Mediated paradise: The use of social media for destination branding.

A case study on Aruba, Bonaire, and Curaçao.

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Abstract

Social media has changed how Destination Management Organizations (DMOs) construct destination branding. Where once the destination branding was solely determined and communicated through one-way information channels, now technological affordances have shifted how messages are constructed, disseminated, and consumed by external audiences. Therefore, brands need to wisely use the affordances given to them by these new technologies to capture the hearts and minds of external audiences and appease their local stakeholders. Within destination branding, the destination identity is created by the branding produced by administrators of the DMOs. The administrators communicate this identity through brand messages through various channels to external stakeholders, who in turn shape the destination image through their own perception and evaluation of the brand identity. Currently, the body of research on how destination brand identity is communicated on social media is limited, with most research only focusing on the destination image. Thus, this research aims to identify the role that content on social media has in the constructing a destination brand identity.

Within this research, a case study was conducted to analyze how this process takes in the real world. Therefore, this research looks at destination brand identity construction on social media in the context of Aruba, Bonaire, and Curaçao. To address this, the content and production process for the tourist-oriented Instagram pages of the local DMOs will be investigated. This research takes a mixed-method approach to understand the presented query. Firstly, a visual discourse analysis was conducted to evaluate what destination brand messages are posted on the Instagram channels, followed by in-depth expert interviews with branding and social media administrators of the local DMOs of the ABC islands.

The main finding for the visual discourse analysis includes that the most prevalent brand messages and characteristics posted on social media are related to the destination's offerings, including the beaches, relaxation, nature, culture, on-island activities, and local identity. Furthermore, it was concluded through the interviews that the messages dispersed on social media are used to illustrate the values of the destination brand identity while trying to balance the expectations of different customer segments, working with local and international stakeholders, developing the physical product, and abiding by the ever-changing social media algorithms.

Keywords: *destination branding, destination identity, destination image, brand messaging social media.*

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1. Introduction

Historically, countries have abided by informal and formal branding practices (Garay Tamajón, 2019). Setting up an identity for a country based on its societal beliefs, geolocational offerings, and local people is called place branding (Cleave et al., 2017). Place branding is an umbrella term for a group of disciplines within a field of social research that aims to understand how places can be branded for economic, political, & societal purposes (Hanna & Rowley, 2008). Place branding can be performed at multiple geolocational levels, including cities, provinces, countries, and continents (Cleave et al., 2017). The development of Web 2.0 has disrupted how countries can leverage their brand image to appeal to their desired target audience (Skinner et al., 2022). Social media, in particular, has disrupted how this branding is constructed, maintained, and built in an environment with a two-way communication process that is in the control and influenced by various stakeholders (Sevin et al., 2020).

One of the fundamental reasons why countries use social media is to market their product offering to external audiences. Web 2.0 and social media has drastically changed how public administrators can perform place branding. With the advent of social media platforms, places must now make sure they stand out not only in their physical environment but also in online environments in an increasingly competitive, connected, and globalized world (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010; Ashworth & Kavaratzis, 2009). As such, social media is now used to leverage place branding practices to external audiences and key stakeholders (Acharya & Rahman, 2016). Place branding is communicated through social media in myriad forms, through multiple technological affordances, and with different strategies and goals in mind.

Closely related to place branding is destination branding, which will be the focus of this research. Destination branding encompasses all tools, tactics, and strategies that destination marketers can use to shape an exclusive image of their geolocational brand to capture the attention of external audiences and stakeholders for touristic purposes (Rudolf & Tran, 2022). In essence, destination branding is a multiple-step branding method where countries aim to construct an image and story to influence the perception and flow of visitors to their offering (Giannopoulos et al., 2011). While similar in terms of strategy, destination and place branding differ in goal. Destination branding aims to create a brand for tourism purposes. In contrast, place branding encompasses administrators' activities to attract a broader set of external

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stakeholders beyond sole tourists (Cleave et al., 2017). These purposes include local investments, education, and permanent residency, amongst other reasons.

As more countries turn to tourism as a source of income, destination branding efforts have started to take place on all scales, ranging from municipal to continental place branding. Each scale presents unique challenges and requires tailored destination branding strategies. Therefore, local and international Destination Management Organizations (DMOs) must use cutting-edge and relevant communication methods and channels to their full potential to build an effective destination brand for their domain (Cleave et al., 2017; Hanna & Rowley, 2008).

The rise of Web 2.0 and social media have created new channels that are now used for many purposes. Destination marketers saw its potential early on, using its communicational affordances to directly interact and market to their audience in the early days of the internet. However, social media has disrupted how destination marketing is conducted online. This disruption in branding practices took place because of the affordances granted by social media to both administrators and external audiences alike (Lim et al., 2012). Social media platforms are less hierarchical in structure in comparison to traditional media channels. Furthermore, social media offer tools for co-creating content by external audiences, otherwise understood as user-generated content. This affordance gave outside stakeholders more control and influence in forming a destination identity and image (Lim et al., 2012).

Within destination branding research, several concepts are used to guide the studies in the field of branding. When discussing the production side of destination branding, destination identity is the concept brought into evaluation. *Destination identity* is the brand identity transmitted by the DMOs to outside stakeholders. This identity includes the visual identity and messages that DMOs send to their audiences to brand their offering. In contrast, when studies aim to identify how external audiences perceive destination branding, they look at the destination image. Destination image reflects the mental picture, perception, and attitudes that outside stakeholders construct of a particular destination or place, either by their own experiences or secondary experiences created when consuming content by other parties. (Skinner et al., 2022). Thus, DMOs must be proactive, extensive, and inclusive when promoting a destination to capture the brand's essence and convey it in a relevant, concise, and comprehensive way to their target audiences. When DMOs cannot do so, this could cause the brand identity to be evaluated as inauthentic, unfitting, and lacking in credibility (Skinner et al., 2022).

This present research investigates how the destination identity of Aruba, Bonaire, and Curaçao is constructed through the local DMO-curated social media channels, specifically through their Instagram channels. This research aims to answer the question: *What role do visuals on social media have in forming the destination brand identity of Aruba, Bonaire, & Curaçao?*

Instagram was chosen as the platform for this research as it is one of the most visual-based social media channels; thus, it is fit to evaluate the construction of destination branding on social media. The ABC islands were chosen as the case study for this research, as tourism revenue is their primary source of income (Oostindie & van Stipriaan, 2021). Thus, destination branding and tourism marketing are essential activities that administrators at the local DMOs must undertake to stand out in a global market surrounded by homogeneous market offerings and competitors (Cleave et al., 2017). Two sub-questions were developed to guide the data collection and analysis process of the research project; these are:

- How do the Destination Management Organizations of Aruba, Bonaire, & Curaçao construct their destination brand identity on tourist-oriented social media?
- How do administrators at the Destination Management Organizations of Aruba, Bonaire, & Curaçao execute their social media strategy for destination branding purposes?

Prior research on the relationship between social media and destination branding has been conducted in many areas within the field (Tran & Rudolf, 2022). However, more research needs to be done on how destination identity is constructed through the visuals posted on social media channels curated by DMOs. Thus, to investigate how visuals on social media channels contribute to destination branding & destination identity formation efforts by DMOs, a geolocational context will be applied to research this phenomenon. Furthermore, much research in the field focuses on the consumer side of the perception of destination branding. In contrast, the focus on constructing and disseminating the destination branding, including the visuals, brand messages, and brand identity, needs more academic attention in the current literature. This lack of research could lead to an imbalanced and potentially misunderstood image of the importance and role of destination branding formation's production or supply side (Skinner et al., 2022; Konecnik & Go, 2008).

This research examines how the DMOs of the ABC islands perform destination branding on their social media channels. This research is unique because it focuses on destination branding and identity formation by DMOs through the messages and meaning presented in the visual content that these DMOs post on their tourist-oriented social media channels. Research in the context of Caribbean nations has been a field that has historically been underrepresented, undervalued, and underfunded. On a more positive note, academic publishing by Dutch Caribbean institutions has increased in yearly publications, partially due to the increased importance of these studies in both the Dutch Caribbean islands and The Netherlands, leading to more funding and opportunities for academic research. This shift in importance can already be noticed in the number of published academic works, increasing from 3 publications by Dutch Caribbean institutions in 2012 to 111 publications in 2021 (Scientific research, 2022). Furthermore, a case study of the ABC islands offers cross-national, comparative research on the branding of small nation-states in the Caribbean and how destinations with overarching homogenous tourism offerings can create personalized, unique, and relevant destination branding strategies in an increasingly digitized global economy.

This thesis comprises the following five chapters: Theoretical Framework, Methodology, Results and Discussion, and Conclusion. The following chapter will present the theoretical framework for this study, reviewing the foundational concepts and theories for this research. Following this chapter, the Methodology introduces the research sample for this research, discusses the research design, and argues why a qualitative mixed method approach is suitable for investigating the research questions. Afterward, in the Results and Discussion chapter, the results of the data analysis will be presented and triangulated with data and theory. In the last chapter, Conclusion, the strategic & managerial implications are presented, followed by the limitations of the research.

2. Theoretical Background

Before delving deeper into the current research, it is important to illustrate the current body of research and the various angles that show the importance of social media as a tool employed for destination branding, and why it is important to further research the practice. Within this literature review, the intertwined relationship between the concepts of place branding, social media branding, brand identity formation, branding messages will be substantiated. Furthermore, in the last subsection, contextual information about the ABC islands will be presented, to examine why applying this research is relevant within their situational context.

2.1 Destination Branding: What is it?

Before delving further into the relationship between the various concepts it's crucial to develop the concept of destination branding and why it has become a pivotal element in the tourism marketing strategies undertaken by DMOs globally (Pike, 2005). Research on destination branding started to take off in the mid 1990s and has now evolved into a field of research based in several paradigms and perspectives, often requiring multidisciplinary research to fully grasp its scope and influence (Pike, 2005; Pereira et al., 2012). Destination branding refers to the use of strategies to create a brand based on a country, area, or other geographical boundary for touristic purposes, oftentimes employed by DMOs and other organizations entrusted with touristic promotion (Pike, 2005; Pereira et al., 2012). In destination branding practices, practitioners use the cultural, environmental, and sometimes historical aspects of a country, to be able to market the physical product and the services available on the destination to potential tourists and other external stakeholders (Pereira et al., 2012). There are several key tasks undertaken within destination branding such as the (re)positioning of a country, and the construction of a destination brand identity and image (Pereira et al., 2012) Destination branding relies heavily on the construction of a visual destination brand identity to distinguish a destination from its competitors and create a distinct image in the perspectives of potential tourists (Pike, 2005).

One of the crucial aspects why destination branding is important for DMOs is the fact that through these processes, DMOs can create an emotional connection with potential tourists (Pereira et al., 2012). This process of creating an emotional connection is desirable for practitioners, as this connection creates a "unique identity and personality that is different from all competitive destinations" (Pereira et al., 2012, p. 93). Blain et al. (2005) highlights this idea further by arguing that the primary motives that countries employ destination branding is to identify the offerings of the destination, and to differentiate these offerings from the offerings of its competition.

Furthermore, there are several key reasons why destination branding is important for practitioners to implement within their organizations to improve their tourism marketing practices (Pereira et al., 2012; Hoeffler & Keller, 2003). The first of which is that a strong destination branding attaches a more favorable perception towards the destination by external audiences as it is more defined by favorable, calculated attributes. Additionally, because the destination is presented in concise and captivating methods, it is easier for external audiences to capture and retain information about the brand and react positively to said information. Furthermore, having a defined branding attracts tourists with higher incomes and who are more willing to spend higher amounts on their vacations, as they have more trust in the value of the brand. And lastly, considering the aforementioned points, having a clear branding assists in how tourists value and perceive their vacation experience at a destination (Pereira et al., 2012; Hoeffler & Keller, 2003). Blain et al. (2005) tie this notion to the idea of assurance of quality, where a recognizable and trusted brand plays a crucial role in the expectation management of incoming travelers. Additionally, this assurance of quality again correlates to the higher expenditure that the visitors are willing to have. This is because of the higher perceived brand awareness by the external audience (Blain et al., 2005). Furthermore, the time spent searching for vacation destinations becomes less, as tourists are more inclined to lean towards destinations that correlate with their values and wants (Blain et al., 2005).

However, there are some inherent considerations that DMOs must consider and find applicable solutions for when implementing a destination brand identity to a destination, so as to not misconstruct the identity of said location (Pike, 2005). Firstly, is that the destination brand identity, especially the slogans and taglines associated with the branding must be brief and captivating. Paradoxically is the fact that these slogans must try to incorporate the diverse

aspects and offerings that destinations have to offer. This leads to the second consideration, which is that the branding should be flexible and encompassing enough to attract multiple types of segments, as DMOs usually try to attract people from different global regions. Thirdly is the fact that in some countries, local politics have an impact on the decision-making process of DMOs, as they are often categorized as public organizations and thus receive their funding from governmental bodies. Leading to the fourth struggle, which is that funding can be an issue for DMOs, as in some cases they rely on external sources to get funding, this leads to the fact that DMOs often become organizations that are partially publicly and privately funded, increasing their spending capacity (Pike, 2005).

While the previous four considerations were based on necessities from the production's side, the last two considerations presented by Pike (2005) have implications grounded on the external perceptions side. The first consideration is that the message should be accepted by external stakeholders, especially local stakeholders working in the tourism sector. Failing to appease these stakeholders may lead to the message being dismissed and will not be transmitted to tourists when they visit the destination. The last consideration is brand loyalty, reflected by the number of repeat visitors at a destination. Brand loyalty for destination branding is an often-undermined tool in research, as it is hard to pinpoint what degree of communication visitors would like to experience after their vacations (Pike, 2005).

In conclusion, destination branding is a crucial tool for DMOs to use within tourism marketing and promotion. A good destination brand ties all the offerings and advantages that a country has to offer in comparison with their competitors. Furthermore, by creating a concise, captivating, and lasting identity for a destination, DMOs are able to influence the perception that external audiences have of their destination and thereby impacting their travel behavior and post travel perspective of the destination. However, DMOs need to consider the complexity and multidimensionality of branding a country, as to not misrepresent or exclude local stakeholders of the brand identity. Now that the fundamental importance of destination branding has been presented, its connection to the guiding concepts will be examined.

2.2 Destination branding and social media

The advent of social media has disrupted how countries & cities practice place branding. Place branding is the strategies administrators employ to foster a positive, lingering mental

image of a particular place (Govers, 2014). When conducting place branding, a set of practices are taken on by public entities such as countries, cities, and geographic regions. These practices aim to distinguish regions from their surrounding areas and attract people to their place & its offerings (Cleave et al., 2017). Although place branding refers to various activities in different domains – including, but not limited to, politics, tourism, economy, and social development – it is usually exploited through place promotion through marketing and branding efforts (Cleave et al., 2017; Ashworth & Kavaratzis, 2009).

Before the development of the web, place branding was predominantly a one-way stream of information. News outlets, travel companies, governments, traditional media channels, and marketing agencies have defined the branding produced to brand a location to its consumers (Cleave et al., 2017). Internet communications have facilitated the flattening of the branding hierarchy, giving consumers the power to influence the brand image and perception (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010). Furthermore, due to the relatively low cost of social media marketing, smaller countries and smaller communities can now compete internationally with established tourist destinations (Baker, 2007; Hanna & Rowley, 2008). Consumers in the context of place branding refer to people who consume the constructed brand identity place branding, including tourists, investors, businesses, and the local community (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010).

The boom of Web 2.0 and the communication affordances that were given to individuals has revolutionized how branding is co-created in virtual spaces by community members and visitors (Cleave et al., 2017; Xiang & Gretzel, 2010). Social media platforms have become a powerful tool in place branding efforts. These platforms have become information-rich resources for the offerings of a place and its brand identity (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010). In many countries and cities, social networks are used as a tool for the stimulation of tourism activities, customer acquisition, and helping the travel planning process of customers (Ebrahimi et al., 2020).

Social media has changed the way companies do business in general. An industry that has used this tool efficiently is the tourism and destination branding sector. In destination branding, DMOs and administrators can leverage their social media channels for the promotion of destination branding on the web, as social media content are great for search engine optimization due to their affordances, e.g., user-generated content and links to external pages (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010). Using social media, these companies can inform potential visitors about what the destinations offer; to create a visual image of the place for consumers (Tran & Rudolf, 2022).

Additionally, companies and their audience can share & interact on the platforms. Therefore, social media connects the audience to the brand better. Social media has flattened the hierarchy of place and destination branding efforts (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010). Now there is a two-way stream in the communication of destination branding, with DMOs and administrators on the one hand and the user or consumer-generated content on the other (Govers, 2014; Lim et al., 2012). However, brands must leverage this carefully to negate potential risk situations that could result in negative press and damage the brand image (Lim et al., 2012).

A good social media brand is unequivocally vital for developing a positive lasting impression in the minds of potential visitors. Thus, social media is a crucial tool for fostering brand loyalty. In tourism branding on social media, brand competence, predictability, and reputation are the most critical factors for establishing positive branding (Christou, 2015). Therefore, travel companies should ensure that their branding on social media matches their promoted destination (Giannopoulos et al., 2011). Furthermore, it should also be congruent with the offline offering to ensure that there is no cognitive dissonance between the online and offline presentation of the brand (Christou, 2015). However, empirical research by Ebrahimi et al. (2020) proposes that more than using social media alone is needed to promote a tourism destination. However, social media such be considered as a required supplementary activity that administrators must undertake aside from the place branding efforts in different societal domains.

2.3 Branding Messaging on social media

Social media has become a platform where brands can present themselves to an audience to reach a specific goal. While some brands use social media to create brand awareness, others use social media as a marketplace where conversion happens. Up until 2014, brands needed a way of keeping track of their performance and using their social media platform as a tool for business. However, once that was in place, brands now had the affordance of a new array of marketing channels that, in many ways, trumped the affordances available in traditional advertisements (Coursaris et al., 2016).

However, with this new technology came a new area that brands had to pay attention to, standing out of a sea of competitors in a digital environment. A brand needs to pay attention to many things to stand out online. For the scope of this thesis, the visual brand identity and

message framing are the two most important factors. The visual identity is reflected through how a brand is presented, constructed, and maintained by the social media page administrators. This will be developed in the next segment. The brand message framing refers to how advertorial messages and experiences are expressed in online communication. There is limited research that focuses on the message in destination branding literature. Therefore, this section looks at the business context of brand messaging and relates it to the obvious overarching themes that encompass branding both in a business and tourism or destination branding context.

Destinations, similar to commercial brands, have the ability to produce messages that are built on predefined ideas and visions that they try to communicate to external audiences. The interactive, social , and engaging nature of social media channels have catapulted the use of digital tools for the promotion and dispersion of these brand messages, with social media being one of the fastest growing marketing tools internationally. What makes social media marketing such a powerful tool is its ability to give administrators the possibility to produce free, personal, and accessible messages that are also cost effective when compared to messages communicated through traditional media channels (Coursaris et al., 2016).

However, in order for the message to be received as expected by the audience, practitioners should be wary that the message is delivered in an applicable manner (Ghodeswar, 2008). Thus, achieving effective communication with external audiences requires practitioners to create clear brand messages that add value and that are applicable to the receiver. To ensure effective communication captivates the target audience, DMOs need to ensure that the destination brand is positioned in an appropriate manner, so that the brand identity and brand messages that they produce correlate and sustain the created branding (Ghodeswar, 2008). Within brand messaging there are several methods to decipher what a message aims to convey. Coursaris et al. (2016) provide the theory that brand messages have two distinct focuses, inspirational and informational messages. Inspirational messages that aim to inspire, informing you how a product or service affects your life. Informational messages disclose how a certain product or service, or provides information about the use.

There are different factors that could negatively affect the performance of the branding. These factors range from individual developments in consumer behavior and perception to collective developments that take place in the market. Relevant for DMOs to consider are the trends in tourism, competitor offerings, and developments on the technical side of social media,

such as algorithmic performance. However, while the performance in such areas may periodically diminish, such as changing affordances and performance in certain communication channels, administrators must make sure that the brand message is communicated clearly at all times and across all channels, as consumers receive brand messages through various methods and channels; sometimes even simultaneously (Ghodeswar, 2008)

2.4 Destination Identity & Destination Image

Within destination branding research, two central perspectives are used to guide research. These are the supply-side and demand-driven of destination branding (Konecnik & Go, 2008). The supply side of destination branding should be understood as the production side of branding strategy, also referred to as the destination identity. In contrast, demand-driven destination branding is referred to as the destination image, which can be understood as how produced destination identity is perceived by outside stakeholders (Konecnik & Go, 2008). The present research is grounded in the supply side of destination branding.

Some elements of destination identity have been set in stone as crucial aspects of its theoretical importance. Firstly, a destination identity serves "as a network picture, which draws, in turn on historical, national, and cultural relationships, to develop a common view, which becomes the basis for joint action for/or against change" (Konecnik & Go, 2008, p. 179). A network picture can be understood as different products, services, and experiences a destination offers to achieve a competitive edge. The intersection of historical, national, and cultural relationships is of high importance when producing a destination identity, as merely grounding a destination brand on touristic endeavors may cause a disbalance in the perception of local identity, which may spoil the identity characteristics of a place, which in turn could lead to the destruction of an area's sense of place (Konecnik & Go, 2008). Crucial to producing destination identity are the stakeholders of the destination and its tourism sector, who, in one way or another, play a role in how a destination's identity is constructed, maintained, and dispersed (Konecnik & Go, 2008).

Research on destination identity from the supply side is still in the early phases. However, it is now more important than ever to understand the role that the production side of a destination's brand identity and image is structured. Firstly, as locations are increasingly becoming brands for commercial purposes, it is relevant to identify who is represented and

included when producing a destination brand. Secondly, tying into the first reasoning, in an ever-globalizing world, the concept of national identity has seen a resurgence in importance (Konecnik & Go, 2008; Oostindie & van Stipriaan, 2021). Lastly, because of the convergence of disciplinary boundaries, prominently the social, historical, and cultural boundaries, there is more interest in how these are interrelated on a theoretical level, especially in smaller, developing nations that do not have the same amount of recorded, sociohistorical data as developed nations (Konecnik & Go, 2008; Oostindie & van Stipriaan, 2021).

Creating a destination identity is a powerful tool for promoting a location for touristic purposes. Like the principles of destination branding, destination identity formulation also has similar goals (Konecnik & Go, 2008). Namely creating and maintaining a set of, often visual, associations tied to a brand and creating a vision of how strategists would like the brand to be perceived by their targeted external audiences. This ultimately should lead to building and maintaining a relationship with these external audiences through the process of value creation, through its value proposition, customer benefits, and brand credibility (Konecnik & Go, 2008). However, several developments influence destination identity perception from the demand-driven angle or customer perception. One of the factors central to the changing perception of destination brand identity is how these are encountered. The most crucial factor for this research is social media, its use, and its reach (Skinner et al., 2022). Another factor that has stressed the importance of destination branding in the past two years is the post-COVID-19 pandemic. Skinner et al. (2022) suggest that DMOs in destinations that rely on tourism will restart their marketing efforts, focusing on developing and differentiating their touristic product further to recover lost revenue due to lockdowns and stand out in an ever-competitive global market. Furthermore, they argue that one of the innovative strategies these DMOs will undertake is the projection of the destination identity through less formal routes, including social media (Skinner et al., 2022).

Social media has become a crucial tool for the promotion of destination image. The affordances offered by social media have bypassed the efficacy of the branded materials that DMOs have produced for decades. Some have argued that the role of social media for destination branding is crucial for smaller, less popular destinations, as user-generated content (UGC) acts as material for destination identity and image formation.

Historically, creating a destination identity has been perceived as an aspect of a country's branding solely controlled by the DMOs of said country. Usually, these DMOs were intrinsically linked to the public sector and the government, so the provided destination image reflected the views of the people in charge of the country. However, with the advent of digital platforms and social media, the power to create and shape a destination identity has been granted to everyone who produces content about a particular destination and promotes it to an outside audience. This phenomenon of co-creation of a destination identity does have its benefits and drawbacks. On the positive side, the myriad of voices that can have a say in the production of the destination identity may lead to creating a destination identity that is more authentic to the inherent identity of a country, leading to a more realistic insight into the destination for external audiences. However, authenticity in destination branding has been challenged as a necessity, as it is hard to achieve and, in some cases, dependent on the customer segment, not relevant. Some tourist segments do not care for authentic immersion into a destination's history or culture (Skinner et al., 2022).

There are two levels to which a destination identity and image are created. The first level is the image created when tourists physically visit a destination. However, most tourists get acquainted with the destination identity and image through the secondary level before their visit, as this level includes all communication, whether it be DMO-curated messages, or messages about the destination, not created by DMOs that reach the target audience.

Skinner et al. (2022) identify three sources for the messages that can be identified for the secondary level for destination brand image formation. Firstly, are induced destination image formation sources. These are promotional materials that DMOs create on traditional sources, such as flyers, brochures, email marketing, and websites. Although these are the most professionally branded of messages, they suffer from an intrinsic downside, as audiences perceive these DMO-produced messages as biased, thus less trustworthy, and authentic (Skinner et al., 2022). The second source of destination branding messages is autonomous agencies. These include the likes of television, news, and films. These sources are perceived to be less biased and thus more trustworthy than induced messages from DMO communications. Furthermore, the storytelling aspects of these media channels can pique the interest and intrigue of potential tourists toward a specific destination (Skinner et al., 2022). The third source is through organic messages attained. These messages are usually in the form of word-of-mouth and electronic

word-of-mouth sources. One important source of organic secondary level of brand image formation is user-generated content, or in the case of destination branding, tourist-generated content (TGC) (Skinner et al., 2022).

TGC is rapidly becoming an influential source of information for potential tourists, as they usually present an unbiased and outside perspective of the visited destination (Skinner et al., 2022). One of the innovative methods to build credibility and authenticity employed by DMOs is the creation of semi-promotional content in partnership with vloggers and bloggers. With this, the messages presented to external audiences are perceived as more authentic and livelier than the standard-based DMO-produced messages (Skinner et al., 2022). This innovative approach is further profitable for DMOs because the source of messages on social media is sometimes more challenging to pinpoint, as content is shared and reshared through many channels, blurring the fact that formal or informal communication channels produce the message. However, the potential downside is that destination identity creation falls outside the control of the destinations in charge and is now a two-way stream of information (Skinner et al., 2022).

2.5 The ABC islands

Aruba, Bonaire, and Curaçao form part of The Kingdom of The Netherlands. Together with Saba, Sint Eustatius, and Sint Maarten, the six islands form the area named the Dutch Caribbean. Although some aspects of the legislation are undertaken in conjunction with the other members of The Kingdom of Netherlands, others, including tourism planning and management, are handled independently (Oostindie & van Stipriaan, 2021b). The ABC islands were united for most of modern history under one governmental identity, with the most recent incarnation referred to as The Netherlands Antilles (1954 to 2010). However, this changed when Aruba seceded from The Netherlands Antilles on the 1st of January 1986 due to political unhappiness, decades later leading to the complete dissolution of the Netherlands Antilles on the 10th of October 2010 (Oostindie & van Stipriaan, 2021a; Bongers, 2009). Presently, Aruba and Curaçao are autonomous countries within the Kingdom of The Netherlands, in the same vein as European Netherlands and Sint Maarten. While Bonaire, Saba, and Sint Eustatius hold the position of a particular municipality of the European Netherlands due to this now having closer ties to the mainland Netherlands.

The ABC islands have a rich globalized history, having experienced many industries in their relatively short, industrialized economic societies. Tourism in the Dutch Caribbean started to flourish in the mid-20th century with the arrival of commercial touristic flights and cruises to the Caribbean (Oostindie & van Stipriaan, 2021a; Bongers, 2009). While in that time, it was seen as a secondary economic pillar compared to the lucrative oil refinery industries present in Aruba & Curaçao, its importance quickly grew in the latter half of the century. For Aruba, this was a necessity, as the refinery stopped its operations in 1985, leaving the island in a poor financial state, with high unemployment rates and a desperate need for a new industry (Bongers, 2009). For Curaçao tourism started in earlier years, as Curaçao had more historical prestige and development compared to the other two islands. However, they branched out into tourism as an alternative source of income next to oil refineries and the transshipment of goods. In time this was revealed to be a good move, as, in 2012, their refinery also shut its doors. Bonaire's touristic endeavors started much slower and more relaxed, with a low population quantity and specialized touristic segmentation. However, after the dissolution of The Netherlands Antilles, this started to change, with Bonaire now being one of the preferred Caribbean destinations for Dutch tourists, alongside Curaçao. This rapid change led to a growth in population and tourism sector undertakings (Oostindie & van Stipriaan, 2021b).

3. Methodology

The following section includes the steps taken to conduct the presented research. After introducing the research objective, the scope of the research, and building upon it with different theoretical and analytical developments that are taking place momentarily in the field, the focus is now turned on how to research the development of this phenomena in the context of the case study, where primary data will be used to understand how these international developments in the realm of branding are used, exploited, and localized to smaller, more homogeneous economies.

3.1 Justification of Research Method

A qualitative approach was taken to research the role of visuals on social media in the destination branding efforts of Aruba, Bonaire, and Curaçao. Qualitative research aims to make sense of certain societal phenomena that perplexes the curious. Furthermore, qualitative research is often rich in collected data and in-depth information on the studied subject. This is an apt method of research to employ for this investigation, as this research aims to understand the construction of the destination brand identity that the DMOs create; and thus needs an inductive method of research to achieve this goal (Brennen, 2017). The destination branding of Aruba, Bonaire, and Curaçao is constructed and maintained by the islands' national destination management organizations (DMOs). Tourism acts as the primary economic pillar for all three islands; therefore, the destination brand of the islands produced by the DMOs is also exploited as the place brand of the island. Thus, the destination branding constructed by the DMOs of the ABC islands is essential for the identity of the nations for multiple reasons. The DMOs in charge of the destination branding of the islands are Aruba Tourism Authority in Aruba, Tourism Corporation Bonaire in Bonaire, and Curaçao Tourism Board in Curaçao (Roberts, 2018; Britell, 2023; Drayer, 2023).

3.2 Procedure

The following section outlines the steps taken to conduct the research. This includes the data collection phase, the sampling procedure, the participants, and the data analysis phase.

3.2.1 Data Collection

A mixed-method approach was taken to answer the main research question and identify the role of visuals on the DMOs' Instagram channels for the destination branding of the ABC islands. In order to do so, the research question was investigated from two different angles to answer the two sub-questions that were developed and expanded on in Chapter 2. On the one hand, this research looked at how the DMOs are currently constructing the destination brand identity on social media to identify what brand messaging strategies are currently being disseminated to external audiences; in hopes of understanding how a destination is presented on social media. On the other hand, social media and branding practitioners of the DMOs were interviewed to understand the choices, decisions, and strategies they aim to employ when promoting the islands as branded destinations on social media.

For the first segment of the research, the analysis of the Instagram channels, 120 Instagram posts were analyzed using visual discourse analysis. The total number of analyzed posts was divided between the islands, meaning 40 Instagram posts will be analyzed per island. The following table presents the tourist-oriented Instagram pages created by the local DMOs. It should be noted that the DMOs have Instagram pages for different segments that vary in content and language. The pages evaluated within this research are the Global pages that target English-speaking markets.

Country	DMO	Instagram Channel	Number of Posts	Number of Followers
Aruba	Aruba Tourism Authority	@arubatourism	2718	249K
Bonaire	Bonaire Tourism Corporation	@bonaireisland	3007	37K
Curaçao	Curacao Tourism Board	@curacaotb	2896	89.8K

Table 1: DMO and Instagram channel of Aruba, Bonaire, & Curaçao.

3.2.2 Visual Discourse Analysis

The content of the 120 Instagram posts was examined using qualitative visual discourse analysis. Visual discourse analysis, a research method based on the critical discourse analysis paradigm, was chosen for this research as the aim is to identify how the destination branding of the islands is constructed on the Instagram channel of the DMOs. Visual analysis is a competent tool to explore this query, as it can identify the implicit and explicit meanings in visual data (Machin & Mayr, 2012). Thus, more aspects of visual content can be examined to investigate how a particular phenomenon is constructed, in this case, destination branding. However, as meaning-making processes in qualitative research are iterative, it is essential to reflect on one's positionality and how this influences how someone makes sense of the data (Machin & Mayr, 2012).

The visual discourse analysis was conducted through a scheme that denotes the process of the analysis of visual content provided by Machin & Mayr (2012). The toolkit adapted from Machin & Mayr (2012) that was used for visual discourse analysis examines content using the following tools: General, Object, Setting, Salience, and Denotation/Connotation. The tool General examines the explicit meaning of the post, what someone sees at first glance. Object pays attention to the details of the picture and what they communicate. This tool examines and analyzes every object and detail in the picture. Setting refers to the contexts in which the characters or objects are situated. Salience focuses on what aspects of the advertisements call attention, namely, the aspects of the images that are made to stand out. This tool examines the following features: potent cultural symbols, size, color, tone, focus, foregrounding, and overlapping. Lastly, visual analysis is valuable in qualitative research because this tool examines both the denotative, descriptive meanings and connotative, symbolic meanings that arise in visual data (Machin & Mayr, 2012). The table on the following page presents a template for the visual discourse analysis coding frame. One hundred twenty templates will be created for the data collection phase, as one template is needed per analysis per post. A pilot study of 10 posts per channel will be undertaken to ensure validity in the data collection process and ensure that the data collected answers the question it was set up to answer (Silverman, 2011). Examples of the pilot study are available in Appendix A. The results from the visual discourse analysis are presented in segment 4.2. Visual Discourse Analysis Results.

Image #, Channel, Date		
Tool	**Denotation**	**Connotation**
General		
Object		
Setting		
Salience		

Table 2: Template of the coding scheme for the visual analysis.

3.2.3 Expert Interviews

The second part of the data collection took place after the visual discourse analysis in the form of expert interviews. Three expert interviews were conducted to investigate the second query, which aimed to understand how decisions are made internally at DMOs regarding how branding is conducted on social media. These expert interviews were conducted with executives from the marketing, branding, and social media teams of the respective DMOs. Because of the small size of the islands and companies, social media management tasks usually fall into one person's hands. Therefore, three expert interviews suffice for this study (Bogner et al., 2009).

The interviews aimed to delve deeper into the decisions made about the social media strategies of the islands regarding their destination branding. A topic list was developed based on the theoretical concepts that underpin the relationship between destination branding, marketing, and tourism promotion on social media in combination with empirical data collected through the visual analysis of their respective Instagram channels (Bogner et al., 2009). The topic list is available in Appendix C. Two interviews took place through Zoom, while one was conducted at the DMO headquarters. A follow-up interview was conducted as one of the expert interviews was a few minutes short of the requirements of the ESHCC Methodological Guidelines. With

this being done, all interviews were now between 54 to 72 minutes. The interviews were voice recorded with the consent of the participants. All participants gave verbal consent for voice recordings. The verbal consent is found in the separate file containing the interview transcripts.

3.2.4 Participants and Sampling

The posts selected for the visual discourse analysis were selected through convenience sampling, with a cut-off date on the 10th of March 2023. Convenience sampling was used as it presented a way to make the selection of content fair and unbiased across the channels, as they all have the same cut-off date (Brennen, 2017; Flick, 2007). The first 40 posts per page before the 10th of March were considered for this study. The 10th of March was selected as the cut-off date as that was the day the Revised MA Thesis Proposal was handed in for approval. As the DMOs have different frequencies in posting content, the date of the 40th post varied per channel. However, after the visual discourse analysis, the final dates of posts in the complete sample were December 14, 2022, for ATA; January 18, 2023, for TCB; January 27, 2023, for CTB. The complete sample description for the posts used in the analysis is available in Appendix B.

In terms of the expert interviews, three professionals working in the branding, marketing, or social media departments of the DMOs were needed for in-depth industry-specific insights, purposeful sampling was used to select the participants of these interviews (Brennen, 2017; Flick, 2007). The following table shows the personal data that was collected from the participants.

Participant	Organization	Position at Organization	Ethnicity	Gender	Age
Participant 1	Aruba Tourism Authority	Brand & Niche Marketing Manager	Aruban	Female	30
Participant 2	Tourism Corporation Bonaire	Social Media & Product Development Coordinator	Bonairean	Female	27
Participant 3	Curaçao Tourism Board	Marketing Coordinator	Curaçaoan	Female	30

Table 3: Expert Interview Participant Information.

3.2.5 Data Analysis

As mentioned, the second part of the research process was conducted through expert interviews with branding and social media professionals working at the DMOs of the ABC islands. As the type of data gathered in qualitative research and interviews can be more complex and varied in topic, a systematic approach should be taken when analyzing the raw data. Swain (2018) argues that qualitative data analysis should have three main flows: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. Data will be analyzed through thematic analysis in Atlas.ti for the first part of the flow, according to the steps provided by Braun & Clarke (2006), to reduce and make sense of the raw data collected. Thematic analysis is a method used to identify, analyze, and report data from qualitative sources in a structured sequence. Furthermore, the thematic analysis makes it possible to report various aspects in interplay regarding the research topic and how they affect and are affected by other aspects (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis is well suited for analyzing interview data, as thematic analysis is flexible and has tools that are apt for epistemological research (Swain, 2018).

Clark & Braun (2006) identify six thematic analysis steps. The first step of thematic analysis is familiarizing oneself with the data. This step includes the verbatim transcription of the collected interview data. The data will be transcribed with the help of transcription software, in this case, Trint, an online transcription software that transcribes recorded data. In this step, the data is delved into by reading the transcripts, and initial ideas are noted. In the second step, the raw data is codified for the whole data set, creating initial codes corresponding with raw quotes from the interviewees. In the third step, potential themes are created from the initial codes identified in the previous step. In the fourth step, the potential themes are reviewed by comparing them with the raw data and initial codes to see if they are coherent and appropriate. The fifth step takes place when this step is complete, where the themes can be defined and named. The sixth and last step refers to writing up the analysis, where through raw data and triangulation, the identified and created themes are explained and argued for, which will be done in the upcoming Results section (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Taking these steps ensures the validity of the research project, provided that the data collected answers what it set out to answer (Silverman, 2011). In the end, 248 unique initial codes were identified from the thematic analysis in Atlas.ti, while 386 quotations were extracted from the interview transcripts. Six main themes were constructed from these 248 initial codes; these will be discussed in 4.2 Expert interview results.

3.3 Operationalization

The research question has been operationalized through the theoretical concepts presented in the sub-questions for this research to make it answerable. Regarding the first sub-question, How do the Destination Management Organizations of Aruba, Bonaire, & Curaçao construct their destination brand identity on tourist-oriented social media? As this query will be examined by looking at the social media channels of the DMOs through the visual discourse analysis, the measurement of the presentation of the social media content will be analyzed through the tools presented by Machin & Mayr (2012), namely the General, Object, Setting, and Salience. Destination brand identity is operationalized as the brand identity transmitted by the DMOs to outside stakeholders, which in this case refers to the social media posts transmitted to the target audience (Skinner et al., 2022). Social media has been operationalized into the Instagram channels of the DMOs as Instagram is their most followed social media account and provides significant platform affordances for posting visual content.

Regarding the second sub-question, How do administrators at the Destination Management Organizations of Aruba, Bonaire, & Curaçao execute their social media strategy for destination branding purposes? The concepts of social media strategy and destination branding were operationalized into researchable concepts. Social media strategy is here defined as the strategy used to manage, promote, and create content for social media to reach one's goals (Hays et al., 2013). Destination branding refers to the 'efforts to increase tourist visits and spending for a particular travel destination' (Hanna & Rowley, 2008, p. 68).

3.4 Reliability and Validity

In qualitative research, credibility is examined not based on absolute truth but on the rigorous and in-depth description of the research process (Silverman, 2011). The credibility of a study is examined through its reliability and validity (Roberts & Priest, 2006). Reliability refers to the soundness of methods, and with this, there is transparency in the study's theoretical perspective and research process. This research abides by reliability criteria as the research question is built upon prior studies and theories & a detailed research design is presented (Silverman, 2011; Roberts & Priest, 2006). Furthermore, this is backed by the process of triangulation, where the research is consolidated by using multiple external sources to ensure that

what is being presented is valid, unbiased, and based on prior knowledge in the field (Thurmond, 2001). There are several forms of triangulation; however, the ones most valid for this research are data-source, methodologic, and theoretical triangulation (Thurmond, 2001).

Regarding data source triangulation, the primary data collected for this study was sourced from different sources, namely social media channels and expert interviews. Furthermore, theoretical triangulation comes into play, as the theory used in the literature review is based on the perspectives of different research fields, namely branding, marketing, business, and social studies research. Furthermore, the data is rich in perspective and meaning by employing a mixed methods approach to the research (Thurmond, 2001).

Validity in qualitative research is all about the results of the research. Validity measures the trustworthiness of the research findings and if it reflects the phenomena it aims to research. Through the research design presented above and the different methods and perspectives included in this research, validity is ensured through the constant comparison of the data, triangulation, and analytic induction of qualitative methods (Silverman, 2011; Roberts & Priest, 2006).

4. Results

The following chapter presents the results of the visual discourse analysis of the 120 posts on the Instagram channels curated by the DMOs of the ABC islands and the three expert interviews conducted with branding and social media representatives of the DMMOs of the ABC islands. The chapter is partitioned into three main segments, the first responding to the results of the visual discourse analysis of the Instagram channels. The second section focuses on the results developed from the thematic analysis of the expert interviews. Within the last section, the relationship between the results of the visual discourse analysis and the expert interviews will be elaborated on and combined.

4.1 Visual Discourse Analysis Results

Although all three islands and DMO operate independently from each other, one must recognize the homogeneity within the island's offerings. This homogeneity is unsurprising, as the islands have similar geographic locations, historical roots, and cultural development. This homogeneity of offerings became visible when dissecting the visual branding produced on the individual social media channels of the DMOs. However, amongst the overarching homogeneity in on-island offerings, the DMOs have developed unique branding identities and brand messaging strategies for the islands that set them apart even from their competitors and neighbors within their geographical boundaries. The following segments compare and contrast the primary common visual markers identified through the visual analysis.

4.1.1 Beaches on the ABC Islands

The most prominent visual marker on Instagram for all three islands are the posts that highlight beaches. The visual analysis shows that beaches, oceans, and the sea are essential elements in the ABC islands' visual brand identity and marketing efforts. However, throughout the analysis, it is clear that the focus per island differs on how much they want to promote their beaches, how they want to promote the beaches, and their importance for their visual identity construction. For example, Aruba's Instagram channel currently relies heavily on beaches, with almost all posts having images or videos of the beach as the post's primary focus. This fact leads to the overall

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Instagram page looking predominantly blue, contrasting with Curaçao and Bonaire, whose Instagram pages look more colorful at first glance. Furthermore, their frequency of posts with beaches as the defining feature was lower than Aruba's channel.

The beaches and oceans were presented in two distinct manners online, either as tourist attractions or natural scenes. In most photos presenting the beach as a tourist attraction, the beaches are presented with only one or a limited number of people pictured. This presentation creates a feeling of exclusivity, privacy, and disconnect from the rest of the world and other people. In the posts where the beach was presented as a natural scene, there were usually no people in the picture. In these pictures, more turbulent bodies of water were usually presented in combination with local flora and fauna. Nature is a theme that will be developed further in an upcoming section; however, it must be noted that beaches and nature were frequently presented in combination. This presentation was especially the case for Curaçao and Bonaire, as their commercial beaches are presented as less touristic than Aruba, where most touristic beaches are also located near the developed touristic area. Furthermore, all three islands presented the beaches in a way that stimulates relaxation, leading to the next theme identified.

4.1.2 Relaxation on the ABC Islands

Relaxation was also a recurring dimension on the analyzed tourist-oriented Instagram channels, usually in combination with other dimensions. Relating to the beach, within the Instagram posts, people are presented lying in the sun, walking on the beaches, or sitting near the ocean. Other posts showing relaxation methods include people at spas and other wellness amenities. Within these posts, the sheets, curtains, and other aspects are usually draped in white fabric, which often represents cleanliness and purity. Additionally, frequent posts depict people lounging or standing in the distance. These posts exude a feeling of calmness and tranquility, antonymous to active or busy visual depictions. The amenities are presented within these posts as secluded, private, and exclusive. In general, most posts exude feelings of relaxation. This representation could be because the ABC islands and the Caribbean, as a whole, are associated with feelings of relaxation and recharging energy. Frequently, these messages are combined with tropical forests, coastal beaches, or luxury accommodations in the images, furthering the connection between the geographic boundary, its offerings, and relaxation.

4.1.3 Nature on the ABC Islands

Within the visual analysis, nature was also one of the most poignant elements present in the posts. This depiction is incredibly accurate for Bonaire, as many of their posts are related to untamed nature, showing many pictures of untouched landscapes. This presentation also relates to its brand identity, as its brand tagline is "It's in our nature." All three islands post pictures relating to nature, both flora and fauna. With flora, the purpose is to highlight the wilderness and its untamed state of it usually. This untamed characteristic is seen in images highlighting the island's sub-tropical forests and natural sceneries. Usually, within these posts, no humans are depicted, with the focus being fully on nature.

Regarding the posts highlighting fauna, mostly local birds are posted on the Instagram channels. This depiction was highly relevant for Bonaire, as their destination branding logo for the island contains a flamingo, the nation bird. Thus, the Bonairean flamingos were also highlighted in their posts. All three islands posted photos of eye-catching local birds in aesthetically pleasing, silly, or majestic poses. The local fauna is an advantage for Caribbean destinations, as the Caribbean has many colorful and exotic bird species that appear quite frequently on the island. Furthermore, aside from avian animals, marine animals were also depicted on the Instagram channels, again highlighting the importance of marine ecosystems for the local and promotional aspects of the island.

Within this research, beaches, and nature have been categorized as different themes because they often serve different purposes. However, when it comes to Bonaire again, this boundary is blurred; as on their page, they often use beaches to show both as an attraction to tourists and also to show their marine ecosystems, something that the two other islands often do not do as often as Bonaire. Additionally, in some cases, beaches on the North side of the islands were posted. However, people are not advised to swim at these beaches as the current and cliffs make for hazardous conditions. Instead, These beaches are presented as natural scenes that active tourists can see if they prefer hiking in nature while on vacation.

4.1.4 Culture on the ABC Islands

Culture is a pillar that was also presented quite frequently on the Instagram channels of the ABC Islands. This depiction is especially visible on the pages of Bonaire & Curaçao. Culture

is present on all islands. However, it can be hard to promote culture as it is not static or always visible; thus, it can be hard to pinpoint what culture is. However, on all three pages were cultural elements identified. Again for Bonaire, this was most visible, having reels showing how to make local cuisines and posts of a person playing a traditional instrument. For Curaçao, there was a post highlighting local dances and parades. For Aruba, the local culture was way less visible, with one of the only posts in the dataset that showed a local celebration being a Christmas post, showing a family having a holiday feast on the beach, while aesthetically pleasing, is not something that happens in reality as a tradition.

However, all three islands did share one element of culture that they all boast, namely Carnival. Carnival is a yearly celebration on the islands that is exaggeratedly glamorous, eye-catching, and thoroughly celebrated. All three Instagram pages did have at least one photo of Carnival goers in their costumes. The DMO post this celebration could be because Carnaval is a season that brings many tourists to watch the Carnival parades on the islands and its visual appeal and grandeur. However, it should be noted that the photo from Aruba that shows Carnival was posted outside of the range of the dataset, so not in the Carnival period itself.

4.1.5 Activities and Amenities on the ABC Islands

Another theme that often appears on the social media pages of the DMOs is the range of activities and amenities that the ABC islands offer. This theme is tied together with many of the themes, as many of the posts present the activities and amenities that the island hosts that potential tourists can do on the island, such as activities near the beach or in nature, relaxational activities, or culturally immersive experiences. However, aside from these previously mentioned activities, the posted activities were frequently tied together with themes of exploration and immersion. Examples of these amenities and activities posted on social media include restaurants, spas, hiking, water sports, diving, bars, and looking at artistic murals found in districts on all three islands. Aside from presenting what the islands offer, these activities also help potential and incoming tourists plan their vacations before their arrival on the island. Furthermore, within this falls the fact that the islands also promote unique local spots that tourists can visit to try things that are not available anywhere else. These could be restaurants serving local dishes or bars with island-specific cocktails and liquors. This depiction again ties to relaxation and leisure time.

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Aside from this, the DMOs also promote places of accommodation on the island. In some cases, these are established and commonly known brand names. In contrast, in other cases, these are smaller, more secluded, or alternative accommodations on the island, such as Bali-type suites or caravan lodges. This dynamic could hint at the destinations trying to broaden their scope in the type of tourists they aim to attract. The promotion of on-island accommodations was only visible on the Instagram pages of Aruba and Curaçao. Furthermore, the channels presented images showing kid-friendly activities that families can undertake on the island, which correlates to safety and security messages on the islands.

What was also noticeable was the fact that the DMOs posted a mix of active and relaxing activities on the island. This mix of content shows people doing relaxing activities, such as suntanning, drinking, and lounging, and content shows people climbing mountains, partaking in water sports, and hiking. This dynamic identity again highlights that the islands have things to do for different types of tourists with different wants and needs and that tourists can decide how they would like to spend their days on vacation.

4.1.6 Local identity

The last significant discourse shown within the analysis is the role that local people from the islands have in the tourism and hospitality sectors on the islands. Examples include posts from Instagram pages where locals are shown working in bars, farms, tour operators, and restaurants. This theme was most present in the posts of Bonaire, where the focus on presenting local people was the highest compared to the other two islands. In Curaçao, the local people were shown as well to certain extents quite visibly; however, on Aruba's channel, it was tough to find, with most images showing ambiguously dressed people, with only one carousel slide highlighting a hospitality industry employee.

However, the local identity is not solely tied to people but also to the local architecture, history, and heritage. This element was most visible on the page of Curaçao, where the historical city center is displayed quite frequently on the Instagram page. These posts are also a way for them to present an attraction, as tourists go to the historic capital to walk in the city center, explore the historic districts, and see the street art scattered throughout the streets of the capital city Willemstad. In the case of Bonaire, a couple of posts also focused on the island's historical and architectural elements; however, it was far less compared to Curaçao. When examining the

page of Aruba, the island's architectural, historical, and heritage aspects were not fully present in the dataset, with the only post that could be categorized in this category being a beach hut without any further elaboration about its significance.

These dimensions mentioned above were the most prominent visual markers identified from the VDA. These dimensions were considered as guiding topics to be discussed during the interviews. The connection between these visual markers and what the administrators disclose about them will be elaborated upon in section *5.1 Key Findings*

4.2 Expert Interview Results

The following segment will discuss the results from the expert interviews conducted with administrators within branding, marketing, and social media at the DMOs of the ABC islands' discussed. It should be noted that during the interviews it was presented that the Destination Marketing Organizations are not only DMOs, but are Destination Management and Marketing Organizations (DMMOs). This is due to the fact that they also conduct activities on the island to improve the touristic product; this will be further developed in section *4.2.5 Destination Management*. Thus, for the remainder of this research, they will be referred to as such. The following themes were created based on the thematic analysis conducted to analyze the interview transcripts. The identified themes are Brand Identity Formation, Brand Messaging, Customer Segmentation, Destination Management, and External Stakeholder Involvement.

4.2.1 Brand Identity Formation

All three participants from the DMMOs discussed how the brand identity came to exist within their organization. For Aruba this constitutes the branding of 'Aruba: One Happy Island' branding. For Bonaire, this is the 'Bonaire: It's in our Nature' branding. And for Curaçao, this is the 'Curaçao: Feel It For Yourself' branding. Within the interviews it was indicated that the development of the destination branding resulted from wanting to modernize their appearance and to differentiate from the competitors. This supports the argument by Pike (2005) and Pereira et al. (2012) that destinations use branding the create a distinction between their offerings and competitors. In terms of modernization, Participant 1 from ATA noted that

the current brand identity came into existence when the company went through a change in business structure, becoming a mixture of a public and private organization.

In the case of Bonaire, they have the newest destination branding, having been in use for merely a year. This finding correlates to the argument presented by Skinner et al. (2022), arguing that destinations will seek to improve and modernize their tourist offering and marketing capabilities after the end of the pandemic, as tourism revenue is expected to increase within the coming decade. Furthermore, in the case of Bonaire, it was revealed that the main challenge they faced at that point with their target audience needed brand awareness about what Bonaire entailed as a tourist destination.

'Our challenge was that Bonaire lacked awareness as a Caribbean destination [...] and especially one that offers high end experiences alongside adventurous activities.' Participant 2, TCB.

As the branding for Bonaire is newer, Participant 2 was able to give in depth insight into the process, noting that during this process, all of the visual elements of the branding were created by the external agency, including a repository of photos and videos that are still being waiting to be used on social media. Thus, form. This can be concluded that a large number of posts were created during the creation of the brand identity. The participants from TCB and CTB provided insight into creating and forming the destination brand identity. Participant 3 discussed how one of the first steps within the destination brand development was to conduct large-scale market research to identify what the core brand should entail:

'There was a big market research done within our main focus markets because primarily it was necessary to get a better understanding and insights from who we are. We wanted to find out what our target market is and how they perceive destination Curacao and how they perceive going on vacation to the Caribbean. And also from the people that have been on the island to understand better, [...] what they enjoy the most of the destination, [...] how they, in their own words, describe Curacao and what makes Curacao, [...] what made their vacation on our island so special in comparison to vacationing in another destination' Participant 3, CTB.

Thus, from this passage it is concluded that the customer perception of the island plays a significant role in brand identity formation. This supports the argument by Skinner et al. (2022) has point to the fact that more voices that are heard when producing the branding leads to a realistic and authentic branding. This means that the core of the destination identity used by the DMMOs is rooted in the destination image provided by the customers in the markets in which they operate. In the case of Curaçao, it was also noted that they are currently conducting large-scale research, where again the audience's perception of the brand and the destination are being evaluated to see if a shift is needed in their communications. In the case of ATA, they noticed that some of the elements within their branding guidelines, which was established in 2011, were not applicable anymore. These aspects were especially obvious in the context of digital channels, as social media has changed significantly since 2011, especially for business purposes. Thus, therefore, they are now in the process of updating the guidelines to include the elements that are crucial for modern communication channels. Participant 1 (ATA) also brought up the fact that after conducting a market analysis, the unique selling points of the island were taken into consideration to inform the brand strategy.

Regarding the brand perception, Participant 2 noted that because Bonaire's destination branding strategy is still new, one of the key tasks for them is to communicate this new branding to tourists that have already visited the island, potential tourists, but also local, stating that locals are 'the ambassadors' of the island. This is supported by Participant 1 states that with time, the island locals also start using and living by the branding "the One Happy Island, I feel that over the years Arubans as well really identify more with that brand promise."

The interviews concluded that all three tourism agencies used external advertising agencies to help create brand identities. Coincidentally, all three destinations work with US-based advertising agencies for this purpose. From the interview with the participant from Bonaire was brought to light how they select the organization that will produce the branding for them. Once they had a general idea of what they wanted for the brand identity, they sent proposals to different international advertising agencies. Afterward, the top ten advertising agencies were invited to the island to showcase how they would approach the formulation of the branding. Once there was a match between the advertising agency and the DMO, they started developing the brand identity, brand visuals, and brand messaging. Based on the interviews, it can be

concluded that the agencies still work with the DMMOs regularly. This finding will be discussed further in segment *4.2.6. External Stakeholders.*

4.2.2 Brand Messaging

Regarding brand messaging on social media, all three participants discussed the importance of differentiation from their competitors. As mentioned before, the countries have very homogenous offerings, not only with each other but also with other destinations in the Caribbean. Thus, the DMMOs need to build a brand message that ensures that their unique selling points are communicated clearly to the audiences on social media. Participant 1 noted that it is crucial for the islands' unique selling points to be communicated online, as many aspiring tourists nowadays follow the pages before their arrival. Thus, it is crucial to give them the needed information that sets them apart from the competitors in a low-barrier method.

Furthermore, the role of user-generated or tourist-generated content was also a factor that contributed to the brand messaging of the DMMOs. The interviews discussed that all three DMMOs use content generated by external parties, including content created by island locals and tourists alike. The participants discussed that they believe it performs well on social media because it presents the island in a non-branded manner and is true to the destination's experiences. Regarding content made by island locals, the DMO considers this the most authentic insight that external audiences can have into the islands. Participant 2 explains that the locals are 'the ambassadors' of the island. Participant 3 explains, ' The nice part of showing things of the locals themselves is that [...] Who knows the island better than the locals?'.

Regarding brand visuals on social media, it was discussed that the DMMOs prefer to post content with limited branded imagery, such as logos and taglines. This is because this content does not perform well on social media, receiving limited engagement from the audience.

One of the topics that was discussed extensively during the interviews was how culture should be communicated on social media pages. The DMMOs have different perspectives on this query. This is due to the fact that their audiences react differently to posts that spotlight culture. Participant 2 notes that promoting local culture is at the core of their branding strategy as their goal is to show the 'authentic Bonaire experience'. In contrast, Participant 1 notes that for Aruba this is not always applicable, as their target audience is not necessarily interested in cultural

immersion. However, they also note that this is something that they are actively trying to work on, so promote the local culture and people as well:

"we're trying to find a balance of [...] getting the target audience interested in the destination based on what they're interested in, but also pushing forward values and messaging that we think is important to showcase about our destination. Because the risk, if you show too much of the beach only [...] you're going to fall into. [...] the sea of sameness. [...] We're in that same sea as other competing Caribbean destinations and bringing forward our culture, our unique points in our culture, and our diversity will help us differentiate."

Participant 3 sees this query from both perspectives, noting that it is important and feasible to promote local culture and activities, but that this does cost more time and effort than creating generic touristic images, as you have to be keener and more expressive of what these local, traditional, or cultural symbols mean:

"It's also really important, especially for the more cultural things, to have really good high quality content. For example, I'm going to go back to the Seu Harvest Parade. [...]. In the past we didn't have nice pictures or videos. Like if you would look at a picture or a video in the past, [...] it was very boring or didn't look as great, didn't look as 'sexy'. So you also have kind of that task to make that cultural thing look really amazing [...] for visitors who don't really understand it or don't know it, you need to kind of make it attractive for them and also explain it because they don't know anything about it."

Something that the participants mentioned is how in cases of the promotion of local or cultural events that do not happen on a regular basis, they started collecting high quality images now that are stored in databases to be used for future promotion and other marketing content. In this way, the DMMOs know that when the time comes around, they have the raw files that they can use to promote the event in a way that is appealing for the tourists. All participants mentioned that they work with yearly content calendars to help guide them about what content   needs to be promoted timely. Furthermore, Participant 1 mentions that this is crucial for the destination marketing sector, as tourists usually make up their mind and book their vacations

months in advance. Therefore, the DMOs need to make sure that their year round social media presence is relevant for the upcoming period.

4.2.3 Social Media Performance

Social media performance was one of the main aspects discussed during the interview. All three participants noted the importance of abiding to customer wants when creating content for social media. Participant 1 notes:

"what people have to understand is that the target audience wants to see themselves pictured in the destination. It's a kind of [...] weird thing, but [...] research shows that".

From this quotation can be concluded that aside from the fact that DMO's need to promote the local offerings of the islands, they also need to make content that shows the potential customers on the destination. This is because the tourists need to be able to see themselves at the destination to create mental images of what they can expect when they go on vacation to this destination. In contrast, it was discussed that although the DMMOs want to achieve this presentation of tourists on island, they also want to include more of the locals and local culture in the social media posts to promote the local lifestyle as well. Participant 2 further emphasizes this claim by saying: "we want to keep authenticity as much as possible in our culture, but especially too, because that's something that's really important for the community". However, an aspect that should be considered when discussing this element is the fact that posts that show locals and local culture do not perform as well in certain demographics. This correlates with the argument presented by Skinner et al. (2022) who argued that certain demographics do not care for cultural immersion.

All three DMMOs set up internal KPIs to ensure that their social media performance is up to par with their expectations. All participants indicated that the most important metrics that they pay attention to include the number of likes, comments, shares, and interactions that their posts receive. However, Participant 3 noted that this is not as simple as it sounds, as the algorithm of Instagram frequently changes, leading to the DMMOs having to constantly assess what type of posts is performing well when considering the ever changing algorithmic functionally on social media. To combat this, Participant 3 noted that there are several methods

that they use to minimize how this affects their performance. In the first place they keep up with the news from the market, to identify what is performing well IT wise. Secondly, they regularly post a mixture of content types, such as photos, carousels, reels, and stories; to hereby identify what is performing best at the moment. And lastly, more in terms of the type of content they post, they look at the insight of what elements of the island perform well based on consumer insights from social media, to guide what they should focus on when they want higher engagement. This is done similarly at TCB and ATA as well, with ATA noting that they take inspiration from all types of social media content and trends to see how they can implement it within their own social media strategy as well. Furthermore, Participant 3 noted that the social media channel also influences the performance of the posts, with video-based posts performing well on Instagram, while static image posts perform better on Facebook.

4.2.4 Customer Segmentation

From the interviews, it was identified that all three DMMOs use customer segmentation within their brand messaging and audience targeting. The customer segmentation happened based on geographic location, with markets understood at a continental level. However, Participant 1 also notes what their markets have in common despite segmentation is the fact that they target their audience based on household income as well. Although the brand identity is set in stone globally, the brand messaging changes based on geographic segmentation. This is because the interests and behaviors these markets show and want to experience on vacation change per segment. An example given by ATA was how the frequency of topics posted on their various social media channels differs per segment, indicating that beaches perform the best in all segments, but that the rest of the content varies per market "the common denominator is mostly the beach assets and the content. And then the other things, which is the other 50 to 40%. That differs per market". They further went on to explain that their different geographic segments have different wants and needs for their vacation on island:

"Europeans are less interested in the hotel strip area. They want to explore, go where the locals are, and experience culture. A lot of our North American visitors, they're much more interested in just a very simple vacation and a lot of beach. [...] And Latin American visitors are much more interested in the shopping experience. So you do see a shift in that. And the data shows that

because we do a lot of surveys and you see it in their spending behavior, when you look at how they spend, you see the differences for markets."

Furthermore, the participants noted that the segments also behave and respond differently to posts on social media. With Participant 2 noting that their Dutch audience was more active in giveaways then their global channel. In contrast, Participant 1 noted that their European segment is way less in creating user-generated content in comparison to their Latin American market.

Additionally, audience size also is a factor, with some segments being much larger than others and others being more specific. An example is how Participant 3 notes that Curaçao has a Brazil oriented segment that communicates in Portuguese. However, although the geographic share of Portuguese speakers is limited in comparison to English, they notice that this market is very active when it comes to user generated content influencer marketing.

4.2.5 Destination Management

The interviews discussed that the DMMOs conduct other activities on the islands besides marketing. All interviews discussed how aside from external marketing activities to attract external audiences; they now also take steps to improve the on-island touristic product. With this finding in mind, the tourism bureaus are not only DMOs, namely destination marketing organizations but are considered DMMOs, thus destination marketing and management organizations. From the answers of the participants, it was concluded that the typical tasks that they conduct for destination marketing included promoting on-island activities through various traditional and new media channels, sourcing and creating content and setting up strategies to acquire new customers.

Moreover, on the destination management side of their operations, all three participants discussed how their organization sets out to improve the quality of the touristic product that is noticeable on island. As Participant 3 notes: 'We have a product development department within the tourist board, and they are responsible for the maintenance and upgrading and development of the touristic product'. The fact that these DMMOs actively develop the physical tourist offerings on-island may correspond to the idea that DMMOs try to minimize the cognitive dissonance that tourists could experience if the marketed product does not live up to reality. This was highlighted in a sentence by Participant 2: 'We come up with ideas with projects that can

basically create facilities on the islands to make the visitor's experience a bit better. [...], for example, beautifying the island, for example, beautifying the beaches' [...], so it's like just ways to facilitate the visitors' experience basically'. However, Participant 1 explained that this management does not only include enhancing the physical offerings of the destination but also improving the quality of service on the destination "It's physical, and it's also service, quality, awareness, and certification programs. All of those fall under the product side". In essence, the fact that the DMMOs partake in the improvement of the local product means that they do expectation management, so that the product that they are marketing lives up to the expectations of the incoming tourists. Furthermore, this also improves the on-island offerings for the locals as well.

4.2.6 External Stakeholders

The last central theme developed from the thematic analysis is external stakeholders. The interviews concluded that ATA, TCB, & CTB all rely on external stakeholders for multiple reasons. Some external stakeholders have direct involvement in the construction and production of the destination branding identity and message of the DMMOs. In contrast, others are reliant on and abide by the destination branding.

As presented in *4.2.1. Destination Brand Formation*, the DMMOs work with external agencies that create their brand identity for them. From the interview with Participant 2 it was identified that when producing a new branding, proposals are sent out to different international companies to scout for an advertising agency that fits with the vision that they have for their brand. However, the interviews discussed that these agencies still create content for the DMMOs, primarily branded content. Such content includes but is not limited to, flyers, brochures, and signage. Additionally, it was presented that these agencies also create branded online content for the DMMOs. In the case of Bonaire, their paid social media marketing is conducted by their external advertising agency. In contrast, in-house social media professionals create and manage the organic content for social media. Similar structures exist for Aruba and Curaçao, where external agencies produce the branded items that are then localized to be used in the different customer segments.

Another key stakeholder that was identified through the interviews are on-island partners and organizations within the field of tourism. These stakeholders range from hotels, tour

operators, restaurants, airports, cruise ports, and other players in the segment. Although the DMMOs do have the final say in the branding of destinations, They regularly meet with these stakeholders to discuss the destination branding and tourism marketing developments that they aim to achieve. All three participants noted that these meeting points happen once or twice a year, when a summit or conference is organized. The goal of these meetings is to try to get everyone on the same page about how to promote the destination.

One of the stakeholders that was discussed frequently as well was the island locals. Although they are not in charge of the branding per se, they are the 'ambassadors of the island' as Participant 2 mentioned. Participant 1 of Aruba noted that ATA as an organization feel that this stakeholder has been neglected in recent campaigns, where they focused more on what data shows that external audiences would like to see. Thus, they are now in the process of bringing back the locals within their messaging, as they feel that it's important to also spotlight this demographic. Participant 3 takes this a step further, by saying that they currently work with locals for the production of online content. This includes the creation of vlogs, blogs, and social media content. Participant 3 noted that in this way, potential tourists get the true island experience, as nobody knows the island better than the locals.

On the topic of content created by external stakeholders, all three islands mention that user generated content is an aspect of social media content that is highly appreciated by the DMMOs, as no matter the source, whether it's made by a local or a tourist; they enjoy the fact that these content are being produced, as these content show the island experience through the eyes of external people who see the beauty of the islands. Related to this topic is content created by influencers. Participant 3 from Curaçao mentioned that year round they work with influencers who co create content for them. They notice that this type of content performs really well, having higher engagement and reach in comparison to posts that they post on their own. Furthermore, Participant 1 also discussed the fact that ATA works with influencers. Participant 1 disclosed the fact that this is a two way stream of communication as they sometimes approach influencers while other times they are approached by the influencers to collaborate. In both cases, these influencers go through a filter to see if they match with the goals of ATA, for example in terms of their following, target audience, etc.

The implications of these findings will be discussed in the segment, where they are presented and contrasted with the results on the visual discourse analysis.

5. Discussion & Conclusion

5.1 Key Findings

In this following segment, the relationship between the visuals presented on the Instagram channels of the DMOs and the data provided by the experts during the interviews will be presented.

The most prevalent finding from the visual analysis was the number of photos relating to the beaches, the sea, and the ocean. This analysis made clear that one of the prime focuses of the branding was the island's inherent connection with beaches, sea, and ocean. This finding was proven to be correct by the expert interviews. Regarding this finding, it was discussed how most posts on the social channels of the DMMOs, especially in the case of Aruba, directly relate to or show an image of a body of water. When this was brought up during the interviews, it was disclosed by all three participants that these are the type of posts that perform the best regardless of the customer segment. Furthermore, Participant 1 of ATA, explained that these are the types of posts that always perform the best, even mentioning that posts presenting bodies of water are referred to as posts depicting 'liquid happiness'. Therefore, it should come as no surprise that these types of posts are also the ones that the DMMOs post when they are trying to achieve a higher engagement rate and KPI goals.

The visual analysis concluded that the islands are branded as Caribbean vacation destinations, with relaxation, happiness, and beaches at the forefront of their visual content. The DMOs take island-specific identity markers within this overarching brand identity, such as the historic architecture of Curaçao, untouched nature of Bonaire, and stretched white sand beaches of Aruba. However, there were also overarching themes that performed well on the island. All three interviewees disclosed that one of the elements that perform the best on social media are posts that highlight the hidden gems of the country, these could be culinary, cultural, or natural spots that are not visible or attractive to external audiences until you point it out. Participant 1 pointed out that the promotion of hidden gems is all about the message framing, as intrigue and curiosity makes people want to visit the location to discover it themselves.

Furthermore, it was clear how customer segmentation influences the type of content posted on the segmented Instagram channels. As the DMMOs have different social media channels per

geographic segmentation, it is easier for them to differentiate the appealing message and content per geographic segment. The segmented channels make it possible to tailor their approach to develop strategies with the most efficacy for that targeted audience. However, although creating content that appeases specific segments does deliver successful results on social media performance, this comes at the expense of the themes that the DMOs can post expecting to perform well, such as local culture and events.

5.2 Theoretical and Practical Implications

From a theoretical standpoint, this research gave an insight into the different factors that influence what brand messages are presented on social media and what methods DMOs and DMMOs can use to try to overcome potential hurdles in the formation of their brand messaging. Furthermore, these methods could be implemented as is in DMOs who are trying to enhance their brand messages to include more of that they believe should be transmitted to external audiences. In a row, these methods include collaboration with external stakeholders and creators, involvement of local stakeholders, improvement of destination offerings, inclusion of local identity in brand messaging, varied and strategic social media use, and the employment of differentiated messaging strategies for customer segments. While this research was grounding in destination branding for tourism purposes, these methods could be implemented in many areas of branding, including place branding; as the benefit of employing these methods all lead to the creation of a distinguished, co-created, and social media proof brand message.

5.3 Limitations and implications for future research

As discussed in Chapter 2, most research in destination branding for a demand driven perspective. However, what was made apparent through this research is the fact that contextually, there lacks a theoretical understanding about the social media preferences of incoming or potential tourists to a certain destination. Building onto this recommendation is the fact that brand messaging regarding destination branding on social media is a concept that has rarely been addressed in the body of research within this paradigm. Therefore, it is crucial for future research to address potential brand messaging that could lead to the fostering of higher engagement on social media, higher tourist stream to destinations, and ultimately building brand

loyalty and brand equity. Furthermore, aside from the potential that brand messaging has, it should also be investigated the challenges brand messaging for destination branding brings. Central to this research should be the clash between DMOs wanting to perform well by posting images that abide by the desires of their target audience with the challenge of wanting to be as authentic as possible to the local culture and people.

5.4 Conclusion

This research aimed to investigate how the destination brand identity of Aruba, Bonaire, and Curaçao are constructed on the DMO curated official local Instagram channels. The research gave a unique perspective into this inquiry by providing a dual approach to understanding how their presented destination brand identity is achieved. On the one hand, the content of the Instagram channels was analyzed to get an image of how the islands are visually branded as a destination on social media. On the other hand, critical administrators at the DMOs of the ABC islands were interviewed to identify the decision-making processes regarding their branding efforts both in an online and offline environment.

From the research was concluded that the social media challenges are used as channels to disperse brand messages that are built upon the branding strategy that is use by the DMMOs of the ABC islands. Furthermore, was identified through the interviews that this brand message and brand identity in general is construction, built upon, and reshaped by different factors, stakeholders, and developments, both internally and externally. From the interviews was determined that the brand message is influenced by the different customer segments and their needs and wants. Furthermore, the method in which the brand message is presented on social media is determined by the algorithmic performance of social media platforms, as administrators try to abide by the affordances and elements that perform well on social media. Additionally, the opinion, input, and influence of external stakeholders also guide what messages and what elements administrators of the destination branding choose to promote on their pages. Lastly, the projects that the DMOs conduct on island to enhance the touristic product boosts the value of the island as a vacation destination.

Taking the points mentioned above into account, it is concluded that the role of the visuals on social media are to serve as a reflection of the destination branding and destination brand identity. Thus, administrators use social media as an aggregate tool to communicate the

branding of the island to external stakeholders in a way that is more organic and not overtly branded. Through this strategy, the administrators of the destination brand identity, working at the DMMOs of the ABC islands use social media for the creation of destination image using organic images, that feel immersive and blend into content that users would want to see on their Instagram feed, regardless of the fact that they are consuming subliminally branded and promotional content.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Pilot Visual Discourse Analysis Examples

Aruba (@Arubatourism):

Image A2 - March 8, 2023		
Tool	**Denotation**	**Connotation**
General	Reel thumbnail, a beach photo with a tree and a woman in the sand	Relaxation, Nature, Freedom
Object	A palm tree.	Nature, tranquility
	A woman wearing a sunhat, beachwear, and a beach bag, sitting in the sand on a towel.	Freedom, activities to do, style, feeling
Setting	A beach, with clear skies	Freedom, Happiness, Relaxation
Salience	The tree is placed in the foreground of the picture, while the woman is sitting in the shade of the tree enjoying the view	Relaxation, Connection with nature

Bonaire (@Bonaireisland):

Image B4, - March 7, 2023

Tool	Denotation	Connotation
General	A photo of a traditional Dutch Caribbean snack	Traditional, Gastronomic, Heritage
Object	Cheeseball snack	Food, Gastronomy
Setting	A blue bowl of cheeseballs	Calming, Inviting, Appetizing
Salience	The snack is made as the center of the photo	This image shows the local flavors of the islands

Curaçao (@Curaçaotb):

Image C3 - March 8, 2023

Tool	Denotation	Connotation
General	A reel thumbnail, an alley full of traditional houses	Attractions, history, heritage
Object	An alley of monumental colorful houses	Happiness, history, heritage
Setting	Blue sky and trees	Nature, no worries
Salience	The colorful houses almost give a dreamscape feeling	Freedom, wonder, imagination

Table 3: Complete Sample Description for the VDA, DMO Instagram Posts

ARUBA'S INSTAGRAM CHANNEL - @Arubatourism

Code number	Post Link	Post Date
A1.	https://www.instagram.com/p/CpnUXOusZId/	March 10, 2023
A2.	https://www.instagram.com/p/CpiVDnRLCSQ/	March 8, 2023
A3.	https://www.instagram.com/p/Cpdcnj7vee7/	March 6, 2023
A4.	https://www.instagram.com/p/CpVhBT2LrMI/	March 3, 2023
A5.	https://www.instagram.com/p/CpP0i3Lt0g7/	March 1, 2023
A6.	https://www.instagram.com/p/CpNMW22NU19/	February 28, 2023
A7.	https://www.instagram.com/p/CpIT8wNv3qc/	February 26, 2023
A8.	https://www.instagram.com/p/CpDbb6yLPDW/	February 24, 2023
A9.	https://www.instagram.com/p/CpC8rBtsci4/	February 24, 2023
A10.	https://www.instagram.com/p/Co92Ec1MJ3M/	February 22, 2023
A11.	https://www.instagram.com/p/Co7uaPwLTYk/	February 21, 2023
A12.	https://www.instagram.com/p/Copikbbrmki/	February 14, 2023
A13.	https://www.instagram.com/p/Com39beJULu/	February 13, 2023
A14.	https://www.instagram.com/p/CohsRwFscX1/	February 11, 2023
A15.	https://www.instagram.com/p/Coe9oSyLbg6/	February 10, 2023
A16.	https://www.instagram.com/p/CodaIhrgVVv/	February 10, 2023
A17.	https://www.instagram.com/p/CoaCK0xLaiO/	February 8, 2023
A18.	https://www.instagram.com/p/CoXdTxLP5pC/	February 7, 2023
A19.	https://www.instagram.com/p/CoUtsoDoRw6/	February 6, 2023
A20.	https://www.instagram.com/p/CoNXY2NLV8l/	February 3, 2023
A21.	https://www.instagram.com/p/CoFMZLiLZ-h/	January 31, 2023
A22.	https://www.instagram.com/p/Cn4wQXBOWM7/	January 26, 2023
A23.	https://www.instagram.com/p/CnplZQtLrVC/	January 20, 2023
A24.	https://www.instagram.com/p/CnjulYVtUDi/	January 18, 2023

A25.	https://www.instagram.com/p/Cnhebd6NDkP/	January 17, 2023
A26.	https://www.instagram.com/p/CneyyU0NX1G/	January 16, 2023
A27.	https://www.instagram.com/p/CnXj4ymheOy/	January 13, 2023
A28.	https://www.instagram.com/p/CnSE6v6tN-f/	January 11, 2023
A29.	https://www.instagram.com/p/CnGYHcwsEhc/	January 7, 2023
A30.	https://www.instagram.com/p/CnAdJhxvb7N/	January 4, 2023
A31.	https://www.instagram.com/p/Cm946wvh28A/	January 3, 2023
A32.	https://www.instagram.com/p/Cmz6IJHsEN4/	December 31, 2022
A33.	https://www.instagram.com/p/CmrzC4hhuz8/	December 27, 2022
A34.	https://www.instagram.com/p/CmmS_-CBD5B/	December 25, 2022
A35.	https://www.instagram.com/p/CmhVYhDhLyb/	December 23, 2022
A36.	https://www.instagram.com/p/CmcUyKBP_QE/	December 21, 2022
A37.	https://www.instagram.com/p/CmWgV08JtpE/	December 19, 2022
A38.	https://www.instagram.com/p/CmWgGklOUiE/	December 19, 2022
A39.	https://www.instagram.com/p/CmO2gKIr0M4/	December 16, 2022
A40.	https://www.instagram.com/p/CmJvKe5rQzt/	December 14, 2022

BONAIRE'S INSTAGRAM CHANNEL - @Bonaireisland

Code number	Post Link	Post Date
B1.	https://www.instagram.com/p/CpnHYvoBjNV/	March 10, 2023
B2.	https://www.instagram.com/p/CpkiRhPOlG3/	March 9, 2023
B3.	https://www.instagram.com/p/Cph9iaJujc3/	March 8, 2023
B4.	https://www.instagram.com/p/CpfdodygNIs/	March 7, 2023
B5.	https://www.instagram.com/p/Cpczg_ZsSb8/	March 6, 2023
B6.	https://www.instagram.com/p/CpXp2N6MmUv/	March 4, 2023
B7.	https://www.instagram.com/p/CpVuQ98rriO/	March 3, 2023
B8.	https://www.instagram.com/p/CpVFAvGM6IC/	March 3, 2023
B9.	https://www.instagram.com/p/CpS8IBtAlHX/	March 2, 2023
B10.	https://www.instagram.com/p/CpP7kp3NLEZ/	March 1, 2023

B11.	https://www.instagram.com/p/CpNfTR0AQHz/	February 28, 2023
B12.	https://www.instagram.com/p/CpLcJUZL_6l/	February 27, 2023
B13.	https://www.instagram.com/p/Co-aLhbNEkF/	February 22, 2023
B14.	https://www.instagram.com/p/Co7TKJQAmlr/	February 21, 2023
B15.	https://www.instagram.com/p/CozzPEhA9bP/	February 18, 2023
B16.	https://www.instagram.com/p/CoxCLkutEcT/	February 17, 2023
B17.	https://www.instagram.com/p/CoudXOPsUDa/	February 16, 2023
B18.	https://www.instagram.com/p/CosFcw-sAe1/	February 15, 2023
B19.	https://www.instagram.com/p/Cor4kAZteyY/	February 15, 2023
B20.	https://www.instagram.com/p/CopUD5qNA7N/	February 14, 2023
B21.	https://www.instagram.com/p/Comu7_1OZZT/	February 13, 2023
B22.	https://www.instagram.com/p/CokKAgiuvua/	February 12, 2023
B23.	https://www.instagram.com/p/CohlO4usHk6/	February 11, 2023
B24.	https://www.instagram.com/p/CofAiJIMPpV/	February 10, 2023
B25.	https://www.instagram.com/p/CocbvmJOePm/	February 9, 2023
B26.	https://www.instagram.com/p/CoZ233Vu_dP/	February 8, 2023
B27.	https://www.instagram.com/p/CoXSDZEOYLR/	February 7, 2023
B28.	https://www.instagram.com/p/CoM4BNDM-KJ/	February 3, 2023
B29.	https://www.instagram.com/p/CoKTNbXM_Ly/	February 2, 2023
B30	https://www.instagram.com/p/CoHua5gu-gM/	February 1, 2023
B31.	https://www.instagram.com/p/CoFJtybO2UF/	January 31, 2023
B32.	https://www.instagram.com/p/CoCkzxAAzzv/	January 30, 2023
B33.	https://www.instagram.com/p/Cn4YresAG7b/	January 26, 2023
B34.	https://www.instagram.com/p/Cn1z3ukuewy/	January 25, 2023
B35.	https://www.instagram.com/p/CnwqjqmO8Cy/	January 23, 2023
B36.	https://www.instagram.com/p/CnrgkWKu_7z/	January 21, 2023
B37.	https://www.instagram.com/p/Cno79Rtutiz/	January 20, 2023
B38.	https://www.instagram.com/p/CnmWasDh7tt/	January 19, 2023
B39.	https://www.instagram.com/p/CnjyS9MsH5a/	January 18, 2023
B40.	https://www.instagram.com/p/Cni-CjmjRVG/	January 18, 2023

3. CURACAO'S INSTAGRAM CHANNEL - @Curacaotb

Code number	Post Link	Post Date
C1.	https://www.instagram.com/p/CpnPFwytppV/	March 10, 2023
C2.	https://www.instagram.com/p/CpkgI9vswEX/	March 9, 2023
C3.	https://www.instagram.com/p/Cph-ZeOPrkB/	March 8, 2023
C4.	https://www.instagram.com/p/CpfTXy5h5cu/	March 7, 2023
C5.	https://www.instagram.com/p/CpdS9BcMM9S/	March 6, 2023
C6.	https://www.instagram.com/p/CpaQbqruUfi/	March 5, 2023
C7.	https://www.instagram.com/p/CpXbPKJgodH/	March 4, 2023
C8.	https://www.instagram.com/p/CpVABjCuM8p/	March 3, 2023
C9.	https://www.instagram.com/p/CpSaeODN3ey/	March 2, 2023
C10.	https://www.instagram.com/p/CpQYsAOvNC8/	March 1, 2023
C11.	https://www.instagram.com/p/CpNmUERNfNX/	February 28, 2023
C12.	https://www.instagram.com/p/CpLMrd1AeC8/	February 27, 2023
C13.	https://www.instagram.com/p/CpIEdI6tEiK/	February 26, 2023
C14.	https://www.instagram.com/p/CpFi5Y6A4Gr/	February 25, 2023
C15.	https://www.instagram.com/p/CpDz-zhAV6t/	February 24, 2023
C16.	https://www.instagram.com/p/CpA8RGzPPjr/	February 23, 2023
C17.	https://www.instagram.com/p/Co95azCOzWK/	February 22, 2023
C18.	https://www.instagram.com/p/Co7al4ggTKe/	February 21, 2023
C19.	https://www.instagram.com/p/Co2P0VUsPM8/	February 19, 2023
C20.	https://www.instagram.com/p/Cozg0MrM9Uz/	February 18, 2023
C21.	https://www.instagram.com/p/Cow9ZBxshkQ/	February 17, 2023
C22.	https://www.instagram.com/p/CouWTaaMMhc/	February 16, 2023
C23.	https://www.instagram.com/p/Cor-VYBA_Fo/	February 15, 2023
C24.	https://www.instagram.com/p/CoqBioVtF55/	February 14, 2023
C25.	https://www.instagram.com/p/Conp4_-LnZ-/	February 13, 2023
C26.	https://www.instagram.com/p/CokGnFLstBq/	February 12, 2023
C27.	https://www.instagram.com/p/CohqpSSMZJ6/	February 11, 2023
C28.	https://www.instagram.com/p/Coe92W3gHtV/	February 10, 2023

C29.	https://www.instagram.com/p/CocZOh0sP5n/	February 9, 2023
C30.	https://www.instagram.com/p/CoSAuuVsvgj/	February 5, 2023
C31.	https://www.instagram.com/p/CoPgyOXgpnI/	February 4, 2023
C32.	https://www.instagram.com/p/CoM68hdMZh4/	February 3, 2023
C33.	https://www.instagram.com/p/CoKay9YsOYf/	February 2, 2023
C34.	https://www.instagram.com/p/CoIq-z6uDV5/	February 1, 2023
C35.	https://www.instagram.com/p/CoFQkVNMTAk/	January 31, 2023
C36.	https://www.instagram.com/p/CoDHnPNjtNV/	January 30, 2023
C37.	https://www.instagram.com/p/CoAQWa8Doiv/	January 29, 2023
C38.	https://www.instagram.com/p/Cn9ckkfMP8R/	January 28, 2023
C39.	https://www.instagram.com/p/Cn7LuHXuDbk/	January 27, 2023
C40.	https://www.instagram.com/p/Cn66rCiMGyX/	January 27, 2023

Verbal Interviewee Consent Form

Thank you for participating in this research. This interview is estimated to take between 45 to 60 minutes. Please be assured that interviewee data will be anonymized within the final paper if that is wanted. Furthermore, you have the right to skip a question, stop the interview, or withdraw from the research at any time. This interview will be recorded for the sake of data collection and analysis. Do I have your consent to keep recording this session?

NOTE: In the following section, *insert organization's name* refers to either ATA, TCB, or CTB, depending on the company of the interviewee.

Introduction

- Could you perhaps introduce yourself and the work you do for (*insert organization's name*)?
- How long have you been working at (*insert organization's name*)?
- Could you give a short summary of the work that (*insert organization's name*) does as a DMO/DMMO for the island?

Destination Branding

- How would you define the current branding strategy implemented in your organization to promote the island? (Aruba: One Happy Island, Bonaire: It's in our Nature, & Curaçao: Feel it for Yourself)
- How did the destination branding strategy come to exist at (*insert organization's name*)?
  - How was the process of creating the destination branding structured?
- How often does your organization set out to produce a new marketing and promotional campaigns within the branding?
  - Can you tell me a little about how the latest marketing strategy came to be?
  - How long does a campaign usually last?

- - - o Is (insert organization's name planning to use the current tagline for a longer period?
- How is the branding maintained throughout time within the organization?
- What strategies does (*insert organization's name*) employ to differentiate its touristic offering from competitors?
- Is there currently room within the branding strategy to include more local aspects (such as historical, demographical, or cultural aspects) to the brand identity?
  - o Do you think that potential tourists would react positively to messages that include other aspects of national identity beyond touristic activities?
  - o Do you foresee the inclusion of these aspects happening soon?
- When does (*insert organization's name*) reevaluate the performance of the destination branding strategy of the Island?
  - o What aspects of the branding are evaluated during these reevaluations?
- What sort of promotion does (*insert organization's name) do on a local level?

Social Media & Visual Identity
- How does the content production process happen at (*insert organization's name*)?
  - o Does (*insert organization's name*) have brand book with branding guidelines?
  - o Does (*insert organization's name*) have external parties that create content?
- How does (*insert organization's name*) track the performance of the tourist-oriented Instagram channel?
  - o What are the main key performance indicators used by (*insert organization's name*)?
- How do you track the social media performance of your brand on social media?
- How much content is aimed to be produced for social media monthly?
  - o Is there a target number of posts on Instagram?
- How is the branding maintained throughout time on social media?
- Is data collected from consumer insights or third parties used to inform the content to be created?
- What sort of content performs the best according to you?
- Does (*Insert organization's name*) pay attention to user generated content?

- o Does (*Insert organization's name*) use/repost user generated content?
- o Does (*Insert organization's name*) try to minimize the amount of negative user content?
- o Does (*Insert organization's name*) try to reduce the visibility of user generated content?
- o What type of post do you believe receives more user engagement (comment, likes, & shares)?
- Would you say that there is a difference in how (*insert organization's name*)'s destination branding strategy is performed on social media in comparison to physical promotions?
  - o How does the tourism management organization try to create a cohesive brand message through digital and physical channels?
  - o How visible is the destination branding on-island (physical channels)?
- Are there any major hurdles that you encounter within your branding strategy on social media?
- Does the current social media strategy allow for the promotion of cultural events?
- How do you plan for short term events in the overall strategy of the social media?
  - o Is there a strategy in place to delegate how content for and from these events are collected and used?
- Are posts that highlight one or more amenities such as hotels, restaurant, or tour operators considered advertorial content by (*insert organization's name*)?
- How does (*insert organization's name*) manage the relationship between the different segmented channels?
  - o How much does the content differ per customer segment channel?

Organizational Structure

- How are the branding, social media teams, and marketing teams connected at (*insert organization's name*)?
  - o How many employees does the content creation team at (*insert organization's name*) have?
  - o How much does (*insert organization's name*) aim to post in a week?

- Is the produced content solely determined by the organization or is it a shared decision with other stakeholders?
    - How does (*insert organization's name*) collaborate with other organizations on the island to make the message more cohesive?
    - Can you give examples of on-island stakeholders and the role that they have in the content production?
    - Is there collaboration or cooperation with other organizations on an international scale to make the message more cohesive? (e.g., travel agents, hotel industries)
    - Do you have regular meetings with external parties to discuss your strategy?
    - Does the government use the destination branding strategy constructed by (*insert organization's name*) in any shape?

Supplementary Questions (For ATA Follow Up Interview)

- Regarding Destination Identity:
    - How would you define Aruba's Destination Brand Identity?
    - What role does local culture play in the destination brand identity at (*insert organization's name)?
    - Do you aim to incorporate local culture in the current social media strategy?
    - On a couple of posts on Instagram is noticeable that there are themes of privacy and exclusivity depicted in the photos, is this something that ATA consciously tries to communicate.
- Regarding Brand Messaging:
    - Does (*insert organization's name) also market, not per se on social media, does (*insert organization's name) also market Aruba as a destination for other reasons beside tourism? Such as a place for international business meetings, etc.?
    - Does ATA work with external content creators such as vloggers & bloggers?
    - In our prior interview you mentioned the term 'Hidden Gems' can you give examples of what you consider to be Aruba's hidden gems?
    - Do you shift your brand message during certain periods of the year, such as Summer Vacation, Christmas, or Carnaval?
- Regarding Social Media Performance:

- Are there certain types of content that perform better than others? (Such as reels, static images, or carousels?)

- Regarding External Agencies:
    - From the prior interview was concluded that the brand identity employed by (*insert organization's name) was created by an external advertisement agency, a US based agency if I'm not mistaken. Is that correct?
        - Is this agency still in charge of making content for (*insert organization's name)?
    - In the first interview you mentioned how (*insert organization's name) has agencies in different segments (such as the North American, South American, and European markets). But it was unclear to me, all are these separate external advertisement agencies, or are these agencies be understood as (*insert organization's name) branches within these markets that localize content that is produced by one external agency?

- Regarding Consumer Segments:
    - Is there a difference in the behavior of customer segments on social media?
    - Does (*insert organization's name) notice a shift in the type consumers when comparing their pre pandemic and post pandemic behavior and preferences?