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# Destination branding through local food products:

The case of Südtirol / Alto Adige

by

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# Abstract

**Title:** Destination branding through local food products: The case of Südtirol / Alto Adige

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**Keywords:** Destination branding, food tourism, inverse country of origin, stakeholder collaboration, Südtirol / Alto Adige

**Thesis purpose:** The purpose of this thesis is to investigate the relationship between local food products and destinations. More specifically, this thesis aims to research how local food is used as a differentiating tool in destination branding.

**Methodology:** A qualitative study was conducted to achieve the research aim. The thesis used a case study method on the destination branding of Südtirol / Alto Adige by gathering and thematically analysing primary and secondary data.

**Theoretical perspective:** A conceptual framework was developed by carrying out destination branding adaptations to a pre-existing branding framework. The adapted framework showcases the journey of a destination brand, from brand identity to brand image.

**Empirical data:** The researchers collected primary and secondary data in relation to the destination branding of Südtirol / Alto Adige. Primary data were collected under the forms of semi-structured interviews with seven professionals associated with the destination. Secondary data were collected under the form of official reports carried out by Südtirol's / Alto Adige's official destination management organisation.

**Findings / Conclusion:** This case study shows how Südtirol / Alto Adige stakeholders, including local food producers, the destination management organisation and restaurant owners use local food products to market the destination as a place that is characterised by pleasure and well-being. Furthermore, this thesis shows that local food is used in Südtirol / Alto Adige to communicate the destination's unique culture and traditions. Finally, an important finding is that stakeholder interaction and collaboration are present throughout the entire branding process of the destination.

**Practical implications:** This thesis shows that destination brand identity can be used as a guiding principle for stakeholders of a destination. The study shows that local food products can help to differentiate destination brands, which is why destination managers should leverage this phenomenon to market a destination differently from competitors.

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*Alla nostra cara Italia, radice del nostro passato, gioia del nostro presente e bussola del nostro futuro.*

*To our dear Italy, the root of our past, the joy of our present and the compass of our future.*

We would like to dedicate this thesis to Italy, our home-country. In fact, our passion for food and Italian cuisine and food culture were the elicitors for writing this thesis. Being passionate about food and sharing an interest in the tourism and travel industry have motivated us to investigate the relationship between food products and tourist destinations.

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May, 2020

Florian Felder



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## **Keywords**

COO: abbreviation for country of origin effect

DMO: abbreviation for destination management organisation

IDM: destination management organisation in charge of the branding strategy of Südtirol / Alto Adige with headquarters in Bozen / Bolzano

Quality mark: label which is granted to local food products from Südtirol / Alto Adige which satisfy specific quality and origin criteria. Graphically the label recalls the umbrella brand of the destination, indicating a link between destination brand and local food products

Ski hut: typically wooden construction that perform the function of a restaurant at high altitudes for skiers in winter and hikers in sum

Speck Südtirol / Alto Adige IGP: typical charcuterie product (pork) from Südtirol / Alto Adige, characterised by its dry-cured production process and lightly-smoked taste

# 1. Introduction

In this chapter, we describe the background of our thesis and the current state of research on destination branding and food tourism and we identify a research gap. Based on this gap, we present our research question and the aim of our thesis. The chapter finishes with an outline of the thesis.

## 1.1 Background

The origin of products is a key ingredient used to differentiate and market products. In particular, when it comes to the food sector, the origin of a product plays an important role when marketing and differentiating food products (Marcoz, Melewar & Dennis, 2016). The origin of a product and its influence on consumers is academically known as country of origin effect (COO), whereby consumers' perceptions of a certain product are influenced by the associations of the country where the product originates from (Johnson, Tian & Lee, 2016). However, in the same way that the country of origin can influence consumers' perceptions of a product, some products may influence how the country where these products originate from is perceived. This is an important aspect to consider when it comes to the management of destination brands, as they strongly rely on the image tourists have about the destination. Furthermore, while tourists generally experience a destination as a package, the management of destinations is typically the result of a co-creation amongst several stakeholders (Engl, 2017). Hence, when discussing destination-specific products that influence and contribute to the formation of a destination brand image, producers of these products have, alongside other actors operating at a destination, an influence on the destination brand image. The collaboration of several stakeholders at a tourism destination represents a significant challenge when managing and establishing a consistent destination brand. For instance, if Luisa enjoys coffee from Brazil, this will improve her perception of Brazil as a tourist destination (Felder & Macelloni, 2020a). A coffee producer from Brazil can thus, even though not part of the tourism management of Brazil, influence how the country is perceived, as coffee acts as an ambassador for the destination. In the existing literature, the effect whereby products specific to a country influence the perception of that country is known as the inverse country of origin effect (White, 2012).

## 1.2 Problematisation and research aim

As stated in the previous section, the origin of products plays a key role when differentiating and marketing products (Marcoz, Melewar & Dennis, 2016). Not surprisingly, the country of origin effect (COO) was extensively discussed in previous literature.



A more specific form of COO was described by van Ittersum, Candel and Meulenberg (2003) as region of origin effect. The authors refer to region as a specific geographical area within a nation and to the region of origin as the effect whereby the origin of a product from a specific region influences the perception of that product (Felder & Macelloni, 2020b, p.9).

For instance, if a person perceives Tuscany as a region that is home to high-quality red wine, his/her perception of red wine with origin from Tuscany will be positively influenced. Given the existence of the COO in a regional context, the question arises as to whether the inverse COO is applicable when referring to regions. Specifically, one may ask if and how a region's local food product can influence the image of the region it comes from. Going back to the example of red wine from Tuscany, the question would be how red wine influences the brand image of Tuscany as a region.

Given the constant growth of tourism worldwide (Statista, 2019) and the fact that many regions around the world are tourist destinations with characteristic food products, it is worthwhile to investigate how the inverse region of origin effect influences destination branding. Stated differently, it is important to analyse the effect and use of characteristic food products within a destination branding context. Based on the notion of region of origin effect and its importance within the food sector (van Ittersum, Candel & Meulenberg, 2003), we decided to analyse the role of food products in destination branding.

Lin, Pearson and Cai (2011) state that food has been used to develop destination brands, arguing that food offers a way for destination managers to develop a destination identity. Berg and Sevón (2014) have also observed more frequent use of food, meals and gastronomy within place branding. The authors state that a place does not only affect the experience of food in that place but also that food affects the character of the place and its brand image. This confirms the previously mentioned phenomena of COO and inverse COO within the tourism context (Felder & Macelloni, 2020b, p.10).

Although previous literature highlighted the links between food and tourism, particularly when talking about food tourism, a research gap appears to exist when it comes to how the inverse COO of local food products is used within destination branding. In other words, there appears to be research potential on the mechanisms of how local food products are used in destination branding. Based on this research gap, we have developed the following research question:

*How is local food used by destination branding as a differentiating tool?*

In order to provide a more practical understanding of the relationship between local food and destination branding, our thesis focuses on the case study of the destination branding of Südtirol / Alto Adige, a specific area in Northern Italy where local food products are at the core of the destination branding strategy. Although the destination has an English nomenclature (South Tyrol), we will refer to the destination as Südtirol / Alto Adige, respectively by its German and Italian names, which are the ones more frequently used. Südtirol / Alto Adige is particularly well-suited to study how local food is used in destination branding for two reasons. Firstly,

Südtirol / Alto Adige has a very characteristic cuisine and food culture. The unique cuisine of Südtirol / Alto Adige, with elements of both Italian and Austrian food culture, is a key ingredient for developing a destination branding strategy centred around local food products. In other words, the presence of a distinct cuisine and typical local food products provides the basis for developing Südtirol's / Alto Adige's destination branding strategy through local food products. Secondly, tourism is a key sector of Südtirol's / Alto Adige's economy, with 33 million overnight stays in 2018 (IDM, 2019). Given the economic importance of tourism in Südtirol / Alto Adige and taking into account the constant growth of tourism on a global level (Statista, 2019), it is of utter importance to investigate how a destination branding strategy with local food at its core is implemented.

Furthermore, given that the management of destinations and tourism in general are typically characterised by the participation of several different actors, our focus lies on how these different stakeholders jointly use local food to brand and to differentiate the destination brand. Applied to our case study, the aim is to investigate how different stakeholders, such as the destination management organisation, restaurant owners and food producers, use local food products to brand and to differentiate the destination Südtirol / Alto Adige.

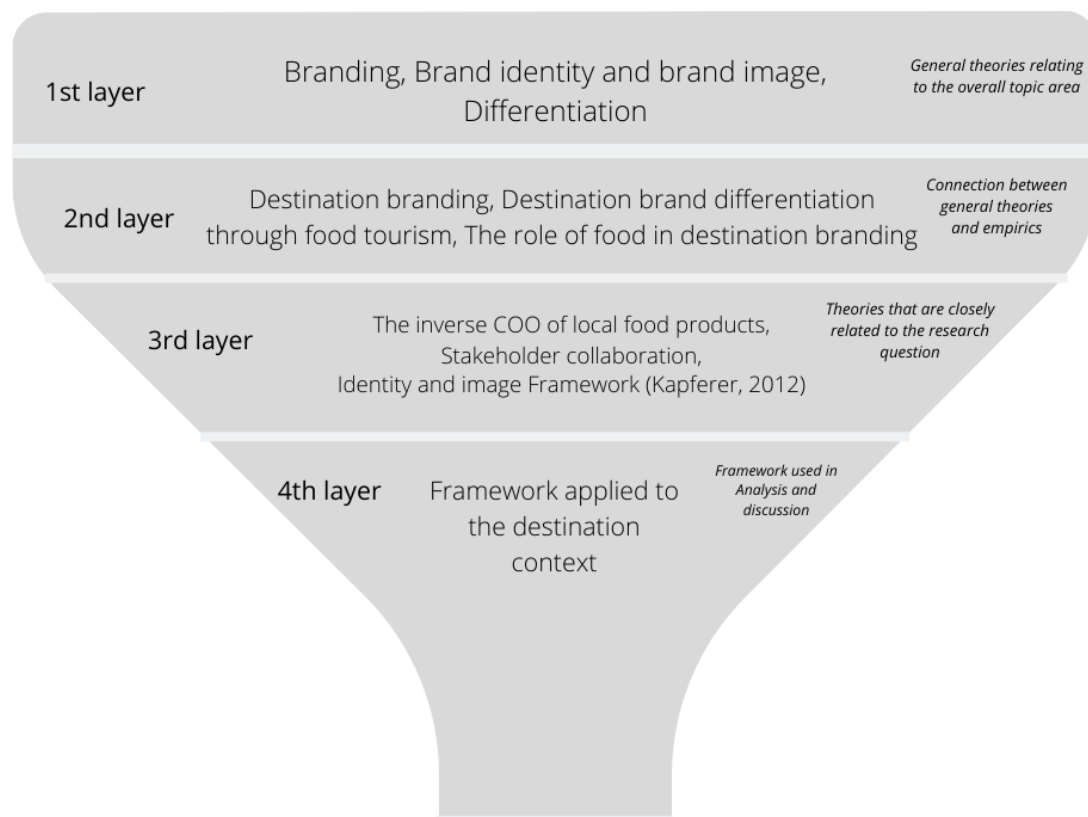
### 1.3 Outline of the thesis

This thesis begins by critically reviewing existing literature in chapter two, which is structured into a funnel characterised by four layers. The first two layers are less applied to the research question compared to the last two layers. In fact, the first layer includes general theories, while the second layer aims to connect general theories with the empirics. The third layer is characterised by theories that are closely related to the research question. The fourth and narrowest layer of the literature review funnel includes the brand identity and brand image framework by Kapferer (2012), which is adapted to fit the destination context.

The third chapter covers the methodological aspects of this thesis. In fact, the rationale for choosing an abductive approach and the rationale for adopting a case study as well as background information on the destination Südtirol / Alto Adige are provided. Chapter four, namely Analysis and discussion, presents the findings that emerged from the interviews with the seven participants and critically discusses, assesses and compares the findings with the existing literature from chapter two. Finally, chapter five concerns the conclusion and theoretical as well as managerial contributions of this thesis. Chapter five and this thesis end by including the limitations and the recommendations for future research.

## 2. Literature review

This chapter outlines the theoretical background of this study, as it includes the existing theories that will guide us throughout the research. The chapter has a funnel structure, as seen in Figure 1, in order to provide the reader with an in-depth understanding of the specific study. The University of Hull (n.d.) suggests following the literature review funnel by including in the first layer theories that have more to do with the topic area than with the research question. For this reason, the first layer of our literature review includes general theories such as branding, brand identity, and brand image as well as brand differentiation. In the second layer of the funnel, we connect the general theories to the empirics, namely we enter the context of destinations. Thus, we present theories related to destination branding, destination brand identity, and destination brand image as well as destination brand differentiation. Given that in our case study of destination branding in Südtirol / Alto Adige food plays a central role, the concepts of food tourism and the role of food in destination branding are also discussed in the second layer. In the third layer, we include research that is strictly related to our study. Hence, we introduce the inverse COO of local food products, stakeholder collaboration and Kapferer's (2012) brand identity and image framework. Finally, in the fourth and narrowest layer we present Kapferer's (2012) framework applied and adapted to the context of destination branding which is then used in chapter four to analyse and discuss the findings gathered from the data collection process.



*Figure 1: Literature review funnel*

## 2.1 First layer of the literature review funnel

This layer of the literature review funnel includes the general concepts and theories that are essential for the reader in order to get an understanding of the overall topic area. This section includes theories on branding, brand identity, and brand image as well as brand differentiation.

### 2.1.1 Branding

In order to analyse the multifaceted aspects of branding, one has to start from defining and understanding the wider background of branding. There are various definitions of brands, as Kotler (1991) states that a brand is a name, term, sign, symbol, or design which aims to provide a classification to goods and services to the market. Kotler (1991) also affirms that brands differentiate goods and services from competition. On the other hand, Kapferer (2012) more recently defined a brand as:

a name that symbolises a long-term engagement, crusade or commitment to a unique set of values, embedded into products, services and behaviours, which make the organisation, person or products stand apart or stand out (Kapferer, 2012, p.13).

Therefore, it is noticeable that different definitions exist depending on the year that they were formulated. In fact, there is a shift from identifying the brand as a name that guarantees a product's origin (early definition) to a name that has the power to create a community around its foundations. According to Aaker (1996), a brand has the ability to create more market success than the product itself. In fact, while a product can be copied, a successful brand is unique and as a consequence, it cannot be copied. Furthermore, Aaker (1996) emphasises that successful brands are timeless, while a product can be easily outdated.

Nonetheless, a brand has to carry out extensions if it wants to grow and expand, either through extending its product range or product categories (Kapferer, 2012). The author claims that extensions also shape brand architecture. In fact, once a brand decides to extend its portfolio, this has to follow a brand architecture strategy that better suits its way of managing the extension. Given that this thesis focuses on a destination that follows the umbrella brand strategy as a type of brand architecture, we decided only to provide an account of umbrella branding strategy. This approach can be implemented in two different ways (Kapferer, 2012). In the first type of implementation, brands are liberal with their subsidiaries, while in the second type of approach brands have real control over their subsidiaries. Depending on the type of implementation, there will be different levels of flexibility involved in the strategy, which will have an impact on the performance of the subsidiaries.

### 2.1.2 Brand identity and brand image

Kapferer (2012) highlights that in order to project an image to the audience, a brand firstly needs to know what it wants to project. The message that the brand chooses to project is theoretically known as brand identity. Aaker (1996) states that brand identity offers brands direction, purpose, and meaning and is thus essential for a brand's strategic vision. This goes in line with Wagner and Peters (2009), who explain that brand identity represents what an organisation stands for and it serves as the foundation of brand positioning and as a tool for differentiating a brand. In addition, Aaker (1996) highlights that brand identity is characterised by a core and extended identity. The author emphasises more on the core identity, given that it makes the brand unique and valuable. Therefore, brand identity can be defined as what makes the brand unique, it is the central element of the brand and describes, amongst other characteristics, its vision and values (Aaker, 1996; Hatch & Schultz, 2001; Kapferer, 2012). Brand identity is a concept related to the sender (the firm), hence Yusof, Ismail and Ghazali (2014) define brand identity as "an image wanted by marketers to be projected to the consumers" (Yusof, Ismail & Ghazali, 2014, p.3).

On the other hand, brand image is the gathered opinion about the brand amongst all stakeholders, including customers, the media, shareholders, and the public in general (Hatch & Schultz, 2001). In other words, brand image is how the public perceives a brand. In fact, Hatch and Schultz (2001) suggest that brand image is the opinion that the brand's audience forms once it sees the message delivered by the sender. The result of the receiver's interpretation is the de-codification of all the outputs communicated by the brand through different channels. Therefore, despite the relationship between brand image and brand identity, Lin, Pearson and Cai (2011) suggest they are two different concepts. In fact, the main difference between them relies on the fact that brand identity is formed by the brand itself, while brand image is the perception that the consumer forms about the brand.

### 2.1.3 Brand differentiation

Today's market is increasingly becoming more competitive due to globalisation and there is a need for brands to stand out from the competition. One of the strategies that brands use to differentiate themselves from others is the brand differentiation strategy (Ghauri & Cateora, 2014). As mentioned in the previous section by Wagner and Peters (2009), a strong brand identity can be used to differentiate a brand. In addition, the authors state that having a unique and strong brand identity can help brands to convince the market that they are different from competition.

Ghauri and Cateora (2014) define differentiation as providing consumers with a message which indicates that their brand offers more value than others. If a brand follows a premium differentiation strategy, the consumer has to be convinced that the products that the brand offers are high-quality in order to justify a higher price. Not only has a brand to offer quality in order to differentiate itself, but it also has to show elements of uniqueness. In fact, brand uniqueness

is determined by the assessment that consumers carry out on features that make brands stand out from others (Kemp, Childers & Williams, 2012). Brand uniqueness is often achieved by using advertising or through consumers' past experiences with the brand itself. The higher the degree of brand uniqueness, the higher the price the consumer is willing to pay (Kalra and Goodstein, 1998). This is caused by consumers that associate uniqueness with higher value and superior quality.

## 2.2 Second layer of the literature review funnel

This layer of the literature review funnel integrates the general theories of the first layer with the empirics. More specifically, this means that we move from branding to destination branding, while following the structure of section 2.1.

### 2.2.1 Destination branding

Prior to presenting the core aspects of destination branding, it is necessary to consider how destinations differ from firms. According to Engl (2017), destinations differ from firms in one central aspect, namely in their more limited ability to control several aspects that are important for customers. In other words, the author argues that when managing destinations, many aspects are difficult to control and that the tourist experience is co-produced by several different actors. However, Engl (2017) points out that a traveller experiences the destination as a whole rather than paying attention to the contributions of single actors. For example, a tourist spending one week at a seaside destination in Greece may come across services and products supplied by different actors. These actors may include the hotel where the tourist resides, the municipality in charge of the streets, green areas and safety, tour operators responsible for the provision of leisure activities, restaurants where the tourist eats, museums that are visited, local public transport and so on. If one of these experiences is particularly negative, for instance, if the quality of food is extremely low, the overall experience and perception of Greece as a holiday destination will be negative. From a destination branding perspective, this is an important aspect to consider, as it shows that even though there may be a single destination brand, like in the previous example one brand for the Greek seaside destination, there is not one actor who is in charge of the experience tourists are making. Thus, compared to a firm brand, who is in charge of several aspects such as product development, pricing, distribution, quality, post-purchase assistance, etc., destinations are potentially more challenging to manage because of the contribution of a myriad of actors.

Branding began expanding to the destination context in the 1990s. A theory developed in that decade by Um and Crompton (1990) shows that tourists are expected to choose a destination from a variety of alternatives, known in branding as an evoked set. At a later stage, Tasci and Kozak (2006) state that destinations, just like brands, compete with other destinations to be placed in the consideration set of their target market. In fact, Kerr (2006) defines a destination

brand as a name that is used to identify and differentiate a destination. Kerr (2006) also highlights that a destination brand helps to transmit a memorable travel experience to the audience and it also plays a role in reinforcing pleasurable memories of the destination. On the other hand, Cai (2002) provides another definition of destination branding, which helps to clarify its distinction from the branding of goods and services. Cai (2002) states that destination branding is:

selecting a consistent element mix to identify and distinguish it through positive image building; unlike typical goods and services, the name of a destination brand is relatively fixed by the actual geographic name of the place (Cai, 2002, p.722).

As seen in the definitions by Kerr (2006) and Cai (2002), definitions of destination branding differ from branding in the goods and services sector. In line with this, Kemp, Childers and Williams (2012) explain that destination branding can be more challenging than branding goods and services, given the multidimensional nature of destinations.

In addition, Blain, Levy and Ritchie (2005) state that the promise that a brand makes to its audience is more important in the destination context than in it is in an organisational context. Its importance is given by the fact that a promise can extend the degree of comfort to the destination visitors, as it helps preview their vacation experience. In fact, Blain, Levy and Ritchie (2005) identify a strong destination brand as a promise that conveys quality and, as a result, a strong destination brand is seen as an assurance of quality. Hence, the assurance of quality may also have an impact on all the elements associated with destinations, such as people and products. Nonetheless, strong destination brands are not only ambassadors of quality but also a way of differentiating destinations from their competitors (Morgan, Pritchard & Piggott, 2002).

### 2.2.2 Destination brand identity and destination brand image

There is agreement amongst academics that destination brands have similar characteristics as brands of products and services and that destinations can be branded in the same way as products and services (Anholt, 2003; Cai, 2002; Tasci and Kozak, 2006). Based on this notion, the concepts of brand identity and brand image are applicable in a destination branding context. In the destination branding context, we argue that brand identity refers to the identity of the destination, while brand image refers to how the general public and tourists perceive the destination brand. In fact, Yusof, Ismail and Ghazali (2014) state that destination brand image relates to the tourist's perception of the destination.

An aspect that appears to be essential when referring to destination brand identity and destination brand image is the coordination and collaboration amongst destination stakeholders. As a matter of fact, Tasci and Gartner (2007) suggest that stakeholders play an important role in determining the projection of a unique destination image. Given the

importance of stakeholders in the context of destinations, it is essential to clarify the concept of stakeholder and stakeholder collaboration. In general, stakeholder theory indicates that a brand or an organisation is made up of various stakeholders such as governments, suppliers, workers, and consumers (Freeman, 1984) and that in order to be classified as a stakeholder, the subject has to have an interest in the brand or the organisation's activities. Within the destination context, stakeholders include tour operators, restaurant and hotel owners, area residents, employees and other groups that are part of the destination (Flagestad, 2002). In addition to the destination management organisation (DMO), these destination stakeholders may, for example, through their communication and behaviour, influence how the public perceives the destination.

As previously stated, destinations are characterised by the contribution and interaction of a myriad of actors (Engl, 2017). In such an interactive environment like the destination environment, where various stakeholders communicate and thus shape the brand image, some challenges may arise. For instance, there may be a clashing identity or ambiguous identity because each stakeholder may have its idea of destination identity, thus influencing how visitors perceive a destination (Jenkins, 1999). For this reason, Jenkins (1999) stresses that it is essential for the marketing bodies that manage the image of the destination to provide a well-recognised and precise destination identity. To overcome challenges and misalignments amongst stakeholders, destination brand identity can serve as a general guideline that stakeholders can follow to achieve coherent communication with their audience (Jenkins, 1999). In fact, Lai, Khoo-Lattimore and Wang (2018) highlight the importance for marketers to identify a precise destination identity and to conserve it. Furthermore, the authors highlight that the consistency of identity and communication should be examined and managed by DMOs. For example, if a destination has tradition as the cornerstone of its brand identity, various stakeholders of a destination may be encouraged to design their communication in line with the concept of tradition. Ideally, consumers that are receiving the messages that are communicated in relation to the destination should end up forming a destination brand image where the element of tradition is present.

On the issue of who is in charge of brand identity, Lin, Pearson and Cai (2011) highlight that the DMO should coordinate brand identity amongst all stakeholders. In other words, the authors suggest that the DMO should be responsible for defining brand identity, which can then guide other stakeholders of a destination, such as hotel owners and restaurant owners. In addition, Yusof, Ismail and Ghazali (2014) state that the purpose of having a strong destination brand identity is to position itself to tourists. Another aspect regards the notion that if all the stakeholders fully support the destination, the image will be stronger. As a matter of fact, Zouganeli, Trihas, Antonaki and Kladou (2012) mention the importance for internal stakeholders to agree with the projected image of the destination, as otherwise, they will not fully support the destination brand. Finally, Konecnik and Go (2008) state that a destination's brand identity has not only to reflect the core elements of the destination brand but can also differentiate the destination from competing destinations. Destination brand differentiation is discussed in the next subsection.



### 2.2.3 Destination brand differentiation

As seen in subsection 2.1.3, differentiation is a key element for building strong brands (Ghauri & Cateora, 2014). Like any other type of brand, destination brands also have to consider the role of brand differentiation to become strong brands. According to Engl (2017), the tourism industry and thus also destination brands are particularly characterised by homogeneous offerings, which are not unique and thus easy to compare. The author argues that similar offerings lead to price battles, while the advantage of destinations and tourist offerings that are incomparable and unique lies in the fact that they are defined by their value and not only by their prices. To be unique, effective destination brands need to have a unique selling point that is relevant, believable and hard to usurp. Such differentiation is essential when determining a destination choice. In fact, when looking for elements of differentiation, destination stakeholders often rely on the unique characteristics of their destination in order to underline the aspects that make their area superior to the competitors (Netemeyer, Krishnan, Pullig, Wang, Yagci, Dean, Ricks & Wirth, 2004). In addition, the authors state that various elements are used as differentiating factors when it comes to destination branding, such as local foods and local music. These perceptions of uniqueness may evoke feelings of pride in local residents who then project these feelings on the destination and as a result, they make the whole experience more local and unique for the visitors. Furthermore, through differentiation, brands provide consumers with a message which indicates that their brand offers more value than competitors. For example, if a skiing destination differentiates itself through high-quality food, it may be able to distinguish itself from other skiing destinations. By doing so, the skiing destination is no longer compared on the sole basis of its price level, but also based on its value, which may be a unique selling point for travellers. As a matter of fact, one way for a destination to differentiate from competitors is through food tourism and by using a destination's local food as a differentiating tool. However, before looking at food tourism in more depth, the next subsection discusses a more general characteristic of food, which is that of being an expression of the identity of a place and thus of a destination.

### 2.2.4 Food as an expression of identity

The cuisine of a country and its food are an expression of cultural and national identity (Rand, Heath & Alberts, 2003; Andersson, Mossberg & Therkelsen, 2017). For example, in Italy food is part of national culture and linked to the lifestyle of its people (Antonioli Corigliano, 2002). In times of increasing globalisation, food represents a point of cultural difference and is thus an important element of cultural identity (Delamont, 1994). As a matter of fact, "Gastronomy has become a significant source of identity formation in postmodern societies" (Hjalager & Richards, 2002, p.3). Considering that food is an expression of identity and culture of a place, Quan and Wang (2004) mention the potential for developing a destination image by means of food consumption. According to Everett and Aitchison (2008), food is a distinctive element of a place and is, therefore, a crucial ingredient of the identity of a destination.

Not only is food an expression of the identity of a particular place, but the food experiences on holidays are also linked to one's own identity construction (Andersson, Mossberg & Therkelsen, 2017). In fact, food experiences have the general ability to communicate who we are and how we aim to appear (Andersson, Mossberg & Therkelsen, 2017). In other words, the authors stress the fact that food has the potential for identity construction. For instance, a person who identifies with healthy nutrition may choose a destination where the cuisine is particularly healthy, as travelling to that specific destination rather than to another conveys something about his or her identity as a healthy person.

### 2.2.5 Food tourism: a differentiating strategy for destination management

According to Hall and Mitchell (2001), food tourism can be defined as:

visitation to primary and secondary food producers, food festivals, restaurants and specific locations for which food and tasting and / or experiencing the attributes of a specialist food production region are the primary motivating factor for travel (Hall & Mitchell, 2001, p.308).

Similarly, Andersson, Mossberg and Therkelsen (2017) argue that a food tourist is someone who chooses a destination because he or she anticipates and expects certain types of food as well as food-related activities. Several authors agree that travelling to destinations because of culinary experiences is a common phenomenon (Bessiere, 1998; Hall, Sharples, Mitchell, Macionis, & Cambourne, 2003; Long, 2004). Ab Karim and Chi (2010) even state that culinary tourism is “one of the most promising tourism products in that it has been very successful in recent years” (Ab Karim & Chi, 2010, p.548). When talking about food tourism, Hall and Sharples (2003) state that spatial fixity is a critical factor to consider, as it requires tourists to travel to a destination to consume local products and become food tourists. However, the authors also mention that this does not imply that local products are necessarily consumed at the destination, arguing that exporting food products to other places is a great opportunity that arises from food tourism (Hall et al., 2003). In addition, because of this export potential, food tourism allows reinforcing local food economies, while also supporting local identities (Hall et al., 2003).

In general, there appears to be a significant relationship between a destination's food image and the intention to visit a destination (Ab Karim & Chi, 2010). Moreover, knowing which image travellers hold about a specific destination makes it possible to determine which marketing efforts appeal to potential travellers (Ab Karim & Chi, 2010).

## 2.2.6 Various experiences and degrees of food tourism

Within food tourism, it is possible to distinguish between various experiences that arise when tourists engage with food at a destination. Therkelsen (2015) mentions four different types of experiences as a result of tourists' interaction with food at a destination. In particular, Therkelsen (2015) mentions pleasure, health, social bonding and sense of place as types of experiences tourists may have when consuming food and meals at a destination. The first experience, pleasure, is linked to indulgence and the stimulation of senses through taste and smell of food and texture and visual impression. Sense stimulation may also result from the interaction with service staff and other guests or from factors such as the physical set-up and interior of the restaurant, food event, or store (Gustafsson, Jonsäll, Mossberg, Swahn & Öström, 2014). The second experience, health, is linked to healthy food and the resulting nutritious qualities of the consumption of specific food products. For example, travellers may particularly appreciate the availability of fresh products such as fruits and vegetables at their holiday destination, as those products may not be available at their place of residence. As the third type of experience, Therkelsen (2015) mentions social bonding, which concerns more social aspects resulting from food consumption, such as interpersonal relations through company and conversations. For instance, when eating at a restaurant and trying a destination's cuisine, travellers may engage in conversation with other people, which is why social bonding may be one experience of consuming food as a traveller. The fourth and final experience, sense of place, is related to acquiring knowledge about food practices of a place and thus, related to a broader understanding of the culture in a particular place (Therkelsen, 2015).

On the topic of experiences resulting from food tourism, Lin, Pearson and Cai (2011) emphasise the importance of consistency between food, destinations, and experiences. Single actors within the food sector at a destination can have a major influence on the experience. In fact, Sparks, Bowen and Klag (2003) highlight that restaurants have a central role and can influence travellers' overall satisfaction with a destination. The importance of restaurants is confirmed by Lin, Pearson and Cai (2011) who state that "Local restaurants can become a part of destination image held by tourists" (Lin, Pearson & Cai, 2011, p.32-33). Overall, concerning the previously mentioned experiences, it is essential to notice that food and meals do not result in one experience only, but rather that tourists may have several different experiences during the same holiday (Andersson, Mossberg & Therkelsen, 2017). For example, a tourist visiting Tuscany and eating local food may, first of all, engage in a pleasurable experience due to the taste and smell of typical dishes. At the same time, it is most likely that he or she will also gain an understanding about the culture within the specific area of Tuscany, including food production patterns and agriculture of Tuscany.

Just as the type of experience resulting from food tourism may differ amongst tourists, travellers may also have different levels of interest in food. In fact, Andersson, Mossberg and Therkelsen (2017) highlight that no tourists are food tourists all the time, but rather act as food tourists once in a while. The different role that food may play during a holiday is also discussed by Quan and Wang (2004) who distinguish between peak food experiences and supporting food experiences. If food is the main reason to visit a destination, it is the peak experience, while if

food is a contributing factor to the overall experience at a destination, it is a supporting food experience. For instance, if a traveller decides to go to Meaux in France to visit Brie cheese producers, his or her food experience would, according to Quan and Wang (2004), be classified as a peak food experience. On the other hand, if a traveller visits Athens because of the Ancient history of the capital of Greece, but he or she also enjoys Greek cuisine in addition to the city's culture and history, the Greek cuisine acts as a supporting rather than peak food experience.

### 2.2.7 Local food as an opportunity for the local community

Other than allowing destination brands to differentiate themselves from other destinations, food tourism, and in particular, the use of local food products within destination branding, is credited with contributions to the local community. In fact, other than having the potential to attract tourists and thus offering a source for destination development, local food is supportive in terms of the social, economic and environmental development of a destination (Antonioli Corigliano, 2002). In line with this, Andersson, Mossberg and Therkelsen (2017) point out that food tourism can be related to sustainable tourism, as the use of local food allows destinations to support local producers and to reduce transportation routes and thus pollution. In addition to environmental and economic benefits for the local community, Andersson, Mossberg and Therkelsen (2017) also point out a series of cultural benefits arising from food tourism, such as an increased sense of belonging amongst residents and an improvement in the understanding of a destination's culture by tourists. Hence, food tourism appears to be a sustainable tourism practice, as it provides benefits from an economic, environmental and social perspective. This is in line with Everett and Aitchison (2008), who argue that food tourism can strengthen the identity of a region and may also be effective in contesting global food homogenisation. The fact that within destination development sustainable tourism is increasingly valued (Andersson, Mossberg & Therkelsen, 2017) increases the relevance of food tourism for destination branding strategies in the near future.

### 2.2.8 Food events and their role within food tourism

Food events have an important role when implementing food tourism at a destination. Generally speaking, food events may revolve around a specific kind of food product or a range of local food products (Andersson, Mossberg & Therkelsen, 2017). Depending on local resources, food events may vary in form, size, and length. In terms of marketing, food events have the function:

to provide products, sponsors, host communities and other stakeholders with an opportunity to secure high prominence in the marketplace while also adding brand value and building customer and consumer relationships (Hall & Sharples, 2008, p.4).

In addition, Lin, Pearson and Cai (2011) point out that for local communities, food-related activities such as festivals and exhibitions have the advantage of making food products marketable and of making food products become part of a destination's identity. Moreover, it is common that food events such as food festivals and food fairs are the outcome of collective efforts (Andersson, Mossberg & Therkelsen, 2017), thus confirming the notion that collaboration amongst stakeholders is a key characteristic in the destination context.

Food events are seldom private actors acting on their own, the local DMO or business association often acts as a coordinating force in bringing the interests of a multitude of actors, including local volunteers, together (Andersson, Mossberg, Therkelsen, 2017, p.4).

For example, a taste path centred around wine may require the joint efforts of hotels, wine producers, tourist associations, and municipalities of the region. Antonioli Corigliano (2002) highlights the importance of managing relational dynamics as a critical aspect to consider when creating a taste path. On the importance of stakeholder collaboration, Antonioli Corigliano (2002) even argues that the quality of the system is not only influenced by the quality of single components, but also by the quality of relations and the overall ability to coordinate different actors. In addition, Antonioli Corigliano (2002) argues that quality standards need to be checked and control procedures have to be implemented. Furthermore, Antonioli Corigliano (2002) points out that to develop a network amongst different actors, food paths need to be specific in terms of spatial area and require a local identity shared amongst stakeholders. In other words, a food path should avoid being too broad in terms of geographical area and have a common identity, which is key for network formations. Moreover, the author states that a wine path should "...valorize locally produced or locally managed products characterized by the local landscape, region and culture in order to maximize benefits at local level" (Antonioli Corigliano, 2002, p.175). Finally, Antonioli Corigliano (2002) also reflects upon potential problems of improved quality initiatives in the tourism sector and mentions free-riding behaviours as potential risks that may arise, as some producers could take advantage of investments made by others. To avoid this and to ensure the development of high-quality gastronomic products, Antonioli Corigliano (2002) calls for institutional frameworks. "Without institutional frameworks, the development of high-quality, sustainable gastronomic products becomes almost impossible. Quality control mechanisms for regional products represent important assets to diffuse through regional networks." (Antonioli Corigliano, 2002, p.181). Thus, it appears that stakeholder collaboration is not only a characteristic of destinations, but also a key ingredient for the successful implementation of food events and quality standards.

Finally, going back to the concept of brand image, Folgado-Fernandez, Hernandez-Mogollon and Duarte (2017) acknowledge that if visitors to a food event have a positive experience, this positively affects their image about the destination. This indicates that food events may be relevant opportunities for destination brands to influence the image tourists have about a destination.

### 2.2.9 The role of food in destination branding

In general, food is credited with having “...substantial destination branding potential that reaches beyond a tourism context” (Andersson, Mossberg & Therkelsen, 2017, p.1). In addition, food is used by several destinations as a source of attraction (Lin, Pearson & Cai, 2011). All travellers have to eat and drink, but when speaking of food tourism, there is something more than mere eating and drinking for survival. In fact, Jones and Jenkins (2002) state that food is more than a basic need for travellers, as it is an element of culture. In line with this, Ab Karim and Chi (2010) point out that the cuisine of a destination strongly influences the choice made by travellers about a destination. The authors go as far as to say that “...the importance of the connection between food and tourism cannot be ignored” (Ab Karim & Chi, 2010, p.533). Similarly, Hashimoto and Telfer (2006) argue that specific food can be crucial for the success of a tourist destination and can become a key element in the development of a destination brand. Food may also play a central role in the differentiation of destination brands. According to Engl (2017), it is essential for destination brands to differentiate and it is by its differentiating power that destination brands determine their value. As seen in subsection 2.2.4, Engl (2017) also suggests that in saturated markets such as the tourism industry, it is key for destinations to differentiate through their peak performances to avoid competition that is only price-based. Differentiating via food tourism involves capitalising and promoting the food and cuisine of a destination as a unique product (Ab Karim & Chi, 2010). When destination brand managers choose this approach, destinations need to be aware of the underlying factors that can attract travellers and what the image held by targeted customers about the destination is like (Ab Karim & Chi, 2010). Hjalager and Richards (2002) affirm that destinations may use food as a tool for promotion and positioning. In line with Hjalager and Richards (2002), Andersson, Mossberg and Therkelsen (2017) point out that due to its ties with culture and nature of a specific place, local food and meals are often used as place symbols. This aspect is also discussed by Fox (2007), who underlines the importance of gastronomic symbols. According to Fox (2007), symbols are more effective for representing the gastronomic identity of a place in a market characterised by extreme supply. For example, a destination may use specific products as symbols for their cuisine, as this most likely makes it easier for the public to recognise the product and establish a link with the destination. As a matter of fact, “...place-specific food can assist the development of a tourism destination brand” (Lin, Pearson & Cai, 2011, p.33).

## 2.3 Third layer of the literature review funnel

As the third level of the literature review funnel, this section presents the inverse COO and the role of stakeholder collaboration. These two concepts are central for analysing the case study on destination branding of Südtirol / Alto Adige through local food products. Finally, the brand identity and image framework by Kapferer (2012), which is at the base of our adapted framework in section 2.4, is presented.

### 2.3.1 The Inverse country of origin effect

As the previous section has shown, food products can influence how consumers perceive a destination. At this point, it is worthwhile to ask what is the underlying factor that makes it possible for food products to influence the brand image of a destination. Especially within the food industry, it is generally accepted that the origin of products plays an important role when differentiating and marketing products (Marcoz, Melewar & Dennis, 2016). In the academic field, the product origin and its effect on product evaluations are known as country of origin effect (COO), whereby the associations of a country can influence consumers' perceptions (Johnson, Tian & Lee, 2016). "Nonetheless, just as the country of origin may have an impact on the perception of specific products, certain products may affect how people perceive the country where these products are produced" (Felder & Macelloni, 2020b, p.1). This brings us to what White (2012) calls inverse country-of-origin effect; instead of looking at how products are influenced by the reputation of its country of origin, White (2012) proposes to analyse how products influence country reputation. According to White (2012), the inverse COO determines "...if a brand or product can influence the image of its country of origin" (White, 2012, p.111). Hence, the initial question of this subsection, namely what is the underlying factor that makes it possible for food products to influence the image of a destination, may be answered through the concept of inverse COO. In fact, just like products of a country can influence the image of its country of origin, food products that are typical of a destination can influence the image of that destination. For instance, if Simona enjoys yoghurt from the destination Südtirol / Alto Adige, this will improve her perception of Südtirol / Alto Adige. Yoghurt, a local food product from Südtirol / Alto Adige, may thus influence how Simona perceives its destination of origin, namely Südtirol / Alto Adige. Although the previous authors mainly discussed the concepts of COO and inverse COO in terms of countries, we argue that the concepts are of interest also in the context of smaller realities such as regions. Hence, applied to a regional destination branding setting, the inverse COO is the underlying mechanism that makes it possible for food products to influence the brand image of a destination. Finally, we argue that just like a country's unique culture and tradition strengthens the power of associations, a destination with a unique brand identity will evoke a stronger inverse COO and thus allow for a more significant influence of food products in shaping the destination's brand image.

### 2.3.2 Stakeholder collaboration within food tourism

As seen in subsection 2.2.2, collaboration is of particular relevance in the context of tourism and destinations. As a matter of fact, tourism products are typically characterised by sectoral transversality, meaning that actors belonging to different sectors are involved in the delivery of the tourist product (Antonioli Corigliano, 2002). The participation of various actors is also an aspect that concerns the use of food and its role in destination branding. In fact, food is rarely the act of one producer, but its production and delivery require cooperation that is often cross-sectorial and may involve conflicting interests and modes of operation (Andersson, Mossberg & Therkelsen, 2017). Destination management organisations have to be aware of

different interests and develop compromises for stakeholders; for example, private actors may see organisations operating within the same field as competitors, which is why they would be reluctant to cooperate (Andersson, Mossberg & Therkelsen, 2017).

The importance of a collaborative approach in the context of local food and tourism is further emphasised by Antonioli Corigliano (2002): “It is highly likely that networks are needed to build an efficient and competitive network, to market high-quality products and to safeguard the region’s positive image.” (Antonioli Corigliano, 2002, p.166). Furthermore, the author highlights that the sole presence of various producers does not automatically lead to the formation of networks and that an organising unit may be required to coordinate various stakeholders. With regard to the difficulty of collaboration amongst stakeholders, Mei, Lersfald and Bråtå (2017) even mention the risk of dissatisfaction and negative attitudes, indicating that achieving collaboration amongst stakeholders represents a challenge. Henriksen and Halkier (2015) also address the aspect of stakeholder collaboration by arguing that the development of a destination with food at its core requires cooperation between public and private entities and different interests. Given the importance of stakeholder collaboration, the question is what actually favours collaboration. Boesen, Sundbo and Sundbo (2017) argue that for a successful collaboration there needs to be a common logic amongst tourist actors. The authors argue that a common logic, such as the support of the local community, will favour collaboration amongst different parties, while a pure market logic would lead stakeholders to develop forms of egoistic behaviour and thus inhibit effective collaboration.

### 2.3.3 Identity and image framework

Based on the notion that brand identity and brand image are two distinct yet related concepts, we now proceed to investigate the relationship between identity and image of a brand. The relationship between brand identity and brand image has been discussed by Kapferer (2012) through the identity and image framework, which can be seen in Figure 2.

In general, companies communicate with customers and other stakeholders in order to create awareness and convey their message (Ghauri & Cateora, 2014). The process of communication, where a sender encodes a message which is decoded by a receiver, is also relevant in branding. As a matter of fact, companies may want to communicate their brand identity. In addition to brand identity, there may be other sources of inspiration that influence what messages the brands are communicating, such as imitation, opportunism, or idealism (Kapferer, 2012). The framework developed by Kapferer (2012) defines brands as senders, given that they project their vision and values to their audience, who in turn will decode the message received. The decoded message contributes to the formation of the brand image.

The model by Kapferer (2012) emphasises that there are various channels to project brand identity to the audience; these channels are known as signals transmitted and are the following: products, people, places, and communication. In other words, brand identity can be presented



to consumers in the form of products, people, places, and communication, which may vary according to the sector or industry to which a brand belongs. However, before reaching the audience, brand identity may encounter some challenges identified in the framework as “communication from competition and noise”. This implies that the process of transformation from brand identity to brand image is not completely under a brand’s control. Finally, once brand identity has reached the audience, identified in the framework as the receiver, the final recipient will form an opinion of the brand, known as brand image.

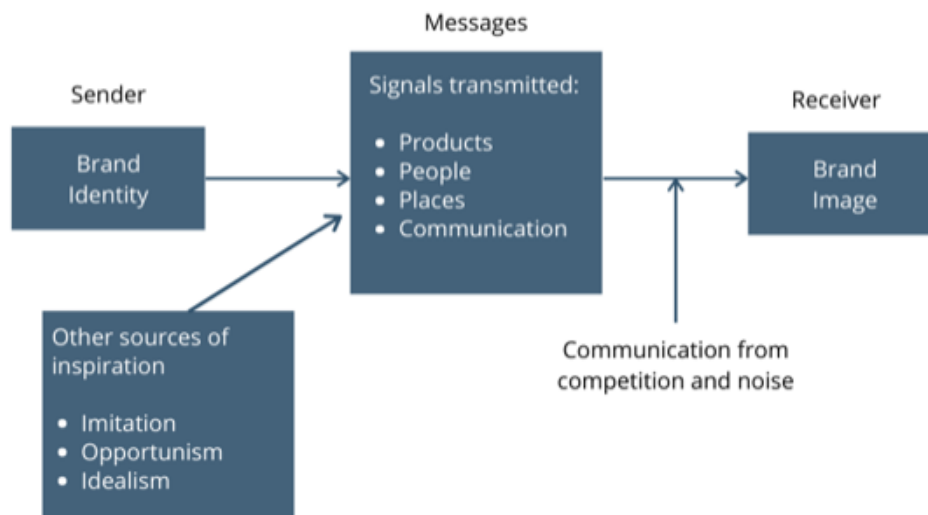


Figure 2: Brand identity and image framework (Kapferer, 2012, p.152)

## 2.4 Identity and image framework applied to the destination context

As the fourth and narrowest level of the literature review funnel, this section of the thesis adapts the framework in Figure 2 to the context of destination branding. The edited framework can be seen in Figure 3. We believe that the framework by Kapferer (2012), seen in Figure 2, is a suitable tool to explain how local food is used by destination brands to differentiate themselves from competitors, i.e. other destinations. However, given that the framework by Kapferer (2012) was not developed specifically for destination brands, we made some adaptations to the original framework.

When it comes to the first section of the framework, namely brand identity, Lin, Pearson and Cai (2011) point out that a DMO should coordinate brand identity amongst the destination’s stakeholders. Our interviews with the managers of IDM, the DMO that is responsible for Südtirol’s / Alto Adige’s branding strategy, allowed us to get an understanding of the brand identity, including the uniqueness, core, and vision of the brand. However, since destination brands are characterised by the contribution of several different actors (Engl, 2017), an

important part of our analysis focuses on stakeholder collaboration. For this reason, we included stakeholder collaboration and interaction amongst stakeholders in the adapted framework. This is based on the notion that there may be challenges when forming a destination's brand identity, because each stakeholder may have its own idea of destination brand identity (Jenkins, 1999). By integrating stakeholder collaboration and interaction into the framework, we are able to visualise the contributions and interactions of stakeholders when forming brand identity. One could argue that stakeholder collaboration in our adapted framework replaces what Kapferer (2012) labelled as "other sources of inspiration" in the original version of the framework. This does not mean that destination brands are exempt from other sources of inspiration. However, given the collaborative nature of destinations (Engl, 2017) and our empirical data, stakeholders are important to consider when it comes to establishing brand identity. For example, if destination brand identity is communicated via products, it is clear that the food producer has a very central role, as he/she is in charge of central aspects of the product, such as design and distribution. The integration of stakeholders into the existing framework is justified by the fact that it permits us to focus on the mechanism of collaboration between the various stakeholders.

Our interviews with different stakeholders including players in the tourism industry and food industry as well as their examples of various initiatives put forward to communicate the centrality of food products in the destination branding of Südtirol / Alto Adige, allowed us to cover the central section of the framework, i.e. signals transmitted. In its original form, the framework developed by Kapferer (2012) mentions four different channels by which the brand identity is transmitted. Given that in our data events emerged as having a central role in communicating destination brand identity, we have added events as the fifth channel to the framework.

Another adaptation concerns the element "communication from competition and noise", by which Kapferer (2012) highlights that, before reaching the receiver, brand identity may encounter some challenges. In the adapted framework, we replaced competition and noise with the inverse COO. This is justified for two reasons. Firstly, our focus was on the single case study of destination branding in Südtirol / Alto Adige and not on studying how other competing destinations could affect the communication of Südtirol's / Alto Adige's brand identity. Secondly, given our empirical data and our focus on local food products where, as has been shown, the concept of origin plays an important role, we added inverse COO as an external factor that influences the communication of brand identity. As a matter of fact, before the message reaches the receiver, the inverse COO can influence how the receiver decodes the message. The following example serves to make the influence of the inverse COO on destination image clearer: imagine that Silvio sees a commercial of the destination of Südtirol / Alto Adige and that he regularly consumes yoghurt from Südtirol / Alto Adige. Even if Silvio has never visited Südtirol / Alto Adige, his regular consumption and previous knowledge of yoghurt from Südtirol / Alto Adige most likely influences how he decodes the message of the commercial. In particular, if he is very positive about yoghurt from Südtirol / Alto Adige, he will be more susceptible to the message that is communicated. This can be explained by the inverse COO, which, according to White (2012), describes how products influence country

reputation. Given that yoghurt is a typical food product of Südtirol / Alto Adige, it can influence how Südtirol / Alto Adige is perceived. We intentionally referred to inverse COO as an external factor since it is not the sender, e.g. the DMO, who can influence the prior knowledge and experience someone has had with a product. Hence it is an external factor, which is outside of the sender's control. The previous example, where Silvio is influenced by his prior experience with yoghurt when seeing and decoding a commercial from Südtirol / Alto Adige, clearly illustrates how the inverse COO acts as an external factor on the communication process of brand identity. It goes without saying that if the inverse COO is in line with the message sent, i.e. consistent with brand identity, it will be easier for the sender to transfer the message. An explanation for this may be that people prefer communication that is consistent with their existing opinions (Becker, Becker, Franzmann & Hagenah, 2016). If, for example, Silvio perceives yoghurt from Südtirol / Alto Adige as high-quality and the commercial he sees emphasises the destination's focus on high-quality food, Silvio will be more likely to accept the message because it is consistent with his existing opinions.

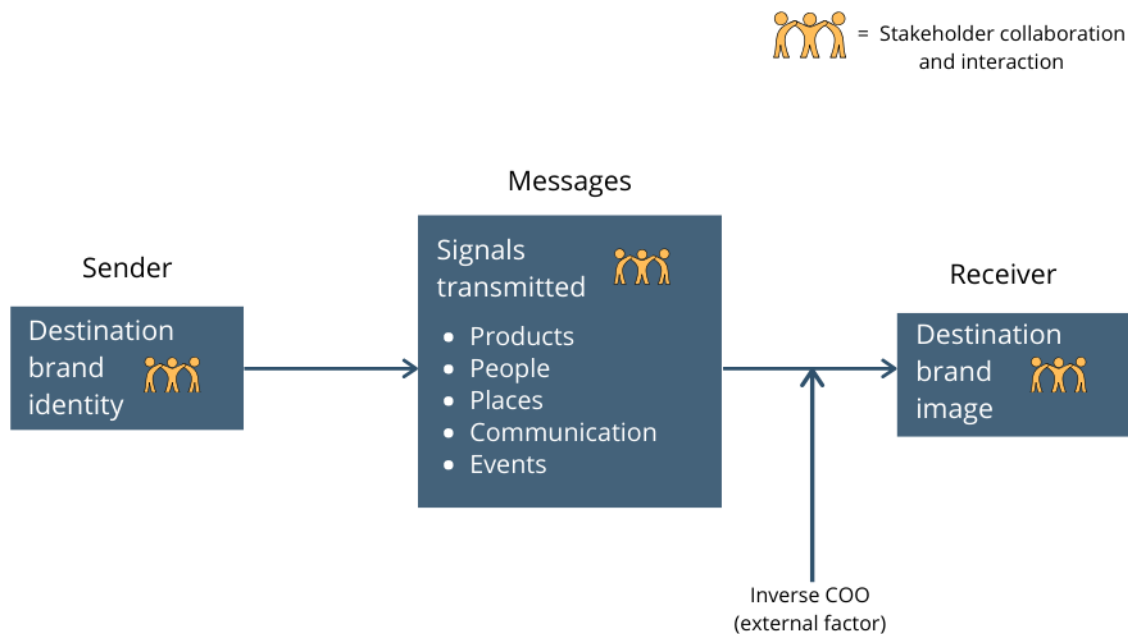


Figure 3: Destination brand identity and image framework, adapted from Kapferer (2012)

## 3. Methodology

In this section, the methodological aspects and the research design that will help us to address our research question are provided.

### 3.1 Research Approach

Given that the aims of this research are to investigate how local food is used by destination branding as a differentiating tool and to analyse the mechanisms of collaboration between various stakeholders in Südtirol / Alto Adige, we chose to adopt an abductive approach known as systematic combining. This type of approach relies on continuous interaction between empirics and theory and it also allows changes to the specific framework used in the study in accordance with the data that were collected (Dubois & Gadde, 2002). This goes in line with our research project, as we continuously emphasise on the interaction between theory and empirics, which can be seen in the analysis and discussion chapter. Moreover, the abductive approach allowed us to integrate some of the empirical data gathered during the collection process in the adapted brand image and identity framework. For instance, we added events in the central part of the framework known as signals transmitted, as the participants often mentioned events. Furthermore, our choice of adopting an abductive approach was also dictated by our focus on the case study of Südtirol / Alto Adige, as Dubois and Gadde (2002) state that a case study allows ways of creating new theory by using specific and relevant insights gathered from the empirical material.

Since our research question aims to investigate how local food is used by destination branding as a differentiating tool, we require collecting data that can explain how local food products are used in destination branding. Given that this phenomenon cannot be measured nor be perceived by the senses, we need data that can explain destination branding strategies in relation to local food. More specifically, the type of data required for this study consists of managerial insights, including critical reflections on the adopted strategy. By gathering managerial insights as type of data, it is possible to investigate how local food is used by different stakeholders operating in the destination Südtirol / Alto Adige to shape its brand image.

### 3.2 Case study methodology

As mentioned previously, our thesis focuses on the case study of destination branding in Südtirol / Alto Adige. Yin (2014) states that adopting a case study methodology allows to address how and why questions. In addition, Easterby-Smith, Thorpe and Jackson (2015) highlight that the case study method is characterised by looking at one or a small number of specific organisations or individuals. Eden, Nielsen and Verbeke (2020) state that even though

case studies are not particularly generalisable, they often make an extensive contribution. For this reason, given the nature of our research question and that our thesis aims to investigate how destination branding uses local food products as a differentiating tool, we adopted a case study method. Furthermore, we decided to focus on a single case study, as we aspire to gain an in-depth insight of the phenomenon. In fact, Easterby-Smith, Thorpe and Jackson (2015) state that focusing on a single case study generally intends to provide a full picture of the organisation studied. Lastly, in relation to the lack of generalisability of the case study method, Yin (2014) affirms that it is essential for case studies to follow a straightforward design before collecting data. Hence, we include a more detailed description of our case study design in the following sections.

The case study is based on both primary and secondary data. We decided to collect both types of data in order to gain a more complete picture of how the destination Südtirol / Alto Adige uses local food products as a differentiating tool.

### 3.2.1 Case study choice: Südtirol / Alto Adige

This section aims to provide some background on the destination that was chosen to study destination branding through local food products, namely the destination Südtirol / Alto Adige. As mentioned in the introduction, Südtirol / Alto Adige is a destination that is particularly well-suited to study destination branding through local food products, as it has a very characteristic cuisine and food culture. The destination owes its characteristic cuisine to its history and geographic position in Northern Italy close to the Austrian border. Südtirol / Alto Adige was not always part of Italy. As a matter of fact, it was part of Austria until 1919 (Steininger, 2012), which is why its culture, and in particular its food culture, is still influenced by Austrian elements. The mix of Italian and Austrian culture allowed Südtirol / Alto Adige to develop a cuisine that is different both from Austrian cuisine as well as from the cuisine of the rest of Italy, being in fact a mix of the two. The unique culture of Südtirol / Alto Adige can also be seen in the three languages that are spoken within the area, namely German, Italian and Ladin (IDM, 2020). For Südtirol / Alto Adige tourism represents a key pillar of the local economy, with more than 33 million overnight stays in 2018 (IDM, 2019). The main tourism markets of the destination are Germany and Italy, respectively accounting for 48,8% and 31,1% of the total overnight stays (IDM, 2019). In general, the mountains of Südtirol / Alto Adige, attract tourists during winter and during summer. During 2019, 62,9% of overnight stays were registered in summer, while 37,1% were registered during the winter season (Astat, 2020). The branding strategy of Südtirol / Alto Adige is managed by IDM, the DMO with headquarters in Bozen / Bolzano.

### 3.2.2 Primary data

As in regard to primary data collection, we gathered qualitative data by interviewing various professionals of the destination Südtirol / Alto Adige. For our semi-structured interviews, we used a purposive sampling technique. This technique generally allows researchers to select participants with key characteristics that are strictly relevant to the study being carried (Bryman & Bell, 2015). In fact, we selected participants who operate within the destination Südtirol / Alto Adige and have managerial roles within the organisations they work for. Moreover, given that our focus lies on the strategies and initiatives that are implemented to communicate the centrality of food products in destination branding, we adopted a managerial perspective with qualitative interviews of professionals working in different industries as the main source of primary data. In particular, our interviewees are professionals within the following categories: DMO, food production, restaurants and delicacy food stores. Through the collection of primary data, researchers can gain new insights and be more confident about research outcomes (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015). In our particular case, interviewing professionals allowed us to gain insights about the relationship between local food products and destination branding.

For the qualitative interviews, we opted for a remote interview typology, which was necessary due to unforeseen circumstances caused by the COVID-19 outbreak, which made face-to-face interviews impossible. In general, remote interviews have the advantage of being more flexible for both the interviewers and the interviewee (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015). The language spoken in the remote interviews was Italian. The quotes included in the analysis and discussion chapter were translated from Italian to English by meaning rather than literally, in order to avoid any loss of sense. This way of translating allowed us to follow the theory developed by Larson (1991) who states that research should express all the dimensions of meaning in a way that is understandable, while reproducing as accurately as possible the original statement. In addition, the questions asked to the participants were translated from Italian to English and are included in Appendix 1. In the following table, we present the list of our interview participants, the stakeholder category they belong to, their position within the organisation as well as the interview date and length.

*Table 1: Interviewees*

<b>Participant</b>	<b>Stakeholder category</b>	<b>Position</b>	<b>Interview date</b>	<b>Interview length</b>
1	Food production (dairy products)	Marketing Director	25.03.2020	30 minutes
2	Food consortium (Speck, i.e. typical local charcuterie)	Director	25.03.2020	45 minutes
3	Restaurants (Alta Badia)	Owner	26.03.2020	1 hour
4	DMO (IDM, Bozen/ Bolzano)	Head of Brand and Content	03.03.2020	1 hour
5	DMO (IDM, Bozen/ Bolzano)	Head of Destination and Partner Marketing	06.04.2020	30 minutes
6	Delicacy food stores and restaurants (Milan)	Owner	24.03.2020	20 minutes
7	Food production (dairy) and delicacy food stores (Bozen/ Bolzano)	Head of Sales	03.04.2020	30 minutes

For some of our remote interviews, we provided sample questions, as they were requested by participants beforehand. In literature, an interview that follows a set of predefined questions is known as semi-structured (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015). This type of interview differs from the highly-structured and unstructured interview types, where the former has predefined questions and the latter resembles an informal conversation (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015). Moreover, the semi-structured interview is “...capable of disclosing important and often hidden facets of human and organizational behavior.” (Qu & Dumay, 2011,

p.246). As a matter of fact, through semi-structured interviews with professionals, we aim to investigate the interactions amongst different stakeholders. In general, the reason for collecting data through interviews relies on the fact that they allow researchers to carry out a deeper exploration of a specific topic or phenomenon (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015).

In order to provide a more complete picture of how destination branding uses local food as a differentiating tool, we also included findings of a visual method. The visual method was carried as a pre-study for this thesis as part of an assignment, namely a pilot study on destination branding through local food products in Südtirol / Alto Adige.

Easterby-Smith, Thorpe and Jackson (2015) refer to visual method as to any type of visual material that is available on a variety of platforms, whether physical or digital. This kind of data not only makes researchers gain new insights on the phenomenon they are studying, but it also allows for multiple interpretations (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015). In particular, we focused on the promotional content of the destination Südtirol / Alto Adige. For instance, we analysed YouTube videos released on “Südtirol bewegt - Alto Adige da vivere”, IDM’s official YouTube channel and we carried out observations on the official Instagram account. By observing the content on these platforms, we investigated the use of local food products in the branding of Südtirol / Alto Adige. According to Rakić and Chambers (2012), visual data includes content such as advertising campaigns, brochures and videos on social networking sites. We analysed secondary visual data produced by IDM by looking at how local food products are communicated in different media channels. In general, given our fluency in German, Italian and English, the three languages most used in the content of the destination Südtirol / Alto Adige, we were able to understand most contents and food products’ promotion by the destination. In this sense, our aim was not only to analyse the content and messages, but also to look for more subtle elements in the visual material. (Felder & Macelloni, 2020a, pp.6-7).

Given that the visual method focused on the same topic as the case study of this thesis, we consider it a valuable contribution to this thesis. It adds an additional perspective and unit of analysis to the topic of destination branding through local food products.

### 3.2.3 Secondary data

In order to provide a comprehensive picture of the phenomenon that is being researched, our primary data are supported by secondary data. Secondary data are defined as “written sources of information produced for a purpose other than research but with some relevance to a given research project.” (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015, p.130). Easterby-Smith, Thorpe and Jackson (2015) suggest that this type of data typically refers to sources such as company reports, government reports, books and blogs. For this thesis, we analyse secondary data that include a variety of reports from IDM. In particular, we collected insights from the most recent annual report where a specific section related to food marketing showcases some of the core



activities that IDM carries out. For instance, we analyse the main promotional activities, as well as the future plans for the branding of Südtirol / Alto Adige. Furthermore, we study the overall branding strategy of the destination by focusing on specific sections of IDM's website which relate to both the destination's food products as well as its brand architecture.

In general, an advantage of secondary data is that it enables immediate access to information, offering a more time-efficient method of assembling data. Additionally, if the information is published by reliable entities such as governments and organisations, it is considered high quality and trustworthy (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015). By adding secondary data that have been previously published by IDM, we can gather reliable information that adds depth and credibility to our research.

### 3.3 Quality Criteria

Research can be compared to a great meal. In fact, Easterby-Smith, Thorpe and Jackson (2015) state that good and reliable data is essential for the researcher to carry out a good research, just as good ingredients are vital for a chef to cook a delicious meal. In a more theoretical context, quality research should carefully assess and consider the bias of the study. Moreover, it should include all materials gathered by the researchers that are relevant for the research itself. Avoiding to do so by ignoring and omitting relevant data can pose a severe threat to the reliability of research (Barbour, 2014). Nonetheless, omitting relevant data is not the only aspect that limits the quality of the research, as superficial thematic analysis can also decrease research quality. Hence, Easterby-Smith, Thorpe and Jackson (2015) state that themes should be identified in order to compare, evaluate and integrate findings with existing literature. For this reason, we identified themes that follow the structure of Kapferer's (2012) brand identity and image framework and we integrated them with other themes that were often mentioned by the interviewees in the data collection process. Reflexivity also plays a key role in the quality of research, as it is essential to be honest about what a research project can achieve (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe and Jackson, 2015). Alvesson, Hardy and Harley (2008) strengthen Easterby-Smith, Thorpe and Jackson's (2015) view, as they believe that reflexivity is key to understanding what is happening in a particular study. In fact, Alvesson, Hardy and Harley (2008) state that reflexivity allows to gather new perspectives and new ways of developing the study in accordance to the stage of research. Overall, to enhance the quality of the research, it is essential to show transparency and highlight the procedures that were carried out during the whole research process, as doing otherwise will decrease the quality.

### 3.4 Data analysis

Data analysis is of utter importance in qualitative research, as it influences the results and findings of a study (Flick, 2014). There are several approaches in qualitative data analysis that researchers can choose from; some of them can be more systematic, while others can be more loosely structured. Mayer (2015) states that data has to be analysed more systematically if the research is based on a specific framework. In our concrete case, we used the adapted framework of Kapferer's (2012) brand identity and brand image framework to systematically analyse the data. The adaptations to the original version of the framework, in line with our abductive research approach, are supported by our empirical data, which allow us to cover each section of the framework. In fact, we collected information about different channels used to communicate the centrality of food and we paid particular attention to interactions amongst different stakeholders to analyse the impact stakeholders have on the various components of the framework. Moreover, the seven qualitative interviews with destination managers and other professionals from various industries offer relevant insights to understand how food products contribute to the formation of the destination brand image of Südtirol / Alto Adige. Because of that, the section "signals transmitted" of the adapted framework is our primary focus. In other words, we concentrate on how brand identity is communicated, thus on the channels used to communicate brand identity. Furthermore, considering that different actors are responsible for the signals, we analyse the interaction amongst these actors by looking at the mechanism and interactions amongst destination stakeholders. In general, thanks to the adapted version of the brand image and brand identity framework by Kapferer (2012), we were able to systematically analyse our empirical data. Given that Mayer (2015) suggests using a more systematic way of analysing data when research is based on a specific framework, we identified and used thematic analysis, as it has a systematic approach due to its highly structured nature (King, 2004). Nowell, Norris, White and Moules (2017) state that by using thematic analysis, the researchers can gain a detailed account of the data that have been gathered.

We identified some of the themes by focusing on the adapted brand identity and brand image framework by Kapferer (2012). As a result, we included brand identity, products, people, places, communication, events and brand image as themes, given that they all play an important role when communicating the centrality of local food products. Prior to analysing the transcripts, we associated each theme with a different colour to distinguish them for future reference. Furthermore, in order to identify the quotes in the interview transcripts, we proofread the materials and underlined the terms and sentences that were of interest to our research, as suggested by Ryan and Bernard (2003). Each time we found an interesting quote made by a participant, we highlighted the quote in a specific colour in accordance to the theme that it belonged to. This procedure allowed us to gain a better understanding of the data meanings and due to its structure and organisation, it prevented us from misplacing quotes under the wrong themes. Nonetheless, to conduct a more comprehensive and complete analysis, we also identified three other themes by using the repetition technique. The themes are stakeholder collaboration, inverse country of origin and quality mark. Ryan and Bernard (2003) state that this technique is amongst the most popular approaches to thematic analysis. According to Guba

(1978), the repetition technique consists of identifying themes that are recurring regularities. In fact, the three themes that were identified by carrying out the repetition technique are often mentioned in the transcripts by all participants.

The themes that were identified by looking at the adapted framework and one of the themes that was identified through the repetition technique are then used to structure the next chapter. For this reason, brand identity is the first theme to be analysed and discussed in the Analysis and discussion chapter. Subsequently, the central part of the framework, which refers to the messages through which the brand identity is communicated to consumers, is presented. More specifically, that section of the chapter delves into each of the five channels used to communicate brand identity. Afterwards, brand image is presented as the last theme that was identified by analysing the framework. Finally, stakeholder collaboration, one of the three themes identified with the repetition technique, is presented as the final section of the next chapter. The other two themes identified with the repetition technique, namely the inverse COO and quality mark, are integrated throughout the next chapter, as they are themes that constantly emerged during the data analysis.

## 4. Analysis and discussion

In this chapter, we present and discuss the empirical results of our case study on destination branding in Südtirol / Alto Adige. The chapter aims to illustrate how local food is used to differentiate the destination brand of Südtirol / Alto Adige. By referring to existing literature, we present the results of seven qualitative interviews with professionals in the fields of destination management, hospitality and food production. In addition, the findings of a visual analysis of the destination's official Instagram and YouTube channel are presented. Moreover, particular emphasis is placed on stakeholder collaboration, given that the collaboration and the interactions amongst various stakeholders emerged as a central element in our empirical data. Furthermore, this chapter combines the analysis and the discussion of our empirical findings. By merging analysis and discussion, we are able to directly connect our data with existing literature, which we deem to be more convenient for the reader than separating analysis and discussion in two chapters.

Overall, the chapter is structured in four main sections. The first section (4.1) focuses on the brand identity of the destination Südtirol / Alto Adige. How this brand identity is communicated is the focus of the second section (4.2). In particular, the use of different channels to communicate brand identity of the destination Südtirol / Alto Adige is examined. The third section (4.3) presents the result of communicating brand identity via different channels, denoted as brand image. Finally, the interaction and collaboration amongst different stakeholders is the object of study of the fourth section (4.4) of this chapter.

Throughout this chapter, the framework on brand identity and brand image by Kapferer (2012), which we adapted to the context of destinations in section 2.4, will accompany our analysis and discussion. In fact, in line with the model by Kapferer (2012), our chapter is structured into (4.1) brand identity (sender), (4.2) how brand identity is communicated through different channels (messages) and (4.3) what the outcome is like (brand image), thus reflecting Kapferer's (2012) overall framework structure. Finally, in section 4.4, stakeholder collaboration, an aspect present in all sections, is presented and discussed.

### 4.1 Brand identity

As seen in existing literature (Kapferer, 2012; Aaker, 1996; Wagner & Peters, 2009; Hatch & Schultz, 2001), brand identity is defined as the core of the brand, it is what makes the brand unique and it includes the vision and values that a brand possesses. Applying brand identity to our case study, we refer to the brand identity of the destination Südtirol / Alto Adige. As mentioned by Lin, Pearson and Cai (2011), it should be the DMO to form the overall destination brand identity and then coordinate it amongst all stakeholders. For this reason, we interviewed two professionals who work for IDM. This allowed us to understand the main concepts behind the branding and promotion of Südtirol / Alto Adige.

In order to identify the brand identity of the destination, we asked if the two professionals could give us an account of it. Participant 5 stated the following in relation to the destination brand identity: “Südtirol / Alto Adige is the perfect Alpine and Mediterranean destination mix characterised by spontaneity, credibility, culture and nature.” (Participant 5). This quote goes in line with the statement by Participant 4, who said:

We are in Italy and in our destination we have two cultures, we have proof of concept, we have a dynamic cuisine that is characterised by these two worlds. This characteristic is a differentiator for us, it is an important factor on all markets (Participant 4).

Moreover, Participant 4 mentioned well-being and pleasure as unique selling points that are often associated with the destination. When Participant 4 cites two cultures and two worlds, the respondent refers to what stated by Participant 5 about the mix of the Alpine and Mediterranean culture. In other words, this dichotomy relates to the Italian (Mediterranean) and Austrian (Alpine) culture, given Südtirol’s / Alto Adige’s history and geographical proximity to Austria.

The quote by Participant 4 and the quote by Participant 5 perfectly follow the brand strategy illustrated on the Südtirol / Alto Adige umbrella brand’s website (Provincia Autonoma di Bolzano - Alto Adige, 2019). In fact, the website clearly states the positioning of the destination: “Südtirol / Alto Adige is a region rich in contrasts - the perfect symbiosis of Alpine and Mediterranean ways of life, of spontaneity and dependability, of nature and culture.” (IDM, online, n.p.a). This positioning statement, which is at the basis of the brand identity, is significant, as it strengthens what was mentioned by Participant 4 and Participant 5 concerning the dichotomy. In fact, the term “symbiosis” shows that despite the elements of the destination are contrasting, they perfectly coexist and they cannot be without one another. Participant 5 suggested that the concept of symbiosis can also be noticed when analysing tourism and agriculture in Südtirol / Alto Adige: “Agriculture and tourism in Südtirol / Alto Adige cannot be without one another” (Participant 5). Therefore, what emerges is that the destination thrives on symbiosis, whether it is a symbiosis of culture, landscape, or culinary elements. In fact, from the interviews with the two professionals, it emerged that local food plays an important role in the identity of the destination, as it is a vital element of the culture of Südtirol / Alto Adige. This is given by the fact that food from this specific destination is a mix of Austrian and Italian cuisine. This unique cuisine with elements of Austrian and Italian cooking traditions helps to strengthen and to make the cultural dichotomy of the destination more visible. Hence, we argue that local food adds a tangible dimension to the symbiosis between these “two worlds”, as Participant 4 defined them. In other words, to make the concept of cultural dichotomy clearer, the destination uses its typical food products to communicate the mix between the Austrian and the Italian culture.

The importance of local food in the destination is also highlighted in the brand architecture of Südtirol / Alto Adige. In fact, other than the umbrella brand, the destination has a quality mark that is only granted to high-quality local food products after passing a strict quality assessment. Südtirol’s / Alto Adige’s brand identity, as stated on the website, is the essential concept that

determines the positioning of the overall destination brand, i.e. the Südtirol / Alto Adige umbrella brand (see Appendix 2). The official website of IDM also states that Südtirol's / Alto Adige's brand identity is used as a guideline for communication purposes and product development (Provincia Autonoma di Bolzano - Alto Adige, 2019). This latest statement about brand identity being used as a lead is the perfect example of theory into practice. In fact, Jenkins (1999) recommends following a guideline in an environment characterised by many stakeholders. Hence, the author states that brand identity can guide stakeholders in achieving the destination's purpose and as a consequence, he supports the effect that Südtirol's / Alto Adige's brand identity has on communication and product development. In fact, Jenkins (1999) underlines that it is imperative for DMOs to provide a well-recognised and precise destination identity to make stakeholder collaboration successful. Similarly, Boesen, Sundbo and Sundbo (2017) argue that for collaboration amongst stakeholders to be successful, there needs to be a common logic amongst tourist actors. Applied to the case of Südtirol / Alto Adige, we argue that the brand identity of the destination serves the function of what Boesen, Sundbo and Sundbo (2017) call "common logic". The website also graphically shows the four categories that the destination identity of Südtirol / Alto Adige is divided into. This can be seen in the table below, which has been translated from Italian to English.

*Table 2: Four categories of Südtirol's / Alto Adige's destination brand identity, English translation  
(Provincia Autonoma di Bolzano - Alto Adige, 2019)*

<p><b>Essential characteristics</b></p> <p><i>We are...</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Warm and welcoming</li> <li>● Ingenious and spontaneous</li> <li>● Direct and sincere</li> <li>● Reliable and supportive</li> </ul>	<p><b>Values</b></p> <p><i>Our actions aim to...</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Be loyal to our lifestyle</li> <li>● Be modern while respecting traditions</li> <li>● Be responsible for future generations</li> <li>● Be a community</li> </ul>
<p><b>Geographic peculiarities</b></p> <p><i>Our landscape is characterised by...</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Alpine and Mediterranean symbiosis</li> <li>● Natural monuments and care for the environment</li> <li>● Lively towns and villages</li> </ul>	<p><b>Competences</b></p> <p><i>Our special skills are based on...</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Value-seeking attitudes</li> <li>● All-round experiences</li> <li>● Variety</li> </ul>

Not only does this table go in line with the statements made by the two participants, but it also suggests that there are other elements that IDM takes into account when referring to the brand identity of the destination. There is always a reference to the two cultures that characterise Südtirol / Alto Adige. For instance, when looking at essential characteristics, we can see that the brand identity suggests that the destination is warm and welcoming towards its visitors, as well as spontaneous. We argue that these are characteristics that are generally more inclined towards the Italian lifestyle. On the other hand, essential characteristics such as reliability can be interpreted as a link to Austria. Therefore, the main element that emerged from the data collection is that the destination wants to showcase and use the symbiosis between the Alpine

and Mediterranean worlds as a differentiating tool. Furthermore, it emerged that local food products and local cuisine are an expression of the cultural symbiosis between Austria and Italy.

## 4.2 Different channels to communicate brand identity

After having analysed the brand identity of the destination Südtirol / Alto Adige, this section focuses on how brand identity is communicated. Given the variety of channels used to communicate brand identity and in order to provide the reader with some structure, the following paragraphs follow the five channels which are present in our adapted framework. In particular, we discuss how products, people, places, communication and events are used to communicate Südtirol's / Alto Adige's brand identity.

### 4.2.1 Products

The first channel found in our adapted framework is products. Applied to our case study, where the focus lies on how the destination Südtirol / Alto Adige uses local food as a key element of its branding strategy, products mainly refers to local food of the region and typical dishes. These products may be consumed during the holiday, meaning at the destination, or elsewhere if they are exported. The fact that food may be consumed at the destination or outside is explained by Participant 2, who pointed out that while the destination has geographical borders, Speck has no such borders and can be consumed anywhere. The export potential of food is also discussed by Hall et al. (2003), who argue that the possibility to export food products represents a great opportunity arising from food tourism, as it allows to reinforce local food economies and to support local identities. A more general observation on food and its ability to communicate has been made by Participant 5, who emphasised that food has a strong emotional component: "With food, there is always something that goes into your heart" (Participant 5). This emotional aspect and the fact that food is an expression of identity (Delamont, 1994; Hjalager & Richards, 2002; Rand, Heath & Alberts, 2003; Andersson, Mossberg & Therkelsen, 2017), makes it a very powerful product for communicating brand identity of a destination that has food at its core.

When looking at how local food products contribute to transfer the brand identity of Südtirol / Alto Adige, an aspect which also emerged frequently in our data is the quality mark that may be granted to certain food products from Südtirol / Alto Adige. According to Participant 4, all products that carry the quality mark have a higher quality and have origin from Südtirol / Alto Adige.

On the official website of IDM, it is stated that "This mark of quality serves the consumer as a sign; it says and guarantees that production methods must meet much

higher, more selective and more objective quality criteria, and that the products are from the region.” (IDM, online, n.p.b) So far, 15 products or product groups were granted the quality mark (IDM, online, n.p.c). Examples include apples, Speck, wine, milk, and other typical products that reflect the origin and quality criteria of Südtirol / Alto Adige. (Felder & Macelloni, 2020a, p.8)

The role of quality controls is also discussed by Antonioli Corigliano (2002), who emphasises the need to check quality standards and to have control procedures. In fact, Antonioli Corigliano (2002) states that institutional frameworks are necessary to ensure the development of high-quality gastronomic products. The quality mark, which requires producers to comply with specific criteria can be seen as an institutional framework that ensures the high quality of local food products. With regard to the aspect of collaboration amongst different stakeholders, one could argue that local food products are also the outcome of collaboration. On the one hand, food producers manufacture local food products. On the other hand, IDM coordinates and oversees the use of the quality mark found on the products’ packaging and advertising. Hence, the final food products which carry the quality mark can be seen as the result of the contribution by different stakeholders, specifically food producers and IDM.

The opinions on the use of the quality mark differed amongst respondents. Participant 1, who is Marketing Director of one of the area’s major dairy producers, stated:

For us, the quality mark is very important, we are proud that most of our products carry it, because especially in Südtirol / Alto Adige it has a high value for consumers. It is important to communicate that the product and also the raw materials come from here (Participant 1).

Unlike Participant 1, Participant 6 explained that consumers in Milan only care about the origin but not about the quality mark. Participant 3, who is the owner of a ski hut, argued that the quality mark is essential and a guarantee for high-quality products, but that “...our guests don’t really ask for it...what they care about is that a dish is home-made and local”. (Participant 3).

In terms of brand architecture, the quality mark for food products is to be seen within the broader umbrella brand strategy of the destination, which is also used for sectors other than food (Provincia Autonoma di Bolzano - Alto Adige, 2019). (Felder & Macelloni, 2020a, p.8)

In fact, we can argue that extending the destination brand of Südtirol / Alto Adige towards a culinary dimension by means of the quality mark allowed the destination to differentiate itself from competitors and as a result, it helped the destination brand to grow. This goes in line with what Kapferer (2012) mentions in regard to brand extensions, as the author states that a brand needs to carry out extensions if it wants to grow. As stated on IDM’s website, “The seal [the quality mark] harmonises with the umbrella brand of South Tyrol with the goal of promoting a unified image and benefitting from synergies.” (IDM, online, n.p.b). This can also be observed graphically, as the quality mark (see Appendix 2) contains elements of the umbrella brand.



Overall, this indicates that there has been a conscious intention to connect the broader destination brand with the more food-specific quality mark.

When asked if there is one particular product that is most representative or most used to transfer the brand identity of Südtirol / Alto Adige as a territory of pleasure and well-being through high-quality food, there has not been a clear trend in the respondents' answers. Some respondents argued that it is an ensemble of different products that is communicated. In contrast, other respondents mentioned specific products as being the most representative of the gastronomic identity of Südtirol / Alto Adige. In particular, Participant 4 said that "We as IDM are not pushing one product, but we rather focus on the ensemble of products and pleasure." (Participant 4). The answer shows that IDM focuses on a range of products and not on single products. While Fox (2007) mentions the vital role of gastronomic symbols for representing the gastronomic identity of a place, the strategy pursued by IDM appears to be different. In fact, IDM promotes a range of products, described as "ensemble" (Participant 4), rather than one product, which would become a gastronomic symbol of the destination. A potential explanation for this may be the fact that IDM is the DMO of Südtirol / Alto Adige and as such, it has to accommodate the interest of all stakeholders. As a matter of fact, Andersson, Mossberg and Therkelsen (2017) highlight that DMOs have to be aware of different interests amongst stakeholders and should ideally develop compromises. Favouring specific food products over others, for example, promoting only Speck and thus neglecting other local food products, could create dissatisfaction amongst other food producers. On the topic of focusing on an ensemble of local food products, Participant 4 also pointed out that their communication is not limited to products that carry the quality mark but also includes products such as farmers' products that carry the "Roter Hahn / Gallo Rosso" trademark. Participant 6 also agreed that it is not one product that stands out and has a protagonist role in the communication of the destination's food identity. When investigating whether there is an iconic product that represents Südtirol / Alto Adige, Participant 2 said:

It is clear that the quality products such as Speck, wine, apples, cheese and yoghurt together with the destination form the package Südtirol / Alto Adige. This package is sold together, you cannot sell the destination without products or the products without the destination (Participant 2).

This quote clearly illustrates that there is a strong link between food products and the destination Südtirol / Alto Adige. However, although several participants affirmed that not one single product stands out, within the dairy category yoghurt emerged as the most representative product of Südtirol / Alto Adige, in particular when looking at the Italian market. In fact, Participant 1 stated that in the dairy products category, in Italy yoghurt best represents Südtirol / Alto Adige and that "...yoghurt has become a product of excellence" (Participant 1). Participant 7 confirmed the central role of yoghurt on the Italian market: "If you talk about whole-milk yoghurt, you talk about yoghurt of Südtirol / Alto Adige." (Participant 7).

Furthermore, according to Participant 1, food products can strengthen the brand image of the destination: "I believe that the gastronomic experience that a tourist makes in Südtirol / Alto

Adige is strongly linked to the products, which are typical and part of the tourist experience.” (Participant 1). In addition, Participant 1 highlighted that as food producers, they benefit from the destination’s communication, as it creates awareness amongst consumers about the origin of products:

Our market research has shown that the origin of products is very important for consumers, in particular for Italian consumers, who want products from Italy. Especially within dairy products, Südtirol / Alto Adige is highly valued by consumers. (Participant 1)

Because of this connection, Participant 1 argued that the food production sector and the tourism sector support each other. This confirms the argument made by Andersson, Mossberg and Therkelsen (2017) that food is rarely the act of one producer, but that its production and delivery require cooperation that is often cross-sectorial. Satisfaction about the collaboration between the food sector and the tourism sector was also expressed by Participant 3:

We are very lucky to have these products. Just think about yoghurt that is sold in Italy or abroad, on each package it is written that it comes from Südtirol / Alto Adige (Participant 3).

Participant 2 went one step further and argued that a product is able to create the desire to visit a destination and to get to know the territory it originates from, which shows that destinations can use food as a source of attraction (Lin, Pearson & Cai, 2011).

Overall, the analysis of our participants’ answers showed that local food products from Südtirol / Alto Adige are an important vehicle for transferring the brand identity of the destination. In view of stakeholder collaboration, it was shown how actors operating in different industries collaborate. In particular, the food production sector emerged as a key actor when it comes to transferring brand identity via products. These findings are in line with Hashimoto and Telfer (2006), who point out that specific food can become a crucial element in the development of a destination brand.

#### 4.2.2 People

According to our adapted framework, people are another channel through which brand identity can be communicated from sender to receiver. Although in its original form Kapferer (2012) does not provide a stringent definition of what constitutes people, we argue that, just as products may communicate brand identity, also people can express the brand identity. This could happen through their concrete actions, behaviour, or more general attitudes. Although the elements products, communication, and events emerged as key channels for transferring the brand identity of Südtirol / Alto Adige, the role of people has also been referred to in our interviews. In particular, Participant 1 argued that farmers perform an essential role:

Through their work on the Alpine meadows, more than 5,000 farmers take care of the territory, which is very important for maintaining our iconic landscape made of barns and green meadows. (Participant 1)

Andersson, Mossberg and Therkelsen (2017) state that food tourism can provide environmental and economic benefits for the local community. Indeed, local farmers who provide milk benefit from tourism, as tourists consume their products and are potential buyers. However, at the same time, the destination also benefits from farmers. Firstly, because farmers provide high-quality milk and secondly because, as stated by Participant 1, they take care of the territory, ensuring that the iconic landscape is preserved.

Employees were mentioned by Participant 6 as an important channel through which brand identity can be communicated. According to Participant 6, employees working in restaurants in Milan, where typical food from Südtirol / Alto Adige is served, have a central role, as guests often ask for recommendations for their next holiday in Südtirol / Alto Adige. “Restaurants are an ideal place to interact with potential tourists, because you are in direct contact with people.” (Participant 6). Participant 3 explained that there are also cases when restaurants and farmers interact with each other. As a consequence, they jointly contribute to the benefit of the destination. In fact, Participant 3 stated:

We have organised an initiative in autumn, namely Autumn flavours, where we receive honey from local producers, edible wild grass that has been picked up by local farmers and finally, meat. With these three ingredients we have to make three different dishes. (Participant 3)

One could say that this quote by Participant 3 shows that stakeholder collaboration may, in some cases, take place naturally in Südtirol / Alto Adige. Nonetheless, as Jenkins (1999) states, it is still essential for the DMO to administer the interaction between different local stakeholders. By doing so, the DMO can monitor that every initiative jointly carried out by the stakeholders is in line with the brand identity of the destination.

#### 4.2.3 Places

Places emerged as having an important role in transferring local food as a key component of the brand identity of the destination Südtirol / Alto Adige. In particular, restaurants, delicacy stores and hotels were mentioned as critical places through which brand identity is transferred. Considering that independent stakeholders manage these places and that they are not under the direct control of IDM, it is possible to observe how brand identity in the context of destinations is affected by various stakeholders rather than by a single one. This is in line with the notion that the tourist experience is the result of a co-production amongst actors belonging to different sectors (Engl, 2017).

As mentioned in the section about People, Participant 6 highlighted the importance of restaurants where employees interact with guests. Thus, restaurants, where people try typical dishes for the first time, are places where potential guests get to know the destination. “Our restaurants and delicacy stores definitely act as spokesperson for Südtirol / Alto Adige in Milan”. (Participant 6). The quote illustrates how restaurants located outside of the destination, like Milan in this specific case, can promote the destination and allow consumers to get to know the destination. Also Participant 3 emphasised the importance of restaurants and said that “Ski huts are an extremely important calling card which is not to be underestimated, especially if they offer local products”. (Participant 3). Ski huts are typically wooden constructions that perform the function of a restaurant at high altitudes for skiers in winter and hikers in summer. Participant 3 argued that ski huts that offer high-quality dishes are an important differentiator for skiing resorts, as “Other destinations do have high-quality restaurants in the villages and towns, but not at higher altitudes”. (Participant 3). This goes hand in hand with Sparks, Bowen and Klag (2003) and Lin, Pearson and Cai (2011), who highlight the central role of restaurants. Furthermore, by arguing that high-quality food at ski huts is an important differentiator for skiing resorts, Participant 3 touched upon the notion of destination brand differentiation, which according to Engl (2017) allows destinations to avoid comparable offerings, which eventually lead to competition that is only price-based. According to Engl (2017), an incomparable offering helps the destination to be defined according to the value it provides. Thus, if high-quality food at a ski hut is perceived as valuable and as a unique offering, it can allow Südtirol / Alto Adige to stand out compared to other skiing destinations. Furthermore, Participant 3 stated that eating a typical dish surrounded by nature may affect the dining experience:

Imagine you are served a dish made from local milk while you see cows grazing in the meadows close-by. Will it be made of the milk of the cow I see eating grass over there? It can create a wow-effect, it is psychological. (Participant 3).

In terms of experiences arising from food tourism, Therkelsen (2015) distinguishes between four different types of experiences that can arise when tourists engage with food at a destination, namely pleasure, health, social bonding and sense of place. We argue that a dining experience at a ski hut surrounded by Alpine scenery most probably results in a pleasurable experience, which also creates a strong sense of place for the visitor. Another aspect that Participant 3 emphasised was quality. In particular, Participant 3 explained that they require several rooms for preparing high-quality dishes and that one main kitchen would not be sufficient: “In the basement, there is a room where we solely produce pasta from scratch and another room is only dedicated to patisserie”. (Participant 3). Given that ski huts are typically located at high altitude and therefore differ from restaurants in an urban context, we argue that this illustrates how devoted Participant 3 is to quality.

The role of restaurants as places where brand identity is communicated was also mentioned by Participant 7, who presented a new store concept: “In our store we combined the concept of a bistro with the concept of a store to create a different atmosphere.” (Participant 7). According to Participant 7, who is Head of Sales for one of the area’s major dairy food producers, the idea was to create a meeting place for the city and the surrounding area. Furthermore, Participant 7 explained that products available at their store are not limited to their own production, but they

also wanted to give other local producers a space to sell their products. “We as local producers wanted to work with other producers. Our store has a strategic location where many people pass by, both during winter and during summer” (Participant 7). Stores were also mentioned by Participant 2, referring to the sale of Speck outside of Südtirol / Alto Adige: “At Eataly in New York we have a section dedicated to our Speck.” Considering that Speck has very strong links with its territory of origin Südtirol / Alto Adige and that Participant 2 previously pointed out that “The product is able to create the desire to visit the destination” we argue that a store like Eataly in New York for the display of a product from Südtirol / Alto Adige is contributing to transfer the brand identity of Südtirol / Alto Adige as a destination of high-quality food.

Finally, other places that were mentioned where the brand identity of Südtirol / Alto Adige is communicated are hotels and the accommodation sector. Participant 1 stated that guests who spend their holiday in Südtirol / Alto Adige are an important group of potential product buyers:

A person who is on holiday in Südtirol / Alto Adige can try a product for the first time, for instance at the breakfast buffet in the hotel, and then buy it at a supermarket once back home (Participant 1).

For this reason, Participant 1 also explained that skiing resorts are an essential location for placing advertisements. According to Participant 1, this is due to the fact that a guest who tastes a product for breakfast and then sees an advertisement of the product during the day while skiing is much more likely to remember the product and purchase it once back home. The role of communication and advertisements is discussed further in the next section.

#### 4.2.4 Communication

Communication has a central role when it comes to projecting the brand identity to the audience (Kapferer, 2012). This channel’s key role relies on the fact that communication is a brand’s weapon (Kapferer, 2012) and can have a critical impact on how the audience perceives the brand. During the data collection, it emerged that communication is an important part of branding Südtirol / Alto Adige. A common aspect that we noticed during data collection was the presence of local food. This can be seen in the commercials that were released on the official Südtirol’s / Alto Adige’s YouTube channel (Südtirol bewegt – Alto Adige da vivere, online).

For instance, a commercial named “South Tyrol seeks Dolce Vita skiers” emphasises the centrality of food products. In particular, the video shows Südtirol’s / Alto Adige’s iconic winter landscape and scenes of people skiing. What stands out in this commercial is that it is more than the mere communication of Südtirol / Alto Adige as a skiing destination. In fact, the advert includes scenes where skiers enjoy a glass of wine from Südtirol / Alto Adige and a plate of Speck. The focus on food is not only emphasised by visual elements, but also by the very few words used to communicate the message. As a matter of fact, the commercial says that Südtirol / Alto Adige seeks “taste

explorers” and the advertisement ends with “South Tyrol seeks Dolce vita skiers”. We believe that this commercial clearly illustrates how food is playing a protagonist role in the communication of Südtirol / Alto Adige. (Felder & Macelloni, 2020a, p.10)

Participant 4 explained that the choice of emphasising on well-being, pleasure and food in communication initiatives is connected to the fact that the destination is often associated with the concepts of “Wohlfühlen” and “Genuss”. The former, which is the German word for well-being, relates to well-being achieved through tourism activities such as skiing and biking. In contrast, the latter, which is the German word for pleasure, reconnects to the pleasure of food and culinary experiences. Participant 4 stated:

In general, these principles of well-being and pleasure are our unique selling points. Hence, we made some commercial campaigns where the skier is nowhere to be seen, but the focus is on a couple who is drinking local wine and having a nice meal in a ski hut in front of the Dolomites.” (Participant 4).

The campaigns described in the previous quote may be seen as a differentiated communication approach of a skiing resort. In fact, the emphasis lies on the unique selling points of the destination, namely well-being and pleasure, rather than on the skiing activity and landscape, which one would typically expect in a commercial of a skiing destination. The focus on unique characteristics of a destination as an element of differentiation is also discussed by Netemeyer et al. (2004), who point out that destination stakeholders often rely on unique characteristics to underline that their area is superior. In the case of Südtirol / Alto Adige, pleasure and well-being, expressed through local food products, appear to be unique characteristics by which the destination differentiates itself.

The theme of well-being and food pleasure can also be seen on the official Südtirol / Alto Adige Instagram account, namely VisitSouthTyrol (online), which often features local food products.

When featuring culinary products, VisitSouthTyrol often combines dishes from Südtirol / Alto Adige with the landscape of the area. For instance, the Instagram post (see Appendix 3) is the emblem of such a combination, as it features both the destination (the Alpine plateau in the background) and two dishes made with products from Südtirol / Alto Adige. On a different note, another post (see Appendix 4) only shows local food products such as Speck, cheese, chestnuts and wine on a wooden table. This post illustrates how the destination is communicated only via its typical food products. It appears as if the previously mentioned food products do not require the support of other visual elements such as iconic landscapes to communicate the destination, as Speck, cheese, chestnuts and wine have by themselves a very strong link with the territory. Stated differently, certain food products are so representative of Südtirol / Alto Adige that they are used independently to communicate Südtirol / Alto Adige as a tourist destination (Felder & Macelloni, 2020a, p.11).

The ability of food products to represent a destination is also discussed by Hjalager and Richards (2002) who state that destinations may use food as a tool for promotion and positioning and by Andersson, Mossberg and Therkelsen (2017) who point out that because of its ties with culture and nature of a specific place, local food and meals are often used as place symbols.

Overall, the prominent use of food products in the destination's visual content, as seen in the two posts, indicates that food products are a central element of the visual communication of the destination branding. (Felder & Macelloni, 2020a, p.11)

During the interviews, it also emerged that some of the stakeholders truly appreciate the communication efforts of IDM. In fact, Participant 6 explained:

The advertisements are beautiful. Trentino [the area that is adjacent to Südtirol / Alto Adige] has been taking inspiration from Südtirol's / Alto Adige's communication during the past few years, but our destination is ahead of every other Italian destination in regard to communication. (Participant 6)

Not only do stakeholders appreciate the communication efforts by IDM, but they also work together. In fact, Participant 3 highlighted that "we create the product, they promote it", suggesting that collaboration takes place amongst destination stakeholders. More specifically, Participant 3 made the example of the "Skiing with taste" initiative, where the skiing resort and the ski huts are in charge of providing the product and event planning and IDM is in charge of the promotion. "In the past we also shared the costs of some promotions. They pay half of it and we pay half of it." (Participant 3). Also Participant 2 stated that IDM is an important marketing partner.

Nonetheless, it also emerged that there are some aspects that IDM should work on when it comes to branding and communication. For instance, Participant 3 made clear that it is counterproductive that the destination has three names (Südtirol, Alto Adige and South Tyrol). In particular, Participant 3 criticised the use of the English nomenclature by saying: "The name South Tyrol does not fit, IDM needs to work on it." (Participant 3). Participant 2 also touched upon the different names of the destination and stated:

In Europe, the destination name that we most use is Südtirol. In the United States, we use the name Alto Adige in order to strengthen the Italianness. The adjective Alto already makes a connection to high quality and high quality helps us to stand out. (Participant 2).

The quote by Participant 2 shows that depending on the tourist market, different nomenclatures are more effective. In particular, Participant 2 suggested that "alto", the Italian adjective for high, creates a connection to high quality. Combined with the quality mark, one could argue that the nomenclature Alto Adige does further emphasise the high-quality local food products in communication.

Overall, the communication of Südtirol / Alto Adige is strongly focused on promoting well-being and pleasure, as seen on the destination's official YouTube channel and Instagram account. Furthermore, the communication initiatives by IDM are appreciated and supported by the stakeholders, even though some aspects such as the nomenclature of the destination need to be improved upon.

#### 4.2.5 Events

From the analysis of our empirical data, events emerged as important when communicating the brand identity of Südtirol / Alto Adige. Participant 2 explained that events play a central role to market Speck on the American and Canadian market. In particular, Participant 2 highlighted that tasting events at food stores as well as PR events are essential to create awareness for the product. With regard to events, Participant 5 explained that IDM collaborates in the organisation of various food events. Participant 5 mentioned several different events, some of which have become mass events and others that are more niche, showing how food events may vary in size, as pointed out in 2.2.8. Examples included a festival centred around Speck taking place in Villnössal / Val di Funes, an event centred around the destination's typical dessert made with apples (apple strudel) in Brixen / Bressanone and a smaller event that evolves around the Südtiroler Marille / albicocca dell'Alto Adige. In particular, Participant 5 mentioned the Meran/Merano WineFestival which each year attracts more than 10,000 wine enthusiasts and which "...gives Südtirol / Alto Adige great visibility".

Another event called "Wine Ski Safari" was mentioned by Participant 3. As the word suggests, the event, which is held in Alta Badia, is centred around wine and consists of a wine path, where skiers visit four different ski huts and can choose amongst a selection of around 100 wines. "We started the Wine Ski Safari 10 years ago and it has been an enormous success. Other skiing resorts have tried to imitate us". (Participant 3). This event exemplifies how food events are the outcome of collective efforts (Andersson, Mossberg & Therkelsen, 2017), as the ski resort and different ski huts jointly organise the "Wine Ski Safari". Moreover, the success of the event may be related to the fact that it is specific, as it takes place at a specific skiing resort and as it is centred around a specific product, namely wine. In fact, Antonioli Corigliano (2002) emphasises that food paths should have a common identity and not be too broad in terms of geography. Considering the success of the Wine Ski Safari, we argue that events of this type have the ability to communicate local food products as a core element of the destination's brand identity.

Concerning more general success factors for food events, Participant 3 stated that to be successful with an event, it is vital to be the first one to offer it, as otherwise it is seen as a copy. In fact, Participant 3 mentioned other events in different areas of Südtirol / Alto Adige, stating that if Alta Badia was to imitate them, the success would not be the same. Thus, a certain degree of first-mover advantage seems to prevail when organising unique events centred around food.



Overall, food events are important for communicating the central role of local food in the brand identity of the destination Südtirol / Alto Adige. Given their success and the fact that Folgado-Fernandez, Hernandez-Mogollon and Duarte (2017) acknowledge that if visitors of a food event have a positive experience this has a positive effect on their image about the destination, events play a central role in shaping the brand image of Südtirol / Alto Adige through local food. This leads us to the next section, namely the brand image of the destination Südtirol / Alto Adige.

### 4.3 Brand image

As seen in existing literature (Hatch & Schultz, 2001; Kapferer, 2012), brand image is the opinion that the public makes of the brand. Applied to the case study of destination branding in Südtirol / Alto Adige, brand image is the result of how the destination brand identity is communicated through the five channels outlined in section 4.2. In fact, Participant 2 mentioned that destination brand identity and destination brand image go hand in hand in the case of Südtirol / Alto Adige. Participant 2 stated:

Identity and image are complementary to each other in our case and this can be seen when we ask people about it. By carrying out market research, we have investigated what Südtirol / Alto Adige stands for. It emerged that this culinary side is very often seen as being part of the destination's image. (Participant 2).

The quote by Participant 2 confirms that local food plays a protagonist role in the identity of the destination and this goes in line with what was said in the first part of the analysis and discussion chapter about the importance of local food in the destination. Moreover, the quote by Participant 2 emphasises that IDM is putting theory into practice, as Quan and Wang (2004) state that a destination image can be developed through food. Another concept that emerged as being part of the image of the destination is well-being, which was advertised in the commercial "South Tyrol seeks Dolce vita skiers" that has been discussed in subsection 4.2.4. In fact, Participant 4 said:

We know from our investigations that Südtirol / Alto Adige has some associations that are stronger compared to other destinations. For example, in relation to the concept of well-being...we know that for almost every market, even markets that have not been too important so far, we were able to communicate this specific element. (Participant 4).

Furthermore, Participant 4 explained that the concept of well-being, merged with the local cuisine that is known for being unique due to its varied cultural background and mix of Austrian and Italian culinary methods, allows the destination to have a stronger unique selling point. This goes in line with Hashimoto and Telfer (2006), who state that specific food can play a crucial role in the development of a destination. So one might wonder: What is the underlying

mechanism that makes it possible to communicate brand identity through local food products? We argue that the use of local food to brand the destination Südtirol / Alto Adige can be explained through the inverse COO. This effect describes how products influence the perception of a place (White, 2012). In Südtirol / Alto Adige, local food products speak for the destination and influence how the public perceives the destination. In fact, both Participant 4 and Participant 5 stated that the public generally associates Südtirol / Alto Adige with high-quality food. In addition, Participant 6 said:

People trust Südtirol / Alto Adige more also due to genuine local products such as organic free-range eggs. This product category is also produced and available in other parts of Italy, but consumers trust this product more when it is from Südtirol / Alto Adige (Participant 6).

As a consequence, one could argue that the quality and trust that are associated with Südtirol's / Alto Adige's local food products get transferred to the destination itself. In other words, the positive image of local food products positively influences how people perceive Südtirol / Alto Adige. Thus, we argue that local food products have spillover effects on the destination brand image of Südtirol / Alto Adige. This also shows that the inverse COO does not only take place at a country level, but it can also manifest itself in a regional context. As a result, local food products offer a way for the destination Südtirol / Alto Adige to differentiate itself.

#### 4.4 Stakeholder collaboration

Going back to our research question, namely how local food is used by destination branding as a differentiating tool, an aspect that emerged throughout our data is stakeholder collaboration. As a matter of fact, when it comes to how the destination Südtirol / Alto Adige differentiates itself through local food products, collaboration amongst stakeholders plays an essential role. Hence, when asked how Südtirol / Alto Adige differentiates itself through local food products, the answer would be that one ingredient that makes this possible is collaboration amongst stakeholders. Although the collaborative aspect amongst different stakeholders has already been addressed in the previous sections, we decided to dedicate this section to stakeholder collaboration, given its centrality in our data.

As section 4.2 showed, different channels are used to communicate the brand identity of the destination Südtirol / Alto Adige. An element that is present across the different channels is stakeholder collaboration. However, before collaboration can take place, it is first necessary to unite the various stakeholders. In fact, Antonioli Corigliano (2002) points out that the sole presence of various producers does not automatically lead to the formation of networks and that an organising unit may be required to coordinate various stakeholders. In addition, Jenkins (1999) suggests that a precise and well-recognised destination identity is essential for destinations, as stakeholders may not necessarily share the same identity. For this reason, we argue that the destination brand identity of Südtirol / Alto Adige acts as a unifying force for

enabling stakeholder collaboration. Given that the DMO should coordinate brand identity amongst all stakeholders (Lin, Pearson & Cai, 2011), we identified IDM as the key actor that coordinates stakeholder collaboration. Moreover, on the official website of IDM, it is stated that Südtirol's / Alto Adige's brand identity is used as a guideline for communication purposes and product development of the destination (Provincia Autonoma di Bolzano - Alto Adige, 2019).

Several quotes by destination stakeholders highlighted general satisfaction about IDM's work and coordinating function, indicating that stakeholder collaboration is a lived principle in the destination Südtirol / Alto Adige. For instance, Participant 7 stated that "With IDM we have an excellent relationship" and that "My colleague who is in charge of sales outside of Italy often develops communication projects in collaboration with IDM". In a similar way, Participant 2 referred to IDM as "...an important marketing partner". (Participant 2). With regards to the specific channels used to communicate brand identity, local food products are a visible expression of collaboration amongst stakeholders, given the interaction between food producers and IDM, who oversees the use of the quality mark. Collaboration also emerged as an essential ingredient for food events, where different stakeholders such as ski hut owners and skiing resorts jointly organise events. Restaurants, delicacy stores and hotels, which emerged as places where brand identity is transferred and which are typically managed by independent stakeholders, are also an example of how destination branding is affected by various stakeholders rather than by a single one.

Overall, it appears that destination brand differentiation through local food products would not be feasible without stakeholder collaboration. Stated differently, it seems that stakeholder collaboration is a necessary criterion to ensure that the destination Südtirol / Alto Adige can differentiate itself through local food products. Considering that in general for collaboration to be successful a common logic amongst tourist actors is necessary (Boesen, Sundbo & Sundbo, 2017), we argue that the brand identity centred around well-being and pleasure, concepts which are made more tangible through local food products, acts as common logic for stakeholder collaboration in Südtirol / Alto Adige.

## 5. Conclusion

The aim of this thesis was to investigate how local food is used by destination branding as a differentiating tool. After having reviewed the key concepts in the existing literature about branding, destination branding, food tourism and after adapting the brand identity and image framework by Kapferer (2012) to our study context, we conducted a case study on destination branding in Südtirol / Alto Adige. Our qualitative study, which involved seven interviews with professionals and which presented the findings of a visual analysis of promotional content of the destination Südtirol / Alto Adige, allowed us to better understand how tourism destinations can differentiate themselves through local food products. Moreover, given the central role of stakeholder collaboration within destination management and food tourism, we paid particular attention to the mechanisms and interactions amongst different actors.

Our analysis has shown that different stakeholders, including the destination management organisation, restaurant owners and food producers, use local food products to brand and differentiate Südtirol / Alto Adige as a territory of pleasure and well-being. Moreover, it has been shown that food, being a key component of the culture of a place, is used in the destination branding of Südtirol / Alto Adige to communicate its unique culture, which has elements of both Austria and Italy, more tangibly. In other words, to make the concept of cultural dichotomy more clear, typical food products are used to communicate the mix between the Austrian and the Italian culture. Furthermore, our data indicate that the positive image of local food products from Südtirol / Alto Adige can have positive spillover effects on the brand image of the destination Südtirol / Alto Adige. As a consequence, this suggests that food products can influence the image of a destination, thus confirming the inverse COO in the context of destinations.

In the following sections, we present the main contributions and takeaways from our thesis. The contributions are divided into theoretical (5.1) and managerial contributions (5.2).

### 5.1 Theoretical contributions

A central contribution from an academic perspective was the connection that was found between the inverse COO and destination branding. While previous literature has discussed the inverse COO and the ability of products to influence the perception of the country they originate from, our study has shown that the inverse COO is also relevant in the context of destinations. As a matter of fact, in the case of Südtirol / Alto Adige, local food products speak for the destination and travellers may form a destination brand image of Südtirol / Alto Adige through the destination's iconic food products, which enjoy a positive image. The underlying mechanism for the ability of local food products to influence the destination brand image is the inverse COO. Another contribution, which goes in line with the connection between inverse COO and destination branding, concerns the validity of inverse COO in a regional context.

While the term country may induce readers to relate the concept exclusively to the realm of countries, our case study has shown that the concept is valid also in contexts that are smaller than countries, i.e. regions. We argue that rather than the geographical size of an area, it is the unique culture and strength of associations of an area that determine the ability of local products to influence the destination brand.

Finally, another contribution of this thesis is the adaptation of Kapferer's (2012) brand identity and image framework to the context of destinations. The new framework helps to visualise the process of communicating brand identity of destinations through the use of local food products. Stakeholder collaboration in the destination context and the mechanism of inverse COO were the two major adaptations that allowed to transfer Kapferer's (2012) more general branding framework to the realm of destination branding.

## 5.2 Managerial contributions

From a managerial perspective, what emerged from our data is the vital role of brand identity for destination management organisations. As a matter of fact, it was shown that brand identity is a guiding principle for various stakeholders. This aspect is even more critical for destinations, where many stakeholders participate in the delivery of tourism products and services. More specifically, with regard to the use of local food in destination branding, the thesis has shown how stakeholders operating in different sectors not only depend on each other but also support each other. In particular, the tourism sector and the food production sector appear to benefit from each other and to constitute a strategic alliance.

In addition, another aspect that emerged and may be relevant for further research is the linkage between food tourism and sustainable tourism. Although the focus of our thesis was not on the sustainable aspects of food tourism, previous literature on food tourism refers to this strategy as a more sustainable tourism practice for two main reasons. Firstly, tourism activity focusing on local food products is socially and economically sustainable, as it supports the local economy of a destination, including local farmers and food production companies. Secondly, it is more environmentally sustainable, as the consumption of local products means that transport routes are reduced, thus decreasing pollution.

Overall, the thesis has shown that through the use of local food products, destination brands can differentiate themselves and do so by using different channels. It emerged that brand identity acts as a common logic and guideline for stakeholders and is essential to ensure stakeholders are aligned. Moreover, our thesis has shown that different stakeholders are responsible for the single channels and messages through which the centrality of local food products is communicated.

### 5.3 Limitations and further research

In this section, we address the limitations of our study and suggest areas for further research in using local food products to differentiate destination brands.

To begin with, the focus of our analysis on a single case study represents a limitation in terms of generalisability of our findings. In fact, since we adopted a single case study to analyse the phenomenon of differentiating destination brands through local food products, it is not possible to generalise our findings. This is due to the fact that food, as it was highlighted, is a central element of the culture of a place and, therefore unique and different across destinations. For this reason, and for an improved understanding of the phenomenon, we suggest that future research analyses other destinations and how they use local food products in destination branding. This might add new and valuable perspectives to the current state of knowledge on the phenomenon.

Furthermore, it might be valuable to investigate the phenomenon of using local food products to differentiate a destination brand from a customer perspective. Since we adopted a managerial perspective, we focused more on aspects such as brand identity and the channels used to communicate brand identity rather than on the consumer perspective. Although brand image has been touched upon in our study, future research on the outcomes of destination branding through local food products and potential differences amongst countries and tourist markets, given the cultural value assigned to food, might be of interest.

Future research on other product categories could provide valuable insights for destinations that are not known primarily for their food products. For example, if a region is renowned for innovation and technological advancements, it might be of interest to see if the iconic products of that region can influence how the region is perceived as a tourist destination. Hence, further research could examine whether the inverse COO has the same validity in product categories other than food.

Finally, our thesis has shown how local food products are used in destination branding as a differentiating tool. In particular, it emerged how brand identity centred around local food products allows coordinating various stakeholders that contribute to and influence how a destination is managed and perceived. By analysing destination branding in Südtirol / Alto Adige with particular reference to local food products, it emerged that food has considerable place branding potential. Stated differently, the cuisine and local food of Südtirol / Alto Adige contribute to make the destination more desirable. This is not unsurprising if one is to trust the words of the Irish author and Nobel Prize winner George Bernard Shaw: “There is no love sincerer than the love of food” (Shaw, 1903, n.p.). In that sense, if a traveller sincerely loves food of Südtirol / Alto Adige, his/her love for food can make the destination Südtirol / Alto Adige more desirable.

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# Appendix 1

## Participant 1

- 1) Could you briefly introduce the company you work for and your role within the company?
- 2) What is your relationship with IDM and with other organisations linked to the destination Südtirol / Alto Adige? Do you think that as food producer you are influenced by the destination and vice versa?
- 3) Can you, if applicable, make some examples of collaborations like events or advertisements that you made with the tourism sector?
- 4) Do you believe that a person who consumes dairy products from Südtirol / Alto Adige is influenced by the destination Südtirol / Alto Adige? Does this also apply to products that are sold outside Südtirol / Alto Adige?
- 5) Do you think that local dairy products can give a contribution to tourism in Südtirol / Alto Adige? In other words: Do you believe that local dairy products can strengthen the image of Südtirol / Alto Adige as a territory of pleasure and well-being?
- 6) We have noticed that food seems to have a central role in the branding strategy of Südtirol / Alto Adige and that the quality mark is linked to the umbrella brand. We also know that not all producers can apply the quality mark due to specific criteria. Can you briefly tell us if and how this relates to your products? Do all your products carry the quality mark?
- 7) What is the advantage of applying the quality mark? Do you see disadvantages?
- 8) If you had to mention a food product that is most representative of the destination Südtirol / Alto Adige, which one would it be?
- 9) Overall, do you think that local food products contribute to strengthening the destination brand of Südtirol / Alto Adige?

## Participant 2

- 1) Could you briefly present your role within the consortium for Speck from Südtirol / Alto Adige and how the idea of having a consortium for Speck producers started? How many producers are part of the consortium?
- 2) How did you convince various producers to become part of the consortium? Which are the advantages of this union for the consortium and for the single producers?
- 3) What is your relationship with IDM and other organisations linked to the destination Südtirol / Alto Adige? Do you think that as food producers you are influenced by the destination and vice versa?
- 4) Do you believe that a person who consumes Speck is influenced by the destination Südtirol / Alto Adige?
- 5) Do you think that Speck can give a contribution to tourism in Südtirol / Alto Adige? In other words: Do you believe that Speck can strengthen the image of Südtirol / Alto Adige as a territory of pleasure and well-being?
- 6) We have noticed that food seems to have a central role in the branding strategy of Südtirol / Alto Adige and that the quality mark is linked to the umbrella brand. We also know that not all producers can apply the quality mark due to specific criteria. How does Speck relate to this?
- 7) What is the advantage of applying the quality mark? Do you see any disadvantages?

- 8) Overall, do you think that local food products contribute to strengthening the destination brand of Südtirol / Alto Adige?

### **Participant 3**

- 1) Could you briefly present your restaurant, something about its history and the context in which you operate?
- 2) Do you think that the emphasis of quality is a widespread characteristic in Alta Badia and the rest of Südtirol / Alto Adige? Do you believe that there are mainly single restaurants who decide to focus on high-quality food or that it is partly dictated by the communication made on a central level?
- 3) Are your guests aware of the typical products of the cuisine from Südtirol / Alto Adige? Are there differences amongst nationalities or do all of them assign the same importance to high-quality food? Does it require educating guests?
- 4) Do you believe that tasting typical dishes from Südtirol / Alto Adige in your ski hut can give a contribution to tourism in Südtirol / Alto Adige? Do you believe that your activity contributes to strengthening the image of Südtirol / Alto Adige as a territory of pleasure and well-being?
- 5) If you had to mention a food product or dish that is most representative of Südtirol / Alto Adige which one would it be?
- 6) We have noticed that the quality mark that is granted to certain local food products is linked to the umbrella brand. We also know that not all producers can apply the quality mark due to specific criteria. How do you, as a restaurant operator, judge the use of the quality mark on local products? Do you use products with the quality mark when preparing food? Is it something that your guests ask or look for?
- 7) On the topic of local food products with the quality mark, do you see any advantages or disadvantages?
- 8) Overall, do you think that local food products can contribute to strengthening the destination brand of Südtirol / Alto Adige?

### **Participant 4**

- 1) How and when did the idea to create a destination brand for Südtirol / Alto Adige arise?
- 2) Which were the main challenges when establishing the destination brand?
- 3) Which are the factors that have the highest impact on the formation of a destination image/brand?
- 4) We have noticed that food seems to have a central role in the branding strategy of Südtirol / Alto Adige. Which criteria do you use to select those who can use the brand?
- 5) Does the communication strategy differ depending on the markets you are targeting? In which way does the culture of a market influence your contents? Does food have the same importance in all markets?
- 6) Which food product/product category has the greatest impact on the image of the destination Südtirol / Alto Adige? Are there any food products that do not have a strong influence?
- 7) Did you have negative experiences in the past with products that were not in line with your brand and your value propositions? If so, how did you handle these situations?
- 8) Can you provide examples of how the centrality of food is communicated by IDM in the various communication channels?

## Participant 5

- 1) Could you briefly explain your role within IDM?
- 2) Many academics agree that to develop a strong brand, it is necessary to have a clear brand identity. In the case of the destination brand of Südtirol / Alto Adige, how would you describe the brand identity? Do you have an official statement defining your brand identity?
- 3) Which is the image that people have of the destination Südtirol / Alto Adige? Do you think this image is in line with the brand identity? Can you think of obstacles that make it difficult to communicate the brand identity of the destination to the public?
- 4) Can you tell us anything about the collaboration amongst various stakeholders such as hotel owners, restaurant owners, tour operators, etc.? Which are the most common difficulties that can arise?
- 5) We have noticed that food has a central role in the branding of the destination Südtirol / Alto Adige and that the quality mark is linked to the umbrella brand. Can you think of examples where the centrality of food is emphasised in the communication or through other channels?
- 6) Which product/product category has the strongest impact on the destination Südtirol / Alto Adige? Are some products/product categories less relevant in this context?
- 7) Do you think that someone who buys local food products is influenced by the origin from Südtirol / Alto Adige and by the destination?
- 8) Do you believe that local food can give a contribution to tourism in Südtirol / Alto Adige?
- 9) Overall, do you think that local food can strengthen the destination brand of Südtirol / Alto Adige?

## Participant 6

- 1) Could you briefly present your company and how the idea came up to open food stores and restaurants in Milan that are inspired by the cuisine from Südtirol / Alto Adige?
- 2) Do you think that your customers in Milan are influenced by the destination Südtirol / Alto Adige?
- 3) Do you have customers who visit you because they have previously been on vacation in Südtirol / Alto Adige?
- 4) Do you believe that food products from Südtirol / Alto Adige sold at your stores or served at your restaurants can give a contribution to tourism in Südtirol / Alto Adige?
- 5) If you had to mention one product that is most representative of Südtirol / Alto Adige, which one would it be?
- 6) We have noticed that food seems to have a central role in the branding strategy of Südtirol / Alto Adige and that the quality mark is linked to the umbrella brand. We also know that not all producers can apply the quality mark due to specific criteria. How do you as a reseller of local food products from Südtirol / Alto Adige in Milan judge the quality mark? Is it something that your customers ask for?
- 7) Which are the advantages/disadvantages of using the quality mark? When selecting products, does the quality mark affect your decision?
- 8) Overall, do you think that local food products from Südtirol / Alto Adige that are sold in Milan and elsewhere can strengthen the destination brand of Südtirol / Alto Adige?



## Participant 7

- 1) Could you briefly introduce the company you work for and your role within this company?
- 2) How would you describe the relationship between local food products from Südtirol / Alto Adige and the destination?
- 3) Do you think that people who buy local food products are influenced by the destination Südtirol / Alto Adige?
- 4) Do you believe that local food products can strengthen the image of Südtirol / Alto Adige as a territory of pleasure and well-being?
- 5) If you had to mention one product that is most representative of Südtirol / Alto Adige, which one would it be?
- 6) We have noticed that food seems to have a central role in the branding strategy of Südtirol / Alto Adige and that the quality mark is linked to the umbrella brand. We also know that not all producers can apply the quality mark due to specific criteria. How do you judge the use of the quality mark? Is it something that your customers ask for?
- 7) What is your relationship with IDM and other organisations linked to the destination Südtirol / Alto Adige? Would you say that your activity is influenced by the destination and that the destination is influenced by your activity?
- 8) Overall, do you think that local food products can strengthen the destination brand of Südtirol / Alto Adige?

## Appendix 2

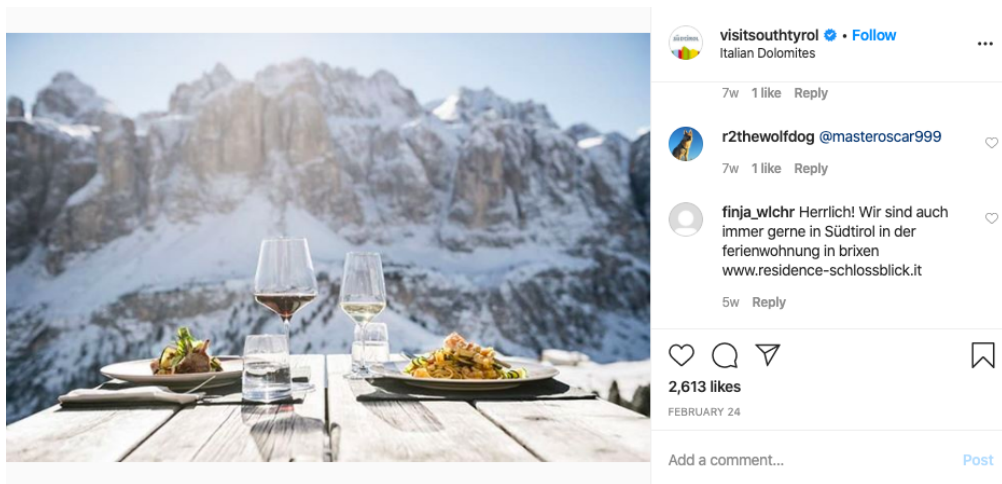


*Umbrella brand of Südtirol / Alto Adige (Provincia Autonoma di Bolzano - Alto Adige, 2019)*



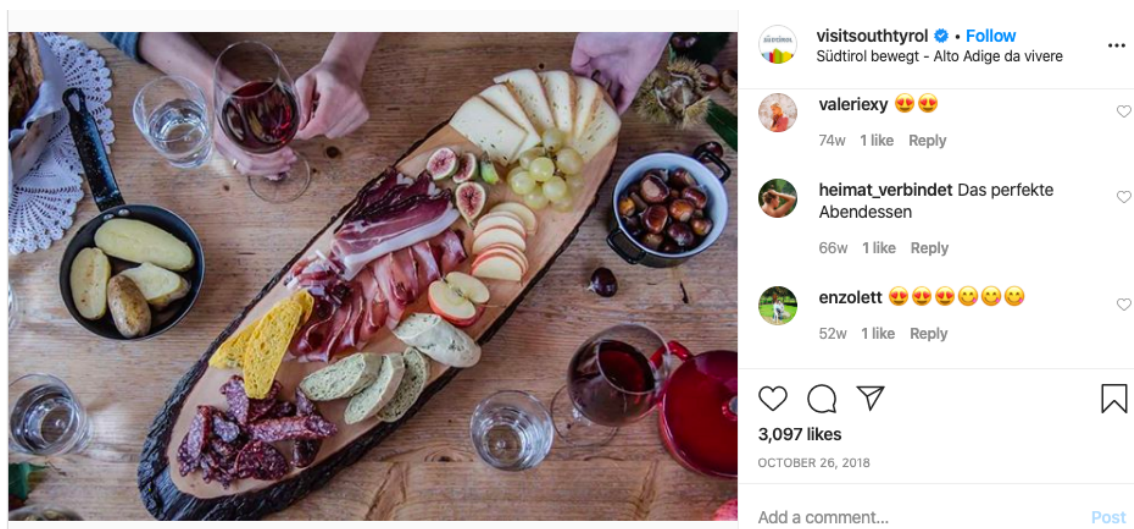
*Quality mark granted to specific food products complying with quality standards (Provincia Autonoma di Bolzano - Alto Adige, 2019)*

## Appendix 3



*Example of how local food products are used in communicating Südtirol's / Alto Adige's unique selling points: well-being and pleasure. Instagram Post from 24th February 2020. (VisitSouthTyrol, online)*

## Appendix 4



*Example of local food products that are representative of Südtirol / Alto Adige. Instagram Post from 28th October 2018. (VisitSouthTyrol, online)*