

Social Media and Destination Branding in Tourism: A Systematic Review of the Literature

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Abstract: Under the impact of technological innovations, particularly the Internet, ways of communication have been changing. In fact, social media has been offering virtual communities and networks that enable the creation and dissemination of information, ideas, interests, and other forms of expression. Furthermore, it clearly plays an important role in the communication strategy of the various stakeholders of the tourism industry. It is vital to create and maintain destination branding not only traditionally but also in the virtual society. This study conducted a systematic review of the literature in order to synthesize the contributions of scholars within the field of place branding and social media, explore current lines of inquiry, and propose avenues for future research. The findings pointed out that there has been a steady extension of the number of the related publications during the last 11 years. Multiple tourist destinations and platforms are included in the research, which leads to a better understanding of different points of view. A total of 114 English-language peer-reviewed academic journal articles are included in this review and categorized into five key themes, examining: (1) destination brand strategy, (2) user-generated content, (3) cognitive dimensions, (4) affective dimensions, and (5) behavioural dimensions. This study also outlines some future research trends.

Keywords: social media; destination branding; place branding; city branding; Twitter; Facebook; literature review



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1. Introduction

It is undisputed that there are significant changes in communication due to the Internet and social networks [1]. Researchers, as well as practitioners, draw their attention to enquiring about how digital communication shapes consumer behavior and how organizations can take advantage of Internet and social networks to achieve their goals. In a world of digital connectivity, the tourism industry and travel businesses have been investing in social media platforms in order to obtain more effective and extensive advertising and marketing [2]. The power of a single click on these social networks is to reach a broader audience [3]; in the end, it has an incredible impact on the destination [4]. The content published on social media platforms connects with potential audiences and encourages them to warm up to a place [5]. In addition, stronger relationships with customers are built through interaction options such as sharing, responding to comments or questions, etc. [6]. Social media, therefore, focuses on connecting with audiences or customers to better understand the brand. Moreover, social media provide the most cost-effective and varied way of destination marketing. They are also beneficial for economic growth.

Worldwide, tourism is an important component of the world's economy, driving a nation's economy and is one of the main sources of foreign exchange revenue in many countries. In order to attract more and more tourists, new residents, investors, and other stakeholders, tourist destinations around the world have begun to make locations more recognizable [7]. Destination branding is the basis of marketing strategies and the most important marketing tool in the tourism sector for shaping the images of the places in the minds of potential tourists and other stakeholders by highlighting the exclusiveness

of these locations [8]. It is important to keep in mind that destination branding, or place branding, is complex and plays an increasingly important role in both local and business marketing strategies serving the tourism population of the region [9].

Digital strategies and tools to promote destinations are expected to be considered in future research into destination brand development. In addition, it is undisputed that social networks play an important role in destination branding. Since 2011, several publications have been published in the field of tourism and hospitality that examine branding and social media. Although there are several articles that reviewed city branding [10], destination branding [11], and place and destination branding [12], no review study has yet focused on both concepts simultaneously—social media and destination branding in hospitality and tourism. In the 2000s, literature reviews on the concept of “branding” in hospitality, travel and tourism started, and these research projects paid more attention to the relationship with place marketing [13], or concentrated on the perspective of destination management organizations [14], marketing [15], internal stakeholders [16], practitioners [17], or tourists’ perspective on co-creation in branding [18]. However, it is better to have a comprehensive understanding from the perspective of both supply and demand in destination branding in order to obtain the balance of the benefits for all. This fragmentation in literature reviews of place branding in hospitality and tourism makes it difficult for branding managers and academic scholars to identify theories and measure key factors related to this phenomenon in several subfields. Our work seeks to fill this gap by conducting a systematic review of the literature to provide a holistic understanding of destination branding on social networks. Specifically, the following research questions (RQ) drive the study:

RQ1. What is the development trend of destination branding and social media in the literature like?

RQ2. Which journals have published studies allowing one to understand destination branding in social media settings?

RQ3. What parts of the world are the most popular case studies in conducting the research related to destination branding and social media?

RQ4. What methods were used to research destination branding and social media?

RQ5: Which social media platforms are popular enough to be considered for an analysis of destination branding studies?

RQ6: What are the key research themes for destination branding and social media in the literature?

RQ7: What are the future research directions that arise from this review?

Therefore, the objective of this article is to synthesize the contributions of scholars within this field, explore current lines of inquiry, and propose avenues for future research. In other words, this study is expected to make some contributions in the following aspects: (1) pointing out the growth of scientific research on destination branding and social media since 2011 until 2021, as well as indicating the part of the world most contributing in terms of research on this topic, and also distinguishing journals that are prominent in the research on this subject, as they are important factors in the knowledge base; (2) summarizing several significant current issues of the literature regarding tourism destination branding and social media; and (3) presenting research gaps for future studies.

2. Materials and Methods

In order to explore the international literature on destination branding and social media, and according to Tranfiled et al. (2003) [19], a systematic review was performed across two world-leading and competing citation academic databases, namely the Web of Science and SCOPUS. Our systematic review is based on the guidelines for “Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses” (PRISMA) [20] and aims to systematically evaluate the prominent research directions in these areas (Appendix A). In 2022, the authors conducted the final query to search the literature combining both fields: i.e., destination branding and social media. The first one was based on the following terms referring to destination: nation, city, region, country, and place. The second one was based

on the following terms: social media, Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, YouTube, TripAdvisor, and TikTok. Table 1 presents the queries used and the search result. Keywords such as social media, destination branding, place branding, city branding, nation branding, region branding, and country branding were searched within the title, abstract, and keyword fields. The search included only articles published before 2022 in peer-reviewed academic journals, excluding the following categories [19]: non-English language articles, non-peer reviewed publications (books, chapters, conference proceedings), and non-refereed publications.

Table 1. Searching queries on Scopus and the Web of Science, and the search results.

Database	Searching Query	Number of Results
SCOPUS	(TITLE-ABS-KEY ("destination brand *" OR "nation * brand *" OR "cit * brand *" OR "region * brand *" OR "countr * brand *" OR "place brand *") AND TITLE-ABS-KEY ("social media" OR "Facebook" OR "Instagram" OR "Twitter" OR "Youtube" OR "TripAdvisor" OR "Tiktok")) AND (PUBYEAR < 2022) AND LANGUAGE (english) AND DOCTYPE (ar) AND SUBJAREA (busi)	111
Web of Science	TS = ("destination brand *" OR "nation * brand *" OR "cit * brand *" OR "region * brand *" OR "countr * brand *" OR "place brand *") AND TS = ("social media" OR "Facebook" OR "Instagram" OR "Twitter" OR "Youtube" OR "TripAdvisor" OR "Tiktok") And Refined by: Document Types: Articles, Languages: English, Web of Science Categories: Hospitality Leisure Sport Tourism. Excluded by: Publication Years: 2022	86

* represents for the matches any sequence of characters.

There were 86 and 111 English-written papers found in the Web of Science and Scopus databases, respectively; the first one was published in 2011. The search results were exported into RIS files, which were imported to the Endnote software. The function "Find Duplicates" was used to remove 49 duplicate records. Moreover, we manually discarded another 13 duplicates due to the accented letter in the authors' name. After excluding the duplicates, the quick scan on the titles and journals was conducted in order for unrelated records to be removed. In fact, the *Journal of Teaching in International Business* (1), the *British Food Journal* (1), *Engineering Management in Production and Services* (1), *Industrial Marketing Management* (1), the *Journal of Business and Retail Management Research* (1), the *Journal of International Marketing* (1), the *Journal of Interactive Marketing* (1), and *Qualitative Marketing and Economics* (1) were all excluded from this study, as they do not focus mainly on hospitality and tourism research. Three book chapters were also removed from the references.

The next stage was screening the articles' full-length to confirm their suitability for this review; there are several publications that did not lead the authors to any conclusion on the relationship between destination branding and social media, and so they were removed. In order to ensure the accuracy and objectivity of the article assignment, two authors independently reviewed all articles included in the sample and eventually, 114 articles met the identified research objectives. The authors maintained regular consultation and thoroughly discussed the examined papers.

The next step was to identify the provisional themes; each article was allocated to one of them on the basis of the title, abstract, keywords, and the main text. The idea was to identify themes referring to the common distinction of three perspectives in destination branding literature already mentioned in the introduction (supply, demand, and mixed). Each co-author undertook an independent allocation of papers to these themes, prior to a discussion on the allocations and the appropriateness of the themes.

Initially, the papers were allocated to one or more themes. Later, in the final iteration and after a discussion, the decision was taken to allocate each paper to a single 'dominant theme'. The identified themes were as follows: DMOs' Destination Branding Strategy (DBS) (36 papers); Cognitive dimensions (CDs) (27 papers); Affective dimensions (Ads)

(10 papers); Behavioural dimensions (BDs) (15 papers); and User-generated content (UGC) (23 papers).

3. Results

This section presents the results of our review and focuses on several themes. We first look at a general number of produced publications and mention the most influential journals concerning destination branding as well as social media. We then explore the methodology used by various research projects into this subject, followed by the most commonly analysed threads and various types and dimensions of the included contents.

3.1. Annual Scientific Production

The first document on destination brand and social media found in two data-bases—i.e., Scopus and the Web of Sciences—was “Tourist-created content: Rethinking destination branding”, by María Munar A., published in 2011 in the *International Journal of Culture, Tourism and Hospitality Research* [21]. Figure 1 shows the number of publications collected on destination branding and social media between 2011 and 2021. The figures show that research on this subject has been steadily increasing over the past few years.

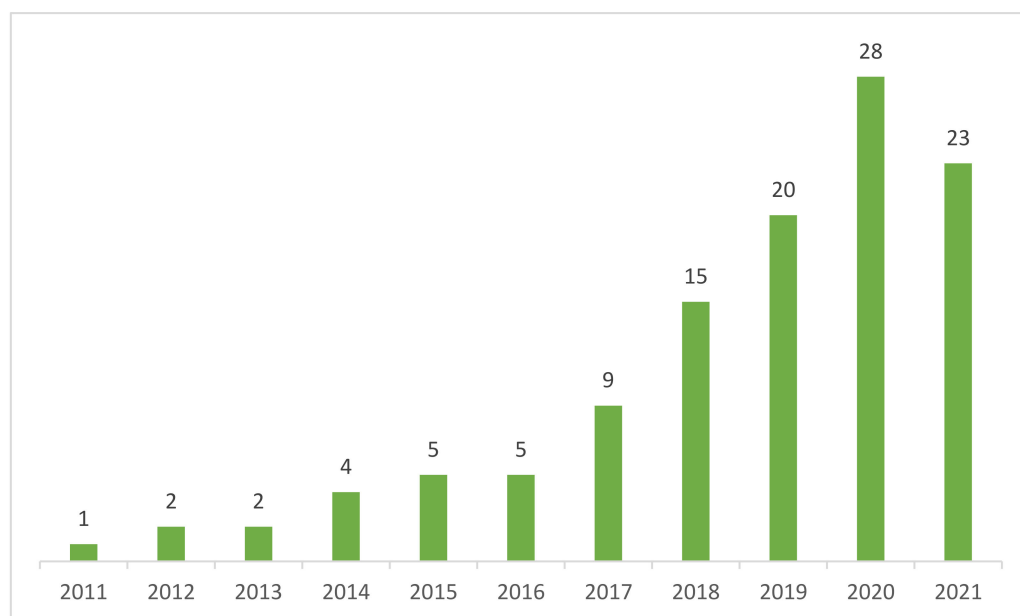


Figure 1. Number of articles published between 2011 and 2021.

The publication of scientific research on destination branding and social media increases slightly during the first six years. Since then, the number of publications grew significantly. In fact, publication numbers increased almost twice from five in 2016 to nine in 2017. The peak of the trend is also recorded in 2020—28 articles. A drop in 2021 is also recorded, with 23 published articles. In brief, trends in the past few years have shown that interest in the subject of scientific research has always grown.

3.2. The Most Influential Journals

The topic of destination branding and social media is usually published in journals specializing in the tourism knowledge area. Table 2 shows the distribution of publications across the top 11 journals. The *Journal of Destination Marketing and Management* sits at the first position on this list, with 16 articles (14.04%), followed by *Place Branding and Public Diplomacy* (13 articles) (11.4%), and *Tourism Management* takes the next place (9 articles) (7.89%). According to the journal ranking (SJR—Scimago Journal & Country Rank) in the field of tourism, leisure, and hospitality management, *Tourism Management* places at the first position, while the *Journal of Destination Marketing and Management* takes the 13th

place in the ranked list. The *Place Branding and Public Diplomacy* journal belongs to the subject of business, management, and accounting, categorised into marketing and strategy and management marketing at the 108th position. Therefore, it is concluded that *Tourism Management* is the most influential journal in the research field of destination branding and social media due to its impact factors and number of publications. We believe that knowing the most influential and relevant journals can help researchers identify the best channels to display their research results and conveniently distribute them.

Table 2. The distribution of publications across journals.

Journal	No	%
<i>Journal of Destination Marketing & Management</i>	16	14.04
<i>Place Branding & Public Diplomacy</i>	13	11.40
<i>Tourism Management</i>	9	7.89
<i>Journal of Place Management & Development</i>	5	4.39
<i>African Journal of Hospitality, Tourism & Leisure</i>	4	3.51
<i>Cities</i>	4	3.51
<i>Journal of Vacation Marketing</i>	4	3.51
<i>Tourism Management Perspectives</i>	4	3.51
<i>Current Issues in Tourism</i>	3	2.63
<i>Information Technology and Tourism</i>	3	2.63
<i>International Journal of Tourism Cities</i>	3	2.63
Others	50	43.86
	114	100

3.3. Parts of the World which Contribute the Most

Figure 2 indicates that research into destination branding links to continents with important roles for tourism, which has a great impact on the development of its economy. In terms of volume of publications, Europe is the most influential continent, followed by Asia. We have been witnessing the remarkable development of the tourism industry in Asia and Europe, with many prominent destination brands. Moreover, it should be noted that there are several scientific publications in Australia and Africa in this field. There are 13 papers on conducted studies across the continents during the last 11 years.

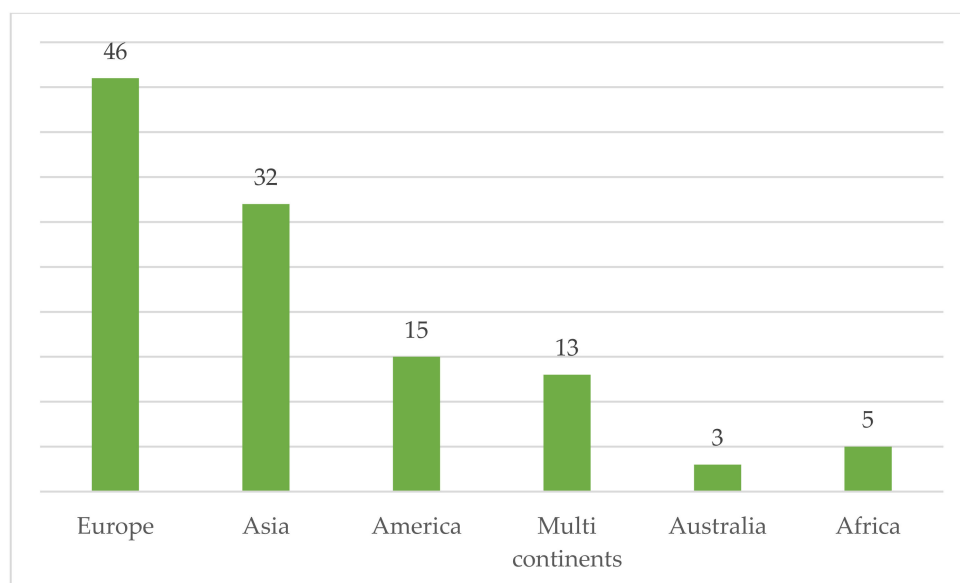


Figure 2. The volume of publications categorized in different continents.

Destination branding is a concept related to geographic location in the context of tourism. Figure 3 presents the volume of publications per year categorized into five

continents where the destinations were chosen for case studies between 2011 and 2021. In terms of nations, Figure 4 shows the distributions of destination cases with the number of publications. It can be seen that Spain and its destinations are the most popular cases for research on place branding and social media. In 2020, a considerable number of papers on the American branding on social media was visible. Moreover, we include the number of comparative studies conducted cross the countries (Figure 5). In the last two years, cases from Asia recorded an increase in research of destination branding and social media. In fact, China and India are the emerging destinations in this research field.

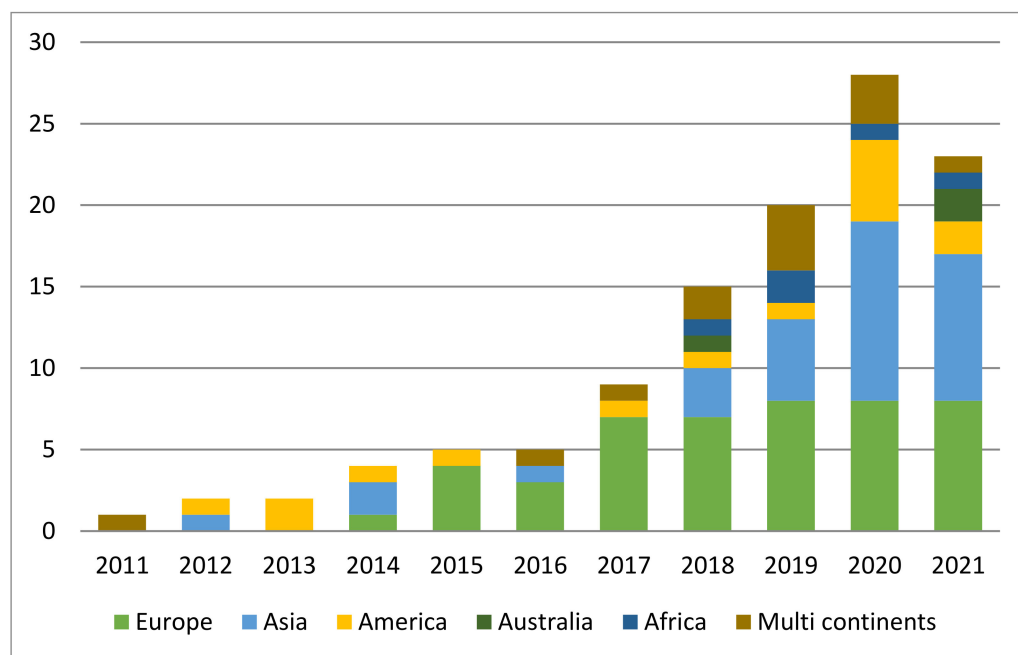


Figure 3. The number of articles published from 2011 to 2021 categorized according to the geographical distribution of cases.

3.4. Methodological Characteristics

There is a variety of methodologies and sampling strategies employed. This section examines each of the most prominent research methods used in the area under scrutiny and points out how they were implemented. It is clear that the included publications employed multiple approaches to obtain research objectives. Within the articles studied, quantitative methods such as content analysis and surveys were identified as the most popular research methods (see Figure 6), with 68 papers (59.65%); they will be briefly discussed in the following section. This was followed by qualitative research papers (24 articles) and mixed methods papers (21). There is only one research using the financial base metric to evaluate the effectiveness of destination branding on social media.

Over the past 11 years, the most common methodology used for research into destination brands and social media has been content analysis, which led the ranking in terms of the number of uses in the last three years, i.e., the period of the pandemic. In 2020, many researchers also collected data through questionnaires. The case study is a method used in combination with others among our collected publications. It is also clear that the interview as a research method was used less frequently during the period of social distancing.

3.4.1. Content Analysis

The most common method during the last 11 years was content analysis (Figure 7), with a diversity of data types, including textual, visual, audio, etc. Due to the availability of user-generated content on social media, many studies were conducted to determine the two-way communication between DMOs, tourists, residents, and other stakeholders.

The researchers preferred to collect data from different platforms to obtain a complete understanding.

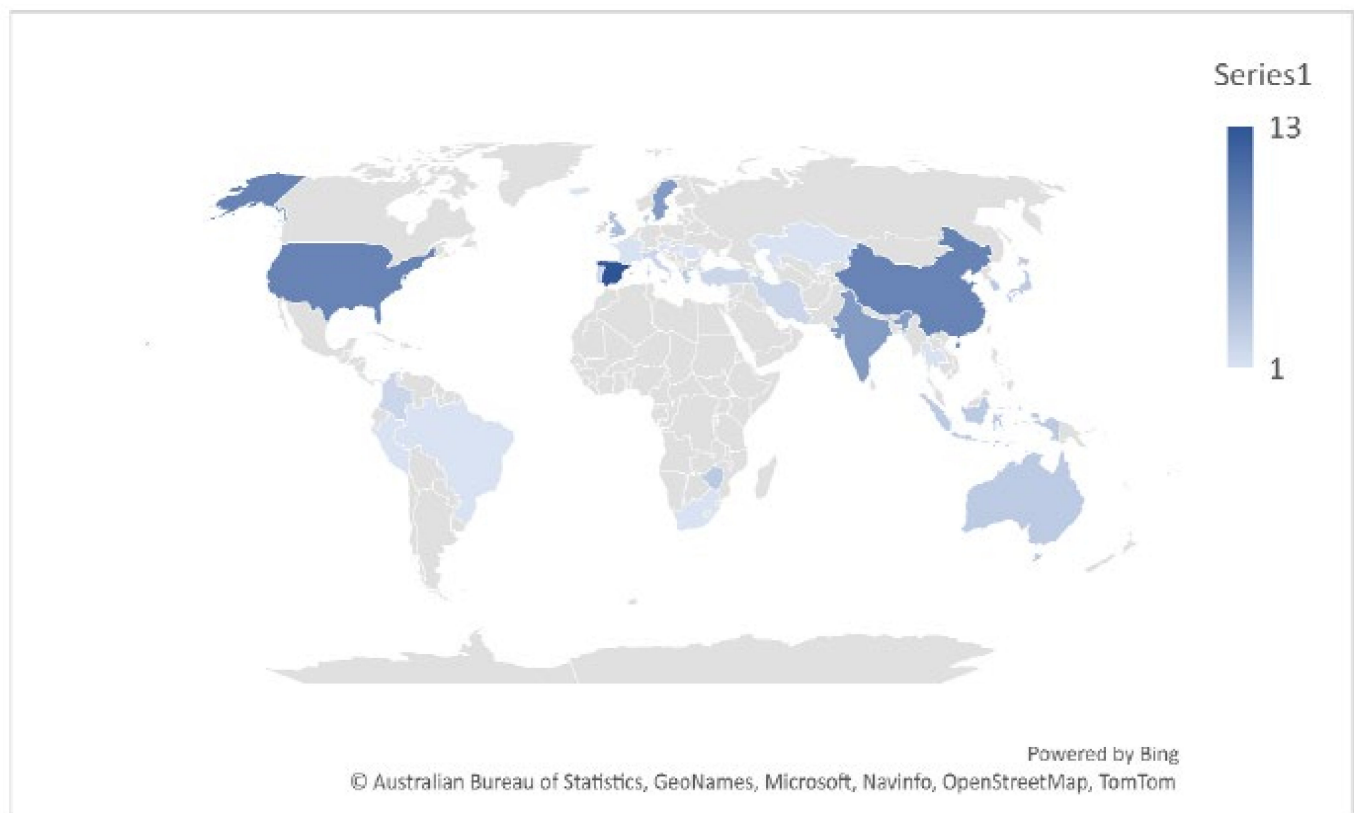


Figure 4. The map of the case studies.

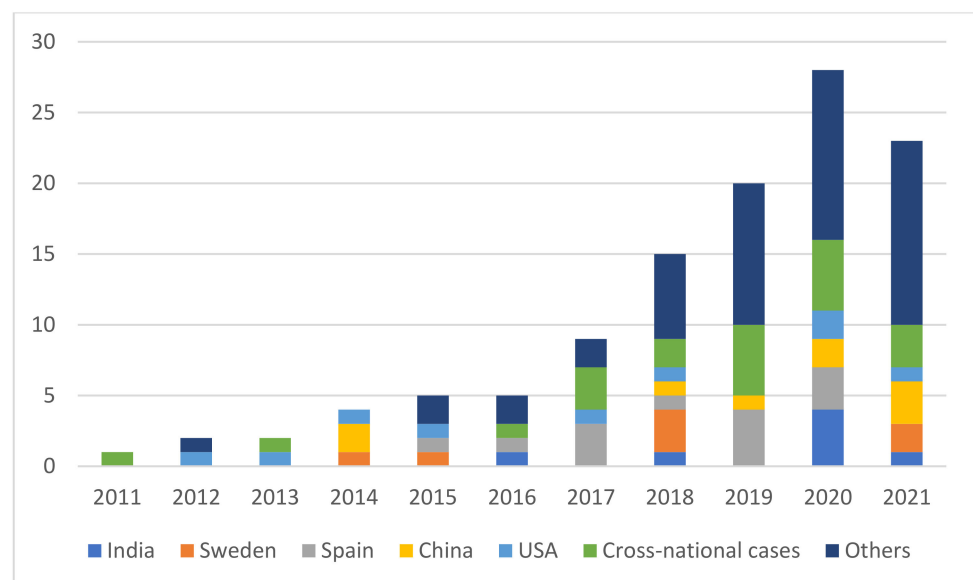


Figure 5. Distribution of destination cases across countries.

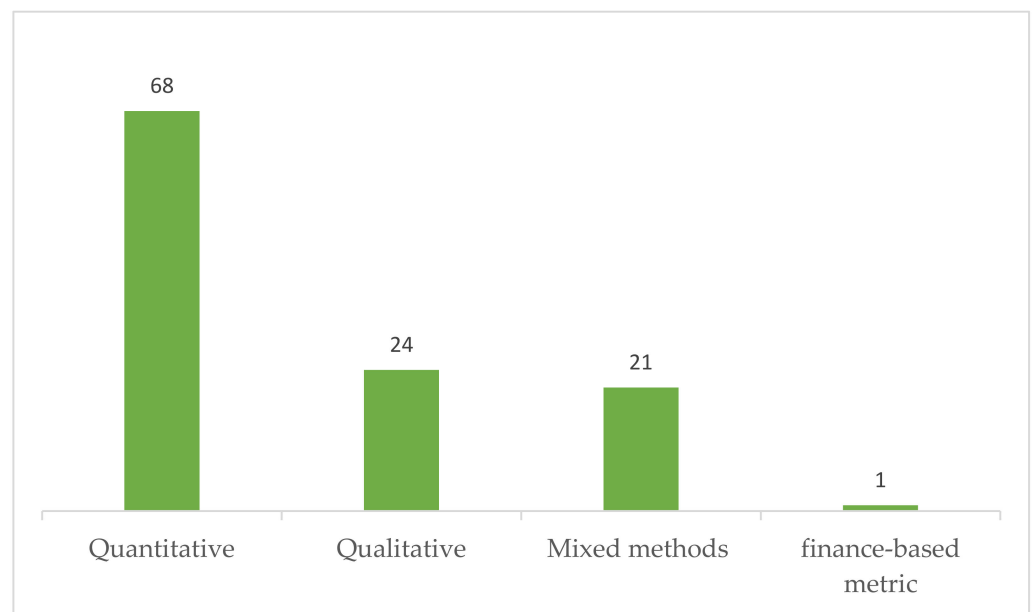


Figure 6. The volume of publications in terms of research methods.

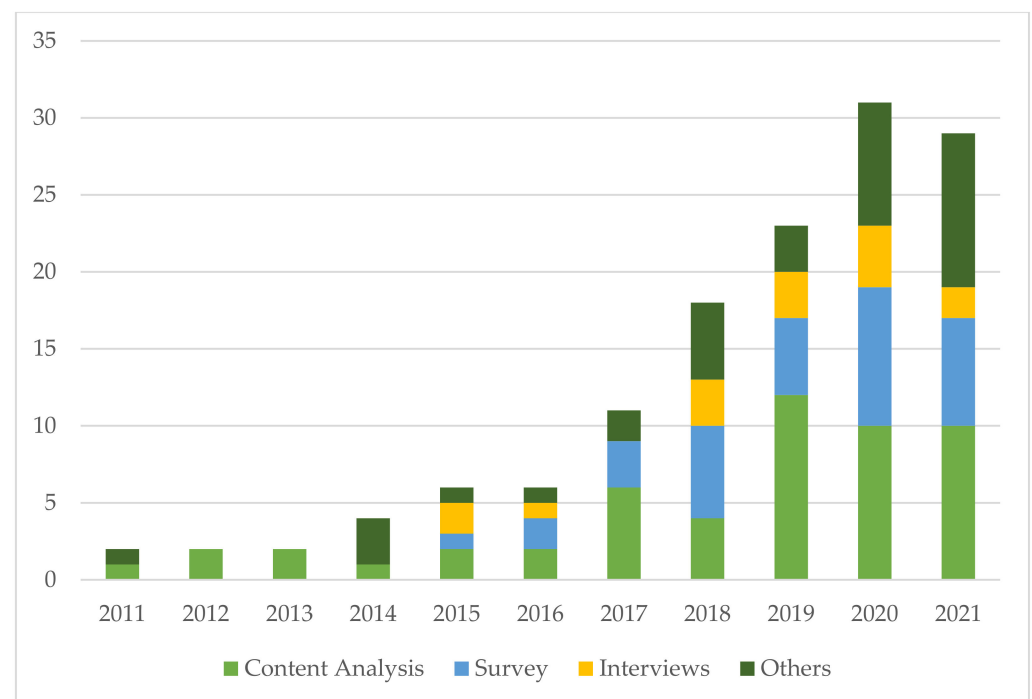


Figure 7. The number of publications and used methodologies categorized each year between 2011 and 2021.

3.4.2. Survey

This research methodology is mainly used to examine the perspective of stakeholders related to the destination brand and social media. Such an approach facilitates a quantitative exploration of factors such as social media usage and behavior, attitudes towards social media marketing and advertising, perceived image of the destination brand and the intention behind the visit. There are different types of participants recruited to share their opinions on related issues of the studies that could be listed as ‘domestic and/or international tourists’ [22–26]; ‘Internet over 18 users’ [27]; ‘generation Z residents’ [28].

3.4.3. Interviews

Mostly, those of the reviewed studies that investigated the perspective of DMOs had conducted interviews with the directors of each social media team [29]; people involved in the dissemination of national content, for various purposes, such as tourism promotion, export promotion, and the attraction of investment [30]; place brand managers [31,32]; employees in the marketing communications departments of operators in the accommodation, travel, and resort sectors [33]; and marketing directors. In addition to this, individual interviews were conducted with consumers/tourists [34,35] in order to complement the results of the content analyses.

3.5. Social Media Platforms

Figure 8 lists the social media platforms that were used in the collected publications. The most popular social media platforms include Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram. This was followed by a well-known travel guide and research website, Trip Advisor, which helps travelers gather information, publish reviews on interactive travel forums, and provide travel advice. The next position belongs to the world's biggest online video sharing website, namely YouTube. Several official tourism websites were also used as a source to collect data. There are several less common online communities, which were also regarded by the researchers in terms of destination branding on social media, e.g., Flickr, online forums, LinkedIn, WeChat, Tiktok, Telegram, travel blogs, etc. It is worth considering the popularity and availability of each of the social media platforms in different countries, as many popular websites and apps are blocked in some places around the world. Moreover, there are several specific social media platforms developed to serve only a certain nationality, e.g., WeChat in China.

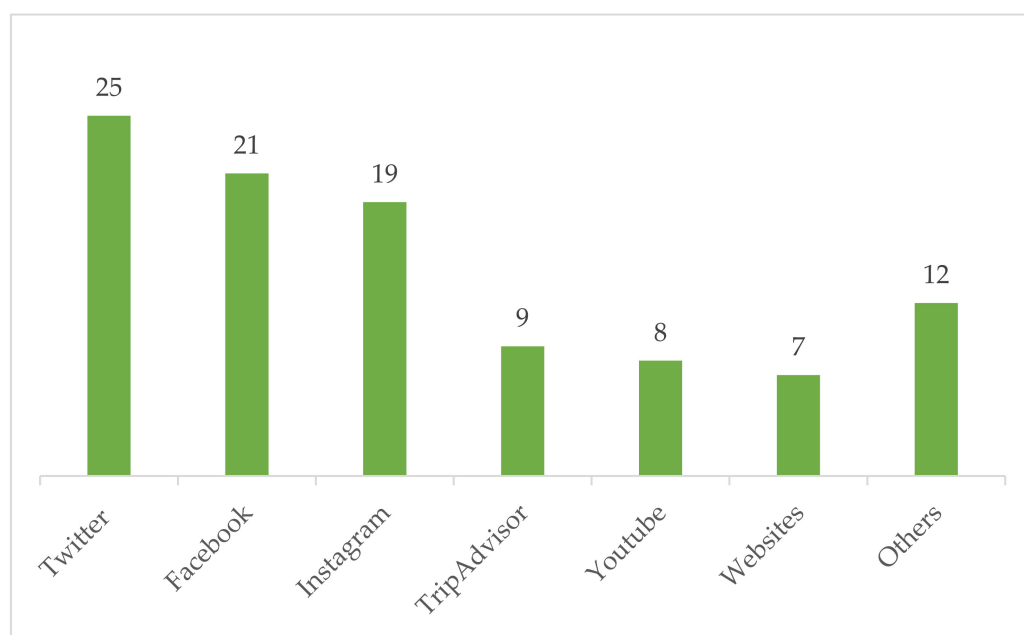


Figure 8. The number of studies on social platforms used to collect data for content analysis research into destination brands and social media.

3.6. Research Themes

The analysis procedure described in Section 2 has led us to identifying the research themes. The focus of this task was the articles' findings and contributions. The authors maintained regular consultation and thoroughly discussed the examined papers. Five research themes of destination branding and social media were investigated throughout the literature. There are three literature review papers excluded from the following categories. Figure 9 shows the key pillars for our conceptual framework, including destination brand-

ing strategy, user-generated content, and cognitive, affective, and behavioural dimensions, all of which are described below.

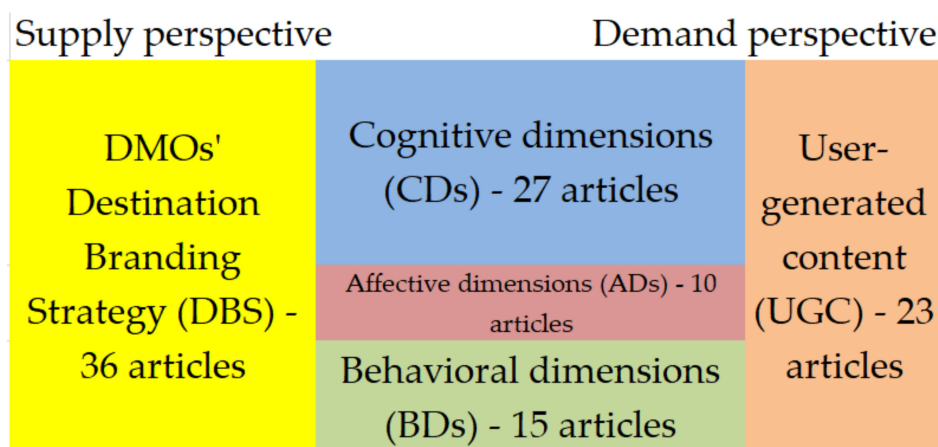


Figure 9. The main research themes of destination branding and social media.

3.6.1. DMOs' Destination Branding Strategy (DBS)

It has been highlighted that local government can play the crucial role in destination branding by engaging in the brand co-creation process with important stakeholders such as hotels and restaurants located at the destinations. In fact, DMOs and tourism industry need to develop messaging strategies using various communication channels to reduce tourist risk perception. Consequently, DMOs must consider strategies that offer opportunities for various social media stakeholders to be involved in the co-creation of destination brand narratives online.

The study of the branding of places began to explore the opportunities for accessing empirical materials and empirical research offered by social media platforms [36]. Firstly, there is the question of whether social media play an important role in combining national identity, so commercial brand campaigns become national brand campaigns [37]. The festival format has been increasingly employed by city managers as a strategic tool to develop tourism and attract visitors, thus building or enhancing place brands [38]. Moreover, the study by Dimitrovski [39] pointed out that international apps tend to not only highlight functional dimensions but also enhance the awareness of the importance of social media to tourism. It would be beneficial for certain applications to provide additional opportunities for users to connect with social media applications such as Instagram and Snapchat. Furthermore, the communication of destination brands has not yet been fully standardized or professionally designed, online tools (websites, social media, and mobile applications) are used tactically and not strategically, and social media and official website use is regarded as more useful by DMOs managers than mobile applications [40]. It is also proposed to incorporate absorption capacity as a means to improve the combination of knowledge and brand equity gathered by managers [31].

3.6.2. Cognitive Dimensions (CDs)

The cognitive domain is a component of the customer experience that relates to the individual's belief or knowledge about an object. Regarding destination branding and social media, the researchers draw the attention to several variables, such as brand awareness, perceived brand quality, or brand image. In fact, they are exploring the positive impact of social media intensity on brand awareness [24], especially in the era of post-truth news [33]. There is also a strong relationship between the image of the consumer brand and the perception of the consumer brand [41]. The relationship between the experience of destination brands online and the authenticity of destination brands constitutes the research objectives of the studies by Jiménez-Barreto et al. [42] as well as Khan and Fatma [43].

3.6.3. Affective Dimensions (ADs)

The emotional components represent the values and personal meanings of tourists, which derive from attributes. Attitude is a general assessment based on attributes and emotional feelings that is the basis of future actions and behaviours. Some [44] state that besides the pre-existing environmental, social, and cultural capital, the emotional capital of the destination brand is a new kind of capital, and should, therefore, be expressed in the destination brand. In social media, there are dimensions including excitement, sophistication, and competence is much more prominent than conventional research [22]. The study by other researchers [45] showed there is a significant difference in personality characteristics between promotional and brand customer messages. Moreover, others [46] showed that the strategy of communicating content did not take emotional values into account.

3.6.4. Behavioural Dimensions (BDs)

Some [27] proved that the motivation to visit a place is influenced by the sources of information that tourists consult via social media. Cognitive images are influenced by the motivation of travellers, and emotional images are influenced by cognitive images. Videos, photos, and stories generated by visitors on the destination's website may increase the intention of tourists to visit the destination. In addition, the pull-external (such as 'search for historic and cultural patrimonial') and push-internal (such as 'knowledge and seeing') motivations predict positive commitment, popularity, commitment, and vitality [47]. Others [48] have determined that destination brand authenticity and destination brand self-congruence positively influence destination brand engagement, the intention to revisit and recommend, as well as that destination brand engagement mediates this relationship.

3.6.5. User-Generated Content (UGC)

A wide range of stakeholders participated in social media's target branding and offered unique analytical opportunities because users freely shared contents on various topics. Online social networks offer opportunities for individuals who have not previously participated in institutional efforts (such as national brand) to be an important part of these efforts [49]. Social media users include residents, local tourists, foreign tourists, local businesses, tourist operators, DMOs, non-visitors, potential visitors, and many others. All users of social media play a role of co-creators in branding together in the online environment. Thus, social media have become a powerful tool for the branding of destinations [50].

Some researchers [51] stated that consumer-generated videos do not have the same destination brand as destination-marketer-generated videos. Even though, the popular words used in the comments are similar in the case of consumer-generated content and in the case of marketing-generated content, the number of times these words have been used varies depending on the content produced by consumers versus marketers. The content generated by consumers has produced more negative or provocative words.

4. Discussion

While the first study on destination branding and social media only investigated the role of user-generated contents in destination branding via social media platforms, the related research themes were stable over the years. In the last three years, the number of research themes are stable at five, although the distribution of articles on each theme changed (Figure 10). In fact, the cognitive dimensions were less studied, but the behavioural ones attracted more interest from researchers and practitioners. These stakeholders also devoted their attention to destination branding strategy.

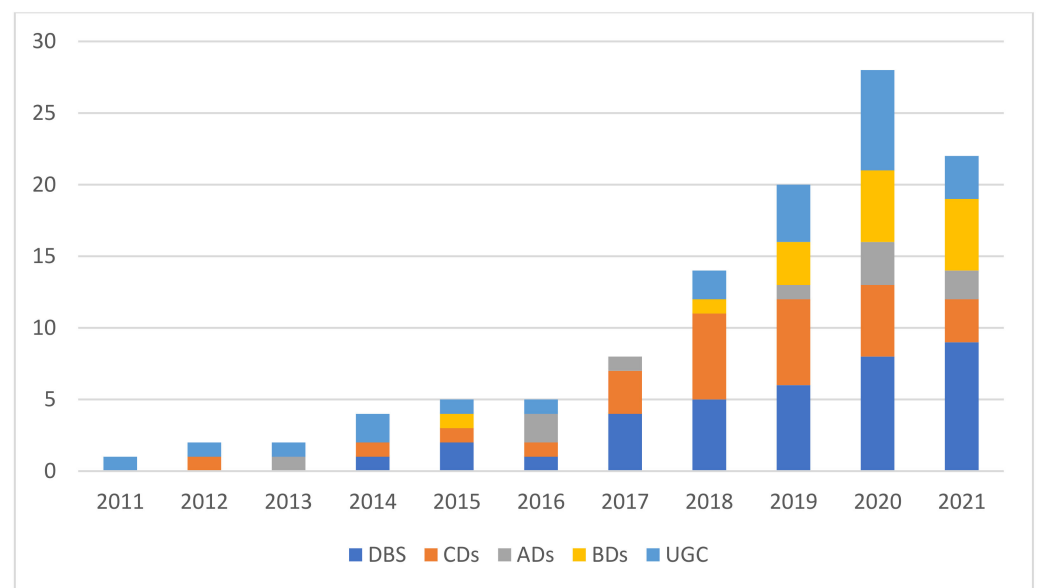


Figure 10. Distribution of each research themes during last 11 years.

We believe that owing to the ongoing technological innovation and changes of consumers' cognition, affection, and behaviour, destination branding and social media remain a controversial affair. This section of our paper presents areas of research to be deepened for a greater understanding of destination branding and social media with further developed related issues (Figure 11).

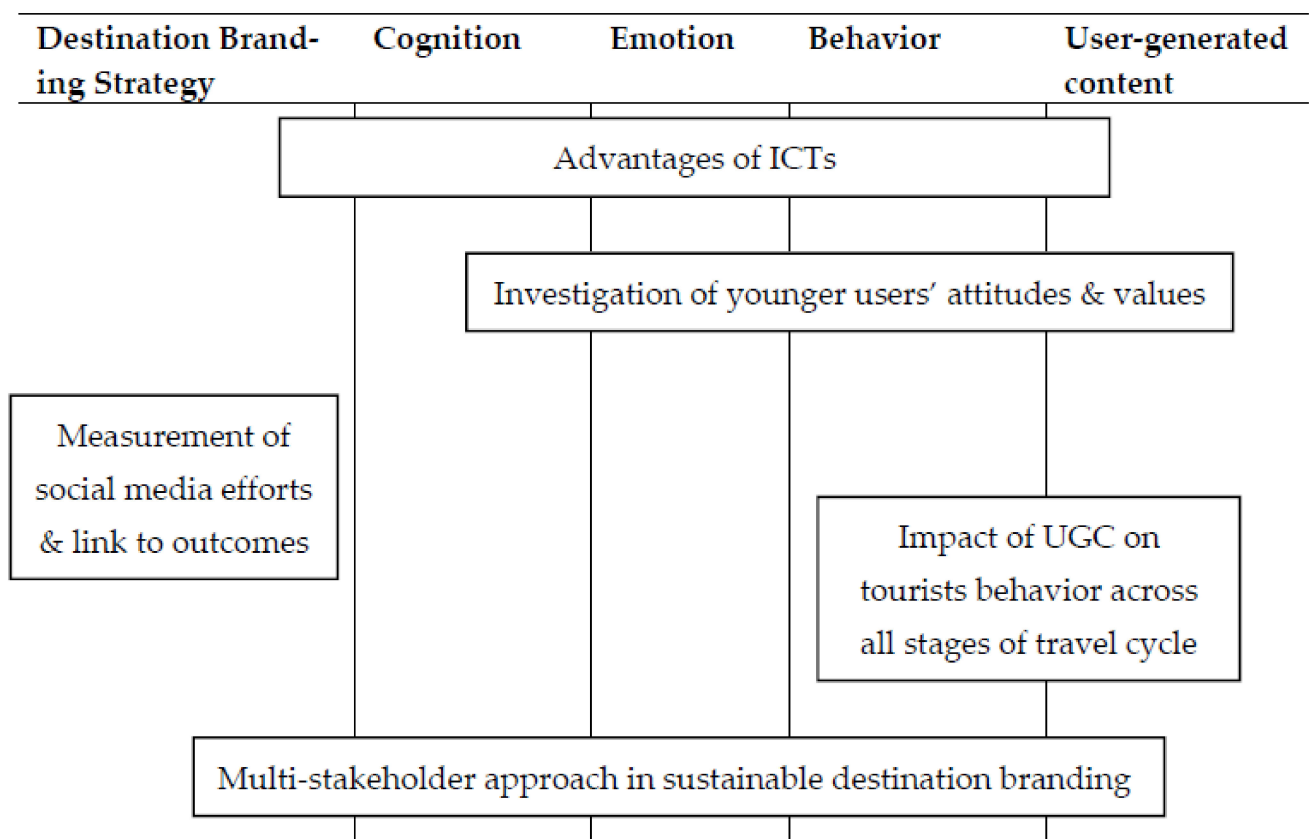


Figure 11. Avenues for future research.

4.1. Information and Technology Innovations

In order to achieve a key strategic aim of an efficient, responsible, and sustainable use of resources, in the smart tourism paradigm, tourism destinations promote appropriate practices and become co-directors, co-designers, and co-creators of tourism experiences. Other researchers [52] argue that tourism resources should be managed sustainably, and smart technology can contribute to social networking websites, which influences the adaptation of sustainable and responsible behaviour of tourists.

In their study, Avila-Robinson and Wakabayashi [53] observed the impact of social media, big data apps, smartphones, GPS technologies, and virtual reality on progress in the field of destination marketing and management. These technologies enable not only the quantification of subjective aspects (e.g., the emotions and perceptions of destination visitors), but also the ‘mining’ of previously unavailable data (e.g., visitor mobility and tracking). DMOs should use social media as a tool for facilitating decision-making and trip planning. The strategic management of communication on social media are increasingly important in the case of user-generated communication, and when it is viewed as more effective than traditional communication, it is obviously crucial to emphasize on social media [54].

It is worth considering the advantages of the Big Data and Deep Learning algorithm in order to maximise the sample size, increase the accuracy of research results, combine a diversity of data types in analysing, save time, etc. This study of Liu et al. (2020) [41] is a bridge between the literature on image extraction and machine learning, and brand literature proposes an approach to monitoring online brands and market intelligence and gathers consumer-generated images. Natural language processing (NLP) is a scientific field that describes the steps of computer recognition, interpretation, and reproduction of natural language structures. Linguistics is closely linked to mathematics and computer science. NLP is usually defined as a subcategory of artificial intelligence and language. Owing to this area, researchers are able to analyse the diversity of languages. Hence, a comprehensive knowledge about the international and domestic tourists’ perspectives on a certain destination branding on social media is obtained.

4.2. New-Generation Users

Young consumers are more motivated to create content about their experience than other aspects of their holidays. Luna-Cortés (2021) [55] concluded that Generation Y tourists may want to talk about emotions and feelings during vacations rather than about destinations. Therefore, when these generations of tourists perceive positive national brands and positive destination images, they create more content in social media. In addition, generation Z is the demographic group after generation Y and generation X. Gen Z is the first to have such easy access to Internet technology and to have had unprecedented technology in their education, thanks to the Web Revolution since the 1990s. This generation includes vigorous contributors and consumers of online contents, and creative and mash-up experts. They prefer to participate in online communication and maintain connectivity through technologies available at the fingers because they have strong gravitational bonds. It is pointed out that there is development of social media users, from consumer to content creator and influencer [56]. Moreover, Gretzel (2018) [57] suggests that tourism marketers can use influencers to reach targeted audiences. For example, travel bloggers reflect destination images projected by DMOs through social media channels. Public figures can be the association of brands in countries, which has an impact on the image of the country and, thus, on the knowledge of consumer brands about destination. Hence, destination managers should use the online personal brands and the virtual brand community of these young users to promote the development of sustainable brand places, in line with the new social environment of the autonomy of the inhabitants of rural tourism communities.

4.3. The Branding Strategy Effectiveness

Some [58] used the quantitative market value based on funds to evaluate the performance of the target. This is the only study that considered that the social media participation of a person has an effect—derived from the resulting social media sentiment—on the brand knowledge of consumers' destinations and, as a result, the influx of travellers to destinations and the value of the tourism market. There is no doubt about the economics-related advantages of using social media in destination branding, although the effectiveness of this marketing and branding tool has not been investigated yet.

4.4. Travel Cycle

In hospitality, travel, and tourism, scholars have spent not only time but also efforts to determine the decision-making process of consumers, figure out the push and pull factors impacting their decisions, what they expect or how they perceive tourism destination, and whether they are satisfied by the destination and are loyal to it. Recently, the development of information technologies, especially the Internet and social media, makes some changes in tourist experience and behaviour. Cybercitizens interact with online destination branding at various stages of travel: before, during, and after consumption. Therefore, it is necessary to develop methods of understanding and predicting these behaviours in the future performance of tourism companies and destinations. However, the perspectives on destination branding and social media along three main successive travel stages—namely pre-travel, during a travel, and post-travel—were not considered. This gap can be bridged by future research.

4.5. Sustainable Tourism

Regarding the elements of green and sustainability in branding strategies, there is a limited number of studies. Garay [59] points out that there is no explicit reference to soft cognitive variables, such as responsible tourism or sustainability. Moreover, we face a variety of crises, which require specific communication strategies. In fact, the study by Joseph (2021) [60] proved that there is no content focusing on the epidemic on social media pages. This is a strategy to project a target image consistent with the image depicted before the epidemic. Social media are an important means of communication for tourism traders in crisis times, and undoubtedly affecting tourists in a complex decision-making situation. In 2020, there has been only one publication—namely that by Sevin et al. (2020) [61]—which considered COVID-19. This number increased in 2021 [43–64]. It is worthwhile to investigate the importance of the concept of sustainable tourism in tourism marketing and social media.

5. Concluding Remarks

Although the interest of academics in social media destination branding is a relatively new phenomenon, the scientific production on this topic has enjoyed a significant growth since 2011 and reached its peak in 2020. There has been a rapid increase in scientific production on destination branding and social media since 2018. The small downs in 2021 could be due to the delay in registering the publications in the databases, and also due to the pandemic and quarantine, which are likely to lead to a slowdown of the process of research. The study of these aspects in depth can open up interesting research and debates.

It is also important to distinguish journals that are prominent in research on this subject, as it is important for the knowledge base. The field has been explored with a wide coverage in prominent journals on tourism in recent years. The fact is that articles on the destinations branding and social media are usually published in specialized journals in the fields of tourism and/or marketing. Unsurprisingly, the *Journal of Destination Marketing & Management* is the lead journal in terms of the number of articles published on destination branding in social media. Two journals *Place Brand and Public Diplomacy* and *Journal of Place Management and Development* keep maintaining their position in the list of topical journals [10,12].

Among the published articles, the majority of publications took the destinations in Europe to be the case studies. Spain and Sweden are the two most popular destination cases on this continent. They are followed by Asia, which is marked by a spectacular increase in two representatives, namely India and China. The USA is also considered to be an outstanding destination in research cases on the American continent.

The results of this literature review indicate that content analysis and survey were the most common methods used in research into destination branding and social media during the last 11 years. There is strong evidence that quantitative methods are the most popular research methods in this field. There is a variety of qualitative research run to indicate the interesting issues referring to destination branding in tourism and social media. Moreover, the mixed methods approach have also been used increasingly owing to its advantages for bringing understanding of the phenomenon [65]. The decrease in the employment of the methodology of interviews, especially face-to-face ones, is a consequence of the pandemic.

Regarding social media platforms, most of the reviewed papers investigated destination branding in relation to Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook. There is a diversity of digital platforms where the Internet surfers could search for travel information, share their experiences, and like or comment on the posted tourism-related online contents. Travel forums or virtual communities, e.g., TripAdvisor, also are travellers' favourite platforms, so not only scholars but also practitioners have paid more attention to research on these platforms. Which social media platform that is popular depends on several factors such as the policy of the nation, users' habits, etc. For example, WeChat is only used in China.

The inductive exploration results in identifying the five research themes included: destination branding strategy, cognitive dimensions, affective dimensions, behavioural dimensions, and user-generated content. This paper also determines that destination branding strategy and behavioural dimensions are increasingly important directions in terms of the number of publications, especially from 2017 to 2021. Besides, cognitive dimensions seem to have been less attractive in the last four years, when the number of related articles dropped. The number of papers researching affective dimensions and user-generated content peaked in 2019.

We have tried not only to translate the literature into a comprehensive framework in order to make possible a better understanding of the current research into the theme under scrutiny, but also to contribute some ideas of future research avenues, such as the advantages of ICTs, new-generation users, sustainability, effectiveness, and travel cycles.

This research suffers from the following limitations in spite of its contribution, as this kind of analysis relies on technical decisions such as choosing investigation fields, databases, or publication language, which may exclude relevant papers of the analysis. First, the inclusion of additional keywords, such as destination promotion, destination identity, place marketing (Lucarelli and Berg, 2011) would bring a better description of the full picture of destination branding. Additionally, even if only the highest quality papers were considered in our investigation, other works such as conference papers, book chapters, or PhD dissertations may give precious clues about future investigations trends. The second limitation is that, although other databases have been considered, it was decided to use just the most recognized ones—Web of Science and SCOPUS. A multisource method comparing different databases might give much broader overview of the investigation in the studied field and a better comprehension of the main developments.

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Appendix A

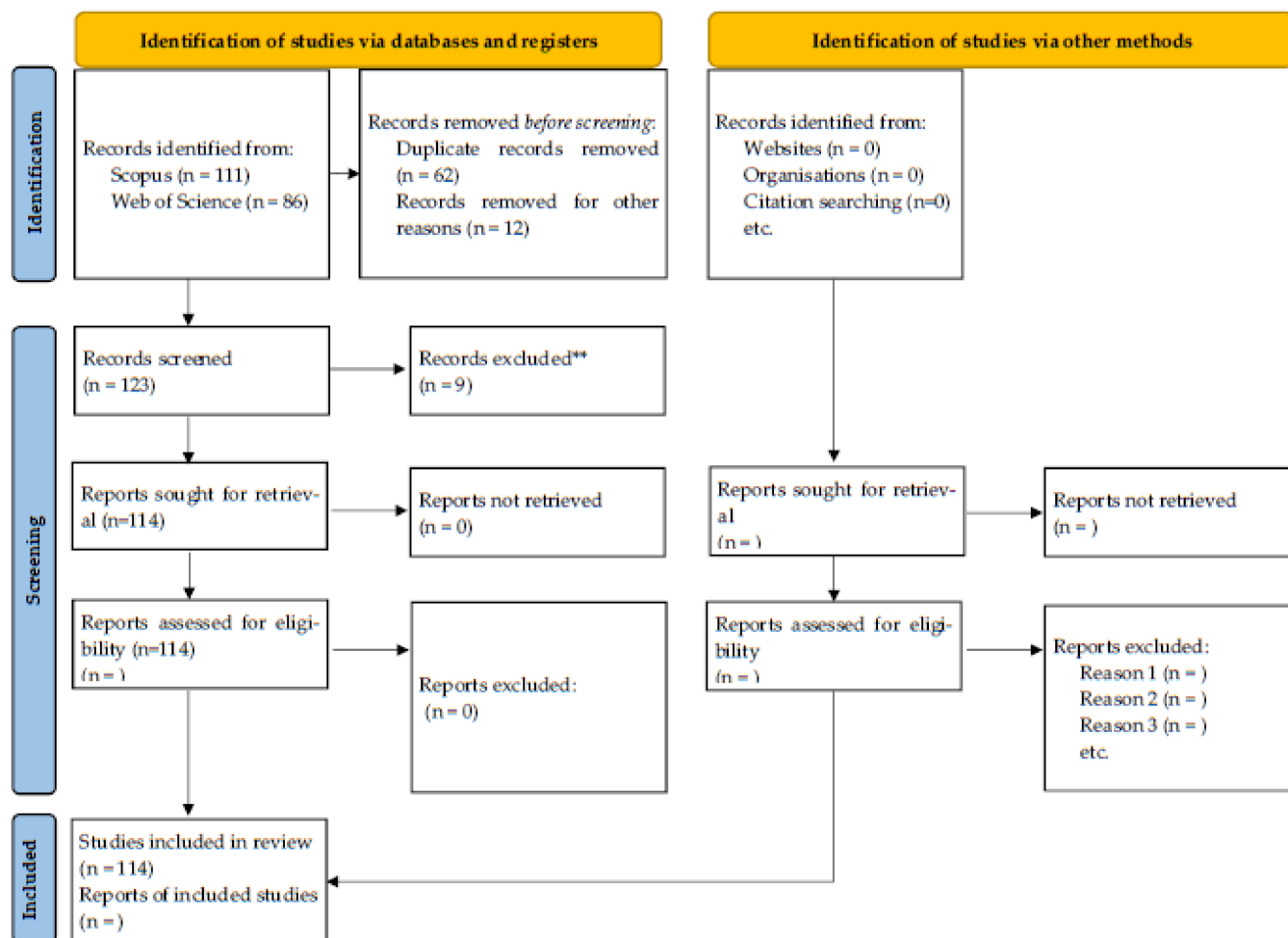


Figure A1. Application of PRISMA flow diagram. ** Represents for matches any sequence of characters.

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