

The Role of Official Websites in Destination Branding: A Systematic Literature Review

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Abstract

In this study, it is aimed to examine the role of official destination websites in destination branding processes. In the research, a systematic literature review has been applied. There were 58 related studies in total, and after inclusion and exclusion process finally a total of 36 studies were included in the systematic literature review. The main research themes of the studies reviewed in the research are; destination brand image, website features, interaction and finally destination brand personality. Official destination websites are important in providing the information that potential tourists need from a reliable source. As a result, while these websites provide useful and reliable information for travelers, their interaction features are not at a satisfactory level. Therefore, it is suggested that these websites should also have interaction opportunities for users such as sharing experiences and communicating among each other and with destination representatives.

Keywords: Destination Branding, Destination Brand Image, Destination Brand Personality, Official Destination Websites.

1. INTRODUCTION

Although the internet is an invention that emerged in the modern age, it plays an important role to shapes the modern world. As of April 2023, there are 5.18 billion Internet users worldwide, equivalent to %64.6 of the world's population (statista.com). As in many other fields, internet usage is increasing in the tourism sector. Nowadays, most travelers use the internet to plan their vacations and travels, make reservations, purchase services and share their experiences. As the scope of Internet use expands, the inevitable relationship between tourism and the Internet is getting closer (Diaz-Luque, 2009: 153). This affects destinations as well as businesses. Today, the Internet is considered as the most effective tool for tourism destinations to reach larger audiences, which are in a global competition (Farias et al., 2013). The internet offers the ability to create destination images at low cost, which is another considerable advantage of Internet for tourism destinations (Luna-Nevarez & Hyman, 2012). Official websites are one of the important tools that used to build a destination image in the online environment, it also provides actual information about the destination for travelers. Considering the substantial role of the Internet in our daily lives in the 21st century, the importance of official tourism websites becomes even more evident (Vila, González, & Darcy, 2018). Official tourism websites are considered ideal tools for

destination branding (Wu, 2018) and creating brand personality (Vinyals-Mirabent, Kavartzis, & Fernández-Cavia, 2019), besides providing information and creating destination image.

The number of travelers is increasing day to day who is planning their own trips. Therefore, managers should ensure that people have access to more accurate and comprehensive information about destinations. Because the information about destination has an effective role on tourists' destination choice (Zhang, Cheung & Law, 2018). Official tourism websites, which are a vital promotional tool for destinations, are an information source that informs all potential tourists about the destination (Fernández-Cavia, Rovira, Diaz-Luque & Cavaller, 2014). These websites, which can provide detailed information on activities, accommodation, transportation and any other matters that tourists may need, have become one of the important sources of information about the destinations (Vila et al., 2018). Nowadays, as well as many tourist destinations have an official website, it is clear that the performance of these sites is proportional to the level of development of the destination. (Zhang et al., 2018).

It is well established from a variety of studies that official websites are utilized to create destination brand image and destination brand personality as well as destination branding (Vinyals-Mirabent et al., 2019; Wu, 2018; Zhang, Xu, Lu, & Lei, 2015). Brand personality has an effective role in creating strong brands by enriching people's understanding of the brand, differentiating the brand from its competitors, strengthening the communication between the brand and consumers, and creating brand equity (Aaker, 2009). Furthermore, brand image is an essential component of a successful destination brand for destinations, as much as brand personality (Qu, Kim, & Im, 2011).

The purpose of this study is to explore the role of destinations' official websites on destination branding processes. For this purpose, it is examined how destinations use websites to create their brand personalities and brand images. In this context, it aims to reveal the current state of knowledge by reviewing previous studies and providing insight into the answers to the research questions below.

RQ1: How is the role of official websites in destination branding addressed in the literature?

RQ2: What are the main research topics on the role of official websites in destination branding in the literature?

2. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

2.1. Destination Branding

Tourism destination branding allows tourists to identify the destination and distinguish it from its competitors (Vengesai, 2003). In other words, destination branding can be defined as a means of creating and communicating an identity that differentiates a destination from its competitors by highlighting the unique aspects of the destination (Qu et al., 2011). The importance of this definition is getting clearer when considering that today's tourism destinations even though have different attractions they still have many similar characteristics. Because tourist destinations are becoming increasingly interchangeable and difficult to distinguish (Pike, 2005). There is no doubt that as the destination choices available to consumers increase, an effective destination positioning strategy will become more important. An important component of this positioning process is the creation and management of a distinctive and attractive destination image (Ekinci, 2003). Therefore, a good destination branding strategy must be unique and distinctive, but its uniqueness and distinctiveness must be sustainable, credible and relevant (Morgan, Pritchard & Pride, 2004: 65).

The basis of destination branding is to create a positive destination image that identifies and differentiates the destination (Armenski, Stankov, & Choi, 2018). According to Cai (2002), destination branding is a coherent combination of brand elements to define and differentiate a destination through creating a positive image. According to the author, to build a brand for a destination, an image must be created by selecting the most appropriate brand elements and identifying the most relevant brand associations. A destination brand must be unique enough to differentiate itself from competitors, while also being broad enough to cover all elements of the destination's appeal (Vinyals-Mirabent et al., 2019). Blain, Levy and Ritchie (2005: 337) drew attention to 4 basic elements while defining destination branding. Accordingly, destination branding;

1. supports the creation of a name, symbol, logo or other graphic that easily identifies and differentiates a destination,
2. constantly communicates the expectations of unforgettable travel experiences uniquely associated with the destination,
3. helps to enhance and strengthen the emotional connection between the tourist and the destination and,
4. is a set of marketing activities that reduce destination promotion costs and perceived risk.

Successful destination branding involves establishing a mutual relationship between destinations and tourists by providing emotional satisfaction to the tourists (Ekinci, 2003). Establishing and maintaining this relationship will be possible with the participation of all stakeholders. The destination branding process can only be successful if all destination stakeholders are involved and cooperate in a harmonious interaction. (Pereira, Correia & Schutz, 2012: 82). Destination image (Verissimo, Tiago, Tiago, & Jardim, 2017; Souiden, Ladhari, & Chiadmi, 2017) and destination personality (Murphy, Benckendorff, & Moscardo 2007) are considered important aspects in creating a strong destination brand. Creating and managing an appropriate destination brand image and destination brand personality is essential for effective positioning and differentiation (Hosany, Ekinci, & Uysal, 2007).

2.2. Destination Brand Image

Brand image reflects current perceptions of the brand (Aaker, 2009) and is one of the most important elements of creating a strong brand (Hosany et al., 2007; Tasci & Gartner, 2007). Destination image can also be simply defined as the impressions or perceptions of a place (Echtner & Ritchie, 1991). With respect to another definition, destination image is the sum of all the descriptive, inferential and informational beliefs that people have about a particular place (Martin and Eroglu, 1993). According to Baloglu and McCleary (1999: 870), destination image has two sub-dimensions: perceptual/cognitive and emotional image. While perceptual/cognitive evaluations express beliefs or knowledge about the qualities of a destination, emotional image expresses feelings or attachment to the destination. The overall image of a destination is formed as a result of both perceptual/cognitive and emotional evaluations of that place.

Destination image affects tourist behavior at each stage, including before, during and after the visit (Tasci & Gartner, 2007). Destination image is known to have a significant impact on tourists' destination choice (Baloglu & McCleary, 1999; Pan, Rasouli & Timmermans, 2021). Furthermore, destination image is an effective factor in creating destination loyalty (Artuğer, Çetinsöz & Kılıç, 2013; Song, Su & Li, 2013), positively affecting preferences for products related to the destination brand (Lim & Weaver, 2014) and increasing destination satisfaction (Veasna, Wu & Huang, 2013).

2.3. Destination Brand Personality

Brand personality can be defined as the set of human characteristics associated with the brand. Therefore, in addition to characteristics such as gender, age and socioeconomic class, classical human personality traits such as being friendly, interested and emotional can also be used for brands (Aaker, 2009). The concept of brand personality is based on the assumption that people tend to personify the objects around them. By defining brands in terms of human characteristics, it serves as an important tool in creating brand loyalty and brand awareness, in the same way that people connect each other according to personality traits (Voeth & Herbst, 2008: 77).

There is a linear relationship between destination brand personality and tourists' travel motivation (Murphy, Benckendorff, & Moscardo, 2007). From this perspective, it is clear that a strong destination brand personality can be effective in tourists' destination choices. Additionally, the fact that the destination perceived brand personality meets the needs of tourists will increase this effect. In today's competitive conditions, creating and managing a suitable destination personality is vital for effective differentiation than competitors (Ekinci & Hosany, 2006). Emphasis should be on developing effective communication methods so that destinations have a distinctive and attractive personality.

2.4. Destination Branding and the Web

Official destination websites are communication platforms that provide up-to-date and reliable information to tourists (Fernandez-Cavia & Castro, 2015: 169). In other words, these sites are considered as a distribution channel for information about destinations (Chung, Lee, Lee & Koo, 2015). As the web has become an increasingly popular source of information, official destination websites have begun to play a critical role in destination choice (Bastida & Huan, 2014). On the other hand, official destination websites that have become an important communication tool in destination branding (Miguez González & Fernández Cavia, 2015), have also become a very important branding channel (Lee, Cai & O'Leary, 2006). These platforms are also used as an important channel to create destination image perceived by tourists (Zhang et al., 2015).

Most tourism websites, especially government-funded official tourism websites, focus on providing basic information services and are a reliable tool used by travelers to obtain information about a destination (Cao & Yang, 2016). Because, according to the decision-making managers during the creation and execution of these sites, the purpose of using official tourism websites as a communication channel is, unsurprisingly, information and promotion. In addition, managers consider the usefulness of the official website as very important in the global communication strategy of the destination brand (Fernandez-Cavia et al., 2017). Administrators emphasize the adequacy of the information provided, reliability, accessibility, controllability of the content and low cost of the medium as the main advantages of official websites. According to the researchers the disadvantages are on the other hand, not each potential visitor uses the web, the information presented is often unattractive, and the lack of dynamism and personalization due to the fact that formal nature of the content is restrictive. In this context, the goals of official tourism websites can be listed as:

- To provide information about the destination,
- To gain visibility,
- To attract target groups,
- To convey brand image,
- To convey the brand's personality,
- To encourage user to participating,
- To capture the attention of the target audience and ensure their repeat visits,

- To interact with target audience,
- To learn the preferences of the target audience.

When branding is associated with image, it refers to the feelings, ideas and attitudes that consumers have towards the brand. On the other hand, when the brand is associated with personality, it expresses the human characteristics that distinguish a brand from its competitors (Pereira et al., 2012: 82). In the study on how brand image is involved in branding processes, Barreda et al. (2020), argued that brand image is among the branding elements and has a significant effect on emotional commitment. On the other hand, Tran et al. (2019) revealed in their study that destination image positively affects overall destination value through perceived destination quality and loyalty, thus it has an important role in destination branding strategies. Likewise, brand personality is one of the fundamental components of an effective brand (Ekinci, 2003; Murphy, Moscardo & Benckendorff, 2007: 6).

3. METHODOLOGY

For all research disciplines and all types of research, it is essential to consider the relevant literature. Literature reviews, which is used for many scientific purposes and generally to evaluate the state of knowledge on a particular subject, can also be used to provide an overview of a particular subject or a research problem (Snyder, 2019). The literature review can be random or it can be done by following some certain predetermined rules and methods (Yavuz, 2022). Organized studies in this manner are described as systematic literature review. According to Çınar's (2021) definition, systematic literature review is: "determining which studies will be included in the review in a comprehensive way by using various acceptance and rejection criteria and to synthesize the information contained in these studies". In this context, language of the studies, indexes of the scanned journals, databases and keyword combinations has determined in advance.

In this section it is described in detail the screening methodology employed. At first, we decided the indexes that scan the studies. The literature review in this study was conducted on journals scanned in SSCI (Social Science Citation Index), ESCI (Emerging Sources Citation Index) and SCIE (Science Citation Index Expanded) indexes. The reason why the research covers the journals scanned in these indexes is because they are internationally accepted. And Web of Science and Scopus databases, which are frequently used by researchers in different disciplines, were used to access the studies.

Other criteria to be used in deciding which studies to be included was about the language. The research was conducted on studies written in English. In order to broad the potential list of studies that might be related to our research questions, destination image and destination personality are also used as keywords besides destination branding. Because destination branding is directly related to the concepts of destination image (Qu et al., 2011) and destination personality (Ekinci & Hosany, 2006). Therefore, all these concepts were determined as the keywords of this search. The keyword combinations were applied for this research is; "destination branding" OR "destination image" OR "destination personality" AND "official website". The total number of studies we reached in the reviewing and the final studies reached according to the inclusion and elimination criteria are presented in the results section.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The systematic literature review process is presented in Figure 1. As a result of the review performed in the databases during the identification process, which is the first stage, it has seen that there were 58 related studies. During the screening process, which is the second stage, it was determined that 10 studies were repetitive studies and after these studies were removed, a total

of 48 studies were included in the review. After considering the exclusion criteria, a total of 14 studies were excluded from the literature review at this stage. When we look at the details it turned out that, 2 of these studies were book chapters, 7 of them did not offer a guidance on literature review, 1 of them was not written in English, 3 of them have a methodology irrelevant to planning, and 1 of them was conducted on a specific topic. In the eligibility stage, which is the third stage, 34 studies were re-examined in detail and a total of 6 studies were excluded. It was understood that 2 of the studies did not offer a guidance on literature review, 2 of them were conducted on a specific topic, and the full text of 2 studies could not be reached. In the fourth and final stage of inclusion, 28 studies were determined to be suitable for the review. As a result of retrospective searches, 8 more studies were identified to be appropriate, and finally a total of 36 studies were included in the literature review in this research. An overview of the reviewed papers is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Overview of the reviewed papers

Year	Authors	Title	Source	Purpose	Type of Research	Sample	Themes	
1	2006	Lee, Cai & O'Leary	www.Branding.States US: An analysis of brand-building elements in the US state tourism websites	Tourism Management	To conceptualize electronic branding, especially in the context of destination marketing, through the analysis of official tourism websites.	Qualitative	Official websites of the 50 US states	Destination brand image
2	2007	Singh & Formica	Level of Congruency in Photographic Representations of Destination Marketing Organizations' Websites and Brochures	Journal of Hospitality & Leisure Marketing	To assess the level of congruency in the photographic representations of two promotional materials (official brochures and official websites) offered by Destination Marketing Organizations (DMOs) located in the U.S. northeastern corridor.	Qualitative	171 DMOs websites from the US North Eastern states	Website features
3	2008	Kim & Fesenmaier	Persuasive Design of Destination Web Sites: An Analysis of First Impression	Journal of Travel Research	To examine the persuasiveness of destination websites by investigating users' first impressions.	Quantitative	65 undergraduate students	Website features

4	2010	Yayli & Bayram	Web-based destination marketing: Do official city culture and tourism websites in Turkey consider international guidelines?	Preliminary Communication	To evaluate the official websites of the Provincial Directorates of Culture and Tourism in Turkey according to the opportunities and services offered by these websites.	Qualitative	79 Official Websites	Interaction
5	2010	Daye	Challenges and prospects of differentiating destination brands: the case of the Dutch Caribbean islands	Journal of Travel & Tourism Marketing	To contribute to the understanding of country brand image management and provide insight into strategies for developing effective communication for destination branding.	Qualitative	6 Official Websites	Destination brand personality
6	2013	Kim & Lehto	Projected and Perceived Destination Brand Personalities: The Case of South Korea	Journal of Travel Research	To understand the relationship between perceived and anticipated destination brand personalities.	Qualitative & Quantitative	1 official website and 480 participants	Destination brand personality
7	2014	Gupta & Utkarsh	Assessing the website effectiveness of top ten tourist attracting nations	Inf Technol Tourism	To examine the effectiveness of destination websites.	Qualitative	10 Official Websites	Interaction
8	2015	Del Vasto-Terrientes, et al.	Official tourist destination websites: Hierarchical analysis and assessment with ELECTRE-III-H	Tourism Management Perspectives	To show that the ELECTRE-III-H method can be used together with the Web Quality Index as a powerful tool for analyzing official destination websites.	Qualitative	10 Official Websites	Destination brand image
9	2015	Fernandez-Cavia & Castro	Communication and branding on national tourism websites	Cuadernos Info	To present the quality assessment of official destination websites of five countries (Spain, Brazil,	Qualitative	10 Official Websites	Interaction

				Argentina, Chile and China), obtained by applying the Web Quality Index.				
10	2015	Miguez-González & Fernández-Cavia	Tourism and online communication: interactivity and social web in official destination websites	Communication & Society	To analyze the relational nature of official destination websites according to two parameters: interactivity and the presence of social web elements.	Qualitative	87 Official Websites	Interaction
11	2015	Zhang, et al.	Cultural Capital and Destination Image of Metropolitans: A Comparative Study of New York and Tokyo Official Tourism Websites in Chinese	Journal of China Tourism Research	To define metropolitan cultural capital as a cultural resource that can attract tourists and produce marketing value in metropolises.	Qualitative	2 Official Websites	Destination brand image
12	2016	Cao & Yang	A study of e-commerce adoption by tourism websites in China	Journal of Destination Marketing & Management	To explain the adoption of e-commerce among different types of tourism websites.	Qualitative	Total 258 Websites, 31 of which are official	Interaction
13	2016	Zins & Lin	From intended to projected destination image elements: the case of prefectures in China	International Journal of Culture, Tourism and Hospitality Research	To examine the initial stages of the destination image process and how these plans are reflected on official destination websites.	Qualitative	Websites of 122 prefectures in China, which were randomly selected out of 365.	Destination brand image
14	2017	Fernandez-Cavia, et al.	Online communication in Spanish destination marketing organizations: The view of practitioners	Journal of Vacation Marketing	To analyze destination brand communication strategies, especially applied to online communications as official websites, social media and	Quantitative	56 Participants	Destination brand image

				mobile applications.				
15	2017	Molinillo, Liébana-Cabanillas & Anaya-Sánchez	Destination image on the DMO's platforms: official website and social media	Tourism & Management Studies	To propose a model and validate the proposed model to contribute to the knowledge of the destination image formation process in the online context.	Quantitative	265 Participants	Destination brand image
16	2017	Rojas-Mendez & Hine	Countries' positioning on personality traits: Analysis of 10 South American national tourism websites	Journal of Vacation Marketing	To analyze the use of personality metaphor in official tourism websites of South American countries.	Qualitative	10 Official Websites	Destination brand personality
17	2017	Yang	Industrial heritage tourism development and city image reconstruction in Chinese traditional industrial cities: a web content analysis	Journal of Heritage Tourism	To explore whether former industrial cities promote industrial heritage tourism and rebuild post-industrial images.	Qualitative	20 Official Websites	Destination brand image
18	2017	Avraham & Ketter	Destination image repair while combatting crises: tourism marketing in Africa	Tourism Geographies	To analyze the media strategies used by Sub Saharan African (SSA) countries to repair their destination image during and after crisis, and attract international tourism.	Qualitative	Official websites and social media pages of SSA countries	Destination brand image
19	2018	Jiménez-Barreto & Campo-Martinez	Destination website quality, willingness to participate in users' attitudes and the online co-creation experiences	European Journal of Management and Business Economics	To propose and evaluate a model that posits destination website quality as a determining factor for predicting users' attitudes towards the	Mixed	2 official websites and 135 participants	Interaction

					website and their willingness to engage in co-creation experiences.			
20	2018	Malenkina & Ivanova	A linguistic analysis of the official tourism websites of the seventeen Spanish Autonomous Communities	Journal of Destination Marketing & Management	To describe and analyze the language strategies and features used by official tourism websites for promotion and branding.	Qualitative	17 Official Websites	Website features
21	2018	Vinyals-Mirabent & Mohammadi	City brand projected personality: A new measure to assess the consistency of projected personality across messages	Communication & Society	To evaluate the destination brand personality reflected through the official website.	Qualitative	2 Official Websites	Destination brand personality
22	2018	Wu	Official websites as a tourism marketing medium: A contrastive analysis from the perspective of appraisal theory	Journal of Destination Marketing & Management	To presents a discourse analysis of the online tourism marketing of two tourism destinations (Hangzhou and London) with the aim of examining how destinations from different cultural contexts promote their local attractions internationally.	Qualitative	2 Official Websites	Destination brand image
23	2019	Cesiri	The Construction of the Territorial Image in Tourism Websites: The Case of the Veneto Provinces	Altre Modernita	To examine the language strategies used by local institutions in the Veneto region of Italy to promote their region in English and Italian on their official websites.	Qualitative	7 Official Websites	Destination brand image
24	2019	Barreto, Rubio & Martinez	The online destination brand experience: Development of a sensorial-cognitive-conative model	International Journal of Tourism Research	To analyze online destination brand experiences resulting from user	Quantitative	257 participants	Interaction

							interactions with official websites at two competing destinations.
25	2019	Vinyals-Mirabent, Kavartzis & Fernández-Cavia	The role of functional associations in building destination brand personality: When official websites do the talking	Tourism Management	Qualitative	12 Official Websites	To contribute to the understanding of projected image and brand personality inference by analyzing the official websites of Europe's twelve most popular urban destinations.
26	2019	De Rosa, Bocci & Dryjanska	Social representations of the European capitals and destination e-branding via multi-channel web communication	Journal of Destination Marketing & Management	Qualitative	10 Official Websites	To explore the questions related to destination e-branding expressed through web marketing of city brand identity and city brand image of ten European capitals.
27	2019	Vinyals-Mirabent	European urban destinations' attractors at the frontier between competitiveness and a unique destination image. A benchmark study of communication practices	Journal of Destination Marketing & Management	Qualitative	12 official websites	To identify similarities and differences in the official websites of the 12 most popular unique destinations in Europe.
28	2019	Iordanova & Stainton	Cognition, emotion and trust: A comparative analysis of Cambodia's perceived and projected online image	Tourist Studies	Qualitative	A total of 22 amateur blog posts	To highlight the differences between perceived and projected destination images by analyzing the use of cognitive and affective image components.
29	2019	Jiménez-Barreto, et al.	Exploring the dimensions of online destination brand experience: Spanish and North American	Tourism Management Perspectives	Qualitative	50 participants	To identify the central elements of a positive online destination

			tourists' perspectives		brand experience via four official destination platforms as the brand's website, Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter.			
30	2020	Jiménez-Barreto, et al.	Linking the online destination brand experience and brand credibility with tourists' behavioral intentions toward a destination	Tourism Management	To examine the causal relationship between online destination brand experience and perceived online destination brand credibility and to determine the effects of these components on users' behavioral intentions towards the destination.	Qualitative	15 Platforms and 27 Participants	Interaction
31	2020	Martinez-Sala, Monserrat-Gauchi & Alemany-Martinez	User Usable Experience: A three-dimensional approach on usability in tourism websites and a model for its evaluation	Tourism Management Perspectives	To develop a model for analysis of destination web quality that includes a three-dimensional approach covering usability, graphic design and navigability.	Qualitative	13 Official Destination Websites	Website features
32	2020	Jimenez-Barreto, Rubio & Campo	Destination brand authenticity: What an experiential simulacrum! A multigroup analysis of its antecedents and outcomes through official online platforms	Tourism Management	To obtain an initial reduction of the theoretical items discussed previously in the literature, which constitute the dimensions of the destination brand authenticity construct (temporal consistency, credibility, and originality)	Quantitative	508 participants	Website features
33	2020	Duan, et al.	Measuring the Gaps in the Projected Image and Perceived Image of Rural Tourism Destinations in China's Yangtze River Delta	Sustainability	To evaluate the projected image and perceived image of rural destinations in China to see whether there is any discrepancy between and within the two categories.	Qualitative	3 official destination websites and 5 OTAs websites	Website features

34	2021	Kanazawa, et al.	Destination website management: A social constructionist approach	Journal of Destination Marketing & Management	To develop and implement a social constructionist model for destination websites.	Qualitative	11 researches and 13 participants	Destination brand image
35	2021	Syafganti, Ramadanty & Walrave	The consistency of projected online destination images: comparing the official websites and Instagram accounts of main destinations in Southeast Asia	Journal of Place Management and Development	To examine the consistency of online destination images projected through official tourism websites and Instagram accounts of five major destinations in Southeast Asia.	Qualitative & Quantitative	5 Official tourism websites and Instagram accounts	Destination brand image
36	2021	Grebosz-Krawczyk	Place branding (r)evolution: the management of the smart city's brand	Place Branding and Public Diplomacy	To present the Smart City's Brand Management model and to formulate the recommendations regarding the implementation of the strategy of the smart city's brand.	Qualitative & Quantitative	Official websites of 90 smart cities and 35 participants	Destination brand image

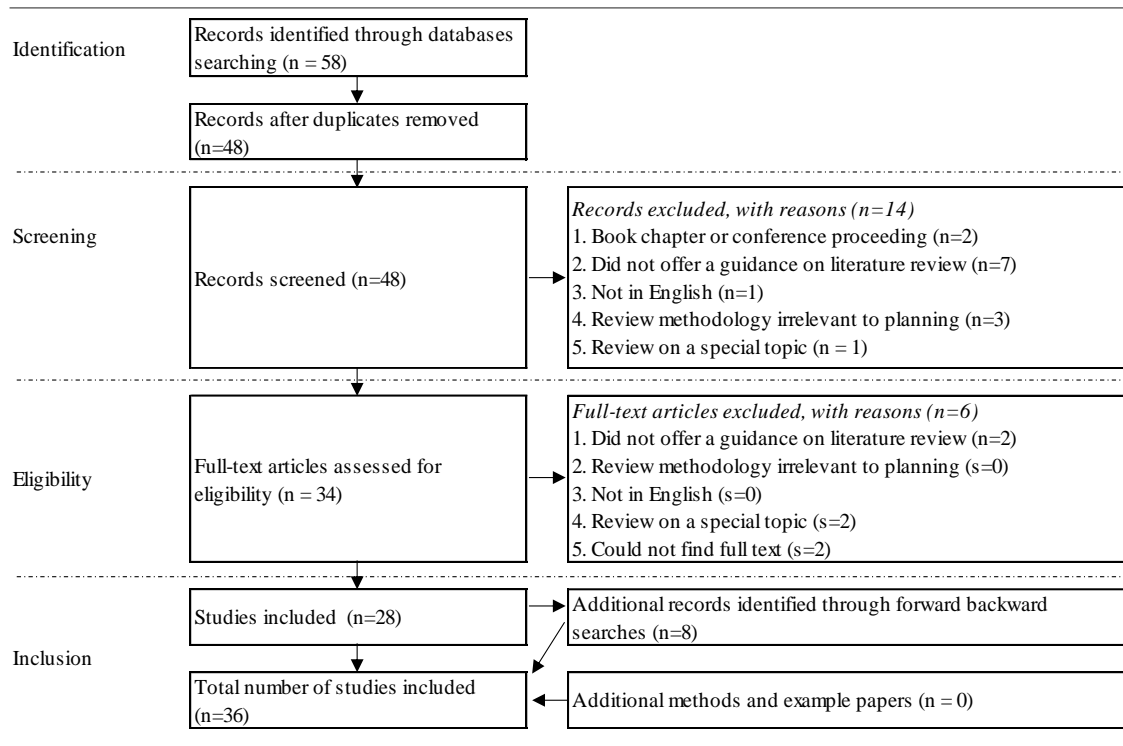


Fig. 1. Systematic literature review process.

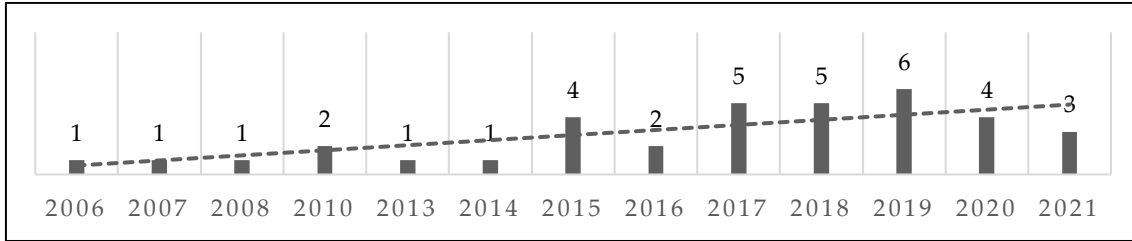


Fig. 2. Distribution of the reviewed studies according to publication year.

Figure 2 shows the distribution of studies included in the review over the period 2006-2021. It would not be wrong to say that studies conducted on the use of official websites in destination branding have shown an increasing trend over the years and from this point of view, this issue is increasingly attracting more and more researchers' attention.

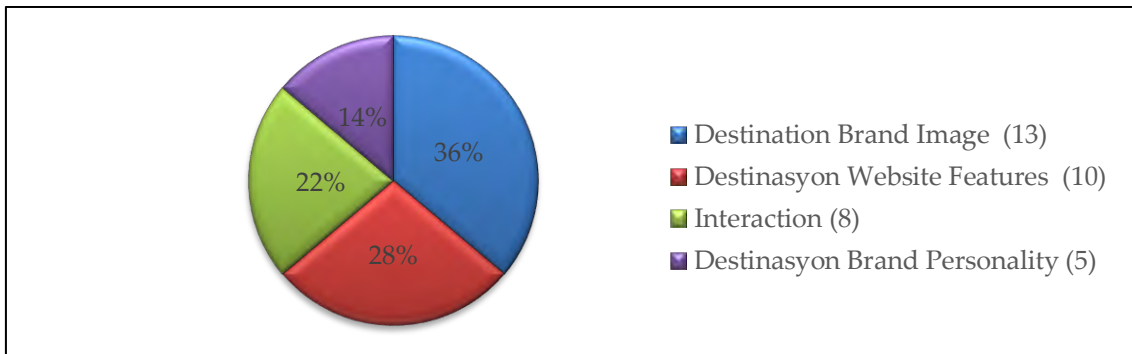


Fig. 3. Distribution of the main research themes in reviewed studies.

Figure 3 presents the main research themes of the studies included in the systematic literature review. Accordingly, 13 of the studies included in the review were focused on destination brand image (36%), 10 on website feature (28%), 8 on interaction (22%), and finally 5 on brand personality (14%).

Table 2 presents the journals which the studies included in the systematic literature review were published in.

Table 2. Distribution of the journals which the reviewed studies published in.

Journals' Name	Number of Studies	Percentage (%)
Journal of Destination Marketing & Management	6	16,7
Tourism Management	4	11,1
Tourism Management Perspectives	3	8,3
Communication & Society	2	5,6
Journal of Vacation Marketing	2	5,6
Journal of Travel Research	2	5,6
Others	17	47,2
Total	36	100,0

Table 2 shows the journals which has been published the reviewed studies on the usage of official websites in destination branding. According to this; 6 of studies are in Journal of Destination Marketing & Management in the journal (16.7%), 4 of them are in Tourism Management magazine (11.1%) and 3 of them are in Tourism Management Perspectives (8.3%). When we look

at the first three journals with the most studies, it is noteworthy that these journals are in the field of management.

4.1. Official Destination Websites and Destination Brand Image

Managers mostly consider that official destination websites were the main source of information offered to potential tourists. Cognitive information items such as infrastructure, order, safety and comfort provided at these websites have a significant effect on the cognitive image of the destination, and this information can positively affect the cognitive image of the destination in the perceptions of potential tourists (Molinillo, Liébana-Cabanillas, & Anaya-Sánchez, 2017). The cognitive image desired to be created through the information presented on destination websites is both an important part of the destination brand image and an important element that affects other dimensions of the image (Zhang et al., 2015). On the other hand, cognitive image strengthens the overall destination image by positively affecting the emotional image. Emotional factors such as fun, excitement and adventure are other factors that influence the overall image of the destination (Molinillo et al., 2017).

Official destination websites are known to be important sources of information for tourists (Fernández-Cavia et al., 2014; Vila et al., 2018). Therefore, destination managers and researchers consider official tourism websites an important tool that can be used for destination branding (Fernández-Cavia, Marchiori, Haven-Tang, & Cantoni, 2017; Kanazawa, Lourenção, de Oliveira & Giraldi, 2021). From this perspective, it can be said that one of the main reasons for using official tourism destination websites for destination branding is that the cognitive and emotional factors about the destination, which have the power to directly affect tourist behavior. In this context, official destination websites are important because they present the information that potential tourists need from a trusted source.

According to Wu (2018), it is important to design attractive websites that can help visitors to learn about destinations and form strong attitudes about them. In addition, the author suggests that a more personal language should be used in destination websites, more attention should be paid to the emotional dimensions of the image, a virtual experience should be ensured, and information diversity should be provided in order to serve different visitors. Similarly, Cesiri (2019) emphasizes the language used in the websites and suggested using a simpler language, and drew attention to the fact that the promotional messages presented on the destination websites should be consistent in terms of both content and language used.

Yang (2017) points out that a destination brand image can be created by promoting industrial heritage and industrial tourism on the official websites of cities, and also argues that these websites can be an important tool to reflect and protect city's past throughout the urban development process. Zhang et al. (2015) examine the official websites of New York and Tokyo by using the content analysis method, and the results showed that, on both websites natural resources were mentioned to some extent, the majority of the information was about cultural resources. Based on this result, the authors argued that cultural capital also plays an important role in creating an urban destination image. Another factor that affects the image wanted to be created on destination websites is slogans. The more clearly a tourism slogan shared on destination websites reflects the unique characteristics of the brand, the more effectively it is able to convey the message (Lee, Cai & O'Leary, 2006). Additionally, rather than an intangible or general statement about the products, slogans that create a tangible image supported by graphic/verbal image matching can reflect a clearer brand image. According to Del Vasto-Terrientes et al., (2015), it is essential for destinations to use suitable and strong slogans in their branding processes and to share these slogans on their official websites. Because a destination

brand image designed with an attractive slogan and logo is very important in attracting the attention of tourists.

It is important to note that with the spread of social media, destination administrators have lost the control over the information presented to tourists to a certain extent, because people often prefer social media to share their experiences (Míguez González & Fernández Cavia, 2015). Therefore, to create an overall destination image, destination managers must not only effectively manage and maintain official websites but also publish information on social networks (Molinillo et al., 2017). In general, destination managers find official websites and social media useful in creating a brand image, among online communication tools (Fernández-Cavia, Marchiori, Haven-Tang & Cantoni, 2017). On the other hand, it is important that channels such as the official destination website and social media are in harmony with each other. Syafganti, Ramadanty and Walrave (2022) mentioned in their study that there are obvious inconsistencies between the images presented on the official destination websites and their Instagram accounts. This result shows that the promotion made through digital platforms is not conveyed in an integrated and coordinated manner. According to the authors, consistency of destinations across all online platforms and sharing focused on their specificities will yield better results for their image.

4.2. Official Destination Websites and Destination Brand Personality

Besides destination brand image, official destination websites help to create destination brand personality. Positioning a unique image and personality proposition for destinations is a strategic decision that will significantly contribute to building a strong destination brand (Vinyals-Mirabent & Mohammadi, 2018). In their study on the relationship between perceived and predicted destination brand personalities through official websites Kim and Lehto (2013) identified seven destination personality dimensions: excitement, competence, sincerity, sophistication, ruggedness, uniqueness and family orientation. The various elements offered by a destination can reflect different personality traits. This makes it difficult to deliver consistent messages that reflect a solid and stable destination brand personality. This variability in personality reflected across information about different attractors can prevent communication messages from reflecting a strong and consistent destination brand personality. Therefore, finding a balance between the information provided about the attractions will ensure that the reflected personality is more stable and thus the desired personality will be better positioned (Vinyals-Mirabent et al., 2019). On the other hand, consistency between the personality models presented by different official sources of destinations is important for positioning an effective destination personality.

Another issue in positioning the brand personality is ensuring a good harmony between the personality we want to portray and the image of the intended destination. Therefore, it is necessary to reflect desired personality traits by using selected words strategically (Daye, 2010). Official destination websites play a functional role in conveying the destination brand personality with symbolic elements such as destination logos on their home pages. However, Rojas-Mendez and Hine (2017) suggested that personality traits have not yet been significantly used to create a clear personality positioning on official destination websites. According to the authors, it is important that an official destination website displays a relatively consistent personality position and that this position is consistent with the tourism experience the country actually offers. In order to achieve this, it is clear that all stakeholders, especially destination management and academician should cooperate (Rojas-Mendez & Hine, 2017).

4.3. Official Destination Websites and Interaction

Official websites, which contain local information about destinations such as history, transportation and climate, and are generally used for informational purposes, are often inadequate in terms of interaction opportunities and cannot use the Internet to its full potential (Yayli & Bayram, 2010). Whereas it is known that there is a direct and significant relationship between attitudes towards these websites and the desire to participate in online co-creation experiences (Jiménez-Barreto and Campo-Martinez, 2018). This is because destination websites collect narratives from tourists who have previously experienced the destination, and then leverage this data to provide value as a source of information for potential tourists at the point of travel decision-making and travel planning. To ensure that users actively participate in the production of value for the destination brand, it is important to develop co-creation processes that can motivate tourists and ensure their participation (Jiménez-Barreto and Campo-Martinez, 2018).

Interaction on official destination websites remains very low, although this is not a completely neglected feature. People often prefer to interact on social networks (Miguez González & Fernández Cavia, 2015). Another reason why social media is popular is because it allows content created with wide user participation. According to Jiménez-Barreto, Rubio, Campo and Molinillo (2020), users consider that only the positive and good aspects of the destination will be presented on official destination websites due to the high level of institutional control. On the other hand, they consider social media more authentic and convincing because they allow open communication between users.

Although interactivity can be considered less important in the perceived quality of official tourism websites, it is one of the key components such as design, information quality and ease of use. One of the reasons for the lower importance of interaction on official websites is that users who are expecting a highly interactive experience prefer official social media applications instead of official websites (Jimenez Barreto, Rubio, & Campo Martinez, 2019). Destination websites need to provide current and relevant information, enable users and other stakeholders to interact with each other, and provide social representation through destination review websites such as Tripadvisor. The official destination website needs to be considered as a constant and dynamic process with the interaction of its all stakeholders (Kanazawa et al., 2021). Fernández Cavia and Castro (2015), in their study aiming to evaluate the quality of official destination websites, similarly emphasize that destination managers should overcome the conceptualization of official destination websites as an information distributor and pay more attention to creating connections and interactions with users, visitors and potential tourists. According to the authors, in the coming years the web will gradually increase its impact in tourism sector and destination websites will continue to play a fundamental role in tourism communication. Therefore, it would not be wrong to say that more emphasis should be given to interaction on official destination websites (Gupta, 2014). However, these sites need to be fully adopted to e-commerce and become international websites for global markets, with features such as multiple language options, visa information, currency converter, online booking and availability search (Cao & Yang, 2016).

4.4. Features of Official Destination Websites

In destination branding processes, it is important which components are included on the official destination website and how these sites appear. Forasmuch, according to users of official destination website, it is known that online destination brand experience has an effect on behavioral intentions (Jiménez-Barreto, Rubio and Campo, 2020). Using keywords unique to the destination, such as proper names, on these websites can contribute to strong destination branding by highlighting uniqueness (Malenkina & Ivanov, 2018). Another way that destinations

can highlight their distinctive features to increase their competitiveness is to present a unique destination image by including their social, cultural and geographic attractions on their official websites (Vinyals-Mirabent, 2019). When deciding which attractions to put forward on these websites, it is helpful to consider the preferences of past and potential visitors. Both positive and negative evaluations about the destination shared by visitors on platforms such as TripAdvisor should be taken into account (De Rosa, Bocci, & Dryjanska, 2019). In addition to promoting attractions on official destination websites, it is also important to provide information about geographic history, local beliefs and local culture (Duan, Marafa, Chan, Xu, & Cheung, 2020).

Contents such as text, images and video presented on official destination websites may be better organized than on social media platforms, but social media platforms are also better at issues such as content engagement and social interactions (Jimenez-Barreto, Sthapit, Rubio, & Campo, 2019). Besides, people consider user-generated content more trustworthy compared to content produced by destination marketers (Iordanova & Stainton, 2019). Reliability is one of the important factors in creating positive user attitudes towards official destination websites. Therefore, official destination websites should clearly demonstrate the quality of the information source (Kim & Fesenmaier, 2008). On the other hand, for official destination websites to contain visually appealing stimuli that attract the attention of visitors, ensure that they stay on the website longer. Other quality dimensions of official destination websites are usability, graphic design and ease of use (Martinez-Sala, Monserrat-Gauchi & Alemany-Martinez, 2020). The harmony of the components that are intended to be conveyed, such as information, visuals, slogans and messages on these websites, with the elements presented in both other electronic and traditional marketing channels will support the destination branding process (Singh & Formica, 2007).

5. CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

This study aims to reveal the importance and purpose of using official destination websites in destination branding process. As a result of the systematic literature review, it was found that these sites are of great importance in creating a strong destination brand. The main research themes of the studies reviewed in the research are; destination brand image, website feature, interaction and finally brand personality. Researchers largely advocate that destination websites can be an effective tool in creating a strong destination brand image and positioning a unique destination brand personality. Official destination websites are important in providing the information potential tourists need from a reliable source. As a result, while these websites provide useful and reliable information for travelers, they should also have interaction opportunities such as sharing experiences and communicating among themselves and with destination representatives.

Another issue that stands out in studies on official destination websites is interaction. The interaction ability of destination websites can positively affect users' attitudes towards these sites. However, the studies in the literature demonstrate that official destination websites are often inadequate in terms of interaction opportunities and do not use the Internet to its full potential. Based on this, destination managers are recommended to pay more attention to the interaction elements on official destination websites and to integrate applications and infrastructure that will increase interaction into these websites.

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