



***The changing narrative of Amsterdam on city branding and
tourism, a case study on the Stay Away! campaign***

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Erasmus University Rotterdam

Wessel Hoekstra (628653)

Coordinator: Jessica Steinman

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Abstract

The implementation of the *Stay Away!* campaign in 2023—a policy aimed at deterring so-called ‘nuisance tourists’. Signals a significant shift away from the liberal and tolerant identity of Amsterdam. This research analyses this changing stance by using a critical discourse analysis on municipality documents between 2017 to 2025. The most important findings show how the municipality has transformed the use liveability from a simple monitoring element towards a legitimizing tool for restrictive measures such as the *Stay Away!* campaign—within the previously mentioned time span. Furthermore, the analysis shows the emerging connection of liveability with accessibility, sustainability and balance, creating a grounded justification for the recently taken policy measures on tourism. This highlights a multidimensional, intersectional approach to contemporary urban governance in Amsterdam.

Key words: City branding, critical discourse analysis, liveability & urban tourism

1.1 Introduction

“If you are coming to Amsterdam to go wild, don’t come” (Gemeente Amsterdam, 2023). With this striking warning, Amsterdam’s municipality launched the *Stay Away!* campaign, a policy aimed at deterring so-called ‘nuisance tourists’—a demographic consisting out of young white adults that excessively use alcohol and drugs, causing disruption in the city center. This campaign highlights Amsterdam’s endeavour to morally police groups that exhibit unwelcome deviant behavior. Furthermore, it displayed a changing attitude of Amsterdam, historically known for its liberal and tolerant identity. By implementing the *Stay Away!* campaign, Amsterdam seeks to rebrand themselves, moving away from its permissive image on drug use, alcohol consumption, and legal prostitution. However, reshaping the long established city brand (and the perceptions of both residents and visitors) seems to be a challenge for policymakers.

According to literature, the concept of city branding emerged during the decolonization period in the 1950s, as developing nations from the Global South entered the global market. By using liberal reforms and embracing capitalism, they gained a stronger competitive position relative to the Global North. As a response, Western nations began transitioning towards post-industrial societies, shaped by the changing international dynamics of the world (Burgess, 1982; Ward, 1998; Braun, 2012; Kaur, 2020). This shift created a reorganization of nations but especially cities in the West, guided by the rise of entrepreneurial governance. Harvey (1989) discusses how this model prioritizes economic growth over social equity, emphasizing businesslike measures to drive development. From an urban perspective, entrepreneurial governance reflects the increasing tendency to manage cities like businesses, incorporating traits such as risk-taking, innovation, promotion, and profit motivation (Hall & Hubbard, 1996). To realize a competitive position on a global scale, nations and cities engaged in branding processes (Zukin, 1987; Kavaratzis, 2004; Kaur, 2020). This refers to creating an idealized urban culture that attracts both tourists and investors through various strategies. One of the most commonly used strategies focuses on governance, with policies often facilitating a favourable environment for capital accumulation that aligns with the entrepreneurial model that cities adopt (Harvey, 1989). However, the introduction of *Stay Away!* suggests that cities are starting to reconsider this model. The campaign demonstrates how Amsterdam is now actively taking regulatory

measures to mitigate the adverse effects of overtourism, rather than indiscriminately attracting tourists as it did in the past.

This development is relatively recent and inadequately discussed in literature, highlighting a new phase within the entrepreneurial model of Harvey (1989). This new approach focuses on a more balanced and curated model of tourism, that aligns with the expectations of the municipality. To realize this, it's deemed necessary to reshape the city's image—which has evolved over decades—towards a more restrictionist environment. In order to justify this new approach, the municipality mobilizes liveability rhetoric as a legitimization tool to implement campaigns such as *Stay Away!*. This development is particularly interesting to analyze considering how liveability has mainly been used to promote state-led gentrification in metropolitan cities of The Netherlands. The campaign shows how liveability is now expanded to other policy fields, such as urban tourism. This expansion is unaddressed within literature, thereby creating a relevant opportunity to analyse how the *Stay Away!* campaign was established. This study aims to analyze this in the following way: *How has liveability contributed to the discursive shift of Amsterdam in tourism policymaking and how has covid accelerated this discursive shift?*

This research aims to contribute to the existing literature on urban city branding and tourism studies. It situates Amsterdam's *Stay Away!* campaign within the broader discourse on city branding, linking it to Harvey's (1989) entrepreneurial governance model. Introducing a new phase of entrepreneurialism, where policing efforts have evolved in an effort to curb urban tourism. Additionally, the campaign demonstrates how policymakers are implementing urban rebranding strategies that contrasts Amsterdam's reputations as a liberal and tolerant city, legitimizing the urgency by using selective frames. This corresponds with existing sociological debates that analyse the broader discourse of urban governance on liveability, tourism, sustainability and sexuality (Kavaratzis & Ashworth, 2007, Kaal 2011, Van den Berg 2012, Dai, Hein & Zhang, 2019).

Analyzing the *Stay Away!* campaign, the influence of liveability and the impact of the COVID pandemic, also offers several insights of societal relevance. This study highlights the ways in which urban policy influences public perceptions and legitimizes the exclusion of individuals. Through an in-depth examination of Amsterdam's *Stay Away!* campaign, this research reveals how the discourse of liveability is not a neutral objective but a deeply normative and politicized tool that excludes specific types of tourism—particularly low-budget or nuisance tourism. This holds public value since it exposes how cities establish their institutional authority to justify their regulatory and exclusionary practices through

perceived neutral terms like liveability. The narratives of the municipality on tourism is thereby relevant to analyze and uncover how people are deemed (un)welcome. This is also linked to the changing identity of Amsterdam—from an open, progressive and liberal city to one that determines how it will shape its urban space and future, contributing to public debates about justice and rights to the city (Schinkel & Van den Berg, 2011).

This paper is structured as follows. A theoretical framework will discuss various sources of nation branding, city branding, liveability and the entrepreneurial model. Examining multiple sources by contrasting, critiquing and connecting them with each other, providing a grounded framework to answer the research question. The third section presents the research design of this paper. This is followed by the results derived from various policy documents from the municipality. Lastly, there will be a discussion about the most important conclusions, limitations, implications and recommendations for future research.

2.1 Literature review

In order to understand the research question, it is essential to review relevant literature that discusses city branding and the changing rhetoric on tourism in the urban environment. This chapter has the goal to compare, contrast, critique and connect empirical literature that applies to the topic of this research project. As a starting point, a historical analysis will be showcased, to highlight the changing dialogue of the city over the last few decades. Following the decolonization of the globe in the '50s, nations in Asia, South-America and Africa opened their markets in order to compete with the rich economic centers in the north, that benefited from the free-trade imperialism during the nineteenth century. Embracing capitalism and liberal economic reforms, several developing nations invested in their industrialization to play a bigger role in the global economy and politics. As an example, India started to brand themselves as “New India”—a popular name for the postreform, technofriendly, high-consumption entrepreneurial nation—attracting foreign investors by marketing their unlimited potential. Furthermore, shops hung up “Open for Business!” signs, conceiving the message of India being a commercial enclosure, a space of limitless exchange and capital investment for the global economy. This example of the reconfiguration of India into a commercial-cultural zone, is what Kaur (2020) calls a *brand new nation*: the nation revitalized and renewed as a profitable business enterprise with claims to ownership over cultural property within its territory.

Kaur's (2020) works highlights how sovereign states construct their identity through appealing narratives that provide a competitive position in a globalizing world stage. A core component of nation branding is the amplification of moral and cultural imaginaries—crafting an idealized version of the nation to attract foreign capital and tourism. While nation and city branding share several characteristics—such as the use of selective narratives, aspirational images, and moral framings—they operate on different scales and under different governance structures. Cities often draw on elements of national identity in their branding, but they also construct distinct imaginaries. In the case of Amsterdam, tolerance, openness, permissiveness, and liberalism—core components of the Dutch national identity—have been embraced while simultaneously projecting an unique urban personality as a global city. However, despite these overlaps, nation and city branding differ in their organization and aims. Whereas nation branding is more centralized and associated with diplomatic or economic initiatives, city branding is more likely to be influenced by several stakeholders—from municipal governments to tourism boards to local businesses to civil

society organizations. This creates space for divergence or even tension between national and urban narratives. Prior to the *Stay Away!* campaign, Amsterdam developed a strong and independent brand—one that aligned with national values in some respects but was not subservient to it. The city emphasized its unique blend of ‘local flavor’ by mobilizing the distinct cultural identity of Amsterdam (Dai et al., 2019). To position themselves as an attractive destination for investments and tourism, correlating to the goals of nation branding.

In this regard, the implementation of the *Stay Away!* campaign marks an important shift: not just of tone and emphasis, but even of how national and city-level framings are becoming ever aligned. Using the campaign as a case, the message the municipality is trying to conceive is a rebrand of the decades (along the lines of control, responsibility and moral limits) long idealized brand of Amsterdam. Reflecting wider national discussions regarding reputation, values, and limits to tolerance.

2.2 The entrepreneurial city and liveability

The emergence of newly developing nations onto the world stage, created an interconnected global economy—accompanied by constant movement of capital, labor, commodities and people—with nations competing for the most resources (Kaur, 2020). Harvey (1989) categorizes this growing competitiveness between nations (within the context of de-industrialization and the transition from Fordist-Keynesian regimes towards Fordist regimes of nations) in his framework of entrepreneurialism. This concept emphasizes the shift in national governance, changing from a managerial approach towards an entrepreneurial one. Showing the process of ‘nation making’ in the early 1970s, where the economy and politics cannot be distinguished and are instead, merged together to realize economic growth by creating a favorable business environment. However, Harvey’s (1989) research fails to address the systematic differences between the U.S. and Europe. A systematic longitudinal comparative study from Audretsch et al. (2002) explains the entrepreneurial differences between the two. Highlighting how European countries were dismissive about the upcoming market-led governance in the U.S. during the 1970s, claiming that the success of Silicon Valley (a hub for entrepreneurship) was not correlated to the new shift in governance, but simply an outlier. Over the following years, this attitude from Europe changed towards recognition and eventually envy of the economic successes in the United States. Ultimately leading to consensus in the 2000s: policymakers in European countries embraced entrepreneurial reforms to gather the same economic successes as the United

States. As a result, the implementation of privatization and deregulation measures (to promote an upcoming start-up culture in countries such as The Netherlands, The United Kingdom and Germany) was initiated. Peck (2001; 2010) discusses how these entrepreneurial reforms of countries and cities are associated to the emergence of neoliberal urbanism. He emphasizes that this process does not manifest everywhere in the same form; rather, neoliberalization is variegated and demonstrates diverse forms in national and urban spaces (e.g. the United States and various countries of Europe), correlating with the findings of Audretsch et al. (2010). Within this conceptualisation of variegated neoliberalization, Peck (2010) defines urban entrepreneurialism as a hybrid mechanism that is defined by the historical, social, political, and, ideological infrastructure of the designated country or city. This versatility is particularly demonstrated in the Netherlands, where there is a focus on a balance between market-driven measures and commitments to social welfare (Strom, 1996).

In the context of the Dutch case, this hybrid model is translated into blending entrepreneurship with maintaining liveability in urban governance. Even though these two concepts contradict each other, they are both articulated in urban renewal efforts, where social cohesion and economic competitiveness serve as primary drivers of development during the late 20th century. Yet, during the implementation of this hybrid model, Dutch civilians started to resist the drastic changes of the urban infrastructure. Post-materialist concerns like environmental sustainability, inclusive cities, and active citizenship translated into socio-political movements for urban development. Eventually, these elements were converged into the redefinition of *liveability* that local movements politicized, demanding that cities were resilient, socially cohesive, and ecologically sustainable (Kaal, 2011).

This pressured municipalities into shifting urban development priorities towards the values of the public, curbing the economic possibilities of entrepreneurship. Eventually, a dual approach—that considers the demands of citizens but also market pressure—was established, a policy framework wherein liveability was mobilized as a legitimizing discourse by Dutch policymakers. To justify this approach, municipalities focused on addressing the necessity to improve liveability in deprived areas. Backed by the national government, state-led gentrification projects across the country were initiated. Themes such as social mixing, improvements to quality of life, and achieving economic growth were framed to reinforce and improve liveability in large cities such as Amsterdam, Rotterdam, Utrecht and The Hague, where urban renewal projects were initiated (Uitermark, 2003; Uitermark et al., 2007; Hochstenbach, 2017). This new approach, however, has been criticized for involuntarily displacing low-income households, increasing social-spatial inequalities within

cities and displaying signs of authoritarian, moralized governance (Uitermark & Duyvendak, 2008; Schinkel & Van den Berg, 2011; Van Gent, Hochstenbach & Uitermark, 2017). Nevertheless, the discourse is marked by nuance. Several scholars note that the Netherlands has been able to maintain low rates of residential segregation relative to other European nations, even amidst entrepreneurial urbanism (Musterd, 2020). Additionally, the arrival of young, politically engaged urban professionals in gentrifying areas has, in certain instances, facilitated civic participation and neighborhood cohesion (Hoekstra, Van Gent & Boterman, 2018).

Thus, the previous elaboration of the use of liveability within entrepreneurial governance highlights a complexity of outcomes. In addition, it shows the manifestation of *liveability*, from a comprehensive post-materialist value towards an instrumental legitimizing tool in the context of post-industrial urban governance. Which is particularly relevant for the establishment of the *Stay away!* campaign in Amsterdam, taking into consideration that the mobilization of *liveability* is now being expanded to other dimensions within policymaking, such as urban tourism governance. This will be further examined in the next chapter, where urban branding strategies—to create a distinct identity—will be discussed, which is intertwined with entrepreneurial governance and crucial to understanding how the *Stay Away!* campaign is established.

2.3 The process of city branding in the United States and Europe

In order to maximize economic growth—by implementing businesslike measures that aligns with the entrepreneurial model described by Harvey (1989). Cities strategically brand themselves through narratives that cultivates an appealing cultural identity that serves as a tool to attract people and investments. Zukin (1987) shows how essential this process is for cities, creating a certain urban culture that generates capital accumulation and increases attractiveness to foreigners. This blend between symbolic branding and increasing capital accumulation in cities was first implemented in the U.S., for example: New York City launched a campaign called “I Love NY” in the late 1970s, attempting to reshape the city, previously dominated by crime, into a global tourist destination (see Greenberg, 2003; Sevin, 2014). This highlights how Harvey’s (1989) entrepreneurial model is put into practice, using tourism as an economic and symbolic tool to attract capital into the city as a means to survive economic collapse. While cities in the U.S. embraced this model relatively early—often as a survival strategy in response to deinstrualization—European cities hesitated to reorganize

their urban policies on the economy of tourism (Garcia, 2004). Eventually, growing economic challenges in European cities and the rise of budget travelling—making mass tourism more accessible—led to increased competition between European cities in attracting tourists (Jessop, 2005; Anttiroiko, 2014). Moving beyond simply advertising themselves and towards comprehensive branding strategies that reinforce the image of the designated city. For example, Amsterdam introduced thorough marketing implementation in 2004, focused on promoting cultural events, hospitality, branding landmarks of the city, and implementing the “I Amsterdam” slogan (Kavaratzis & Ashworth, 2007). This illustrates a different approach in comparison to the American perspective, focusing on boosting inter-urban competitiveness instead of facilitating a necessary change to save a city from collapse, such as New York City.

Another significant aspect of city branding consists of marketing strategies that policymakers use to strengthen the core identity of the respective metropolitan area and project a competitive urban image (Kearn & Philo, 1993). Cultural events such as Pride Amsterdam or Amsterdam Dance Event (ADE), reinforce how tourists identify Amsterdam as permissive and tolerant. These associations create a symbolic narrative that policymakers actively fortify to establish a brand that is hard to diffuse. As a result, a symbolic narrative is created that attracts tourists and also contributes to the city’s global image. The instrumental use of these cultural celebrations stimulates economic growth and aligns with Harvey’s (1989) entrepreneurial city model, wherein culture is strategically used to boost inter-urban competitiveness and capital accumulation. Van den Berg (2012) explains how these successes of Amsterdam are also connected to gender, showing how Amsterdam is inherently stereotyped as a feminine city, due to its distinctive canals, permissive policies, and inclusive identity. Showcasing how symbolic associations shape the city and also realises a competitive position on the global stage. Following Amsterdam’s footsteps, Rotterdam is actively redefining its masculine post-industrial city identity through various measures, including slogans and festivals designed to reshape the narrative about the city. This new intersectional approach to city branding—where gender, sexuality and cultural values are used as marketing tools—reflects how entrepreneurial urbanism has developed over the years. Identity is now intertwined with the accumulation of capital and the strategic use of the symbols is embedded into urban governance. Yet, this process often leads to a commodified city, losing its authenticity (Mac & Bhreithiún, 2014). Consequently, these strategies are often focused on a top-down approach by governments that highlight an idealized, universal homogenized image, overlooking social diversity and inclusivity (Jensen & Richardson, 2007; Colomb & Kalandides, 2010; Birdsall, 2013). In summary, Hubbard & Hall (1998) suggest that: “*it is*

perhaps best to consider the entrepreneurial city as an imaginary city, constituted by a plethora of images and representations”.

3.1 Research design and methodology

The research question—*How has liveability contributed to the discursive shift of Amsterdam in tourism policymaking and how has covid accelerated this discursive shift?*—had two main objectives. The first objective was to analyze how Amsterdam’s image changed in recent years, using the *Stay Away!* campaign as a case study. The second objective was to examine the impact of the COVID pandemic. By comparing documents from both before and after the pandemic, differences in tone and language were identified. To realize these objectives, a critical discourse analysis (CDA) on municipal policy documents was conducted. This method is able to uncover the underlying social, political, and economic elements that played a part in the changing discourse of Amsterdam, eventually leading to the implementation of the campaign (Handford & Gee, 2023). Additionally, CDA helps to explain the changing discourse on Amsterdam’s self-representation and stance on tourism, underpinning the social realities and how existing power relations shape the vocabulary in campaigns—such as *Stay Away!*. This study followed Chouliaraki & Fairclough’s (2010) three-dimensional CDA model, combining textual discourse analysis with the underlying socio-political context. This framework enabled an exploration of how the municipality of Amsterdam establishes and changes the city’s image through policy language, emphasizing a comprehensive understanding of the case study.

The sampling strategy involved the selection of policy documents from the municipality of Amsterdam, this includes: *directing a diverse shopping area, tourist bearing capacity, visitor executive program, vision of tourism, the inner city approach and, city in balance* (see Table 1). These documents were picked in consideration of the main purpose of this analysis: exposing the authoritative discourse of the municipality, outlining their role in the image-shaping process of Amsterdam. However, as Kaur (2020) mentioned, policy discourse does not always fully translate to the creation of social realities. This limitation was taken into account while evaluating the documents. To maintain thoroughness in evaluating data and ensure reproducibility, media sources (e.g., newspapers, global media outlets and social media) were excluded from this study. Even though media discourse influences public perception, the main objective of this analysis focuses on comprehending the institutional perspective—how Amsterdam’s municipality enforces its position on tourism. Nevertheless, excluding external narratives limited the insights into public reception and their potential disagreements on policy goals. These two pitfalls are addressed in the discussion chapter.

The methodology used for the collection of data involved several key dimensions, including timeframe and the anticipation of potential barriers or pitfalls. The selected timeframe spans from 2017 to 2023, this starting point marks the implementation of the *City in Balance* program. This policy focuses on the growing concerns about overtourism, leading to multiple regulatory strategies that are a part of this program. This period also considers the impact of the COVID pandemic, which served as a catalyst for regulatory tourist policies in Amsterdam. The selected timeframe ensured that the data collection captured key years for the changing municipal discourse on tourism management (Gerritsma, 2019). It is also necessary to reflect on several methodological considerations for the chosen research design, to prevent potential barriers and pitfalls as much as possible. Because CDA is inherently interpretative, findings may have been shaped by the positionality of the researcher. As a white Dutch cis man, the results of the policy discourse could be shaped by the researcher's perspective. To minimize bias, this study implemented reflexive measures (peer review of findings, analytical memo's, and a code book), realizing data that is supported by empirical evidence (Saldaña, 2013). This study also used intertextual analyzing, examining how policy documents reference and build upon each other, to enhance validity. This measure helped to explain the discursive shifts from 2017 to 2023 and reduced the risk of selection bias that might have led to unfounded conclusions.

The data analysis was linked to literature on city branding, using the conceptual framework by Boisen et al. (2018). Their model provided insights into how city branding is defined and influenced by subtopics such as identity, image, governance, and other stakeholders. These dimensions offered a theoretically grounded approach to analyzing how the view of Amsterdam has transformed over the years, highlighting the role of the municipality. The data analysis also combined both deductive and inductive coding methods, allowing for the integration of new themes into the results section, even if they deviate from the primary framework of Boisen et al. (2018). The coding was conducted by using the software program ATLAS.ti.

Although this study did not involve human participants, ethical considerations remained relevant in doing a policy analysis. Researching the current discourse on tourism regulation required a critical lens on the power dynamics, socio-economic interests, and political agendas of the municipality. It was therefore necessary to determine if and how certain groups or perspectives are excluded in shaping the tourism narrative of Amsterdam. By using this research design, this study addressed the research question. The previously

mentioned methodological measures ensured an in-depth systematic analysis of the changing discourse of tourism regulations, offering a nuanced understanding of the ongoing matter.

Table 1 - Policy documents to be used for the data analysis

	Year of Publication	Title	Author
1	2017	Sturen op een divers winkelgebied	Gemeente Amsterdam
2	2020	Toeristische draagkracht van Wijken	Gemeente Amsterdam
3	2020	Prognose en scenario's bezoekers 2030	Gemeente Amsterdam
4	2020	Aanpak binnenstad	Gemeente Amsterdam
5	2022	Visie bezoekerseconomie in Amsterdam 2035	Gemeente Amsterdam
6	2025	Uitvoeringsprogramma bezoekerseconomie	Gemeente Amsterdam

4.1 Introduction to the Results Section

The analysis of several policy documents derived from the municipality, convey a clear shift in attitude towards tourism in the city center of Amsterdam. During the timespan of 2017 to 2025, the municipality has taken various restrictionist measures—such as the *Stay Away!* campaign—on tourism in order to realize a less congested city. To accomplish this, the city uses liveability, accessibility, and the need for balance to legitimize their new model on urban tourism management. While each theme offers a distinct discursive function, together they illustrate how the municipality justified their post-pandemic restrictive tourism policies. In what follows, each theme is analyzed in depth to answer the overarching research question regarding Amsterdam’s shift in urban tourism governance.

4.2 Discourse on Liveability in Amsterdam

Every analyzed policy document demonstrates a strong emphasis on liveability as a core justification for restrictive tourism measures. The term encompasses residents’ perceptions of safety, cleanliness, social cohesion, neighborhood satisfaction, and overall urban quality of life (Gemeente Amsterdam, 2023). In order to make this concept measurable, the municipality created a dataset composed of 50 indicators, which has been used since 2015 to observe the liveability of neighborhoods in Amsterdam. Two years later, this dataset was used to legitimise the establishment of Amsterdam’s destination plan, a key policy program that marked a shift in urban governance. Here, liveability began to function not only as a monitoring tool but also as a political and discursive instrument, used to justify the municipality’s increasing use of authoritative power—particularly in the city center. Under this new approach, the municipality justifies their greater control over central Amsterdam as a necessary improvement to the liveability and attractiveness of the city. As noted by the programme itself:

A mixed center (good mix of residents, workers and visitors) is good for the attractiveness of Amsterdam. Tipping the balance towards the dominance of the tourist can repel residents through alienation and affect the attractiveness of the city center in the long term. (Omgevingsvisie 2050, 2021, p. 15)

One of the primary aims of this shift in governance is to enable venue diversification in those spaces that used to be dominated by monocultural, tourist-oriented businesses (i.e. souvenir- and coffeeshops and minimarkets). The policy program suggests that liveability serves a dual purpose: improving the residents' well-being and simultaneously maintaining the city's attractiveness for investments and responsible tourists. This discursive shift on liveability underscores growing concerns about overtourism in the city centre, which is now framed by the municipality as a threat—thereby legitimising what is presented as a necessary intervention.

Since the COVID pandemic, the municipality has relied more heavily on liveability data to justify increasingly restrictionist policies. The post-pandemic period is presented as a moment of reckoning, when the temporary disappearance of tourists exposed the unsustainable dependency of the inner city on tourism. As the municipality notes:

“(...) the way we move through the city. In the places we like to visit or those we prefer to avoid: individual visitors are often only briefly there, but their collective influence on city life is permanent. This can lead to stark contrasts that became painfully clear during the corona crisis. The once jam-packed streets were deserted. The empty canals showed us that a place that becomes too dependent on tourist visits takes on a displaced and almost desolate appearance of our city.” (Visie bezoekerseconomie, 2022, p. 2)

This quote illustrates how the pandemic served as a discursive turning point—allowing both residents and policymakers to reimagine an Amsterdam less dependent on tourism. Due to the pandemic, the contrasts were clearly visible, these differences created the opinion among local citizens that tourists negatively affect the liveability of the city, underpinning the rhetoric of policymakers. Because of this newfound alignment between policymakers and citizens, civic collaboration programs were founded, to collectively improve the liveability of the city. This served the interests of the municipality, citizens, entrepreneurs, and other relevant stakeholders in urban policy processes. These recent developments demonstrate how Amsterdam is moving away from a top-down focused approach that has been a debated topic in various studies (Jensen & Richardson, 2007; Colomb & Kalandides, 2010; Birdsall, 2013), towards an inclusive way of urban planning, focused on civic participation.

Although liveability emphasizes the quality of an inclusive, everyday life, the policy discourse strategically targets and excludes a specific category of tourists. As discussed in the introduction, the *Stay Away!* campaign explicitly frames young white British men as

undesirable visitors. In doing so, the municipality exercises its institutional authority by invoking liveability as a seemingly neutral, common-sense justification for exclusion. This discursive framing not only legitimizes selective tourism efforts but also delineates the criteria for inclusion—prioritizing the needs and voices of residents while excluding tourists in the establishment of the analyzed policy documents. In this process, young white British men are symbolically stigmatized and constructed as a moral threat, framed not as legitimate urban participants but as disruptions to the social order. These concerns are taken up in the next section, which explores how tourism policies have begun to redefine accessibility in the city.

4.3 Changing Attitudes Toward Accessibility

The recent growing desire to return to a less congested, more locally oriented, liveable city has driven a series of comprehensive, restrictive measures targeting various aspects of tourism. These include: banning the construction of new hotels in the city center, restricting guided tours, prohibiting canal boat embarkation/disembarkation in key areas, and limiting businesses that cater to "boozy" bachelor tourism. Each of these policies aims at curbing specific tourist demographics—particularly those associated with nuisance and antisocial behavior—thereby altering who has access to the city and on what terms. As one policy document notes:

“As diverse as the people who visit us are, their motivations for coming here are too. Families from Hoorn come to shop on Kalverstraat. Business travelers from Asia, the Middle East or America come for conferences. Family visitors come over from Belgium or Morocco. And even the boozy bachelor from England knows how to find our city.” (Visie bezoekerseconomie, 2022, p.2)

This quote underscores how the municipality discursively distinguishes between “acceptable” and “undesirable” forms of tourism. The previously celebrated identity of openness and tolerance is now being recalibrated into a more selective strategy—one that delegitimizes low-budget tourists, particularly those attracted by Amsterdam’s long-standing liberal reputation. The commercialization of the city’s image—through coffeeshops, nightlife venues, and the sex industry—is increasingly framed in municipal discourse as a driver of cultural homogenization and the erosion of local character (Mac & Bhreithiún, 2014). Further reinforcing this, the inter-European competition between cities in attracting tourists since the

2000s, has now led to a persistent brand of Amsterdam—one that has become difficult to diffuse (Kavaratzis & Ashworth, 2007). This tension—between Amsterdam’s historic branding as a hedonistic, liberal destination and its current efforts to reposition itself—underpin the implementation of the 2023 *Stay Away!* campaign. It explicitly targets a group of so-called problematic, low-budget tourists—attracted to the city’s hedonistic reputation, which the municipality explicitly promoted and cultivated until now.

From the residents’ perspective, the commodified city center has also disrupted their access to basic services such as childcare, grocery stores, and other daily necessities that have been displaced by tourist focus businesses—that reinforce the image of a hedonistic city—mentioned earlier. This material effect on accessibility reinforces the municipality’s policy shift, as the needs of residents are increasingly prioritized over those of temporary visitors. Despite these efforts, the municipality acknowledges the deep-rooted and globalized image of Amsterdam as a hedonistic city. Policy documents suggest that, even with stronger regulatory measures, tourist numbers will remain high over the next 25 years—raising questions about the long-term efficacy of the current restrictive strategies on selective tourism. This tension connects to the final discursive frame: the pursuit of balance.

4.4 *The Discourse of Balance*

A final and recurring motif in the municipal discourse is the emphasis on balance. The use of this frame connects to the aim of reshaping the city’s tourism model and steer away from the neoliberal entrepreneurial paradigm described by Harvey (1989). After decades of demand-driven growth and market-oriented urban governance, the city appears to have reached its limit—particularly in terms of liveability and accessibility for residents. As one document states:

“Nuisance and overtourism are signs that the limit [of overtourism] has been reached and that liveability is at risk. Visitors remain welcome in our city but this should no longer be at the expense of liveability and accessibility for our residents.” (Visie bezoekerseconomie, 2022, p. 3)

This quote highlights why the municipality is taking measures and why its shifting towards a supply-oriented tourism model, in order to gain more control over the tourism market to preserve the well-being of local residents. Moving away from previous strategies that focused on growth, branding, and international visibility, Amsterdam now emphasizes a more

selective approach to tourism. This change connects to wider academic discussions about how cities respond to the social and spatial costs of unchecked economic growth. By mobilizing the previous mentioned terms of liveability, accessibility and balance, the municipality attempts to create a more sustained model towards tourism—in order to improve urban well-being for citizens. These concepts are deemed as politically neutral, but they are instrumental tools that justify the exclusion of certain tourist demographics (young white British men). As a result, this group experiences targeted exclusion and demoralization by the ideals of sustainable city management—revealing the ongoing conflict with overtourism. This eventually leads to policy practices that disproportionately discriminate certain subgroups of tourists.

In order to conceive a need for balance, the municipality has also implemented various policies that focus on sustainability rhetoric. This concept is used to provide a pragmatic rationale for specific limits on overtourism. A recent example is the prohibition of cruise ships from visiting Amsterdam's port. As of 2023, cruise ships are required to comply with strict environmental norms (Green Award for Sustainable Ships) to dock in the city's port. By 2035, the city council has formally agreed to ban cruise ships from docking altogether (Port of Amsterdam, 2020). This set of policies serves two municipal goals: to restore balance to the city, and to reduce the ecological footprint of tourism by limiting cruise ships drastically. These policy objectives—reducing the environmental impact of the cruise industry over the coming years—are thus discursively grounded in the rhetoric of liveability and sustainability. While the city seeks to achieve a balanced, future-oriented urban environment, this shift demonstrates challenges for cruise tourists, who find themselves indirectly entangled in Amsterdam's evolving urban politics. Their mobility is actively restricted within legitimate policy frameworks—such as sustainability and balance—that render exclusion as being both reasonable and unavoidable.

5.1 Conclusion and discussion

This study draws two conclusions about how the municipality of Amsterdam discursively justifies its shift in tourism governance. First, the use of liveability has evolved into an impactful legitimizing tool for urban policy, particularly demonstrated in the city center. Originally formulated in 2015 as a quantitative instrument, the liveability index had already become very politicized by 2017 when it was invoked to support enhanced regulatory policies in tourism through the Amsterdam's destination plan. Remarkably, this transformation occurred prior to the COVID pandemic, so it suggests that issues of overpopulation, alienation among residents, and spatial inequality were already bringing about local controversies to take place prior to the emergence of global travel restrictions. The pandemic functioned as a key event because it exposed a significant difference between Amsterdam's current empty streets and its previous crowded state. These contrasting situations enabled policymakers to build an appealing argument which transformed liveability into a reason to reshape Amsterdam's urban identity.

Furthermore, the *Stay Away!* campaign demonstrates how the municipality unites liveability with accessibility and balance to create an integrated multiple-dimensional discourse. The municipality uses these frames to establish policy interventions that determine which tourists should access and which tourists should be excluded while maintaining urban well-being. The implementation of this campaign marks a transition away from Amsterdam's previous branding as a liberal hedonistic tolerant destination. Instead, the city displays a more balanced, sustainable and resident-oriented tourism model. The mobilisation of sustainability discourse—especially in policy measures that limit cruise ships drastically—indicate a shift towards long-term urban resilience that the municipality of Amsterdam wants to realise. The establishment of this new, idealized model marks a new phase in urban governance—one that shifts away from unconstrained growth toward a hybrid approach that prioritizes residents' liveability and advances on environmental goals.

This research has provided valuable understanding of the discursive institutional legitimization of projects like *Stay Away!*. It describes how the city constructs its strategy towards tourists and how it renders policies neutral and universally accepted. At the same time, there are several limitations that need to be addressed. The focus on policy discourse and the authoritative position of the municipality overlooks the rich social reality of how

these policies are experienced and talked about in everyday life. Moreover, although this study contributes to ongoing discussions about liveability rhetoric by exposing shifting pre- and post-pandemic policy perspectives—emphasizing the impact of this global event on the debate of liveability—it is necessary to mention that future political developments may reshape this current policy discourse, likely reducing the long-term relevance of this study. Lastly, the interpretative lens of the research has influenced the findings, in spite of attempts at reducing subjectivity through the utilization of overt coding techniques and adherence to well-developed frameworks, coding, framing, and thematic emphasis decisions are still guided by the researcher's positionality.

While this detailed ideological analysis makes replication and consistency of findings between studies challenging, it also enables a deep understanding of the issue. The given findings of this research have a number of significant implications for both policy developments and academic research. By undertaking a critical examination of the ways in which terms like liveability, balance, and accessibility are interpreted, this research demonstrates the extent to which power relationships and ideological assumptions are inscribed within policy regimes. It questions the presumed objectivity of policy discourse and makes visible who benefits—and who is excluded— of dominant urban narratives. Additionally, the findings complicate the assumption that cities consistently embrace the entrepreneurial model described by Harvey (1989). The case of Amsterdam illustrates a discourse that selectively distances itself from market-oriented tourism strategies, prioritizing the liveability of residents instead. This adds nuance to existing literature on entrepreneurial governance by demonstrating how cities may adopt hybrid approaches—balancing commercial interests with social and environmental considerations depending on the sector (Bleich, 2008; Kaal, 2011). Finally, the analysis shows how sustainability is increasingly mobilized as a supplementary justification for tourism regulation. The discursive link between sustainability and liveability contributes to emerging debates on long-term urban transformation and planning (Duyvendak, Kleinhans & Uitermark 2007; Dai et al., 2019).

Even though this study focuses on Amsterdam, the implications extend beyond the local context. As of now, cities across Europe that are also experiencing mass tourism (e.g. Lisbon, Barcelona, Venice & Prague), have started to implement restrictionist tourism measures as well. Similar to Amsterdam, these cities mobilize frames such as liveability and balance in policy discourse to legitimize comprehensive measures that focus on improving the well-being of local citizens. Future research could focus on evaluating policy effectiveness by using quantitative or longitudinal methods, as many of these measures have

only been implemented recently. This creates a valuable opportunity to assess if the intended goals of policymakers are being realized by the use of deterrence strategies in tourism policies. On top of that, this study reveals how the municipality of Amsterdam selectively rejects entrepreneurial strategies in its tourism discourse, contradicting Kaal's (2011) argument that liveability often serves to legitimize entrepreneurial policies—especially in the context of cutting social housing. This selective deployment of liveability rhetoric creates the need of further investigation into how and why municipalities mobilize such discourses across different policy fields. Lastly, this study highlights the emerging intersection between liveability and sustainability in the governance of urban tourism—an area that remains underdeveloped in academic literature. Future research should work toward an intersectional framework that critically examines how these two concepts are co-constructed in urban policy, and how they shape the regulation of tourism in socially and ecologically 'justified' ways.

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Appendix

CHECKLIST ETHICAL AND PRIVACY ASPECTS OF RESEARCH

INSTRUCTION

This checklist should be completed for every research study that is conducted at the Department of Public Administration and Sociology (DPAS). This checklist should be completed before commencing with data collection or approaching participants. Students can complete this checklist with help of their supervisor.

This checklist is a mandatory part of the empirical master's thesis and has to be uploaded along with the research proposal.

The guideline for ethical aspects of research of the Dutch Sociological Association (NSV) can be found on their website (http://www.nsv-sociologie.nl/?page_id=17). If you have doubts about ethical or privacy aspects of your research study, discuss and resolve the matter with your EUR supervisor. If needed and if advised to do so by your supervisor, you can also consult Dr. Bonnie French, coordinator of the Sociology Master's Thesis program.

PART I: GENERAL INFORMATION

Project title: The changing narrative of Amsterdam on city branding and tourism, a case study on the Stay Away! campaign

Name, email of student: Wessel Hoekstra
628653wh@eur.nl

Name, email of supervisor: Jessica Steinman
steinman@essb.eur.nl

Start date and duration: 23/03/2025

Three months, thesis deadline is June 22th.

Is the research study conducted within DPAS **YES**

If 'NO': at or for what institute or organization will the study be conducted? (e.g. internship organization)

PART II: HUMAN SUBJECTS

- Does your research involve human participants. **NO**

If 'NO': skip to part V.

Part V: Data storage and backup

Where and when will you store your data in the short term, after acquisition?

Data will be stored on my personal OneDrive, all the data is digital. The data will be stored till the end of August, keeping the potential thesis resit into account.

Note: indicate for separate data sources, for instance for paper-and pencil test data, and for digital data files.

Who is responsible for the immediate day-to-day management, storage and backup of the data arising from your research?

I (the researcher) will be responsible for the day-to-day management, storage and backup of the data arising from my study.

How (frequently) will you back-up your research data for short-term data security?

The data will automatically save on my OneDrive, to be sure no data gets lost. I will make a backup safe file on a secondary account.

In case of collecting personal data how will you anonymize the data?

Not applicable for this study.

Note: It is advisable to keep directly identifying personal details separated from the rest of the data. Personal details are then replaced by a key/ code. Only the code is part of the database with data and the list of respondents/research subjects is kept separate.

PART VI: SIGNATURE

Please note that it is your responsibility to follow the ethical guidelines in the conduct of your study. This includes providing information to participants about the study and ensuring confidentiality in storage and use of personal data. Treat participants respectfully, be on time at appointments, call participants when they have signed up for your study and fulfil promises made to participants.

Furthermore, it is your responsibility that data are authentic, of high quality and properly stored. The principle is always that the supervisor (or strictly speaking the Erasmus University Rotterdam) remains owner of the data, and that the student should therefore hand over all data to the supervisor.

Hereby I declare that the study will be conducted in accordance with the ethical guidelines of the Department of Public Administration and Sociology at Erasmus University Rotterdam. I have answered the questions truthfully.

Name student: Wessel Hoekstra

Name (EUR) supervisor: Jessica Steinman



Date: 22/06//2025

Date: 11/06/2025

APPENDIX I: Informed Consent Form (if applicable)