

# (Desti)nation branding and image repair strategies in Mexico. A qualitative case study of Visit Mexico's official Instagram posts

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## Abstract

This study analyses the use of image repair strategies and destination marketing techniques in online touristic promotional materials (Instagram posts) from Mexico, a long-standing popular destination which reputation was damaged by crime-related crises. To gain a positive (desti)nation image and a competitive edge in a globalised world, nations employ (desti)nation branding strategies to differentiate themselves. Crisis communication techniques, like Benoit's (1997) Image Restoration Strategies and Coombs' (2007) Situational Crisis Communication Theory can be used in the case of a negative image. Previous research also developed frameworks aimed at recovery marketing in a context of (desti)nation branding, like Avraham and Ketter's (2008a) Source-Audience-Message strategies and Walters and Mair's (2012) Tourism Disaster Recovery Messages. This research investigates image repair strategies used in Mexico's promotional content, their combinations, and variations in English and Spanish corpora. A qualitative case study of 27 English and 43 Spanish posts in NVivo used grounded theory and iterative coding informed by prior research and our data. Results show strategies from destination branding-related frameworks were found most often. The English corpus emphasised a feeling of proximity with its target audience, while the Spanish-language content showed a wider variety of strategies due to its diversity. These results are useful for researchers and place marketers, highlighting the importance of using relevant strategies and understanding the target audience. Additionally, as a theoretical contribution to this field of study, we propose a new integrated framework for destination branding research.

**Keywords:** (desti)nation branding; image repair; crisis communication; recovery marketing; Mexico; qualitative case study; thematic content analysis.

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# Marca de destino y estrategias de reparación de imagen en México. Un estudio de caso cualitativo de las publicaciones oficiales de Visit Mexico en Instagram

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## Extracto

Este estudio analiza el uso de estrategias de reparación de imagen y técnicas de marketing de destino en materiales promocionales turísticos en línea (publicaciones de Instagram) de México, un destino popular de larga tradición, cuya reputación se vio dañada por crisis relacionadas con la delincuencia. Para conseguir una imagen de (desti)nación positiva y una ventaja competitiva en un mundo globalizado, las naciones emplean estrategias de marca (desti)nación para diferenciarse. Las técnicas de comunicación de crisis, como las Estrategias de Restauración de la Imagen de Benoit (1997) y la Teoría de la Comunicación Situacional de Crisis de Coombs (2007), pueden utilizarse en caso de imagen negativa. Investigaciones anteriores también han desarrollado marcos orientados al marketing de recuperación en un contexto de marca (desti)nación, como las estrategias Fuente-Audiencia-Mensaje de Avraham y Ketter (2008a) y los Mensajes de Recuperación de Desastres Turísticos de Walters y Mair (2012). Esta investigación indaga en las estrategias de reparación de imagen utilizadas en el contenido promocional de México, y sus combinaciones y variaciones en un corpus en inglés y español. Un estudio de caso cualitativo de 27 mensajes en inglés y 43 en español en NVivo utilizó la teoría fundamentada y la codificación iterativa informada por estudios anteriores y nuestros datos. Los resultados muestran que las estrategias de los marcos relacionados con la marca de destino fueron las más frecuentes. El corpus en inglés enfatizaba un sentimiento de proximidad con su público objetivo, mientras que el contenido en español mostraba una mayor variedad de estrategias, debido a su diversidad. Estos resultados son útiles para investigadores y comercializadores de lugares, ya que ponen de relieve la importancia de utilizar estrategias pertinentes y de comprender al público destinatario. Además, como contribución teórica a este campo de estudio, proponemos un nuevo marco integrado para la investigación de la marca de destino.

**Palabras clave:** marca (desti)nación; reparación de imagen; comunicación de crisis; marketing de recuperación; México; estudio de caso cualitativo; análisis temático de contenido.

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## 1. Introduction

Since the early 1990s, globalisation has facilitated the international transactions of capital, talent, consumers, and ideas, increasing competition in the global economy and global tourism sectors. At the same time, communication across borders has also become easier and faster. Consequently, the market for international tourism and competition between countries has grown. Because of this increased competition, place leaders have started to apply nation branding techniques to improve the attractiveness and image of “their” place in order to differentiate it from competing places (Avraham and Ketter, 2008a, p. 3; Baker and Cameron, 2008, p. 79; Giannopoulos et al., 2011, p. 2; Sotiriadis, 2021).

Consequently, in 1996, Simon Anholt coined the term nation branding to suggest that a country’s reputation behaves similarly to that of a company or product and is of equal importance (Anholt, 2011, p. 1). Although the term has taken on multiple definitions and interpretations since, scholars agree that having a strong nation brand can give a country an edge over nations with weak identities or negative perceptions in the international market (Kotler and Gertner, 2002, p. 2). They believe that a strong nation brand can lead to the positive and sustainable development of a nation. Some benefits include attracting potential investors, visitors, governments, media outlets, and consumers from other nations (Dinnie et al., 2010, p. 17).

In building a nation brand, countries must not only align their foreign and domestic policies with their identity-brand to enhance their global reputation, they should also consider that a nation’s image is defined by the people outside the country; their perceptions are influenced by stereotyping, media coverage as well as personal experience (Anholt, 2011, p. 8; Fan, 2006, p. 6, 2009, p. 5; Kotler and Gertner, 2002, p. 2; Risen, 2005, p. 2). Gunn (1972) outlines the image formation process, which involves organic images from unbiased sources and personal experiences on the one hand, and induced images created by marketing efforts, on the other. People form their perceptions of countries based on various factors, including first-hand experiences, word-of-mouth, national stereotypes, media portrayals, brand quality, and individual behaviour (in Gallarza et al., 2002, p. 58).

Destination branding is a related concept, often seen as a subfield of nation branding (Fan, 2009, p. 2). It concentrates on promoting a destination, or “a place that attracts visitors for a temporary stay” (Pike, 2009 in Baker and Cameron, 2008, p. 81), and its touristic services and experiences (Buhalis, 2000 in *ibid.*, Fan, 2009, pp. 3 and 7). According to Blain et al. (2005) destination branding encompasses marketing activities involving the creation of a distinct identity that promises a unique travel experience, builds emotional connections with visitors, and reduces search costs and perceived risk (p. 337).

All of these activities work towards the common goal of presenting target markets with a unique destination image that will persuade them to travel to that destination as opposed to another one, as that image has a determining influence on a tourist's selection of destination (Echter and Ritchie, 1991 in Blain et al., 2005, p. 330, 2005, p. 337; RoI and Sert, 2023, p. 115; Ruiz Real et al., 2020, p. 2). Moreover, differentiation through destination image has become crucial in competitive markets where destinations appear substitutable for each other, such as the "sun and sea" holidays (Baker and Cameron, 2008, p. 86).

Furthermore, enhancing a destination's image can have a ripple effect on the nation's overall image, as tourists forming a personal connection with the destination may develop a more favourable view of the country overall, even when their experience was not positive (Anholt, 2016, pp. 76 and 89). Additionally, destination branding can benefit local communities by attracting funds for environmental improvements and boosting the profitability of local businesses, fostering a sense of local pride (Buhalis, 2000 and Horner and Swartebrooke, 1996 in Baker and Cameron, 2008, pp. 81-82 and 92).

Although academics increasingly agree that branding principles can be transferred to (desti)nations, capturing the essence of a (desti)nation proves to be a more challenging task than capturing the essence of a product. Morgan and Pritchard (2002) divide those issues into three categories (in Baker and Cameron, 2008, p. 89). Firstly, the financial challenge lies within the limited budget available to destination marketers (Avraham, 2015, p. 226; Baker and Cameron, 2008, p. 89). Secondly, the fragmentation of ownership due to numerous stakeholders within a destination brand complicates control over the destination brand (Baker and Cameron, 2008, pp. 81-82, 89 and 91; Giannopoulos et al., 2011, pp. 3-4). Moreover, internal stakeholders, including government bodies, touristic entities, and the local community, must be made aware of and understand the destination brand and its advantages to ensure the vital cooperation between them (Avraham and Ketter, 2008a, p. 47; Baker and Cameron, 2008, p. 90). Especially local residents cannot be overlooked. Lastly, environmental factors, e.g. crises, present a significant challenge as they can swiftly damage a destination's image, undermining branding efforts (Avraham and Ketter, 2008b, p. 196; Baker and Cameron, 2008, p. 91).

Mexico has actively embraced destination branding strategies to establish a robust national image, but it grapples with persistent perceptions of being underdeveloped and unsafe. Media representations, particularly those related to crime and violence, have discouraged potential visitors. Furthermore, Mexico's historical, deeper, nuanced problem of its international positioning image, largely influenced by negative portrayals in American media and culture, endures. Addressing these challenges requires a holistic approach, involving cooperation between the government, local communities, and the private sector. Despite these challenges, Mexico possesses cultural richness and natural beauty, making it an attractive tourist spot (Anholt, 2012, pp. 116-124). By leveraging strategies from nation branding, destination marketing, and crisis communication, Mexico aims to mitigate the impact of inse-

curity on tourism and promote economic growth (Ely, 2013, pp. 84-88; Vasile, 2019, p. 69). Image repair theory plays a pivotal role in evaluating “message options” (Benoit, 1997, p. 178) for reputation restoration in this context.

This article explores how Mexico employs (desti)nation branding and image repair strategies to enhance its global recognition, drawing from models like Benoit’s Image Restoration Strategies, Coombs’ Situational Crisis Communication Theory, Walters and Mair’s Tourism Disaster Recovery Messages, and Avraham and Ketter’s Source-Audience-Message (SAM) strategies. The main research aim of the study is to analyze the image repair strategies used in Mexico’s promotional content on Instagram, with a specific focus on how destination branding and crisis communication techniques are employed to manage and improve the country’s image in the face of potential negative perceptions. To this end, a qualitative case study on Visit Mexico’s Instagram posts in English and Spanish is conducted, starting from the hypothesis that the combination of destination branding strategies and crisis communication techniques in Mexico’s promotional content effectively influences stakeholders’ perceptions and behavioral intentions, ultimately contributing to the enhancement of Mexico’s image as a desirable travel destination. As such, the secondary objectives of the study include identifying the used strategies, their combinations, and variations between languages. In addition to the practical relevance of the results to place marketers, the ultimate goal of this study is to develop an integrated image repair framework for destination branding research.

The article is structured as follows: the theoretical section of this paper provides a comprehensive overview of the theoretical frameworks and concepts that underpin the study’s analysis of image repair strategies and destination branding techniques. The methodology section provides a detailed description of the research design, data collection, and analysis procedures used in the study. The results section presents the key findings of the analysis, including the frequency and types of image repair strategies and destination branding techniques used, and their variations across the English and Spanish data. The discussion section interprets the findings and provides insights into the effectiveness of the strategies used in managing and improving Mexico’s image as a travel destination. Finally, the conclusion section summarises the main findings of the study and their implications for destination branding and crisis communication research.

## **2. Theoretical background**

As mentioned in the introduction, crises can easily and almost immediately damage a positive destination image and turn it into a negative one. When a place is in crisis, the use of its regular marketing communications can have adverse effects. For example, if a place is deemed unsafe due to a crisis, the destination would seem untrustworthy if it continued encouraging people to come to a big event held there (Avraham, 2020, p. 712). Instead, (desti)nation marketers can rely on strategies from crisis communication, such as image repair strategies.

To understand crisis management, knowing what incidents are considered crises is necessary. That way, local policymakers can distinguish between everyday negative occurrences that do not harm a destination or place image and crises that negatively affect that image. Glaesser (2006) proposes the following definition:

A crisis is an undesired, extraordinary, often unexpected and timely limited process with ambivalent development possibilities. It demands immediate decisions and countermeasures in order to influence the further development again positively for the organization/destination and to limit the negative consequences as much as possible. A crisis situation is determined by evaluating the seriousness of the occurring negative events, which threaten, weaken or destroy competitive advantages or important goals of the organization/destination (in Avraham and Ketter, 2008a, p. 80).

On top of a crisis's negative consequences and unpredictability, this description mentions the need for a quick and adequate response. Places should measure the potential damage and seriousness of the crisis and respond fittingly in order to prevent the loss of reputation and competitive edge (Avraham and Ketter, 2008a, p. 80).

The response to the crisis depends on the type of crisis and which stage of the crisis life cycle the occurrence is in. Pearson (1996) suggests distinguishing between three types of crises: an immediate one, occurring with little to no warning; an emerging one, which grows slowly and can be stopped or limited; and a sustained one, which lasts for longer periods of time (Avraham and Ketter, 2008a, p. 197). Therefore, although some crises occur suddenly and unexpectedly, the evolution of crises can be predicted. Decision makers should be familiar with the crisis life cycle because the stage of a crisis will determine the type of response required.

Coombs (1999) identifies three stages: pre-crisis, maintaining the crisis, and post-crisis. During the pre-crisis phase, decision-makers or organisations should prepare themselves for possible future crises and work to prevent them. Coombs divides the second phase into three sub-phases: "crisis recognition, crisis containment, and business resumption" (Avraham and Ketter, 2008a, pp. 81-82). Lastly, during the post-crisis stage, organisations ensure the crisis has truly passed and start looking to the future. As for a crisis management cycle, Mitroff and Pearson (1993) suggest a five-phase crisis management model. First, in the signal detection phase, decision-makers monitor incoming signals to distinguish real crises from everyday events. If a crisis is detected, the preparation/prevention phase begins, where strategies are deployed to prevent it. If prevention fails, the containment/damage limitation phase follows to minimise harm. Subsequently, the recovery phase focuses on restoring the destination's image and normal operations. Finally, after recovery, the team learns from the crisis and updates strategies (in Avraham and Ketter, 2008a, p. 82).

As Coombs' (1999) post-crisis stage and Mitroff and Pearson's (1993) recovery stage demonstrate, it is important to rebuild or recover the pre-damaged image after the crisis in

order for the place/organisation to start up the day-to-day activities again. To this end, multiple models were created. One of the pioneering models in the field was Benoit's (1997) Image Restoration Strategies model, which focuses on the messages corporations can send when confronted with a crisis. The basis for comprehending those strategies is understanding the characteristics of attacks that prompt a crisis. According to Benoit (1997), attacks are two-fold: (1) "the accused is held responsible for an action" (p. 177) and (2) "the act is considered offensive" (ibid.) If neither of these conditions is met, there is no crisis. However, for both components, "perceptions are more important than reality" (ibid.). Strategies should be adapted to the severity of the crisis' reputational threat and should first target the most relevant audience before moving on to the other audiences. Benoit (1997) proposes five categories: denial, evasion of responsibility, reducing offensiveness, corrective action, and mortification. The first two categories deal with the first condition of an attack: the ascription of responsibility to the corporation. The next categories deal with the offensiveness of the crisis, with the last category of mortification focusing on the recovery of the image through forgiveness.

Similarly, Coombs' (2007) Situational Crisis Communication Theory (or SCCT) proposes different crisis response strategies to recover an organisation's reputation. This theory is based around the Attribution Theory and pre-crisis reputations of organisations. Which strategies are used depends on the size of reputational threat the crisis entails, the type of crisis, and the emotions and behavioural intentions the crisis evokes in stakeholders. Based on the level of attribution of crisis responsibility (and, thus, the crisis type), Coombs (2007) proposes three groups of response strategies, which are "built around the perceived acceptance of responsibility" (p. 170): denial crisis response strategies, rejecting any connection to the crisis; diminish crisis response strategies, weakening the involvement of the organisation or reducing the importance of the crisis; and rebuild crisis response strategies, negative attention generated from the crisis to positive past or current actions undertaken by the organisation. He also identifies "Bolstering" as a category but argues that these strategies support the other three primary strategies and can only be used if the organisation has a positive reputation.

Avraham and Ketter (2008a) developed a multi-step model comprised of three media strategy groups (SAM: Source, Audience, Message) to help nations identify the best marketing strategies to restore their image. The model is based on a preliminary analysis of three categories of characteristics associated with the crisis, target audience, and place (CAP characteristics). The analysis of crisis characteristics includes factors like geographical scale, casualties' origin, media coverage, and crisis duration. Audience characteristics consider the proximity of the target audience to the affected place, audience type and size, knowledge, sources of information, and social-political context. Place characteristics encompass power, resources, geographical position, life cycle, and the type of regime and leadership. Considering CAP characteristics, the authors identified the SAM strategies. Source strategies aim to influence or replace the perceived source of a negative image, while audience strategies focus on highlighting shared values with the target audience. Message strategies are the largest group, aiming to challenge negative perceptions through various approaches.



Lastly, Walters and Mair's (2012) Tourism Disaster Recovery Messages (or TDRM) extracted nine communication strategies from destination marketing literature to close the gap in literature on disaster recovery messages specifically. These strategies focus on "two main areas –changing (mis)perceptions of the destination caused by intense media coverage and restoring visitor confidence in the destination" (Walters and Mair, 2012, p. 89). While the first area focuses on changing perceptions of visitors, the second focuses on reinforcing an existing perception.

### 3. Methodology

To ensure the validity and reliability of the study's methodology, several measures were implemented. Firstly, the qualitative thematic content analysis was conducted in accordance with established guidelines and best practices in qualitative research. This involved a rigorous process of data collection, coding, categorisation, and interpretation, following the principles of grounded theory. Additionally, the use of NVivo software facilitated the systematic organisation and analysis of the Instagram posts, ensuring consistency and accuracy in the coding process. Furthermore, to enhance the trustworthiness of the findings, the researchers engaged in ongoing discussions and peer debriefing to validate the interpretations and conclusions drawn from the data. This iterative process of data analysis and interpretation contributed to the robustness of the study's methodology and the credibility of the results. In what follows, we explain the methodology in greater detail.

#### 3.1. Data

This case study focuses on the promotional materials created by Mexico's official tourism department and government agencies, specifically the content from the Visit Mexico brand on their Instagram page. The page provides a variety of visual and written content and is frequently updated. Data was collected over a 7-month period extending from September 2022 to March 2023. As such, the final dataset contains 70 Instagram posts. Of these, 42 are single-frame posts, 22 are multi-slide carousel posts, and 6 are reels or videos posted on Instagram. 27 posts were gathered from the English-language @wevisitmexico account, while 43 were collected from the Spanish-language @visitmexico account. We imported these posts into NVivo<sup>1</sup> by using screenshots and screen recordings. To simplify coding, videos containing dialogue were transcribed and carousel posts were compiled into 4-frame collages, resulting in 86 NVivo files. Overall, the corpus consists of 70 posts and 86 NVivo files.

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<sup>1</sup> NVivo is a software used for qualitative analysis. It enables researchers to describe, assess and interpret social occurrences in data sets, such as interviews, surveys, and multimodal media through (iterative) coding (*About NVivo*, n.d.). We used version 1.5.1 for our analysis.

## 3.2. Method

Our research uses qualitative thematic content analysis, which involves examining the data for topics and subtopics based on their frequency, relationship, and absence, as well as interpreting the themes and patterns found (Saldaña and Omasta, 2022, pp. 57-58, 136, 138). Qualitative content analysis is commonly based in grounded theory, as it looks at data or phenomena in their natural setting, taking an interpretative research method. Saldaña and Omasta (2022) define grounded theory as “an inductive and iterative process of data collection, coding, categorisation, and analytic memo writing in order to arrive at a central or core category that helps formulate a theory to explain the phenomenon under investigation” (p. 134). First, as many relevant data on the research question is collected, including relevant literature. Then, the data is coded, followed by an interpretation and discussion of the results in more detail. This method often includes both *in vivo* coding and selective coding. With *in vivo* coding, new concepts surge from the data set, codes are extracted organically and added to the code tree while coding. With selective coding, the coding process is based on core codes or categories (Andreas Böhm, 2005, pp. 270-272; Denscombe, 2010, p. 115; Saldaña and Omasta, 2022, p. 108).

Our approach involved using both *in vivo* coding and selective coding methods. The code tree was based on the frameworks presented in the theoretical background and had three main subsections: general categories, image repairing strategies from the literature, and additional codes developed during the coding process based on communication strategies. The latter often involved adding subcodes to existing codes, such as in Avraham and Ketter’s (2008a) code “Celebrities as alternative source”. The additional subcodes included: “Culturally significant figures”, “Historical figures”, “Influencers”, “Reputable organisation”, and “Visitor”. In a similar vein, Walters and Mair’s (2012) code “Celebrity endorsement” was expanded to include “Engaging reputable organisations (as opinion leaders, as brands, as means to attract public attention)” and “Organisation endorsement”. Additionally, new codes were introduced to contrast existing codes or to account for unique variations. For instance, “Branding in favour of the stereotype” was created as a response to Avraham and Ketter’s (2008a) “Branding contrary to the stereotype”. Other additions, like “Geographical differentiation”, were included to address subtleties that did not fit into existing categories, such as “Geographical association” or “Geographical isolation”. Finally, it is worth noting that two strategies, “Community readiness” and “Solidarity messages”, from Walters and Mair’s (2012) Tourism Disaster Recovery Messages, were not part of the NVivo code tree. This is because they revealed to be too narrowly focused on post-disaster recovery in a country, which does not apply to the crisis in Mexico. The final code tree, including all used strategies from existing frameworks and our own added codes, can be found in the Annex.

Furthermore, we used an iterative collaborative coding approach. This allowed us to improve intercoder agreement by ensuring consistent interpretation of the various communi-

cation strategies (Saldaña and Omasta, 2022, p. 5). In addition, to better understand how safety and crime rates are perceived by both visitors and locals, we consulted the website Numbeo while coding<sup>2</sup>. As previously mentioned, the perceptions of our target audience play a significant role in (desti)nation branding and crisis communication.

## 4. Results

### 4.1. Employed strategies

In our study, we found that the most commonly used frameworks were Tourism Disaster Recovery Messages (Walters and Mair, 2012) and SAM strategies (Avraham and Ketter, 2008a). Image Restoration Strategies (Benoit, 1997) ranked second, while Situational Crisis Communication Theory (Coombs, 2007) was used the least. Additionally, our analysis also revealed that Visit Mexico focuses on promoting Mexico's culture, adventure, and nature, rather than its gastronomy, magic towns, beaches, and events.

Moreover, Visit Mexico's place marketers use strategies to highlight the positive aspects of the country and counteract the negative image portrayed by mass media. For example, from Benoit's Image Restoration Strategies (1997), the 'Reducing offensiveness of event' umbrella strategy appeared in 64 files. This strategy aims to compensate for negative feelings associated with a place due to offending events, such as a safety or drug related crisis. The most commonly used substrategies were "Bolstering", which aims to reinforce a positive attitude, and "Corrective action", which includes a promise to solve the problem and prevent it from reoccurring. Similarly, SCCT's (Coombs, 2007) most common category is "Secondary crisis response strategies" found in 33 samples. This strategy is primarily used as a "Reminder" approach to highlight the organisation's past good works and "Ingratiation" to acknowledge and praise stakeholders. The following caption and its post (figure 1) combines Benoit's "Bolstering" with Coombs' "Reminder", as it reminds tourists of Mexico's past work by listing sights deemed World Heritage by UNESCO, using positive language:

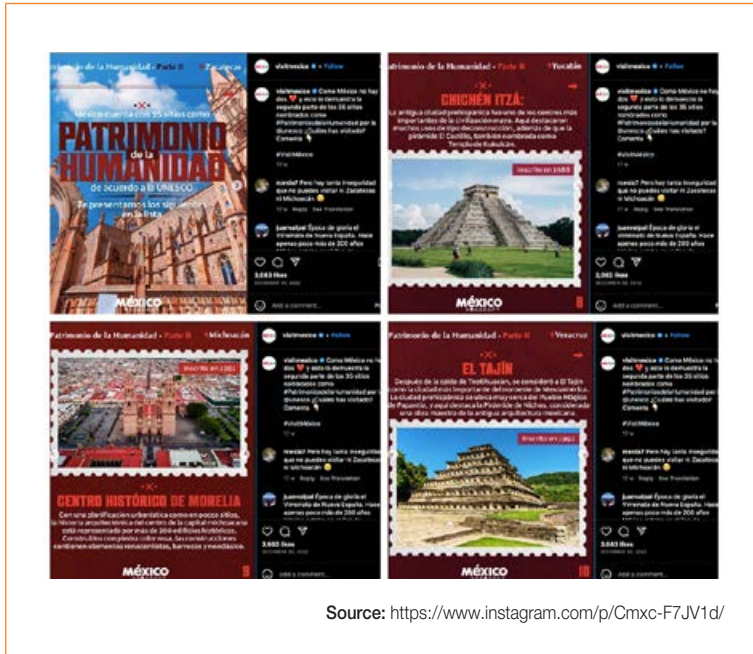
"Como México no hay dos y esto lo demuestra la segunda parte de los 35 sitios nombrados como #PatrimoniosdelaHumanidad por la @unesco ..."

"There are no two places like Mexico and this is demonstrated by the second part of the 35 sites named as #PatrimoniosdelaHumanidad by @unesco ..."

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<sup>2</sup> Numbeo is the world's largest cost of living database. Numbeo is also a crowd-sourced global database of quality-of-life data: housing indicators, perceived crime rates, healthcare quality, transport quality, and other statistics.

Figure 1



Source: <https://www.instagram.com/p/Cmxc-F7JV1d/>

Furthermore, Visit Mexico does not address its ongoing crime crisis. Instead, marketers rely on stereotypical imagery and positive associations, while also distancing themselves from their own turbulent history. Our dataset reveals that different SAM message strategies were used, including “Disregard for/partial acknowledgement,” “Full acknowledgement with moderate coping measures,” “Full acknowledgement with extreme coping measures,” and “Disengagement from main characteristics of the place”. These strategies aim to present a different image of Mexico than what is portrayed in the media. However, it is noteworthy that instead of challenging negative stereotypes, place marketers often reinforced positive ones. As such, we included a code for “Branding in favour of the stereotype”, used 17 times.

These posts typically highlighted Mexican cuisine, traditions, and legends, like Día de Muertos and sugar skulls seen in figure 2. Moreover, “Geographical isolation” was not present in any samples. However, 5 posts were labelled as “Geographical association” and 17 as “Geographical differentiation”, a code we included for instances where place marketers emphasised the distinct charm of Mexico as compared to other destinations. For example, in the following caption, Mexico differentiates itself from other Latin American destinations by highlighting the uniqueness of Mexico: “Did you know that Edward James’s Surrealist Garden is unique in its style in Latin America? ...”

Figure 2

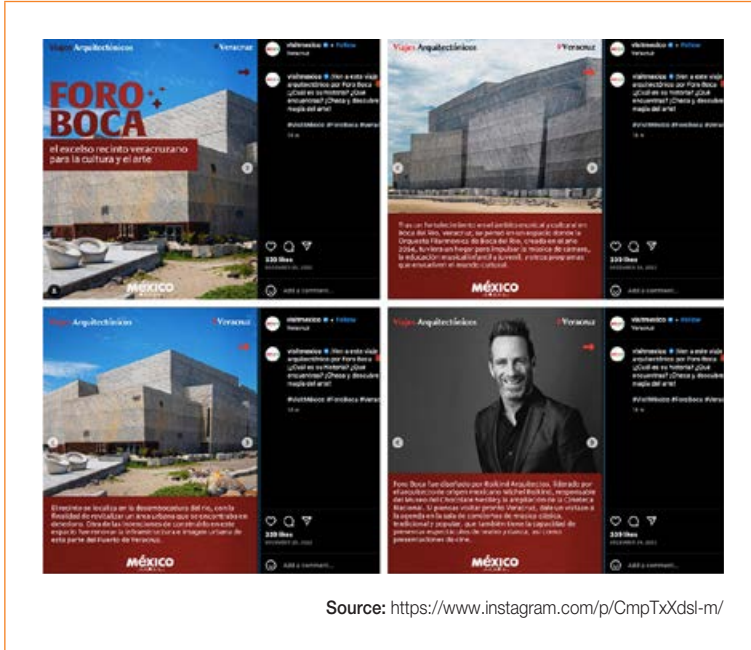


Source: <https://www.instagram.com/p/CkKF9d7NP1q/>

Regarding the samples related to “Disregard for or partial acknowledgment of the crisis”, 26 were classified as “Ignoring the crisis: Total disregard” and 3 were classified as “Acknowledging the negative image: New era technique”. This technique involves separating past from present when promoting Mexico in marketing campaigns. For example, one carousel (figure 3) showcased a new cultural hub, developed to revive a deteriorating urban area in Puerto de Veracruz.

Additionally, in their efforts to emphasise positive aspects, 22 samples were identified as “Spinning liabilities into assets”, which refers to the rebranding of possible negative aspects, such as extreme climate, controversial heritage, ethnicity and ethnic conflicts, stereotypes of underdevelopment and geographical location, as unique qualities. For instance, while for some, Catemaco’s tradition of witchcraft may seem controversial, destination marketers embraced it as an integral part of the destination’s charm and uniqueness in the following caption “Catemaco is a destination of colors and mysticism. It is known as the “Land of the Sorcerers” because people from all over the world travel to heal their spirit or learn their destiny”. Similarly, 11 samples coded as “Delivering a counter-message” combat images of crime, terror, boredom, and one-dimensional images by promoting positive messages. For instance, influencer @chinguamiga encourages people to visit Fundidora in Monterey, stating that she personally feels safe and at peace there, counters the stereotypical idea of Mexico as a dangerous country where tourists should be vigilant.

Figure 3



Source: <https://www.instagram.com/p/CmpTxXdsI-m/>

It is worth noting that place marketers frequently used celebrity and organisation endorsements to advertise Mexico, strategies which fell under the “Full acknowledgement of the crisis and moderate coping measures” category, found in 29 samples. These methods are aimed at drawing in tourists, often through the involvement of celebrities or events. Additionally, it is noteworthy that Visit Mexico often partnered with reputable organisations to persuade the public, which is why we added the “Engaging reputable organisations” code, found in 18 files. For instance, Visit Mexico often showcased monuments included on UNESCO’s World Heritage List through carousels, as seen in figure 1. Additionally, from the TDRM-framework (Walters and Mair, 2012) three examples were identified as “Guest or visitor testimonials”. These examples involve interviews with influencers, including questions about their favourite spots in certain areas. Furthermore, four examples were categorised as “Celebrity endorsement” with the aim of restoring visitor confidence, while three were meant to change the misperceptions presented by media outlets. It should also be noted that our own code “Organisation endorsement” appeared 17 times in the dataset. Moreover, Avraham and Ketter’s (2008a) source messages, which also focus on changing the source of the message, appeared a total of 73 times. Of these, 43 examples were identified as “Celebrities as alternative source”, including subcodes for visitor, influencer, and reputable organisations. Furthermore, 52 samples were categorised as “Witnessing first-hand”.

Making communication with the audience more effective required actively engaging with them, creating an emotional connection, and sparking their interest in different destinations.

This was evident in how each data entry was categorised as “Curiosity enhancement” according to the Tourist Disaster Recovery Messages framework. Every post contained elements that piqued curiosity, such as captivating visuals, informative captions, questions to the audience and clickable hashtags, e.g. “#VisitMexico” that led to more information about the featured destination. These elements were also taken into account when classifying samples based on Avraham and Ketter’s (2008a) audience strategy. Specifically, tags of visitors by place marketers was regarded as “Similarity to the target audience”, as these posts included the use of their pictures to promote Mexico to other visitors. Additionally, content featuring traditional Mexican culture, common values and a welcoming attitude towards both locals and foreigners was also categorised as such. Similarly, place marketers strived to establish a connection with the local community by highlighting themes of patriotism and nationalism. In total, 67 samples were labelled as “Patriotism and nationalism”, with 60 specifically focused on “Enhancing local pride”, 27 featuring “National motifs and symbols”, and 15 using “Explicit use of patriotic feelings”. For example, a post celebrating Independence Day, depicted in figure 4, may elicit strong patriotic emotions among residents. Lastly, in an effort to broaden their audience, eight samples were categorised as “Changing the target audience”.

Figure 4



## 4.2. Combinations within frameworks

We found that strategies within the same framework often complimented each other, with the exception of those within Benoit’s (1997) Image Restoration Strategies framework

and Coombs' (2007) SCCT-framework. For instance, the TDRM-strategies of "Curiosity enhancement" and "Guest or visitor testimonial" were often paired together, as well as our added "Organisation endorsement" strategy to the framework (13 files).

Within the SAM framework (2008a), we noticed that the source strategies complemented the audience strategies. For instance, "Witnessing first-hand" (14 files) and "Celebrities as alternative source" overlap with "Patriotism and nationalism". This indicates various sources were used in Mexico's destination marketing to attract visitors and instil a sense of pride. Celebrities often shared positive opinions and encouraged viewers to visit various locations. Place marketers also promoted locations listed as World Heritage Sites, creating a sense of pride local audiences, and motivating all segments to visit the country. Similarly, "Witnessing first-hand" combined with "Similarity to the target audience" in several files (15), as in captions like: "Would you love a getaway to Playa Los Muertos, one of the most popular destinations in Puerto Vallarta?". The target audience is directly talked to and called to action.

In addition, the source strategies frequently complemented the message strategies. This is because "Celebrities as alternative source" is closely related to "Engaging celebrities - as opinion leaders, brands". Moreover, it supported the tactic "Ignoring the crisis - total disregard". Essentially, various sources were seen as key opinion leaders or brands with valuable, often positive, perspectives for the audience to consider. While promoting Mexico, celebrities relied on "Geographical differentiation", "Branding in favour of the stereotype" and "Delivering a counter-message". Influencer @andres.gjohnson highlighted Mexican cuisine's popularity as an attractive factor and described Mexico as a versatile travel destination due to its diverse landscapes including beaches, deserts, and jungles. Moreover, @mariajosegi described the city of Guadalajara as a lively and beautiful place with a pleasant climate and breath-taking scenery, despite its high crime rate. Furthermore, "Witnessing first-hand" often overlapped with "Delivering a counter-message" (4), so that place marketers invited tourists to come verify the destination image by visiting. Moreover, "Celebrities as alternative source - reputable organisation" often supported the "Spinning liabilities into assets" strategy, as UNESCO was used in four files to back the claim.

Additionally, Avraham and Ketter's (2008a) audience strategy "Patriotism and nationalism" supported various message strategies. More specifically, "Ignoring the crisis - total disregard" (16), "Acknowledging a negative image - new era technique" (2), "Hosting spotlight events - cultural events", "Engaging celebrities - as opinion leaders, brands" (8), "Delivering a counter-message - to images of crime and terror, boredom, one-track images", "Spinning liabilities into assets - extreme climate, controversial heritage, ethnicity and ethnic conflict, stereotypes of underdevelopment, geographical location" (16), "Geographical differentiation" (15), and "Branding in favour of the stereotype" (14). For example, "Patriotism and nationalism" was often combined with "Branding in favour of the stereotype", as positive stereotypes were highlighted as national symbols of which to be proud of. For example, the Mexican tradition of "Día de Muertos" was described as a "tradición chula" (fun tradition). Unique aspects of Mexico were also showcased in posts through "Geographical differentiation" to instil a sense of pride ("Patriotism and nationalism").



Moreover, marketers deliberately avoided discussing safety, crime, or violence in files labelled as “Patriotism and nationalism” and “Ignoring the crisis - total disregard”, as these issues could potentially drive audiences away. Instead, they focused on portraying Mexico in a positive light. Similarly, they highlighted the positive aspects of Mexico by engaging celebrities or organisations “as opinion leaders, as brands”, through strategies like “Patriotism and nationalism”, “Hosting spotlight events – cultural events”. In addition, audience strategy “Changing the target audience” was paired with “Branding in favour of the stereotype” (2), “Geographical differentiation” (1), “Ignoring the crisis – total disregard” (2), “Delivering a counter-message” (1), “Engaging celebrities – as opinion leaders, brands” (2) and “Hosting spotlight events – cultural events” (1).

Finally, audience strategy “Similarity to the target audience” complimented message strategies “Geographical association” (3), “Ignoring the crisis - total disregard” (5), “Delivering a counter-message” (4), “Spinning liabilities into assets” (2), “Hosting spotlight events” (6), and “Engaging celebrities - as opinion leaders” (6) and our added strategies “Branding in favour of the stereotype” (8) and “Geographical differentiation” (2). In these scenarios, marketers interact with the audience and build connections by highlighting shared interests, knowledge, or familiarity. For instance, the audience was often asked which stereotypical Mexican dishes they would prefer, e.g., “What Tijuana dish makes your mouth water the most? Quesabirria or “cochinada taquito”?”.

### 4.3. Combinations across frameworks

We found that strategies from different frameworks could be used together effectively. Avraham and Ketter’s SAM strategies (2008a) were in line with Benoit’s Image Restoration Strategies (1997), Coombs’ SCCT-framework (2007), and Walter’s and Mair’s Tourism Disaster Recovery Messages (2012). Similarly, Image Restoration Strategies were compatible with the SCCT - and TDRM-frameworks. Interestingly, Benoit’s Image Restoration Strategies (1997) and Coombs’ SCCT-framework (2007) contain similar strategies, like “Corrective action” and “Justification”, as well as “Bolstering” and “Bolstering - Reminder, Ingratiation”. As a result, the bolstering strategies were coded together 28 times, 27 of which involved “Reminder”, while one used “Ingratiation”.

Similarly, TDRM’s “Curiosity enhancement”, “Celebrity endorsement”, and our added “Organisation endorsement” coupled well with SAM’s “Celebrities as alternative source” and “Engaging celebrities - as opinion leaders, brands”. Additionally, these strategies were often coded with both Benoit’s and Coombs’ bolstering strategies. This indicates that Visit Mexico often turned to alternative, influential sources to promote a favourable view of Mexico using positive language. These files include positive messages about locations endorsed by UNESCO or celebrities. Furthermore, place marketers often remind the audience to visit these destinations, using the “Witnessing first-hand” strategy. This source strategy was also often combined with Walters and Mair’s (2012) “Curiosity enhancement” and “Guest or vis-

itor testimonial”, and Benoit’s (1997) “Bolstering”. In these files positive language was used to encourage the audience to experience Mexico first-hand and learn more about the country. On one occasion marketers invite the audience to visit Xilitla stating “come discover this architectural treasure in the heart of the Magic Town of Xilitla”.

Correspondingly, Avraham and Ketter’s (2008a) “Ignoring the crisis - total disregard” was often paired with Benoit’s (1997) and Coombs’ (2007) bolstering strategies, in 20 and 14 files respectively. In these files, place marketers advertise destinations that are considered unsafe, but do not mention possible concerns and focus on affirming positive aspects of these locations instead. Furthermore, the “Total disregard” strategy was supported by Walters and Mair’s (2012) “Curiosity enhancement” (23). Using this combination, place marketers diverted the audience’s focus from possible unsafety to popular hotspots and tourist attractions instead. By the same token, message strategies “Delivering a counter-message” and “Spinning liabilities into assets” were supported by both Benoit’s (1997) and Coombs’ (2007) “Bolstering”. For example, place marketers often highlighted the natural diversity of Mexico to counter a one-track image, as in this caption:

¡México tiene una diversidad natural asombrosa! Los bosques nublados, con lluvia y neblina, son uno de los ecosistemas más chulos. ...

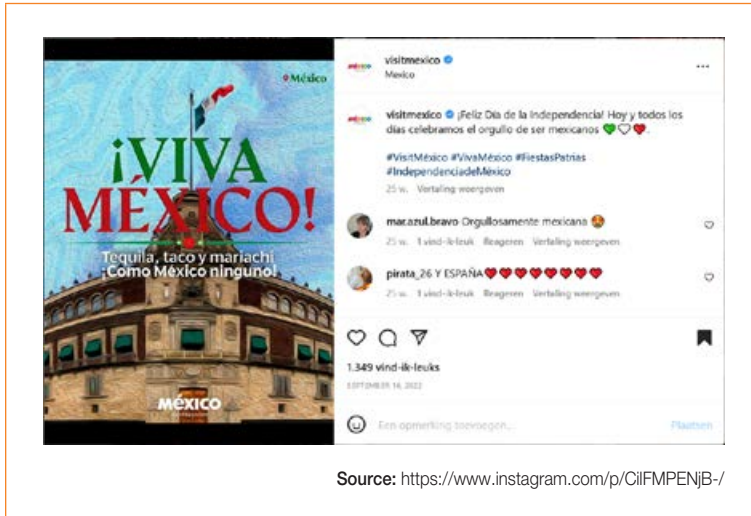
*Mexico has an amazing natural diversity! Cloud forests, with rain and mist, are one of the coolest ecosystems. ...*

Furthermore, “Spinning liabilities into assets” was once combined with Benoit’s (1997) “Corrective action” and Coombs’ (2007) “Justification”. The following caption presents the Tacaná volcano not as a hazard, but as a captivating tourist spot, with reassurance of safety measures taken: “Tacaná or “La Casa del Fuego” is the highest volcano in Chiapas with about 4,000 meters high. It is currently active, so it is monitored by geologists.”

In addition, message strategies “Hosting spotlight events - cultural events”, “Acknowledging a negative image - new era technique”, “Delivering a counter-message”, “Spinning liabilities into assets” complemented Walters and Mair’s (2012) “Curiosity enhancement”. TDRM’s “Spinning the unsafe image into assets” also paired with SAM’s “Ignoring the crisis - total disregard”, “Delivering a counter-message” and “Spinning liabilities into assets”.

Several strategies we added were compatible with existing strategies. For example, Benoit’s (1997) and Coombs’ (2007) “Bolstering” coincided with Avraham and Ketter’s (2008a) message strategy “Geographical association”, and our added “Geographical differentiation” and “Branding in favour of the stereotype” strategies. These files contain positive language used by place marketers to reinforce stereotypes or set themselves apart as a popular tourist destination. For instance, in the following post, found in figure 5, the text on visual reads “¡Viva México! Tequila, taco y mariachi. ¡Como México ninguno!”, which translates to “*Long live Mexico! Tequila, taco and mariachi. There’s no place like Mexico!*”. The stereotypes of tacos, mariachis and tequila are thus implicated to be part of what makes Mexico unique.

Figure 5



Source: <https://www.instagram.com/p/CiFMPENjB-/>

In the following caption, “Geographical differentiation” overlaps with “Reminder”, as place marketers remind the audience of its achievement in underkeeping their touristic sites:

Do you know what place this is? it is the Valley of the Cirios; one of the best preserved Mexican natural treasures on earth. It has a rich diversity of fauna and flora; you can find the Cardón; the largest cactus in the world

Additionally, Walters and Mair’s (2012) “Curiosity enhancement” was also combined with our added strategies “Branding in favour of the stereotype” and “Geographical differentiation”, and Avraham and Ketter’s (2008a) “Geographical association”. Moreover, Avraham and Ketter’s (2008a) audience strategy “Patriotism and nationalism” combined with Walters and Mair’s (2012) “Curiosity enhancement” (65), “Guest or visitor testimonial” (3), and the added “Organisation endorsement” (13) strategy. In doing so, alternative sources were thus used to endorse Mexico, inspiring a sense of pride in locals, and piquing curiosity in all audience segments. For instance, the caption “The walks through the Mercadito de Artesanías and the views of the Tepozteco hill are a must in Tepoztlán!”, sparks curiosity in those who have not visited Tepoztlán and strengthens local pride. Additionally, these files often mention Mexico’s UNESCO World Heritage List sites and local influencers using patriotic language.

Avraham and Ketter’s (2008a) “Similarity to the target audience” was matched with Walters and Mair’s (2012) “Curiosity enhancement” (61), “Celebrity endorsement” (3), “Guest or visitor testimonial” (3) and added “Organisation endorsement” (3). These strategies are used

by place marketers to present a relatable message and engage the audience's curiosity. On the other hand, Avraham and Ketter's (2008a) "Changing the target audience" overlapped with Walters and Mair's (2012) "Curiosity enhancement" (7) and our "Organisation endorsement" (2). In this case, Visit Mexico aimed to attract a new audience by showcasing a destination that catered to their specific needs and interests.

We also observed a compatibility between Avraham and Ketter's (2008a) audience strategies and Benoit's (1997) and Coombs' (2007) "Bolstering". For example, combining bolstering strategies with "Patriotism and nationalism", place marketers effectively convey patriotic sentiments using positive language to remind the audience of what Mexico has to offer. Another example of "Patriotism and nationalism" combined with bolstering strategies is Mexican influencer @mariajosegi emphasising her common values (e.g., "nuestro país" or "our country") with locals and sharing positive opinions about their country. This combination, thus, results in stakeholder-praising messages and reminders of Mexico's attractions.

#### 4.4. Comparison between English and Spanish corpus

Looking at the language of posts, English or Spanish, "Curiosity enhancement" was found in every file for each language. The "Witnessing first-hand" strategy was found in a similar percentage of files for both languages. Interestingly, while "Similarity to target audience" was found in 100% of the English corpus, this strategy was found in only 62,7 % of the Spanish data set. Moreover, the strategy "Using celebrities as alternative source" was found in almost all English files, whereas it was only coded for 28,8 % of Spanish ones. This can be attributed to the fact that almost all English posts referred to a username of a visitor, which was a way to use an alternative source and to establish "Similarity to target audience". Although "Celebrities as alternative source" was less present Spanish-language files, the "celebrities" were more diverse, including influencers, reputable organisations and visitors. Additionally, "Patriotism and nationalism" was found in 86,44 % of Spanish files as opposed to 59,26 % English files. For both data sets, "Enhancing local pride" was the most frequent strategy, followed by "National motifs and symbols", and "Explicit use of patriotic feelings". The first and latter were found significantly more in the Spanish data set.

When it comes to the "Bolstering" strategies, Benoit's (1997) "Bolstering" was found in a similar percentage of files across both languages, with the English data set's percentage being slightly higher. Coombs' (2007) "Reminder" was found in 29,63 % of the English corpus and 42,37 % of the Spanish data set, indicating an emphasis on reminding stakeholders of past good work of the organisation in the Spanish corpus. The "Ingratiation" strategy, however, was slightly more frequent in the English corpus, meaning that English-speaking stakeholders were praised more.

Notably, a more diverse amount of strategies was found in the Spanish corpus than the English corpus. For example, the English data set did not include a “Changing the target audience” strategy, whereas it was found in 13,56 % of Spanish files. Another example is the presence of acknowledging a negative image in the Spanish files, absent in the English corpus. Overall, the Spanish data set contained more of Avraham and Ketter’s (2008a) strategies that fell under the categories “Disregard for or partial acknowledgement of the crisis” and “Full acknowledgement and moderate and extreme coping measures”. The Spanish corpus also branded more in favour of the stereotypes.

Moreover, there was a bigger emphasis on “Geographical differentiation” in the Spanish corpus, whereas the English one had a slight focus on “Geographical association”. The English corpus also included the Benoit’s (1997) “Corrective action” and Coombs’ (2007) “Justification”, which was not found in the Spanish corpus. Out of Avraham and Ketter’s (2008a) message strategies, “Total disregard” and “Spinning liabilities into assets” were most frequent in English files. Walters and Mair’s (2012) “Spinning unsafe image into assets” was also present more often in the English corpus in comparison with the Spanish one.

Interestingly, the English used in the posts attempting to cater to English speakers was subpar, as captions included semantical and syntactical errors. A prime example is the caption: “If you have little energy today, just by looking at this beautiful postcard from Atlixco it will go away. Do you try?”. As such, the caption will leave followers confused.

## 5. Discussion

### 5.1. Literature-related

Visit Mexico’s frequent use of certain strategies correlates with the crisis stage they are in. As Anholt (2012) suggests, Mexico’s crisis is a result of long-term issues that have been accumulating (p. 116), which would make it a sustained crisis, implying that Mexico already went through multiple stages in the crisis life cycle. Over time, then, Mexico entered Coombs’ (1999) post-crisis or Mitroff and Pearson’s (1993) recovery crisis life cycle stage. Indeed, Mexico’s place marketers attempt to invoke a sense of familiarity and/or patriotism among their target audience, using strategies that intend to restore the confidence of visitors by focussing on the country’s positive aspects. This involves using positive language, countering messages, branding to conform to the stereotype and spinning negative images and liabilities into assets. Visit Mexico also seeks to “remind” the audience of all the attractions open and accessible while highlighting the positive attributes of the destination. Visit Mexico, therefore, has started functioning as a regular promotional organisation, thus totally disregarding the crisis.

Our results also reveal that frameworks not tailored for nation branding are less prevalent in our data set, aligning with Avraham’s (2020) assertion that generic image repair strategies

may not seamlessly translate to destination branding (p. 712). This explains the absence of most strategies from Benoit's (1997) and Coombs' (2007) frameworks, which were originally designed for companies and organisations. However, both Benoit's and Coombs' bolstering strategies appear frequently. These strategies emphasise a country's positive qualities, past achievements, and stakeholder relationships, aligning with Visit Mexico's promotional focus during its recovery stage. Importantly, they are versatile and can be applied to various communication channels, including social media posts.

Next, the prevalence of Avraham and Ketter's (2008a) audience-related strategies in our data set indicates that Visit Mexico's place marketers are aware of the importance to bond with their target audience, aligning with Avraham and Ketter's (2008a) perspective on the impact of audience characteristics, such as proximity in terms of geography, culture, socio-political circumstances, on crisis perception (pp. 106-108). Interestingly, during our data collection, we observed that the English content on the "@wevisitmexico" Instagram page was simpler than the Spanish content on the "@visitmexico" page. It seems, therefore, that Visit Mexico has shifted its focus from an English-speaking to a Spanish-speaking audience, likely from neighbouring Latin American countries and Spain. This choice appears strategic as a closer linguistic, geographical and socio-political proximity fosters a more favourable perception of Mexico among a Spanish-speaking target audience.

Strategies such as "Similarity to the target audience," "Bolstering," "Reminder," and "Ingratiation" were more prominent in the English content, indicating a need to bridge the gap between a more distant audience and the destination. For example, in almost every English file a real-life imagery picture was used which was taken by a visitor, showcasing how other visitors similar to the target audience enjoyed Mexico. These strategies all work together to find common ground with the target audience, as the further a target audience is removed from the destination, the more similarities should be found to see the destination in a more positive light.

This is particularly relevant if the target audience includes Northern American tourists, who are close enough to frequently hear about crises in Mexico, also involving themselves as victims, yet more removed from Mexico in language and culture, generally speaking. Indeed, the level of proximity between two countries and the origin of the victims will affect the amount and type of media coverage a crisis will receive. Consequently, it is reasonable to believe that a crisis in Mexico involving an American tourist will receive wide media coverage in Western media, while a crisis involving local residents or tourists from a third-world country is less likely to gain such intensive media coverage in the West (Avraham and Ketter, 2008a, p. 104). This was evidenced by the low ranking of Mexico in Anholt's 2010 Nation Brand Index by the United States and Canada (Anholt, 2012, p. 113). Therefore, Visit Mexico's shift aligns with Anholt's (2012) suggestion to focus less on attracting American or Canadian tourists as reversing their negative perception of Mexico would be an enormous task (p. 118).

Instead, evidenced by the bigger effort put into Spanish-language content, Visit Mexico seems to have turned to a Spanish-speaking target audience, including Mexicans themselves. Indeed, the frequent use of the “Patriotism and nationalism” strategy, combined with regular reference to Mexican traditions, the use of “nosotros” (us) when referring to Mexicans, and a brand deal with Mexican brand Lyncott indicate that domestic tourists constitute a big part of Visit Mexico’s target audience. Moreover, in the Spanish data set, “Similarity to the target audience” was established through shared interests, culture and values.

Notably, Visit Mexico not only leverages visitors to convey similarity to the target audience, but influencers and organisations as well. This use of alternative sources reflects Avraham and Ketter’s (2008a) assertion that the message source affects audience perception (p. 110). As mainstream media outlets cast Mexico in a negative light, Visit Mexico employ “Witnessing first-hand” and “Using celebrities as an alternative source” to bypass those outlets and underline Mexico’s positive aspects. The first strategy aligns with research emphasising the importance of travellers’ first-hand experiences to transform a negative image into a positive one, fostering a connection with the destination (Anholt, 2016, pp. 76, 89; Gunn, 1972 in Gallarza et al., 2002, p. 58). When such experiences are unavailable, selecting the right message mediator is crucial. “Celebrities as an alternative source” strategy replaces mainstream news outlets with alternative reliable messengers, often influencers and organisations, especially UNESCO, with good reputations. For the English files, the alternative source used was limited to other visitors, while the alternative sources found in the Spanish data set were more diverse, including Mexican influencers, reputable organisations and visitors.

The involvement of local influencers, promotion of local pride, use of national motifs, symbol and patriotic feelings also showcase the importance of the involvement of local citizens within nation branding as they “live” the brand message (Avraham and Ketter, 2008a, p. 47; Baker and Cameron, 2008, p. 90; Gunn 2002 in *ibid.*, p. 83). Brand collaborations, references to UNESCO, events taking place or must-visits also exemplify the integration of different stakeholder groups into Visit Mexico’s promotional content.

In terms of message strategies, Visit Mexico consistently employs strategies that counter negative pre-existing stereotypes, spin possible liabilities into assets and focus on the positive stereotypes or traits of the destination. Indeed, it was interesting to see that our original code of “Branding in favour of the stereotypes” was present in the data set, while Avraham and Ketter’s (2008a) “Branding contrary to the stereotypes” was not. This indicates that while the existing frameworks suggested that place marketers dealing with negative destination images focus on working against the negative stereotypes, our results show that place marketers also, if not more so, focus on highlighting positive pre-existing stereotypes, as evidenced by the presence of bolstering strategies and “Branding in favour of the stereotypes”.

Using such strategies also showcases Mexico's competitive edge and its differentiation from other countries, both essential to destination branding (Anholt, 2007, p. 26, 2011, p. 9; Baker and Cameron, 2008, p. 86). Consequently, our strategy "Geographical differentiation" was more prevalent than Avraham and Ketter's (2008a) "Geographical association". Visit Mexico also stands out by introducing diverse topics, not typically associated with Mexico, thus broadening the perception of tourist opportunities, a tactic reinforced by the "Delivering a counter-message to a one-track image" strategy.

## 5.2. Integrated framework

The frequent overlap of various strategies from different frameworks underscores their relevance in branding a crisis-ridden country, albeit with varying degrees of suitability. It highlights the potential for their successful integration, forming the basis of a new comprehensive framework for analysing image repair strategies in multimodal promotional materials for countries in crisis and/or with negative or crisis-induced place images.

Our framework (table 1) aligns with Avraham and Ketter's SAM framework, categorising strategies into source, message, and audience strategies, grouping strategies from the different frameworks with a similar purpose into different sub-categories when necessary. Discrepancies in Avraham and Ketter's (2008a) labels for "Message strategies" prompted the creation of the new sub-categories of "Deflect," "Disregard," "Manage," "Counter," "Disengage from the place's main characteristics," and "Bolster."

New sub-categories for source strategies are also introduced, based on the frequent overlaps between celebrity-, organisation- and testimonial-related strategies from different frameworks. The "Engagement" strategies were placed into one category, while the "Alternative source" and "Endorsement" strategies were put into a separate one. Lastly, the testimonial strategy was broadened by adding the code of "Visitor" to the category.

Next, some SAM strategies were relocated from their original categories, and strategies with similar definitions are combined. For example, Benoit's (1997) Image Restoration Strategies' "Minimisation" and Avraham and Ketter's (2008a) message strategy "Reducing scale of the crisis" both aim to reduce or downplay the impact of a negative image or crisis event, which is why they are combined as "Reduce the scale of the crisis" in our proposed framework's "Message Strategies: Manage" section.

Some image repair strategies from pre-existing frameworks are omitted due to their inapplicability or absence in the dataset, like most strategies from Coombs' (2007) and Benoit's (1997) framework. However, some strategies that were not found in our data set, but did strike us as applicable to other data sets were included in our framework.



Table 1

Type of strategy	Purpose of strategy	Specific strategy
<b>Message strategies</b>	<p>Deflect = to avoid overtly or directly speaking of the crisis and or negative image by deflecting, in other words, putting the focus on something else.</p>	<p>New era technique (Avraham &amp; Ketter, 2008a) Humour technique (Avraham &amp; Ketter, 2008a) Hosting technique (Spotlight events, cultural events, opinion leaders, conferences) (Avraham &amp; Ketter, 2008a)</p>
	<p>Disregard = to ignore or not mention a negative image or crisis event and pretending that nothing has happened.</p>	<p>Total disregard (Avraham &amp; Ketter, 2008a) Business as usual (Avraham &amp; Ketter, 2008a; Walters &amp; Mair, 2012)</p>
	<p>Manage = to communicate the ways in which a crisis has been or is being handled.</p>	<p>Reduce the scale of the crisis (Avraham &amp; Ketter, 2008a) Limit the crisis (Avraham &amp; Ketter, 2008a) Tackle the crisis (Avraham &amp; Ketter, 2008a) Corrective action (Benoit, 1997) Justification (Coombs, 2007)</p>
	<p>Counter = to spread a message that promotes an image different to the existing one depicted by the traditional media.</p>	<p>To images of crime and terror (Avraham &amp; Ketter, 2008a) To images of illness and epidemics (Avraham &amp; Ketter, 2008a) To one-track images (Avraham &amp; Ketter, 2008a) To images of boredom (Avraham &amp; Ketter, 2008a)</p>
	<p>Disengage from the place's main characteristics = to dissociate from traits that are perceived as defining to the place's image or reputation.</p>	<p>Changing the place's name (Avraham &amp; Ketter, 2008a) Geographical isolation (Avraham &amp; Ketter, 2008a) Branding contrary to the stereotype (Avraham &amp; Ketter, 2008a)</p>



Type of strategy	Purpose of strategy	Specific strategy
<b>Message strategies</b>	Bolster (Benoit, 1997) = to highlight the positive aspects of the destination.	Spinning liabilities into assets e.g. extreme climate, controversial heritage, ethic issues, stereotypes, natural and historical disasters, geographical locations into an asset and/or unsafe image (Avraham & Ketter, 2008a; Walters & Mair, 2012) Branding in favour of the stereotype (Based on: Avraham & Ketter, 2008a) Geographical differentiation (Based on: Avraham & Ketter, 2008a) Geographical association (Avraham & Ketter, 2008a) Reminder (Coombs, 2007)
<b>Source strategies</b>	Engagement = to associate the place with celebrities or reputable organisations, so that their traits are linked to the place as well. Essentially, engaging them as brands.	Celebrities (For example, Influencers) (Avraham & Ketter, 2008a) Organisation
	Endorsement = to use celebrities, organisations or other media outlets as an alternative source or opinion leader for information about the place, in order to promote it.	Celebrities (For example, Influencers) (Avraham & Ketter, 2008a; Walters & Mair, 2012) Organisation (Based on: Avraham & Ketter, 2008a; Walters & Mair, 2012) Film, television, music and/or books (Avraham & Ketter, 2008a)
	Testimonial = to have locals and guests/visitors recommend a place, its amenities and/or experiences.	Locals (Based on: Avraham & Ketter, 2008a; Walters & Mair, 2012) Visitor (Walters & Mair, 2012)
<b>Audience strategies</b>	Patriotism and nationalism (Avraham & Ketter, 2008a)	Enhancing local pride (Avraham & Ketter, 2008a) National motifs and symbols (Avraham & Ketter, 2008a) Explicit use of patriotic feelings (Avraham & Ketter, 2008a)

Type of strategy	Purpose of strategy
Audience strategies	Similarity to the target audience (Avraham & Ketter, 2008a)
	Changing the target audience (Avraham & Ketter, 2008a)
	Curiosity enhancement (Walters & Mair, 2012)
	Ingratiation (Coombs, 2007)
	Compensation, e.g. short-term discount/price reduction (Benoit, 1997; Coombs, 2007; Walters & Mair, 2012)

Source: Own elaboration.

## 6. Conclusion

From the results of this qualitative case study it can be concluded that Visit Mexico uses image repair communication strategies from multiple frameworks in their efforts to nation brand and destination market through promotional materials on Instagram and that different strategies are applied according to the language used and the target audience in mind. Multiple strategies from all frameworks were detected, with the frameworks made with nations in mind, namely Avraham and Ketter's (2008a) SAM strategies and Walters and Mair's (2012) Tourism Disaster Recovery Messages, being the most frequent. This can be explained by the fact that the other two frameworks, namely Image Restoration Strategies by Benoit (1997) and Situational Crisis Communication Theory by Coombs (2007), were tailored to the needs of companies. Moreover, strategies added by us based on the frameworks were also coded in a significant number of files, proving their validity. The study also found variations in the use of the strategies between the English and Spanish data, with some strategies being more effective in one language than the other. Overall, the results of this study support the hypothesis that the combination of destination branding strategies and crisis communication techniques can effectively influence stakeholders' perceptions and behavioral intentions towards a travel destination, ultimately contributing to the enhancement of its image. Furthermore, the data analysis showed that combinations of strategies within frameworks were most frequent within the SAM framework. This framework also frequently overlapped with Tourism Disaster Recovery Messages, Image Restoration Strategies and Situational Crisis Communication Theory. These combinations not only demonstrated the compatibility of most strategies from different frameworks, it also highlighted the similarities

between strategies from different frameworks. These frequent overlaps allowed us to integrate the different frameworks from the literature into one cohesive new framework. Future research in nation branding could benefit from this integrated framework, and use it as a starting point for the analysis of other destination marketing communication channels like websites or YouTube, as well as for the purposes of cross-cultural experimental research.

Testing out scenarios on different audiences, with the deliberate use of different combinations of strategies, can then lead to research-based practical recommendations for place marketers. Also, future research endeavors could explore the integration of AI technologies, such as natural language processing and sentiment analysis, to automate the analysis of social media content and assess the real-time impact of image repair strategies and destination branding techniques. This integrated innovative approach holds promise for providing deeper insights into stakeholders’ evolving perceptions and behavioral responses, thereby informing more adaptive and targeted destination marketing strategies in the dynamic digital landscape.

## Annex

Operationalisation matrix: general categories

Variable	Dimension	Indicator	Item
Carrier (case classification)	/	Type of Instagram	Frame
			Reel
Language (case classification)	/	Spanish	Post in Spanish
		English	Post in English
Topic (taken from Visit Mexico website)	/	Type of tourism	Sol y playa (Sun and beach) Cultura (Culture) Aventura y naturaleza (Adventure and nature) Gastronomía (Gastronomy) Pueblos Mágicos (Magical Towns) Eventos (inter)nacionales ((Inter)national events)



Variable	Dimension	Indicator	Item
<b>Multimodal</b>	Audio	Transcript	Transcription of what was said in video
	Visual	Graphics	Animation Illustration
		Real-life imagery	Photo Video
		Emoji	Emoji
	Textual	Captions	Hashtags @s Description
		On visuals	Hashtags @s Description

Source: Own elaboration.

### Operationalisation matrix: image repair communication strategies models

Variable	Dimension	Indicator	Item
<b>SAM strategies (Avraham and Kettler, 2008)</b>	Source strategies	Replacing the source of the message	Witnessing first-hand - "Come see for yourself" Celebrities as alternative source Buying news space
		Influencing the source message	Establishing rapport with the news people Exploiting background similarity (ethnic, religious, cultural) to gain sympathy Blocking media access Physical/economic threat to newspeople

Variable	Dimension	Indicator	Item
<p><b>SAM strategies</b> (Avraham and Kettler, 2008)</p>	Audience strategies	Media strategies focused on target audience	<p>Similarity to the target audience</p> <p>Patriotism and nationalism (explicit use of patriotic feelings, national motifs/symbols, enhancing local pride)</p> <p>Changing the target audience</p>
	Message strategies	Disregard for /partial acknowledgement	<p>Ignoring the crisis (total disregard, business as usual, limiting the crisis)</p> <p>Acknowledging a negative image (“new era” technique, “fencing off” the crisis, multiple facets, the humour technique)</p> <p>Reducing the scale of the crisis</p>
		Full acknowledgement of the crisis and moderate coping measures	<p>Tackling the crisis</p> <p>Hosting spotlight events (sports events, cultural events, Olympic Games)</p> <p>Hosting opinion leaders (Familiarisation trips for journalists, travel agencies, religious leaders, ...; hosting tourism conventions and conferences)</p> <p>Promoting places using films, television series and books</p> <p>Engaging celebrities (as opinion leaders, as brands), as means to attract public attention)</p>

Variable	Dimension	Indicator	Item
<b>SAM strategies (Avraham and Kettler 2008)</b>	Message strategies	Full acknowledgement of the crisis and extreme coping measures	Delivering a counter-message (to images of crime and terror, to images of illness and epidemics, to images of boredom, to one-track images) Spinning liabilities into assets (extreme climate, controversial heritage, ethnicity and ethnic conflicts, stereotypes of underdevelopment, natural and historical disasters, geographical location) Ridiculing the stereotype
		Disengagement from the place's main characteristics	Geographical isolation Geographical association Branding contrary to the stereotype (war stereotypes, industrial stereotypes, economic recession) Changing the place's name
<b>Image Restoration Strategies (Benoit, 1997)</b>	Denial	Simple Denial	Did not perform act
		Shift the Blame	Act performed by another
	Evasion of Responsibility	Provocation	Responded to act of another
		Defeasibility	Lack of Information/Ability
		Accident	Act was a mishap
		Good Intentions	Meant well in act
	Reducing Offensiveness of Event	Bolstering	Stress Good Traits
		Minimisation	Act Not Serious
		Differentiation	Act Less Offensive

Variable	Dimension	Indicator	Item
Image Restoration Strategies (Benoit, 1997)	Reducing Offensiveness of Event	Transcendence	More Important Considerations
		Attack Accuser	Reduce Credibility of Accuser
		Compensation	Reimburse Victim
	Corrective Action	Plan to Solve or Prevent Problem	Preventive measures or solutions
	Mortification	Apologise for Act	Apology
SCCT crisis response strategies (Coombs, 2007)	Primary crisis response strategies	Deny crisis response strategies	<p><i>Attack the accuser:</i> Crisis manager confronts the person or group claiming something is wrong with the organisation.</p> <p><i>Denial:</i> Crisis manager asserts that there is no crisis.</p> <p>Crisis manager blames some person or group outside of the organisation for the crisis.</p>
		Diminish crisis response strategies	<p><i>Excuse:</i> Crisis manager minimises organisational responsibility by denying intent to do harm and/or claiming inability to control the events that triggered the crisis.</p> <p><i>Justification:</i> Crisis manager minimises the perceived damage caused by the crisis.</p>
		Rebuild crisis response strategies	<p><i>Compensation:</i> Crisis manager offers money or other gifts to victims.</p> <p><i>Apology:</i> Crisis manager indicates the organisation takes full responsibility for the crisis and asks stakeholders for forgiveness.</p>



Variable	Dimension	Indicator	Item
<b>SCCT crisis response strategies (Coombs, 2007)</b>	Secondary crisis response strategies	Bolstering crisis response strategies	<i>Reminder:</i> Tell stakeholders about the past good works of the organisation.
			<i>Ingratiation:</i> Crisis manager praises stakeholders and/or reminds them of past good works by the organisation.
<b>Tourism Disaster Recovery Messages (Walters and Mair, 2012)</b>	Changing (mis) perceptions of destination as presented by media	Business as usual	"open and ready for business"
		Celebrity endorsement	Celebrities promoting place/destination
		Spinning the unsafe image into assets	See us in a new light, rejuvenation, highlight the beauty of a regenerating land, etc.
	Restoring visitor confidence	Celebrity endorsement	Celebrities promoting place/destination
		Curiosity enhancement	"come, see for yourself"
		Business as usual	"open and ready for business"
		Short-term discounts/price reductions	Discounts and sales
		Guest/visitor testimonials	Current visitors talking about their experience travelling to the country/place/destination

Source: Own elaboration.

Operationalisation matrix: added strategies based on models

Variable	Dimension	Indicator	Item
Added codes while coding based on models	Based on SAM strategies (Avraham and Kettler, 2008)	Branding in favour of stereotypes	Emphasising stereotypes, e.g., “mariachi, taco, tequila” or things Mexico is well-known for.
		Geographical differentiation	Emphasising uniqueness of Mexico, e.g., “the highest in the world, the biggest in South America, ...”
		Engaging reputable organisations	As brands As opinion leaders To attract public attention
		Celebrities as alternative source	Culturally significant figures Historical figures Influencers Reputable organisation Visitor
	Based on Tourism Disaster Recovery Messages (Walters and Mair, 2012)	Organisation endorsement	Organisations promoting or endorsing place/destination

Source: Own elaboration.

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