DESTINATION BRANDSCAPES.
INTEGRATION OF LANDSCAPE ELEMENTS INTO DESTINATION BRANDS

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Abstract: Encapsulating the destination’s USPs and identity in a logo with high recognition value is a challenge DMOs face. This recognisability as key to a ‘strong brand’ is particularly based on natural resources and the attractiveness of landscapes that form the basis of touristic USP in most destinations. The paper stresses the importance of the logo and that the destination’s ‘DNA’ or identity must be transposed symbolically and naturally by integrating distinctive landscape elements into the logo. Ideally, they merge authentically and harmoniously, fostering identification among locals and tourists, brand awareness and a positive image, contributing to a strong, authentic brand. A 40% presence of landscape elements (mountains prevailed by 85%) was found in the top 50 Austrian logos.

Keywords: Place brands, landscape aesthetics, identity-based destination management, logo, tourism

Highlights
- The symbolic value of landscape elements in logos must be acknowledged.
- The destination’s ‘DNA’ or identity must be transposed symbolically and naturally.
- Landscape elements in logos can contribute to a strong and authentic brand.
- Landscapes have the ability to express identity values and feelings of belonging.
- A positive image, brand awareness and identification as benefits of the integration.

1. Introduction

Today, branding is indispensable and gaining the status of an authentic and strong brand is the ultimate goal for DMO’s. We find ourselves in a world where one sensation follows the next. We process more data than ever at an increasing speed, which makes it difficult to focus among the endless possibilities. Those who stand out through any USP are considered successful and strong (Richardson & Cohen, 1993). Place branding’s roots date back to the period of the 1950s to the 1980s (Hankinson, 2015). Thereby, in the last 20 years, cities, regions and nations have made use of place branding strategies to defend their position on the increasingly competitive tourism market, gradually establishing a popular field of research (Kavaratzis, 2004; Morgan et al., 2002; Dinnie, 2007).

Besides evoking emotions and storytelling being the instrument of the hour, the question of pinning down how to become a strong, authentic brand that stands out remains mostly unanswered, also due to the variety of definitions and evaluation criteria (Gutjahr, 2011). The latter starts with choosing the right indicators (Meffert, 2002) and calculation models. However, the focus is often on the most influential and successful international brands. Place brand rankings (like the Anholt Ipsos Nation Brands Index or Logo Design; Wiedemann, 2015) only provide insight into national images of world-famous city brands, leaving out smaller-scaled destination brands on a regional or local level, revealing a fundamental knowledge gap.

Therefore, this paper will give much-needed input by exploring the role of landscape elements in Austrian tourist destination brands at the community level. Academia has paid much attention to analysing the graphic components of logos and consumer perception, recognition and attitude (Bresciai & Del Ponte, 2017; Herbst, 1998; Kantanen & Tikkanen, 2005; Luffarelli et al., 2019; Park et al., 2013). Contrary sobering results have raised critical voices, labelling branding as superficial, contributing only to the destination’s visibility without sustainably reinforcing the transparency or authenticity (Kladou et al., 2017). The paper argues that despite their shortcomings, logos can be an effective element in destination branding (Lee et al., 2012; Beritelli & Laesser, 2018; Kladou et al., 2017) and play a decisive role in destination management by influencing destination images and tourist’s intent to visit (Lee et al., 2012). To explore these factors, the paper draws the connection to the concept of landscape through two lenses of research: identity-based branding (Kavaratzis & Hatch, 2013) and more specifically, place identity and
landscape aesthetics. With this, the landscape’s suitability as an integrative and symbolic brand element and projection surface is laid bare, and its positive impact on residents and visitors is further revealed.

To gain more practical insight, this article also analyses Austrian top 50 winter and summer destination brands, which are considered strong on the basis of the number of overnight stays (2018/2019), in relation to landscape elements in their logos (including imagery and verbal references). It presents five good practices, further evaluated according to the aesthetic design principles of Rodriguez et al., (2013), based on Gestalt Theory (Wertheimer, [1923] 2012). This paper concludes with valuable insights for destination management by addressing economic and societal aspects of the underestimated projection of local and regional values as part of a highly recommended identity-based destination branding approach.

2. Logos as an element of regional identity

2.1 Identity-based place branding

In general, destination brands may not be treated as ‘ordinary’ product brands, as they differ in many ways. First, the product entails mainly services; therefore, it cannot be tested a priori, as production and consumption take place simultaneously (Bieger & Beritelli, 2013). As tourist activities take place in ‘space’, landscape in terms of natural, artificial and cultural arrangements come into the picture. Second, besides human resources (services), environmental factors also play an essential part as determinants of different levels of customer values, whereby nature can be seen as the primacy of the offer (Bieger & Beritelli, 2013).

The third and perhaps the most important place brand characteristic lies in the nature of its public/collective ownership (Stubbs & Warnaby, 2015), therefore hampering a consistent ‘top-down strategy’. A Unique Selling Proposition (USP) for tourist destinations is a distinctive feature or set of features that sets a particular location apart from others and makes it attractive to visitors. It’s essentially what makes that destination unique and appealing to potential tourists. Nature and heritage are the most common examples of tourism USPs, as both are central to the perception of the landscape. Whether companies (or destinations) should expand their positioning strategies to attract more target groups is a controversial issue among marketing experts (Kotler, 2017, p. 231). As a logo can only contain very few attributes according to the design and gestalt principles, and consumers tend to remember one better than several, the authors argue in favour of the original definition of a USP, namely sticking to one attribute. In order to present a consistent external image while promoting individual identities, the destination brand’s logo has to accomplish various tasks: elaborating and positioning the destination’s USP, finding a distinctive and joint identity, graphically representing the destination’s core values and aiming at target group-oriented communication. As an overall goal, gaining the status of a strong, authentic brand with high brand awareness, positive image and USP (Wang et al., 2019), can be named.

Overall, branding and marketing strategies aim to evoke emotions as doing so is seen as the promise of success (Wala, 2018), successfully demonstrated by authentic and famous brands. Storytelling has become a popular tool to satisfy our need to recognize behavioural patterns through personal, emotional life experiences we can relate to (Gutjahr, 2013, p. 151) and to achieve emotional reactions. In this context, the popularity of the landscape’s imageability as an attractive ground for storytelling and symbolic actions can be observed by the count of shares on social media (Jordi de San et al., 2017, p. 23). Compared to products, places do not necessarily have to be creative in inventing a storyline, as they can draw from the full. Various residents write stories worth telling every day, and historical events, myths and legends contribute to a holistic brand experience that evolves over time. Regional developers have already detected the potential of residents in this realm. Kavaratzis (2017) put them into focus of participative branding strategies, stating that they have been underestimated as a potential target group and important functionaries for far too long.

Thereby, especially the concept of identity seems to be of interest not only from the geographer’s point of view. So does the brand psychology also acknowledge the importance of identity in order to understand the consumer’s point of view and the significance of subconscious processes, leading the consumer to project beliefs, values and attitudes on the brand (Gutjahr, 2013). Furthermore, our ‘imprints’, lessons
learned from our observations and experiences (Scheier & Held, 2013), play a decisive role. Especially ‘places’, perceived and experienced particularly through landscape as visible features in a certain area, provide a suitable projection surface for individual or collective identities (Weichhart, 1990), which will be discussed in more detail in the following chapter.

2.2 Logos: superficial and superfluous destination representations?

The logo often constitutes the first impression and touchpoint between customer and destination. Besides being a signal, its functions can be described as a visual clip and brand in the initial sense of meaning (Essig et al., 2010, p. 70). Furthermore, from the customer perspective, all branding efforts are tied together by this connective device (Kelly, 2017, p. 25). Seen as a ‘graphical counterpart of the place name’ (Mueller & Schade, 2012), the logo nowadays constitutes an umbrella term, including name and/or symbol (Dunkl, 2011).

However, further categorization must be considered, as literature uses different approaches, which seem dynamic and vary depending on the angle of the discipline. Dunkl (2011, p. 95f) differentiates between two types: a signet and a signet with the addition of lettering. The first consists of a symbol, and the second, most common form is a combination of signet and lettering. Moreover, he suggests the use of the legal trademark term, which incorporates three types: the pictorial mark, the combination mark and the wordmark. The first is a signet and is protected at the patent office. In the combination mark, the design of the wording, with or without a signet, equals the logo. The last type is independent of its graphical form and just uses a common font, as it is the name, which is patented. Adams et al., (2004) suggested the use of three categorizations: wordmark, symbol and monogram, presenting the same content with different designations.

Still, a differentiation can be made through descriptiveness (more vs less), ‘the extent to which the textual and/or visual design elements of a logo are indicative of the type of product a brand markets’ (Luffarelli et al., 2019, p. 862). A survey by Luffarelli et al. (2019) found that more descriptive logos may have a positive effect on brand equity, as they are easier to process and are associated with authenticity (p. 874). Other findings claim symbols as logos have higher effectiveness in benefitting self-identity and expressiveness compared to wordmarks (Park et al., 2013). Especially in comparison to simple logos that consist of words only, pictures can direct associations in a certain direction and result in a higher memorable and attention effect (Herbst, 1998). Bresciani and Del Ponte (2017) also point out the enhanced attractiveness of two component brands induced by the icon.

A concept borrowed from psychology that may be applied to identify ‘good logos’ is that of gestalt principles (Khamis et al., 2023). As some logos do a better job than others, the following design principles, drawing on Gestalt Theory were detected: naturalness, simplicity, harmony, parallelism and proportion (Rodriguez et al., 2013, p. 96). According to the authors, the intention to visit could be initiated by high and medium gestalt principle logos.

At this point, it is important to state that communication must be target-group-oriented to be effective; this includes the design of the logo. The concept of ‘involvement’ proves relevant in these terms, as it distinguishes between low- and high-involvement consumers. The involvement reveals itself in personal importance (Kantanen & Tikkanen, 2005). The first type does not gather much information about the product; it is more about the category. However, the product is part of the lifestyle for high-involved customers, and they are eager to learn more about it (Lockshin & Spawton, 2001). To summarise, ‘The depth of experience refers to emotional experience produced by a cultural attraction’ (Kantanen & Tikkanen, 2005, p. 103). In the early stages with low involvement levels, visuals in tourism promotion seem to have essential effects on the tourists’ decision to visit. These visuals may be significantly based on symbolic elements (Fesenmaier & MacKay, 1996).

Contributing not only to a destination’s visibility but also to transparency or authenticity (Kladou et al., 2017), another aspect comes into play: integrating distinctive and unique landscape elements into logos. Landscapes have always shaped locals’ scenery; they are constant and visible stimuli residents can refer to and identify with. Further, a landscape's natural character can be considered authentic per se,
constituting an essential step for creating strong destination brand logos. The following chapter will therefore pay special attention to the concept of landscapes and their graphical representations in logos, as well as place identity as a connecting element.

3. Landscape: a promising concept?

3.1 Aesthetic landscapes

Landscapes have been the academic focus since Alexander von Humboldt identified landscape as one of geography’s main research focuses; thereby, definitions vary by discipline and over time. Fochler-Hauke (1968) points out international linguistic differences, emphasising the definition of landscapes as ‘types’, whereas ‘land’ is seen in its uniqueness as an individual. The Council of Europe 2000 defines landscape as ‘an area, as perceived by people and tourists, whose character is the result of the action and interaction of natural and/or human factors’. This definition states the dichotomy that prevails in geography today: the division between cultural landscape and natural landscape (Leser, 2001). The term ‘cultural landscape’, coined by Ratzel and used in the early 20th century by German geographers (Jones, 2003), incorporates human influence on the environment and is closely connected to the idea of UNESCO World Heritage Sites. The understanding of natural landscapes as being ‘without human influence’ often seems subjective and varies by author, which is also reflected in the discourse of the Anthropocene, yet landscapes were early objects of desire in art and aesthetics. In contrast, urban landscapes have not been conceptualised on the same level (Kirillova et al., 2014). These phenomena also reflect destination managers’ dilemma of whether to build their strategy and USP on natural or cultural assets (Richardson & Cohen, 1993; Lee et al., 2005), often revealed by the logo.

Another concept linked to landscape visuals is aesthetics. Destinations can also be seen as aesthetic products (Kirillova et al., 2014). Therefore, landscapes, as a primary tourist product environment (Benur & Bramwell, 2015), have an essential role. Many diverse sciences, such as philosophy, environmental psychology, urban design, general management and service management, have addressed aesthetics as a topic of interest (Kirillova et al., 2014).

On the one hand, the perceived beauty of landscapes in tourist destinations seems rather subjective, as it may lie in the eye of the beholder. On the other hand, findings indicate that the aesthetic contrast to a tourist’s home environment influences their satisfaction and aesthetic judgement (Kirillova & Lehto, 2015). In this respect, the authors claim that a link could be drawn between a destination perceived as aesthetic and feelings of loyalty, motivation and behaviour (Kirillova & Lehto, 2015). Further, the level of experience or involvement influences overall perception in terms of attachment (MacKay & Fesenmaier, 1997). Moreover, the concept of familiarity plays an important role. Familiarity with natural scenery was seen as more positive than landmarks, which were rated as less-exciting destinations (Olson et al., 1986). Additionally, in terms of well-being and identity, people recognize similar identity-forming patterns like processes and structures in natural landscapes (Morgan et al., 2011). Thereby, the intensity of one’s established identity is influenced by ‘an attractive environment offering aesthetic pleasure’ (Morgan et al., 2011), as the following graphic illustrates.

![Aesthetics and built environment diagram](image)

**Fig 1. Effects of aesthetics on city competitiveness. Source: Amended from Morgan et al., 2011, p. 119**

To sum up, the concept of landscape is closely connected to the principles of aesthetics, which go beyond the surface, influencing tourists’ behaviour and feelings (well-being, happiness). Figure 1 illustrates
a participative and locals-seen-as-stakeholders-approach, where aesthetics may contribute to a destination’s attractiveness and competitiveness (Morgan et al., 2011; Lee et al., 2012), as well as the visitor’s loyalty (Lee et al., 2012). Thereby, ‘through a discursive lens, local people are simultaneously identified as sources, co-creators and beneficiaries of aesthetic environments’ (Kirillova & Wassler, 2019, p. 153), acknowledging the importance of locals as stakeholders in aesthetics and attractiveness.

3.2 Landscapes fostering place identity

This approach will be deepened further by the regional development point of view, as landscapes play a decisive role in regional identity due to their use ‘contextually in practices, rituals and discourses to construct narratives of more or less closed, imagined identities’ (Paasi, 2003, p. 477). This identity can also be defined as ‘processual identification’ (Krönert & Hepp, 2015), yet the object of identification is not the space per se. It functions as a projection surface of spatial images, which can be seen as ‘ideas about one’s own living environment’ (Jekel, 1998). Another definition by Weichhart (1990) speaks of the ‘mental representation and emotional-affective evaluation of those spatial sections of the environment that an individual includes in his self-concept, perceives as part of himself’ (p. 23). Furthermore, identity-building is based on ‘[…] safety and reliability of the environmental assessment and with consistent experience’ (Weichhart, 2000, p. 63), highlighting the importance of experience and participation. Life quality, which is interrelated with aesthetics, as illustrated, can be seen as one cause of regional identity (Mühler & Opp, 2006). The last argument is supported by Kost (2013), who states that to establish a positive connection to a place, it has to be aesthetically appealing and offer many potential activities. Thus, a region’s distinctive landscape functions as a common ground locals can refer to. It can also be seen as a code, operating at a collective and personal level through experiences, memories and actions, on which the foundations of attachment and image are based (Assmann, 2018; Kost, 2013).

Further positive experience and affiliation are vital in creating a place identity. Thus, participation can be seen as a way of experience. Consequently, participative place-branding strategies should be chosen to foster identification. Kavaratzis (2017) provides especially innovative approaches through the ‘participative branding model’, where residents are also seen as the crucial target group of branding actions due to their various and essential functions. If a place identity is established, which is not existent a priori but something that can be induced (Mühler & Opp, 2006), positive effects will result in commitment, satisfaction and even the intention to stay (Zenker & Petersen, 2010). For these reasons, tourists and residents can function as consumers and producers (Seidel, 2016). Residents can be brand ambassadors, contributing to awareness and image building, thus constituting a significant asset (Kavaratzis et al., 2015). In relation to this, Mueller and Schade (2012) stress the coding of identity into symbols (name, logo, rituals) as a crucial precondition for the group to express belonging and existence. Thereby, the concept of landscape offers a promising opportunity to act as a symbol of belonging or place identity, as its value lies beneath the surface: ‘[…] it has been pointed out that symbols are not just entities essential to signify the existence of a group, but means to express the underlying identity values and beliefs of that group. Although a symbol like a place logo is able to express a certain amount of information by its graphic design, its meaning as a symbol of belonging to a city or of being part of the group of local place branding stakeholders does not derive from the graphic layout’ (Mueller & Schade, 2012, p. 89–90).

3.3 Landscape elements in brands and visuals

Regarding landscape elements in brands, literature (Jordi de San et al., 2017) distinguishes between ‘landscape branding’ and ‘brandscape’. The former describes the spatial delimitation of place brands through landscapes, whereas ‘brandscape’ is understood as a large space of brand consumption. In marketing this term refers to the landscape or environment in which a brand operates, interacts, and is perceived by consumers. It’s a concept that goes beyond just the visual representation of a brand and encompasses the entire experience and context in which a brand exists (Sherry and Sherry, 1998; Oswald, 2020).
These ‘brandscapes’ can be among others physical spaces, cultural contexts or associations and perceptions that consumers have about the brand. The definition of landscape as a symbolic representation of the territory and tool for ‘territorial narratives usually linked to scenic imaginaries’ (Nogué & Jordi de San, 2017) seems most suitable in this case. According to this definition, a landscape’s imageability is used to evoke territorial and visual narratives, meeting the need for storytelling, which builds on the familiar and the ability to create share-worthy content for social media, as it implies experience (Nogué & Jordi de San, 2017). Storytelling is not a recent phenomenon used for evoking feelings, fascination, interaction and in marketing realms. It has long been a tool for giving people a deeper sense of life (Fog et al., 2010), illustrating its importance. In the tourism industry, travel is also ‘[…] about consuming and producing narratives; it is about narrative identity and entitlement’ (Noy, 2012, p. 135), which is evident in today’s social media behavioural patterns. Today, visitors become storytellers themselves, acting as ambassadors, which fuels the assumption that destination brands increasingly constitute a product based on storytelling and touristic experiences on social media rather than the marketer’s sophisticated strategies (Lund et al., 2018, p. 271).

The concept of aesthetics also applies when the question of what is beautiful (or not) and what will be shared arises. Interestingly, what is perceived as beautiful depends on the context of the landscape, as cultural settings seem more vibrant if people are present. In contrast, natural landscapes are perceived as less beautiful if this is the case (Kirillova et al., 2014). This phenomenon is underlined by travellers’ representations of natural landscapes on Instagram, where nature is presented as untouched and authentic by intentionally cutting out evidence that tells a different story.

The power of visuals in tourism to communicate a desired image (MacKay & Fesenmaier, 1997) is undoubted. Research confirms that visuals communicate information more effectively than words regarding memories and impressions (Anderson, 1995). However, the portrayed subject must be chosen carefully to evoke emotions. Experience and familiarity, as mentioned, can prove helpful. As MacKay and Fesenmaier (1997) claim, ‘High levels of experience with a natural setting were associated with symbolic attachments to the visuals. Participants with high levels of familiarity also projected beyond what was presented in the pictorial stimuli’ (p. 559). Therefore, not just the experience alone but also related narratives and symbols, which seem to imply experience and participation, can foster identification and the feeling of belonging (Mueller & Schade, 2012).

4. Good practices of landscape elements in tourism brands

The following chapter scrutinises the presence of landscape elements in selected Austrian destination brand logos, analysing the top 50 destinations based on overnight stays in both summer and winter destinations. Good practices will be presented and discussed in more detail.

4.1 Method

In order to analyse landscape elements in strong destination’s logos on the Austrian market, national statistics at municipality level were used, resulting in the selection of Austria’s top 50 destinations, based on their overnight stays pre-Covid in both summer (2019) and winter season (2018–2019) followed by a multidimensional visual content analysis presented in figure 2.
In the first step, the selected raw material (logos containing landscape elements) was subjected to a qualitative content analysis to identify and evaluate design patterns and landscape elements in an inductive approach (figure 2). Hereby, a distinction is made between formulating and reflecting interpretation, i.e., immanent meaning and the question of what can be seen in an image and how the contents are represented. The subsequent analysis of logos will differentiate between the level of representation and the level of content in several stages with accompanying questions. In particular, the documentary method according to Bohnsack (2009) ensures a methodically controlled access to an image and is carried out by answering the following questions:

1. Which landscape elements, objects (sights), living beings (humans/animals), seasons, and activities are present?
2. In which form (abstract, concrete, colour design) are landscape elements used?
3. How are the landscape elements arranged (background, as part of lettering, same level)?
4. What fonts are used (capital, normal, bold, decorative), and what is the overall reproducibility?

Hereby, the above-mentioned characteristics were collected and a differentiation of season between winter and summer destinations was made. Next, a scale from one (low) to three (high) was applied for the dependent categories of ‘abstractness’ and ‘reproducibility’. The former illustrates how clearly and realistic the sense of recognition of the landscape elements as such was presented. Whereas reproducibility refers to the logo’s ability to still be recognizable with its landscape elements when downsized. Here, the more complex or overloaded the logos appeared, the more difficult it gets to be reproducible in small formats.

The pursued approach draws on the Gestalt Theory, which can be considered as a ‘scientific way for describing human perception and our inclination to “group” objects’ (Khamis et al., 2023). Originating from psychology, gestalt principles, such as similarity, proximity, figure-ground relationship and closure, can be understood as the organisation of visual stimuli we perceive, contributing to aesthetic appeal and logo recognition (Mohamed & Adiloglu, 2023, p. 33). By pursuing a practical approach, design principles, which are interlinked to the latter and understood as ‘guidelines and frameworks for creating visually pleasing and cohesive designs’ (Mohamed & Adiloglu, 2023, p. 33), were chosen as a tool for further analysis. Hereby, the most common aesthetic design characteristics for good logos according to Rodriguez et al. (2013) were used for the logo’s interpretation. Thereby, ‘harmony’, patterns building on symmetry and balance, as well as ‘proportion’, capturing the essence of the golden section, are directly linked to the gestalt principles (Henderson & Cote, 1998). On the other hand, ‘simplicity’, showcasing the essence using minimal design (Rodriguez et al., 2013) can be indirectly linked to the gestalt principle of ‘proximity’, which profits from a complexity reduction due to grouping (Khamis et al., 2023). This further applies to ‘parallelism’, which features numerous lines or elements arranged in close proximity (Henderson & Cote,
and the gestalt principle of ‘similarity’, involves the recurrence of a particular shape or colour, whereby the shape is not necessarily identical (Fakri et al., 2015). Finally, the design principle of ‘naturalness’, the degree of the design depicting frequently encountered objects (Henderson & Cote, 1998) can in some way relate to the gestalt principle of ‘continuity’, enabling us to recognise patterns and connections (Khamis et al., 2023).

In our analysis, ‘naturalness’ is addressed by the presence of landscape elements in the place brand’s logos. In order to analyse ‘simplicity’, the font arrangement, its type, and abstractiveness were studied. The principle of ‘harmony’ is reflected through the colour scheme, and ‘parallelism’ is revealed through the elements’ arrangement. Finally, the last principle, ‘proportion’, is captured through reproducibility.

In the second step, a selection of five top ten destination’s logos illustrating different ways of incorporating landscape elements into their logos referring to the incorporation of gestalt and design principles is presented. In order to place a judgement on the extent to which logos follow these principles, a communicative validation by three researchers and two professionals in tourism marketing consulting (‘member check’) was applied. Hereby a scale from 1 (low) to 5 (high principles representation) was used for each category.

4.2 Analysis

Of the 50 top Austrian destination logos at community level, 40% incorporate landscape elements. In the winter season of 2018/2019, that share increased to 44%, which suggests the importance of nature-based activities in the Austrian tourism market. In comparison, the share was lower in the summer of 2019 (36%).

The popularity of mountains as prevailing Alpine characteristics in both seasons (see Figure 3), may reflect the Austrian overall goal to be perceived as an all-year destination. The distribution of the other elements seems equal, whereas summer destinations show a slightly higher variety. When analysing the type of brand that incorporates landscape elements, the share of the combination mark turns out to be 100% in both seasons. Austrian destination brands not incorporating landscape elements mainly use word-marks based on toponyms.
On average three colours were used whereas summer destinations show higher numbers of colour variety, as they do so regarding landscape elements. Winter destinations seem to be more minimalistic. When it comes to colours, white (90.9%), blue (63.6%) and red (45.5%) dominate. In comparison, white is used in every summer destination’s logo, followed by blue (66.7%) and green (33.3%). Moreover, it can be observed that the use of different shades of the same colour is very popular.

Regarding the writing style of the place names, capital letters are used more often than minuscule letters (45%). Slogans are displayed in the opposite direction in lower case letters. In addition, the analysis shows that the destination logos in most cases constitute regional umbrella brands on the community level as well (87.6%), as opposed to exclusively local brands. This result is not surprising, as it can be attributed to Austrian Tourism Strategy, aiming to minimise smaller destination brands to gain a unified image under an umbrella brand and prevent small structures and their additional organisational expenses. However, local logos are still used as an exception, as is the case for certain city brands.

Reproducibility goes hand in hand with the detailed elaboration of the landscape elements. The reproducibility cannot generally be rated as very high, as more than 50% of the summer and winter destinations score very low. Simple logos, which can easily be reproduced on a small scale (see merchandise) without any content or graphical element loss, just account for 17.5%.

The analysis of the alignment of the landscape elements shows half of the logos displaying landscapes at the same level as the destination’s name and a prevailing left alignment – for winter destinations the mountains are often represented in the logos’ background (36.4%). Finally, highly abstract representations of landscape elements are most common in both seasons (40%). However, 44.4% of those who chose a middle ground in terms of abstraction, can be attributed to summer destinations due to their complexity.

In the following, a selection of Austrian examples of strong destination brands is presented based on their ranking among the top 10 in overnight stays. In the second step, 5 examples were selected from this ranking to illustrate a broad and varying picture of landscape elements in Alpine logos. On the one hand, aspects such as the size of the destination (local versus regional or rural versus urban), the seasonality of tourism (winter sports, year-round destinations), but also the presentation of the logo and its design, were included in this final selection.
Obertauern, a destination which reached 965,772 overnight stays in the winter half-year 2018/19 and therefore ranked in 8th position among Austrian’s top 10 winter destinations (Statistik Austria, 2020), has a clear and structured brand presence. The colour family in the logo contains three colours, blue, red and white, therefore not presenting an exaggerated multiple colour scheme and showing its closeness to the Austrian national brand’s colouring in red and white. Its landscape element, the relief of the mountains of ‘Hohe Tauern’, is graphically indicated. The capital letters have an unemotional but memorable appearance, whereas the reproducibility is rated low due to its complexity. Under the aspects of gestalt and design principles, this logo stands out by the latter and the well-visible landscape element, which is not too abstract but rather simple.

Mayrhofen, a destination brand which ranks 10th (868,530) among winter destinations (Statistik Austria, 2020), pursues a different strategy. Here, the place’s name is supplemented by its topographic location. The name, which is written in capital letters, exceeds the logo’s background elements. The shape is reminiscent of the traditional municipal coat of arms. The content is built around four core elements: mountains, sun, green fields and a river, representing its thematic focus of outdoor sports (skiing, hiking, rafting) in both seasons. Here, five base colours exist (white, black, yellow, green, and light blue). Its flashy appearance plays well with merchandise products, yet, such logos often fail when it comes to downscaling advertising material due to their complexity. Additionally, the logo does not appear harmonious and simple. Therefore, it is not as appealing as the first logo in terms of gestalt and design principles.

This logo may be classified as a wordmark at first glance, but it does, like all other examples presented here, count as a combination mark. Graphical elements represent the region’s mountains. In contrast to the previous examples, the landscape element is integrated into the lettering, leaving a mere abstract impression for the viewer. The colour scheme consists of white and green, which aligns with the Styrian umbrella brand Styria Tourism, communicating its affiliation and closeness to nature. Its simplicity and strong statement due to the capital letters make it a perfect applicable logo for merchandise products on any scale. Its colour and abstract but simple form draw a harmonious picture. This logo scores the most regarding reproducibility, simplicity and colour harmony. Due to the abstractiveness of the landscape...
element, the principle of naturalness is considered lower than in the rest of the logos. This destination is ranked 6th place in winter and among the top 10 in the summer season, its design does also underline its applicability to both seasons.

City brands present another possibility of how landscape elements (in a broader sense) can be integrated into logo graphics. In this case, Salzburg has integrated its skyline dotted with UNESCO-certified old town buildings (castle, dome) and the fortress mountain in the background. The colour scheme includes four main colours: black, grey, white and red. Target-group-oriented, the cityscape’s outlines address cultural (day) tourists. In contrast to the other presented destinations, this logo incorporates manifold elements, as the old town as a whole can be seen as a USP; therefore, no standalone special building was selected in this case. The additional use of a slogan affects simplicity and reproducibility. Salzburg is ranked second in summer season and 5th in winter, constituting a year-round destination.

Last but not least among Austria’s top 5 winter destinations ranking fourth based on overnight stays is Ischgl. Contrary to the case of Schladming, the lettering only insinuates the cragged mountain range of the Silvretta aligned with the red of the Tyrolian umbrella brand and bordering Silvretta Montafon destination. According to the accompanying slogan, Ischgl chooses sharper edges to represent the ruggedness of the mountain peaks in addition to the thrill of sports and apres-ski. This is a very abstract example, yet due to its edgy character, it is not considered as simple and harmonious as Schladming-Dachstein. Further, good reproducibility is given with certain limits due to the use of a slogan.

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<tr>
<th>Destination</th>
<th>Scored Points (max. 25)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Schladming-Dachstein</td>
<td>22</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ischgl</td>
<td>16</td>
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<tr>
<td>Obertauern</td>
<td>15</td>
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<td>Salzburg</td>
<td>13</td>
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<td>Mayrhofen</td>
<td>9</td>
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Considering an overall assessment of the presented destination logos, Schladming-Dachstein scores most in gestalt and design principles, although landscape elements in terms of natural representation are scarcely realised. In the latter category, Mayrhofen as well as Obertauern rank first, followed by Salzburg with its urban-mountain scenery. The most conceptual and abstract design is definitely Ischgl.

5. Discussion

As the analysis revealed, mountains are the most common and distinctive landscape element in the top 50 Austrian summer and winter destination brands. They have a strikingly high value and identification potential in Alpine areas. This applies to both summer- and winter-oriented destinations. However, seasonality in the use of landscape elements like rivers, green fields and lakes could be detected due to
its presence and associated colour schemes, mostly in summer destinations logos. This may be related to Austria’s background and image as a famous winter and skiing destination, which was also reflected in the shares of arrivals and nights. However, since 2019 (Statistik Austria, 2020), summer tourism has gained more economical relevance than winter tourism, reinforcing the need to address both target groups at once.

Furthermore, as it could be observed in the Austrian case, Alpine destinations make the most use of combination marks, including lettering and a signet. The use of landscape elements in place brands further illustrates their delimitation to ordinary brands, as place brands make use of their natural assets by displaying them and consequently fostering their symbolic value. As Eisenstein (2021) states and social media content of Austrian destinations highlights, having an intact environment maintains a competitive advantage that is more relevant today than ever. Hence, 40% of the top 50 Austrian destinations rely on the visual representation of their surroundings reaching those with no experience with the brand as well as regulars and residents. Within the top 10 destinations, we can observe that those in the winter ranking show a distinctively higher share (50%) of landscape elements’ appearance than those in summer (30%). This may indicate the existing association of mountains with winter or winter sports instead of them being considered a summer destination. Furthermore, the analysis confirmed that the landscape’s wide-ranging character is also perfectly suitable for umbrella brands at the regional level (e.g., Schladming-Dachstein).

Today, many brands use a variety of colour schemes for different graphic purposes for their logos to become more flexible in their communication. Particularly, the summer destinations presented here choose a more complex colour scheme in order to display different landscape elements. As the survey further revealed, multi-colouring (most commonly three colours) prevails in contrast to strong international product brands like Coca-Cola, Kellogg’s or Nike, where a maximum of two colours are in use. This may constitute a competitive disadvantage due to the displayed complexity and reduced reproducibility.

Overall, landscape elements in place brand logos do especially address locals, which can be seen as a competitive advantage, as these elements reflect ‘real’ and authentic landscapes in a place the locals can refer to and have already established a meaningful link to. Still, especially Alpine areas risk excessive use of interchangeable landscape elements (as they often simply portray steep rocks instead of identifiable local mountainscapes).

6. Conclusion

To reveal the connection between logos, landscape and branding, this paper is framed within the sphere of identity-based destination management, landscape aesthetics and graphic analysis.

As illustrated in Figure 11, the paper stresses that the landscape’s functions are manifold and tightly interrelated to the concept of place-based identity on the one hand and to identity-based destination management on the other. Landscapes thereby act as projection surfaces (Weichhart, 1990) and as symbols of place-based identity (Mueller & Schade, 2012), evoking emotions, longings, and a sense of belonging not only among locals. A process that is further strengthened by the connected principles of aesthetics. These insights can further be used in branding realms when drawing on the concept of H2H marketing (Kotler, Pförtsch & Sponholz, 2022). Landscape is hereby common and in use as a symbol, in the form of a graphic element visualised in the first contact point and impression (Mueller & Schade, 2012), the logos.

Emphasising Kavaratzis’s (2017) participatory branding approach, participation and the commitment of both, the visitors and the locals, are key for long-term success. By doing so, identity-based destination management could be based on a location-based identity, which in turn uses the landscape as a projection surface and builds on it, resulting in a symbolic representation in the shape of the logo. Thereby we can observe a processual and repetitive cycle, supplemented by concepts of aesthetics, storytelling, and authenticity, which are best combined and reflected in the overall concept of landscape.
Based on these arguments, if the destinations feature relevant landscapes, it is highly recommended to make use of them by integrating it into their logos. This proves to be especially relevant for nature-based tourism destinations, which first were dominant forms in alpine areas (Steinecke, 2006). In the last twenty years, rural areas, where not only tourists are looking for inspiration and activity in nature, have also gained popularity (Wanhill & Buhalis, 1999). Thereby, the way of integration and abstractivity of its presentation may vary. Yet, besides too complex overwhelming logos, the integration of landscape elements seems still to be the better choice than following the sector’s too minimalistic trends in graphic designs, as, obviously, there is a risk of implementing interchangeable stereotypes into destination brands. Here, further research on which landscape elements seem most appealing to certain target groups could be conducted (since the understanding and feeling of aesthetics may depend on subjective preferences and may vary between target groups). The findings of such research could also prove useful when linked to the acceptance of residents. Further, the landscape elements have to apply to both, winter and summer season in order to present the place as a year-round destination, which is gaining more and more relevance in adaptive concepts. Also, it is advised to use a colour scheme which harmonises and in the best case picks up the umbrella brand’s colours. When considering the gestalt principles and integrating landscape elements accordingly, the locals’ identification with the brand is higher. This can be fostered further by applying these findings across services as well as in merchandise products (e.g., souvenirs, fashion).

Finally, this study not only presents an academic discussion about the connection between branding and landscape aesthetics but also addresses economic and societal aspects of the underestimated projection of local and regional values as part of identity-based destination branding. In this sense, it is surprising that not more than 40% of the top 50 Austrian destinations incorporate landscape elements in their logos. It is especially surprising from the point of view of both destination management and product marketing, as landscapes are a key selling point in tourism, especially in the case of the Austrian Alpine space. There is a risk of implementing interchangeable stereotypes into destination brands. Here, further research on landscape elements’ appealingness to particular tourist target groups is needed to enhance the understanding of possible linkages to the residents’ acceptance.

Nevertheless, these assets still constitute an underrated and mostly unexploited potential for identity-based destination management for the given reasons, as in the best case, they can even develop into USPs if the destination achieves a certain level of consciousness about their scenery.
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Academic references


**Other sources**


