# Place Branding and Consumer Concerns

A Case Study of Turkey

## Master Thesis

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**Abstract**

The main focus of this thesis is to illuminate the lack of correspondence between place branding and consumer concerns, through a single case study of Turkey, and to generate new ideas for an alternative type of branding, using consumer insights from TripAdvisor and theories on cultural branding. In order to fulfill this aim, this exploratory single case study has been conducted by carrying out a netnography and qualitative content analysis on the Facebook Page of Turkey's official branding organization "Turkey Home" and TripAdvisor travel forums about Turkey. Through an analysis of 85 social media updates created by Turkey Home and 31 threads started by the users on TripAdvisor forums, the findings from both platforms were gathered under axial codes by taking inspiration from grounded theory.

The data analysis demonstrates that there is a big discrepancy between how Turkey is officially branded and what consumers are concerned about and what they are interested in. In addition to the gap between the areas and topics consumers and marketers are occupied with, the findings also point to a lack of correspondence in the format and presentation of those topics and the levels of interest between the two sides. Even though the departure point of this study has been the contrast between consumers' worries about the security of the country and the lack of interest in those concerns by the official branding organization of Turkey, the findings of this project demonstrate that consumers have even a wider range of key concerns about visiting Turkey, which are also neglected by the official branding organization of the country.

Traditional marketing approaches assume that if marketers successfully and repeatedly communicate a fixed and stable brand identity, a favorable brand image can be created in consumers' minds. Yet, as this study demonstrates, places and place images are complex and cultural products that are shaped and influenced by several actors for different groups of consumers. This project also illustrates how online forums, such as TripAdvisor, are platforms that can both help shape and alter consumers' perceptions about places and brand images, in addition to serving as a channel to share consumers' ideas and experiences with the given places. Based on the findings of this thesis, it becomes possible to say that this gap between place marketers and consumers can be addressed by using some of the consumer insights generated from TripAdvisor and based on the theories on cultural branding. The findings of this study, therefore, can both contribute to place marketers for dealing with insecure consumers and to marketing studies by suggesting an alternative, dynamic, and cultural approach to place branding.

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**1. Introduction**

The decision-making process of consumers for choosing a tourism destination to travel to is a complex mechanism involving several rational and emotional elements, and has been studied extensively in tourism and consumption studies (Cohen, Prayag, & Moital, 2014). Even though there's a great deal of disagreement in what motivates consumers to choose a certain travel destination, it is widely accepted that security is one of the top criteria for consumers while making travel plans, since the *image* of a place starts to get *distorted* when security issues arise (Reisinger & Mavondo, 2005). Since destinations are different from concrete products in many ways, how consumers view a place cannot be simply shaped by marketing activities because the place itself has certain images in the eyes of potential tourists prior to branding and the—positive and negative—developments happening within a place affect consumers' image construction (Ren & Blichfeldt, 2011). Yet, today's marketers still heavily rely on functionalist and mechanistic approaches to marketing and place branding, which see marketing messages as the only producers of brand identities, and they neglect the changes that globalization brought into the theories of social and cultural identities (Csaba & Bengtsson, 2006).

The aim of this thesis is, therefore, to shed light on the discrepancy between place branding and consumer reflections, and to discuss how the insights from consumer concerns and ideas from the theories of cultural branding can contribute to addressing this gap and help place brands to deal with unfavorable images and insecure consumers. Even though classical marketing studies can offer us an extensive literature on how to build favorable brands, they assume that brand images are stable, fixed, and fully controllable by marketers, and they lack the social and cultural dimensions to branding, which is critical for places (Ren & Blichfeldt, 2011). Furthermore, they neglect the importance of online communities, such as TripAdvisor as this study demonstrates, on shaping and altering brand images and place perceptions. In order to illuminate this gap between marketing and consumers, Turkey is used as a case country in this study. Analyzing the case country and using insights from traditional and cultural marketing studies, this project will attempt to create a framework that can be useful in creating better brands, which are signified by multiple, contested, and co-created brand identities (Csaba & Bengtsson, 2006).

Turkey, both as a country and a tourism destination, has been struggling with an unfavorable image issue, which has been further heightened during the years 2015 and 2016 that have been marked by major security threats and political instability. After being perceived as *unsafe* by

Western consumers for decades (Sönmez & Sirakaya, 2002), the already distorted image of Turkey has been further damaged by the anti-democratic political and legal practices, and deadly terror attacks that took place in the country. What's more striking is that these new challenges that harm Turkey's image and heighten the anxieties of potential tourists are ignored by the official tourism organization of the country. As of 2019, where the situation has calmed down to an extent, this study demonstrates that the safety of Turkey remains to be a common question in consumers' minds—among other worries. Today, the search term "Is it safe to go to Turkey?" brings more than 50.000 results on Google, including recently written blog articles and user-generated forum entries. Yet, visiting the country's official social media accounts will picture an entirely different story.

The national tourism organization (NTO) of Turkey, called *Turkey Home,* still relies heavily on traditional place branding techniques on social media, using one-way communication, promoting mainly "beautiful views", and covering safe topics such as "food and drinks" about the country. On the other hand, potential tourists raise their questions in online communities in relation to their concerns about visiting Turkey. However, consumers' concerns about a wide range of issues are not being addressed by place marketers, which creates a discrepancy between the official branding efforts of Turkey and consumer reflections, and this wide gap between the producers and consumers of the country's marketing materials constitutes the departure point of this study. Before moving onto the problem formulation, Turkey's negative image issues and the recent developments that further damaged the country's image will be briefly introduced in order to make the reader familiarized with the case country.

### *An Ambivalent Country Image*

Turkey, as a country, a place, and a destination has been suffering from unfavorable and ambivalent image issues for a long time now. Traditionally, Turkey has been positioned in relation to the East-West binary and through its "inbetweenness", where the country has been promoted as a *familiar,* yet *authentic* place via a combination of its Eastern cultural heritage, such as the legacy of the Ottoman Empire and a predominantly Muslim society, and its Western elements, such as secularism, democracy, and historical alliances with Western countries (Tecmen, 2017). Different representations of Turkey as a European, Asian, or Middle Eastern country by different sources and international organizations also have contributed to this distorted image of the country in the minds of consumers (Sönmez & Sirakaya, 2002).

According to some scholars, negative connotations and stereotypes about Turkey have resulted in the creation of an unfavorable country image, which might even be traced back to the country's Ottoman past and previous existence in Europe (Alvarez, 2010). Others suggest that the perception of Turkey as a Muslim country and the contrast between Christianity and Islam influenced the image of Turkey among Europeans since Turkey has been confused with an entire civilization of Islam (Boria, 2006). Moreover, since Turkey is often associated with other Muslim countries in the area, such as Iraq, Syria, and Morocco, the country gained broader Islamic and oriental connotations (Ozturkmen, 2005). These associations also contributed to an unfavorable image among Westerners and perception of Turkey as an unsafe country, due to the conflicts within the region (Sönmez & Sirakaya, 2002). Developments that took place within the country such as the conflict over Cyprus, and the Armenian and Kurdish issues that have been covered and raised by the international media have also affected Turkey's image in the global arena (Altinbasak & Yalcin, 2008). In addition to news media, studies point to the negative influence of movies, such as *Midnight Express (1978)* that portray Turkey as a human rights violator, on the country's image (Tasci, Meydan, & Cavusgil, 2006).

### *Increased Security Threats*

As security threats and political instability recently heightened in Turkey, the country's ambivalent image has been further distorted. In 2016, the growth of Turkish tourism took a major hit due to a number of political and safety issues that had arisen in the country, which resulted in a 30% decrease in foreign tourist arrivals compared to the previous year (Statista, 2018). Starting in the middle of 2015, several terror attacks took place in major cities of Turkey over the course of one and a half years. As security threats heightened in the following year, more than 350 people lost their lives, while almost 1,500 remained injured in the year of 2016 in Turkey (Koker, 2016).

Terrorist attacks held against tourists in a country can have greater implications for both the host country, similar or neighboring countries, and tourists from other locations. A recent study suggests that "terrorism in a predominantly Islamic country against citizens from a specific Western country of origin" has *spillover effects,* which influences other Islamic destination countries and other Western-origin countries negatively (Neumayer & Plumper, 2016). Thus, it's possible to claim that Turkey's image in the eyes of Western tourists might have been further deteriorated due to the political unrest and security threats in the Middle East during that time period. According to World Tourism Organization's data on inbound tourism in

Turkey, it's clear that the number of tourists from Europe, who constitute the largest group of visitors to Turkey, dropped significantly in 2016, which may be affected by the aforementioned spillover effect in the Western world (World Tourism Organization, 2019).

*Political Instability*

Combined with the issue of violence, negative political and social developments that occurred in Turkey during that period might have contributed negatively to the image of Turkey in the minds of Westerners. In July 2016, right in the midst of heightened security issues, Turkey witnessed a deadly coup attempt tied to the Gulen movement, which left over 200 people dead and more than 2,000 injured (Al Jazeera, 2017). Days after the failed coup attempt, the Turkish government declared a state of emergency, which lasted for two years. The emergency decrees paved the way for a so-called "media witch-hunt", which meant that 140 media outlets had been shut down and 149 journalists had been jailed by the end of the year (Human Rights Watch, 2016). The same year, the two co-leaders and several other MPs of the pro-Kurdish Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP), which was the third largest party in the parliament, were arrested after their immunities had been lifted (Al Jazeera, 2016). Moreover, thousands of academics have been dismissed and prosecuted, especially after signing a petition that denounced military operations in Southeast Turkey. The petition started by the Academics for Peace, which have been signed and supported by internationally-known academics such as Noam Chomsky, David Harvey, Judith Butler, and Immanuel Wallerstein, has gathered attention in the Western media (Diken, 2016).

All in all, Turkey has recently received widespread media attention, yet, mostly with regards to its fragile political and security situation, which possibly contributed to the decline in Turkey's tourism numbers, since the coverage of negative events may decrease a destination's reputation (Sönmez & Sirakaya, 2002). Even though Turkish tourism managed to recover some of its lost grounds over the past two years (European Travel Commission, 2019), Turkey is still struggling with negative image issues to a great extent, both as a country and a destination brand. More importantly, as this study aims to demonstrate, global consumers still have doubts about visiting the country, among other concerns that are ignored by the NTO of Turkey. Even though the traditional place branding and marketing literatures offer us different perspectives on promoting destinations to global audiences and coping with troubling brand situations respectively, there's limited information on how to deal with the issue in relation to places and how to create cultural brands that can respond better to insecure consumers.

## 2. Problem Formulation

The lack of knowledge in the literature and the discrepancy between what Turkey officially communicates to a global audience and what consumers are actually interested in poses an interesting problem for both theoretical and practical fields of marketing. Illuminating the gap between marketing materials and consumer reflections using the case of Turkey can be useful in understanding the broader bulk of image issues that have been heightened by security problems in the country. Building a framework by taking inspiration from traditional marketing theories, place branding, and cultural branding studies, as well as the results of the data analysis, this project can contribute to the marketing literature by providing insights from a place brand that has been suffering from ambivalent image issues and consumers with several concerns.

Therefore, the problem formulation is structured as follows: *How do the official branding of Turkey and consumer reactions, based on a netnography of Turkey Home Facebook Page and TripAdvisor forums, differ from each other? How can consumer insights from TripAdvisor and ideas from cultural branding contribute to addressing this gap and to marketing theories?*

In order to answer these questions, first, this study will analyze how Turkey is officially branded on Facebook. Secondly, the type of questions and discussions consumers have about traveling to the country will be studied through a netnography on TripAdvisor. Finally, with the insights gained from consumer reactions and ideas from the theories of cultural branding, a discussion will be presented about the key concerns of consumers and how we can come up with more favorable place brands that can diminish this gap between marketing and consumers, using some of these concerns and ideas from cultural branding theories.

This study will begin by introducing the existing body of literature about the issues of security and image formation, and some managerial strategies for creating favorable brand images. Afterward, theoretical debates about branding and place branding will be presented. The section will be concluded by the introduction and discussion of cultural branding. In the Methodology chapter, the research design, paradigm choices, data collection and analysis methods will be explained in detail. After the data sources and the data are presented, methodological limitations of the study will be briefly introduced. The results of the data analysis will be presented in the Findings section and will be followed by a discussion in relation to the existing body of literature. In that section, the implications of the consumer concerns and ideas from cultural

branding will be presented and discussed. The study will be concluded by suggesting possible implications of the findings for the marketing literature.

### Overview of Concepts

Before moving onto the Literature Review, a brief outline and overview of the concepts that will be utilized throughout this study will be presented in order to have a better understanding of branding of places, countries, and destinations that are similar to our case. Due to the increasing interest in branding of places, the branding literature expanded to cover different dimensions of places and how to market places in the most effective way possible in order to make them attractive to a wider audience (Alvarez, 2010). Today, the academia provides us with different levels of branding, including but not limited to place branding, destination branding, country branding, nation branding, and so on. It might be helpful to draw some possible borders between these terms in order to better understand what they entail and refer to.

*Place branding,* often used as an umbrella term covering some of the other concepts such as city branding or destination branding, has been defined as "the practice of applying brand strategy and other marketing techniques and disciplines to the economic, social, political and cultural development of cities, regions and countries" (Anholt, 2004, as cited in Kerr, 2006). Place branding literature generally uses the concept of *place* to refer to both "a geographic location, a nation, a country, a region, a city, and a tourism destination" (Hanna & Rowley, 2008). Destination, on the other hand, is often understood as "a specific term referring to a place only as a tourism product" (Korać & Šegota, 2017). Therefore, *destination branding* has been traditionally defined as a marketing tool to distinguish a destination from its competitors through promoting its "unique identity" (Cai, 2002). According to Kerr (2006), destination branding exclusively targets tourists, whereas place branding has a broader audience also including residents and companies that exist in a given place.

Another popular term, *country branding,* is frequently used in the literature as a synonym to *nation branding,* and considered as a special type of place branding that is not limited by tourism purposes (Korać & Šegota, 2017). Nation or country branding is the process of creating and altering a nation's image with the aim of improving the country's reputation towards an international audience (Fan, 2010). Even though country branding does not focus on promoting a place for tourism goals, it's possible to argue that effective country branding may contribute to a country's efforts in destination branding, too. The concepts and practices around place

branding are, therefore, highly interconnected and they can easily be influenced by one another. Even though it is difficult to draw specific borders, this project will often refer back to the concepts of place and destination branding since the main focus of the study is the marketing materials targeting tourists and the consumers' reflections. The term "destination" will be necessary while talking about Turkey as a tourism product, and "place" will be referred to cover more dimensions of the country where destination itself becomes too limited. Yet, this study acknowledges that the two terms are highly interrelated and how a place and a destination within that place are branded and perceived may influence each other significantly.

## 3. Literature Review

In this section, first, the literature on the perceptions of security and their impact on images of places will be introduced, in order to understand the influence of consumer concerns on a place's image. Following that, some managerial strategies borrowed from image restoration studies will be presented in order to get inspiration about how we can possibly deal with such ambivalent image issues and concerned consumers, as in the case of Turkey. Due to the nature of places and the difficulties of applying these strategies to places, other studies that specifically focus on places that suffer from bad reputations will be introduced and critically discussed afterward. The flaws and shortcomings of these studies will be attempted to be fixed using the ideas from classical branding and place branding studies. Since the traditional place branding literature is not free from problems, these studies will be critically discussed with the help of more recent studies within the field. Finally, cultural branding will be introduced as an alternative to approaching brands and diminishing the gap between place marketers and consumers.

### 3.1. Security and Unfavorable Place Images

Since the case country suffers from ambivalent and unfavorable image issues that have been further damaged by security threats and political conflicts, it is useful to start with exploring how and why consumers form images about places and how the perception of security affects place images. Even though global tourists have a wide range of motivations for choosing a destination to travel to, and the concepts of dark tourism or slum tourism has been gaining popularity (White & Frew, 2013), safety and security have often been recognized as key factors that influence tourists' decision-making processes (Hall, 2002). Therefore, tourism cannot develop and reach its full potential in unsafe places. On the other hand, it's not enough by itself that a given place is *actually* safe. Places must be *perceived* as being safe by potential tourists, so that the place can have a favorable image in consumers' minds. With the intensification of global terrorism, especially targeting tourists in and out of the Western hemisphere, the perception of the world as a "risky place" to live and to travel to has been growing among consumers (Fischhoff, Nightingdale, & Iannotta, 2001, as cited in Reisinger & Mavondo, 2005). Therefore, it's becoming more and more difficult for places to be branded and promoted as fully safe and secure.

Safety is closely associated with *risk* and *risk perception,* which are key concepts that have been studied extensively in consumer behavior and tourism research. Even though the literature

offers us several different types of risk in relation to travel intentions and tourist behavior, the risk of terrorism and concerns about safety have become major factors for consumers when choosing a travel destination (Sönmez & Graefe, 1998). In an empirical study involving Australian and foreign respondents, it's been demonstrated that culture, personality, and motivation to travel had critical influence on perceptions of travel risk, anxiety, and safety, and that *terrorism* and *sociocultural risk* have been identified as the most significant predictors of travel anxiety (Reisinger & Mavondo, 2005). Unsurprisingly, Reisinger & Mavondo (2005) suggest that perceived risk and travel anxiety may decrease consumers' intention to visit a certain destination, and therefore harm the marketability of a place.

Several other studies within the field demonstrated that travel intentions and consumer behavior are not only affected by terrorism concerns. *Political violence* and *political instability* are also showed to be significant factors that negatively influence the image of a place in the minds of consumers, even if no tourist gets physically harmed or killed (Neumayer, 2004). Protests, riots, human rights violations, strikes, as well as coups and other politically motivated events, or even the threat of the existence of such events are argued to be influential in consumers' travel intentions and their perceived image of places (Hall & O'Sullivan, 1996). According to Neumayer (2004), such events or indicators of political instability can put a country, whose main attractions are, for instance, its climate and nature, in a highly vulnerable position, because consumers can easily choose another country, where they can enjoy a similar attraction without having the risk of confronting violence.

In addition to the negative developments that occur in a given country, in some instances, certain *spatial spillover effects* may come into play by intensifying the adverse effects of security issues even more. According to Neumayer & Plumper (2016), when a negative event, such as a terrorist attack, takes place against a Western tourist in an Islamic destination country, there are multiple spillover effects that are brought by it. First, tourism from the victims' country to any other predominantly Muslim country would drop; secondly, tourism from other Western countries to the country that the event took place would decrease; and lastly, tourism from other Western countries to other Islamic destinations would diminish (Neumayer & Plumper, 2016). The researchers, therefore, claim that any crisis situation that occurs in an Islamic destination country is expected to have spillover effects on the perception of similar locations, and influence those countries' images, too.

One problem with the approaches presented above is that they all assume an all-rational consumer, who always makes decisions based on a logical process of thinking. Moreover, they start with an idea of a mass tourist, who is a group of people with similar travel motivations and consumption patterns. Yet, cultural and affective dimensions can also be involved in consumers' decision-making processes, rather than only rational and cognitive dimensions (Therkelsen, 2003). Furthermore, the issues of safety and security undoubtedly influence place images in the minds of potential visitors, yet, to different extents for different consumer groups. Due to the very nature of tourism experience, destinations depend heavily on positive images, and therefore it is suggested that places should recover from their negative image issues as soon as possible (Sönmez & Graefe, 1998). Even though there's a vast literature on terrorism, security, crises, and consumption behavior in tourism studies, there's little information about what to do under these situations and how to deal with a place's image problems and consumers' worries. Therefore, in order to address these issues, it might be helpful to look for inspiration in managerial strategies from crisis communication and marketing studies.

### 3.2. Managerial Strategies on Unfavorable Brand Images

Even though they are generally targeted towards traditional companies and organizations with tangible consumer goods and services, managerial strategies within the fields of crisis communication and image restoration can inspire us about how to deal with places with unfavorable images and intense consumer concerns. After a brief introduction to the image restoration studies in this section, their shortcomings will be discussed and criticized.

Earlier studies within the field of crisis communication offer us a number of theories and rhetorical crisis management strategies that often take the form of "apologia" under the terms of image repair, restoration, and recovery (Coombs, 2014). One of the most influential studies in the area has been developed by William L. Benoit, where he focuses on the rhetorical image restoration messages that organizations should send in order to repair their negative image after a crisis situation (Benoit, 1997). According to his research based on a number of case studies, Benoit (1997) suggests five major repair strategies that can be used in response to a crisis: *denial, evasion of responsibility, reducing offensiveness of events, corrective action,* and *mortification.* Even though his works have been built to address mainly corporate crises, they still managed to inspire some studies in the tourism and crisis literature (Ketter, 2016). Yet, focusing mainly on the sender side of the communication messages, Benoit fails to take consumer reactions and attributions into account. Taking inspiration from Benoit's and earlier

scholars' work on crisis communication, Timothy Coombs offers an audience-oriented and evidence-based framework, where he builds a communication model based on anticipated stakeholder reactions (Coombs, 2007).

According to Coombs (2007), consumers and other stakeholders attribute different levels of responsibility to organizations under different types of crises, and therefore, develop different kinds of emotional reactions. According to the Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT), if an organization is thought to be a victim in the crisis situation, such as in natural disasters, the consumers are expected to have weak attributions of responsibility towards the organization, and the core feeling of sympathy, rather than anger, would be triggered (Coombs, 2007). Coombs (2007) suggests crisis managers three main communication strategies, depending on the type of expected consumer reactions, namely, *denial*, *diminish*, and *rebuild*. Yet, it's not easy to categorize more complex crisis situations, such as political instability or terrorism in places, and fit them into a cluster, since such events have multiple social dimensions involving several actors. Another challenge of both approaches to image repair is that they are heavily based on the assumption that consumers' perceptions can exclusively be shaped by the media or marketing messages provided by a unified center, such as NTOs in our case.

Even though earlier image restoration studies can provide us with a starting point in understanding crisis situations and crisis managers' options, they're not easily applicable on places and destinations, since places are more complex and living products that involve more stakeholders. Another problem with the existing studies is that they usually handle the initial crisis communication efforts rather than a long process of image recovery. Therefore, the image repair research does not offer much about reverting a long history of negative image issues or prolonged perceptions of crisis situation and consumer concerns. They also neglect the fact that recovering from crises take more than simply one-way crisis communication messages. Traditional organizations, such as corporations, can take actions overnight and promise to revert crisis situations as an attempt to recover from image issues, yet, problems that occur in places usually require a longer time to resolve so that the place can again be perceived as having a more positive image (Avraham, 2015). Therefore, places and destinations need image restoration theories and strategies that are exclusively developed for them to fit the special nature of places and their consumers. That's why, in the next section, the managerial literature on restoring unfavorable place images will be introduced and discussed.

*3.3. Managerial Strategies on Restoring Place Images*

Although places and tourism products are regularly subject to natural or man-made crisis situations, unfortunately, there is not enough research within the fields of place marketing and image restoration, apart from a few managerial studies. Since traditional image restoration methods cannot be applied to places for the reasons presented above, these studies focusing only on place image restoration can inspire us in building a framework to address consumers' worries about places. Yet, these studies are also not free from problems, since they do not necessarily address the consumers' concerns or interests, which will be discussed at the end of the section.

In a multi-step model for altering negative destination images, proposed by Avraham & Ketter, the scholars argue that one should, first and foremost, distinguish between immediate or emerging crises, and sustained crises, which may take months or years, such as the ongoing conflict situation in the Middle East (Avraham & Ketter, 2008). After a preliminary analysis of the crisis, the audience, and the place, place marketers can choose the most suitable communication strategies that the authors offer under three main categories: source, audience, and message (Avraham, 2015). According to the model developed by Avraham & Ketter (2008), place marketers can focus on the *source*, to influence or replace the sources of the negative image; use *audience* strategies that are related to the audience's perceptions and values; or choose *message* strategies that directly focus on handling the problematic areas of the image itself.

Source strategies are those where localities attempt to bypass the source of negative messages, which is often the mass media, and assert that the place is safe by themselves, either taking a "come-see-for-yourself" attitude or using celebrities to send the message. According to Avraham & Ketter (2008), message strategies can take different forms, including but not limited to reducing the scale of the crisis, restricting it to certain areas, showing multiple facets of the place identity, or combating the reasons of the crisis, such as showing that they're fighting against terrorism. One easy message strategy is ignoring or limiting the crisis, where place marketers pretend that nothing major had happened, which has been employed in Spain following a period of terrorist attacks, as well as in Turkey (Avraham & Ketter, 2008). Even though it looks like a quick solution, the authors argue that places that got high coverage in the international media about terrorism or security issues cannot afford to ignore the crisis, and,

instead, they should fight it, since ignoring security problems will only make things worse and increase the anxiety of potential travelers. Among other minor strategies, shooting movies to highlight the safety of the place or hosting cultural events have been suggested by Avraham & Ketter (2008) as effective message strategies, which has been utilized in Egypt in the 1990s to draw away attention from terrorism (Sönmez, 1998). The last strategy offered by Avraham & Ketter (2008) involving the audience is using patriotism and nationalism in communication, or changing the target audience of image repair messages.

A different approach to correcting places' negative images comes from Gertner & Kotler, who claim that place marketers have to find out how to overcome the issue either by (1) ignoring the negatives, (2) reversing negatives into positives, or (3) overwhelming negatives with other positives that the place may be branded with (Gertner & Kotler, 2004). They argue that one of the major factors influencing a place's image, *stereotypes,* are created and reinforced by the media, the entertainment industry, and by the marketing materials place marketers produce themselves, and as a result, several locations around the world, such as Turkey, suffer from some well-known stereotypes, which deeply influence their image (Gertner & Kotler, 2004). Moreover, they claim that a country's image is not only affected by its geography, history, art and music, but also by societal ills, political riots, and civil rights violations, and that it might be easier to create new positive associations than attempting to refute the old ones (Kotler & Gertner, 2002).

Gertner & Kotler (2004) proposes that *strategic image management* (SIM) is the solution to places' image problems, which they define as "the ongoing process of researching a place's image among its various audiences, segmenting and targeting its specific audiences, positioning a place's attractions to support its desired image and communicating those attractions to target groups." For the three image recovery strategies to work effectively, Gertner & Kotler (2004) argue that the place's image must (1) be valid and close to reality, (2) be believable, (3) be simple, (4) have appeal, and (5) be distinctive. Even though it's often easier said than done, promoting *safety* over *risk* has been suggested as a good approach in restoring a place's unfavorable image. Some researchers suggest that place marketers should provide potential tourists with more information about destinations or reposition their travel products in order to reduce their anxiety level (Reisinger & Mavondo, 2005).

Although it is helpful to come across a handful of studies within the field, there are several problems with these managerial strategies. First, the studies presented here assume that mass media, destination marketing organizations, and place marketers are the only centers where consumers can receive information about a place, which neglects several other stakeholders, such as the locals, official travel warnings, online forums, and so on. Moreover, these studies are built on the premise that when consumers receive those marketing messages, the intended brand image will automatically appear in their minds. However, the image formation and co-creation process is much more complex than a unidirectional sender-to-receiver transmission. Since places are challenged by new internal and external crises every day, more research is needed concerning how to build more favorable brand images for places suffering from reputation problems (Ritchie, Dorrell, Miller, & Miller, 2004). One should always keep in mind that the place *itself* has a significant effect on how it can be communicated, and therefore, it's impossible to assume that marketers can fully restore a place's image without the influence of consumers, local actors, and other stakeholders. Going back to the root of the problem, the flaws and issues with these image restoration studies can be repaired with the insights from a critical use of *place branding* theories. Therefore, in the next part, traditional approaches to branding and place branding will be introduced and their potential contributions to our framework will be critically discussed.

### 3.4. Traditional Approaches to Place Branding

In this section, traditional approaches to brands, branding, and place branding will be presented and critically used in order to create a framework that is better suited to dealing with image issues of places, in contrast to tangible products. Keeping in mind that classical branding theories have numerous problem areas, they will be criticized using the new approaches to place branding, and finally cultural branding.

In simple terms, a *brand* has been defined as "a mark, symbol, logo, design, or other form of distinguishing feature" that lets consumers identify a company's products among the others, although brands can also be services, people, or places (Roper, 2016). The process and practice of *branding* have been traditionally explained through the two key concepts: *brand identity* and *brand image.* According to the classical approach, brand identity is created by marketers and shaped by the essential values and characteristics a brand owns and it refers to how a brand wishes to be seen in the eyes of the consumers, whereas brand image is the interpretation of that identity by consumers (Kapferer, 2004). Therefore, the initial assumption of traditional

branding approaches is that brand identities can be developed and sustained by brand managers and successfully transferred to consumers.

One of the most influential researchers in the branding studies, David Aaker describes brand identity as consisting of three interrelated parts, namely *core identity, extended identity* and *brand essence* (Aaker, 1999). According to Aaker (1999), core identity is the foundation and the essence that the brand relies on and it contains the vision and spirit of the brand. Core identity is believed to remain more or less constant over time. Extended brand identity is, allegedly, what supports and complements the core, and unlike core identity, it may change in time. Brand essence is argued to be the glue that holds all together, and it contains the values of the brand. Aaker (1999) suggests that for a successful branding strategy, these three key brand elements should be kept well-positioned by brand managers. If they are aligned properly, the intended brand image is expected to be created in the minds of consumers (Aaker, 1999).

Following the classical branding approaches, *place branding* has been traditionally understood as the process of communicating the brand identity of a place or a destination successfully so that the intended brand image can be created in consumers' minds (Ren & Blichfeldt, 2011). According to Ren & Blichfeldt (2011), traditionally, the goal has been creating one clear identity of a place, usually handled by destination marketing organizations (DMO), and communicating this identity to potential tourists, so that the projected, clear image will be created on the consumer side. While "differentiation" has been seen as the key to achieving a successful brand positioning in classical marketing theories and practices (Trout & Rivkin, 2008), the same approach has often been applied to place branding studies, too. Therefore, the end result of successful place branding has been considered to make a destination brand stand out among the other alternatives by focusing on what the place can offer that the others don't, such as a beautiful landscape, an interesting culture, or a favorable climate (Ren & Blichfeldt, 2011).

As pointed out by Ren & Blichfeldt (2011), in the context of classical place branding, the sender and creator of a brand's identity and the relevant marketing messages are assumed to be DMOs. According to this traditional approach, national tourism organizations (NTOs), which are more comprehensive and nationwide forms of DMOs, are considered to be responsible for attracting visitors to a given country's tourist destinations, and they are assigned to "planning, developing, and managing tourist services" (Lubbe, 2003, as cited in Wight, 2013). Therefore, the

understanding of place branding, in this view, is central and unified, where one-directional brand messages are communicated from a center, namely an NTO, which is often a governmental or semi-governmental organization. Moreover, NTOs typically utilize social media channels as an online destination marketing tool, in addition to print and offline media (Hays, Page, & Buhalis, 2013), even though many of them still take a top-down communication approach leaving little space to a two-way communication (Mariani, Mura, & Felice, 2018).

### 3.5. New Approaches to Place Branding

Both the classical understandings of brands and branding, and the traditional approaches to place branding carry certain problem areas that need to be addressed. Using insights from recent place branding theories, we can create a better framework that can fit today's contested identities and contribute to the marketing literature. First, defining a brand as a mark that differentiates a product, a service, or a place is highly simplistic and one-sided. Instead, brands should be understood as complex cultural and collective creations, which do not have an essential intrinsic value by themselves without the consumers and the cultural context around them (Cayla & Arnould, 2008).

The traditional approaches to branding that are based on differentiation and humanization of the brand do not reflect the changes that are brought into the theories of social identities by globalization. Therefore, the brand management literature needs to be updated under the light of the developments within the social and cultural identity theory (Csaba & Bengtsson, 2006). Challenging the main assumptions of the branding studies, Csaba and Bengtsson (2006) argue that the classical understanding of brands and branding contain a mechanistic approach and a functionalist perspective for a number of reasons. First, the assumption that brand identities are defined and controlled by marketers ignores the consumers' and other stakeholders' role in the production of the brand's identity since they suggest that "consumers negotiate the brand in relation to their own cultural and social identity" and therefore, brand identities are co-produced in today's world (Csaba & Bengtsson, 2006). The view that sees DMOs and NTOs as the sole producers of place brand identities are, thus, problematic for the very same reason. Especially with the recent developments in social media and the rise of the phenomena of "Travel 2.0" and "tourist-generated content", there are more and more stakeholders that have a say in branding of a place, such as online communities (Mak, 2017). Now, consumers can also tell their version of the stories about a place and take part in the process of place branding by challenging the notion of "one clear image".

The assertion that brands have an enduring and stable identity, which is inherent in the brand by itself, does not correspond to contemporary social and cultural identities that are often described as being multiple, conflicting, and contested (Csaba & Bengtsson, 2006). Brands should have fluid identities that can reflect the dynamic and reflexive nature of social identities, instead. The initial belief that brands have an essence and that brand identities are representations of that essence limits the flexibility of branding, and neglects the dialectical process of identity construction between the marketer and the consumer (Csaba & Bengtsson, 2006). Last but not least, the idea of separating brand identity and brand image assumes clear borders between what's internal and external to the brand and sets specific borders between the sender and the receiver of brand messages. Yet, brand identities are not developed in isolation by marketers, but rather co-created and negotiated by consumers and other stakeholders in the marketplace (Csaba & Bengtsson, 2006).

The ideal of developing one clear brand identity and image of a place has its problems for several reasons. Just like social and cultural identities, it's possible to argue that places do not have one fixed and stable identity, but they rather own a multiplicity of identities that are being constantly constructed and negotiated through several actors in the context they operate in (Ren & Blichfeldt, 2011). In their study, Ren & Blichfeldt (2011) show that destinations can be characterized by a multiplicity of images that are created *through* the place itself in a way that cannot be fully and strategically controllable by tourism organizations, and having multiple brand images for the same place does not necessarily mean a mistake or a flaw in the brand strategy. Since places are not homogenous entities that are performed and experienced the same way by everybody, allowing locals and tourists to construct the place in their own versions would help the brand to have an open and flexible identity, which gives it the ability to adjust to today's fast-changing world and shifting social identities.

As demonstrated by Ren & Blichfeldt (2011), places as brands do not exist by themselves in isolation from the place *itself,* and since places are complex products, compared to tangible consumer goods, their images cannot exclusively be created by marketing efforts. Therefore, every place already has an image—either good or bad, intentional or unintentional—prior to the place branding efforts, acquired through education, media, travel, personal experiences, or other places (Papadopoulos & Heslop, 2002). Furthermore, the idea of communicating a single brand identity to all consumers is not an achievable or desirable goal, since tourists will form

different images of the same place, even if they're exposed to the same messages, because a brand's identity will not be understood in the same way by all of the consumers (Solomon et al., 2006, as cited in Ren & Blichfeldt, 2011). Since places and tourism destinations are "culture-bound products", the way consumers perceive and interpret a place is influenced by their cultural and personal backgrounds, as well as "the present and historical relations between the country of origin of the tourist and that of the destination" (Therkelsen, 2003).

All in all, an alternative to traditional place branding and image restoration approaches can be building new stories around these flexible, multiple, and contested brand identities, that can address consumer concerns better and can be more responsive to consumer needs. And that's where we might borrow some ideas from *cultural branding.*

### *3.6. Cultural Branding*

The cultural branding model has been developed by Douglas Holt, based on the actions and strategies used by successful brands that have managed to become *icons* (Holt, 2004). Holt (2004) argues that icons are "cultural symbols" that many people accept to represent significant ideas. According to this model, the brands that have become icons have done certain things right, which can be compiled under a new type of branding, as opposed to classical, functionalist branding approaches. Whether it's a product, a person, or a movie, icons represent a particular kind of story that might be called "an identity myth" that their consumers use to address their identity desires and anxieties (Holt, 2004). According to Holt (2004), what makes these icons successful is not only that they perform an identity myth, but it's also because they perform a myth that the society *needs* and wants at a certain time, and that they do it in a charismatic way.

Challenging the functionalist definitions of brands, which has been presented at the beginning of this chapter, Holt (2004) claims that logos, names, and designs are simply material dimensions of a brand, and even if they have their material signifiers in place, brands are meaningless when they don't have a history. Therefore, in agreement with Csaba and Bengtsson (2006) concerning the co-creative nature of brand identities, he suggests that consumers admire the brands that represent the ideals they themselves hold, and prefer those brands that help them perform who they really want to be (Holt, 2004). Holt (2004) concludes that those brands can become truly *iconic brands,* and cultural branding is the process of making that possible, by creating compelling identity myths.

According to Holt (2004), this type of branding applies especially well to categories of products and services in which consumers tend to value as a way to express themselves, and tourist destinations and other places are good candidates for the application of cultural branding. In order to understand the principles of cultural branding better, one should look into the common features of iconic brands. First, Holt (2004) claims that iconic brands are successful because they manage to address the acute contradictions in a society at a given time. Whether it's the collective anxieties or the desires of a nation, consumers construct and reconstruct their identities in relation to the historical events that affect an entire nation, and that's why it's important that iconic brands and their identities correspond with them. Furthermore, iconic brands not only respond to these desires and anxieties, but they also perform identity myths that address those challenges, and creates simple fictions borrowed from imaginary worlds (Holt, 2004).

Holt (2004) suggests that consumers experience and share the identity myths that reside in the brand as a ritual action. In other words, the brand turns into an embodiment of a myth, and people experience that myth upon consumption of the product. Another common feature of iconic brands is that they usually create these identity myths in populist worlds, which seem far from commercial goals and elitism, so that the myth is authentic, credible, and relatable (Holt, 2004). Moreover, iconic brands tend to perform as activists that are leading culture, and they encourage consumers to think differently about themselves. Last but not least, iconic brands enjoy breakthrough performances that create a cultural halo effect, which means that the acceptance of a great myth by the consumers enhance the brand's reputation in other areas too (Holt, 2004).

Even though iconic brands and cultural branding rely on the current anxieties and desires of a nation, it is obvious that the nation's issues and aspirations do not remain the same over time. Since iconic brands derive their value from the fact that their identity myth corresponds well enough to the tensions in the society, they have to adapt to the changes and cultural shifts that happen in a society, which Holt (2004) calls "cultural disruptions". In the occurrence of a cultural disruption, Holt (2004) claims that iconic brands have to "reinvent" their identity myth, otherwise they will become irrelevant and fade away.

One of the departure points of this study is that cultural branding has a great potential for place branding theories and practices, that are yet waiting to be explored by marketing researchers

and practitioners. When an *iconic place brand* created with cultural branding, it can endure the "cultural disruptions" better, as long as its identity is flexible and open to changes. Therefore, places that employ a cultural branding approach can be more resistant to crisis situations since they are open to having multiple, contested, conflicting, and flexible brand identities. Cultural branding can help destinations that suffer from negative image issues by addressing the consumers' problems and anxieties, while creating myths and stories around the places. Since cultural branding involves reflecting the audience's imaginative, aspired identity, its use in place branding would also be quite natural, due to the idea that most of the consumers experience something different than their regular lives, when they're traveling. In order to discover the collective anxieties of potential consumers, one should, first, look for them in relevant places. That's why this project will also focus on consumer concerns that might give us some ideas about creating an alternative Turkey brand that can respond better to consumers' concerns.

**4. Methodology**

In this section, the philosophical stances this project takes will be briefly explained and the research design that was created in line with those choices will be introduced. After that, the two main data sources of the study will be described and the reasons behind these decisions of data sources will be presented. Following an account of the data sampling process, the methods of data collection and data analysis will be explained in detail, in relation to both data sources. Finally, the limitations of the research regarding the methodological choices, philosophy of science, and the nature of the research design will be shortly discussed, and the section will be concluded.

*4.1. Research Design*

The design of this research has been created in relation to its philosophical approach to the research questions at hand and the nature of the problem formulation. Ontologically, this project is influenced by social constructivism, since the main assumptions here are that brands are constantly constructed and co-created by several stakeholders, and that ideas and perceptions about places are negotiated through social interactions. Therefore, this study approaches brands and branding from an ontological constructivist perspective by recognizing the existence or at least importance of an objective reality, and without taking it to an extreme (Bryman, 2012). Epistemologically, this project is closer to an interpretivist position because the analysis attempts to shed light on the discrepancy between the messages of place marketers and consumers, by interpreting the human action, rather than offering causal explanations or generalizations for them (Schwandt, 2003).

In line with the research questions and the paradigm choices explained above, a qualitative research design was created for this study, since the goal is to understand complex and dynamic social phenomena that require an interpretation, instead of a simplistic quantification of the findings. In order to illuminate how the gap between marketing messages and consumer reactions can be diminished through an alternative type of branding, a single case, where consumers have several concerns, has been selected to be analyzed in detail in this study. Conducting an exploratory single case study around Turkey can help us answer our research question better because case studies have been proved to be useful in examining a concept or an organization in depth (Yin, 2013). Since case studies are often compatible with qualitative data collection methods such as ethnography or interview research (Bryman, 2012), this case

study was conducted by carrying out netnography and qualitative content analysis, as will be explained in more detail shortly.

## *4.2. Data Sources*

Since the problem formulation is built around the two sides of Turkey's branding, namely the place marketers and the consumers, two different types of data sources were required in the analysis. In order to illuminate how the country is branded by official authorities, first, the organization *Turkey Home* has been chosen since they act as the country's primary official promotion medium across several offline and digital channels, carrying the role of a traditional national tourism organization (NTO). Yet, Turkey Home was chosen to provide us with even broader insights about the country since they describe themselves as a "country branding project of Turkey by courtesy of Republic of Turkey Ministry of Culture and Tourism" (Turkey Home, 2017). The branding project aims to associate Turkey with the word *home* since it has "welcomed, hosted, and fostered" many identities, civilizations, and cultures throughout its history, through promoting country's attractions and focusing on its geographical and cultural diversity (Turkey Home, 2017). Started in 2014, the project aims to strengthen Turkey's brand identity, increase global awareness, improve Turkey's perception and reputation on an international level by communicating the country's key features such as friendliness, sincerity, credibility, and safety. Lastly, Turkey Home attempts to differentiate the country from its competitors with its diverse tourism goods, such as "history, culture, nature, adventure, gastronomy" and many more (Turkey Home, 2017).

### 4.2.1. Turkey Home Facebook Page

Having proved to be the official, primary, centralized branding project of the country, Turkey Home has been selected as one of the main data sources of this study. Besides traditional offline media, the project operates in several social media channels, including Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Pinterest, and YouTube. Yet, the brand's Facebook Page[1] is known as one of the most engaging and active NTO pages on social media (Mariania, Mura, & Di Felice, 2018). As of April 2019, Turkey Home Facebook Page has over 5 million followers, where the organization shares around three posts on a daily basis. Since the language of communication across all Turkey Home, as well as on Facebook, is English, it is safe to claim that the project targets an international audience with their marketing activities. Turkey Home Facebook Page

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[1] https://www.facebook.com/TurkeyHomeOf/

has been chosen to be studied in this research since it can provide us with a large amount of data that carry insights about how the country is branded by the official authorities. Since the brand shares different kinds of content on Facebook, including YouTube videos, Instagram photos, and other visual media, Turkey Home's Facebook Page proves to be the most comprehensive source for data collection.

### 4.2.2. TripAdvisor Turkey Travel Forum

In order to shed light on the other side of the problem formulation, consumer reflections on how the country is perceived by tourists and common concerns of potential travelers had to be analyzed. Being the world's largest travel site with around 490 million monthly unique visitors, TripAdvisor helps consumers make better travel decisions through the content created by their users (TripAdvisor, 2017). As of April 2019, the travel forum designated to Turkey on the website[2] hosts more than 200.000 topics that have been discussed by the user community on a wide array of themes ranging from asking for hotel recommendations to sharing post-travel experiences. Since the TripAdvisor forum allows users to ask and answer questions about Turkey, it provides us with valuable data to analyze in order to gain consumer insights that can be used both in understanding how consumers perceive Turkey as a brand, what types of concerns and challenges they have in their minds about the country, and how a better brand can be created by listening to those consumer insights.

### *4.3. Data Analysis*

### 4.3.1. Sampling and Data Collection

After the data sources have been selected, the decisions of data sampling have been made in order to identify the most valuable data that can be collected on both platforms. In order to answer the empirical parts of the research question, a purposive sampling method was employed so that the most relevant and rich data could be analyzed on Facebook and TripAdvisor. Following the purposive sampling strategy, the data collection started on March 27, 2019 on both platforms through collecting the most recent available data and proceeding backward in chronological order. The reason behind this strategic decision is to make sure that we can provide a snapshot of the actual, recent branding efforts of the organization and consumer reactions.

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[2] https://www.tripadvisor.com/ShowForum-g293969-i367-Turkey.html

### 4.3.2. Facebook Data

Facebook updates shared by Turkey Home have been collected using qualitative content analysis. Due to the scope and goals of this research, only textual parts of the shared content have gone through analysis. The video and photo descriptions of the brand's Facebook content have been gathered in a Word document and then, the raw data has been analyzed by taking inspiration from grounded theory, which has originally been developed by Glaser and Strauss (See Appendix A). Grounded theory has been proven to be a helpful data analysis method, especially in areas where there are not enough knowledge or research, and where the researcher does not hold any prior information about what to expect (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Since the place branding and image restoration literatures offer us quite limited knowledge about how to deal with unfavorable place images and insecure consumers, the analysis has been led by data-driven coding inspired by grounded theory.

Using an Excel document, every piece of content has been labeled with open codes, and afterward, similar open codes have been grouped under axial codes according to their relation to one another. The data collection went hand-in-hand with the analysis and the process continued iteratively until no new codes emerged. In the end, 85 Facebook posts containing 2.248 words have been analyzed and five axial codes have been created to encapsulate how the case country is officially branded on social media. Axial codes that were found in this research will be introduced in the Findings section and further discussed in the Discussion section.

### 4.3.3. TripAdvisor Data

Following a similar approach, the data collection on TripAdvisor started by gathering the most recently updated threads. Due to the algorithm of TripAdvisor, whenever there is a new reply to a question, even if it is an old thread, the topic moves to the front page. This means that some of the data that has been collected contained very old threads with one or a few new replies. In order to keep the data fresh and actual, old threads have been excluded from the collected data and only the questions that have been asked in the last two years have been saved for the analysis. Moreover, the majority of the questions asked on the forum have been location-specific (about a town, a district, or a hotel) and centered around getting practical information, such as hotel recommendations, itinerary planning, shopping, contact information, and so on. All of those types of threads have been disregarded during data collection since they potentially do not carry rich data that can help us answer the research question. Instead, topics that ask for

more general and open-ended questions and concerns about Turkey have been selected for analysis.

Overall, 31 questions have been found suitable for analysis out of the 1.383 threads in 70 pages that have been sampled (See Appendix B). On both Facebook and TripAdvisor, the data collection continued until no new categories of codes emerged, which means that theoretical saturation has been reached (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The data on TripAdvisor has been collected and analyzed using the same processes and techniques applied on the Facebook page, and in the end, three axial codes have been created after the analysis of 3.068 words, which will be explained and discussed in detail in the upcoming sections.

In addition to qualitative content analysis, netnography research method has also been utilized in collecting and analyzing data on TripAdvisor. Netnography allows marketing researchers to gain valuable consumer insights from online communities without the need to set a special scene for research and therefore influencing consumers' opinion (Kozinets, 2002). Thus, in this case study, netnography has been combined with qualitative content analysis while studying the consumers' perceptions of the image of Turkey on TripAdvisor.

### *4.4. Limitations of the Research*

This study has several limitations due to its methodological choices, philosophical standpoint, and research design. First of all, as in the case of exploratory single case studies, the findings of this research cannot be generalized (Bryman, 2012). Yet, the results of the data analysis can still help us understand and generate ideas for similar cases of unfavorable place images and insecure consumers, and diminishing the gap between place branding and consumer reactions. Since this research does not attempt to find one objective, positivist truth that exists outside of us, it does not hold any claims of generalizability, in connection with the interpretivist tradition.

Similarly, due to the scope of this study and with the goal to find only the most relevant and up-to-date data, many pieces of text have been excluded in both data sources. Even though questions asking for practical information do not seem relevant to our problem formulation, those threads might still carry important clues about how consumers perceive Turkey as a brand and a destination. Another limitation caused by the sampling and the choice of data is related to the exclusion of visuals used in marketing messages. Since this study is only interested in the textual content on both platforms, visual content, which might also carry significant clues

about branding of Turkey, have been left out. All in all, the choices of data sampling and sources have been deliberately made this way, even though they might contain some limitations.

One might argue that the role and involvement of the researcher in a study can also bring about some limitations. Since the data analysis is inspired by grounded theory and data-driven coding, the process of naming and merging codes might seem highly subjective. The codes that have been created might carry the researcher's previous knowledge, bias, and their own perspective. Even though this seems like a limitation for some, this project does not hold the assumption that a researcher should and can be removed from all their previous knowledge and prejudices prior to analyzing data. Following an interpretivist epistemology, this study does not aim to uncover an external reality, but acknowledges that the findings are the result of the researcher's own interpretation.

Last but not least, being born and raised in the case country might give the researcher a pre-given set of ideas about her own country, the country's image, and the concept of security. Some might argue that the researcher is expected to keep a distance from the subject that is examined, however, the nature of qualitative studies already makes researchers an active and critical part of the research process itself. Thus, this study does not claim that the researcher should or can try to stay impartial or purely objective. In any case, qualitative content analysis and netnography that have been employed in this study can already be useful in minimizing the researcher's physical involvement in the research process, in comparison with other qualitative methods, such as ethnography or interview research.

**5. Findings**

In this section, the results of the data analysis that has been carried out on Turkey's official branding organization's Facebook Page and the Turkey travel forum on TripAdvisor will be introduced to demonstrate the discrepancy between marketing messages and consumer reactions. Moreover, the findings will act as a departure point for creating an alternative type of branding that can contribute to different bodies of literature within branding and marketing studies. In the first part, the main patterns that have been discovered among the marketing materials will be presented in order to shed light on how the country is officially branded on social media. Therefore, the first part on Facebook will illustrate the traditional approaches to branding that have been long suggested by marketing researchers, which will be elaborated in the discussion section.

The second part, which is about TripAdvisor, will focus on consumer reactions, where the findings of the coding process will be presented in order to illuminate the common discussions among tourists and potential travelers about Turkey. Following, the main themes, topics, and formats from both sections will be compared and contrasted in order to identify the gap between how the country's image is officially trying to be created and what kind of issues are being discussed by the consumers. In addition to shedding light on this wide gap, findings from TripAdvisor will also be used to develop some ideas about how a different type of branding, based on the insights of cultural branding theories, can be created. Thus, the findings of the study will be used both for illuminating the gap between place marketers and consumers, as well as for contributing to existing branding and marketing literatures.

*5.1. Turkey Home – Main Findings*

Turkey Home's Facebook Page covers a specific range of topics by utilizing different types of media, such as photos, videos, blog posts, and user-generated content. It has been observed that Turkey Home creates and publishes updates regularly on Facebook around certain themes and using recurring hashtags, which will be exemplified shortly. The first thing that this study stumbled upon on the given Facebook Page is how Turkey has been defined by the organization's own words. Being a country branding project, Turkey Home describes the case country as "the country where the East meets with the West. The home of two continents, hospitality, heavenly food, and more…" on their Facebook Page. In addition to this openly stated description, how the organization communicates on Facebook carries significant clues about what kind of a place image is trying to be created in the minds of global consumers.

Based on an analysis of Turkey's official place branding efforts on Facebook, it has been discovered that the organization often creates content around certain topics, which have been used as descriptive codes in this analysis. Through constant comparison, these descriptive open codes have been converted into five axial codes, by drawing connections between them, as well as by looking at the "conditions, context, and strategies" (Corbin, M., & Strauss, 1990). The axial codes will be presented shortly, and later explained in detail with examples and with the help of descriptive codes under them.

First and foremost, it is possible to say that the organization has a unidimensional and idealized approach to branding, which will be exemplified shortly. Moreover, it's been discovered that the organization chooses to showcase Turkey as a place free from problems and conflicts by displaying and promoting the material elements of the country without their social contexts. As will be presented shortly, the organization refrains from touching upon any complex stories, problem areas, or consumer concerns, and instead focuses on simple messages and safe topics.

After the analysis of Turkey Home's textual content, it's been discovered that the organization's communication is focused on Facebook around these five patterns: *types of perfection, types of variety, types of differentiation, marketization of culture,* and *neutralization of connotations.* In other words, Turkey is officially branded as a *perfect, varied,* and *different* place, through the use of several ordinary topics ranging from food to nature and by offering its culture as a *marketplace product,* yet without any religious, political, or cultural *connotations.* The five axial codes will now be explained to better understand how they are used in Turkey Home's content, what topics (descriptive codes) they cover, and they will be later discussed in the following chapter.

### 5.1.1. Types of Perfection

Firstly, the axial code *types of perfection* refers to instances where the organization positions Turkey as a *perfect* and *ideal* place brand, free from conflicts, issues, and problems. Under this category, the country is branded as a place where consumers can find peace, calmness, and beautiful destinations, which is portrayed as an almost utopic happy place. While doing that, the organization heavily relies on compelling images of beautiful sceneries of nature and complementary text to generally describe the destination and the elements in the picture. As the most commonly used type of perfection on the Turkey Home Facebook Page, *natural perfection*

of the country is communicated through the use of city views, sunsets, mountains, rivers, and lakes.
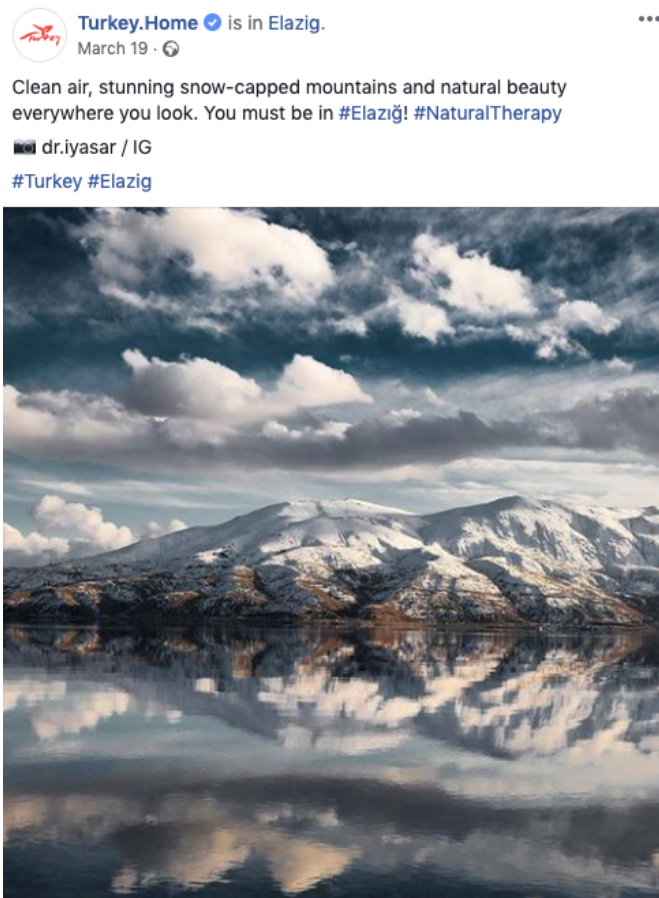


*Figure 1.* Example of "natural perfection" on Turkey Home.

In the example above, a natural landscape picture is accompanied by a simple, descriptive text that reads "Clean air, stunning snow-capped mountains and natural beauty everywhere you look." In addition to offering natural perfection as an eye-pleasing view, the nature of Turkey is associated with tranquility and happiness, through the use of the hashtag "Natural Therapy". In many other examples, *tranquility* and *calmness* of Turkey's several tourism destinations are underlined through visual representations of similar landscapes without any human elements. The organization also frequently promotes the tranquility of the cities and islands in the Mediterranean and Aegean coasts, and describes the country or parts of it as quiet, peaceful, and with a high quality of life. For instance, in one update published on March 2, an aerial plateau picture with no people around it is displayed with the following text: *"Zorkun is one of the oldest plateaus of #Cukurova with its greenery and tranquility.",* which is another example

of communicating a sense of perfection in relation to nature and tranquility by a human-free scenery picture and simple, descriptive image description.

The portrayal of perfection of Turkey with its nature and claimed tranquility is often combined with suggesting their destinations as the ideal *getaway* places, either for a weekend or in relation to a sports activity. Going hand-in-hand with the concept of tranquility, little-known destinations that are close to major cities are promoted with their calmness, in contrast to big cities. For instance, "cittaslow movement" that has been occasionally mentioned by the organization is used to brand Turkey as a place with small, calm towns that are suitable for a getaway to relax and unwind. In another example, the organization uses the hashtag "Long Weekend" while branding Turkey as a ski holiday destination (See Figure 2.) The representation of the place is merely reduced to its material aspects, such as "world-class accommodation", as well as "slopes and views", which resembles a brochure page without any human context.
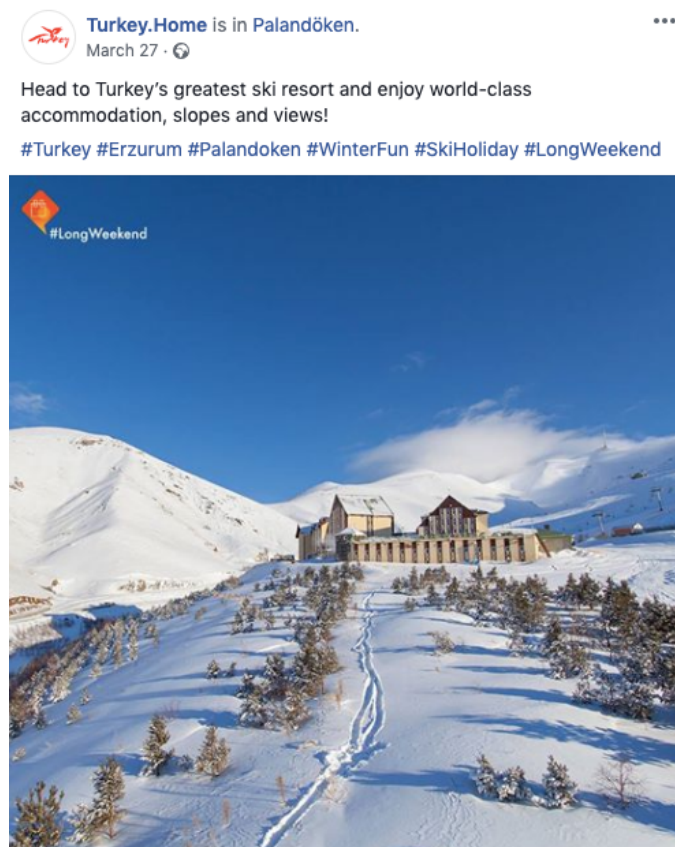


*Figure 2*. Example of a ski holiday promotion on Turkey Home.

### 5.1.2. Types of Variety

Secondly, the organization brands Turkey with a focus on different types of variety that the country offers. Turkey Home highlights both the country's varied historical background and the tourist attractions that have been inherited from different civilizations, as well as the variety of activities and tourism products that the country can offer to consumers. Yet, while using variety as a way to market plurality of things to do, see, and experience, the organization reduces them to merely market products that can be sold to consumers, without their historical and social contexts, which is another common pattern in Turkey Home's communication. An update from March 12 that reads *"When you visit the ancient civilizations of Turkey, you KNOW you're visiting a place with a way of life completely removed from modern life."* points at the historical variety of the country. However, instead of framing it around its historical context, the historical site that is promoted with the update is reduced to an attraction without any social and cultural elements, and is rather introduced as a "getaway from modern life".

Although the data collected for this study is dated on the months of spring, it was significantly apparent in the data analysis that Turkey is branded as a destination that is available for tourism in all four seasons, offering, for instance, both skiing opportunities and beach holidays. In a similar fashion, the organization almost creates a catalog of their popular tourist attractions in a traditional and stereotypical manner. Sights, monuments, or museums are often presented as hosting a diverse range of civilizations and coming from a varied geography. Yet, while doing so, they are promoted by being taken out of their social and cultural contexts and presented as material sites without any human touch (See Figure 3.)

*Figure 3.* Example of a historical attraction on Turkey Home.

### 5.1.3. Types of Differentiation

The second axial code, *types of differentiation,* covers the instances where the Turkey brand is positioned superior or unique through a differentiation from the others, mostly in relation to the country's cultural elements, such as the tradition of artisanship or its culinary customs. In order to differentiate Turkey as a brand, the traditional arts and handicrafts of the country is promoted with images and descriptive texts about certain branches of artisanship "that cannot be found anywhere else". While doing so, the organization focuses more on the tangible, material aspects of the end-products of artisanship, rather than the cultural stories behind it, which is in close relation with "marketization of culture", which will be introduced shortly.

One repeated type of differentiation comes from the topic of *handicrafts.* In an update shared on March 16, the organization uses a generic picture of hand-knitted socks and complement it with a text that reads "Common in Turkey. Priceless everywhere else." (See Figure 4.) Even though it's a simple product like socks, Turkey Home frames it in a way that is different from the rest of the world and even "priceless". This way, the organization refers to this cultural element's material value and promotes Turkey to a superior position, since the product is claimed to be difficult to purchase or acquire anywhere else.

*Figure 4.* Example of differentiation through handicrafts on Turkey Home.

Another type of cultural differentiation the organization uses is achieved through the promotion of upcoming cultural events such as music or cinema festivals, as well as museum and exhibition openings, which are often described as "the best" or "world-class". In an update from March 24, the organization shares a 3D rendering of a building and writes: *"A new museum unlike any other is opening in Eskişehir, inspired by local wooden homes and featuring brilliant works of modern and contemporary art!"*. With this announcement, they assign superiority to their brand and highlight its *uniqueness* without any deeper cultural context and actual human elements (See Figure 5.)
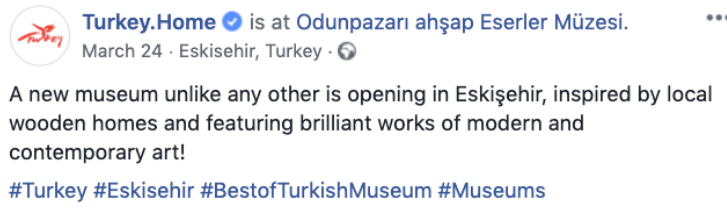
*Figure 5.* Example of a museum opening announcement on Turkey Home.

### 5.1.4. Marketization of Culture

As briefly mentioned earlier, a common pattern in Turkey Home's branding efforts that was discovered in this study is *marketization* of a national culture. In many instances, the organization refers back to the traditional elements of an almost unified Turkish culture and promotes the given material as a product. This type of marketization can often be stumbled upon across the topics *handicrafts, artisanship,* and *food and drinks,* among others.

In an update shared on March 12, a picture of handmade carpets without their makers are presented and accompanied with the following text: *"When you see the handmade kilims of #Karatepe you'll understand that your shopping here will take hours, days, weeks."* (See Figure 6.) As can be seen in this example and many others, the cultural elements are removed from their context and simply attached a certain material value to them. While the organization promotes "a typical Turkish culture" that is different from the others, culture becomes a marketplace object that can be bought and sold. In addition to such commercialization of cultural elements, the choice of the topics, *handicrafts and artisanship*, can be seen as simple, yet safe areas for the organization, which will be discussed later on.

*Figure 6.* Example of marketization of culture on Turkey Home.

Another example of marketization of culture through a conflict-free area is *food and drinks*, which is frequently utilized by Turkey Home on Facebook. Through visuals and simple messages about Turkish cuisine, many updates are shared with the hashtag "Tastes Traditional". In an update published on March 7 that reads *"Cold in the summer, hot in the winter. Soups made with yogurt in Turkey are always healthy and delicious.",* it can be observed that food and drinks are presented in a highly simplistic manner (See Figure 7.) Through a differentiation of the Turkish culture via food and drinks, the place brand is marketed as a gastronomical experience to be consumed, rather than a cultural story. In the end, the Turkey brand is positioned as a *good, simple,* and *safe* kind of *different,* with several cultural products that possess material value.

*Figure 7.* Example of food and drinks on Turkey Home.

### 5.1.5. Neutralization of Connotations

Another main finding this research has discovered in the country's online branding is Turkey Home's attempt to remove the religious, political, or social connotations from the topics they cover. In other words, Turkey Home presents certain features of the country by taking them out of their political or religious contexts. An example of neutralizing such connotations comes from the organization's use of mosques in a non-religious way while branding Turkey. Even though Turkey's top attractions include mosques, such as the Blue Mosque, and that Turkey is a predominantly Muslim country, mosques that are used in the official branding of Turkey on Facebook are presented to a global audience by removing them out of the context of religion. In an update shared on March 9, a compelling mosque picture is coupled with the following text: *"A mosque so wonderful that even the birds in the sky feel the emotion exuding from this beautiful mosque."* (See Figure 8.)
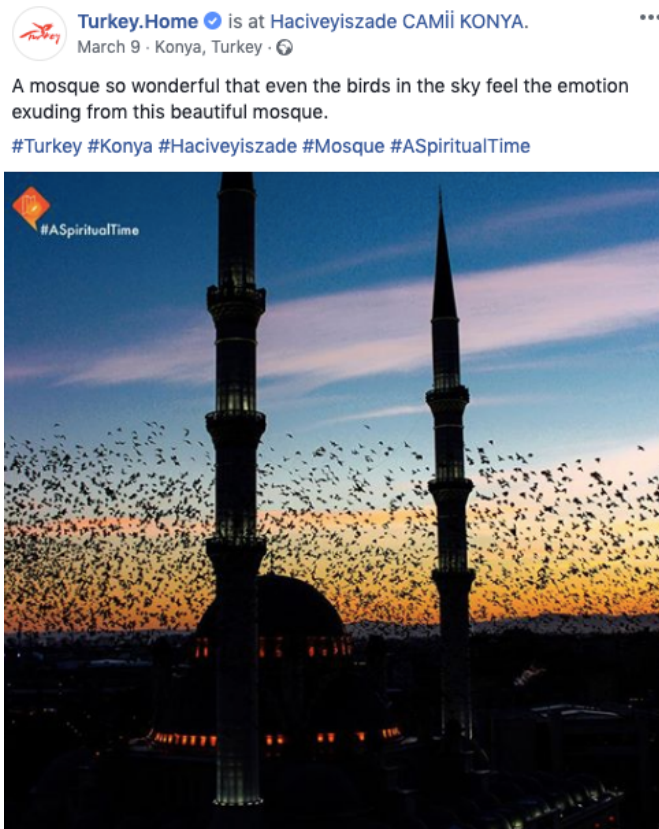
*Figure 8.* Example of a neutralized religious connotation on Turkey Home.

Similarly, on March 11, the organization asks their followers this question: *"Do you think it's the minarets or the Bosphorus that make Istanbul look so incredible at night?",* which also points at the material and functional meanings attached to mosques.

Another way Turkey Home neutralizes potential cultural and political connotations is related to the country's geographical positioning. Even though the metropolitan city of Istanbul and its tourist attractions are repeatedly used in branding Turkey, the organization utilizes different parts of the country that cover a broad geography to explain what the place brand has to offer. Yet, in several instances, the geographical markers "Aegean" and "Mediterranean" are used, and Turkey is not officially branded as a Middle Eastern country on Facebook to a global audience. The focus on the Aegean and Mediterranean regions of Turkey are often coupled with the "cittaslow movement", and therefore, the use of small towns, in parallel to the topics "getaway" and "tranquility" (See Figure 9.) This way the country is removed from an area known for conflicts and crises, namely the Middle East, and repositioned closer to the Mediterranean region, while being associated with peace and calmness.
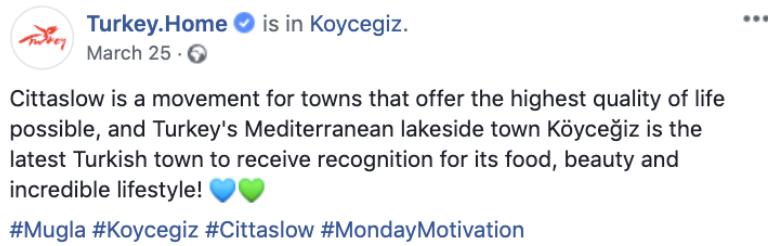
*Figure 9.* Example of a cittaslow town on Turkey Home.

In general, Turkey is branded as a place that competes and wins over other places in the world in several topics, and that can offer consumers different experiences in all four seasons. Furthermore, Turkey Home communicates with consumers using generally safe topics and simple messages, including but not limited to the non-religious use of mosques, and does not necessarily brand Turkey as a Middle Eastern country to global consumers. All in all, the country is officially branded as an ideal and *perfect* place without any conflicts; *different* from other places, yet, only in safe topics; and offering a rich and *varied* range of activities, attractions, and experiences. This type of branding utilized by Turkey Home resembles a traditional, stereotypical, materialistic and unidimensional marketing effort, which lacks the social and cultural elements. Turkey Home's approach to branding will be criticized and discussed in light of the findings acquired on TripAdvisor, as well as the existing marketing theories after an introduction to the consumer reactions gathered on TripAdvisor forums.

## *5.2. TripAdvisor – Main Findings*

As explained in the Methodology section, most of the data that is available on TripAdvisor can be classified as irrelevant to this study, since they are mainly questions centered around practical information. Instead, this research focused on choosing potentially relevant questions that are open to discussion and that can collect subjective views about the country. After the main topics users discuss on the forum have been organized under descriptive codes, they have

been transformed into axial codes in relation to their connections to one another and to the overall context. In the following sections, the three axial codes will be presented to illuminate what consumers are discussing or debating about visiting Turkey, and what type of questions they have in mind before and after their travel experiences in the country. While doing that, descriptive codes (topics) will be presented as examples which have helped us to reach these analytical insights.

Although the codes are highly interrelated and they cross each other at several points, consumer reflections on Turkey as a brand are labeled under the following categories: *types of concern, types of conflict,* and *types of critique.* In other words, consumers on TripAdvisor forums discuss their concerns about visiting Turkey in relation to several topics; they elaborate on the conflicts that are usually centered around the attitudes of the host country towards their own culture, identity, and gender; and share their critique about the country in political, personal, and cultural levels. The data analysis made it apparent that the consumer reactions on TripAdvisor show no correspondence to the official branding of Turkey, which will later be presented and discussed in detail. The findings in this section will, therefore, be used to shed light on the discrepancy between consumer insights and the marketing materials presented earlier on the part about Facebook, as well as a departure point for creating an alternative approach to branding in contrast to the current traditional and functionalist understanding.

### 5.2.1. Types of Concern

The data analysis showed that, among other purposes, TripAdvisor users utilize the platform as a channel to raise their different *types of concerns* and ask related questions to fellow travelers and locals, before traveling to Turkey. Unsurprisingly, *security* of the host country is one of the most common concerns among consumers on the platform. In many instances, users openly ask if Turkey is safe to travel to in 2019, whereas in others, consumers are asking for fellow travelers' experiences with the country and whether they feel the country is safe or not. One recurring theme that shows up in these types of concerns is the mention of country-specific travel warnings, namely in the United States, United Kingdom, and Australia in our sample. In several occasions, consumers refer back to their country's travel warnings about visiting Turkey and use them to ask for real consumers' experiences and discuss if those warnings are reliable or not. In the example below, one user asks the community for advice about whether or not they should change their travel plans to Turkey, due to an update in the travel warning issued by

their country. Moreover, they ask their "fellow American tourists" to share their own experiences and stories to evaluate the security situation in Turkey.

*"On Feb 14 2019 the US Dept of State changed the security level for traveling to Turkey to level 3 "reconsider travel", so I am pondering whether I should abandon my plan to travel to Istanbul. I would really, really appreciate it if some of my fellow American tourists could share their experience in Istanbul within the last 6 months or so. The more stories the better."*

When it comes to security concerns, acts of terrorism or armed conflict are not the only types of issues that lead to safety-related questions on the forum. Political instability in the country seems like another reason why consumers are concerned about their security in Turkey. In the example below, the user asks for tips, do's and don't's due to the "political unrest" in the country, and raises a typical question: "Is it safe to travel to Turkey?"

*"My husband and I we are in our early 30's, Sri Lankans and planning to visit Turkey in mid-April 2019 for about a week. I would really appreciate if you could let us know if Turkey is safe to travel given the escalated political unrest in the country? Tips on do's and dont's are also highly appreciated."*

In addition to travel warnings, consumers also refer to the news articles they have read, threads they have seen on TripAdvisor, or the information they have received from their friends and family members, and then use TripAdvisor to ask for insider experiences to evaluate if those concerns are real. In close relation to that, the data analysis demonstrated that in addition to the general security of the country, *personal safety* is another topic consumers are concerned about, when it comes to visiting Turkey. The descriptive code personal safety differs from general security worries about the country since the former refers to the instances about the *everyday life*. In many instances, personal safety takes forms of scams, economic safety, and other feelings of personal security, and can be related to both the commenter's gender, country of origin, or any other type of identity. In one example in relation to the topics of *gender* and *personal safety*, a worried consumer writes down her concerns about the—possible—negative behavior of male taxi drivers towards herself, as a female traveler, and asks for help from the community*: "After reading numerous disturbing posts on this forum regarding the behaviour of many male taxi drivers I am trying to find the number of a female taxi driver. (…)"*

In many instances, such questions about gender are centered around female solo travelers, asking for insights about if it's safe to, for instance, go out alone after 10 P.M., take a beach walk in the morning, go to restaurants without being pestered, and so on. The data analysis shows that many women who are considering or planning to travel to the country have concerns about their personal safety and using the TripAdvisor forums, they are looking for measures to prevent such possible disturbing behavior they may face in the country.

### 5.2.2. Types of Conflict

A second common pattern that was discovered through the analysis of TripAdvisor forums is that the users express their opinion and, again, raise their concerns in relation to different *types of conflict* between Turkey and the consumer's home country, cultural background, or identity. The conflict can take many different forms, such as political conflicts between the host country and the traveler's country of origin, as well as possible conflicts between the traveler's cultural background, social identity, and those of Turkish citizens. In many instances, consumers expect a certain amount of conflict when they visit Turkey, and they raise these questions on TripAdvisor forums. These are usually centered around the Turkish people's approaches and behaviors towards different groups of people, including but not limited to women, travelers from certain countries of origin, or tourists in general. One example is a forum thread about the political conflict between Turkey and the consumer's country of origin, and how it affects the consumer's perception of Turkey.

*"(...) My husband is concerned about the Turkish sentiment towards Australians. I've told him that what he is listening to on the news is sensationalism. (...) I would just like reassurance from DEs in Instanbul [sic] (or any Turkish citizen) that we are safe and we will be welcome. (...) I have checked the Department of Foreign Affairs in Australia website and the warning remains unchanged since before recent events. (...)"*

The user raises their concerns about the current Turkish sentiment towards Australians, due to the controversial statements made by President Erdogan about Australian and New Zealander travelers in the aftermath of mosque shootings that took place in New Zealand (Fraser, 2019). Moreover, they ask for "reassurance" from fellow travelers or locals. Finally, they state that they also consulted the travel warnings issued by their own country. As can be seen from this example, consumers expect and are worried about a potential conflict between the citizens of

the host country and themselves, as tourists. It is also possible to observe the impact of actual politics on shaping consumers' image perceptions about a place.

Another common type of conflict expected by consumers has more social and cultural dimensions to it. The data analysis showed that some consumers expect a conflict based on *religion* and Turks' possible attitudes towards non-Muslims. While some consumers are worried about creating a conflict due to their potentially "disrespectful" clothing, others simply have questions about the Turks' attitudes towards other nationalities. In one example, a user asks the TripAdvisor community if they might face a potential social conflict since they come from South Africa, and they wonder the attitude of Turks towards non-Muslims, especially in their relation to alcohol. Furthermore, the user refers back to their bad experience in the United Arab Emirates, while posing a similar question about Turkey.

*"(…) I am planning to visit Turkey and wanted to find out about the type of people in the country. I'm a South African but I look Indian. I did not enjoy Dubai as I found the people rather judgemental and unwelcoming of non Muslims in certain areas my experience . Is turkey an open minded country in terms of having a glass of wine or just being oneself?"*

As mentioned earlier, religion also has been found to have an impact on other types of expected conflict. One such area is related to clothing and questions about an "appropriate" dress code that will not offend the host culture and create a cultural conflict between the traveler and the locals. Given that Turkey is a predominantly Muslim country, consumers seem to be confused about how to act or dress so that they can prevent a potential cultural clash. In one example, a user asks what she should pack and that she considers long sleeves and a head scarf for a summer trip. Furthermore, after stating that she knows that the Turkish culture is "based on women's clothing", she explains that she's also concerned about her partner.

*"(…) I'm going to Istanbul for the day in August and I'm considering what to wear. Long sleeve dress and head scarf was on the cards but I'm thinking about my other half too. I know their culture is based around women's clothing however I don't want him to stick out like a sore thumb and anyone to think we're disresepctfuly [sic] of their culture. (…)"*

### 5.2.3. Types of Critique

As mentioned in the beginning, TripAdvisor forums are not only a place for pre-travel questions, but it is also a platform for users to share their actual travel experiences in the country. The data analysis demonstrated that in many forum threads, post-travel experiences take the form of different *types of critique* about the country. In the threads that have been analyzed, it's been observed that the critique made by consumers are centered around the topics that have been mentioned earlier as pre-travel concerns, including but not limited to personal safety, female solo travelers, scams, the locals' attitudes, the country's political situation, and many more. In one example, a forum user starts a thread with the headline "Review your Turkey travel plans" and refers to the same political issues concerning Australian tourists that have been presented earlier. Interestingly, the user does not simply share their own experience of canceling travel plans, but they invite other consumers to join them in a politically-motivated (non)consumption activity. They also mention that this situation creates a bigger problem than their love for Turkey and the Turkish people, which demonstrates the strong negative effects of political instability in a given country on brand image perception.

*"Given the shocking comments by the Turkish president and the threats he is making to send Australian tourists home in coffins I think it's time for all tourists to reconsider their Turkey travel plans. I love turkey and I love the Turkish people but this is just unbelievable and cannot be left to stand like this."*

Other consumers criticize Turkey by sharing their bad experiences in the country in relation to their sense of personal safety. In this type of critique, the Turkey brand is naturally associated with negative feelings and usually include advice and a warning for other consumers, too. Thus, these users might have the capacity to influence TripAdvisor users' and other readers' perceptions of the country. In an example written by a traveler, she shares the negative attitude she faced as a woman in Turkey and explains how she even regrets the whole travel.

*"Cab driver would only interact with male traveling companion (even though I was the one requesting the stop). Pervasive (and let's be honest, creepy) staring of men on the street. Some random woman at the train station yelling at me (unprovoked). I've been to Ephesus before (…) and thought it was worth it to come back, but the feeling is completely different than it was three years ago. I've never felt uncomfortable in Turkey until now, and I am regretting this entire vacation."*

Another type of critique takes the form of experience sharing and fraud warning since it is related to scams, and taxi scams in particular, which appear to be a highly popular discussion point among consumers on TripAdvisor. Many users of the forum warn other travelers about being overcharged by taxi drivers or against their disturbing behaviors. In close relation to those post-travel experiences, many users also turn to this forum to ask how they can prevent being "ripped off" when they visit the country. In the example below, a traveler shares their negative experience with taxi drivers in detail, and states that they hold a bad image of the people from Istanbul now after this experience. Lastly, they end the thread with a strong statement that they will never travel to the country again.

*"(...) I did enjoy Istanbul so far but I was really disappointed about the dishonesty of Istanbul taxi drivers. (...) With this short distance (3km), he charged us 140 Turkish Lira (around 27usd). We refused to pay this amount but he was so aggressive & violent. He wanted to beat us up, we were very shocked & didn't want any trouble so we paid the required amount. But we keep a very bad image about Istanbul people. We told to ourselves we would never come back again to Turkey. Never!"*

### 5.2.4. TripAdvisor – Other Interesting Findings

In addition to the three main codes presented above, the data analysis carried out on the TripAdvisor Turkey forums have brought about a few other interesting findings. Firstly, looking at the top questions section of the given forum can give us significant clues about what type of topics are frequently discussed about Turkey, since this section is updated by forum moderators and that the questions are expected to be selected based on their importance or frequency of being asked. As of April 2019, the top question about Turkey that is pinned is "Is Turkey safe?", and two other relevant ones are "Taxi Dos and Don'ts" and "What is the let's have a drink scam?".

As mentioned earlier, the Turkey travel forum on TripAdvisor is used for multiple purposes by consumers. Therefore, the topics that concern the consumers are both their questions and worries before their trip to Turkey and threads where they share their experiences and insights after traveling to the country. One interesting finding of this study is that there are several instances in which the consumers explain that they have been to Turkey some time ago, yet, they are still unsure about some topics, for instance, safety of the women. In many cases, users

want to find out if the situation has changed over the last few years. Even though they have been to the country before and haven't had any problems earlier, some of them still have doubts about the issues explained above. Last but not least, this study discovered that there's a general tendency that fellow forum users, locals of the country, and previous tourists reply to users' questions in detail in order to comfort the owners of the posts by sharing their own experiences in the country.

To sum up, consumers have *concerns,* expected *conflicts,* and *critiques* about the security of the country, their personal safety, locals' attitudes, gender relations and other topics about Turkey. It can be observed that there's a tendency to worry about the attitudes of Turks towards specific groups of people, and that the situation of women is a major problem area for both existing and potential consumers of the Turkey brand. The results of the data analysis on Facebook and TripAdvisor show that there is no correspondence between the official marketing materials used in branding Turkey and the areas consumers are interested in or discussing on. As the marketing materials on Facebook lack the social context and neglects the dynamics of everyday life in the country, the data analysis on TripAdvisor demonstrates that consumers are *exactly* concerned about these issues. While Turkey Home prefers simple messages, safe topics, and portrays a conflict-free picture, consumers are engaged with more complex issues, such as gender, politics, and safety, and actual problems about the daily practices in the country. Therefore, the discrepancy between the place marketers and consumers are not only limited to the topics, but there's also a wide gap between the presentation of those topics and a difference in consumers' and marketers' levels of interest, which will all be discussed in the following section.

**6. Discussion**

In this section, the results of the data analysis will be discussed in relation to the problem formulation, with regards to their connections to one another, and in the light of the existing body of literature that has been introduced at the beginning of this study. First, the findings from Facebook will be discussed in order to understand how Turkey is officially branded and how the organization is attempting to create a favorable place image for the country. Then, Turkey Home's approach to place branding will be discussed as a traditional and functionalist marketing understanding. After a discussion of the marketing materials, user reflections gathered from TripAdvisor will be elaborated to understand how consumers perceive the Turkey brand and what kind of issues are associated with it. Next, the different types and levels of discrepancy between the marketing messages and consumer insights will be illuminated as a response to our research question. Finally, the ideas from theories of cultural branding and new approaches to place branding will be suggested and discussed as an alternative type of branding to Turkey Home's current understanding, which can contribute to diminishing the gap between marketing and consumers both for our case, as well as for the marketing literature.

*6.1. Branding of Turkey*

### 6.1.1. Turkey Home's Marketing Materials

Turkey Home communicates with consumers through the use of these five main patterns while branding the country on Facebook: *glossing over problems, simplification of variety, decontextualization of differentiation, marketization of culture, and neutralization of controversial connotations.* The topics, messages, and the way they are presented on Facebook by Turkey Home will now be reintroduced and discussed before Turkey Home's overall approach to branding is summarized and the findings are contrasted with the actual areas of interest of consumers.

*Glossing Over Problems*

Turkey Home's focus on "perfection" through several topics can be seen as an attempt to portray an ever-happy country without any problems, and therefore glossing over existing issues and negative developments that have been happening in the country. It also stands as an example of how Turkey Home employs a traditional and simplistic approach to place branding, where the country is simply reduced to its nature and landscapes. The frequent use of sceneries and beautiful views without any deeper meaning can be seen as an illustration of the one-

dimensional marketing approach Turkey Home employs in their branding efforts. Presenting and promoting landscapes without any people or social dimensions that resembles a postcard or a page from a traditional tourism brochure is quite far from the human touch and experience. On the other hand, nature remains as a safe topic that does not invite any conflict, nor does it remind consumers about the troubling issues in the country. Therefore, perfection through the *nature* is utilized as a mechanism to whitewash the problems within the country, as well as a functional marketing tool that is used to promote the country.

In close relation to the promotion of the country's natural beauty and landscapes, several cities and towns in Turkey are often presented as *getaway* opportunities on Facebook. Introducing their destinations as ideal getaway places assigns them a meaning that is in contrast with the busy, modern city life. Furthermore, the reason behind this contrast is usually the quiet and peaceful nature of such getaway places. Therefore, branding certain parts of the country as perfect getaway places, Turkey Home highlights the claimed tranquility of the country, and thus, aims to strengthen the assumption that Turkey is free from problems and conflicts. Through the repeated use of the "cittaslow" movement, that focuses on locality, collectivity, and traditions (Karabag, Yucel, & Inal, 2012), a handful of small towns are often promoted with the hope to position the whole country as a place with high-quality of life and calmness, and therefore free from problems.

The frequent use of the topic *tranquility,* often coupled with nature and getaway, indicates the attempt to brand Turkey as a peaceful and calm place, free from conflicts and violence. The way Turkey Home presents the country gives the impression that nothing negative ever happens in the country and in the everyday lives of its inhabitants. Through such an indirect way of positioning Turkey as a safe country, the security issues are again being glossed over by the organization. Yet, as mentioned earlier, the assurances given by place marketers are not enough in the creation of favorable brand images and perceptions of safe places in the minds of consumers. On top of being positioned as a safe and calm country, through the use of the hashtag "Natural Therapy", the country is even assigned a sense of healing power due to its "therapeutically calm" nature. All these messages serve the same goal of branding Turkey as a perfect country with no issues and therefore, ignoring the actual problems that might make consumers even more anxious about visiting the country.

### Simplification of Variety

Using the country's varied history and focusing on the variety of attractions tourists can see and the variety of activities they can experience, Turkey Home attempts to position the country as a rich tourism product. While doing so, they utilize Turkey's *history* and *tourist attractions* in a way that they are merely market products that are to be bought and sold, regardless of their historical and social contexts. In parallel to a traditional marketing understanding, the country's rich historical past and the popular tourist attractions that are usually the remnants of that past are removed from their contexts and are rather displayed in a brochure-like manner. In most of the instances Turkey Home uses the country's history and historical attractions, it is not possible to come across the cultural or historical story behind the shared sights. Furthermore, these sights are often visually presented without any people around them, which also resembles postcard images, with no or little information about them. Even though Turkey Home attempts to paint a varied and multiple picture of Turkey by promoting several different types of variety, they reduce the country's historical and cultural past to mere tourism products and display them in a simplistic manner.

### Decontextualization of Differentiation

Turkey Home often highlights the unique and original aspects of the Turkish culture, such as its tradition of *artisanship* and several *culinary* customs, in order to compare the country with the others in the world and position Turkey as superior or simply different from them. Using multiple types of differentiation, Turkey Home tries to create an interesting and attractive place brand with the mindset of traditional marketing approaches, where differentiation is suggested as the key for a successful brand positioning (Trout & Rivkin, 2008). Differentiation, as a strategy, has also been suggested extensively in classical place branding studies, with the idea that destinations have to stand out among their competitors by highlighting what the place can offer that the others can't, such as a nice climate, attractive culture, or beautiful landscapes (Ren & Blichfeldt, 2011). Creating a "different" brand is also seen by some traditional place marketing researchers as a good strategy that can lead to image restoration for places, when the place image is simple and distinctive (Gertner & Kotler, 2004).

Turkey Home uses their cultural elements to create a sense of differentiation by reducing them to material items that have a product value, and then, assigns superiority to their own culture, which is also problematic. Customs and traditions are seen as important, yet as long as they are "unique" and "priceless". Similar to many other topics, the presentation of types of

differentiation are also handled by removing them out of their cultural contexts. This can be observed in the museum opening announcement that was presented earlier, where the new museum is presented as "unlike any other", yet with little to no context about the arts to accompany it. The use of safe topics *food and drinks* and *arts and handicrafts* in differentiating the country from the others also demonstrates to goal to create a *safe kind of difference.* Positioning the place brand as "exotic, but not dangerously different" to a global audience fits well in line with the traditional promotion of Turkey through its "inbetweenness", where the country is presented as a mixture of Eastern and Western elements (Tecmen, 2017).

### Marketization of Culture

As repeatedly mentioned earlier, one common practice Turkey Home employs in branding the country is promoting a Turkish culture and its elements through assigning them a material value and treating them as things that can be bought and sold in a competitive marketplace. Such commercialization or marketization of the culture is achieved by, first, removing the elements from their wider context, and, then, promoting them as simply tourism goods. While doing so, for instance, artisanship loses its cultural value, and instead gains a material value, in relation to the end product created through it. In a similar fashion, food and drinks, which carry a significant part in the Turkish culture, becomes a gastronomical experience that is waiting to be consumed by tourists. This way, Turkey Home picks and chooses certain elements of a wider culture and promotes them in a simplistic manner without any social and cultural context or value.

### Neutralization of Controversial Connotations

Turkey Home's particular focus on safe areas that do not invite any discussion is further supported by their attempt to neutralize any possible controversial connotations—such as political or religious—that can be attributed to their content and the topics they cover. Therefore, the organization not only removes cultural elements out of their social context, but also ensures that no religious or political connotation becomes visible, while they present certain features or areas of the country. Refraining from dangerous areas such as religion and politics, Turkey Home builds itself a safe ground to build on, even though these are the exact topics consumers are interested in or concerned about.

Neutralization of such controversial connotations is visible at Turkey Home's rare and superficial representation of the country's religious elements, such as mosques, in their

marketing communication. Although Turkey is a country with a predominantly Muslim population and there are numerous mosques among the country's top attractions, mosques are presented by the organization after being detached from their religious connotations. Thus, when the organization talks about mosques for branding the country, they are generally reduced down to a material value, by being positioned as either top attractions to see or praised for, for instance, creating a beautiful skyline for cities. This practice can be an attempt to counteract the religious connotations usually attached to the country by Westerners, since Turkey is often identified with other Muslim countries in the Middle East and gain more Islamic and oriental connotations (Ozturkmen, 2005). Removal of Islam from the official branding of the country, therefore, can be seen as an attempt to brand Turkey as a safe place and a non-dangerous discussion area for Western consumers.

Another way the country's ties to the region is attempted to be removed is through the neutralization of the troubling political situation attached to the Middle East. Even though Turkey is positioned as both a European, Asian, and a Middle Eastern country by different organizations and sources, which creates a further ambiguous image in the minds of consumers (Sönmez & Sirakaya, 2002), Turkey Home seems to be refraining from choosing the side of Middle East, while branding the country towards an English-speaking global audience. When we look at the geographical marks and their promotion in Turkey Home's marketing material, it becomes apparent that there are no references to a Middle Eastern identity. Instead, the country is mainly positioned as an Aegean and Mediterranean country, with an extended and diverse geography.

Turkey Home's approach to distance the country from the Middle Eastern region can be seen as an attempt to minimize the spillover effects that are caused by the negative political and security developments that take place in the area (Neumayer & Plumper, 2016). Furthermore, it can be seen as a way to get rid of the "unsafe place" connotations attached to it due to the conflicts in the region, which also contributes to the creation of an unfavorable Turkey brand among Westerners (Sönmez & Sirakaya, 2002). Bringing Turkey closer to Europe rather than the Middle East can also be related to the brand positioning of the country as "*different*, yet not so far from Europe."

### 6.1.2. Turkey Home's Approach to Branding

As briefly mentioned in the Findings section and as presented with its examples above, Turkey Home's overall approach to branding is in line with the traditional, functionalist, and mechanistic understandings of brands, branding, and marketing, that are closer to the approaches of Aaker (1999) and Gertner & Kotler (2004), which have been introduced and challenged in the Literature Review section. Even though, in the beginning, the organization describes the country with multiplicities, such as "where the East meets with the East" and "the home of two continents", the main characteristics of Turkey Home's marketing communication and their approach to branding reflect a unidimensional marketing understanding, instead. Moreover, the organization starts with the claims that they will communicate Turkey's key features, such as credibility and safety. Yet, the data analysis demonstrates that the organization fails to fulfill this promise, and even if they do attempt to focus on these features, it has been observed that they don't go beyond words and generic images rather than covering the more dynamic cultural context they operate in.

In addition to their one-dimensional overall approach, Turkey Home represents the classical, centralized understanding of place branding, where a governmental NTO creates and distributes marketing messages with the intention to develop or alternate favorable brand images in the minds of consumers, while being the single source of information. Such an understanding of centralized branding efforts resembles the highly functionalist crisis communication and image restoration approaches introduced by Benoit (1997) and Coombs (2007), where the organization takes charge under crisis situations and restores a favorable brand image simply by following managerial strategies they offer. Such an approach is based on the premise that if marketers manage to communicate a unified, stable brand identity, the intended brand image will appear in consumers' minds (Kapferer, 2004), and therefore, marketers should try to align a brand's identity and essence in order to build strong brands with favorable images (Aaker, 1999). Both approaches would share the idea that a safe, happy, and perfect image of Turkey can easily be created if the conflicts and actual problems within the country are replaced by more positive marketing messages through a single, central source. However, this approach is problematic, if not dysfunctional, since this study demonstrates that consumers have major concerns about the issues that Turkey Home is attempting to gloss over.

As this study repeatedly demonstrates, consumers have several concerns about visiting the country. Yet, nothing is done by the official branding organization of Turkey in order to address

the worries of potential customers. Therefore, the overall approach Turkey takes in dealing with their image problems and consumer concerns is simply, what can be called, a "complete disregard". Turkey Home not only ignores the consumers' worries, but they also fail to address the consumers' potential prejudices and lack of information about the country. Instead, they gloss them over with simplistic messages about safe topics, such as food and drinks, which leaves those important issues unresolved.

In these aspects, the organization's approach stands close to some of the traditional managerial strategies for restoring place images that have been shaken by security issues or political problems, just like Turkey. Similar to Turkey's official marketing communication, ignoring or limiting the crises and conflicts is one of the easy message strategies sometimes used as a quick fix by countries suffering from these issues (Avraham & Ketter, 2008). Yet, it's been suggested that places that receive widespread international media coverage around their issues of security or terrorism cannot and should not ignore these conflicts since choosing the path of ignoring them will only make the situation worse by making potential tourists even more concerned (Avraham & Ketter, 2008).

The results of our data analysis agree with Avraham and Ketter's arguments since it has been displayed here that even though the official Facebook page ignores the safety issues and political instability that have been taking place in the country, consumers are still informed and, more importantly, concerned about them. Furthermore, their anxieties and concerns, in many instances, reduce their intention to visit the country and even result in them changing their travel plans. Similarly, the functionalist approach presented by Gertner & Kotler (2004) for repairing place images by "ignoring the negatives" or "overwhelming negatives with other positives" does not seem to solve the discrepancy between place marketers and consumers, as our findings have shown.

One reason for this might be that the consumers' perceptions about a place cannot be simply developed or altered fully by marketers, even though a sense of safety is attempted to be created by Turkey Home. Furthermore, as will be demonstrated shortly, there are several other actors that shape the perceptions of the consumers, such as travel warnings, online forums, or the user's personal background. Even though the organization portrays a peaceful and conflict-free country with one-way messages and may be subtly trying to address security concerns by offering a completely different, alternative place identity, consumers may not necessarily agree

with that image if it does not correspond to the reality in their minds that they obtained from other sources. All in all, while approaching branding from a traditional perspective, Turkey Home does not take into account that image formation is a much more complex and dynamic process that involves multiple actors and stakeholders that cannot be controllable by a central source.

As it has been presented in the previous section, Turkey Home's choice of topics, messages, and presentation of these topics and messages also point to a functionalist, one-dimensional marketing approach. By choosing safe topics to cover areas that almost nobody can disagree on, such as food or handicrafts, the organization might want to ensure that they avoid topics that can lead to conflicts, both in consumers' minds, as well as among them. In addition to the choice of topics that don't raise any eyebrows, the way Turkey Home presents those topics are also through simplistic messages that lack the social, political, and cultural context they operate in. Turkey Home not only picks and chooses certain safe cultural elements of the country, but they also promote them by removing their contextual meanings. Therefore, the messages consumers receive are reduced to a simple, one-way, conflict-free type of communication, even though that is not what the consumers are interested in.

### *6.2. Consumer Reactions to Turkey*

As the data analysis of this study demonstrated, consumers have completely different interests, concerns, and questions in mind, when compared to the marketing materials produced and distributed by the country's official branding organization. As presented in the Findings section, the topics and areas that Turkey Home leaves out are exactly the things that consumers are interested in, such as the social and cultural context of the country's elements and the dynamics of the daily life in Turkey. The discrepancy between Turkey's official branding and consumer reactions will be further discussed, after a deeper look into our findings from TripAdvisor forums and their possible theoretical contributions to marketing studies.

### 6.2.1. Consumer Reactions on TripAdvisor

Based on the data analysis of TripAdvisor forums on Turkey, the three main areas users discuss, share their experiences, and raise questions have been identified as *types of concern, types of conflict,* and *types of critique.* After a discussion of these three axial codes, the insights gathered through the analysis on TripAdvisor will be shared in order to contribute to the development of

better place branding theories, and finally, the discrepancy between the consumer reactions and marketing materials will be discussed to help us create an alternative place branding framework for the country.

***Types of Concern***

Even though it's not a surprising finding that users ask their questions about any given topic on online fora, the questions and threads started by users on TripAdvisor forums often contain different types of concerns about visiting Turkey and potential problems that might arise from it. The most dominant pattern that was discovered during the data analysis on TripAdvisor was, therefore, different types of concern consumers have regarding the country. This study demonstrated that consumers are, first and foremost, concerned about the overall *security* of the country in relation to terrorism and political unrest, as well as their own *personal safety* during the everyday life of the country, mostly in relation to parts of their personal identities, such as gender and nationality.

Being one of the key factors that affect consumers' decision-making processes in relation to travel destinations (Hall, 2002), *security* is shown to be the most common question users have in mind when it comes to visiting Turkey. In addition to being frequently asked by consumers, the fact that questions about the country's safety in 2019 have been pinned as a source to the top of the forum demonstrates the importance of the issue and gives clues about the consumer perceptions about the safety of the country. Yet, consumer concerns about the security of the country are too critical to be ignored, since it is often argued that the risk of terrorism and safety concerns can damage a place's brand image dramatically and influence consumers' choice of travel destinations (Sönmez & Graefe, 1998).

In addition to the frequency of questions about security, the way those questions are formed also can carry interesting clues about the perception of the place. While some questions are formed around if Turkey is *still* safe since their last visit, it holds the assumption that things might have gone bad for Turkey within the last few years. This might mean that even though there haven't been any significant violence threats in the country over the past few years, consumers are still aware that there are certain negative developments in the country that might have led to heightened security concerns. Even though many users have been to the country before and returned home without having any problems, they still carry doubts about the security of Turkey as of 2019. This might mean that consumers are not convinced by the official

branding of Turkey as a perfectly calm place and the superficial positive messages about the country's current situation.

Users' frequent references to their home country's official travel warnings about Turkey demonstrates that consumers already have some doubts about the security of the country, and therefore, they make some research and consult official statements to get more information about it. Yet, as our case has shown, not all consumers fully trust those official warnings. Some, instead, turn to TripAdvisor and ask for real consumers' experiences to agree or disagree with the official statements. The reason behind this might be that consumers do not have any other reliable, unofficial, non-political sources they can learn about the issue, which points to a knowledge gap about the security of the country.

The findings of this study also agree with the previous research that claims that not only terrorism, but also political instability in a country is a significant factor that influences a place's image dramatically (Neumayer, 2004). According to the findings of this study, consumers are aware that certain negative political developments are taking place in the country, and even though they receive some information from different sources, they are still not well-informed about what is exactly going on in the country, which creates another gap that the users try to close on TripAdvisor, with nowhere else to go. Neumayer (2004) also claims that political instability or similar negative events can put a country in a vulnerable position, if their main attractions and points of differentiation are things like climate and nature, since consumers can easily turn to another country with similar attractions without being under the risk of political violence.

As this study demonstrated, consumers do not only have concerns about the general security of the country, but they are also worried about their personal safety during the flow of the everyday life in the country. Their concerns range from being harassed due to their gender, to losing their money in a scam, when they visit the country. Overall, their discussions and questions about the country include the perceived risk about visiting Turkey and their "travel anxiety", which is argued to decrease consumers' intention to visit a destination and harm the marketability of a place (Reisinger & Mavondo, 2005). One group of people that is especially concerned about visiting the country is women. Moreover, their concerns seem to be notably intensified, if they are female solo travelers planning a trip to Turkey. That is the reason why it is possible to

observe numerous threads on the forum with the headline "female solo traveler", where users ask if they can travel the country alone safely and without being disturbed.

Due to its nature, the practice of solo traveling generally carries a certain amount of perceived risk, especially for women, which is usually considered in relation with the possibility of unwanted attention and sexual harassment (Yang, Khoo-Lattimore, & Arcodia, 2018). Yet, as our study shows, women who are planning to visit the country alone have questions about very basic activities that are normally not expected to carry a big amount of risk, such as taking a walk by the beach in the morning. In addition to general safety concerns, women have worries about such small and unimportant everyday activities, which are not in the area of interest for the country's official marketing communication.

The frequency of questions and concerns about gender-related issues on the forums also point to a significant problem area that needs to be addressed by place marketers in Turkey, since these concerns might stem from consumers' lack of knowledge or a confusion about the situation of women in the country or the gender dynamics in the everyday life of Turkish people. International media coverage of the negative events and developments that are related to gender issues that take place in other Middle Eastern countries might also have spillover effects, which lead to consumers' perception of Turkey as carrying a high-risk potential for women. Instead of attempting to neutralize oriental and religious connotations by repositioning the country geographically, women's concerns should be addressed by Turkey's official branding organization, through bringing the context of "everyday life" back into the communication.

*Types of Conflict*

In addition to raising their concerns, a common behavior among consumers on TripAdvisor forums is explaining the different types of conflict they expect when they travel to the country. These conflicts often take the form of a clash between the consumers' country of origin and Turkey; their own cultural background and the Turkish culture; or any other type of identity that they have against the predominant social identities in Turkey, such as a non-Muslim versus Muslim identity. Consumers' expression of these different types of conflict are usually the expectations about a certain amount of conflict between themselves and the locals, or the risk and worry about creating a conflict when they visit Turkey. In other words, these types of conflict are also highly related to the daily relations and interactions between the tourists and locals, which is neglected in marketing.

As mentioned earlier, most of the discussions in this category are related to the expected attitudes of locals towards the tourists, and tourists' worries about creating a potential cultural conflict. Unsurprisingly, the same factors, such as gender, nationality, or other types of consumer identity come into play in the creation of conflicts. This risk perception of consumers about the daily life and interactions in the country can be associated with "sociocultural risk", which has been shown to be one of the strongest predictors of travel anxiety (Reisinger & Mavondo, 2005). In some of the instances this study has analyzed, the expectation of a cultural conflict simply arises from a lack of knowledge about the country, especially when the topic of religion enters into the equation.

As in the example of the South African traveler who is asking for information about the Turks' attitudes towards non-Muslims, a social and cultural conflict is already expected during the everyday life between Muslims (the local population) and the non-Muslim (the tourist themselves), due to the consumer's previous negative experiences in an Islamic travel destination. As the comparison is made between Dubai and the desired travel destination in Turkey, a connection is automatically built between the country and other Middle Eastern or Islamic countries. Even though Turkey Home attempts to distance itself from the region by removing oriental and religious connotations, these findings demonstrate that consumers have different perceptions of the country, in relation to geography and religion, and they expect a certain amount of tension due to their prejudices about the country.

Clothing and the appropriate dress code in the country is another area where consumers expect and worry about a potential conflict, in close relation to religion and gender. As one user builds their question about appropriate clothing based on what they believe to be central to the Turkish culture, they reflect on their assumed gender relations in the country and the role of women in the Turkish culture. Yet, their assumptions are problematic and ill-informed, which again points to a lack of knowledge and an interest about the everyday practices of the Turkish culture among consumers, rather than the material sides of it, as it is currently promoted on Facebook by Turkey Home. Such instances demonstrate that consumers are unfamiliar with or confused about the country and the everyday things that are happening in it. Yet, if they are not able to see the everyday life in the materials produced by the official marketing channels, they build place images only through other channels, which may not reflect reality. Therefore, the official branding of Turkey could benefit from focusing on the everyday life and, in a wider sense, the

areas consumers are most concerned about, since providing more information about places by place marketers can help reduce consumers' anxiety level and contribute to creating a more favorable place image (Reisinger & Mavondo, 2005).

While in some instances, the expectations about a possible conflict are related to the lack of knowledge about the country, some others are caused by the knowledge of certain events that take place in the country. The example of the Australian couple who are worried about the Turkish sentiment towards Australians demonstrates the influence of real politics and the political developments that happen in the country on the place's brand image. Rather than being a hypothetical question, this example focuses on a very specific and concrete issue that shows how a simple political statement can influence the place image in the minds of consumers that live tens of thousands of kilometers away. While some might consider politics and tourism as two separate realms, our findings show how real politics can help shape place images, as information is easily accessible now and that the world is more interconnected than ever before. On the other hand, it demonstrates one more time that brand images are not fully controllable by marketers, and that places themselves also affect how they are being branded and perceived. Moreover, it illuminates how the relations between the consumers' country of origin and the destination country can impact how a place is perceived and interpreted by the consumers (Therkelsen, 2003).

### Types of Critique

As the findings and earlier examples of this study suggest, TripAdvisor is not only a platform that reflects what kind of place images consumers hold about Turkey, but it is also a channel that contributes to the formation of such brand images. Naturally, many consumers raise their voices on TripAdvisor forums to criticize certain aspects of the country by sharing their travel experiences, which might, in return, have an impact on how other users perceive the country. Interestingly, the types of critique users make on the forums correspond to the topics of concerns and expected conflicts by the users that have been presented earlier. In other words, the areas that users share their critiques on are almost the exact same issues that consumers are concerned about or expect a conflict around. Therefore, it is possible to say that all three discussion types are interrelated and these different types of critique might possibly become a source of concern for other consumers.

Being a common source of concern and conflict among consumers, the political situation in the country is also one of the main issues that receive criticism from consumers on the platform. Even though the traditional approaches to marketing and place branding would not expect to see a direct and strong impact of domestic politics in the host country on place image formation, the examples on types of critique point to the opposite direction. As shown in the Findings section, one user's critique about the political situation in the country goes even beyond simple criticism and turns into an act of politically-motivated rejection of consumption. Although this study cannot possibly measure the effects of one user's comments on other users' image formation, it is apparent that the negative political developments that happen in a country contribute to the creation of unfavorable brand images and to their consumption behavior.

Another recurring theme that has been discussed in relation to concerns and conflicts, the topic of gender shows itself as a type of critique, where users share their negative experiences in the country in relation to their gender. As one user shares several instances of the possibly gender-related negative attitude she received from the locals while she was visiting Turkey, she attaches strong negative feelings to the country based on her experiences, and she uses the platform to criticize the gender-related sociocultural conflicts she experienced in the host country. As opposed to the overall, general-level, political critique discussed above, the gender-related critique deals with the issues of everyday life in the country that have been ignored by the official branding of Turkey. The same user also compares Turkey's current situation with her previous visit to the country and comments that it is not the same as before. This idea of a negative change that is taking place in the country has also been presented previously as a concern in the minds of consumers. There's a tendency among the users on TripAdvisor to consider if Turkey has recently been subject to any changes, which might be related to the negative political and social developments that have been happening in the country, and therefore leading to the creation of a more unfavorable country image.

Finally, as introduced before as part of personal safety, many users on the forum share their experiences with scams and criticize the country. In addition to being a source of critique, consumers also warn other users against such tourist scams and taxi scams by sharing their own negative experiences concerning the country. As one example has demonstrated, even though a consumer has enjoyed the city (Istanbul), the negative behavior of one taxi driver could dramatically change their perception about the whole country, which even prevents them to visit Turkey again. Since negative attitudes of taxi drivers and topics around taxi scams are

highly frequent issues for users on TripAdvisor forums, it demonstrates how locals in a place can shape the place image, too, and the events that cannot be possibly foreseen by place marketers can contribute to the creation of unfavorable place images.

### 6.2.2. Discussion of the Findings

In addition to shedding a light on the discrepancy between the official marketing materials and consumer reactions in the case country, the data analysis carried out on TripAdvisor can provide us with some insights that can be helpful in developing better place branding theories by giving us some ideas about how place images are influenced by several actors and stakeholders, rather than a single source of information, i.e. national tourism organizations. Our findings gathered from TripAdvisor forums demonstrate, in agreement with new place branding theories, that place images and perceptions about places are shaped by multiple factors, and therefore, brand images are not fully controllable by marketers.

First and foremost, the consumer discussions on TripAdvisor show that the actors that exist in a place, such as the locals or the politicians, as well as the place itself have a significant impact on how the place image is perceived or can be changed in the minds of consumers. As can be observed in the examples presented earlier, not only the political situation, but also the statements made by political actors in a given country can have—negative or positive—impacts on how the place is perceived, both as a country and as a tourist destination. Furthermore, this influence can go beyond creating an unfavorable place image, and result in a decrease or complete dismissal of travel intentions to that place. This study also demonstrates that besides the political context, the social dynamics within a place itself can have significant effects on the brand image and travel intentions, and locals who reside in that place are a big part of it. This influence can be observed in the examples of how ill-mannered taxi drivers or complete strangers who are disrespectful to tourists in a place can alter the place image dramatically.

The findings of this study also show that local and international media are some of the sources of image formation about a place, since many consumers often refer back to the news articles they have read about the current situation in Turkey before posing their questions. Furthermore, the official documents, such as travel warnings also play a significant role in consumers' travel intentions to the country by helping them assess the perceived risk of the travel decision. Yet, both the impact of media sources and travel warnings issued are subject to differences according to the consumer's country of origin. Moreover, as our examples demonstrated, the political

relations between the consumer's home country and the host country can have a dramatic impact on place images and consumer behavior.

Finally, this project revealed that even though consumers refer to the information they got through the media or official travel warnings, they still consult to online forums in order to learn about other consumers' first-hand experiences about visiting the country. On the other hand, many users already share their positive and negative experiences about Turkey using the forums, which can contribute to shaping other users' perceptions about the country. Therefore, it becomes apparent that online forums are platforms that are not only a source for forming place images, but also a way for multiple actors to help shape others' perceptions of a place. This dual role of online forums and the practice of asking for and sharing post-travel experiences point to a new type of consumer in connection with a more social and interconnected "Travel 2.0" phenomenon (Mak, 2017). This study shows that this new type of consumers asks for first-hand experiences, complex messages, and richer stories that the current marketing approaches lack. Thus, it signals the importance and necessity of creating a richer cultural branding understanding that global consumers need one more time.

### 6.3. The Discrepancy Between Marketing Materials and Consumer Concerns

As illustrated several times through this study, the official marketing materials provided by the branding organization of Turkey and the consumer reflections about the country on TripAdvisor have no correspondence in either the topics that are discussed and communicated, in the levels of interest, or in the format. This study demonstrated that Turkey Home covers safe topics, such as food and drinks or material elements of their arts and culture, while consumers are concerned about more "dangerous" areas, such as security and political situation in the country. While Turkey Home attempts to portray the country as an ever-happy, conflict-free place that is free from problems, TripAdvisor data displays that conflict and real issues are a big part of everything that consumers are discussing. Therefore, it is apparent that there is a huge discrepancy in the topics discussed among the consumers and presented by the official branding organization about the country, and with the current understanding of a static, traditional, and unidimensional branding, the topics consumers are interested in will not be addressed, and thus, the gap between marketers and consumers will only get broader.

This study also demonstrates that it is not only the topics that do not correspond to what marketers and consumers are interested in, but also that their level of interest differs to a great

extent. In other words, while the official Facebook page of Turkey neglects the dimension of everyday life in the country, the analysis on TripAdvisor shows that almost everything that consumers are concerned about is around the daily practices and everyday life in the country. Tourists and potential travelers are not worried about the taste of the food and drinks they will get to experience or the quality of handmade products they can purchase while they visit Turkey, but they are anxious about, for instance, whether or not they will be ripped off or verbally abused in the country, which are all about daily practices and interactions. While Turkey Home resorts to generic and simplistic marketing messages about why consumers should visit the country by using their top attractions and nature in a brochure-like manner, they ignore the real concerns about the daily life that are preventing consumers from going to Turkey.

In addition to the discrepancy in the topics that are covered by marketers and consumers, the way Turkey Home presents those topics also points to a wide gap between the two groups of people. While Turkey Home introduces and promotes the country's certain features in order to make them attractive to the global consumers, they remove those topics out of the dynamic social, cultural, and historical context they operate in, and they rather reduce them to a static, material value. On the other hand, what consumers are interested in, are exactly those social and cultural contexts that have been officially neglected by place marketers in Turkey. For instance, while Turkey Home detaches the religious connotations, as well as the human factor from their content, the TripAdvisor data shows that consumers are uninformed or confused about the impact of religion on the dynamics of everyday social life in the country. As Turkey Home utilizes a simple presentation of their marketing messages as a format preference, TripAdvisor data demonstrates that consumers are ready and willing to hear about more complex messages and create more dynamic, multi-dimensional place images.

This study illustrates that the official branding organization of Turkey fails to address the consumers' tensions and concerns, and the level and format of their marketing messages are highly detached and far from what consumers are interested in. Even though it is not possible to include all of the consumer concerns in marketing, an alternative type of branding can still help the organization to subtly address some of these issues. As we have seen, the official marketing channel of the country completely ignores these concerns and do not provide consumers with enough information that can ease their minds. If the organization continues to turn a blind eye to the consumer concerns about critical issues, such as security, and rather

resort to ambiguous and simplistic marketing messages, this gap may only get wider, which leaves consumers confused or ill-informed, which might impact their travel intentions to visit the country.

All in all, this study makes it clear that Turkey Home should move away from such a simplistic and shallow understanding of place branding, if they want to create a more favorable place image and develop a better, cultural place brand. While Turkey Home presents us a case of a typical functional and unidimensional marketing approach that is not able to respond to consumer needs, this project suggests that a new understanding of branding is needed, where both brands and places are considered as cultural products with dynamic and multiple identities, and that this new cultural place branding approach would not only benefit the case country, but also the overall international marketing literature, too.

### 6.4. Diminishing the Gap with Cultural Branding

A new branding understanding that sees brand identities as fluid and contextual, and acknowledges the role and involvement of *culture* in place branding, which can be summarized as *cultural branding,* can help us build better brands that can respond to the consumers' needs and concerns and therefore, lead to more favorable brand images. Thus, this project claims that ideas from the theories of cultural branding can contribute to diminishing the gap between marketers and consumers, not only in the case of Turkey, but also in other cases where traditional marketing approaches are still in use.

Applying the cultural branding model of Holt (2004) to places, in order to create a successful place brand and a favorable brand image, place marketers need to address the tensions and contradictions among their potential consumers. Only that way, they can become iconic brands that can respond to the cultural context they operate in. In the case of Turkey Home, therefore, a better Turkey brand can only be created, if the branding organization focuses on addressing the concerns and dilemmas in consumers' minds, as this study has exemplified using the online forums on TripAdvisor. Therefore, Turkey Home should, first and foremost, take some of the topics users are most interested in into account, and start addressing those cultural and social tensions in their marketing communication by creating myths around them.

Using the ideas from cultural branding, Turkey Home could address some of the tensions among the consumers, which have been presented in this study, in their marketing—directly or

indirectly. In order to respond to the concerns and confusions about the everyday life in the country, Turkey Home could, for instance, include several different presentations of the daily life in the country in their marketing. Showing the colors of everyday life with real humans and their stories, rather than still pictures of empty spaces, can help consumers have a better understanding of the *ordinary*, but *real* life in the country that they are curious about. While many of the areas consumers are interested in cannot be directly included in branding of the country, subtle and indirect references to those issues can address consumers' concerns to some extent. For instance, since consumers are uncertain or uninformed about the gender dynamics in the country, Turkey Home could save more space for women by focusing on their success stories or in reference to the strong female figures in Turkish politics, literature, or cinema.

Regardless of where in the world they are located, places are almost never free from problems. Rather than resorting to mechanistic and functionalist image recovery theories that do not apply to places, marketers should aim to create flexible, changing, and fluid place identities, so that they can easily adjust in times of crises and deal more comfortably with unfavorable image situations. Moving away from a static and stable brand identity understanding towards a dynamic cultural brand model can help places and other brands more easily adapt to cultural shifts in societies, which Holt (2004) calls "cultural disruptions". For instance, the attempt to creating a myth that Turkey is a peaceful and quiet country with no cultural context is doomed to failure, since it does not address the most acute tensions among the global consumers, which is related to security and safety. If Turkey Home builds their branding around a fixed brand identity that claims to be safe, they cannot create a myth that responds to the shifts which put Turkey in an unsafe position.

Ideas from cultural branding can help Turkey Home to respond better to today's conflicting and multiple social identities by moving the focus away from its stereotypical homogeneity towards a more dynamic brand identity understanding. Rather than attempting to develop a unidimensional and traditional ambition to have a single, fixed brand identity that is flawless and ideal, Turkey Home should embrace the possibility of having multiple and sometimes conflicting place identities that are open to change. Knowing that different consumer groups will form different brand images for the same place anyway (Solomon et al., 2006, as cited in Ren & Blichfeldt, 2011), and that having multiple images is a strength rather than a flaw (Ren & Blichfeldt, 2011), Turkey Home should employ a more dynamic and cultural branding approach that does not only use the material elements of their culture. Theories of cultural

branding also remind us that places are different from tangible goods, since consumers already have pre-understandings and certain images about places prior to the travel (Papadopoulos & Heslop, 2002), and therefore, place marketers should keep their brands open to the possibility of change and a multiplicity of images.

Since brand identities are co-created and negotiated by consumers and other stakeholders in the marketplace according to the cultural branding perspective (Csaba & Bengtsson, 2006), as opposed to the traditional, centralist one-way approaches to marketing, the social and cultural context that the Turkey brand exists in should be invited back to the communication efforts of Turkey Home. Without the cultural dimension and context of the place brand, consumers' concerns and interests cannot be addressed, and therefore, a cultural brand cannot be created. If the purpose of Turkey Home's branding efforts is to create a favorable Turkey brand, it is not possible to remove the brand out of the context of Turkey, since place identities do not exist somewhere outside of the place, and rather gain a separate, fixed identity, developed in marketing departments. According to the view of cultural branding, as well as the results of our data analysis, consumers are not confused by complex messages that contain cultural dimensions, but rather, they need and ask for them. Therefore, resorting to simplistic messages without any social and cultural context will not respond to the needs and questions of consumers, but will only widen the gap between marketers and consumers.

All in all, the ideas borrowed from theories of cultural branding and new place branding approaches can help Turkey Home and similar cases with creating a better place brand that corresponds to consumer concerns, by (1) pointing to the topics and current tensions among consumers that need to be addressed by the organization, (2) suggesting a more dynamic understanding of places and brands, and (3) offering a more contextual presentation of those topics that are covered. Using the theories from cultural branding and consumer insights from TripAdvisor, we can develop alternative types of branding in contrast with the stereotypical, functional marketing approaches, and can contribute to the international marketing literature by offering new types of branding that can better fit the identities and brands of today's world.

## 7. Conclusion

This project focused on illuminating the discrepancies between the official branding of Turkey on Facebook and the consumer reactions on TripAdvisor forums in an attempt to shed light on the gap between marketers and consumers; the potential problems that are brought by it; and how consumer insights from TripAdvisor can help generate ideas for an alternative type of branding in the case of Turkey. Moreover, this study aimed to discuss how the ideas from the theories of cultural branding can contribute to diminishing this gap and, therefore, can help build better marketing theories that move away from functionalist, traditional approaches that do not correspond to today's multiple, conflicting social identities, as well as the consumers' needs. Our research discovered that there is a complete lack of correspondence between the official marketing materials and consumer concerns in the case of Turkey, both in terms of topics that are discussed, levels of interest, and the format of presentation.

One of the key findings of this study is that Turkey Home relies heavily on the traditional approaches to branding by attempting to differentiate the country from its competitors and positioning it as a *different, but safe* place that is free from conflicts and problems, whereas consumers are mainly busy discussing the security of Turkey, as well as their personal safety during the everyday life in the country. The official branding organization of Turkey attempts to gloss over the social and political issues that have been taking place in the country by highlighting safe topics, such as nature or food, and through the use of simplistic messages that do not contain any religious or political connotations. On the other hand, consumers are constantly asking questions about the very religious, political, social, and cultural aspects of the country, since they are concerned about a possible conflict between their identities and of the locals'. In addition to shedding light on the discrepancy between marketing messages and consumer reactions, this study also demonstrates the influence of several stakeholders, such as online forums and official travel warnings, on the formation and alteration of place images, which are generally neglected by the traditional marketing approaches. Due to this multiplicity of resources that help forming and altering brand images in consumers' minds, this study concludes that even though it is not possible to fully *close* the gap between marketers and consumers, the ideas from cultural branding can help us go deeper into some of the tensions among consumers by addressing them with marketing.

As they have been presented earlier, this study shows that several ideas borrowed from the theories of cultural branding can help us build a better framework for place branding by

addressing the tensions among the consumers, diminishing the gap between marketers and consumers, and offering a new type of branding that focuses on the multiplicity and flexibility of place images. Since this project is based on a single case study, the findings of this research do not carry any claims of generalizability, yet it can shed light on the problems of current approaches to marketing and branding, and help us understand similar cases of places with ambivalent or unfavorable image problems. The wide gap between marketers and consumers that has been illustrated and discussed in this study points to an acute problem within the international marketing literature that calls for a necessary shift in the direction of future studies that should move away from the traditional, static, and mechanistic understanding of brands and brand identities towards pluralistic, multidimensional, and co-created cultural brands.

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**Appendix A: Turkey Home**

*A.1.: Turkey Home Raw Data*

1.

Streets so picturesque you almost didn't notice that's the #GalataTower there in the background!

#Turkey #Istanbul #Galata #Street #LetsGetLost

2.

Head to Turkey's greatest ski resort and enjoy world-class accommodation, slopes and views!

#Turkey #Erzurum #Palandoken #WinterFun #SkiHoliday #LongWeekend

3.

Just imagine yourself swimming in the cascading travertine pools of Pamukkale. 💙 #Hierapolis #UNESCO #WorldHeritage

📷 mahperiyildiz / IG

#Turkey #Denizli #Pamukkale

4.

Looking to hit the slopes next time you're in Turkey? Check out Turkey's top skiing destinations! 🎿🏂

#Turkey #Palandoken #Saklikent #Uludag #Kartalkaya #Erciyes #Ski #SkiCenter #Snowboarding

5.

Check out what happens as an institute literally opens its doors to shed light on millennia of history and the history of human civilization itself!

#Turkey #Gaziantep #Kendirli #IconicExperinces

6.

Discover the glory of the female ruler of the Saltukid dynasty in the incredible complex and tomb of Melike Mama Hatun in Erzincan. #MamaHatun #AncientCities #IconicExperiences

📷 muhammedkosen / IG

#Turkey #Erzincan #Tercan

7.

As you think about your spring/summer vacays… think the sunset over Gölyazı might affect your decision? 🌅 #NaturalTherapy

📷 orhanozcaki / IG

#Turkey #Bursa #Golyazi

8.

Cittaslow is a movement for towns that offer the highest quality of life possible, and Turkey's Mediterranean lakeside town Köyceğiz is the latest Turkish town to receive recognition for its food, beauty and incredible lifestyle! 💙💚

#Mugla #Koycegiz #Cittaslow #MondayMotivation

9.

A quiet drive along the #Aegean in the car of your dreams is all you need to find happiness! 🌺#NaturalTherapy #MondayMotivation

📷 blackjacckk / IG

#Turkey #Izmir #Alacati

10.

If you had the choice, which cute little Kuzguncuk house would you want to live in? 😉 #IstanbulHighlights

📷 emreevegi / IG

#Turkey #Istanbul #Kuzguncuk

11.

The 38th Istanbul Film Festival is almost here, with hundreds of directors from dozens of cities flooding the city and award-winning movies all over - what a week it'll be! 🎬🎥 İKSV İstanbul Film Festivali

#Turkey #Istanbul #Movie #Festival

12.

A new museum unlike any other is opening in Eskişehir, inspired by local wooden homes and featuring brilliant works of modern and contemporary art!

#Turkey #Eskisehir #BestofTurkishMuseum #Museums

13.

Fresh bread. Freshly grilled and spiced #köfte meatballs. Tomato, onion, lettuce. Ready to eat! 😍

#Turkey #Kofte #StreetDelicious

14.

Blue, green, and everything in between. 💙💚 #MadForMed #SummerIsComing

📷 mahperiyildiz / IG

#Turkey #Antalya #Mediterranean

15.

Spring's here, and that means the #bougainvillea alone are worth the visit! 🌺 #NaturalTherapy

📷 ceyyhuun / IG

#Turkey #Izmir #Alacati

16.

The Valens Aqueduct is maybe one of the most iconic entrances into any city in the world. 🖤 #IstanbulHighlights #IstanbulDay #RomanHistory #IconicExperiences

📷 bildrone / IG

#Turkey #Istanbul #ValensAqueduct

17.

Istanbul Airport set to become the new aviation center of the world, see just why it's gotten the whole industry so excited! ✈️

#Turkey #Istanbul #IstanbulAirport #Travel

18.

Cruise of a lifetime or daily commute? In Istanbul, they're one and the same. 🚢 #IstanbulHiglights #IstanbulDay #HistoricPeninsula #UNESCO #WorldHeritage

📷 agoniiya / IG

#Turkey #Istanbul #Bosphorus

19.

The Ottoman art exhibit has opened at the National Art Center in Tokyo, see it for yourself until May 20th! https://turkey2019.exhn.jp/en/

#Turkey #Japan #2019TurkishCultureYear #Art

20.

It's the spring equinox - so what do you do in Istanbul when day and night are equal? Everything! 🌞🌛

📷 jesus_tr / IG

#Turkey #Istanbul #SpringEquinox

21.

Spring's here in Turkey – it's time to enjoy nature at its finest! 💜🏵️ #NaturalTherapy

📷 muratate.s / IG

#Turkey #Bolu #Mudurnu

22.

Turkish Airlines flights planned for Ataturk Airport will all fly to or out of Istanbul Airport as of April 6th at 02:00 in the morning - the world's newest and largest airport and aviation center of the world! ✈

#Turkey #Istanbul #IstanbulAirport #TurkishAirlines

23.

Discover the origins of human civilization itself as Göbeklitepe is open to the public!

#Turkey #Gaziantep #Diyarbakir #Adiyaman #Sanliurfa #Gobeklitepe #IconicExperiences #2019YearofGobeklitepe

24.

Every detail of Hasankeyf's marvels would are enough to keep you staring for hours. #ZeynelBey #Tomb #SimplyUnforgettable

📷 tanerbeyoglu / IG

#Turkey #Batman #Hasankeyf

25.

Clean air, stunning snow-capped mountains and natural beauty everywhere you look. You must be in #Elazığ! #NaturalTherapy

📷 dr.iyasar / IG

#Turkey #Elazig

26.

The prep for the Ottoman art exhibition in Japan is going on full speed ahead! https://turkey2019.exhn.jp/en/

#Turkey #Japan #2019TurkishCultureYear #Art

27.

Get Ready for the Marmaris Jazz Festival!
Thinking of a vacation in sunny Marmaris? Well from August 23rd to September 6th, the Marmaris Jazz Festival will feature some of the biggest names in jazz from around the world. 🎷🎶

#Turkey #Marmaris #MarmarisJazzFestival #Jazz #Festival #Summer

28.

On March 21st and 22nd, Ankara's Indian Embassy is hosting a brilliant Turkey-India Friendship Concert with Turkish and Indian musicians coming together - should be an incredible show!

#Turkey #India #Ankara #Concert #Friendship

29.

Today is March 18th, the day we remember all those who gave their lives from all over the world at the battle of Gallipoli so many years ago.

📷 jesus_tr / IG

#Turkey #Canakkale #Gallipoli #March18 #ÇanakkaleGeçilmez

30.

Why walk up the cotton castle of Pamukkale when you could fly! 🎈 #UNESCO #WorldHeritage #MondayMotivation

📷 aliunlu92 / IG

#Turkey #Denizli #Pamukkale

31.

Spring's almost here and we can't wait to see the leaves peeking out again in Yedigoller National Park! #NationalPark #NaturalTherapy

📷 frht.idog / IG

#Turkey #Bolu #Yedigoller

32.

#CundaIsland really is a lifestyle – come out and live it up! 🧿 #IslandLife #NazarBeads #Nazar

📷 fotozade / IG

#Turkey #Balikesir #Ayvalik #Cunda

33.

The little breads you get to soak up the breakfast sauces in Turkey, and particularly in Rize, are amazing.

#Turkey #Rize #Breakfast #Simit #TurkishCuisine

34.

Hand-knitted socks to keep you warm in the winter. Common in Turkey. Priceless everywhere else. 🧦

#Turkey #Winter #Socks #Clothing #Handmade #PreciousHands

35.

The cutest little town and just a few minutes away from Ephesus! #Şirince #Ephesus #UNESCO #WorldHeritage

📷 ahmet.erdem / IG

#Turkey #Izmir #Sirince

36.

All you have to do is zoom in, and that's your summer dream taken care of! 😍 #NaturalTherapy

📷 mucahitmuglu / IG

#Turkey #Denizli #IncegizCanyon

37.

The sunset over historic Istanbul is stunning. 💛 #ChasingSunsets #IstanbulDay #IstanbulHighlights #ASpiritualTime

📷 bildrone / IG

#Turkey #Istanbul #YavuzSultanSelimMosque

38.

From May 12th to 16th, the world's best Wedding & MICE agencies will be at the Rixos Premium in Belek, Antalya for the International MICE & Wedding Forum the most comprehensive forum for MICE and wedding agencies in the world.

#Turkey #Antalya #IMWF2019 #InternationalMiceAndWeddingForum #IMWF19

39.

Even after over a hundred years, still one of the most eye-catching train stations in the world.

#Turkey #Istanbul #Haydarpasa #IstanbulDay #Train #Station

40.

One of the world's most stunning natural settings is all lit up, waiting for your visit! 😊 #UNESCO #WorldHeritage #IconicExperiences

📷 frht.idog / IG

#Turkey #Nevsehir #Cappadocia

41.

Don't Miss the PSM Jazz Festival in Istanbul!
From April 25th to June 1st, all kinds of jazz music will be at the PSM Jazz Festival held in Zorlu PSM with legendary artists, up-and-comers, and new names blending musical genres and pioneering new sounds! 🎶🎷

#Turkey #PSMJazzFestival

42.

Şeyhandede Waterfalls in Diyarbakir are the perfect spring destination as the water rushes by, welcoming in budding life! #Waterfalls #NaturalTherapy

📷 mveyseldamar / IG

#Turkey #Diyarbakir #Seyhandede

43.

Ala Mosque, used as a monastery, a church and a mosque over the years. No wonder people call this monument the "Hagia Sophia of Osmaniye".

#Turkey #Osmaniye #Kadirli #ASpiritualTime

44.

The stunning mosaics from Zeugma, art from a time long past, shed light on how our ancestors lived thousands of years ago. İş Sanat

#Turkey #Gaziantep #Zeugma #GypsyGirl #Mozaic #BestOfTurkishMuseums

45.

Just a few hours outside Istanbul, the views of stunning natural beauty are waiting for you on a day trip to Camlitepe! 💙 #TurkishTea #NaturalTherapy

📷 orhanozcaki / IG

#Turkey #Kocaeli #Yuvacik

46.

Meatball "Köfte" is really common in Turkey. In Hatay, a veggie option with semolina and bulgur is out of this world.

#Turkey #Adana #Hatay #Fellah #Kofte #TastesTraditional

47.

When you see the handmade kilims of #Karatepe you'll understand that your shopping here will take hours, days, weeks...

#Osmaniye #Kilim #Rug #Handmade #PreciousHands

48.

When you visit the ancient civilizations of Turkey, you KNOW you're visiting a place with a way of life completely removed from modern life. #IconicExperiences

📷 tahagnc / IG

#Turkey #Sanliurfa #Harran

49.

Do you think it's the minarets or the Bosphorus that make Istanbul look so incredible at night?

#Turkey #Istanbul #Suleymaniye #Mosque #Bosphorus

50.

Sumela Monastery is set along one of the most picturesque spots in the world - a true marvel of history. Discover it for yourself as it is reopened on May 18th, Museum Day!

#Turkey #Trabzon #SumelaMonastery #PlanYourTrip #MuseumDay

51.

Cunda is a small island to wander, but full of discoveries that might take forever to find. 😍 #IconicExperiences #MondayMotivation

📷 kus.bakisi / IG

#Turkey #Balikesir #CundaIsland

52.

The fermented wheat drink of boza is a winter specialty, and still sold on the street - listen for a seller shouting BOOOOOO-ZAAAAAA! ☺

#Turkey #Boza #WinterNights #StreetDelicious

53.

Those blues of Topkapi will leave you enchanted well after you've left! #UNESCO #WorldHeritage

#Turkey #Istanbul #TopkapiPalace

54.

Feel the cure of the #Ceyhan River in the tiny town of Duzici. It will treat your body and your soul the way only it can. 💙

#Osmaniye #Duzici #Haruniye #HotSprings #LivingForTheFeeling

55.

A mosque so wonderful that even the birds in the sky feel the emotion exuding from this beautiful mosque.

#Turkey #Konya #Haciveyiszade #Mosque #ASpiritualTime

56.

Yep, I'm living my best life! 😉🐱 #UNESCO #WorldHeritage #Caturday #Cats #Animal

#Turkey #Nevsehir #Cappadocia

57.

The water rushes even harder in the winter, and the hiking's even more amazing - get out there!

#Turkey #Balikesir #Mount #Ida #Kaz #Mountains #LetsGetLost

58.

The 7th International Orange Blossom Carnival is coming to Adana this April, with the usual fanfare of crazy outfits, concerts and an atmosphere unlike anywhere else in the world! 🧡

#Turkey #Adana #InternationalOrangeBlossomCarnival

59.

Happy International Women's Day to everyone fighting to make this world a better, more equal place. 💐

#Turkey #WomenPioneersOfTurkey #InternationalWomensDay #IWD2019

60.

It's the Year of Göbeklitepe. So what is this amazing place? Nothing less than the origins of human civilization - see it now like never before as it opens to the public today. ✨

#Turkey #Sanliurfa #Gobeklitepe #IconicExperiences #2019YearofGobeklitepe

61.

Sometimes the Maiden's Tower looks lonely in the Bosphorus. But really it's right in the middle of the city – you can see it from almost everywhere! 🚤💙 #Bosphorus #SimplyUnforgettable #IstanbulDay

📷 anastasiaeki / IG

#Turkey #Istanbul #MaidensTower

62.

Göbeklitepe is going to open tomorrow, learn more about the origins of human civilization itself! ✨

#Turkey #Sanliurfa #Gobeklitepe #IconicExperiences #2019YearofGobeklitepe

63.

From March 20th to May 20th at the National Art Center in Tokyo, from, see tulip-shaped "lale" motifs and Ottoman artwork!

64.

Cold in the summer, hot in the winter. Soups made with yogurt in Turkey are always healthy and delicious. 🍲

#Turkey #Yayla #Soup #WinterCooking #TurkishCuisine

65.

The gymnasium of Sardis looks EVEN bigger when you see it in person! 😍

#Turkey #Manisa #Sardis #Ancient #City #UNESCO #WorldHeritage

66.

How are Osmaniye's wooden spoons made? With love of nature and the #PreciousHands of the city's people course.

#Turkey #Osmaniye #Karatepe #Wood #Carving

67.

Whichever fork in the road you take – it's sure to lead to more stunning beauty in Istanbul! 📍 #IstanbulHighlights #HistoricPeninsula

📷 emreevegi / IG

#Turkey #Istanbul #Balat

68.

#TurkishTea and breathtaking views? Not a bad way to spend a long weekend! ⛄☕

#Turkey #Bolu #Camping #Snow #WinterFun #LongWeekend

69.

Rize's got the hike of a lifetime waiting for you! 💚💙🌲🌳

#Turkey #Rize #Cat #Bridge #LetsGetLost #NaturalTherapy

70.

In the village of Eskikaraağaç lives a fisherman named Adem who looks after a stork named Yaren, and every year when Yaren returns from his long migration they celebrate their reunion. Yaren has just returned, heralding in the upcoming spring. ❤️

71.

Spread your wings and fly into nature's beauty! 💚👐 #Camlihemsin #Hiking #NaturalTherapy

📷 kampyapsak / IG

#Turkey #HomeOf #Rize

72.

Sónar comes to Istanbul!
On March 8th and 9th, Sónar, the electronic music festival phenomenon that's taking over the world, comes to Zorlu PSM, with the top DJs and producers in electronic music making for an incredible weekend! 🎶

#Turkey #Istanbul #Sónar #Festival

73.

Frothy, salty, yogurty and delicious - a drink that goes with just about any meal - "Ayran". 😊

#Turkey #Ayran #TastesTraditional

74.

Cappadocia is made of the same stuff dreams are made of. 🎈 #UNESCO #WorldHeritage #LoveValley #MondayMotivation

📷 dinka.travel / IG

#Turkey #HomeOf #Cappadocia

75.

Did you know that Ahlat is famous for the beautiful hand-crafted walking sticks it produces?

#Turkey #Bitlis #Ahlat #Walking #Stick #PreciousHands

76.

The world is so beautiful – it's just up to you to see it all! 💙 #Hiking #NaturalTherapy

📷 yavuztan7 / IG

#Turkey #HomeOf #Artvin

77.

Don't forget to take a final look at the vista below when you fly out of Istanbul! 😍

#Turkey #Istanbul #Aerial

78.

Zorkun is one of the oldest plateaus of #Cukurova with its greenery and tranquility.

#Osmaniye #Zorkun #Plateau #LetsGetLost

79.

Hey there, how's your day going? 😺😻 #Kadirga #IstanbulHighlights #Caturday

📷 mstfatyfn / IG

#Turkey #HomeOf #Cats #Istanbul

80.

How does an ancient city become a UNESCO World Heritage Site? As the saying goes, you know it when you see it. ❤️

#Turkey #Mugla #Xanthos #Letoon #Ancient #City #UNESCO #WorldHeritage

81.

Bridging continents the most beautiful way possible. 🌅💛 #IstanbulHighlights #IstanbulDay #Bosphorus #ChasingSunsets

📷 bildrone / IG

#Turkey #HomeOf #Istanbul

82.

A sweet lemony syrupy cake called "şambali" is here to make you fall in love again! 😍

#Turkey #Sambali #Dessert #StreetDelicious

83.

In case you want a fresh snack before heading up to admire the view! #Simit #TurkishCuisine #GalataTower #IstanbulDay

📷 cerenlyce / IG

#Turkey #HomeOf #Istanbul

84.

The dusting of snow you get in Artvin makes every hike so much more beautiful, don't you think? 😊

#Turkey #Artvin #Fish #Lake #Cittaslow #LivingForTheFeeling

85.

Might be the best dish at tea time or a weekend brunch in Turkey!

#Turkey #LentilBalls #TastesTraditional

### A.2.: Turkey Home Data Coded

| Open Code | Axial Code | Axial Code |
|---|---|---|
| Art, Cultural Events | Arts and Culture | Differentiation |
| Cultural Events | Arts and Culture | |
| Forum | Industry Update | |
| Museum, Modern Art | Arts and Culture | |
| Nature, Handmade | Arts and Culture | |
| New Airport | Industry Update | |
| Drinks | Food and Drinks | Differentiation, Marketization of Culture |
| Food | Food and Drinks | |
| Food, Health | Food and Drinks | |
| Food, View, Monuments | Food and Drinks | |
| Handmade | Arts and Culture | |
| Mosque, Beauty | Tourist Attractions | Neutralization of Connotations |
| View, Beauty, Mosque | Natural Beauty | |
| Beauty | Natural Beauty | Perfection |
| Beauty, Attractions | Tranquility | |
| Beauty, Nature | Natural Beauty | |
| Beauty, Nature, Sports | Natural Beauty | |
| Beauty, Quiet | Tranquility | |
| Beauty, View | Natural Beauty | |
| Drinks, View, Beauty, Nature | Getaway | |
| Nature, Beauty | Natural Beauty | |
| Nature, Beauty, Drinks | Getaway | |
| Nature, Beauty, Sports, Cittaslow | Tranquility | |
| Nature, Beauty, View | Natural Beauty | |
| Nature, Sports | Natural Beauty | |
| Nature, Therapy | Natural Beauty | |
| Nature, Tranquility | Tranquility | |
| Nature, View, Beauty | Natural Beauty | |
| Sports | Getaway | |
| Sports, Nature | Natural Beauty | |
| View | Natural Beauty | |
| View, Beauty | Natural Beauty | |
| View, Quiet | Tranquility | |
| Beauty, Mediterranean | Natural Beauty | Perfection, Neutralization of Connotations |
| Cittaslow, Food, Beauty, Mediterranean | Tranquility | |
| Quiet, Aegean, Happiness | Tranquility | |
| Attractions | Tourist Attractions | Variety |
| Attractions, Monuments, View | Tourist Attractions | |
| Beauty, Attractions | Tourist Attractions | |
| Beauty, Nature, Attractions | Tourist Attractions | |
| History | History | |
| History, Art, Museum | History | |
| History, Civilizations | History | |
| History, Monuments | History | |
| History, Monuments | History | |
| History, Mosque | History | |
| History, Museum, View | History | |
| Monuments | History | |
| View, Attractions | Tourist Attractions | |
| World Heritage, Attractions | Tourist Attractions | |

**Appendix B: TripAdvisor**

*B.1.: TripAdvisor Raw Data*

1.

Airport taxis Ankara and Izmir
Mar 27, 2019, 9:03 AM

Can anyone please advise on taxi travel between airports at Ankara and Izmir to the city centres of each city? Is it straightforward enough to head to the official airport taxi ranks and take one from there? Are these taxis likely to overcharge/scam? I will be a solo female traveller. Many thanks!

2.

Female taxi drivers
Mar 27, 2019, 4:56 PM

After reading numerous disturbing posts on this forum regarding the behaviour of many male taxi drivers I am trying to find the number of a female taxi driver, Can anyone provide me with a link so I can make contact.

Thanks

3.

Walking on my own Female over 60
Mar 24, 2019, 10:38 AM

Hi have not been to Turkey for about 4 years.

Can anyone advice is it still safe for a female to walk on her own early morning.

Walking from Sealight to Marine in Kuşadasi And back keeping the sea on my left on the way in.

4.

Side travelling solo female
Oct 7, 2018, 9:32 AM

I'm thinking of visiting side September 2019 is it safe for single mature female. Do yo get pestered to go into restaurants. I've visited other parts of Turkey and have been ok. Thanks

5.

Single lady in Bodrum
Mar 3, 2019, 4:08 AM

Hi!

First time in my life Im planing to travel somewhere alone. I have plan to arrive with ferry from Kos, and to stay in Bodrum for 6 days. I have hotel reservation and tickets, but I have no any idea what is "must do" in Bodrum alone. :D

Okey, sea and sun in the day time. Bodrum palace? Turkish bath?

How is public beach in Bodrum in center?

How is public transport system? Is it easy?

Is it safe for single lady to go out for some drink in the evening?

I will be very thankful for any advice :)

6.

An ageing Aussie couple in Istanbul

Mar 23, 2019, 3:27 PM

Hi

Istanbul has been on our must do list for many years, we were forced to cancel our trip in 2016 and have now had this one planned since then.

We arrive on 24th April and my husband is concerned about the Turkish sentiment towards Australians. I've told him that what he is listening to on the news is sensationalism. Without getting into the nitty gritty of why this sensationalism exists I would just like reassurance from DEs in Instanbul (or any Turkish citizen) that we are safe and we will be welcome. We are aware of risks in any foreign country so we do take measures ensuring our personal safety as far as possible.

I have checked the Department of Foreign Affairs in Australia website and the warning remains unchanged since before recent events.

I've visited Turkey before and know how warm and welcoming you are, I just want my husband to experience your beautiful city and culture without any fear.

Thanks

Deb

7.

3 days in Istanbul

Feb 2, 2019, 4:51 PM

Hi, I have three days in Instanbul before I join my tour of Turkey. What should I not miss and do I need a guide to see all the recommended sites. I love architecture and historical sites. I hear the Grand Bazzar is a little daunting for a lone female

8.

Please share experience in Istanbul as a US citizen
Mar 22, 2019, 9:19 AM

Hi Everyone,

On Feb 14 2019 the US Dept of State changed the security level for traveling to Turkey to level 3 "reconsider travel", so I am pondering whether I should abandon my plan to travel to Istanbul. I would really, really appreciate it if some of my fellow American tourists could share their experience in Istanbul within the last 6 months or so. The more stories the better.

My original plan was to spend 4 nights in Istanbul.

Thank you so much for your time

9.

Swimwear in resort
Mar 16, 2019, 3:36 PM

Hi please can you confirm if islamic swimwear(burkini) is allowed at Ramada resort swimming pools. Thankyou

10.

Safety
Mar 20, 2019, 7:52 PM

Hi there,

I'm looking to book a holiday at Cooks Club Adakoy near Marmaris but have a few niggles about safety. Has anyone who's been to the area/Turkey recently give me an idea of what the

atmosphere is like and whether they felt safe or not. The GOV.UK advice is a bit mixed, as are news reports so would be good to hear from someone who has been there.

Thanks.

11.

Review your Turkey travel plans
Mar 20, 2019, 8:32 PM

Given the shocking comments by the Turkish president and the threats he is making to send Australian tourists home in coffins I think it's time for all tourists to reconsider their Turkey travel plans. I love turkey and I love the Turkish people but this is just unbelievable and cannot be left to stand like this.

12.

Booked ideal prime hotel and now been scaremongered
Feb 26, 2019, 6:56 PM

I've just booked to go to ideal prime hotel April 2020 myself and my 5 children plus my daughter,husband and her two young children,I was excited to start with but now friends & family are saying to cancel as it's not safe over there,this will be our first holiday together abroad and now I'm really worried as to whether I should pay a fee and go somewhere else..please help x

13.

Planning a Trip to Istanbul March 2019
Mar 1, 2019, 2:25 PM

Hey there!

Is it safe to travel for only girls? Which places best to visit during March? And using tram is safe? Does anyone know reliable and reasonable tour agent?

We will he there for a week only.

14.

Rip off carpets
Apr 23, 2018, 6:25 AM

Has anyone had any experience with being ripped off purchasing rugs in Side? I bought one from Valentin's Carpet. They wrapped it up for me, however upon opening it at the hotel, there an incredibly strong smell on chemicals coming from it. Also there is a tag on the carpet at the back which they have cut off. Obviously I have been scammed and they have bought this somewhere and are selling it on for outrageous prices to tourists.

I have emailed them saying I want to return it, however I doubt I will get a response, so will be going back down to them personally. Has this happened to anyone else?

15.

Ladies, be careful riding inner city buses
Mar 19, 2019, 12:18 AM

I have been struggling for a day whether I should write about it or not because I truly want to believe this was just one time accident and bad luck but I just can't get it off my mind. I was in Denizli riding a bus from otogar to a shopping mall. I was wearing leggings and boyfriend shorts which are these ugly very loose knee length shorts that guys wear to play basketball. I was also wearing a loose t-shirt and a sports jacket. I had my hair in a tight bun because long blonde hair sometimes gets unwanted attention. Basically I was the epitome of antisex. So this guy was standing right behind me and then suddenly he squeezes my butt. I turn around and look at him with disgust and surprise. He starts mumbling something in Turkish and by his gestures I figured he was trying to explain that the bus shook and he accidentally pushed me. This was a total lie because I'm old enough to differentiate an intentional squeeze and an

accidental push. I told him in cold voice in English that he needs to step back or I will call the police. Some other guy told him something in Turkish and he moved to the rear end of the bus. So, ladies, be careful.

16.
I need help with my 2 weeks itinerary in Turkey
Mar 16, 2019, 12:00 PM

Hi everyone!

I will be traveling to Turkey in April (15th-28th) and I need some help planning my itinerary. I have traveled quite a bit, but this is my first time in Turkey. I am going alone and on a low budget regarding transport, accommodation and food.

I was thinking of spending a week in Istanbul, 4 days in Cappadocia and 1 day in Pamukkale.

- I have 2 days to spare. Do you have any recommendations regarding where to go?

- Are there night buses I could take between Istanbul and Cappadocia, Cappadocia and Pamukkale, Pamukkale and Istanbul?

- Do I need to worry about safety?

Thank you in advance for taking the time to help me out.

Ana

17.

Beware of some of the taxi drivers
Mar 17, 2019, 12:41 PM

We were cautious of the scam where the driver says that you gave a lower denomination than you actually did , but we fell for the fake notes scam.

At the end of the journey , we handed over a 100 Lira note and he returned it to us saying it was torn , so we gave him another . He then asked if we could change the 100 lira note for small change as he didn't have change which we did.We didn't realise until later when we tried to use them that we had 2 fake 100 lira notes ( about £30 ), the torn one and the second one for change.

I am sure that he had swapped both of our notes ( with slight of hand) to fakes. He had asked us to small change more 100 Lira notes but we didn't have anymore change , so it could have been worse.

The many taxi drivers we used were lovely , it was just this one who tarnished out last day in Istanbul. So beware of the different scams a small amount of drivers might try.

18.
Istanbul culture
Dec 19, 2018, 3:23 PM

Hi I am. Planning to visit Turkey and wanted to find out about the type of people in the country. I'm a South African but I look Indian. I did not enjoy Dubai as I found the people rather judgemental and unwelcoming of non Muslims in certain areas my experience . Is turkey an open minded country in terms of having a glass of wine or just being oneself?

19.

dress code in alanya?
Mar 10, 2019, 6:48 PM

Out of interest, I have been googling a 'dress-code' in alanya in order to see if such a thing actually exists. I have seen multiple websites stating not to wear revealing clothes, e.g. one website said 'do not wear too bright or revealing clothes when you go for a walk.' The locals have quite strict rules when concerning clothes and look.' surely this is a bit extreme, i've never been to turkey but after seeing photos of tourists in alanya they all seem to be wearing shorts and a strappy top or something along those lines. I understand 'beachwear' is not widely

acceptable in restaurants which is obviously understandable but can anyone enlighten me as to whats acceptable in general? is it really that strict or are they laid back?

20.

Clothing in Istanbul
Mar 11, 2019, 3:45 AM

Hi everyone I'm going to Istanbul for the day in August and I'm considering what to wear. Long sleeve dress and head scarf was on the cards but I'm thinking about my other half too. I know their culture is based around women's clothing however I don't want him to stick out like a sore thumb and anyone to think we're disresepctfuly of their culture any ideas?

21.

Evening safe for solo mature lady
Mar 10, 2019, 4:46 PM

I will be Istanbul for 4 days in mid-September and want to maximize my stay seeing and experiencing as much as possible. I will be visiting the main attractions in the daytime to see inside places like the Blue Mosque and Hagia Sophia but would also like to see them from the outside in the early evening to take photos. Staying in the Sultanahmet area so easy walking distance to many of the attractions, but I'm happy to take taxis to and from my hotel if that's advised. And if I got a taxi to the Galata Tower area would that be ok to walk around the well light shopping area in the evenings on my own. I would also like to do an evening Bosphorus Dinner Cruise would this be best with an organized tour with hotel pickup and drop off, and as a solo lady would this even be possible or do you need to be a couple to do the dinner cruise. Any advice would be appreciated, thanks.

22.

Is Turkey safe to travel in 2019?
Jan 28, 2019, 3:36 AM

Hello everyone,

My husband and I we are in our early 30's, Sri Lankans and planning to visit Turkey in mid-April 2019 for about a week. I would really appreciate if you could let us know if Turkey is safe to travel given the escalated political unrest in the country? Tips on do's and dont's are also highly appreciated.

23.

Why the gov travel warning against Istanbul and Ankara?
Jul 15, 2018, 11:43 PM

Istanbul is one of the great cities that I have yet to visit. And I have always wanted to see it.

But the Australian government currently has a travel warning "reconsider your need to travel" against Istanbul, Ankara and south-east region near Syria, Iran and Iraq. And "High Degree of Caution" for everywhere else. Now I can understand the last bit but Istanbul?!?

What is the situation there at the moment? What are we worried about - in just those cities?! The Australian government website just says: "Think seriously about whether you need to travel here due to the high level of risk".

24.

Is Izmir always like this?
Jun 25, 2018, 6:30 AM

- Cab driver would only interact with male traveling companion (even though I was the one requesting the stop).

- Pervasive (and let's be honest, creepy) staring of men on the street.

- Some random woman at the train station yelling at me (unprovoked)

I've been to Ephesus before (via Kushadasu) and thought it was worth it to come back, but the feeling is completely different than it was three years ago. I've never felt uncomfortable in Turkey until now, and I am regretting this entire vacation.

25.

Safety in Cappadocia early 2018
Feb 25, 2018, 8:24 AM

Hi, can someone who had very recently (say Jan or Feb 2018) traveled to Cappadocia please advise on the general feel of safety & tension in this region, given its 'closer proximity' to Syrian border with the war still going on there, than say obviously Istanbul. This is much appreciated. Thank you.

26.

Woman travelling alone in Şanlıurfa
May 27, 2018, 2:32 PM

Hi there,

I'm 23 and female and hoping to travel to Şanlıurfa in a few weeks! I speak a little Turkish and have travelled alone in Van and Istanbul before (and with a friend in Kars and Izmir) but was wondering if anyone had any experiences of travelling alone as a woman in Şanlıurfa? I imagine it's much more conservative than those places. Thank you!

27.

Where to visit in turkey
Feb 16, 2019, 3:32 PM

Looking for an all inclusive holiday up to £1000pp.

Is May a good time to visit?

Is turkey safe

Best areas to visit?

Weather

28.

Single Female Traveller in Istanbul Easter 2019
Feb 26, 2019, 8:22 PM

Hi folks, I'm a professional middle-aged woman of colour planning to travel from western Europe to Istanbul during Easter 2019 for 5 or 6 days and then head to Cappadocia for 3 or 5 days. I have wanted to get to Istanbul for 10 years and now feels like the time. I have travelled to Turkish beach resorts on numerous occasions and do really enjoy that aspect of Turkey.

Whilst in Istanbul, I'm likely to stay in Sultanahmet area as this is easy access to the key sites.

Please may I have your honest opinion about travelling there my own and getting around the city to see the sites.

On the other hand I have considered buying a hotel package that includes a local guide. This service would be available all day until about 6pm when I would be "returned to hotel reception". I feel a bit uncertain about this option as I do like my own space as well.

I'm also a bit of a night owl and enjoy things like eating out in the evening, listening to live indigenous music and seeing artistic performances etc. I was wondering if I would be safe on my own in the evening? I have seen info online about not safe being out after 10pm??

It would be a crying shame to have to shelter in the hotel restaurant all evening. It is also great to meet local people just to get a real feel for the place.

Thank you in advance for your helpful advice.

29.

Is Istanbul - and Turkey in general - safe for Americans?
Mar 3, 2019, 8:54 PM

(There is another forum question on this topic but it's a decade old.) Currently, Turkey is on the US State Dept 'Reconsider Travel' list. I'm not sure how seriously to take this warning. It may refer to just the southern area near Syria. My husband has a business trip likely to Istanbul and it's a part of the world I've always wanted to see. What are your thoughts?

30.

Is the City of Hatay in Turkey Safe for a female traveller
Mar 1, 2019, 6:18 PM

I am planning a trip to the city of Hatay in Turkey and I am concerned about my safety due to the proximity with Syria. Any advice will be appreciated. I am also looking to connect with local farmers figs/ olive in the Aegean Region of Turkey

Thanks

31.

Taxi scam
Feb 27, 2019, 3:40 PM

Hi all,

I've just come back to Canada from Turkey & Israel trip. I did enjoy Istanbul so far but I was really disappointed about the dishonesty of Istanbul taxi drivers. On my very last day in Istanbul, after a visit at Grand Bazaar, my 2 girl friends & I, took a taxi from Grand Bazaar to Taksim square. Normally, it costs only around 20-25 Turksih Lira. We got in the taxi, asked him about the price. He said "it's the busiest time in Istanbul so it all depends on the traffic.

So the price will be based on the taximeter". Ok! we agreed because we saw him turn on the taximeter. But we were so naive because there were something fishy on his taximeter. With this short distance (3km), he charged us 140 Turkish Lira (around 27usd). We refused to pay this amount but he was so aggressive & violent. He wanted to beat us up, we were very shocked & didn't want any trouble so we paid the required amount. But we keep a very bad image about Istanbul people. We told to ourselves we would never come back again to Turkey. Never!

My friend & I were lucky to take the pictures of that driver & his taxi. This website doesn't allow me to join these pics. But if someone needs them, I can send by private message.

*B.2.: TripAdvisor Data Coded*

| Open Code | Axial Code |
|---|---|
| Personal Safety, Gender | Concern |
| Scams, Gender | |
| Security | |
| Security, Politics | |
| Attitude, Religion | Conflict |
| Clothing, Gender | |
| Politics, Attitude | |
| Attitude, Gender | Critique |
| Politics | |
| Scams | |