

Social Media Marketing And Destination Branding: Current Research Trend And Direction For Future Research

Pemasaran Media Sosial Dan Pencitraan Merek Destinasi: Tren Penelitian Saat Ini Dan Arah Penelitian Di Masa Depan

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ABSTRACT

Social media has become a pivotal tool in shaping destination branding strategies, profoundly influencing tourists' perceptions and behaviors. This study aims to systematically review the existing literature to examine the intersection of social media marketing and destination branding, with the goal of identifying dominant research themes, theoretical gaps, and future research directions. Utilizing a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) methodology, the study analyzes peer-reviewed journal articles published between 2010 and 2025, sourced from the Scopus database. Following the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) framework, a rigorous screening, data extraction, and synthesis process was applied. The final dataset includes 103 relevant studies, with 66 articles subjected to in-depth bibliometric and content analysis. VOSviewer was employed for data visualization and thematic clustering. The findings reveal eight key thematic clusters: Social Media and Co-Creation, Sustainability in Branding, Digital Engagement, Emotional and Experiential Branding, Place Identity, and Brand Equity. The results offer critical insights into how social media facilitates brand co-creation and emotional resonance in destination marketing, and highlight underexplored areas for future investigation. This review contributes to both academic scholarship and practical strategy development by offering a comprehensive thematic map of the evolving discourse on social media and destination branding.

Keywords: *Social Media Marketing; Destination Branding; Brand Management; Systematic Literature Review.*

ABSTRAK

Media sosial telah menjadi alat yang sangat penting dalam membentuk strategi pencitraan merek destinasi, yang sangat mempengaruhi persepsi dan perilaku wisatawan. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk meninjau literatur yang ada secara sistematis untuk memeriksa titik temu antara pemasaran media sosial dan pencitraan merek destinasi, dengan tujuan mengidentifikasi tema penelitian yang dominan, kesenjangan teoritis, dan arah penelitian di masa depan. Dengan menggunakan metodologi Tinjauan Literatur Sistematis (SLR), penelitian ini menganalisis artikel jurnal yang telah ditelaah oleh rekan sejawat yang diterbitkan antara tahun 2010 dan 2025, yang bersumber dari basis data Scopus. Mengikuti kerangka kerja PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses), penyaringan yang ketat, ekstraksi data, dan proses sintesis diterapkan. Kumpulan data akhir mencakup 103 studi yang relevan, dengan 66 artikel yang menjadi sasaran analisis bibliometrik dan konten yang mendalam. VOSviewer digunakan untuk visualisasi data dan pengelompokan tematik. Temuan ini mengungkapkan delapan kelompok tematik utama: Media Sosial dan Ko-Kreasi, Keberlanjutan dalam Branding, Keterlibatan Digital, Branding Emosional dan Eksperiensial, Identitas Tempat, dan Ekuitas Merek. Hasil penelitian ini menawarkan wawasan penting tentang bagaimana media sosial memfasilitasi penciptaan bersama merek dan resonansi emosional dalam pemasaran destinasi, serta menyoroti area yang belum dieksplorasi untuk penyelidikan di masa depan. Kajian ini berkontribusi pada keilmuan akademis dan pengembangan strategi praktis dengan menawarkan peta tematik yang komprehensif tentang wacana yang berkembang di media sosial dan branding destinasi.

Kata Kunci: Pemasaran Media Sosial; Pencitraan Merek Destinasi; Manajemen Merek; Tinjauan

Literatur Sistematis

1. Introduction

The emergence and integration of social media have profoundly reshaped the landscape of destination branding and tourism marketing. Destinations, once promoted primarily through traditional media and print campaigns, are now branded through dynamic digital interactions that occur across various social and digital platforms (Mandagi & Aseng, 2021; Waworuntu et al., 2022). These platforms enable destination marketing organizations (DMOs) and travelers alike to create and share content, co-construct destination narratives, and influence prospective tourists' perceptions (Warbung et al., 2023; Walean et al., 2023; Poluan et al., 2023). Social media not only enhances the visibility of destinations but also plays a critical role in forming emotional, cognitive, and behavioral associations with places, which are central to the concept of place branding (Mandagi et al., 2024).

The rise in digital connectivity and social networking has created an urgent need for DMOs and tourism stakeholders to adapt their branding strategies. Social media offers an interactive, cost-effective, and wide-reaching channel for destination promotion, making it an indispensable tool in modern tourism marketing (Carundeng et al., 2024; Wantah et al., 2024). The immediacy of social media content and its ability to engage users through comments, shares, and live interactions have added new dimensions to branding, where both supply-side agents and travelers contribute to brand development (Marhareita et al., 2022). Despite this rapid evolution, many destination branding practices remain outdated or fail to leverage the full potential of these platforms, highlighting the need for more timely and strategic academic contributions.

Current research tends to treat destination branding and social media as separate or loosely connected domains. There is a notable lack of integrated frameworks that systematically explore how social media impacts the multiple layers of destination branding, including cognitive perceptions, emotional attachments, and behavioral intentions (Mandagi et al., 202; Mandagi & Centeno, 2024; Pongoh & Mandagi, 2025). Moreover, platform-specific impacts, cross-cultural effectiveness, and the long-term influence of user-generated content (UGC) are underexplored. Therefore, this study aims to bridge these gaps by synthesizing existing literature, identifying prevailing research trends, and proposing a comprehensive agenda for future studies that align digital marketing tools with destination branding outcomes.

This research contributes both theoretically and practically to the field of tourism marketing. Theoretically, it builds on interdisciplinary insights to enhance the conceptual understanding of how social media drives destination image formation, brand identity, and user engagement (Hanna et al., 2020). Practically, it equips tourism professionals with knowledge to craft more effective branding strategies that resonate with digital audiences and promote sustainable tourism development. By highlighting gaps and future research directions, the study also sets the stage for more holistic, data-driven, and stakeholder-informed approaches to destination branding.

2. Methodology

This research aims to systematically review the literature on social media marketing and destination branding, aligning with broader objectives of identifying influential studies, prevailing themes, and methodological trends within this domain (Kowaat et al., 2023; Mandagi et al., 2024). Employing the Systematic Literature Review (SLR) methodology ensures transparency, objectivity, and replicability through a rigorously defined and executed research protocol (Kitchenham, 2004). The SLR method is recognized for its scientific rigor, offering an auditable trail of decisions that minimizes bias and enhances the reliability of research findings (Pati & Lorusso, 2018).

To operationalize this approach, the study adopted the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) framework, which structures the review into clearly defined stages, identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion. This framework guides the systematic collection, evaluation, and synthesis of relevant studies and ensures methodological consistency throughout the review process (Moher et al., 2010; Phillips & Barker, 2021). The review was guided by a carefully formulated research question focusing on the factors that influence the attractiveness of sustainable tourism destinations, with an emphasis on social media and destination branding as key drivers of tourist engagement and perception.

As illustrated in Figure 1, the article selection process began with an initial retrieval of 103 documents from the Scopus database, using targeted keywords such as “social media marketing,” “destination branding,” and related terms. After eliminating 4 duplicate or irrelevant entries, 98 articles remained for further assessment. In the screening phase, 26 documents were excluded for falling outside the relevant subject areas of tourism, marketing, and branding. This reduced the sample to 72 articles. Next, five non-article items, including book chapters, conference proceedings, and editorials, were excluded, resulting in a dataset of 67 peer-reviewed journal articles.

The refining phase further excluded one non-English article, ensuring that the final selection comprised only English-language sources to maintain consistency and scholarly reliability, as emphasized by Podsakoff et al. (2005). This refinement yielded a final sample of 66 articles, all published in peer-reviewed journals and directly relevant to the study’s objectives. This sample forms the basis for the subsequent bibliometric and content analysis, which investigates the intellectual structure, thematic evolution, and influential contributions within the research area.

Table 1. Article Inclusion Criteria

Criteria	Description
Document type	Scientific articles from Journal
Source	Scopus Database
Time frame	2010-2025
Research design	Quantitative and Qualitative
Language	English
Keywords	Social Media Marketing and Destination Branding
Subject area	Tourism; Business; Management; Economics & Social Science

By systematically applying well-defined inclusion and exclusion criteria stipulated in Table 1, this study ensures that only the most relevant and high-quality sources inform the analysis. These articles represent a concentrated body of literature through which trends, gaps, and opportunities in social media marketing and destination branding can be critically examined. Bibliometric analysis was conducted using VOSviewer to visualize author networks, keyword co-occurrence, and citation patterns. In parallel, content analysis was employed to classify the articles into thematic categories, providing deeper insight into the conceptual underpinnings and practical implications of current research. Together, these analyses contribute to a comprehensive understanding of the scholarly landscape surrounding social media marketing and destination branding.

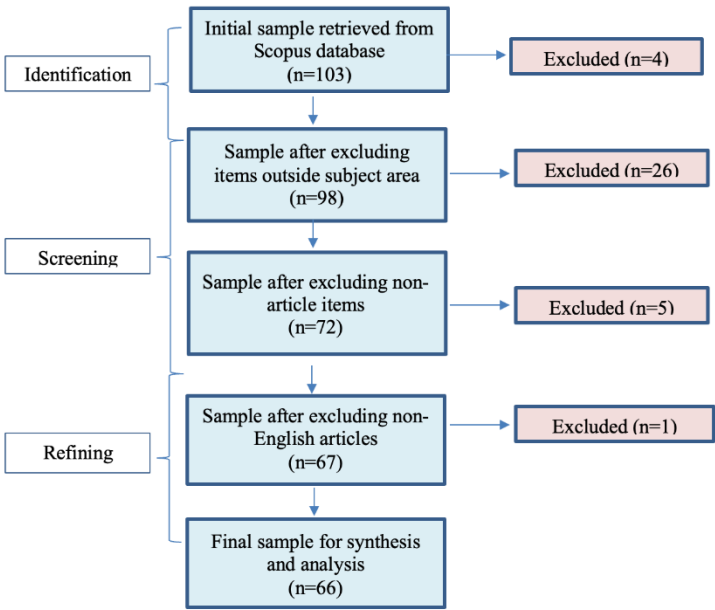


Figure 1. Article Selection Process

3. Results And Discussion
Descriptive analysis

Figure 2 shows the trend in the number of publications and citations of selected studies related to social media and destination branding from 2007 to 2025. The graphs illustrate the increasing academic attention given to this research field over time. The number of publications displays an overall upward trend, especially after 2018, peaking in 2021 with 13 documents. Another notable surge occurred in 2024, with 12 publications, followed by a slight drop in 2025. This suggests growing scholarly interest and recognition of the importance of social media in shaping destination branding strategies, particularly in recent years.

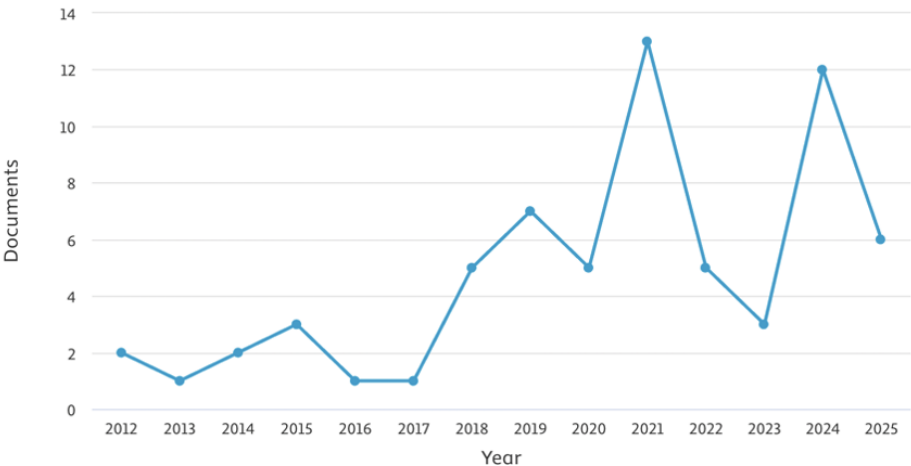


Figure 2. Number of Document Per Year

Source: Extracted from Scopus Database (2025)

Similarly, figure 3 reflect a rising trend, indicating the growing impact and visibility of earlier published works. Citation counts saw sharp increases starting around 2018 and peaked in 2021 with 13 citations. The trend continued strongly into 2024, before experiencing a decline in 2025. This pattern underscores how foundational studies, particularly those published before

2021, have become central references in the field. These findings emphasize a clear rise in both academic production and influence, suggesting that social media's role in destination marketing is an expanding area of research with increasing relevance to tourism scholars and practitioners.

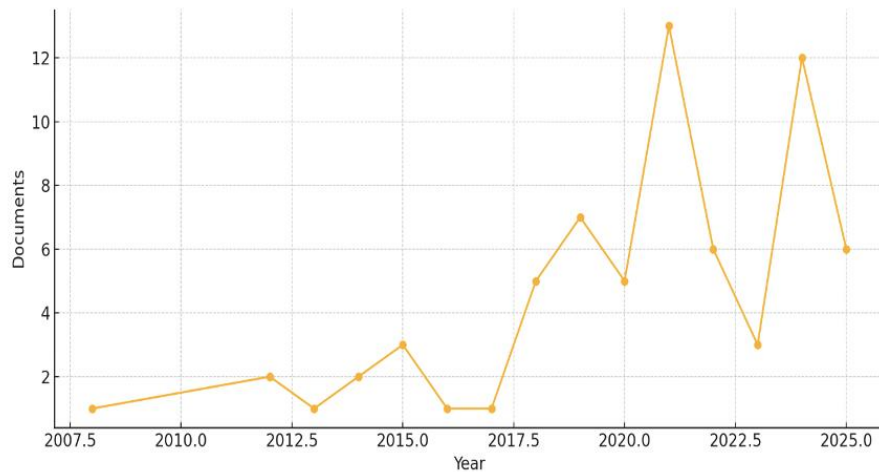


Figure 3. Number of Citation per year

Table 2 presents the ten most-cited articles in the field of social media and destination branding, reflecting the most influential contributions based on Google Scholar citations. The most cited article is by Marine-Roig and Clavé (2015), with 282 citations, focusing on tourism analytics using user-generated content in Barcelona. This is followed by Lund et al. (2018), whose work on social media storytelling in destination branding has garnered 253 citations, and Lim et al. (2012), with 163 citations, comparing consumer- and marketer-generated videos. Notably, three highly cited papers were published in the *Journal of Destination Marketing and Management*, indicating the journal's central role in advancing this research area. The list also highlights the diversity of analytical approaches, such as machine learning (Arefieva et al., 2021) and qualitative investigation (Zavattaro et al., 2015), and platforms like Twitter and Instagram, showcasing the interdisciplinary and evolving nature of this domain. These articles underscore the growing academic interest and practical relevance of understanding how social media shapes destination image and branding strategies.

Table 2. Top ten articles with the highest citations

Authors	Title	Year	Source title	Cited by
Marine-Roig & Clavé	Tourism analytics with massive user-generated content: A case study of Barcelona	2015	Journal of Destination Marketing and Management	282
Lund et al.	The power of social media storytelling in destination branding	2018	Journal of Destination Marketing and Management	253
Lim et al.	The impact of social media on destination branding: Consumer-generated videos versus destination marketer-generated videos	2012	Journal of Vacation Marketing	163
Ruiz-Real et al.	Destination branding: Opportunities and new challenges	2020	Journal of Destination Marketing and Management	120
Arefieva et al.	A machine learning approach to cluster destination image on Instagram	2021	Tourism Management	112
Sevin	Places going viral: Twitter usage patterns in destination marketing and place branding	2013	Journal of Place Management and Development	94
Zavattaro et al.	Assessing managerial methods for evaluating place brand equity: A qualitative investigation	2015	Tourism Management	85
Iglesias-Sánchez et al.	Instagram as a co-creation space for tourist destination image-building: Algarve and costa del sol case studies	2020	Sustainability (Switzerland)	80

Cheung et al.	Examining the role of social media-based destination brand community in evoking tourists' emotions and intention to co-create and visit	2021	Journal of Product and Brand Management	73
Uchinaka et al.	Classifying residents' roles as online place-ambassadors	2019	Tourism Management	69

Figure 4 illustrates the geographical distribution of scholarly publications on social media marketing and destination branding, as indexed in the Scopus Database in 2025. Spain emerges as the leading contributor, with a total of 10 documents, reflecting a significant academic interest in leveraging social platforms for tourism and national image promotion. The United Kingdom follows with 8 documents, and the United States with 7, indicating robust research efforts from these Western nations in this domain. Other notable contributors include Indonesia, Australia, China, and South Africa, each producing between 5 to 6 publications, suggesting growing academic engagement from both developed and emerging markets. Countries like India, Italy, and Morocco also appear in the list with a modest yet notable output, each contributing 3 to 4 documents. This figure highlights not only the global relevance of social media-driven destination branding but also underscores Spain's prominent role in advancing academic discourse in this evolving field.

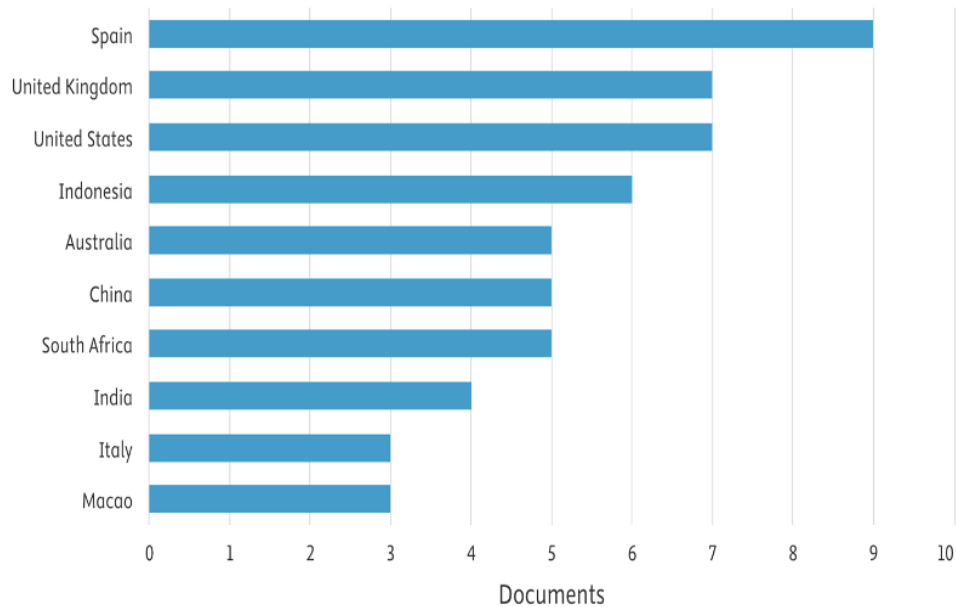


Figure 4. Document By Country or territory

Source: Extracted from Scopus Database (2025)

Table 4 shows that Sustainability leads in publishing research on social media marketing and destination branding, contributing seven articles. This is followed by Place Branding and Public Diplomacy and the International Journal of Tourism Cities with three articles each, while other journals such as Tourism Management Perspectives and the International Journal of Tourism Research contributed two. Most journals listed are ranked Q1 or Q2 based on the Scimago Journal Rank (SJR), indicating strong academic credibility, with Tourism Management Perspectives standing out in Q1 and Sustainability in Q2 despite its higher output.

Table 3. Distribution of Articles Across Journals (Top 10)

Rank	Journal	Total Citations	Total Articles	SJR (2024)
1	Tourism Management	69	3	4.146 Q1
2	International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management	9	1	3.141 Q1

3	Journal of Destination Marketing and Management	668	5	2.260 Q1
4	Journal of Product and Brand Management	73	1	1.886 Q1
5	Tourism Geographies	51	2	1.356 Q1
6	Journal of Vacation Marketing	194	2	1.299 Q1
7	Sustainability (Switzerland)	106	4	0.688 Q1
8	International Journal of Tourism Cities	37	2	0.681 Q1
9	Place Branding and Public Diplomacy	47	2	0.617 Q2
10	Journal of Place Management and Development	112	3	0.435 Q2

Source: Data Processed by the Authors (2025)

Figure 5 illustrates the distribution of publications by subject area related to social media marketing and destination branding. The field is most prominently represented in Business, Management and Accounting, with over 50 publications, highlighting the central role of strategic marketing and branding within tourism and business disciplines. Social Sciences follows closely with around 45 publications, indicating strong interdisciplinary engagement with topics such as consumer behavior, communication, and cultural studies. Environmental Science also appears significantly with over 15 publications, likely reflecting growing interest in sustainable destination branding. Other subject areas, including Energy, Computer Science, and Decision Sciences, show modest contributions, while fields such as Psychology, Medicine, and Engineering have minimal representation. This distribution underscores that research in this area is predominantly grounded in business and social contexts, with emerging interest in environmental and technological perspectives.

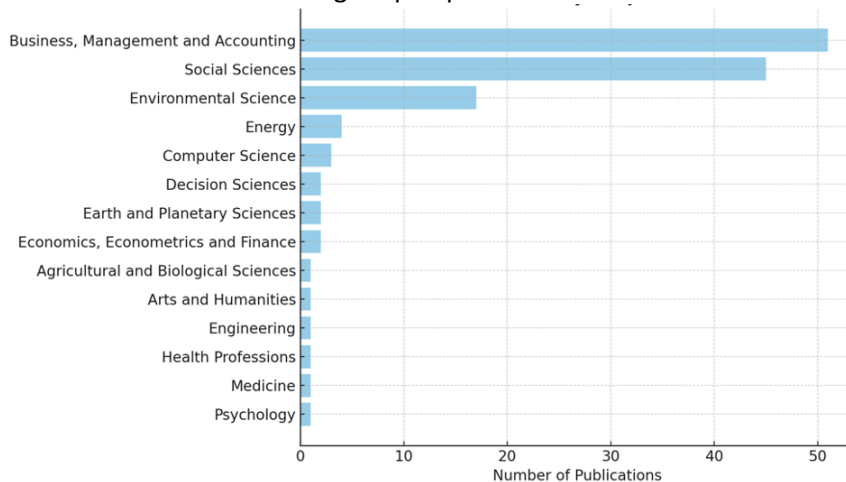


Figure 5. Document By Subject Area

Source: Processed by Authored (2025)

Current Research Trend in Social Media Marketing and Destination Branding

Co-occurrence analysis explores the relationships between terms found in the titles, abstracts, or keywords of scholarly documents (Bernatovic et al., 2022). In the context of social media marketing and destination branding, this method aims to uncover thematic connections between frequently used terms that may reflect emerging research clusters or conceptual linkages. Drawing from the same Scopus database, a total of 1,343 keywords were initially extracted. To identify high-frequency keywords suitable for deeper analysis, a formula proposed by Donohue (1974) was applied:

$$N = \frac{1}{2}(1 + \sqrt{1 + 8I_1})$$

Where:

N = number of high-frequency keywords,

I_1 = number of keywords that appeared only once.

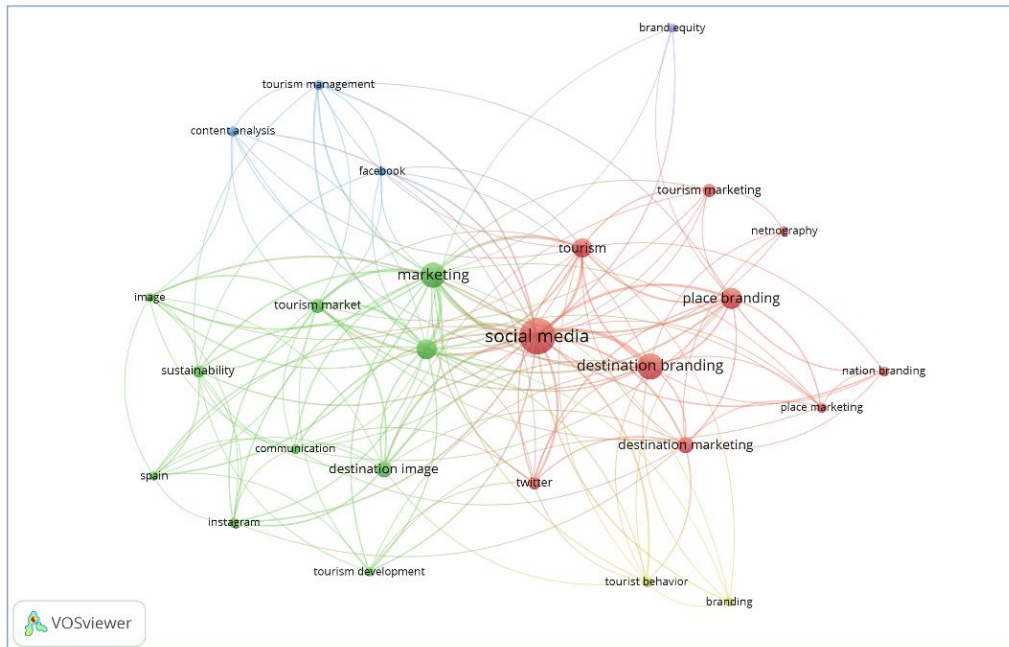


Figure 5. Network Visualization

Source: VOSviewer output, processed by Author

Cluster 1: Social Media and Co-Creation

Social media has fundamentally reshaped destination branding by enabling co-creation between brands and tourists. Platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, and YouTube provide spaces where users share travel experiences that collectively shape the destination's identity (Iglesias-Sánchez et al., 2020; Marine-Roig & Clavé, 2015). User-generated content (UGC) lends authenticity and trust to brand narratives, especially among younger demographics who prioritize peer-shared experiences over official messaging (Cheung et al., 2021; Sevin, 2013).

Researches also highlights how destination brand communities formed through social media cultivate emotional engagement and loyalty (Alshehri, 2024; Walean et al., 2024). Studies by Mandagi and Centeno (2024) and Mandagi et al. (2024) introduce the concept of destination brand gestalt, which describes how co-created digital content results in a unified brand perception. Visual storytelling, particularly via Instagram and TikTok, enhances this process by enabling emotional and aesthetic alignment between tourists and destinations (Arefieva et al., 2021; Lin et al., 2022).

Cluster 2: Sustainability in Branding

Sustainable branding has become a critical component of destination competitiveness in response to heightened environmental awareness. Travelers, especially millennials and Gen Z, now consider sustainability when selecting destinations (Ruiz-Real et al., 2020). Tourism boards increasingly promote eco-conscious values, such as community-based tourism, conservation efforts, and carbon-neutral initiatives, as core brand messages (Swart et al., 2021; Carvajal-Aparicio et al., 2024).

Strategic alignment between destination development and sustainability goals is vital (Donaldson et al., 2021). Scholars like Wang et al. (2024) argue that brand diffusion and perception through social media must be framed around ecological responsibility to resonate with today's ethically conscious tourists. Furthermore, authenticity in sustainability communication, especially when amplified by local influencers or community representatives, enhances trust and engagement (Cassel & de Bernardi, 2021).

Cluster 3: Digital Engagement

Digital engagement is central to modern destination branding, especially via platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. These platforms enable real-time feedback, sentiment analysis, and tourist interaction, offering rich insights for data-driven branding strategies (Xiang et al., 2015; Alshehri, 2024). Research by Lim et al. (2012) shows that consumer-generated videos outperform official marketing videos in generating emotional engagement and shaping destination image.

Crisis communication also falls under this cluster. Destinations use digital tools to manage crises, ranging from natural disasters to pandemics, with timely updates and strategic messaging (Huertas et al., 2021). Wang et al. (2024) provide evidence on how World Heritage Sites can sustain their brand image through social media even in times of uncertainty. Furthermore, the interactive design of social media platforms allows destinations to monitor brand health and public sentiment continuously (Li et al., 2019).

Cluster 4: Emotional and Experiential Branding

Cluster 4 examines the psychological and behavioral aspects of tourism, with a particular focus on how branding influences tourist decision-making and brand loyalty. Branding efforts must resonate with tourists on an emotional level, aligning with their values, desires, and expectations. Traditional branding tools such as logos and slogans are no longer sufficient; effective destination branding requires a deeper connection with the consumer's identity (Pike, 2002; Tasci & Gartner, 2007). This cluster underscores the importance of emotional branding, where tourists are encouraged to form strong attachments to a destination, which in turn fosters repeat visits and brand loyalty. Additionally, with the rise of experiential travel, tourists increasingly seek immersive and authentic experiences, which necessitates branding that offers more than just promotional content (Pine & Gilmore, 1999).

Strategic destination marketing within this cluster aims to create differentiation in a highly competitive market. By segmenting audiences and tailoring messages to specific consumer groups, destinations can build perceived value and foster a unique identity that appeals to various types of travelers. Emotional appeal is a key component in this strategy, as it taps into the tourists' quest for novelty, transformation, and a sense of belonging. This approach not only attracts tourists but also creates long-lasting connections, leading to higher levels of engagement and loyalty. In a marketplace where authenticity and experiences are paramount, destinations that craft compelling, emotionally resonant branding strategies are more likely to succeed in creating lasting impressions and fostering repeat visits.

Cluster 5: Place Identity and Brand Equity

Cluster 5 captures the deeper symbolic dimensions of place identity, branding, and brand equity, focusing on how destinations are perceived both emotionally and culturally. Place identity encompasses the values, heritage, architecture, and collective memory that people associate with a destination. It is a reflection of how locals and visitors perceive the essence of a place. Branding efforts in this cluster aim to amplify or reinterpret these identities to create compelling narratives that resonate with both residents and tourists. Successful branding in this context helps reinforce a destination's cultural uniqueness, fostering pride among locals and

attracting tourists who seek authenticity and a deeper connection to the place (Kavaratzis & Hatch, 2013).

Brand equity, a central concept in this cluster, is built through consistent, meaningful experiences and emotional connections. It reflects how well a destination is trusted and differentiated in the minds of potential visitors. The authentic representation of place identity plays a critical role in enhancing brand equity, as it creates a sense of loyalty and emotional attachment to the destination. This cluster also emphasizes the importance of internal branding efforts, which involve engaging local residents and stakeholders in the branding process. By ensuring that residents align with the destination's branding efforts, destinations can create a cohesive and resilient brand that can withstand global shifts and changes in tourist preferences. Ultimately, this approach enhances the destination's competitiveness by building a strong, trusted brand rooted in local identity and pride (Kaplan et al., 2018).

Direction for Future Research in Social Media Marketing and Destination Branding

This study highlights the increasing academic focus on destination branding in the digital age, with co-word analysis (Figure 6) revealing five dominant thematic areas: social media-driven co-creation, sustainability marketing, digital engagement strategies, emotional and experiential branding, and place identity and brand equity. These themes reflect the evolving nature of tourism marketing as it adapts to technological advancements and shifting traveler expectations.



Figure 4. Emerging topics in research on SMM and Destination Branding

The theme of *social media-driven co-creation* emphasizes the critical role of platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, and YouTube in transforming destination branding. Branding has shifted from a top-down process to a collaborative endeavor where tourists and influencers contribute content that shapes public perception. User-generated content (UGC) enhances brand authenticity and creates a sense of community and belonging. This participatory model empowers travelers to become co-creators of a destination's identity, strengthening emotional connections and increasing brand loyalty.

Sustainability marketing has emerged as another vital theme, driven by increasing environmental awareness and the values of younger generations. Destinations are now required to integrate sustainability into their branding strategies, promoting eco-conscious practices, community engagement, and cultural preservation. Marketing efforts that highlight sustainable tourism appeal to travelers seeking ethical and responsible travel experiences. This theme

underscores the importance of aligning destination images with environmental and social responsibility to ensure long-term viability.

The theme of *digital engagement strategies* focuses on the use of platforms like Facebook for interactive marketing, real-time feedback, and content analysis. These digital tools allow marketers to monitor tourist experiences, manage reputation during crises, and refine their strategies based on actual user data. Particularly in times of crisis, such as pandemics or natural disasters, digital platforms serve as critical tools for maintaining tourist trust and effectively communicating recovery plans.

Emotional and experiential branding explores how destinations can forge deeper psychological connections with tourists. Travelers today seek meaningful, immersive experiences rather than superficial promotional messages. This theme stresses the importance of tailoring branding efforts to resonate emotionally with tourists, influencing their decision-making and fostering repeat visits. Emotional branding taps into personal identity, values, and transformation, making destination experiences more memorable and impactful.

Lastly, the theme of *place identity and brand equity* examines how destinations can build strong brands rooted in cultural and emotional significance. By amplifying local heritage, traditions, and values, destinations can create compelling narratives that attract tourists seeking authenticity. This theme also highlights the role of internal stakeholders, such as local communities, in shaping and supporting the brand. Strong place identity contributes to higher brand equity, fostering trust, loyalty, and differentiation in competitive tourism markets.

Together, these thematic areas offer valuable insights into the future of destination branding. They point to the need for further research into co-creative branding models, integration of sustainability into marketing strategies, the strategic role of digital platforms, emotional engagement mechanisms, and the development of authentic, community-driven brand identities.

4. Conclusions

The thematic analysis conducted in this study addresses the primary research objective of examining the evolving dynamics of destination branding in the context of social media and digital transformation. By mapping the core thematic areas, this study deepens our understanding of how digital platforms, sustainability imperatives, and emotional connections shape the ways destinations are marketed and perceived. The increasing scholarly interest in this subject, as visualized through VOSviewer, highlights a growing recognition of the complex interplay between technology, community engagement, and place identity. The substantial clustering around themes such as social media co-creation, digital engagement, and sustainability signals a paradigm shift from traditional, top-down branding approaches to more participatory, authentic, and values-based strategies.

This research identifies five key thematic areas: the role of social media in co-creating brand narratives; sustainability marketing as a response to environmental and social responsibility; digital engagement and crisis communication through platforms like Facebook; emotional and experiential branding strategies that build long-term tourist loyalty; and the integration of place identity into branding efforts to enhance brand equity. Each theme contributes uniquely to the discourse on destination branding, offering insights into the emotional, cultural, and technological forces that influence tourist behavior and perceptions. These themes also underline the necessity of measuring branding success not merely by visibility or reach but through deeper indicators such as authenticity, emotional resonance, and stakeholder involvement.

In addition, the study outlines several critical avenues for future research. First, there is a pressing need to examine the long-term impact of UGC on destination brand equity and loyalty. While UGC is often cited as a source of authenticity, further investigation is needed to

understand how its varying quality and credibility influence brand perceptions. Second, more research is warranted on how destinations can align their sustainability communication with genuine practices to avoid accusations of greenwashing. Third, future studies should explore the integration of emerging technologies, such as augmented reality, AI, and immersive storytelling, into digital engagement strategies to enhance destination image and tourist satisfaction. Fourth, the emotional and psychological aspects of branding merit further exploration, particularly concerning cross-cultural differences in perception and brand attachment. Finally, future research should focus on the internal branding processes that involve local communities in co-developing destination narratives, fostering alignment between local identity and global appeal.

This study also presents practical implications for destination marketers, tourism boards, and policymakers. Marketing strategies should emphasize authenticity and emotional resonance by leveraging local culture and personal experiences. Policies supporting sustainable tourism development should be prioritized and communicated transparently to attract environmentally conscious travelers. Furthermore, digital platforms must be used not only for promotional purposes but also as tools for stakeholder engagement, feedback management, and crisis communication. Training programs can be designed to help local tourism operators harness social media and digital marketing tools effectively.

Nevertheless, this study is not without limitations. First, the reliance on keyword co-occurrence analysis using VOSviewer may exclude thematic nuances not reflected in frequently used terms, potentially overlooking emerging subtopics. Second, thematic clustering can be influenced by subjective interpretation, introducing bias into the identification and grouping of topics. Third, the analysis is primarily based on available literature, which may underrepresent regions or contexts where destination branding practices differ significantly. Therefore, ongoing research should incorporate more qualitative and mixed-method approaches to validate and expand upon the themes identified here. In addition, more contextual studies focusing on different geographical regions, cultural settings, and demographic groups will enrich our understanding and offer more generalizable insights.

Overall, this study contributes to the theoretical and practical understanding of destination branding by mapping its key thematic areas and highlighting promising directions for future research. As destination marketing continues to evolve in the digital age, a deeper and more nuanced exploration of these themes will be essential to build resilient, authentic, and engaging destination brands.

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