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Transformation as city brand attribute for Medellín, Colombia: bottom-up tourist destination brand strategy

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Abstract

Purpose – Medellín, Colombia, experienced a remarkable social transformation in just two decades, leaving behind its troubled past of violence and insecurity. This study aims to identify the key actors and initiatives contributing to this transformation, considering cultural and social values shaping residents' and visitors' perceptions and determining the potential for the city's brand. The research uses identity-based place branding theory and Delphi rounds to compare expert and promoter perspectives through surveys and tourist insights. The findings reveal recognising having a transformation in mind having offers guidelines for residents to propose tourism initiatives, aiding strategic city promotion and brand-building in collaboration with various organisations.

Keywords City brand, Destination marketing, Tourism, Bottom-up branding, Transformation, Medellín

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

In Colombia, tourism is a sector in the consolidation process and has enormous possibilities (Alzate-Torres and Espinel-Monsalve, 2018). Medellín is a central industrial hub and the second-largest city in the country. But the city once faced drug-related violence and crime, which were addressed through urban development and public safety initiatives.

The city has been effectively losing its violent reputation and, in the process, has obtained distinctions such as the most innovative city in the world (ULI, 2013), the best destination for conferences and leading meetings and the best getaway destination, both in South America (WTA, 2016). It joined the ten best cities in the world to visit (Abel, 2018) and has been seen



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as a model of social innovation and inclusive growth (Lee-Kwan-Yew-Prize, 2016). All this has been achieved through initiatives in different areas, such as microcredit programmes, the revitalisation of rivers, the availability of transportation or the expansion of green areas to improve the quality of life of its citizens (Zengkun, 2019). Medellín earned numerous accolades, including becoming Colombia's first Smart Tourist Destination (Muñoz, 2020), ranking third among Time Out's 53 Best Cities in the World (Oliver, 2022) and receiving recognition for its progress in achieving UNESCO's Sustainable Development Goals (Universidad de Antioquia; Secretaría de Educación de Medellín and UNESCO, 2023). All recognitions reinforce its image as a destination of interest and the efforts to achieve it through several transformation campaigns to overcome the conflict-ridden destination label.

Medellín today hosts festivals and cultural and artistic scenes, attracting visitors and investors and is considered a tourist destination. Research on Medellín's transformation and its impact on tourism offer a contribution to the tourism area of knowledge to show how improved infrastructure and the adoption of artistic assets and sustainable practices affect the quality of life, engaging the community (Blanco and Kobayashi, 2009; Castillo-Palacio *et al.*, 2017; Corburn *et al.*, 2020; Naef, 2018). All of these allow tourism growth and offer valuable lessons for other cities undergoing transitions or facing challenges. Some studies have explored vital aspects, such as the consequences of massive tourism on residents (Hernandez-Maskivker *et al.*, 2021), resilience through urban changes (Cristiano and Gonella, 2020) and bottom-up processes of "touristification" (Freytag and Bauder, 2018). Other research examines the effects of urban rehabilitation (Fernandes *et al.*, 2023), the role of technological advancements (Lee *et al.*, 2020) and the challenges of gentrification resulting from tourism (Tanaka *et al.*, 2023). This offers an opportunity to identify the achievements and efforts to transform the city, which has gone from a conflictive place to a place to visit, where even its violent aspect is an attraction.

The panorama corresponds to a city that has undergone a transformation that has left behind a reality of violence and insecurity (Hernandez-Garcia, 2013), which is possible to relate a city brand, a unique identity with effects on reputation and attractiveness resonating with stakeholders used to be created in a marketing process (Dinnie, 2011). However, this change occurred due to the bottom-up city brand construction with inclusive and participative actions (Gerosa and Tartari, 2021). Then, destination branding that emphasises the emotional connection with unique features (Gnoth *et al.*, 2007) leads to the transformation of a feature for the city brand. That happened in changes made in public space with infrastructure and mobility to connect peripheral and marginal areas with the rest of the urban network with transport infrastructures (Levy and Dávila, 2017; Brand and Dávila, 2011) and spaces for leisure and culture (Granda and Machin-Mastromatteo, 2018).

These actions were based on community-oriented planning [Blanco and Kobayashi, 2009; United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat), 2016] and a participative approach to appropriating tourist activities (Van Broeck, 2019). They were further strengthened by policies promoting civic culture and social interventions designed for transformation in post-conflict environments. They were further strengthened by policies promoting civic culture and social interventions designed for transformation in post-conflict environments. These elements constituted the foundation for developing sustainable spaces and opportunities for tourism (Castillo-Palacio *et al.*, 2017; Leite *et al.*, 2020) with actions that positioned the city of Medellín to ensure both the transformation and the maintenance of its achievements through the creation of opportunities (Pineda-Gómez, 2019). Consequently, Medellín has emerged as a city exemplifying "phoenix tourism", related to post-conflict areas that have become tourist destinations (Causevic and Lynch, 2011).

On the other hand, Medellín concerning tourist offer has led circuits in peripheral neighbourhoods where it is possible to know the achievements in transformation (Torres, 2018), urban agriculture (Ramírez, 2014), peripheral walks (Taborda, 2017), bird watching and, in general, activities addressing environmental and social issues. The same *Comunas* (Communes' administrative zones). Developed some of the activities in places that used to be associated with conflictive issues (Bassols, 2016). These initiatives have become a sign of transformation (Naef, 2018), reducing inequality and violence by planning (Corburn *et al.*, 2020), essential in promoting tourism in those areas and constructing the Medellín destination brand. In this panorama of actions, it is possible to analyse how, from people and their values, we can recognise attributes related to the city, such as its image, what it represents and, above all, its positioning, its brand.

That led us to questions about which actors and initiatives are critical in contributing to these changes, what the residents and visitors think and what the potential for a marketing destination brand construction is.

Considering the construction of the destination brand of Medellín City, this paper also aims to show how transformation (Hernandez-Garcia, 2013; López-Zapata *et al.*, 2018; Naef, 2020) and resilience (Naef, 2022) which have become themes to which the city has been associated (Corburn *et al.*, 2020). Then, this study focuses on finding out the change in the perception of the city's image transformation, considering it as an attribute and a contribution to the city brand by identifying aspects that led Medellín to go from a conflictive destination to a tourist destination.

Literature review

Understanding some concepts is necessary to explore the possibilities for a destination brand strategy from a bottom-up perspective. First, place branding is based on identity: when a place can communicate characteristics attractive to different stakeholders. Pedeliento and Kavartzis (2019) saw it in the connections between identity, culture and image, where narratives can be aligned between the resident's emotional ties and visitors' perceptions of branding strategies. Eshuis and Ripoll González (2024) proposed using symbolic constructions, cognitive associations and experiential elements. Second, the city brand can be built through residents' and stakeholders' participatory actions, seeking a more authentic representation of the city and resonating with the local population (Gerosa and Tartari, 2021). Third, based on that approach, the destination brand can achieve authenticity, coherence and sustainability; emotional values associated with the destination make locals act as brand ambassadors or co-creators (Jain *et al.*, 2022). A bottom-up brand in destination marketing affects locals' commitment, improving the general perception of the brand, so the marketing processes occur in day-to-day efforts in a way that can be collaborative, as Casais and Monteiro (2019) explained in the case of Porto.

The city's image and its brand may have a relationship. To develop the city brand, knowing the city's image is essential, and this can come from a process that arises between those who observe and the observed environment, a process that involves variations because the created image depends on the perspective of each observer (Lynch, 1960) and the city's identity (Chan *et al.*, 2021), which can also generate association networks with which a brand can be built (Sevin, 2014).

Kavartzis' (2004) pioneering work on the city brand states that cities' peculiar nature must be a marketable asset in their management through marketing. Therefore, it is necessary to consider the perceptions and images of the city in terms of the construction, communication and management of its image. These aspects are a starting point to develop the city's brand and management with effects on the identity of those who inhabit it, where the perception and experience of residents with the city are involved, as works on values, image and identity

suggest (Khirfan and Momani, 2013). Transforming events (Ceballos *et al.*, 2020; Gold and Gold, 2023; Herstein and Berger, 2013) also play a significant role.

Then, through targeted marketing strategies, it is possible to achieve a well-positioned image (Pike and Page, 2014). In this sense, these strategies point to specific types of activities reflecting images or giving ideas and perspectives to imagine the city or places in it (Avraham, 2016), all to generate interest in experiencing the environment and attractions through destination marketing (Sorokina *et al.*, 2022). Constructing an intelligent destination framework: A destination marketing organisation perspective, identifying city perceptions (Giglio *et al.*, 2019) by social construction (Hunter, 2016), asking tourism organisations, tourists and residents (Stylidis *et al.*, 2017).

When implementing destination-marketing strategies, there are identity aspects related to the image to achieve, recognising the inhabitants' and visitors' image as a possible way to position the city within embodied experiences (Eshuis and Ripoll González, 2024). With these images, it is possible to recognise and communicate an ideal image (Dinardi, 2017), which should be congruent with the identity and the accurate picture of the city (Pedeliento and Kavaratzis, 2019), constructed through people's perception of the city and its attributes (Papadimitriou *et al.*, 2018). Using those aspects to design methods and processes (Soteriades, 2012) implies recognising the perceptions of those who visit a city, whether they are business or leisure travellers, and its residents (Campelo *et al.*, 2014). In that sense, residents have an essential role in their cultural expressions, which can be part of the tourist consumption experience and used to attract and remain in the minds (Eshuis and Ripoll González, 2024). These expressions affect the construction and consolidation of the identity, gradually incorporated from being reflected in the shared experiences of those who perceive it from outside (Braun *et al.*, 2013; Kavaratzis and Ashworth, 2005).

When the strategy for destination branding can orient the construction of the city brand with a composition of messages directed to the target market, drawing attention to the place, it helps consumers decide about visiting that place and consuming the place's experiences (Konečnik Ruzzier, 2010). The strategy gains strength by considering the context of inhabitants' and visitors' perceptions and shared meanings in consumption stages, sensing that their own experiences as tourists fit with those of locals (Campelo *et al.*, 2014; Casais and Monteiro), as seen in social media destination branding strategies (Lund *et al.*, 2018). To find an attractive value proposition, not created but as an identification stamp found from representations about the place in people's minds, thematic experiences emerge that can be used in strategic actions (de Rosa *et al.*, 2016; Dwyer *et al.*, 2009; Larsen, 2014).

With a destination brand, it is also possible to generate positive impacts for the community in the social, cultural and environmental spheres to ensure the future of that place (DeAlcântara-Buosi *et al.*, 2017), drawing attention to investors and positioning the city with effects on economic growth (Herget, Petru and Abrahm, 2015), reversing a negative or stereotypical image (Isaac and Çakmak, 2016), transforming the destination's reputation while considering different circumstances in collaborative processes (Pavlovich, 2014) or generating more effective expectations (Soteriades, 2012).

Social transformation as an attribute of the city involves processes of empowerment of local communities, promotion of a sense of belonging, resilience and participation in decision-making processes; this is associated with infrastructure changes that have facilitated social interactions promoting inclusion, processes of citizen education, improvement of the quality of life, transparency, accountability and collaboration that are part of a participatory approach (Corburn *et al.*, 2020). That transformation affects the destination's internal and external perceptions regarding inclusion (Blanco and Kobayashi, 2009; García *et al.*, 2015) or as social transformation and the basis for sustainable tourism (Castillo-Palacio *et al.*, 2017). If

the destination presents reputation and image challenges (Torres, 2018), then transformation processes are essential for planning branding models and strategies to position destinations in the market. In the case of Medellín

In summary, developing destination marketing involves organisations, inhabitants' sense of belonging and visitors' experiences with the city. These aspects reinforce any strategy, making any campaign that generates expectations more effective.

Methodology

This study examines Medellín's transformation from a conflictive city to a tourist destination, focusing on its perceived image, tourist interests and contributions to the Medellín brand.

This study uses both qualitative and quantitative methodologies at an exploratory level, seeks to open paths for larger and more complex studies and uses techniques or instruments that require validation and various approaches (Van Teijlingen and Hundley, 2001).

Berger and Luckmann's (2001) approach guided the data collection and analysis, focusing on society's construction of "knowledge" and "reality". The authors applied this approach to various audiences, including experts, visitors, inhabitants and campaign executors.

The study uses a constructivist–interpretive paradigm, using an inductive approach grounded in texts provided by expert participants (Ricoy Lorenzo, 2006).

It began by identifying actors and actions contributing to, promoting and positioning the city of Medellín through strategies to understand its image. The Delphi method allows for relatively flexible information collection and can be adapted to specific objectives (Reguant, Torrado and Torrado, 2016). The Delphi method is appropriate when the study object is difficult to delimit and when the existing evidence is insufficient, unpublished and requires experts in the field to describe it (García Valdés and Suárez Marín, 2013). The authors used this method to interact with experts and people related to tourism activities or decision-making processes about Medellín.

The authors conducted two rounds of protocols via email, using a guide with nine sections, including experts' profiles, tourism components, brand objectives and communication strategies. Eleven tourism experts from institutions such as the Tourism Secretariat, the Investment and Cooperation Agency (ACI) and Greater Medellín participated in the first round, as well as The Convention and Visitors Bureau (known as Medellín Convention Bureau), Business Tourism Cluster, Fairs and Conventions, the National Federation of Traders – FENALCO, and representatives of cultural and private organisations such as Teatrigo, the Slow Tours Organization and the CJ Tours Company, among others.

This first application allowed the authors to obtain a database of contacts classified according to a profile based on occupations, experience and knowledge in the strategic promotion of various city organisations and the subject of tourism for the second round. In this round, executors of tourism promotion campaigns and those involved in city management related to the study topic participated. The authors applied an open questionnaire considering findings from the previous round with 55 participants involved in the tourism industry of Medellín, including the participation of the first experts and new participants, with 20 representatives of organisations such as FENALCO, Turibus, Raidho, Antioquia Museum, COTELCO, Fly Colombia, HatoViejo and 35 other participants including accommodation service providers and other service providers. (Table 1 contains a more detailed explanation of the institutions and other participants in the research to understand their activities and impact on tourism in the city.)

The authors shared findings from the first two rounds through debriefing (Given, 2012) with several of the participants of the stages and opened to stakeholders to find replication or validation. This experience gave the guidelines for building the questionnaires applied to tourists and inhabitants. It was recorded and published (Sierra *et al.*, 2018).

Table 1. Institutions and other participants in the research to understand their activities and impact on tourism in the city

Institutions	Role
Tourism Undersecretariat	A public organisation that plans, manages and promotes Medellín's tourism internationally. Develops tourism products and strategies
ACI – International Cooperation Agency	Leads the city-regions internationalisation via strategic relations, investment attraction and tourism infrastructure development
Medellín Convention Bureau	The private organisation promotes Medellín and Antioquia nationally and internationally as a tourist destination. Organises events
Business Tourism Cluster of the Chamber of Commerce	Enhances the industry's competitiveness by fostering collaboration between sectors, strengthening Medellín as a destination
FENALCO National Federation of Commerce	Supports Colombian merchants, defending free enterprise while boosting competitiveness, productivity and sustainability
Slow Tours Organisation	Advocates for environmentally conscious tourism, offering stress-free and simple travel experiences
CJ Tours Company	Specialises in ecological and experiential tourism as a member of the Medellín Visitors Bureau
Teatrigo	Organises personalised comedy shows and cultural tours for event-based tourism
Business tourism cluster fairs and conventions	Bridges local businesses with regional development opportunities and ensures competitiveness in business tourism
Turibus	Conducts bus tours of Medellín's major tourist, architectural, cultural and ecological attractions
Raidho	Connects travellers with tips, destinations and community-based experiences through a robust travel network
Cotelco	Hotel and Tourism Association of Colombia. Represents Colombia's sector, offering tailored support services
Fly Colombia	Offers helicopter flights showcasing Medellín and its surrounding landscapes
Antioquia Museum	Displays internationally relevant collections as a cultural hub in Medellín – a national monument since 1995
Hatoviejo	Showcases traditional <i>Paisa</i> * culture through food, architecture and music, earning significant recognition

Note: * “Paisa” refers to a person who was born in a Colombian region that shares cultural issues

Source: Table by authors

The first survey targeted 112 visitors (foreigners and Colombians from other regions), whereas the second focused on 131 long-term Medellín residents. Both surveys focused on understanding the words used by visitors and inhabitants to describe the city. The authors applied a third survey with open and closed questions, relating the recently created visual identity for Medellín's city, and it had a focus on understanding how much the city inhabitants felt identified with it, in addition to understanding how much the new visual identity can contribute to improving the Medellín problems. The authors interviewed a leader involved in creating the visual identity to discuss the findings.

The authors transcribed and analysed the data using analytical units in matrices, and triangulation sought to identify categories and trends responding to the study's specific objectives and methodological moments. Also, the authors considered all the ethical parameters, respecting the participants' identity, giving them all the information of the study and letting them decide whether they want to participate or not, so the findings group the expert's contributions without direct mention of each participant due to the previously agreed confidentiality aspects. The whole process started in 2018 and ended in March 2022.

Analysis: findings and results

This section describes aspects to consider in the brand construction of the Colombian city of Medellín. It considers the tourism sector's perspective and the perception of visitors and inhabitants. Findings and results show aspects to believe in the city brand. Among these aspects stands out the transformation as a differential element related to the brand's construction. Medellín is defined by its remarkable ability to overcome adversity, transforming a central attribute of its city brand.

Actors that contribute to the construction of the city brand

Among the actors and actions that are identified, there are 27 organisations and institutions that are cognised of their contribution to the construction of the city brand in Medellín. The following [Table 2](#) resumes those.

Below is [Figure 1](#), which gives an order of magnitude of the mentions that each organisation received in the first Delphi round applied.

This alluvial bar diagram shows the number of times the organisations are mentioned as contributors to the construction of the Medellín brand. On the left of the diagram, consider the mentions in percentage, and on the right, the 15 organisations. Then, Antioquia Museum, Explora Park, the Gastronomic tour, the Colombian Association of Travel and Tourism Agencies (ANATO) and other public institutions had 2%; the Colombian Association of Hotels and Tourism 4%; hotels and others related 5%; the Cultural and Social City groups 6%; Advertising Agencies, Business Organisations and Event Organisers 7%. Plaza Mayor the city events placement 10%, the Medellín City Hall Tourism Secretary 19% and the Greater Bureau of Medellín 22%.

Transformative actions

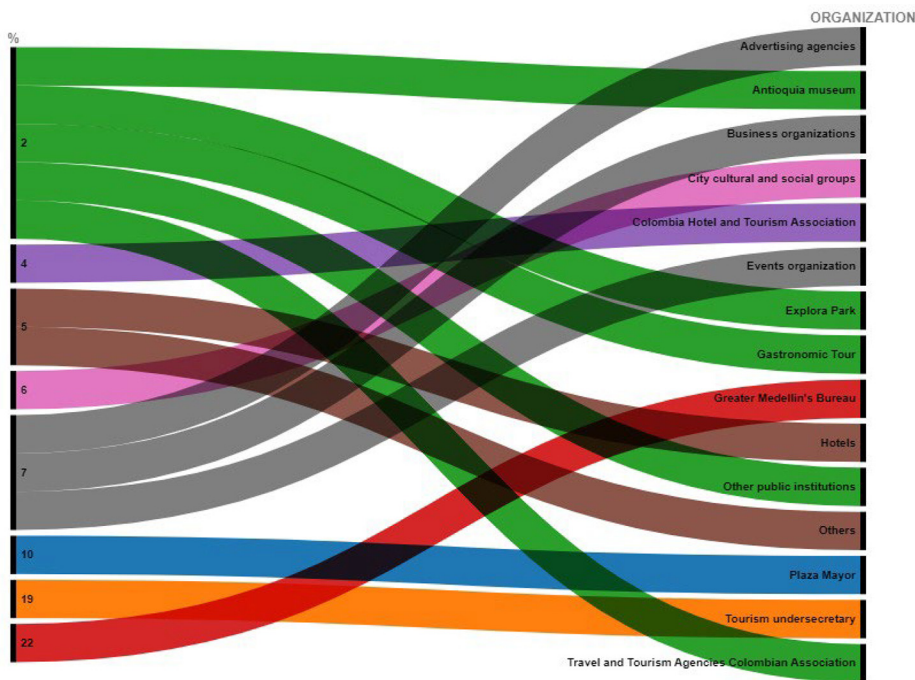
According to the evidence presented, Medellín is a city to be discovered and recognised. This appreciation reflects efforts under the 2018–2022 tourism development plans ([Ministerio de Comercio, Industria y Turismo, 2018](#)).

Defining an offer is necessary to consider the local's lifestyle and culture. Expressions and events such as “festivities, places that tell stories and culture like museums” and also “public spaces that locals frequent, that give the possibility of finding local gastronomy or enjoying the climate and nature” because “the role of the people who inhabit it is essential”.

Table 2. Recognised organisations for their contributions to tourism in the city

Institutions	Contribution*
Tourism Undersecretariat	Design and implement strategies to strengthen and promote the city's tourist attractions
Medellin Convention Bureau	Promoting Medellín and Antioquia in the national and international markets
Plaza Mayor	Holding city events for academic, business, commercial, cultural and social purposes, fairs and conventions, among others stands Colombiamoda, a fashion event
Medellin Chamber of Commerce	Clustering organisations
Business Tourism Cluster	
Cultural and social groups in the city	Casa Tomada: producer of cultural events and shows. Casa Morada: a group that organises cultural projects in the city. Casa Tres Patios: contemporary art centre
Museums	Antioquia Museum and the Modern Art Museum (MAMM)
Companies that offer organisation of cultural and business events	CirculArt: musical platform of Latin American scope Altavoz Rock festival
Cultour: cultural organisations and cultural media group	Promoting art, culture and entertainment in the city
Cotelco	Enhancing competitiveness and productivity
Gastronomic Tour	Corporation that brings together restaurants in the city and region
Parks	Explora Park is an interactive museum in the city. Botanical Garden Parque Arví: corporation, a non-profit foundation that preserves and manages forest reserve
ACI	Support Medellín's cooperation and investment and the Tourism Policy of the Antioquia Government
ANATO	Clustering Colombian Association of Travel and Tourism Agencies
Universities with tourism training programmes	Colegio Mayor de Antioquia Fundación Universitaria Autónoma de las Américas Universidad de Medellín
Other	Politécnico de Medellín Foundation of Alumni of the District University
	Business organisations, advertising agencies, hostels, the creative and cultural industries and all actors provide leisure activities in which music, dance and literature stand out

Source: Table by authors



Source: Figure by authors

Figure 1. Organisations that contribute to the construction of the city brand in Medellín

Something is changing, even though insecurity exists in the city. All the participants of the rounds mentioned an initiative developed with considerable success. A tour takes place in Comuna13 – once the most violent zone of the city – in the three neighbourhoods, 20 de Julio, Independencia I and II. The Graftour activities are carried out by young graffiti artists, rap singers and neighbours. They share their experiences of transformation by telling their stories related to *graffiti*.

Tourists also mention other places where they have “enjoy exotic landscapes and natural places” related to urban agriculture in different parts of the city. This includes ecological walks and hiking activities in Alta Vista, a place in the surrounding mountains. Besides, it also offers bird-watching opportunities, learning Spanish and addressing environmental and social issues when visitors keep the surroundings as they found them and have contact with locals.

Transformation in the process: what is left to do?

According to some participants, “Medellín is a city with much to offer, but it still does not have an element that differentiates it in a forceful way and that completely counteracts an image with a negative connotation, or that shows what has been done in the face of insecurity”. Faced with this, the experts consider that the entire chain conformed by service providers, operators, establishments and infrastructure have collaborated so that, from their practices, “it shows the face of a Medellín that leaves the imaginary of a violent city, of drug

traffickers, of drugs, *prepagos* (those who practice prostitution and other forms of commercialisation of sexual activities)". So, although "the Medellín of the 'Narcoseries' [drug-themed television series], and an underground tourism or black tourism continue to be sold, the service shows the friendly face, the development, transformation, competitiveness, wealth in the gastronomic and commercial offer", allowing to experience transformation by being able to compare the experience with the expectation. Visitors often express surprise, citing the city's peaceful atmosphere despite its troubled past, "They warned us of the danger, and we found love", or admit finding "very friendly and a city that reflects citizen culture".

The transformation does not end. According to participant experts, there is still much to improve regarding the informality of the services. Also, all the activities related to tourist attractions referring to Pablo Escobar, especially regarding sex tourism, are information to consider when previous expectations about Medellín indicate "there are gorgeous women". Some inhabitants mention that "there should be plans around the issue to formally control and integrate it into tourism policies" without affecting another aspect of the city related to nightlife and the party atmosphere.

Therefore, the evidence shows a significant transformation for tourism actors; inhabitants and tourists are the highlights. This transformation can be "the sense of belonging of the citizen and provide interaction platforms with the community to integrate the brand so that they integrate and share it" to maintain the achieved because visitors look for the locals' experience.

The tourism sector system still requires "articulation to guide practices with long-term plans" with programmes to enhance the strengths, promote training and disseminate actions" because "the offer is good. "However, there are more opportunities, and there is always potential to improve service hours, open, diverse proposals, allow actors' inclusion and bilingualism, and facilitate good customer service practices".

Medellín's residents and visitors' perceptions

The themes associated with the image of the city fall into four categories: the identification of the transformation process, messages related to the friendliness and hospitality of the city's residents, messages describing social innovation, and the infrastructure that enables tourist services.

The first group of messages about the city's transformation includes words such as resilience and belonging. The town transformed, trying to leave behind a reality full of violence and insecurity. Today, its inhabitants indicate the "sense of belonging or membership" and "being resilient" as part of themselves, given the circumstances they previously experienced and what has been achieved in the face of their reality. Today, those words are part of a "culture that hopes to overcome it". This reflection is also part of visitors' perception and is an aspect that experts propose to consider concerning the city's brand.

The second group of messages concerns a culture that stands out in kindness. Visitors mention the city's people for their kindness in "finding hosts who lend good attention, good service and hospitality". They also highlight the "joy and the atmosphere of the city". They find a civic culture integrated into the city's being as the way to face the problems that "still subsist and is necessary to assume to continue working". Residents commonly highlighted insecurity, prostitution, pollution and mobility as persistent challenges.

This panorama of transformation mentions civic culture, social innovation, and infrastructure; for example, the effects of the city's investment in transportation—Metro, Metrocable, Tram, and Metroplus [articulated bus]— a materialised change that led to the city's perception of an "innovative city" and civic behaviour by the inhabitants and visitors.

Finally, there is a mention of the city’s attractions related to the cultural and artistic offer, where the cultural spaces and green spaces or the “combination of both near the river” stand out, as the nightlife, the views that the city offers, the stores, the gastronomic offer and integrating easily into the life of the locals, favoured by the characteristics of “good hosts”.

As shown in [Figure 2](#), the most relevant data was collected from all rounds to describe Medellín attributes for the residents. The most prominent darkest words mention People and Service as most related to the city offer experiences, followed by Transformation and Events; the first as an adjective for the city and the second as an attribute of the offer. Medium-sized words explain the relevance associated with Gastronomy, Culture, Infrastructure, Business and Innovation in the destination; some perceptions related to people’s Happiness and resilience. Smaller words show Helpful, Hope or Creative as adjectives associated with the people and the city or the offer of Music events, the Metro, the Spaces, Ambient, Landscape, the Nightlife and the sense of belonging, which can explain the colloquial word “Parce” explained in the following sections.

Experts agree with visitors and residents and add the events and the companies that make Medellín an “industrial city and a destination for business”. See [Figure 3](#) to visualise the words with which visitors’ perceptions of Medellín associate with the experience.

The word cloud shows words for visitor’s perception of Medellín in which People is the most important. Then again is the word transformation, followed by kindness, service and resilience, which is near to transformation. Medium-sized words show associations to Innovation, Culture, Gastronomy, the Local experience, Happiness, Hosts and the Nightlife. Also, Events, Environment, Good Landscape, Youthful, Artists and Good are linked with the experience perceived. Moreover, Transport, Business, Sense of belonging, Hope and Parce are connected to the perceptions.

Integration of transformation messages into the Medellín city brand

The experts affirm that the message is “to live the environment felt in the streets of Medellín, and to be ‘Parce,’ a colloquial term referring to closeness” ([Lopera, 2013](#)), used as a way of integration, and to describe someone who “is part of the attitude.” This can be seen as “Medellín’s greatest differential” because they assert that “people are overflowing with hope, are positive, are vigorous, and work to improve and exceed their limits continually”. This



Source: Figure by authors
Figure 2. Word cloud depicting residents’ perceptions of Medellín



Source: Figure by authors

Figure 3. Word cloud depicting visitors' perceptions and experience of Medellín

mood and hospitality typically produce admiration in those who visit. The hosts appreciate a message about resilience, the “ability to overcome difficulties and improve”.

Building a brand implies maintaining it but integrating “replicators of transformation messages, in a coherent way with the city” because, for some, brands that come from political strategies “Do not add value to the tourist destination”. In this sense, some propose “to advertise the progress of the local administration planning, the projects carried out in the communes, the activities of sustainable tourism, nature and biodiversity”.

It is about “showing the transformation of the city”, both socially and in the recovery of urban spaces. For this reason, “you cannot fight with the city’s past, visitors ask to know that dark side, from the legal point of view”, then it is about “using it as an opportunity for the territory, what it is today”. Without ceasing to consider “the risks of black tourism”, there must be certainty and internal confidence “about what happens in a resilient city”, which struggles to keep up with cities with better living standards”.

The perception of the “Medellín brand” by inhabitants and an expert

In the last instrument, it was possible to identify the following relevant aspects regarding the recently created brand of Medellín (see [Figure 4](#)): opinion of the logo and slogan; how the graphic identity and the copy represent the city to achieve its tourism objectives; what are the indicators that the inhabitants believe that the graphic image will enhance; and to finish, the perception of the video that accompanies the logo and the slogan. These findings will be described and discussed with the testimonies of an advertising expert who worked as creative director in the “Medellín brand” design.

The previous image includes the visual identity of the Medellín brand. Both the logo and the graphics and complementary text. According to the interview with its creative director, the logo selected a friendly typography that alludes to the civic campaign of the 80s, “Quiero a Medellín”. For its creators, the cultural imaginary of that time could once again generate appropriation and connection with the native values of the city. On the other hand, the upper counterform of the word refers to the seven hills surrounding Medellín. The flower as an isotype comes from rotating and superimposing the Spanish symbol of “the tilde”. The colours were taken from a photograph of the landscape, including the green of its mountains, the orange of its bricks and the blue of the sky. The slogan represents how the city has been a



Note: This figure is available for public use in a city brand identity manual on the government website

Source: JUA and Breakfast Club (2022)

Figure 4. New visual identity of Medellín

place where business, artistic and social influences have arrived, which, after being reinterpreted, flourish and empowered to go out into the world; for example, reggaeton being a Caribbean rhythm is now exported with the Medellín seal.

The authors identified divided opinions regarding the logo and the slogan: some think that the logo is simple and minimalist: “A little simple”; other allude to the fact that the logo is sober and formal: “It is formal, distancing itself from the more casual image it has had up to now, it represents some of the most representative elements in the flowers and mountains”, while a few participants affirm that they like the logo, although they say that it is simple: “Elementary, but I like the font of the letter because it alludes to the mountains, it can be more emphatic”. Regarding the slogan, it is clear that, even though the logo does not generate as much acceptance and appropriation, the slogan and the complete concept do, and that it alludes to the exuberance of nature and the strength of its inhabitants: “I think it makes much sense to the city, considering that it is known as ‘eternal spring’ and has the largest flower festival in South America. It also has to do with the fact that it is an innovative city and people come from all over the country looking to flourish, looking for opportunities”; “That here every sowing yields a harvest”. At this point, there is a coincidence between what the expert describes what they wanted to convey with the brand concept and what the inhabitants perceive of it, and this is how the expert describes it: “Let us tell the world about this topic of cultural innovation, and we find a poetic way of saying that Medellín is a fertile land”, and it is from that talk of Medellín as fertile land, that there is an openness to new ideas and that things are happening here, we get the statement “everything flourishes here” (expert, personal interview).

On the contrary, the inhabitants who answered the instrument indicated that the graphic identity would help the city to achieve its tourist objectives in 55.4%, an assessment that is because the inhabitants think that the graphic image does not manage to cover everything about the city of Medellín “Because it stays with a single very leading idea, the flower. Medellín is much more than that”; “Because it gives me the image that the only attractiveness in Medellín are flowers”; and “It is simple, but not only with a brand and a short slogan they will come to the city”. Contrasting this information with the opinion of the expert, it is evident that the expert also agrees that the graphic image alone will not attract visitors to the city, because he states: “advertising or integrated marketing communications are a weak force, but what motivates visitors are bigger things than just having seen an ad piece”. However, he also affirms that, by having a graphic image of the city, those imaginaries generated from it will be similar and will have a purpose.

“Then, although I believe that more tourists are not necessarily going to come as a result of having an organised and branded city, if we are going to be able to have control over that imaginary (...) Not so much that more tourists come, but that people come more out of curiosity for cultural innovation. A city brand can be a tool for selling scenarios like business spaces, conventions, and fairs. Moreover, specifically, that city brand proposal ‘Everything Blooms Here’ also lends itself very well as a platform for messages of innovation and entrepreneurship.” See [Figure 5](#) below to visualise the indicators the inhabitants believe the brand will enhance.

The word cloud shows the indicators enhanced with the new graphic identity image of the Medellín brand. Tourism is the most prominent and darkest word and, therefore, the most relevant and frequent. The medium-sized words in medium tone with lower relevance are Investment in business and Appropriation and care of the territory. The words with less relevance and much smaller in a clear tone that appeared in the study are Social Development and Security Perception.

Tourism stands out, followed by business investment, and then the appropriation and care of the territory, at the same level as social development, to end the perception of security. In this sense, this insight agrees with what the expert indicates because he affirms that communication has limitations: “Well if it exists insecurity, common crime and damage to private property, that demand larger changes, more than an ad campaign can do”. He also indicates that the graphic image may increase the sense of belonging to the city, understanding this as the appropriation and care of the territory.

Discussion

This chapter presents what emerges in the study about the perception of the city’s transformation by experts, visitors and inhabitants to contribute and provide information on decisions constructing the city brand of Medellín, based on the associations made about the city as [Sevin \(2014\)](#) suggested about building the brand. In addition, the article provide evidence indicating that aspects related to identity and the image experienced and projected from everyday practices are part of target marketing strategies ([Pike and Page, 2014](#)) regarding shared experiences ([Kavaratzis and Ashworth, 2005](#)) and how resident’s and stakeholders provide insights for a city branding ([Jain et al., 2022](#)).



Source: Figure by authors

Figure 5. City indicators enhanced by the new graphic image

On the other hand, the authors found that these individuals play a crucial role in the perception obtained about the city. The evidence agrees that visitors make the difference between expectation and experience when visiting a destination, and multi-sensory experience provide symbolic constructs differentiating the place (Eshuis and Ripoll González, 2024). In the perception of Medellín achieved through the findings of this study, the transformation described in studies carried out by Naef (2018) and Hernandez-Garcia (2013) is integrated as a critical aspect to work on the image, transitioning from a negative to a positive one or highlighting the achievements in managing challenges as opportunities. That aligns with destination marketing strategies and the positioning of the city, involving organisations and inhabitants, which corresponds with the proposals of Kavaratzis recognising the city's dynamics in constructing a brand (Kavaratzis and Hatch, 2013) whether to rethink or propose the brand (Kavaratzis and Kalandides, 2015) and allowing place branding based on identity, culture, and self-perceived image (Pedeliento and Kavaratzis (2019).

The study provides evidence of how the transformation discussed in the literature has already been perceived and integrated into the city, extending to all spheres (Castillo-Palacio *et al.*, 2017; Hernandez-Garcia, 2013; Pineda-Gómez, 2019). As Medellín is recognised for its process of transformation and innovative city planning (Coburn *et al.*, 2020). It supports the agenda that includes places transformed into communes previously flagged as conflictive, marginal or extramural (Ramírez, 2014; Taborda, 2017; Torres, 2018), framing the shift from a conflictive destination (Bassols, 2016) to a transformed tourist destination (Naef, 2018). It also accounts for the collaborative processes that have led to organisational transformation (Pavlovich, 2014), integrating the inclusion as Blanco and Kobayashi exposed (2009) as part of tourist agendas, with routes designed to bring visitors closer to the transformation experience, understood as the journey narrating that transformation (Rojas De Francisco and Henao-Rengifo, 2017). Moreover, it demonstrates the learning acquired in resilience, perceived as part of the character of its inhabitants, providing evidence to support what Levy and Dávila (2017) stated about overcoming difficulties and the learning achieved through social urbanism in Medellín. This process reinforces digital communication in tourism and strengthens public policies (Gorlevskaya, 2016) a while strengthening public policies aimed at sustainable development (Quinchía Roldán, 2013). This study provides information about the transformation as an attribute perceived, and doing it provides evidence about a bottom-up perspective for a destination brand strategy that can provide an exciting narrative to visitors and residents as participatory actions provide an authentic representation of positioning the city and give a base to sustain actions as residents can become brand ambassadors (Jain *et al.*, 2022; Casais and Monteiro, 2019).

Conclusions

The study identifies key contributors to Medellín's brand transformation, offering pathways for further exploration. In the strategic aspects of brand design, the authors expose strategic promotion actions and opportunities to continue exploring, such as relating the city's inhabitants with visitors, understood as a strategic factor or competitive advantage.

The study found other aspects related to the image of Medellín that are not developed in this article, referring to the "Colombiamoda" event and the city's association with fashion. Also, different associations outlined Medellín as a regional interconnection centre with other destinations such as the Colombian Pacific, the coffee region and populations in the department of Antioquia and consider it a city linked with the music known as "Reggaeton" and other Latin American musical expressions. All aspects can be studied.

This study makes practical contributions that could be used by designers of tourism products, destination brands and city brands because it shows the importance of considering the peculiarities of a destination and its different audiences so that having a construction

from within and not an imposed configuration, which guarantees the appropriation of it by its inhabitants and visitors.

In the cultural sphere, this study was initially limited to exploring associations already integrated into the destination, such as the flower fair. Their inclusion is necessary due to the dimension of the information that emerged in the first stage, assuming them as a separate studio with exclusive dedication.

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