

Digital Destination Branding in Tourism: Intellectual Structure and Emerging Research Trends

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Abstract

The development of digital communication technology has rapidly revolutionised the destination branding techniques in the tourist industry, especially with the growing role of social media and user-generated content. Although digital destination branding is increasingly attracting scholarly interest, research in the field remains scattered among multiple issues, including destination image, social media marketing, tourist engagement, narrative, and digital communication. Hence, this study intends to analyse the intellectual structure, theme progression, and upcoming research trends in digital destination branding. A bibliometric method was carried out based on data extracted from the Scopus database. The search term TITLE-ABS-KEY ("destination branding" AND ("social media" OR "digital")) retrieved publications between 2019 and 2025. After applying document type and language criteria, 77 journal articles in English were selected for study. Biblioshiny in RStudio and VOSviewer were used for the analysis of publishing trends, influential authors, country scientific production, citation structures, theme clusters, and keyword co-occurrence networks. The results show a large rise in research production after 2023, showing increased academic interest on digital tourism communication. The main topics identified in the field were social media, destination image, tourist experience, storytelling and sustainability. The study shows that destination branding research has progressed from conventional advertising strategies towards interactive and digitally mediated tourist ecosystems. This work adds by offering an extensive bibliometric mapping of the subject and highlighting future research opportunities on artificial intelligence, immersive tourism experiences, and sustainable destination communication.

Keywords: bibliometric analysis; destination branding; destination image; digital tourism; social media; tourism marketing

INTRODUCTION

The rapid advancement of digital technology has significantly transformed the tourism industry, particularly in the way destinations communicate, compete, and establish their identities in increasingly global and interconnected tourism markets. Traditional destination promotion has gradually shifted toward digitally mediated communication ecosystems that incorporate social media platforms, online reviews, user-generated content, digital storytelling, and influencer marketing. Recent studies indicate that destination branding increasingly depends on the ability of destinations to communicate territorial values through digital platforms and social media ecosystems, enabling destinations to strengthen competitiveness and global visibility (Francisco et al., 2024). Digital communication has become increasingly important in shaping destination visibility and competitiveness, while branding functions not only as a promotional instrument but also as a mechanism for creating differentiation and strengthening destination image (Habiburrahman, et al., 2024; Sakuntalawati et al., 2024). Consequently, destination branding has evolved from a promotional activity into a dynamic and decentralized communication process, where destination image is increasingly shaped by authentic digital narratives, user-generated content, and interactions among diverse tourism stakeholders (Simeli et al., 2025).

Social media has become one of the most powerful tools in modern

destination branding. The growing popularity of short-video platforms such as TikTok and Douyin has further transformed destination branding practices by influencing travel planning and behavioral intentions through user-generated content and electronic word-of-mouth (Wang et al., 2022). Tourists utilise social networks such as Instagram, TikTok, Facebook, YouTube and TripAdvisor to search for information, rate places, share experiences and influence the travel choices of other users. Social media has been found to have an important role in the construction of destination image, visitor interaction, destination attractiveness and travel intention (Tran & Rudolf, 2022). Furthermore, user-created content is becoming seen as more real and trustworthy than traditional promotional campaigns, thereby making travellers active players in the co-creation of destination brands. This finding validates the increasing importance of digital marketing and social media in enabling involvement, enhancing brand awareness, and affecting consumer views in modern marketplaces (Habiburrahman et al., 2024).

The growing integration of tourism and digital communication has stimulated substantial academic interest in destination branding research. During the last decade, studies related to destination image, social media marketing, electronic word-of-mouth, tourism storytelling, tourist engagement, and digital communication have expanded considerably within tourism and hospitality literature (Zhang & Ramayah, 2024). Recent research suggests that tourists increasingly

depend on digital information sources when selecting destinations and evaluating tourism experiences. Social media has become a crucial channel for destination branding, enabling destinations to disseminate information more effectively and strengthen brand influence among potential tourists through digital interactions and online communication networks (Deng et al., 2024). Branding activities are increasingly recognized as strategic tools for creating destination differentiation, building positive perceptions, and enhancing market competitiveness (Sakuntalawati et al., 2024).

Although digital destination branding literature is growing rapidly, it is scattered across numerous thematic viewpoints. However, the intellectual structure connecting these themes remains fragmented and insufficiently synthesized through bibliometric approaches (Deng et al., 2024; Francisco et al., 2024). Previous studies tend to focus on certain elements, such as destination image, tourist satisfaction, storytelling, influencer marketing, social media involvement or tourism communication. Hence, there is inadequate comprehension of the publication trends, prominent contributors, conceptual links, thematic evolution, and emerging research directions in digital destination branding study (Tuyen, 2025). The current studies have investigated destination image, social media engagement and social media storytelling in isolation. Nevertheless, there are few studies that have examined publication trends, citation structures, country scientific

production, conceptual relationships and thematic evolution in digital destination branding research using a bibliometric approach.

Bibliometric analysis is a systematic method to examine the history of scientific knowledge and to figure out publication trends, influential authors, prolific countries, top journals, citation networks and thematic evolution in a research domain. Bibliometric techniques provide quantitative information on intellectual structures and research trends and allow a visualisation of conceptual linkages among major themes as contrasted to traditional literature evaluations (Donthu et al., 2021); Aria & Cuccurullo, 2017). Therefore, bibliometric analysis is highly suited to investigate the heterogenous and dynamic nature of research on digital destination branding.

Destination branding and social media communication have been approached from diverse perspectives in recent studies. For example, Francisco et al., (2024) argued that destination branding extends beyond promotional activities and involves the communication of territorial values through the coordinated participation of multiple stakeholders. They further emphasized the importance of destination identity, stakeholder collaboration, and value-based communication in strengthening destination competitiveness and brand positioning. Likewise, Tuyen (2025), found destination branding, participation of stakeholders, emotional experience and digital interaction as significant thematic clusters. However, the overall

intellectual structure, subject development, significant contributors and new research paths in the digital destination branding literature are not well revealed in prior studies.

Therefore, the present study intends to analyse the evolution of digital destination branding research indexed in the Scopus database between 2019 and 2025. The present analysis is focused on publication trends, influential authors and journals, country scientific production, conceptual structure, subject clusters and developing research areas. Previous review studies investigated specific dimensions of destination branding. This study combines performance analysis and science mapping techniques to expose the publication trends, influential authors and institutions, conceptual frameworks, thematic clusters, and future research directions with an integrated analytical approach. The originality of this study resides in the full bibliometric mapping of digital destination branding literature by integrating performance analysis and scientific mapping approaches to disclose the intellectual structure and theme evolution of the domain. The findings are expected to contribute to the advancement of destination branding research and provide practical insights for tourism researchers, destination managers, and policymakers in developing effective digital branding strategies.

METHOD

Data Collection

This paper used a bibliometric approach to explore the evolution of digital destination branding research. Bibliometric data were extracted from the Scopus database in January 2026, using the search phrase TITLE-ABS-KEY ("destination branding" AND ("social media" OR "digital")). The search scope was limited to journal articles published from 2019 to 2025 to cover the recent innovations in digital destination branding and tourist communication. Scopus was chosen as it is one of the largest and most comprehensive multidisciplinary scientific databases, containing high-quality bibliographical information for bibliometric analysis.

Study Selection

The article selection process followed the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) framework to ensure transparency and reproducibility. The initial search identified 163 documents. Subsequently, document type and language filters were applied. Only journal articles published in English were retained for analysis. After the screening process, a final dataset of 77 articles was selected for bibliometric analysis.

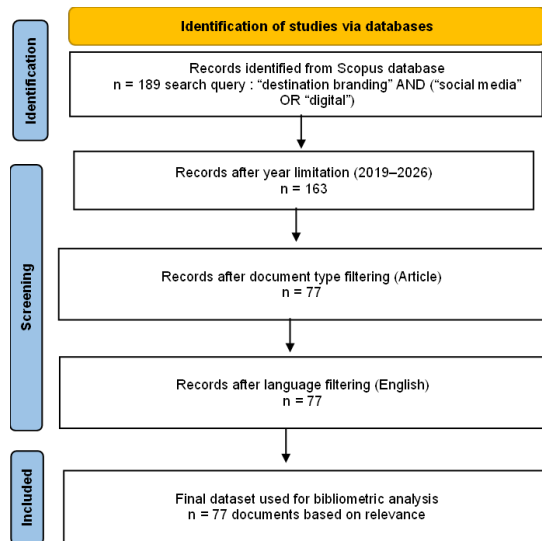


Figure 1. PRISMA flow diagram

Data Analysis

Bibliometric analysis was conducted using Biblioshiny, an R-package interface of Bibliometrix, and VOSviewer. Performance analysis was used to examine annual scientific production, source productivity, author productivity, citation performance, and country scientific production. Science mapping techniques were applied to identify conceptual structures, thematic

clusters, keyword co-occurrence networks, and emerging research trends.

Biblioshiny was used to generate descriptive bibliometric indicators, including annual publication trends, most relevant authors, most relevant sources, and thematic evolution. VOSviewer was employed to visualize network relationships among keywords and research themes. The integration of these two software packages enabled a comprehensive understanding of the intellectual structure and thematic development of digital destination branding research.

Research Framework

The analytical framework of this study consisted of four stages: data collection, study selection, bibliometric performance analysis, and science mapping analysis. The results were interpreted to identify dominant themes, influential contributors, and future research opportunities in digital destination branding.

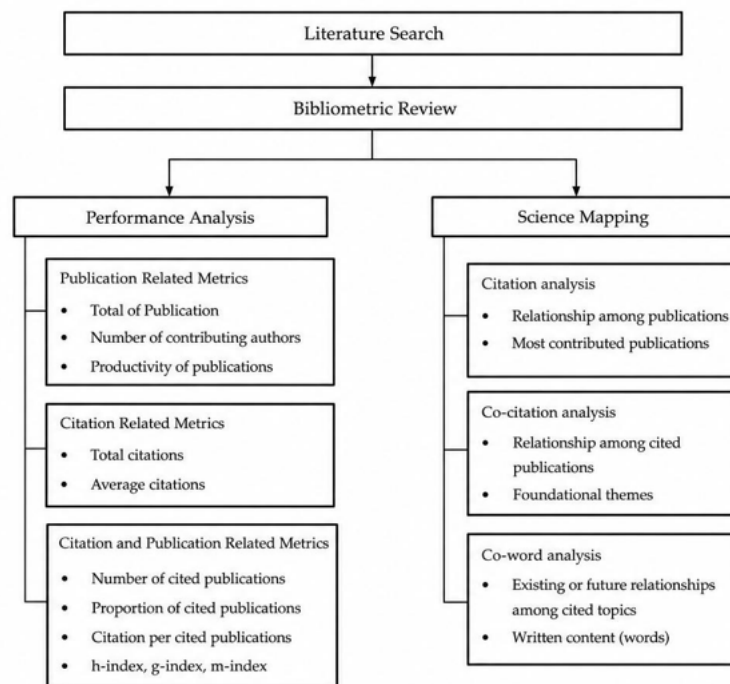


Figure 2. Research framework of the study

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This part provides the results of the bibliometric study of digital destination branding research included in the Scopus database in the period between 2019–2026. The main bibliometric indicators, annual scientific production, nation scientific production, influential authors and sources, network of co-occurrence of keywords, thematic structures, trend themes and thematic evolution are presented and analysed. Finally, the findings are reviewed to figure out the conceptual framework and future study directions of digital destination branding studies.

Main Information

Bibliometric analysis was conducted using Biblioshiny in RStudio and VOSviewer to investigate the development of digital destination branding and social media tourism studies indexed in the Scopus database. The dataset consisted of 77 journal articles published between 2019 and 2026, originating from 56 academic sources, involving 228 authors, and supported by 5,255 cited references. The average citation per document was 13.21, while the annual growth rate reached 6.67%. International collaboration accounted for 28.57% of total publications, indicating the growing involvement of global scholars in tourism branding and digital communication research.



Figure 3. Summary of the analysed dataset

Results indicate a growing academic interest in destination branding, social media communication and digital tourism ecosystems (Table 3). The range of keywords, authors and publication sources further suggest that digital destination branding has become a multidisciplinary research area that covers tourism, marketing, communication and digital technology studies. This finding is in line with Tran & Rudolf (2022), who stressed the increasing importance of social media in destination branding research and

Mandagi et al. (2024), who recognised destination brand co-creation and digital interaction as rising issues in tourism branding studies.

Annual Scientific Production

The annual scientific production was analyzed to examine the development of digital destination branding research over time. The findings indicate a fluctuating but progressively increasing publication trend throughout the study period.

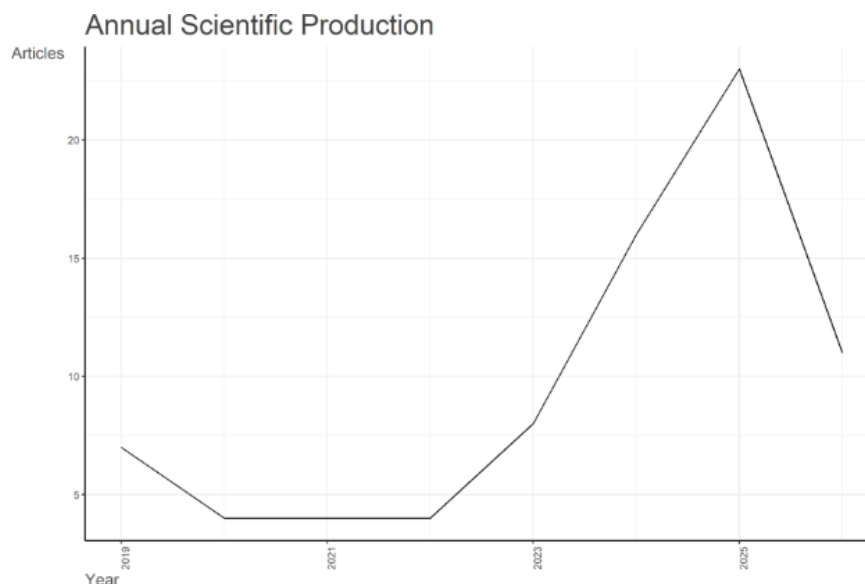


Figure 4. Annual scientific production

Figure 4 illustrates the annual scientific production between 2019 and 2026. Research productivity remained relatively limited during the

period from 2019 to 2022, followed by a substantial increase beginning in 2023. The highest publication output was recorded in 2025, reflecting the growing academic relevance of destination branding, social media engagement, and digital tourism communication. The rapid increase in publication intensity after 2023 may indicate the acceleration of digital tourism transformation, online destination promotion, and post-pandemic tourism recovery strategies emphasizing technology-driven branding approaches. Similar observations were reported by Alshehri (2024), who emphasized that social media contributes to destination visits, destination image formation, and destination branding through the dissemination of user-generated tourism content. Furthermore, Kitsios et al. (2022), argued that digital tourism services and digital marketing have become increasingly important in shaping tourist experiences and satisfaction through online information and user-generated content.

Most Productive Authors, Sources, and Documents

The analysis of authors, cited documents, and publication sources provides an overview of the major contributors shaping the development of digital destination branding research. This analysis helps identify influential scholars, highly cited

studies, and leading journals that contribute to the advancement of knowledge in destination branding and digital tourism communication.

Table 1. Most relevant authors

Rank	Authors	Documents
1	Chen Z	2
2	Chigora F	2
3	Christou E	2
4	Ispas A	2
5	Ivasciuc I-S	2
6	Mandagi DW	2
7	Simeli I	2
8	Wang C	2
9	Abiola-Oke E	1
10	ACHILLAS C	1

Table 1 Most Prolific Authors in Digital Destination Branding Research The findings demonstrate that scholarly works are still rather scattered, implying that the topic is still in its infancy and there is no dominant authority in the research. Two papers were contributed to the dataset by several authors: Chen Z, Chigora F, Christou E, Ispas A, Ivasciuc I-S, Mandagi DW, Simeli I, and camposC. This trend illustrates the interdisciplinary character of destination branding study which incorporates viewpoints from tourism, marketing, communication and digital media studies. Similar views were shared by Tuyen (2025) that the body of destination branding research is still expanding across several theme areas and research communities.

Table 2. Most global cited documents

Rank	Author	Journal	TC	TC/Y	NTC
1	Ruiz Real JL (2020)	Journal of Destination Marketing and Management	157	22.40	1.79
2	Filieri R (2021)	Tourism Management	131	21.80	2.86
3	Iglesias-Sánchez PP (2020)	Sustainability	109	15.60	1.24
4	Lund NF (2020)	Journal of Travel Research	83	11.90	0.95
5	Uchinaka S (2019)	Tourism Management	79	9.90	4.35
6	Wang C (2022)	Frontiers in Psychology	46	9.20	2.33
7	Confetto MG (2023)	Journal of Destination Marketing and Management	38	9.50	4.28
8	Wilk V (2024)	Tourism Recreation Research	31	10.30	3.79
9	Lin M-P (2022)	Tourism Recreation Research	27	5.40	1.37
10	Li C (2019)	Technological Forecasting and Social Change	25	3.60	0.92

Table 2 presents the most cited documents in the topic of digital destination branding study. The most notable paper was published by Ruiz-Real (2020), in Journal of Destination Marketing and Management, with a total of 157 citations. Followed by Filieri (2021), in Tourism Management with 131 citations and Iglesias-Sánchez (2020), in Sustainability with 109 citations. The prominence of highly referenced articles published in prominent tourism and hospitality journals indicates that the intellectual underpinnings of contemporary destination branding research are destination image, visitor engagement, digital communication and online branding approaches. The finding is in line with Mandagi et al. (2024), who found destination brand co-creation, destination identity and visitor interaction as the key themes of social

media-based destination branding studies.

Table 3. Most relevant sources

Rank	Journal	Doc
1	Tourism Recreation Research	6
2	African Journal of Hospitality, Tourism and Leisure	4
3	Journal of Destination Marketing and Management	4
4	Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Insights	4
5	Sustainability (Switzerland)	3
6	Academica Turistica	2
7	Administrative Sciences	2
8	Cogent Business and Management	2
9	Journal of Travel Research	2
10	Tourism Management	2

Table 3 presents the most productive journals in digital destination branding research. Tourism Recreation Research emerged as the leading source with six publications, followed by African Journal of Hospitality, Tourism and Leisure, Journal of Destination Marketing and Management, and Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Insights. The dominance of tourism and hospitality journals indicates that destination branding research remains strongly associated with tourist behavior, destination competitiveness, digital communication, and experiential marketing. Furthermore, the presence of internationally recognized tourism journals demonstrates the increasing academic

importance of digital destination branding within contemporary tourism studies. Similar findings were reported by Tran & Rudolf (2022), who emphasized the growing integration of social media communication and destination branding within tourism research.

Country Scientific Production

Country scientific production analysis was conducted to identify the geographical distribution of research contributions within digital destination branding studies. The results reveal the countries that have contributed most actively to the development of this research field and demonstrate the global expansion of destination branding scholarship.

Country Scientific Production

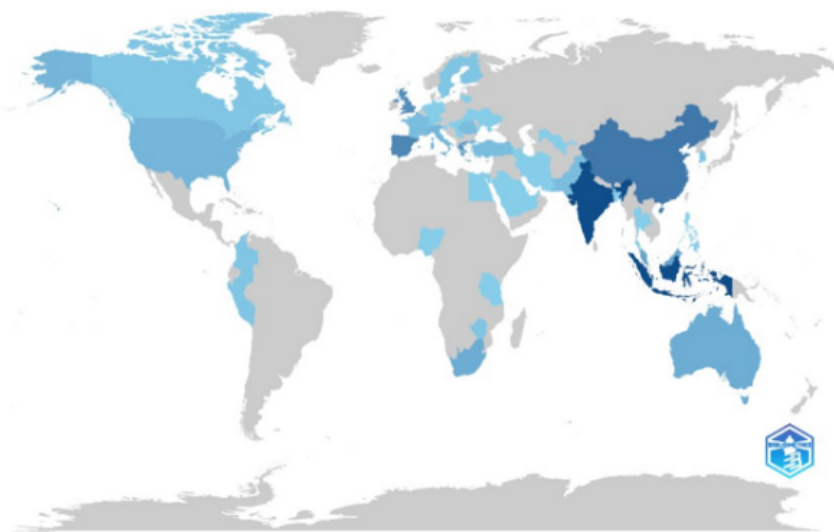


Figure 5. Country Scientific Production

The geographical distribution of scientific production by country is shown in Figure 5. The data show that few countries dominate the publishing output, indicating a high research interest in destination branding, digital communication and tourism marketing. The countries with the

sophisticated tourism and digital sectors are more likely to contribute more to knowledge growth in the area. The findings also highlight rising prospects for international collaboration and expanded engagement from emerging tourism destinations. These findings are

consistent with Salgado et al. (2024), who reported that communication and tourism research has experienced substantial global growth, driven by increasing digitalization and international scientific collaboration?

Conceptual Structure Analysis

Conceptual structure analysis was conducted to identify the relationships among author keywords and reveal the intellectual structure of digital destination branding research. The analysis provides insights into dominant research themes and the conceptual connections that have shaped the development of the field.

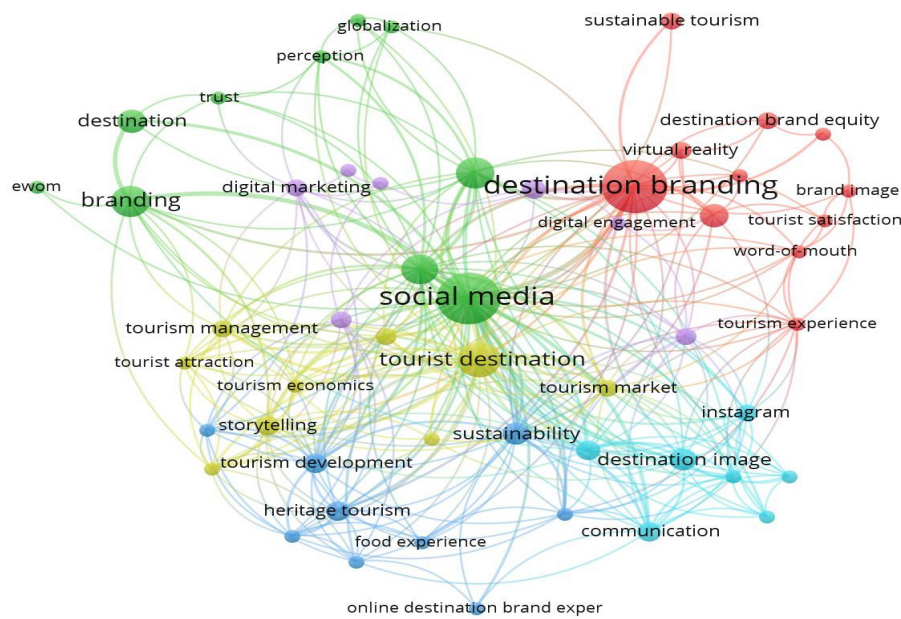


Figure 6. Network visualization of author keywords

Figure 6 presents the network visualization of author keywords generated using VOSviewer. The visualization reveals several interconnected research clusters centered on destination branding, social media, destination image, tourist experience, digital marketing, and tourism communication. The strong connections among these keywords indicate that contemporary destination branding research increasingly emphasizes the role of digital platforms in influencing tourist perceptions and destination competitiveness. The findings support

Tran & Rudolf (2022), who highlighted the growing importance of social media in destination image formation and tourist decision-making processes.

The network structure further demonstrates that destination branding is closely associated with communication, engagement, and experience-related concepts. This suggests that destination branding has evolved beyond traditional promotional approaches and increasingly incorporates interactive and participatory communication processes. Similar observations were reported by Mandagi et al (2024), who

Figure 8 illustrates the evolution of research topics over time. Earlier studies primarily focused on destination image and branding strategies, whereas more recent studies increasingly emphasize social media engagement, digital experiences, sustainability, and technology-enabled tourism communication. This shift reflects broader transformations occurring within the tourism industry as destinations adopt digital technologies to strengthen competitiveness and improve visitor experiences. Similar findings were reported by Salgado et al (2024), who highlighted the

increasing prominence of digitalization, communication technologies, and emerging tourism-related research themes in recent scholarly publications.

Future Research Directions

Future research directions were identified based on the thematic clusters and emerging topics revealed through the bibliometric analysis. Table 4 summarizes several potential research opportunities that may contribute to the advancement of digital destination branding studies.

Table 4. Future research directions

Cluster	Future Research Question	Relevant Themes
Destination Branding and Experience	How does virtual reality influence tourist emotional attachment and destination loyalty?	Virtual tourism, immersive branding
Social media and Engagement	How do TikTok and Instagram reshape destination image formation among young tourists?	Social media marketing
Tourism Storytelling	Can digital storytelling strengthen cultural authenticity in tourism branding?	Heritage tourism, branding narratives
Online Communication	How does AI-generated tourism content influence tourist trust and travel intention?	Artificial intelligence, communication
Sustainability and Tourism Management	How can sustainable destination brand balance tourism competitiveness and environmental responsibility?	Sustainable tourism

Table 4 presents potential topics that can be explored in future research. The findings suggest that digital destination branding research is increasingly moving toward technology-driven, experience-

oriented, and sustainability-focused perspectives. Emerging topics include virtual tourism experiences, social media engagement, digital storytelling, artificial intelligence, and sustainable destination management.

These themes indicate opportunities for researchers to investigate how digital technologies and innovative communication strategies influence destination competitiveness, tourist behavior, and long-term sustainability. Similar observations were reported by Rol & Sert (2023), who identified digital communication, online engagement, and technology-based branding strategies as emerging priorities in destination branding research.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the evolution of digital destination branding research in the Scopus database from 2019 to 2025 with a bibliometric approach. The data indicate a rising trend in publications, which suggests an expanding academic interest in digital destination branding as an emerging research area within tourism studies. The investigation revealed the following main themes that shape the intellectual structure of the sector, namely, destination branding, social media, destination image, visitor experience and digital communication. Furthermore, the results suggest that study in this area is increasingly multidisciplinary, including research streams from tourism, marketing, communication and digital technology. The conceptual structure analysis highlighted the high correlations between destination branding, social media engagement, tourist behaviour and digital communication, as well as the significant significance of digital platforms in the formation of destination competitiveness and tourists' views. Furthermore, the trend

topic research shows a change from traditional brand management attitudes to topics more related to technology, such as digital engagement, sustainability, and online tourism experiences. The findings imply that digital change still drives destination branding strategies, as well as tourism research goals.

This study contributes to the literature by providing a comprehensive bibliometric overview of digital destination branding research and identifying emerging research opportunities. Future studies are encouraged to explore topics related to artificial intelligence, immersive tourism experiences, digital storytelling, social media engagement, and sustainability-oriented destination branding to further advance theoretical understanding and practical applications within the field.

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