seen in figure 11. This caption alludes to the idea

Figure 10 TGC post #363

that this ice cream company is a quintessential part of the city and considered to be a "must-visit" on your trip. As a result, many posts indicated a 30-40 minute wait to get ice cream. The comment sections on DMO posts also expressed the view that this shop receives too much attention and that other ice cream companies in the city serve ice cream that is just as good, if not better.

The example of Little Man ice cream company typifies many aspects of the overall "foodie" appeal, in the sense that aesthetics and popularity play a pivotal role in what is featured, not just the quality of the food displayed. Additionally, it exemplifies the notion of online DI as a hermeneutic circle of representation. As place narratives about certain restaurants and bars help shape the perception of Denver as a "foodie" city, tourists then seek out those experiences that will confirm the representations and notions that they have formed before leaving their homes, forming a hermeneutic circle of representation (Caton& Santos, 2008, p.8). As tourists add to the DI by sharing their own images and experiences online, their perceived DI becomes part of the overall projected DI. This process goes one step further, where that particular TGC photograph is then re-posted by a DMO on their own page, exposing more tourists to that particular narrative of the destination. The perceived DI of tourists then becomes part of the projected DI by DMO's, which in turn influences the perceived DI of potential tourists. Consequently, destination image is continually negotiated through tourist experiences.

Another aspect of the Denver culinary scene that is emphasized through both DMO and TGC is the use of locally sourced and organic products. This is especially relevant to the many microbreweries scattered throughout the city. Referred to by one visitor as "the beer promised land", Denver is home to over 150 craft breweries, almost all of which offer tours, as well as tastings. Emphasizing the presence of the multitude of local breweries demonstrates Denver's uniqueness in contrast to other US cities. The breweries are made even more appealing to food-oriented tourists by their aesthetic qualities. As mentioned before, look and atmosphere are essential

factors for thriving foodie "hotspots". As such, most breweries, bars, and restaurants facilitate a strong sense of atmosphere and style in their establishments. Most of their aesthetics are complementary, as they all project an "urban" ambiance with industrial furniture surrounded by lots of greenery and colorful art. String lights lined along the ceilings and extensive patios where guests can enjoy the Colorado sunshine provide a cozy, relaxed feel. The restaurants and bars are tied in with the idea of vibrancy and a young, growing urban center that is also emphasized through the focus on activated alleyways or street art. All aspects work together to provide an overall place narrative that focuses on the uniqueness of Denver against other US cities.

The last "b" in the title of this section refers to "buds". The recreational use of marijuana has been legalized in Colorado for any person over the age of 21. Colorado was one of the first states to legalize both the use and cultivation of marijuana, providing the state with a competitive advantage and unique selling point over other US cities. Attaching another meaning to the famous nickname, the "mile high" city, this particular narrative is notoriously absent from DMO pages. Marijuana is not part of the projected DI as conceived by DMO's. Earlier research on cannabis tourism in Colorado suggests that marijuana legalization has led to a shift in DI, away from the narrative of the state as a healthy place that emphasis outdoor activities. (Kang et al., 2016). Therefore, the absence of marijuana can arguably be regarded as a way to shift the DI somewhat back to narratives of health and the outdoors.

However, through both TGC content and independent tour operators that offer marijuana tours of the city, this functional place narrative still plays a role in the online DI of Denver. Marijuana is tied in with the other urban place narratives as described above. The connection between cannabis and craft breweries is made especially explicit through so-called "buds and beers" tours of the city. Additionally, the connection to art and the repurposing of old buildings is established through the "International Church of Cannabis." Featuring mainly in TGC posts, the Church of Cannabis is a repurposed church building that now is home to an evangelical

community centered around the use of marijuana. The Church offers a weekly show for visitors that combines meditation with a psychedelic laser light show.
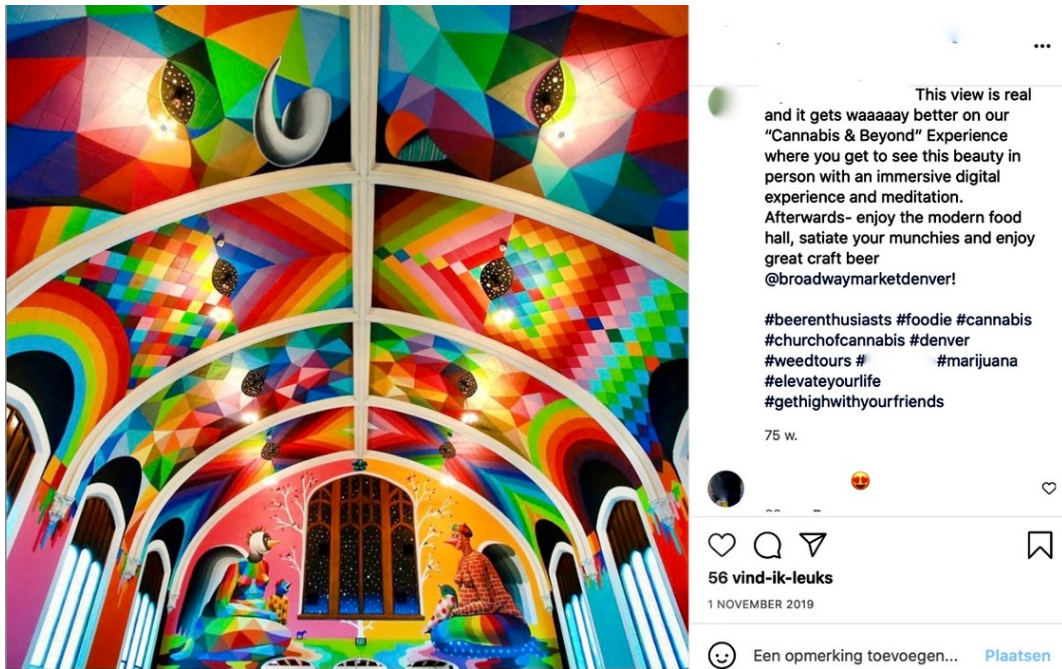

Figure 11 Local tour company post #97

Additionally, the building is covered in colorful art, as seen in figure 12, tying the Church back to the narrative of creativity. This post is from a local tour company offering marijuana tours and connecting their tour to craft beer. Guided day trips offer both tours of breweries and growing facilities in conjunction with one another. Naming this particular tour "buds and beers", the element of craft breweries and marijuana are merged in what this company refers to as "combining Colorado's two claims to fame". While the use of marijuana is purposely not a part of the DI as projected by DMO's, it has nevertheless become a popular aspect of the online DI that is tied into the larger narrative of a vibrant and urban atmosphere by tourists. Additionally, the fact that cannabis is not an active part of DMO place branding may arguably contribute to its fame and popularity as marijuana tourism now exists underneath the urban façade of Denver tourism, adding an element of adventure and

discovery. This narrative exemplifies the argument that DMO's cannot control the holistic DI; they can only seek to manage it.

Overall, this section has centered around the urban side of Denver. The affective component of the DI is established through an emphasis on discovery, adventure, vibrancy, creativity, and gastronomy. As such, it is this focus on the atmosphere that is meant to distinguish Denver from other US cities that might feature similar amenities and characteristics. The amount and the content of TGC posts appear to indicate that visitors resonate with these particular place narratives using terms such as "exploring", "wandering", and "grammable" to summarize their time in the city. However, the negative sides to the place branding of Denver as a creative city of urban renewal are brought up by local residents. Their remarks and complaints nuance the positive DI with their day-to-day experience in the city and draw attention to broader and complex social issues.

This section has discussed the branding of Denver as a city of "Urban sophistication". While an emphasis on buildings, alleyways, street art, food, beer, and marijuana establishes distinct urban narratives of Denver, they hardly highlight what is arguably the most unique feature of the city skyline: the imposing Rocky Mountains. Rising dramatically in the background of skyline photographs, the mountains epitomize the affective qualities of adventure and discovery, which are central to the urban narratives discussed in this section as well.

4.2 Outdoor Adventure

4.2.1 The Rocky Mountain State

"Scoot over Denver, you're blocking the view of the Rockies" reads the caption of the photograph posted by DMO account @cityofdenver. Pictured is Denver's city skyline; the tall skyscrapers pale in comparison to the majestic mountain range that rises behind it. This post (figure 13) refers, not so subtly, to the fact that Denver is situated on a plain sandwiched between the Rocky Mountains. With close proximity to such splendor of nature, it is perhaps not surprising that the Rockies are
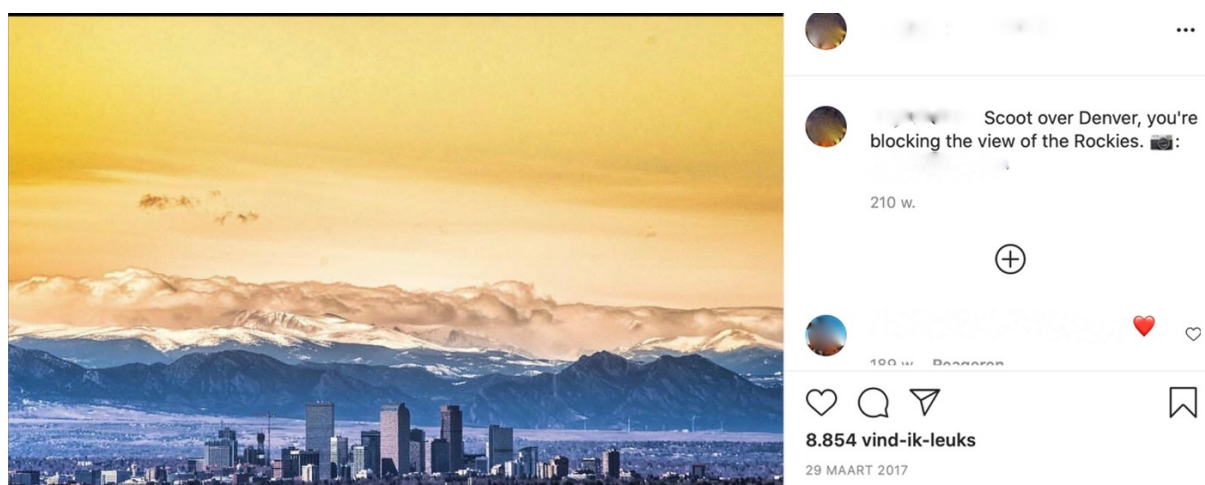

Figure 12 DMO post #249

heavily represented, both in DMO and TGC posts. In fact, DMO pages are partial to referring to the mountains as "Denver's backyard", reiterating the idea that outdoor adventure may be found only as little as an hour's drive from the city. The Rocky Mountains are arguably one of the most visible functional components of Denver's overall DI that simultaneously differentiates the city from other US metropolises. The emphasis on the mountains and the surrounding nature around Denver spurs a place narrative of experience, adventure, and natural beauty, parallel to place narratives about adventure and exploration in the city itself.

Accompanied by hashtags such as #wanderlust and #mountainview, TGC photos of the Rockies are broadly divisible in two categories, both of which are arguably well suited to the Instagram platform. The first type may be classified as the (amateur)

nature photographer, with scenic photographs of the surrounding mountains, trees, rivers, lakes, waterfalls, and anything else that showcases the landscape's natural beauty. The second type includes people in the photograph, often the owner of the Instagram account, either looking wistfully into the distance or posing in front of a panoramic vista of the mountains. Many of these photographs are remarkably similar, some minor changes like the angle or the specific background aside. The TGC posts in figure 14 exemplify a few of the many photographs with similar poses. The photos below all feature people with their backs towards the camera, looking out over a panoramic vista of the mountains. From the many similar poses, it appears that TGC

Figure 13 Posts #242, #254, #259, #261, #262, and #263

content is being re-created by other tourists, influenced by the perceived DI they have created through Instagram. Subsequently, tourists upload those photos of themselves on Instagram, strengthening the DI by adding their perceived DI, completing the hermeneutic circle of representation (Caton& Santos, 2008, p.8). Additionally, the

similarity between posts may also point to an element of "instagrammability" that goes beyond place narratives of Denver. Instead, certain poses and angles have been shown to gain higher levels of engagement from social media audiences (Lindell, 2019). As such, the re-creation of the specific back towards the camera pose could stem from a desire to collect more likes and comments instead of being influenced by a specific place narrative.

Another notable aspect is the use of sensory descriptive words and phrases within the captions of TGC posts. Phrases such as "breathing in the fresh mountain air" or "the smell of pine trees" describe the physical sensations of tangibly being there. The use of such descriptors allows the viewer to have a stronger emotional connection to the image, almost as if they are able to experience a small part of the trip themselves. Perhaps somewhat ironically, these posts occasionally mention the desire to "disconnect" or "unplug" from society and social media in particular. A purpose that is arguably defeated by posting the subsequent trip on Instagram. Underlying this apparent paradox is the notion that "unplugging" and getting away from society fit into the place narrative of outdoor adventure thematically. The idea of "getting away" from society and social media, resulting in an experience off the beaten path, full of discovery and adventure, fits in with the place narratives constructed about Denver. As such, mentions of "unplugging" could also be used symbolically to emphasize the oasis of the outdoors as opposed to the hustle and bustle of city life.

On the DMO side, the hashtags #adventure and #optoutside are employed to encourage visitors to venture out into the copious amounts of national parks surrounding the city. An emphasis is placed on discovery and exploration, where a great view, or hidden waterfall, could be just around the corner. This sentiment is similar to the notion of exploration and surprise in the city itself, where activated alleyways and street art serve as "hidden gems". Instead of more sensory descriptions, DMO posts tend to use more general descriptors such as "stunning", "gorgeous", and "beautiful" to describe the Rocky Mountains. DMO pages as a whole tend to share

various TGC posts about the mountains and nature. By re-uploading the posts to their own Instagram page, DMO's are able to curate those perceived DI's that match their intended projected DI. Many of such shared posts also feature an element of interaction and engagement with the viewers through the description. This predominantly occurs through questions such as "Where are you exploring this weekend" and "ready for adventure?". By interacting with (potential) tourists on Instagram through prompts and questions, social media is transformed into more than just an extension of more traditional marketing efforts by DMO's.

The emphasis on nature and the great outdoors places the mountains firmly in the DI on Denver. The Rockies are portrayed as an essential part of the city that is a "must-visit" for all tourists. While most national parks are relatively far outside the city, they are nevertheless promoted by Denver's DMO's with hashtags such as #optoutside. As they are outside of the city, these must-visit sites are framed as ideal day trips from Denver, widening the projected DI from the city limits to the surrounding cities and national parks as well. This sentiment is echoed within TGC posts, as photographs of nature, taken at least 100 kilometers outside Denver, are still tagged with #denver.

One such place is a national park known as the "Garden of the Gods". A large national park dotted with massive, jagged formations of red rocks rising out of the ground, Garden of the Gods is represented heavily amongst TGC centering around nature. While the photographs usually reflect a vast expanse of quiet nature, the captions infer that the park is quite crowded in reality. However, TGC posts also indicate that the park is so beautiful that it warrants a visit, sharing tips on avoiding crowds in their captions as well as the best hiking trails in the area.

4.2.2 Hikes and Bikes: Getting Active

An emphasis on "adventuring in the Rockies" as an integral part of Denver's destination image is inextricably linked to notions of physical activity and exercise, from hiking to biking. Therefore, it may not be surprising that both DMO and TGC

posts center around such physical undertakings, so much so that one DMO page asked, "good morning Denver, where did you get active today?". This post implies that daily exercise is a given, but from the comments, it becomes clear that the city offers up many types of exercise. The types of physical activity that are stressed most on DMO pages are those that are conducive to the critical tenants of adventure and discovery that permeate the city's overall DI. This includes "roaming" and "wandering" to explore the city, as discussed in the previous section. Interestingly, when it comes to hiking in the Rocky Mountains, the focus in DMO posts is not on active verbs like hiking, working out, or climbing. Instead, the focus is on the rewards of the hikes, like looking out at a beautiful view.

A key aspect of physical activity appears to be hiking. Portrayed as one of the best ways to discover the mountains and "get in touch with" nature, hiking permeates most posts and pages about Denver. DMO and TGC photographs of hiking are relatively similar, consisting of mountain views or people dressed in athletic wear and hiking boots looking out over mountain views. However, an interesting difference between DMO and TGC posts lies in the content of the accompanying captions. DMO pages primarily focus on the rewards of the hike, like the gorgeous views on top of a mountain, whereas TGC posts tend to go into more detail about the actual hike, as is demonstrated in figure 15, mentioning the length of the trail, parking advice, and tips

Figure 14 DMO post #287

on attractions along the way. This distinction fits with the emphasis on adventure and discovery expressed through DMO pages, as hiking is primarily portrayed as a way in which to achieve adventure and discovery. TGC posts primarily point out the length of the trail as well as the level of difficulty, providing more information on the actual physical experience of the hike. While DMO posts focus on the more functional aspects of the DI, like the beauty of the scenery and landscape, TGC posts focus more on the practical details of the experience, focusing on aspects such as difficulty level, the time it takes, and directions to the start of the hike. The inclusion of such details may contribute to higher levels of perceived credibility of TGC posts as opposed to DMO posts.

Another aspect that was mentioned more throughout posts created by tourists was the presence of many other people on the trails, particularly other tourists. This issue was discussed earlier in relation to the Garden of the Gods national park, as it is a popular tourist hotspot that is framed as a "must-visit" While this was not always experienced as inherently negative, it nevertheless forms a stark contrast against the image created by DMO's of an expansive wilderness in which one can retreat from society for a short while and experience the peaceful environment of untouched wilderness. While such places exist, they are often further away from the city and more challenging to reach. However, TGC posts imply that this revelation does not take away from the beauty of the landscape or the experience of nature, as well as the notion that hiking is a "must-do" activity when visiting the area. The emphasis on hiking and the outdoors creates a place-narrative of outdoor adventuring, which is stimulated even further because DMO posts continually refer to the "adventurous nature" of the state of Colorado while referring more specifically to Denver as a physically active and "outdoorsy" city.

Cycling is another physical activity promoted through DMO pages, which takes this discussion back to the urban confines of the city. Interestingly, there appear to be little to no posts about biking uploaded by tourists inferring that this activity is not

genuinely relevant for tourists. Nevertheless, bike-related posts by DMO accounts appear to be cropping up increasingly over the past couple of years. As such, it is arguable that cycling and bike-sharing are relatively new ventures for the city. According to DMO page @visitdenver, in 2019, the city was home to over 130 kilometers of paved bike paths. In addition, bike-rental enterprises appear to be especially popular. These enterprises offer bikes for rent, stalled at many locations throughout the city, that tourists or locals can rent per hour or per day, and drop off at any location. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the renting of bikes is framed as an excellent way to discover the city, and particularly the downtown area, again combining exercise and adventure. As such, cycling is not only portrayed as a physical activity but also as a means of transportation within the city, allowing for the freedom to discover the hidden gems of Denver while also staying active. This narrative is combined with food and drink as well, as posts seem to indicate that bikes are used to hop from restaurant to bar to brewery all around the city. It is also prudent to mention that the connection between biking and the ideal of a "greener" city is made. Cycling is portrayed as an alternative to more environmentally taxing modes of transportation, branding the city as innovative and forward-thinking. This also differentiates Denver from other US cities, which are arguably less adapted and open to bicycles.

Nevertheless, cycling is not a recurring theme throughout TGC posts, as discussed earlier, suggesting that while this particular narrative is part of the projected DI, it is less prominent in the perceived DI and, as such, is unable to establish a hermeneutic circle of representation (Caton & Santos, 2008). The discontinuity between perceived and projected DI in this particular narrative also appears to indicate the need for both TGC and DMO content in order to establish a place narrative successfully. As more TGC posts about cycling are made, the place narrative will solidify within the perceived DI, which subsequently becomes part of the projected DI.

The focus on outdoor adventure and activities brings into consideration an essential factor that lies at the foundation of all outdoor undertakings and, as such, also takes up an essential functional component of the DI: the climate and weather of Denver.

4.2.3. 300 days of sunshine

The phrase "300 days of sunshine" makes an appearance on Instagram every so often in connection to the weather in Denver. This phrase is especially popular with DMO's, as it brands Denver as a highly visitable city at any time of the year and simultaneously establishes the functional aspect of weather as a part of the holistic DI. Whether this statement is actually true is both questionable and somewhat irrelevant as the phrase nevertheless conjures up images of bright sunshine, t-shirts, and ice cream. The promise of 300 days of sunshine is somewhat mitigated by TGC posts that, while acknowledging the presence of sunshine, remark that it can still be bone-chillingly cold in the city. Moreover, tourists remarked that Denver's weather could be quite temperamental and change on a dime, requiring them to pack for various scenarios. Interestingly, TGC posts tend to focus more on cold weather and snow, as opposed to sunshine.

"Heading back to Denver, we got caught in the snow!! Absolutely incredible!!!! Passing mountainsides that just 3 hours ago were clear now covered in snow was mind-blowing.". This quote stems from a post by a tourist returning to the city after an excursion to a brewery just outside Denver. While the quote serves as a perfect demonstration of the temperamental nature of the weather, as discussed above, it also expresses wonder and amazement. This particular post adequately sums up the general sentiment of most TGC posts about the weather and winter weather in particular. Amazement, joy, and a sense of adventure are conveyed through tourists' posts by framing snowfall as a unique and positive experience. DMO pages, in turn, emphasize how the city is even more beautiful in the snow and how the winter weather can produce beautiful

"instagrammable" pictures. Moreover, they connect the snow and cold to the "foodie" aspect of the city by posting images of steaming bowls of ramen noodles and cups of hot chocolate overflowing with marshmallows. Using keywords as "cozy" and "snuggle up to", the freezing cold temperatures are implemented as a backdrop for cozying up to a fireplace, enjoying the best food and drink the city has to offer while a beautiful winter landscape takes shape outside the window. As such, the narrative of gastronomy is connected to the weather condition, an aspect that was also observed in the discussion of bites, bars, beers, and buds, only in relation to the summer and eating/drinking outside. This example shows that place narratives are highly interconnected. The overall DI can be regarded as a web of interrelated core narratives, around which peripheral images and narratives that are more temporal in nature are tied (Xu & Ye, 2018, p.136).

Romantic notions of snow are moderated by local inhabitants complaining of the impracticalities of dealing with snow on a daily basis. As was the case concerning gentrification and, to an extent, homelessness, these moderations take place in the

Figure 15 DMO post #379

comment sections of DMO posts. As figure 16 clarifies, these commenters are not impressed with the romantic and beautiful take on snow as portrayed in the photograph. Instead, they are concerned with the lack of snow removal. As such, the local citizens bridge the gap between the projected DI represented by DMO and TGC

posts and the realities that come with the experience of snow. A similar story unfolds with the connection between snow and physical activity, as photographs of skiing and snowboarding occasionally make an appearance on DMO and TGC posts. While the state of Colorado is internationally renowned for its ski resorts, most of these are situated around Vail, Aspen, and Colorado Springs; all situated quite some distance from Denver, which might explain the lack of TGC content on this particular theme in Denver tourist's posts. The references that are made to winter sports on DMO pages are again mitigated by local citizens, arguing that they do not frequent the ski resorts because they are simply too expensive. This argument ties back to notions of gentrification, as discussed previously, as many locals are financially excluded from enjoying one of Colorado's most prominent features and tourist attractions, its ski slopes.

Additionally, winter sports are only sparsely mentioned on DMO posts, likely because of the lack of resorts in the immediate vicinity of Denver. However, the projected DI constructed by DMO's might also purposefully moderate this particular narrative, as it is already well established in the minds of many potential tourists. In this case, the overall DI of Denver would serve to add to, or even contrast, any previous knowledge that potential tourists may possess.

This section discussed the emphasis on nature, the mountains, and being active to establish a place-narrative of Denver as an "outdoorsy" and adventurous city. DMO's make use of the functional landscape components of the DI to create place narratives of adventure, exploration, and activeness. While DMO's focus more on a holistic image of the Rocky Mountains, TGC content tends to revolve a bit more around the attributes and specifics of the image, as was demonstrated by the multiple mentions of crowds at national parks, difficulty levels of different hikes, and other practical considerations. Local citizens also contribute to the perceived DI by pointing out those aspects of the projected DI that clash with their respective embodied experiences. Additionally, this section contemplated the notion that the place

narratives described above are all highly interconnected and revolve around two core narratives of urban sophistication and outdoor adventure. The following section examines where these two core narratives meet and how they are interwoven into a holistic DI.

4.3 Urban Sophistication Meets Outdoor Adventure

4.3.1. Urban Oasis

"The Mile High City is a vibrant urban oasis with plenty of places to experience greenery!" reads the caption of a DMO post, alongside a photograph of a luscious green park as the sunlight filter through the trees. Of particular interest is the use of the phrase "urban oasis", a term used across DMO pages to reflect the abundance of nature and greenery within the city limits, blurring the boundary between urban and outdoors. The use of functional destination image elements, such as parks, bodies of water, and other green spaces, are used to tie the image of the Rocky Mountains and adventure to the image of Denver as a vibrant and thriving urban center. The emphasis on the city as an urban oasis helps cement the place narrative that Denver is a genuine "outdoor city" by implying that one does not necessarily have to leave the city in order to experience nature. This sentiment is echoed by TGC posts that describe Denver as "between nature and city", inferring that the city combines elements of both, which differentiates it from other US urban centers.

Arguably the most photographed and uploaded example of an urban oasis is the Denver Botanical Gardens. Located in central Denver, the botanical gardens feature a considerable collection of gardens and nurseries filled with substantial varieties of plants, flowers, and trees. The amount of TGC posts that concern the
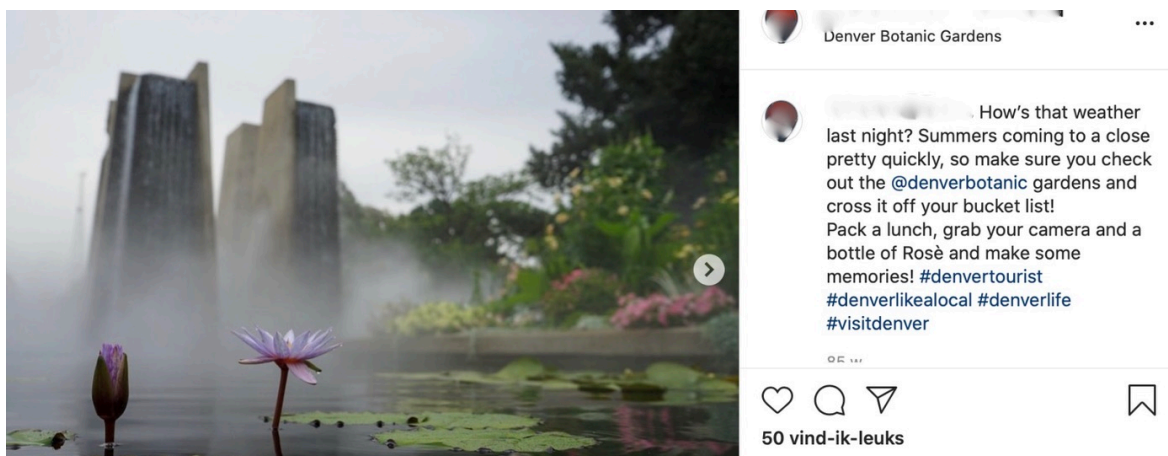

Figure 16 DMO post #53

botanical gardens would suggest that it is quite a popular attraction for visitors to the city. DMO posts brand the botanical gardens as a "bucket list" item when visiting Denver, as exemplified in figure 17. Moreover, the photograph attached to this particular post is reflective of uploaded photographs about the botanical gardens in general, as it is an artistic shot that could arguably be classified as highly "instagrammable". The aesthetic value of these gardens is also echoed in TGC posts, as the captions accompanying the pictures mention that they were able to take "amazing shots" or employ hashtags such as #travelphotographer. The use of photography-related terms and hashtags infers that while TGC is made up of the posts of "ordinary" travelers as opposed to paid professionals (Mak, 2017), they have become more professional in look and quality. Both DMO and TGC posts predominantly utilize visual communication to convey particular place narratives (Palazzo et al., 2021). Therefore, it is not surprising that TGC posts are arguably becoming more professionalized, blurring the boundaries between DMO and TGC.

Parks and other green spaces in the city, including the Denver Botanical Gardens, are also portrayed by DMO's as places to escape from the "hustle and bustle" of city life. As such, the two narratives of Denver as a center of urban sophistication and outdoor adventure are portrayed as complementary. Nature serves as a refuge from city life while simultaneously being incorporated into urban areas through urban oases. "We love all the vibrant energy of the city, but we also love the places to slow down," reads the caption of a DMO post attached to a photograph of the botanic gardens. The narrative of city meets nature is furthered by the mention of urban farms. Located on rooftops across the city, these urban farms connect green spaces to the idea of discovery and "hidden gems", in a similar vein as the activated alleyways discussed earlier. While the phrase "urban farming" might, at first glance, come across as an oxymoron, the term serves to blur the boundaries between nature and city, bringing both green spaces and fresh produce into Denver. Simultaneously, the urban farms have seating and serve drinks and food, connecting back to the narrative of

unique gastronomy. Urban farming is also tied to notions of sustainability. Throughout DMO pages, references to sustainability and sustainable travel are peppered in, although they tend to be either blanket statements about the environment or mention the environment more indirectly. The latter was the case with the focus on biking and more environmentally friendly modes of transportation, as was discussed previously. Other DMO posts connect sustainability to the parks and greenways in the city by posting about new initiatives to manage and protect such green areas.

Additionally, other environmental issues, such as food wastage, were also briefly addressed, connecting sustainability to the food and beverage industry. The emphasis on sustainability also serves to distinguish Denver from other US cities as more people become concerned for the environment and consequently become interested in sustainable tourism. Even though they are relatively sparse, these posts seek to establish an image of Denver as a "green" city. Throughout posts, the term "green city" is used in three distinct ways, referring to green spaces in the city, sustainability, and the legal use of marijuana, respectively. As such, the term "green city" is used to connect three place narratives into a larger overarching core narrative (Lai & Li, 2012).

The term "urban oasis" establishes the notion of nature in the city as a place of calmness, nature, and escapism from thriving city life while lying enclosed within it. It contrasts the projected DI of vibrancy and creativity to that of the outdoors and a more slowed down pace of life, cementing the place narrative of "urban sophistication meets outdoor adventure". In the next section, another aspect of the DI that plays into the same narrative is discussed. City and nature are also combined through the term "urban adventure", blending urban sophistication with outdoor adventure.

4.3.2. Urban Adventure

"There are SO many accessible adventures that are within an hour of two of the city. So gear up and get out there! And we'll be waiting for you back in Denver with world class dining, drinking and dozing." This quote features next to an image of a woman staring out over a picturesque vista of the Rocky Mountains, a typical TGC photograph, as was discussed in the previous section. Posted by a DMO page, this quote establishes Denver as a base from which various outdoor adventures can be undertaken. It offers the possibility of being outdoors while still maintaining the comforts and amenities of a city instead of camping in nature. It also connects the notion of outdoor adventure to the gastronomy narrative of Denver as a creative and "foodie" city.
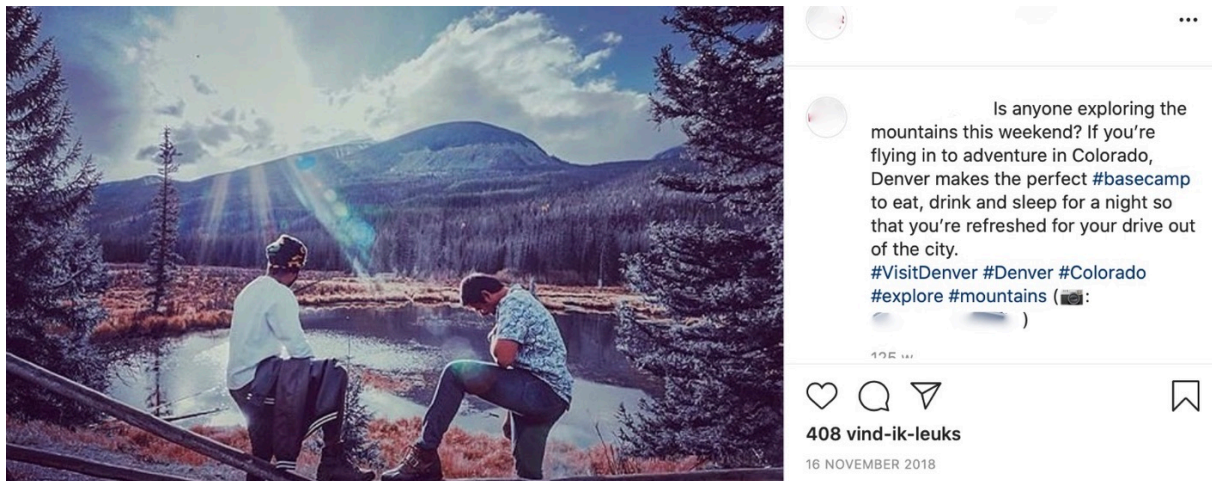

Figure 17 DMO post #268

Figure 18 contains a similar message, differing slightly in the sense that Denver is portrayed as a basecamp to stay for a night before continuing with the journey. The photograph accompanying this DMO post is once again a re-upload from TGC, containing the now-familiar trope of looking artfully away at the landscape. Another aspect of TGC posts about the mountains, and one visible in figure 18, is the use of a filter. Instagram offers a seemingly endless variety of filters that users can apply to their images to enhance the aesthetic quality of the image. As is visible in figure 18, the whole image appears to have a sepia tint to it, altering the colors of the image. As such, TGC photographs posted to Instagram do not necessarily convey a perceived destination image. While the unedited photograph more accurately reflects how a

visitor views a destination, the act of retouching and enhancing the photographs arguably changes the image from what is perceived by tourists to what they desire to perceive. As such, the image may be considered more as a projected form of DI. This is especially relevant in this case, as a DMO shared the photograph. By re-uploading tourist content, DMO's utilize content of perceived DI to construct and manage a projected DI actively (Iglesias-Sánchez et al., 2020). As such, re-uploading blurs the boundaries between DMO and TGC, providing DMO's with the opportunity to curate and highlight those place narratives that fit within their respective place branding strategies. This practice supports the argument that while DMO's are no longer able to maintain complete control over the dissemination and content of DI, they can still create and convey core place narratives (Skinner, 2008).

As established before, the narrative of the creative and vibrant city rests partially on the notion of discovery, surprise, and experience, especially with regard to activated alleyways, street art, and urban oases. This narrative is connected to the narrative of outdoor adventure by DMO's through the use of the hashtag #urbanadventure, as visible in figure 19. The term urban adventure provides a counterpart to adventuring in the Rocky Mountains and furthers Denver's image as a
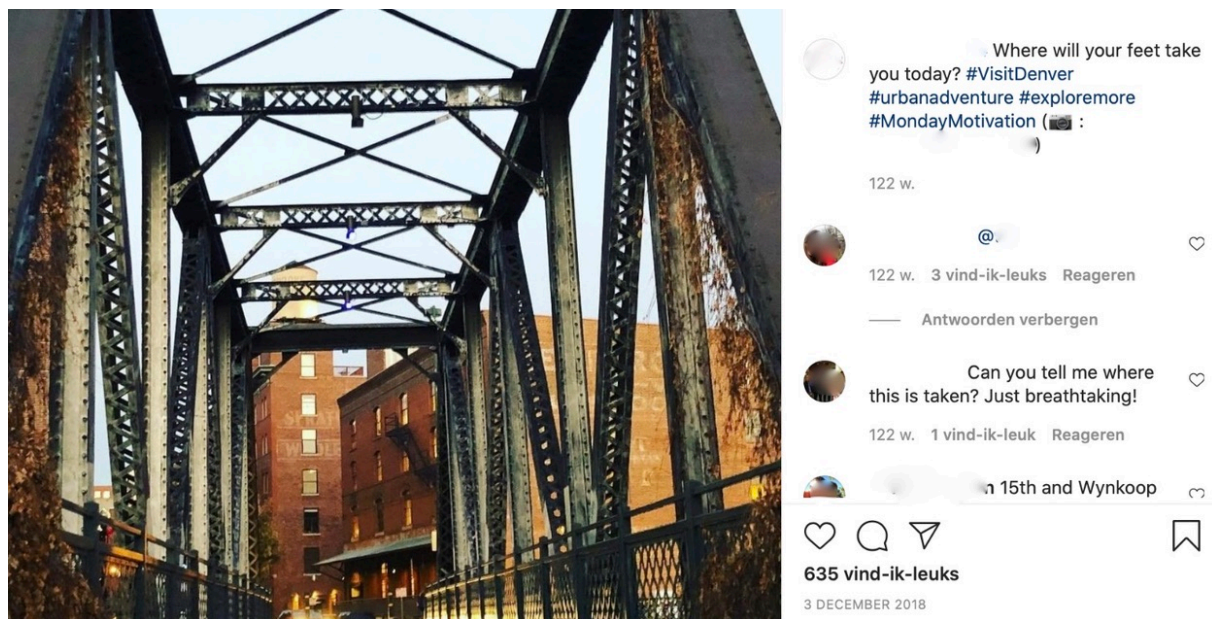

Figure 18 DMO post #391

young and fashionable city. While the exact terminology lacks TGC posts, the

sentiment is nevertheless shared as words such as "adventuring" and "discovering" the city are frequently used. Figure 19 is a DMO post, once again re-uploaded from TGC. Of note are both the use of a filter, as visible in the photograph, and the question asked in the caption. This question does not only serve to interact and engage with the viewers of the post but also reiterates the notion that walking around Denver, it is easy to stumble upon unique and beautiful locations, echoing the notion of getting beneath the urban façade. Interestingly, the bottom comment, answering the question where the photograph was taken, is from a local citizen. The fact that locals are commenting beneath these posts infers that they follow the DMO account to which it was posted or at least viewed that specific page. This supports the argument that locals, along with tourists, are influenced on some level by the projected DI as established by DMO's (Freire, 2009).

Another element that ties outdoor adventure to urban sophistication is the Red Rocks amphitheater. Framed by both DMO and TGC posts as a "must-visit" or "bucket list" attraction, this concert venue is famous for its natural seating, carved into the side of a mountain. Attached to the theater are various hiking trails. In addition to serving as a concert venue, DMO pages also portray the venue as an excellent place to have a workout. As such, it may imply that such a message is directed primarily at local residents. Nevertheless, it also ties together the narrative of the active city and hiking into what could be considered a tourist attraction.

Simultaneously, DMO's pages encourage visitors to "explore" the theater and the attached Red Rocks National Park located in the city of Denver. Comments from locals under such posts indicate that Red Rocks is technically not in Denver, as it is located in a neighboring county. As established before regarding day trips into the mountains, the DI is not confined to the geographical limits of the city and instead covers all aspects associated with the city. In this instance, the local commenting on this post attempts to bridge the gap between DI and factual reality. They actively negotiate the differences between geopolitical boundaries as perceived in the DI

instead of those in embodied experience. Locals contribute to the active creation of place narratives by contrasting image and experience (Zenker et al.,2017). This gap between reality and destination image is also addressed by TGC posts. Several posts mention that tourists were surprised to discover that it takes an actual hike to get up to the amphitheater from the parking lot, albeit a relatively short one, and that they were consequently underprepared for such a physical undertaking. Similar to TGC posts about hiking, TGG posts about Red Rock Amphitheatre provide more functional information, such as the advice to bring water and wear comfortable shoes. The inclusion of such details may contribute to higher levels of perceived credibility of TGC posts as opposed to DMO posts, which primarily center around the uniqueness and beauty of the venue.

Throughout both DMO and TGC posts playing into the narrative of urban adventure, an emphasis is put on the weekend and weekend getaways. TGC posts tend to include hashtags such as #weekendgetaway, #longweekend, or #weekendtrip. DMO pages, on the other hand, do not explicitly refer to weekend trips but instead pose questions in their captions such as "where are you exploring this weekend?". The emphasis on weekend trips implies that the target audience of the online DI is primarily comprised of American tourists as they are able to travel to the city for a weekend only much simpler and more cost-effectively. With an American target audience, establishing distinctions between Denver and other US cities becomes more crucial, especially as US cities are often considered relatively homogenous (Sharpley, 2018). The emphasis on the weekend and weekend trips can arguably be classified as a more peripheral place narrative as it serves to cater to domestic tourists. As such, this narrative is subject to a specific target group and place and therefore sensitive to change, as opposed to the more stable core place narratives of the DI (Xu & Ye, 2018).

In order to differentiate Denver further from other US weekend destinations, DMO's also make use of the hashtag #denverlikealocal. The DMO post in figure 20
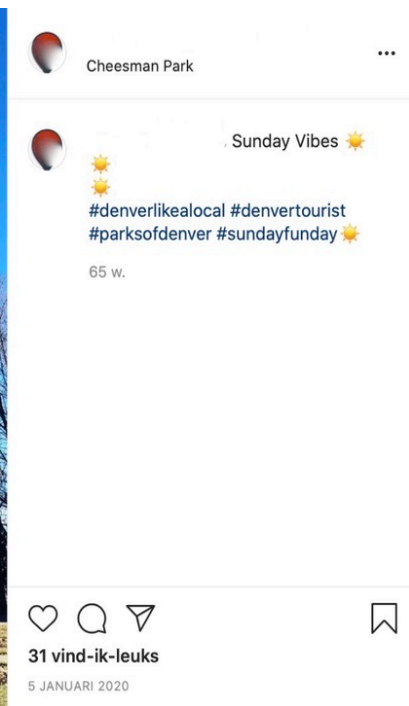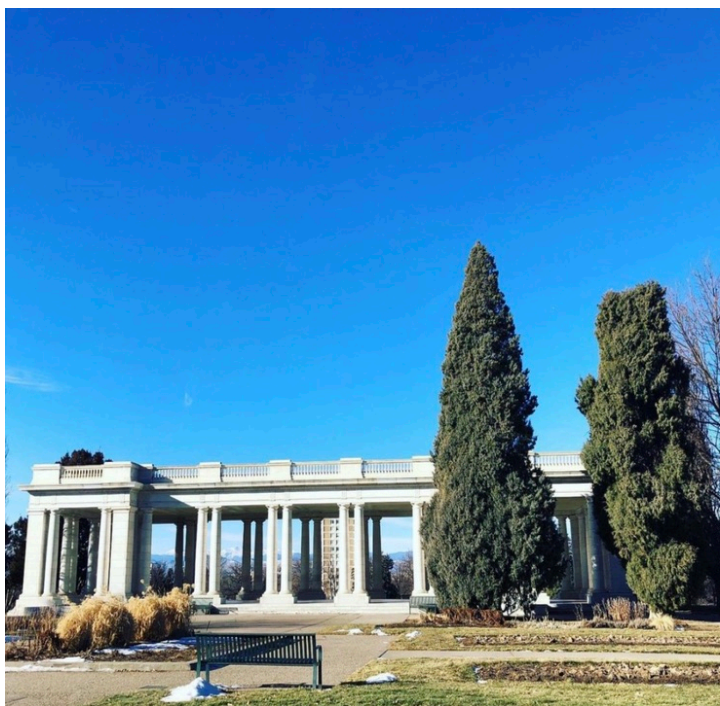
Figure 19 DMO post #52

utilizes this hashtag in conjunction with the mention of Sunday. Simultaneously, the image ties back in with the "urban oasis" narrative by showcasing a park. The phrasing of "Denver like a local" moves away from those narratives that can be considered more tourist-oriented and instead invite visitors to venture beyond the beaten path. Nevertheless, this hashtag is followed up by the #Denvertourist, seemingly indicating that visiting these parks is still considered a more tourist activity, a narrative that is examined in more depth in the next section.

4.3.3 The Mile High City

Across countless posts concerning the city of Denver, both TGC and DMO, the phrase "Mile High City" makes an appearance, often in the form of #milehighcity. As mentioned before, this nickname stems from the fact that Denver is located one mile above sea level. Over the last few years, after the legalization of marijuana use in the state of Colorado, the name has taken on another meaning colloquially. The ubiquitous use of the nickname is explicitly tied to the city of Denver and, as such, features heavily in both the projected and perceived DI. Interestingly, TGC content tends to utilize the hashtag #milehighcity in their captions mainly. Other mentions of the nickname in TGC posts tend to be explanatory in nature, clarifying why the city has been ascribed such a nickname. While DMO posts also make use of the same hashtag, the phrase is featured in the captions in different ways. Captions such as

"this stunning view of the Mile High City" accompany photographs of the city skyline. Figure 21 demonstrates another use of the phrase by a DMO account, asking the viewer if they are enjoying the mile-high sunshine. As such, the nickname is also


Figure 20 DMO post #142

linked to the narrative of "300 days of sunshine". The accompanying photograph links the phrase to the DI attribute of gastronomy as well. Similar posts connect the notion of "mile high hospitality" to images of bars and restaurants. Additionally, the essence of the nickname implicitly connects the city to the landscape it is set in. A mile high in elevation, the city is located in the middle of a mountain range, implying that nature and outdoor adventure are never far away. As such, the core narratives of outdoor adventure and urban sophistication are firmly connected.

Lastly, the nickname also differentiates Denver from other US cities by amplifying this unique feature. On the thirteenth step of the Colorado State Capitol Building, the words "one mile high" are engraved in the stone staircase. The engraving denotes that that specific step is located exactly one mile above sea level. This particular step predominantly features TGC content, mainly consisting of variations upon the pose in figure 22. Interestingly, the caption next to this photograph mentions the phrase "tourisiting for the day". This sentiment is echoed in many TGC posts about the one-

Figure 21 TGC post #216
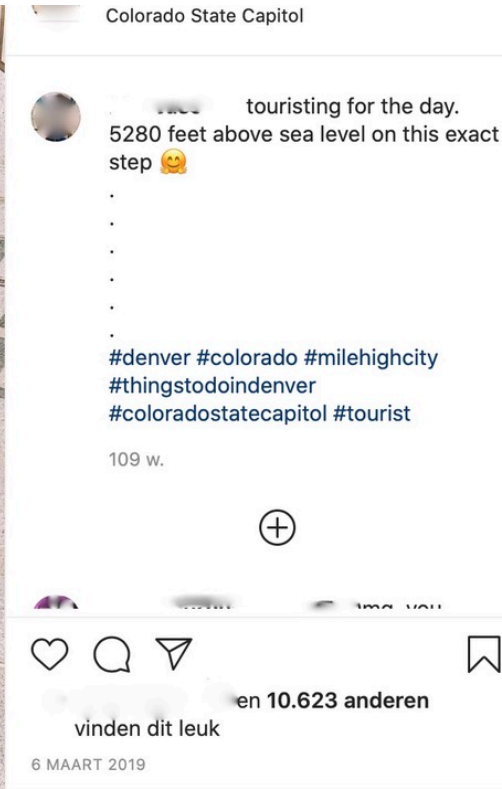
mile marker. Evidently, posing on this step is considered a tourist activity. This particular activity is the only aspect of the city frequently featured in TGC posts explicitly connected to the word "tourist". While TGC posts about other sites, like Red Rocks Amphitheatre or the Garden of the Gods National Park, mention the presence of other people, the word tourist, or any variation thereof, is not mentioned. It must be noted that images strikingly similar to the figure above were ubiquitous amongst all TGC posts concerning the city of Denver. While it is portrayed as an essential part of the destination image, it is also represented as touristic and somewhat tacky. In this sense, phrases such as "being such a tourist" or hashtags as #touristythings are used somewhat ironically to parody popular tourist practices and narratives set by DMO's. Interestingly, the one-mile marker hardly makes an appearance on DMO pages. This tourist attraction has been cemented within the DI based practically exclusively through   TGC content, fortifying the argument that tourism-generated content is becoming increasingly important in the formation of DI (Xiang& Gretzel, 2010).

The few times that the 13th step of the Capitol building has made an appearance on DMO pages, the images were re-uploaded TGC posts. As noted before, the practice of sharing TGC content by Denver's DMO's occurs frequently. In fact, several of the most prominent Denver DMO pages almost exclusively re-upload TGC posts, crediting the original photographer in the description. By sharing tourists' perceived DI of the city, those posts now function as projectors of DI, which in turn might inform how other tourists experience and post about the city, completing the hermeneutic circle of representation. The re-posting of tourist-generated content as the primary approach to disseminating an online DI shifts the role of DMO's from actively creating DI to managing the destination image of Denver, fortifying the argument that DMO's are shifting from being creators to managers (Skinner, 2018). Much like the real-life galleries dotted around the RiNo art district, DMO pages for the city become a gallery where the TGC posts that best fit the desired projected DI are curated, collected, and displayed.

This section has explored the intersection where urban sophistication and outdoor adventure meet. Through seemingly paradoxical terms such as urban oases and urban farming, green spaces within the city are connected to notions of adventure, discovery, and temporary retreats from busy city life in the outdoors. Simultaneously, the core narrative of outdoor adventure is mirrored within the city itself through an emphasis on urban adventure. As such, the place narrative of Denver as a city where nature meets culture is created.

5. Conclusion

5.1. Conclusion

This study employed netnography to examine the co-creation and dissemination of online DI on Instagram, specifically for the city of Denver. Both DMO and TGC content were examined in order to gain a better understanding of the development of destination image through web 2.0 platforms and the rising influence of "prosumers". The notion of "urban sophistication meets outdoor adventure", as quoted from a DMO post, underlines the structure of the analysis as it outlines two distinct place narratives, who interact and intersect to form a holistic image of Denver. Firstly, the narrative of "urban sophistication" was examined in-depth, centering around the keywords of creative and vibrant. Through a focus on street art, restaurants, and breweries, the place narrative of creativity is established. Activated alleyways were showcased to display a sense of discovery and experience, inviting tourists to explore the "hidden gems" of the city. Throughout this particular place narrative, Denver is portrayed as a thriving and growing city that has a lively cultural scene, emphasizing the atmosphere and more affective components of the DI. The second place narrative centered around "outdoor adventure". Through an emphasis on nature, the Rocky Mountains, and being active, a place-narrative of Denver as an "outdoorsy" and adventurous city is established. DMO's make use of the functional components of the DI, in this case, the mountains, to suggest an atmosphere of adventure, exploration, and activeness. While DMO's focused more on a holistic image of the Rocky Mountains, TGC content tended to revolve a bit more around the attributes and specifics of the image, as was demonstrated by the multiple mentions of crowds-levels at National Parks, difficulty levels of different hikes, and other practical considerations having to do with going out into nature.

The two narratives were brought together in the last section, the intersection between outdoor adventure and urban sophistication. The merger of these two

narratives blended nature and city. The presence of nature in the city was emphasized through narratives of urban oases as places to escape from bustling city life without leaving the confines of the city. The notion of urban adventure paralleled narratives of outdoor adventure and functioned as the intersection between the narratives of urban sophistication and outdoor adventure that form the main components of Denver's destination image.

The study briefly summarized above was employed in order to answer the research question: *How is a destination image of Denver, Colorado co-created and conveyed on Instagram by both Destination Marketing Organizations and Tourist Generated Content, and how are potential differences between representation and experience reconciled?*

Firstly, an online DI of Denver is constructed through the interaction and intersections of different place narratives: a thriving city meets the quietness of nature, creativity meets adventure, and the outdoors meets the conveniences of modern city life. These narratives form the core of Denver's DI, and as are such, relatively stable. Simultaneously, several peripheral place narratives are contingent upon fluctuating factors such as time and place surrounding the cores (Xu & Ye, 2018). These are the more marginal place narratives that are easily interchanged, as was examined in the case of cycling. The core and peripheral place narratives together form a holistic DI that is meant to tell a story of adventure, exploration, and activity, inviting online viewers to imagine themselves in the city while also distinguishing Denver from other destinations (Rickly-Boyd, 2009). The latter is especially relevant in the United States, as urban centers are often quite similar in terms of layout and architecture. Such similarities may affect the attractiveness of a city in a negative manner (Crouch & Ritchie, 1999). The focus on unique place narratives, grounded in local assets and features, such as the Rocky Mountains, ensures that Denver's DI distinguishes the city from other major US cities.

Secondly, a holistic destination image of Denver is actively co-created through both TGC and DMO content (Xiang& Gretzel, 2010). One of the main differences

between DMO and TGC can generally not be unearthed in the photographs but instead in the captions accompanying the Instagram posts. DMO's tend to utilize more affective and narrative-oriented words and phrases such as "vibrant", "thriving", and "urban adventure", which seek to establish the more psychological aspect of the functional-psychological continuum (Echtner& Ritchie, 1993). On the other hand, TGC posts primarily contain more functional characteristics of the DI, as was exemplified by the focus on the length and ease of hiking trails, practical tips on how to avoid crowds while visiting the National Parks, and general advice on where to eat and how to get around, representing the cognitive component of the DI (MacKay& Fesenmaier, 1997). Consequently, DMO and TGC content fulfill different roles within the DI, contributing distinctive characteristics to the holistic image of Denver.

Throughout TGC posts, in particular, another trend was observed as many TGC photos appeared remarkably similar, exemplified by the looking away at the mountainous vistas in the distance pose that cropped up in various iterations. Another potent example is that of the shoes on the thirteenth step of the Colorado State Capitol Building. While a photo of the mile-high marker was lacking from DMO pages in general, this specific pose was recreated multiple times across TGC posts, with the recognition that taking such a photograph was quite "touristy" in nature. From this example, it appears that TGC posts inspired other visitors to recreate and share their own version, thereby strengthening this particular feature of the destination image. In this case, DMO influence is minimal as the "one mile high" step is not featured on their pages, supporting the argument that the creation of DI is no longer a one way street from DMO to the consumer, as TGC becomes increasingly influential in the creation and dissemination of DI (Mak, 2017). This argument is fortified by the notion that DMO's do not only publish original photographic content but also share or re-post content created by tourists (Iglesias-Sánchez et al., 2020).

Furthermore, several of the most prominent Denver DMO pages almost exclusively re-uploaded TGC posts. As such, DMO's are able to cherry-pick those

images that fit their desired projected DI and share them with their own social media following. By sharing tourists' perceived DI of the city, those posts now function as projectors of DI, blurring the boundaries between DMO and TGC, projected and perceived DI. Simultaneously, the line between tourism-tie sources and weak-tie sources becomes unclear, as weak-tie sources become tourism-tie sources (Narangajavana et al., 2019). The shared TGC posts may, in turn, inform how other tourists experience the city and what they consequently post on social media, completing the hermeneutic circle of representation (Caton & Santos, 2008). As such, the hermeneutic circle of representation is arguably not rooted in the confirmation of projected DI but instead in the sharing of perceived DI of tourists by DMO pages across social media. Consequently, destination image and experience are continually negotiated through tourist experiences.

Consequently, the re-posting of tourist-generated content as the primary approach to disseminating an online DI shifts the role of DMO's from actively creating DI to managing the destination image of Denver. Much like the real-life galleries dotted around the RiNo art district, DMO pages for the city become a gallery where the TGC posts that best fit the desired projected DI are curated, collected, and displayed, supporting the argument that DMO's are increasingly only able to manage, rather than truly market the destination image (Skinner, 2018).

Furthermore, the creation of an online DI is highly reliant on several dynamic factors, such as language, time, and the specific platform to which content is uploaded (Lee et al., 2014, p,241). As such, the nature of Instagram itself must be considered in light of the formation of online DI. As has become apparent throughout the analysis, the aesthetic quality of photographs and images is a high priority across both DMO and TGC posts. From black and white shots of alleyways to artful photos of food, as well as the application of filters over the photograph to enhance the image, the focus on a particular "instagrammability" influences the manner in which DI is created and conveyed. As the platform's currency is likes, comments, and shares, the

more a post is able to grab the attention of viewers and differentiate itself from others, the more it will be rewarded in that currency. In this way, Instagram is not dissimilar from DI, which also seeks to distinguish a destination from others in order to attract more visitors (Lund et al., 2018, p. 274). The use of filters and other image-enhancing technologies in TGC posts implies that TGC photographs posted to Instagram do not necessarily convey a perceived destination image. While the unedited photograph more accurately reflects how a visitor views a destination, the act of retouching and enhancing the photographs arguably changes the image from what is perceived by tourists to what they desire to perceive, representing an active negotiation between destination image and embodied experience.

The final part of the research question concerns itself with potential differences between the online DI as displayed through TGC and DMO content and the embodied experiences of visitors to the city. These differences are broadly addressed in two distinct ways, either by local citizens in the comment sections of DMO posts or by tourists in the captions accompanying their photographs. From the analysis, it follows that locals are mainly instrumental in contrasting the idyllic picture that is painted of the city as part of the projected DI and the realities of living in the city, actively negotiating the DI as opposed to embodied experience. The negative aspects they raise are mainly social in nature and are arguably prevalent in most urban areas, such as homelessness, gentrification, and pollution. Comments by locals largely point out the social cost of projecting an image of creativity and vibrancy, especially for those who have to deal with the consequences on a daily basis. Local residents arguably ground the overwhelmingly positive DI in the embodied experience of reality, supporting the argument that local citizens play an influential role in the creation of online DI (Freire, 2009).

In conclusion, a destination image of Denver is co-created on Instagram through the establishment of several core place narratives. It is co-created because both TGC and DMO posts contribute to the DI. The line between the two becomes blurred as

DMO's increasingly utilize TGC posts to convey a specific projected DI. As such, the role of DMO's shifts from actively marketing a projected DI to managing the DI that is co-created through TGC and DMO content. Differences between the destination image and reality are reconciled through both tourist content and comments from local inhabitants. TGC posts tend to remedy the affective nature of the DI by providing cognitive information that is more practical in nature. Simultaneously, local citizens are negating the overwhelmingly positive nature of the DI as opposed to embodied experience by addressing socio-economic, environmental, and practical issues that arise as a result of the projected DI and a subsequent influx of tourism.

Returning to the Denver Tourism logo featured in the introduction (figure 1), it has now become clear that this image conveys a core place narrative of Denver, urban sophistication meets outdoor adventure, as it showcases the city skyline before an outline of mountains. As such, the mere logo already provides an image of the city. Coupled with the words "the Mile High City", this logo arguably captures the essence of the holistic destination image of Denver, Colorado, where nature meets culture.

5.2 Discussion

Some limitations to this study were previously outlined in the methods chapter. The foremost being the inability to collect data from a more extended period of time, as to focus on the development of destination image more longitudinally. The lack of ability to sort or search posts by date severely hindered the capacity to collect data from several different years because of time constraints. Simultaneously, 2020 and 2021 were excluded from this study because of the significant impact the COVID-19 pandemic has had on the tourism sector, reverberating through DMO and TGC posts. On the other hand, the focus on a shorter timeline has allowed for more depth of information and a higher level of immersion in the data collected, allowing for a more detailed analysis. Nevertheless, a more longitudinal approach may also yield valuable insights in further research.

It is also important to note that this study was somewhat limited as it only concerned itself with Instagram. It is highly probable that Instagram is not the only source through which DI is consumed by tourists but instead is formed through complex interactions between media such as television and movies, marketing campaigns, word-of-mouth, social media, and preconceived notions. These sources, and their interactionism, are not considered in this study. Throughout the analysis, the notion of "Instagrammability" and the specific defining features of the medium have played a role in how the DI is co-created and conveyed, raising questions about the creation and negotiation of destination image across different forms of social media. As such, comparable studies conducted on other social media platforms may give more insight into the nuances between social media applications such as Facebook and Twitter, but also more recently popularized platforms, such as TikTok. Alternatively, similar studies may be conducted for cities that are either at the very beginning of promoting tourism to that city or for cities that have long since established a DI, like New York City, as mentioned in the introduction, in order to examine to what extent DI and embodied experience are actively being negotiated in these particular instances.

This study has demonstrated the importance of holistic research on DI as a co-creation between TGC and DMO content, especially as sharing and re-uploading become more prominent across social media. One aspect which did not present itself in this study is the role of the influencer. As such, further research on the position of influencers in the creation and dissemination of DI could potentially yield valuable insights. As destination marketing organizations shift from actively creating DI to actively curating DI, social media will arguably continue to become more influential in the way in which destination images are created, shared, and consumed.

6. References

About Visit Denver: Visit Denver. (n.d.) Retrieved February 3rd, 2021, from
    http://www.denver.org/about-visit-denver/

Ayeh, J. K., Au, N., & Law, R. (2013). "Do we believe in TripAdvisor?" Examining
    credibility perceptions and online travelers' attitude toward using user-generated
    content. *Journal of Travel Research, 52*(4), 437-452.

Barbe, D., Neuburger, L., & Pennington-Gray, L. (2020). Follow us on Instagram!
    Understanding the driving force behind following travel accounts on Instagram. *E-
    review of Tourism Research, 17*(4), 592-609.

Campelo, A., Aitken, R., Thyne, M., & Gnoth, J. (2014). Sense of place: The importance for
    destination branding. *Journal of travel research, 53*(2), 154-166.

Caton, K., & Santos, C. A. (2008). Closing the hermeneutic circle? Photographic
    encounters with the other. *Annals of Tourism Research, 35*(1), 7-26.

Catterall, M., & Maclaran, P. (2002). Researching consumers in virtual worlds: A
    cyberspace odyssey. *Journal of Consumer Behavior: An International Research Review, 1*(3),
    228-237.

Chandler, D. (2017). *Semiotics: the basics*. New York: Taylor & Francis.

Chatzigeorgiou, C. (2017). Modelling the impact of social media influencers on
    behavioural intentions of millennials: The case of tourism in rural areas in
    Greece. *Journal of Tourism, Heritage & Services Marketing (JTHSM), 3*(2), 25-29.

Chen, Y. F., & Law, R. (2016). A review of research on electronic word-of-mouth in hospitality and tourism management. *International Journal of Hospitality & Tourism Administration, 17*(4), 347-372.

Choi, S., Lehto, X. Y., & Morrison, A. M. (2007). Destination image representation on the web: Content analysis of Macau travel related websites. *Tourism management, 28*(1), 118-129.

Clement, J. (2019). Instagram – Statistics & Facts. Statista. Retrieved March 4th, 2021, from https://www.statista.com/topics/1882/instagram/

Constantinides, E., & Fountain, S. J. (2008). Web 2.0: Conceptual foundations and marketing issues. *Journal of direct, data and digital marketing practica, 9*(3), 231-244.

Crompton, J. L. (1979). An assessment of the image of Mexico as a vacation destination and the influence of geographical location upon that image. *Journal of travel research, 17*(4), 18-23.

Crouch, G. I., & Ritchie, J. B. (1999). Tourism, competitiveness, and societal prosperity. *Journal of business research, 44*(3), 137-152.

Daugherty, T., Eastin, M. S., & Bright, L. (2008). Exploring consumer motivations for creating user-generated content. *Journal of interactive advertising, 8*(2), 16-25.

Dickinson, J. E., Filimonau, V., Hibbert, J. F., Cherrett, T., Davies, N., Norgate, S., Winstanley, C. (2017). Tourism communities and social ties: The role of online and

offline tourist social networks in building social capital and sustainable practice. *Journal of Sustainable Tourism, 25*(2), 163-180.

Dioko, L., Harrill, R., & Munar, A. M. (2011). Tourist-created content: rethinking destination branding. *International journal of culture, tourism and hospitality research, 5*(3), 291-305.

Echtner, C. M., & Ritchie, J. R. (1993). The measurement of destination image: An empirical assessment. *Journal of travel research, 31*(4), 3-13.

Echtner, C. M., & Ritchie, J. R. (2003). The meaning and measurement of destination image. *Journal of tourism studies, 14*(1), 37-48. [Reprinted from: *Journal of tourism studies, 2*(2), 1991, 2-12.

Eco, U. (1976). A theory of semiotics. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Eriksen, T. H. (2007). *Globalization: The key concepts*. Oxford: Berg.

Fatanti, M. N., & Suyadnya, I. W. (2015). Beyond user gaze: How Instagram creates tourism destination brand? *Procedia-Social and Behavioral Sciences, 211*, 1089-1095.

Ferrer-Rosell, B. & Marine-Roig, E. (2020). Projected versus perceived destination image. *Tourism Analysis, 25*(2-3), 227-237.

Francalanci, C., & Hussain, A. (2015). A visual analysis of social influencers and influence in the tourism domain. In *Information and communication technologies in tourism 2015* (pp. 19-32). Springer: Cham.

Freire, J. R. (2009). 'Local People' a critical dimension for place brands. *Journal of brand management, 16*(7), 420-438.

Gale, T. (2009). Urban beaches, virtual worlds and 'the end of tourism'. *Mobilities, 4*(1), 119-138.

Gartner, W. (1993). Image Formation process. In M. Uysal, & D. R. Fesenmaier (Eds.), Communication and channel systems in tourism marketing (pp. 191e215). New York: The Haworth Press.

Gallarza, M. G., Saura, I. G., & Garćıa, H. C. (2002). Destination image: Towards a conceptual framework. *Annals of tourism research, 29*(1), 56-78.

Govers, R., Go, F. M., & Kumar, K. (2007). Promoting tourism destination image. *Journal of travel research, 46*(1), 15-23.

Granovetter, M. S. (1973). The strength of weak ties. *American journal of sociology, 78*(6), 1360-1380

Gretzel, U. (2017). #Travelselfie: a netnographic study of travel identity communicated via Instagram. In *Performing cultural tourism* (pp. 115-127). New York: Routledge.

Gunn, C. A. (1972). *Vacationscape: Designing tourist regions*. Austin: Bureau of Business Research, University of Texas at Austin.

Hays, S., Page, S. J., & Buhalis, D. (2013). Social media as a destination marketing tool: its use by national tourism organisations. *Current issues in Tourism, 16*(3), 211-239

Hernández-Méndez, J., Muñoz-Leiva, F., & Sánchez-Fernández, J. (2015). The influence of
    e-word-of-mouth on travel decision-making: consumer profiles. *Current issues in
    tourism*, *18*(11), 1001-1021.

Hunter, W. C. (2016). The social construction of tourism online destination image: A
    comparative semiotic analysis of the visual representation of Seoul. *Tourism
    management*, *54*(1), 221-229.

Iglesias-Sánchez, P. P., Correia, M. B., Jambrino-Maldonado, C., & de las Heras-Pedrosa, C.
    (2020). Instagram as a co-creation space for tourist destination image-building:
    Algarve and Costa del Sol case studies. *Sustainability*, *12*(7), 2793.

Kang, S. K., O'Leary, J., & Miller, J. (2016). From forbidden fruit to the goose that lays
    golden eggs: Marijuana tourism in Colorado. *Sage Open*, *6*(4), 1-12.

Khamis, S., Ang, L., & Welling, R. (2017). Self-branding, 'micro-celebrity'and the rise of
    Social Media Influencers. *Celebrity studies*, *8*(2), 191-208.

Kislali, H., Kavaratzis, M., & Saren, M. (2020). Destination image formation: Towards a
    holistic approach. *International Journal of Tourism Research*, *22*(2), 266-276.

Kozinets, R. V. (1997). "I want to believe": A netnography of the X-Philes' subculture of
    consumption. *Advances in consumer research, xxiv (24)*, 470-475.

Kozinets, R. V. (2002). The field behind the screen: Using netnography for marketing
    research in online communities. *Journal of marketing research*, *39*(1), 61-72.

Kozinets, R. V. (2007). Netnography 2.0. In Belk, R.W. (Eds.) *Handbook of qualitative research methods in marketing* (pp.129-142.). Northampton, MA: Edward Elgar Publishing.

Kozinets, R. V. (2010). *Netnography: Doing ethnographic research online*. London: Sage publications.

Kozinets, R. V. (2015). *Netnography: Redefined*. Los Angeles: Sage publications.

Kress, G., & Van Leeuwen, T. (2006). *Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design*. New York: Routledge.

Lai, K., & Li, Y. (2012). Core-periphery structure of destination image: Concept, evidence and implication. *Annals of Tourism Research, 39*(3), 1359-1379.

Lee, B., Lee, C. K., & Lee, J. (2014). Dynamic nature of destination image and influence of tourist overall satisfaction on image modification. *Journal of Travel Research, 53*(2), 239-251.

Leung, D. H., Lee, A., & Law, R. (2012). Examining hotel managers' acceptance of Web 2.0 in website development: a case study of Hotels in Hong Kong. In: *Social media in travel, tourism and hospitality: Theory, practice and cases* (pp.53-65). New York: Routledge.

Lichrou, M., O'Malley, L., & Patterson, M. (2008). Place-product or place narrative (s)? Perspectives in the Marketing of Tourism Destinations. *Journal of Strategic Marketing, 16*(1), 27-39.

Lim, Y., Chung, Y., & Weaver, P. A. (2012). The impact of social media on destination branding: Consumer-generated videos versus destination marketer-generated videos. *Journal of Vacation Marketing, 18*(3), 197-206.

Lindell, A. K. (2019). Left cheek poses garner more likes: the effect of pose orientation on Instagram engagement. *Laterality: Asymmetries of Body, Brain and Cognition, 24*(5), 600-613.

Lindsay, G. (2018). One icon, two audiences: how the Denver Art Museum used their new building to both brand the city and bolster civic pride. *Journal of urban Design, 23*(2), 193-205.

Longwoods International. (2019). *Colorado Longwoods 2019 Report.* https://www.industry.colorado.com/longwoods-international

Macbeth, D. (2001). On "reflexivity" in qualitative research: Two readings, and a third. *Qualitative inquiry, 7*(1), 35-68.

MacKay, K. J., & Fesenmaier, D. R. (1997). Pictorial element of destination in image formation. *Annals of Tourism Research, 24*(3), 537–565. https://doi.org/10.1016/S0160-7383(97)00011-X

MacKay, K. J., & Couldwell, Christine M. (2004). Using Visitor-Employed Photography to Investigate Destination Image. *Journal of Travel Research, 42*(4), 390-396. DOI: 10.1177/0047287504263035

Mak, A. H. (2017). Online destination image: Comparing national tourism organisation's and tourists' perspectives. *Tourism Management, 60*(1), 280-297.

Mariani, M. M., Di Felice, M., & Mura, M. (2016). Facebook as a destination marketing tool: Evidence from Italian regional Destination Management Organizations. *Tourism management, 54*, 321-343.

Massey, D. S., Arango, J., Hugo, G., Kouaouci, A., Pellegrino, A., & Taylor, J. E. (1994). An evaluation of international migration theory: The North American case. *Population and development Review*, 699-751.

Messaris, P. (1997). *Visual persuasion: The role of images in advertising*. London: Sage.

Molinillo, S., Liébana-Cabanillas, F., Anaya-Sánchez, R., & Buhalis, D. (2018). DMO online platforms: Image and intention to visit. *Tourism management, 65*(1), 116-130.

Moreno, M. A., Goniu, N., Moreno, P. S., & Diekema, D. (2013). Ethics of social media research: common concerns and practical considerations. *Cyberpsychology, behavior, and social networking, 16*(9), 708-713.

Narangajavana Kaosiri, Y., Callarisa Fiol, L. J., Moliner Tena, M. A., Rodriguez Artola, R. M., & Sanchez Garcia, J. (2019). User-generated content sources in social media: A new approach to explore tourist satisfaction. *Journal of Travel Research, 58*(2), 253-265.

Palazzo, M., Vollero, A., Vitale, P., & Siano, A. (2021). Urban and rural destinations on Instagram: Exploring the influencers' role in #sustainabletourism. *Land Use Policy, 100*(1), 104915.

Pike, S., & Page, S. J. (2014). Destination Marketing Organizations and destination marketing: A narrative analysis of the literature. *Tourism management, 41,* 202-227.

Qu, H., Kim, L. H., & Im, H. H. (2011). A model of destination branding: Integrating the concepts of the branding and destination image. *Tourism management, 32*(3), 465-476.

Reid, N., & Gatrell, J. D. (2017). Craft breweries and economic development: Local geographies of beer. *Polymath: An Interdisciplinary Arts and Sciences Journal, 7*(2), 90-110.

Rickly-Boyd, J. M. (2009). The tourist narrative. *Tourist studies, 9*(3), 259-280.

Ritzer, G., Dean, P., & Jurgenson, N. (2012). The coming of age of the prosumer. *American behavioral scientist, 56*(4), 379-398.

Sharpley, R. (2018). *Tourism, tourists and society.* London: Routledge.

Skinner, H. M. (2018). Who really creates the place brand? Considering the role of user generated content in creating and communicating a place identity. *Communication and Society, 31*(4), 9-24.

Sun, M., Ryan, C., & Pan, S. (2015). Using Chinese travel blogs to examine perceived destination image: The case of New Zealand. *Journal of Travel Research, 54*(4), 543-555.

Tavakoli, R., & Wijesinghe, S. N. (2019). The evolution of the web and netnography in tourism: A systematic review. *Tourism Management Perspectives, 29,* 48-55.

Townsend, L., & Wallace, C. (2016). Social media research: A guide to ethics. *University of Aberdeen, 1*(1), 1-16.

Watt, D. (2007). On becoming a qualitative researcher: the value of reflexivity. *Qualitative Report, 12*(1), 82-101.

Weiler, S. (2000). Pioneers and settlers in Lo-Do Denver: Private risk and public benefits in urban redevelopment. *Urban Studies, 37*(1), 167-179.

Xiang, Z., & Gretzel, U. (2010). Role of social media in online travel information search. *Tourism management, 31*(2), 179-188.

Xu, H., & Ye, T. (2018). Dynamic destination image formation and change under the effect of various agents: The case of Lijiang, 'The Capital of Yanyu'. *Journal of Destination Marketing & Management, 7,* 131-139.

Zenker, S., Braun, E., & Petersen, S. (2017). Branding the destination versus the place: The effects of brand complexity and identification for residents and visitors. *Tourism Management, 58,* 15-27.

Appendix A: Overview of Hashtags and Accounts Followed

DMO accounts followed in chronological order:

	Name	Number of Posts	Number of Followers
1.	Visit Denver	1.911	135.000
2.	City of Denver	408	211.000
3.	Real City of Denver	345	12.600
4.	Explore Denver	220	7.007
5.	The Mile High City	1.707	100.000
6.	Denver Local Tours	241	3.833
7.	DNVR Colorado	323	88.100

Hashtags followed in chronological order:

	Name	Number of Posts
1.	#Visitdenver	118.248
2.	#Denvertravel	4.085
3.	#Traveldenver	5.456
4.	#exploreDenver	22.397

5.	#Denvertrip	8.181
6.	#Milehighcity	784.972
7.	#Denver	13.866.810
8.	#Coloradostatecapitol	5.107
9.	#Denvervacation	2.744
10.	#Redrocksamphitheatre	197.858
11.	#Denvertourist	1.720
12.	#Denvertourism	791
13.	#TriptoDenver	459
14.	#Denverlikealocal	1.717
15.	#cityofDenver	218.979
16.	#Denvervisit	530
17.	#onemileabovesealevel	1.307
18.	#DenverColorado	1.708.280
19.	#Gardenofthegods	619.578
20.	#Denverstreetart	69.940
21.	#Denvertour	568
22.	#Denverfood	137.453
23.	#Denverbotanicgardens	72.483
24.	#Denveradventures	9.137
25.	#Denverdaytrip	1.784

Appendix B: Excerpt from Codebook

Name	References	Files
▼ ◯ Data analysis in total	1.131	391
▼ ◯ outdoor adventure	189	117
▼ ◯ #rockymountains	71	37
▶ ◯ adventerous nature of the state of colorado	13	12
◯ fall colors	7	7
◯ rockies as Denver's backyard	5	5
▶ ◯ uniquely situated within the rockies	46	21
▶ ◯ #sportscity	53	45
▼ ◯ #weather	65	52
▶ ◯ 300 days of sunshine	18	17
▶ ◯ bad weather-- still beautiful	12	11
▶ ◯ weather tag	15	15
▶ ◯ weather--fall	8	7
▼ ◯ weather--snow	11	9
◯ blizzard	2	2
◯ snow-- fun surpirse-adventure	2	2
◯ weather--snow--negative sides	2	2
◯ weather-very cold	2	2
◯ weather--spring	1	1
▼ ◯ urban sophistication	671	261
▶ ◯ #beers, bars, and buds	98	44
▶ ◯ #cityofdenver	207	140
▶ ◯ #foodie-- the culinary city	176	74
▶ ◯ #street art	112	53
▶ ◯ #transportation	78	38
▼ ◯ urban sophistication meets outdoor adventure	271	188
▶ ◯ #milehighcity	99	75
▶ ◯ #visitdenver-- tourit attractions, must sees adn things to do	67	60
▶ ◯ 'urban oasis'	30	21
▶ ◯ urban adventure	35	31
▶ ◯ weekend getaway	35	33

Appendix C: Thematic Map