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**City Branding in #stayhome Era: Impact of COVID-19 Pandemic on Official Tourism Instagram Account Uses of New York City and London**

#evdekal Döneminde Şehir Markalama: COVID-19 Pandemisinin New York ve Londra Şehirlerinin Resmi Turizm Instagram Hesabı Kullanımlarına Etkisi

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Abstract: The purpose of this research is to explore how Instagram was utilized in city branding context during COVID-19. By applying visual and textual content analysis method, this study aimed to identify any shifts in Instagram uses of two iconic tourism destinations, which were hit by the crisis particularly hard: New York City, and London. According to data collected from official tourism accounts of above-mentioned cities, the first confirmed cases significantly impacted city branding practices of both cities. The findings indicate that the most frequently used hashtags have changed, the number of informative posts has increased, the number of landscape photos in the post content has increased, while the number of photos containing elements such as cultural events, shopping and people has decreased. Furthermore, a significant decline in the number of inviting posts was observed. The study provides significant insights both to the city branding professionals, and to the scholars of this understudied area.

Keywords: City Branding, Destination Image, Tourism, Pandemic, Travelling.

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Öz: Bu araştırmanın amacı, Instagram'ın COVID-19 sırasında şehir markalama bağlamında nasıl kullanıldığını keşfetmektir. Bu çalışmada, görsel ve metinsel içerik analizi yöntemi uygulanarak, krizden önemli derecede etkilenen iki ikonik turizm destinasyonu olan New York City ve Londra'nın Instagram kullanımlarındaki değişimlerin tespit edilmesi amaçlanmıştır. Söz konusu şehirlerin resmi turizm hesaplarından toplanan veriler, ilk vakaların her iki şehrin de markalama uygulamalarını önemli ölçüde etkilediğini göstermiştir. Bulgulara göre, en sık kullanılan hashtaglerin değiştiği, bilgilendirici paylaşımların sayısının arttığı, paylaşım içeriklerindeki manzara öğelerinin sayısının arttığı; kültürel olaylar, alışveriş ve insan gibi unsurları içeren fotoğrafların sayısının ise azaldığı görülmüştür. Ayrıca, kullanıcıları şehre davet eden mesajların sayısında da önemli bir düşüş gözlemlenmiştir. Akademik olarak yeterince çalışılmamış bir alanda yapılan bu çalışmanın sonuçları hem şehir markalama uzmanlarına hem de akademisyenlere önemli iç görüler sunmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Şehir Markalama, Destinasyon İmajı, Turizm, Pandemi, Seyahat.

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1. Introduction

Started from the last month of 2019 in China, the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) rapidly turned into a pandemic. In the absence of a precise treatment, public health authorities worldwide attempted to respond to the pandemic with nonpharmaceutical interventions, e.g., case isolation, household quarantine, closure of schools and/or workplaces, and travel restrictions (Ferguson et al., 2020; Rice et al., 2020). At first, Chinese government authorities stopped planes and trains scheduled to leave the city of Wuhan, the then-epicenter of the COVID-19, to contain the virus (Elegant, 2020). After that, the governments around the world followed by suspending the flights to and from China, then by restricting travel activities to other countries (BBC News, 2020). According to the World Tourism Organization (UNTWO); as of 20th April 2020, all the destinations in the world restricted traveling activities to some extent (2020a: 5).

Serious restrictions mentioned above, combined with the extensive media coverage of the frightening news about the disease tend to affect individuals' risk perceptions towards destinations (Reisinger and Mavondo 2005: 223), traveling behavior (Aro et al., 2009), and destination images (Hugo and Miller, 2017). In such an era in which most regions of the world are regarded as risky; creating strong images, as one of the primary purposes of city branding (Cai, 2002), can be beneficial (Rizzi and Dioli, 2010).

Social media platforms are considered tools with high importance for city branding efforts (Insch, 2011: 13). Especially in crisis situations, platforms enabling visual communication (e.g., Instagram, Facebook, and Pinterest) need special attention since using visual messages may be efficient as they have the capacity to affect human behaviors (Bergkvist et al., 2012). However, to the best of the authors' knowledge, social media strategies of city brands to attract visitors under the presence of the COVID-19 pandemic did not receive empirical attention yet. The purpose of this study is to examine the use of social media platforms in city branding practices during global health crises. Therefore, the main focus of the research is to analyze the observable patterns and trends found in the official tourism accounts of two significant tourist destinations, namely New York City (NYC) and London. By this, it is aimed to uncover the changes in their Instagram strategies before and after the pandemic hit them. Since COVID-19 constituted an unprecedented challenge to the branding bodies of the most captivating tourism destinations of the world, researchers believe that the result of a systematic analysis of the Instagram uses of the above-mentioned cities will provide valuable insights to practitioners in the realm of city branding. Thus, the significance of this academic research article stems from the empirical evidence it provides from a highly significant milestone in the history of city branding, and its innovative research approach. Based on a content analysis framework that is handling both the verbal and the visual material, research is aimed at paving the way for other related research studies that especially focuses on Instagram.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. City Branding

Cities, as tourist destinations, distinguish themselves from competitors not only by their physical offerings but also by their ability to attract consumers. City administrators and policy makers have learned that only in this way can they attract the attention of investors and tourists (Gümüş and Onurlubaş, 2021: 1832). Branding is a crucial concept for cities to showcase their unique characteristics to both internal and external audiences (Mearns, 2007). City branding, in its simplest definition, is the implementation of product branding strategies on cities (Avçılar and Kara, 2015: 81). Due to the complex nature of tourism, which involves increasing economic competition (Rizzi and Dioli, 2010; Dudek-Mańkowska and Grochowski, 2019), globalization (Kavaratzis, 2005), technological advancements (Oliveira and Panyik, 2015), and other compelling factors, branding becomes a strategic way for city management and development.

In the marketing and communication literature, brands are considered a key factor for an organization's long-term success (Todor, 2014). It is argued that the most important aim of any city brand is to boost economic returns (Torlak, 2015: 59). A brand, from a corporate perspective, can be defined as "a product or service made distinctive by its positioning relative to the competition and by its personality, which comprises a unique combination of functional attributes and symbolic values" (Hankinson and Cowking,

1993: 10). However, when applied to city branding, it can be interpreted as a “purposeful symbolic embodiment of all information connected to a city in order to create associations around it” (Lucarelli and Berg, 2011: 21). City branding is a means to communicate cultural values, historical background, and quality of the city (Zhang and Zhao, 2009).

Although this paper discusses branding theory based on “cities”, destination branding literature was also referred, because it covers a broader perspective according to the reviewed literature in the field of tourism (e.g., Ruiz-Real, Uribe-Toril and Gázquez-Abad, 2020). The distinction between the terms in the city branding literature is not sharp (Lucarelli and Berg, 2011), since the concept arises from different fields including corporate branding, destination branding, and marketing. Destinations, including cities (Hankinson 2004), are “places towards which people travel and there they choose to stay for a while in order to experience certain features or characteristics – a perceived attraction of some sort” (Leiper, 1995: 87). According to Blain et al. (2005: 331), a destination brand should “serve to consolidate and reinforce the recollection of pleasurable memories of the destination experience, all with the intended purpose of creating an image that influences consumers’ decisions to visit the destination in question”.

City branding is a useful way to practice city marketing that is related to “construction, communication, and management of the city's image, as it is accepted that encounters with the city take place through perceptions and images” (Kavaratzis, 2004: 58). The success of the city branding underlies creating a city image that creates strong emotional bonds with stakeholders (Ekinici, 2003: 22). Branding includes shaping people’s perceptions and images (Kavaratzis and Ashworth, 2005) that are “the sum of beliefs, ideas, and impressions that a person has of a destination” (Crompton, 1979: 18). Positive and distinguishing city image, as an important indicator of city branding, increases the number of potential visitors (Lin et al., 2007). Particularly, if a place was not visited earlier, the image of it has a crucial role in the decision-making process (Beerli and Martín, 2004) since visitors’ knowledge is limited (Sönmez and Sirakaya, 2002). It was also found that destination image affects destination attachment positively (Vaesna, Wu and Huang, 2013). A destination image can be cognitive or affective (Dichter 1985) which establishes the total image of the destination together (Stern and Krakover, 1993). The cognitive image is related to how the destination is perceived intellectually (Gartner, 1994). On the other hand, the affective image refers to emotions about the destination (Yüksel and Aygül, 2007). A powerful image must introduce reasons to people to “live in, invest in, work in or visit a place” based on different traits like “economic stability, quality of life, openness and infrastructure” (Gertner and Kotler, 2004: 55).

Attractiveness is an important matter for branding a city, considering both its resources and target groups. Branding may focus on different attractions of cities such as culture, history, lifestyle, environment, entertainment, sports, shopping, and food (Capone and Lazzeretti, 2016; Chan, Peters and Marafa, 2015; Kneesel, Baloglu, & Millar, 2010; Richard and Wilson, 2004; Tellström, 2011). City brands can have different target groups such as tourists, investors, students, and media (Andersson and Ekman, 2009; Zenker, 2009). Residents of a place are also a significant target group for destination branding because they are representers of the city (Zenker, Braun, and Petersen, 2017). Furthermore, cities can endure if they can contribute to locals in terms of economic, social, cultural, and environmental aspects (Insch, 2011).

2.2. Instagram in the City Branding Context

The Internet, with platforms it enables, has become pivotal for branding a destination (Hanna and Rowley, 2015) and has altered the branding and communication practices of cities (Florek, 2011). Similarly, it has become an undeniable information source for travelers who seek extensive information about where to go (Pan, Maclaurin and Crotts, 2007) since they find it hard to decide (Sirakaya and Woodside, 2005). According to We Are Social’s report (2021), 38.7 percent of the Internet users are using it to research places, travel, and vacations. Despite the extensive use of online tools in city branding, it is argued that research on online city branding studies is narrow (Björner, 2013).

City branding studies focus on two different sides of the subject, visitor perceptions and destination-determined information. Like this research, several studies attempted to reveal how destinations use different digital platforms for branding, such as websites (Choi, Lehto and Morrison, 2007; Horng and Tsai, 2010), blogs (Tseng, 2015), Facebook (Glińska and Rudolf, 2019), Twitter (Baksi, 2020; Sevin, 2013), YouTube (Damiasih et al., 2021; Huertas, Míguez-González and Lozano-Monterrubio, 2017) and Instagram (Acuti et al., 2018; Benedek, 2018; Uzunoglu, 2017).

Instagram, as a visual social media platform, provides significant benefits to successfully implement city branding strategies (Uzunoglu, 2017). Along with its popularity as the fifth most used social media platform with more than one billion active users (We Are Social, 2021), it enables strong city brands by its features such as like, comment, share, and hashtags. Visuals including pictures, charts, and illustrations have been discussed by researchers in the field (e.g., i Agusti, 2018; Rakić and Chambers, 2011). They are “thought to send people along emotive pathways where textual/verbal material leaves them in a more rational, logical, and linear pathway of thought” (Joffe, 2008, 84). Considering the view that a brand is “a cluster of functional and emotional values that enables organizations to make a promise about a unique and welcomed experience” (De Chernatony, 2010: 31), Instagram should be closely followed and managed by the city brands.

It was also argued that including visuals in a message increases the engagement level when compared to text-based messages (Abbott et al., 2013). Houghton and Stevens (2011: 45) claimed that one of the most important reasons for the unsuccess of city branding is the “absence or inadequacy of a program for engaging and energizing local people, businesses and community groups in shaping, articulating and conveying the brand”. However, the power of Instagram in terms of city branding is not limited to visuals; prior research on social media platforms discussed like, sharing and, comments as an indicator of engagement (e.g., Cho, Schweickart, and Haase, 2014; Men and Tsai, 2013). Another advantage of Instagram is the availability of hashtags which are “tags or words prepended with ‘#’ used to indicate the content of the picture, allowing users to search for pictures and increase visibility” (Giannoulakis and Tsapatsoulis, 2016: 115). Thanks to the hashtag feature, Instagram users can follow their interests besides accounts of people and organizations. It is suggested that, with the use of hashtags, brands have the opportunity to have a larger organic reach, transmit their key messages to a specific group, and monitor the conversations (Hitz, 2020).

2.3 Health Risks as a Threat for City Brands

As discussed above, city branding strategies offer significant contributions to destination image management efforts. However, the image of a destination is known to be open for negative effects triggered by a variety of unpleasant events such as terrorist attacks (Sönmez, 1998; Ferreira et al., 2019), natural disasters (Chew and Jahari, 2014), and disease outbreaks (Mizrachi and Fuchs, 2016; Hugo and Miller, 2017).

Declared as a pandemic on the 11th of March 2020 (WHO, 2020), COVID-19 is considered to be one of the most subversive health emergencies that the world has ever witnessed. Inevitably, it has affected tourism activities around the globe. According to the publicly available data provided by UNTWO; in 2020, international tourist arrivals dropped by 74 percent compared to the year before, therefore it went “*back to levels of 30 years ago*” (2020a).

To a great extent, this major decline can be explained by travel restrictions implemented by governments worldwide. However, despite the initial figure of 100 percent as of 20.04.2020, travel restrictions have eased in 22 percent of the world in less than two months (UNTWO, 2020b: 6). The destinations that have eased their restrictions increased to 53 percent by 1 September, and to 70 percent by 1 November (UNTWO, 2020c: 13). Considering the rapid re-openings of tourism destinations, it can be argued that the travel restrictions alone are insufficient to fully explain the decline in international tourist arrivals. Thus, individuals’ risk perceptions, which are known to influence the intentions to travel greatly (Reisinger and Mavondo, 2005; Cui et al., 2016), must also be taken into account.

Perceived health risks by the global community have the potential to harm the tourism industry by eroding tourism demand (Mizrachi and Fuchs, 2016: 60). For instance, like many other countries in Asia, Taiwan's tourism industry had suffered significantly because of the SARS outbreak in 2003. Reportedly, a drop of nearly 72 percent was observed in tourist arrival numbers in the second quarter of the year (Mao, Ding, and Lee, 2010: 856). When the idea of traveling gets converged with the threats they perceive, "*tourists exercise their freedom and power to avoid risky situations*" (Sönmez, Apostolopoulos, and Tarlow, 1999: 13). In the case of COVID-19, several studies were conducted in different parts of the world to explore the concerns of individuals regarding traveling. Evidence suggests that the risk perceptions of individuals towards international tourism activities had affected negatively by the pandemic (Neuburger and Egger, 2020; Godovykh, Pizam, and Bahja, 2021; Nazneen, Hong, and Ud Din, 2020), which can be seen in the significantly decreased international tourist arrivals of 2020.

The negative perceptions towards tourism activities caused by the COVID-19 cannot be suppressed solely by image management efforts of the city brands, especially when there is an ongoing pandemic around the world. Furthermore, a destination cannot apply the conventional practices of image restoration developed within the field of public relations such as denial, attacking the accuser, or apology (Coombs and Holladay, 2009) against a health crisis. However, at least minimizing the impact of a crisis has been found to be possible by using crisis management practices (Glaesser, 2006). One of the successful examples of such attempts demonstrated by the government of Mexico in 2009: After the tourism industry in the country hit by a highly contagious disease called swine flu in late April, Mexican authorities started to manage the health crisis first by shutting down the airports, then by using the mass media, both traditional and digital, to provide the world with updated information regarding the situation (Pennington-Gray and Pizam, 2011: 320). When the outbreak started to decline, Mexican Tourism Board began to execute their three-phase image management plan (Speakman and Sharpley, 2012: 73) that highly relied on the use of the Internet and social media platforms (Pennington-Gray and Pizam, 2011: 321). Only in six months, the country managed to reach the normal levels of tourist activities back again (Speakman and Sharpley, 2012: 72).

It's argued that the Mexico case which took place in 2009 "*indicates that the role of the Internet and social media in disseminating updated information following a crisis is critical*" (Pennington-Gray and Pizam, 2011: 321). Therefore, it can be further argued that the role of digital technologies as such should be considered even more critical in the case of COVID-19, considering (1) the massive growth in the numbers of social media users worldwide, which is five times more (Kemp, 2021) compared to 2009 (Ortiz-Ospina, 2019), and (2) the fact that the COVID-19 is a global crisis rather than a country-specific one, in which the household quarantine was among the most widely used nonpharmaceutical interventions as noted above. In #stayhome era, using social media platforms had been a "*notable trend*" (Khodabakhsh and Ahmadi, 2020: 106) both to reach the news and information, and to communicate with the outside world.

2.4 COVID-19 in NYC & London

Even though the COVID-19 pandemic affected the images of tourism destinations globally, it hit two of the most well-known tourism destinations of the world (Euromonitor International, 2019) particularly harder. NYC and London, two highly regarded city brands (Papp-Váry, 2011), were harshly suffered from distinctly high numbers of the COVID-19 positive cases as well as confirmed deaths, especially in the early months of the crisis (GOV.UK, 2021; NYT, 2021). The high numbers, combined with their popularity as brands, resulted in the information about the worrisome situation in NYC and London being circulated a lot more³ compared to the other important tourism destinations. As noted above, high media coverage

³ As of 23rd of March, 2023; a Google search with the keywords "New York"+"COVID-19"+"Death" returns 119 million results. When repeated, the same search with the keyword "London" returns 72 million, whereas "Paris", "Dubai", and "Barcelona" returns 35, 8, and 7 million results, respectively.

affects the perceived risks of individuals negatively regarding an already crisis-stricken place. Thus, dream destination images of NYC and London were threatened due to the pandemic.

Based on the reviewed literature, this study aims to contribute to the field of research by providing empirical evidence on the social media strategies of city brands before and after the first COVID-19 cases. Specifically, the research aims to explore the change in the use of visual communication tools such as Instagram which are considered essential for city branding efforts. The following research question (RQ) constituted the basis of the research:

RQ: What are the observable effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, if any, on the Instagram uses of London and NYC for city branding purposes?

3. Research

3.1. Methodology

The study was constructed with a mixed methods research design. By utilizing the content analysis method, which is an instrument to derive meanings, intentions, consequences, and context from “*verbal, visual, or written data in order to describe and quantify specific phenomena*” (Downe-Wamboldt, 1992: 314), this study attempted to analyze the Instagram posts of the selected sample as a whole, both with their qualitative and quantitative aspects. Hence, the same analysis framework is systematically applied to the visual content as well as the textual part, e.g., captions and hashtags, of the posts.

The data were collected from the official tourism information Instagram accounts of NYC (@nycgo) and London (@visitlondon). In addition to their similarities in terms of both COVID-19 damage and city brand strength, another key reason for them to be selected was that they operate in the same language which allowed researchers to collect data and to evaluate findings by avoiding the pitfalls of translation-related issues. “@nycgo” is an Instagram account connected to NYC & Company which is “the official destination marketing organization (DMO) and convention and visitors bureau (CVB) for the five boroughs of New York City” (NYC Go, n.d.). On the other hand, “@visitlondon” is connected to London & Partners, “the official promotional agency for London” and supported by the Mayor of London (Visit London, n.d.).

For this study, posts disseminated by the above-mentioned Instagram accounts were analyzed for an 8-month timeframe, and data were evaluated by splitting it into two periods. The first period, which will be referred to as the *pre-crisis period* throughout the study, starts 4 months before the first COVID-19 positive case for each city. The second period, i.e., *crisis period*, starts with the first confirmed cases for each, since the first cases were expected to provide evident turning points for their branding strategies. Therefore, the analyzed periods varied: For NYC, the period between 01.11.2019 and 01.07.2020 was analyzed (First confirmed case: 01.03.2020), whereas, for London, the period between 12.10.2019 and 12.06.2020 was taken into account (First confirmed case: 12.02.2020).

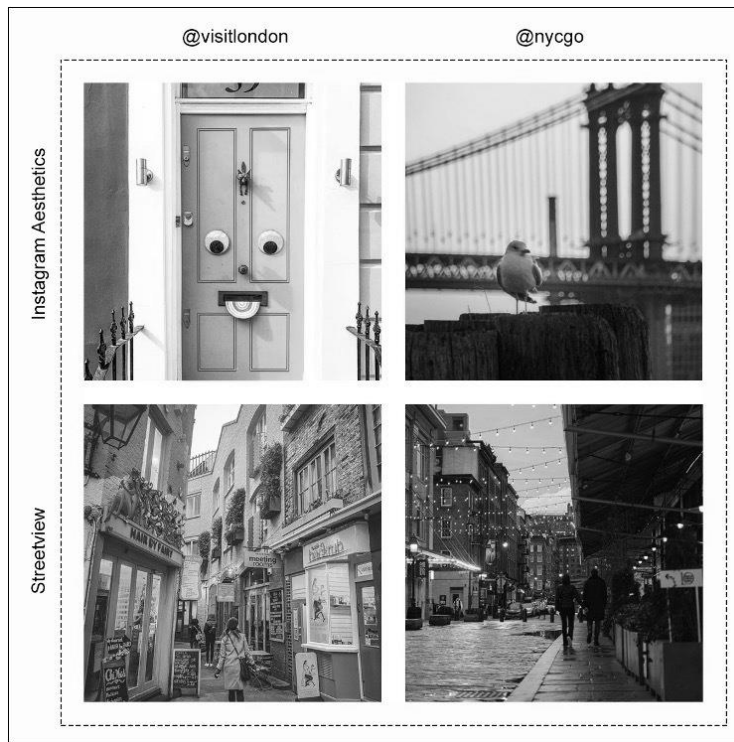
3.2. Codebook Development, Coding Procedure and Data Analysis

The codebook of this study was constructed using both inductive and deductive approaches (see Elo & Kyngäs, 2008) to ensure that it has the capacity to explore the effects of COVID-19 within the city branding practices of NYC and London on Instagram. In addition to their quantitative features (numbers of likes, comments, and posts), each item coded for the following variables: (1) targeted audiences and textual information - based on the previous city branding literature (Anholt, 2006; Blain et al, 2005; Sevin, 2013), (2) hashtags, (3) aim of the post, (4) availability of invitation, (5) relation to the pandemic, (6) dialogue intention. Finally, each item coded according to the visual elements the post contains, by developing the classification of Choi et al. (2007). Choi et al. presents a classification consisting of 11 elements as follows; (1) historic buildings and heritage, (2) cultural events and facilities, (3) parks and gardens, (4) shopping, (5) tourism facilities and infrastructure, (6) entertainment and gaming, (7) bird’s eye or scenic views, (8) local cuisine and dining, (9) sports/recreation activities and festivals, (10) people and local residents, (11) others (Choi et al., 2007: 124). However, this classification was built in order to analyze the visual material found in travel related websites. Thus, it does not particularly address the requirements of this study, which

focuses on travel related Instagram accounts. It has been argued that the Instagram community created their own visual culture (Manovich, 2017: 71-73) over the years, and any *classical* classification of visual elements would be inadequate to analyze the Instagram-specific content. Therefore, the researchers expanded the classification by adding 2 new items to it: street view, and Instagram aesthetics (see Figure 1).

After completion of the codebook, two researchers conducted a pilot study to test the codebook and establish an intercoder agreement. After the agreement, they coded the data independently between September and October 2020. The total agreement level across all variables ($\alpha = .814$) was indicated a high level of intercoder reliability (see Neuendorf, 2002). The collected data then were analyzed to calculate the descriptive statistics by using the *Microsoft Excel* software, which is a useful tool, especially when making comparisons between data sets (Carr, 2008: 45). The data evaluated first according to the months (1-8), then by the periods (pre-crisis & crisis) that the posts were published.

Figure 1: Examples of “Instagram Aesthetics” and “Streetview”



Note: The initial (in-color) figure is available at the following URL: <https://bit.ly/Instagram-Examples>

Source: Researchers' own collage, with the use of photographs retrieved from Instagram.

4. Findings

Within the scope of this research, as illustrated in Table 1, a total of 788 Instagram posts were analyzed. While @nycgo was observed to be more active in terms of posting frequency, @visitlondon was getting considerably more attention, i.e., likes and comments from its followers.

Table 1: General Statistics of the Analyzed Posts

Item	City	Pre-crisis period	Crisis period	Total
Number of posts	NYC	306	340	646
	London	76	66	142
Avg. likes per post	NYC	8497	6692	7594
	London	21246	22878	22062
Avg. comments per post	NYC	46	41	44
	London	207	184	196

4.1. Targeted Audiences

The study analyzed the audiences that were targeted based on three different categories: local audiences, global audiences, and general audiences (see Table 2). In London, there was not a significant change between the two periods. In NYC, number of posts targeting locals showed a marked increase (from 1% to 21%). Global citizens were the least targeted group among others. While there were not any posts regarding this topic in London, 1% of posts pointed out global audience in NYC in total. The posts that did not target a specific group primarily were coded as “general”.

Table 2: The Percentages of Targeted Groups in Total Posts

Target Audience	City	Pre-crisis period	Crisis period	Total
Locals	NYC	1	21	11
	London	4	5	4
Global	NYC	0	1	1
	London	0	0	0
General	NYC	99	78	88
	London	96	95	96

4.2. Aim of the Posts

As illustrated in Table 3, there was a significant difference between NYC and London in terms of pandemic warning. In the crisis period, 24% of all posts in NYC included an explicit warning; however, only 2% of London's posts aimed to warn its followers. Almost all posts were recorded as including positive emotions in both cities (by 99% in NYC and by 100% in London). Another important finding showed that the percentage of contents that aimed to boost local economics increased by 6% in NYC in the crisis period,

while it decreased by 23% in London. Although the percentage of posts aimed to inform increased in both cities, there were more posts with regard to this in NYC than in London (41% in total in NYC and 15% in total in London).

Table 3: The Change in the Percentage of Aim of the Posts

		Aim		Information		Pandemic warning		Positive emotions		Local economics		Other	
		NYC	Ldn	NYC	Ldn	NYC	Ldn	NYC	Ldn	NYC	Ldn	NYC	Ldn
Pre-crisis period	1st month	24	23	-	-	100	100	17	32	1	0		
	2nd month	37	11	-	-	99	100	16	47	0	5		
	3rd month	49	5	-	-	99	100	32	45	1	0		
	4th month	46	13	-	-	100	100	31	20	0	0		
Crisis period	5th month	18	11	14	0	100	100	14	17	2	0		
	6th month	41	50	36	0	99	100	34	0	3	0		
	7th month	47	28	22	6	100	100	29	11	4	11		
	8th month	65	5	20	0	97	100	38	18	6	9		
Pre-crisis period		39	13	-	-	99	100	24	37	1	1		
Crisis period		44	18	24	2	99	100	30	14	4	6		
Total		41	15	13	1	99	100	27	26	2	4		

4.3. The Most Frequently Used Hashtags

The most frequently used hashtags by months and their percentages are as shown in Table 4. The hashtags varied to a great extent between two periods, both in terms of quantity and quality. According to the findings, in both accounts, there was a significant decline in the crisis period regarding the number of posts that are accompanied with hashtags such as “SeeYourCity” in the case of NYC and “VisitLondon” in the case of London, which were used for inviting the followers to travel in the pre-crisis period. On the other hand, hashtags that challenge the followers to send photos that they took from inside their houses, e.g., “NYCThroughMyWindow” and “LondonFromHome”, were used more often in the same period. @nycgo invented a couple of new hashtags in the crisis period such as #DineInNYC, #StillOpen, and #StillDelivering, which were functioning to inform the local community regarding the food shops that were still up. Another notable finding is that the hashtag use of @nycgo was slightly starting to get back to normal as of the last month of analysis, while a similar approach was not observed for @visitlondon.

Table 4: The Change in the Percentage of the Most Frequently Used Hashtags

		NYC									London			
The most frequently used hashtags		#SeeYourCity	#ThisIsNewYorkCity	#ILoveNY	#NewYorkCity	#StayHome	#NYCThroughMyWi	#DineInNYC	#StillOpen	#StillDelivering	#VisitLondon	#ChristmasInLondon	#LondonFromHome	#LondonTogether
		▼	▼	▼	▼	▼	▼	▼	▼	▼	▼	▼	▼	▼
Pre-crisis period	1st month	65	61	61	59	-	-	-	-	-	82	0	-	-
	2nd month	71	67	70	70	-	-	-	-	-	58	21	-	-
	3rd month	57	52	44	48	-	-	-	-	-	90	10	-	-
	4th month	50	36	36	34	-	-	-	-	-	93	0	-	-
Crisis period	5th month	5	5	5	5	8	0	5	0	0	72	0	0	0
	6th month	0	0	3	7	31	24	21	0	20	13	0	38	0
	7th month	0	0	0	3	13	25	11	12	20	17	0	39	6
	8th month	15	10	8	41	5	15	13	0	0	0	0	9	5
Pre-crisis period		61	55	54	54	-	-	-	-	-	87	8	-	-
Crisis period		4	3	3	13	15	18	13	4	11	26	0	18	3
Total		31	29	28	33	8	9	7	2	6	56	4	8	1

4.4. Visual Elements Found in the Post Content

The visual elements found in the Instagram posts were also showed a significant difference between the two periods, as illustrated in Table 5. The most decreased elements of use for @NYCgo were *cultural events and facilities, tourism facilities and infrastructure, people and local residents, and streetview*. In the case of @visitlondon, *shopping* was added, and *tourism facilities & infrastructure* was dropped from the above-listed items. When examined, the elements with the most increased use were found to be the *bird's eye or scenic views* and *local cuisine and dining* within the Instagram strategy of @nycgo. On the other hand, for @visitlondon, the identified items that were used more frequently in the crisis period were *historic buildings and heritage, scenic views, and Instagram aesthetics*.

Table 5: The Change in the Percentage of the Visual Elements Found in the Post Content

Elements Found in the Post Content		Historic buildings and heritage	Cultural events and facilities	Shopping	Parks and gardens	Tourism facilities and infrastructure	Entertainment and gaming	Birds eye or cenic views	Local cuisine and dining	Sports/recreation activities and facilities	People and local residents	Streetview	Instagram aesthetics	Other
		▼	▼	▼	▼	▼	▼	▼	▼	▼	▼	▼	▼	▼
NYC	Pre-crisis period	7	13	7	7	27	6	18	11	3	35	26	15	3
	Crisis period	5	0	1	6	11	0	36	30	1	12	12	14	9
London	Pre-crisis period	17	18	22	22	28	3	22	18	5	87	32	36	5
	Crisis period	23	0	0	6	18	0	29	15	0	20	14	41	12
Total	NYC	7	7	4	7	19	3	27	21	2	23	19	14	6
	London	20	10	12	15	23	1	25	17	3	56	23	38	8

Note: Posts were attributed to more than one element when needed in the coding process.

4.5. Other Notable Changes

Apart from the findings mentioned above, we noticed that the availability of a textual element that explicitly contains an intention to invite was dropped from 84 percent to 27 percent in the case of @visitlondon between pre-crisis and crisis periods. Similarly, it declined from 69 percent to 5 percent within the Instagram strategy of @nycgo.

On the other hand, in both accounts, we observed an increase in the posts in which an explicit textual statement to start a dialogue is available: @nycgo increased it from 2 percent to 10 percent, and @visitlondon increased its use from 26 percent to 39 percent between two periods.

The first pandemic-related contents were posted on 3.3.2020 by @nycgo, and on 16.3.2020 by @visitlondon. While 11% of all posts were related to the crisis in the first month of the crisis period in NYC, there were not any crisis-related posts in London in this period. 67% of all posts in the second month and 69% of all posts in the third month in NYC were crisis-related while it dropped to 41% in the last month. On the other hand, London gave place to the crisis by 63% in the second month, by 56% in the third month and by 18% in the last month.

4. Results and Discussion

According to the findings, the first confirmed COVID-19 cases seem to affect the Instagram strategies of NYC and London in many aspects. The most significant changes between the pre-crisis and the crisis periods for both cities were observed in the most frequently used hashtags, increased numbers of informative posts, increased use of *scenic views* as visual content, and decreased use of cultural events, shopping, people, and street views as the main element of the posts. These changes may be attributed to certain effects of the pandemic. For instance, the decrease in the use of cultural events, people, and street views are likely to be tied with both the measures to prevent the spread of the virus such as lockdowns, and the concerns of individuals regarding the pandemic that keeps them from leaving their homes. In both cases, the result is empty cities, where there is neither a person nor a cultural event to create an Instagram post of. Similarly, when examined, the change in the most frequently used hashtags found to be reflecting the spirit of *#stayhome* era.

The most notable change among all was the decline in the number of posts aimed at inviting potential visitors in both cities. Since its *raison d'être* is to attract individuals, a city brand that moves away from inviting tourists can be considered as an oxymoron. However, in the presence of a pandemic, it must be noted that a branding strategy that is responsible and well-mannered, i.e., calling the public to *#stayhome*, promoting local food shops for the sake of solidarity, providing the community with informative content, can only add to the positive image of a destination in the long term (Lindstedt, 2011). Analogously, city brands would not be expected to cover a health crisis as broadly as they did during the quarantine, since their main objective is considered as creating positive images (Lin et al., 2007). Thus, it is recommended to the city branding practitioners to focus on managing negative images which are "*obstacles that forestall a brighter future*", as Avraham (2004: 471) emphasized. Rethinking the concept of a *positive image* may be essential to comprehend the communication practices applied under a global health crisis.

Another practical implication of the research is related to the percentages of comments and dialogue-seeking posts. It can be claimed that cities limit themselves to a mass communication understanding and do not benefit from the technical opportunities of Instagram (Valentini et al., 2018). Moreover, the usage of hashtags shows that neither of the cities connect themselves to the larger discussions (see Zappavigna, 2018). They employ hashtags to associate their messages with general subjects such as *#seeyourcity* and *#IloveNY*. However, city brand managers can benefit from engagement opportunities to strengthen the relationships between the target audience and the cities during a crisis (Chen et al., 2020).

NYC seemed to target the locals a lot more in the crisis period in line with the suggestions that city branding should support locals as representatives of the city (Insch, 2011), whereas, London had not followed this practice. Another reflection of this strategic difference was found in the change of post contents. While NYC used its local cuisine as an element in Instagram posts and aimed to promote its local economy more often in the crisis period, London seemed to put little to no effort into this objective within its Instagram strategy. Thus, it can be claimed that the approach of London was different from NYC's, and also from the prevalent understanding in the literature in this regard.

In the light of the findings, this study fills the gap both in the tourism and city branding literature by drawing attention to the impacts of a global health crisis on digital city branding practices via official tourism formations. The revealed patterns also provide a basis for the future studies that can examine user reactions to destination brand contents in social media (e.g. Huertas and Marine-Roig, 2016).

To conclude, the importance of city branding strategies needs further emphasis with regards to the destination image management efforts in the digital sphere. In a substantially globalized world, future crises due to infectious diseases would not be considered surprising. Hence, the results of this study may provide a perspective to the city brands both for now and the future on how to manage health crises that affect their destination images by making use of digital technologies.

As with any empirical study, this research had limitations. Firstly, the opportunity to make a comprehensive international comparison is limited due to the number of selected cities. Further studies can include other important cities to see the effects of the crisis on city branding efforts from a broader perspective. The second limitation is the selected time frame which does not include the following phases of the pandemic. The speed of the spread of the pandemic slowed down in Summer 2020, however, in the following months it accelerated again. Therefore, analyzing a longer time frame can enrich the patterns.

The literature suggests that social media platforms are indispensable in today's tourism marketing and communications understanding. Therefore, further researchers are recommended to develop the above-detailed codebook in accordance with the requirements of the social media platform that they give their attention to; and encouraged to conduct a comparative study that discusses other digital media platforms in the city branding context.

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