



Identifying Research Gaps in Destination Branding and Social Media Studies Between the Global North and Global South: Literature Review

Abstract

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The exploratory study sought to present a review of scholarly literature and synthesise academic insights encompassing the span of 2010 to 2020, to shed light on the contemporary state of knowledge pertaining the intersection of destination branding and social media. The convergence between destination branding and social media has emerged as a pivotal component within the tourism industry, garnering heightened attention from practitioners and researchers. The methodology implemented was quantitative, using a Systematic Quantitative Literature Review to investigate how researchers study destination branding and social media within tourism literature. Data collection, drawing from a diverse array of scholarly articles sourced from prominent literature databases such as Emerald, Web of Science, Scopus, and Web of Science, was used. Data analysis included descriptive statistics, followed by a Cluster analysis to describe current research. Two types of articles emerged, clearly indicating the disparities between Global North and Global South in terms of the social media and branding dimensions studied, as well as the methodologies employed. Findings show polarisation of the research attention with majority focus on destination case studies from the Global North perspective. This study highlights important existing research gaps and presents a roadmap for future research endeavors.

Keywords: Destination branding, social media, literature review, Global North, Global South

How to cite this article: Makumbi, M.B. & du Preez, E.A. (2024). Identifying Research Gaps in Destination Branding and Social Media Studies Between the Global North and Global South: Literature Review. *African Journal of Hospitality, Tourism and Leisure*, 13(3):557-566 DOI: <https://doi.org/10.46222/ajhtl.19770720.540>

Introduction

Tourism is primarily a destination-driven activity (Pike & Page, 2014). Over an extensive span of nearly five decades, research on destinations has garnered a substantial body of empirical evidence, engendering a multitude of distinctive research themes and conceptual frameworks (Huang et al., 2023). Of particular scholarly significance is the emergence of destination branding as a focal point within tourism research, representing an integral facet of a destination's overarching marketing strategy (Dioko & Harrill, 2011; Hay et al., 2022; Tran & Rudolf, 2022). Destination branding serves to enhance and elevate the perceived reputation of a destination (Molinillo et al., 2022). Recently, the advancement of internet technology introduced social media to the tourism scene as a noteworthy and cost-effective marketing tool (Mariani et al., 2016; Pachucki et al., 2022), making these the two most significant communication channels used by destinations and tourists (Hays et al., 2013; Uşaklı et al., 2017). Consequently, destinations are turning to social media as a branding tool to attract travellers and become competitive (Jorge et al., 2020; Pirnar & Caliskan, 2022). This shift has also garnered the attention of researchers in the contemporary tourism literature with an increasing number of publications in the space of tourism examining the theme of destination branding and social media. The same shift has not spread evenly or at the same pace across the globe, particularly discernible when examining the binary geographical demarcations of the global domain—namely, the Global North (GN) and the Global South (GS). The GN, encompassing economically advanced societies such as those in Europe and North America, among others, stands in contrast to the GS, which comprises economically less developed nations like those in Africa, India, China, Brazil, Mexico, and various others (Odeh, 2010). Discrepancies become particularly noticeable in technological dissemination and resource availability in GN (Anguelovski et al., 2016; Odeh, 2010). Conversely, the GS, characterised by its developing status, faces significant impoverishment and typically lags behind the GN in technological advancements (Morgan, 2015; Odeh, 2010; Omeje, 2017). Scholarly literature underscores that predominant research attention has been directed towards premier destinations, situated in the GN (Hays et al., 2013; Tran & Rudolf, 2022; Uşaklı et al., 2017), notably Europe and North America. While there is still a dearth of destination branding and social media studies in the GS (Brett, 2019; Ezeuduji & Mhlongo, 2019; Ezeuduji & Mlambo, 2019; Kimbu, 2011), few contributions have nonetheless emerged from the GS (Tran & Rudolf, 2022; Zeng & Gerritsen, 2014). Consequently, many destinations within the GS often do not garner the same level of research interest as those situated in the GN (Saarinen & Rogerson, 2021). This paper aims to conduct a review of scholarly literature and synthesise academic insights encompassing the span of 2010 to 2020, to shed light on the contemporary state of knowledge pertaining the intersection of destination branding and social media. The study examines the dominant themes such as, publication year, journal type, branding aspect, social media type, number of DMOs studied, research design, data collection method, data analysis method, context, list of destinations studied. Furthermore, the study looks to highlight research gaps and disparities between the GN, and GS's research focuses, thereby guiding future scholarly investigations. The study is structured based on the subsequent research questions:

RQ1. Which components of destination branding are explored in the literature?

RQ2. Which social media platforms attract the most academic interest?



- RQ3. Which academic journals have been pivotal in enriching the understanding of destination branding and social media milieus?
- RQ4. Which geographic regions have served as the primary focal points for case studies in this research domain?
- RQ5. What research methodologies dominate in studies of destination branding and social media?

The study constitutes a valuable resource for emerging scholars and diverse academic backgrounds, offering a foundation for future research, particularly in the dynamic realms of social media and destination branding. Therefore, the significance of periodic literature review, as emphasised by Denyer & Tranfield (2009), lies in its pivotal role in elucidating the interconnections between destination branding and social media research topics.

Summary of destination branding and social media review studies: review-on-review

The purpose of undertaking a review-on-review is to highlight gaps left by prior studies and articulate how the current study adds to the extant body of knowledge. It aims to discern the nature and investigative focus of previous reviews while pinpointing existing gaps that the present study seeks to address. Acknowledging the crucial role of reviews in scholarly discourse, this investigation retrieves and evaluates destination reviews to enhance the comprehension of the current landscape in this domain. By using indexed keywords such as "destination branding," "review," "literature review," "narrative review," "meta-analysis," "bibliometric analysis," and "social media," the inquiry sought reviews associated with the terms in the timeframe 2010 (or earlier, overlapping into the period between 2010 and 2020) to 2020. The search, emphasising destination branding and social media, was executed on Google Scholar, yielding a meticulous scrutiny of six destination branding reviews, as detailed in Table 1. It offers a succinct overview of diverse destination branding literature review studies. Some studies focus on the strategic role of social media, while others encompass broader themes of destination competitiveness, branding, and management. The current study contribution is noteworthy for recognising the evolving dynamics of social media and destination branding in Africa. Its distinctive focus on the disparities between the GN and GS suggests avenues for further research and advocates for a more inclusive approach to destination studies, considering the diverse global landscape.

Table 1: A summary of destination branding and social media review studies

Author	Time frame	Number of reviewed papers	Major topics	Social media platforms studied in reviewed papers	Major findings
Pike and Page (2014)	1973 to 2013	Not mentioned	Destination competitiveness, destination branding, and destination image	None	The study directs its attention toward existing gaps that are poised to capture researchers' interest in the short to medium term. In addition to the various research gaps illuminated, the study revealed several promising research opportunities.
Huang, Karl, Wong and Law (2023)	2000 to 2020	1393	Destination branding, destination management	None	The study identified that the most prominent clusters within destination research encompass themes such as loyalty, image, destination digitisation, destination marketing, and destination experience.
Leung, Law, van Hoof and Buhalis (2013)	2007 to 2011	44	Social media, tourism competitiveness	Not specified	Research findings thoroughly demonstrated the strategic importance of social media for tourism competitiveness.
Zeng and Gerritsen (2014)	2007 to 2013	279	Social media, tourism marketing	Not specified	The study proposes that the exploration of social media within the realm of tourism is in its early stages. It advocates for a thorough examination of how social media, integrated into tourism management and marketing strategies, affects various facets of the tourism sector, including its impact on local communities.
Leung, Sun and Bai (2017)	2007 to 2016	406	Social media, Word-of-Mouth	Not specified	The findings reveal several noteworthy domains within the hospitality and tourism literature that have not been thoroughly explored in the context of social media. These uncharted areas present considerable potential for future research initiatives.
Tran and Rudolf (2022)	2011 to 2021	114	Social media and destination branding	Facebook, X, Instagram, TripAdvisor, WeChat, and Flickr	The study predominantly focuses on European destinations, with Spain and Sweden being prominent. Asia, especially India and China, has seen increased attention, as well as the USA. Content analysis and surveys are the main research methods for destination branding and social media. Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook are the primary platforms studied for destination branding.

Literature review

Destination branding is the strategic communication of a destination's distinct identity (Bregoli, 2013; Saraniemi & Komppula, 2019), encompassing a myriad of marketing endeavours that aim to establish a recognisable symbol, logo, or name tied to the destination while promising an exceptional tourism experience (Kladou et al., 2017). A potent branding strategy enhances the perception of a destination among tourists and also provides crucial metrics for Destination Marketing Organisations (DMOs) to assess progress (Hemmonsbey & Tichaawa, 2020; Tuclea & Nistoreanu, 2011). The process of destination branding endeavours to establish distinctive brand identities and images for destinations, akin to the branding of consumer goods, by crafting unique selling propositions (Atadil et al., 2017). In contemporary scholarship, the impact of technological advancements, particularly the emergence of social media, are unmistakably evident in the transformation of the tourism paradigm (De Miguel-Pérez & Aramendia-Muneta, 2022; Oliveira et al., 2020). Within the dynamic landscape of the tourism industry, the deployment of impactful strategies for destination promotion is deemed critical (Díaz-Pacheco et al., 2024; Leung et al., 2017). Harnessing the widespread global reach and real-time capabilities of social media constitutes a notable advantage, marked by its simplicity of access and proficiency in facilitating dynamic communication exchanges (Khan, 2012). This allows for the strategic utilisation of social media platforms as efficient and direct channels for communicating with potential visitors (Díaz-Pacheco et al., 2024). Consequently, destinations are turning to social media as a branding tool to attract travellers and become more competitive (Benedek, 2018; Hays et al., 2013).



Methodology

The study employed a Systematic Quantitative Literature Review (SQLR) to ensure a rigorous and comprehensive analysis of the literature. The SQLR is an efficient and exhaustive procedure for consolidating and depicting an enormous body of research (Mahmoudi et al., 2019). The criteria used for study selection included full journal articles, published between 2010 and 2020 in English, and within the focus of the study. To identify the relevant studies, the authors conducted an extensive search across major literature databases such as EBSCO Host (Hospitality and Tourism Complete); Science Direct (Elsevier); Emerald; Scopus; Web of Science; ProQuest; Sage publications and one search engine, namely, Google Scholar. The search yielded a first pool of 3,650 records. To ensure that only the most relevant and suitable articles were included in the review, the exclusionary criteria and abstract screening were applied. The literature catalogued in Endnote was re-evaluated based on the accessibility of abstracts and keywords. When these were not accessible, the recorded URL was consulted or, alternatively, a Google Scholar search was performed using the paper titles to rectify the information in Endnote. Consequently, this led to the final selection of 300 articles. These articles were analysed to identify specific characteristics including author, publication year, type of journal, dimension of branding, type of social media, number of DMOs, type of DMO, research design, data collection, data analysis, context, and list of destinations. Initially, descriptive statistics were utilised to explore differences between the observed categorical variables (Gaboardi & Rogers, 2018). The objective was to explore notable disparities in the categorisation of articles based on context, brand dimensions, and the specific social media platforms under discussion. Subsequent to this, a Two-Step cluster analysis was conducted to discern distinct article types, taking into account an amalgamation of the variables (Kent et al., 2014). The deployment of the Two-Step Cluster Analysis offers a segmentation mechanism that determines the most important criteria that present significant differences between article types. As such, it highlights the variables that differ most between segments, providing a clear picture of gaps in the literature, and potentially influencing the trajectory of future academic pursuits in the field (Sheikh et al., 2019).

Results

This section starts off with a description of the sample and current body of knowledge as presented in the reviewed publications. The sample included 300 articles selected across the review period 2010 to 2020, with variation in the number of articles per year (refer to Figure 1). The number of publications meeting the criteria of both studying branding and social media might indicate the growing popularity of the study field evident from 2013 with the strong emergence of social media as marketing tool.

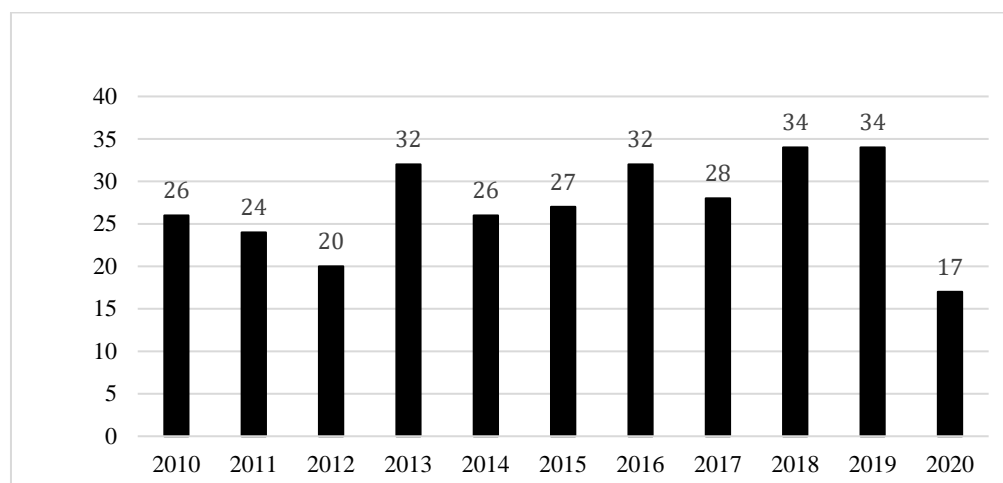


Figure 1. Number of articles published between 2010 and 2020.

Note: the small simple size of 2020 relates to the time when data collected ended

Figure 2 provides insights into the distribution of reviewed publications across various journal types.

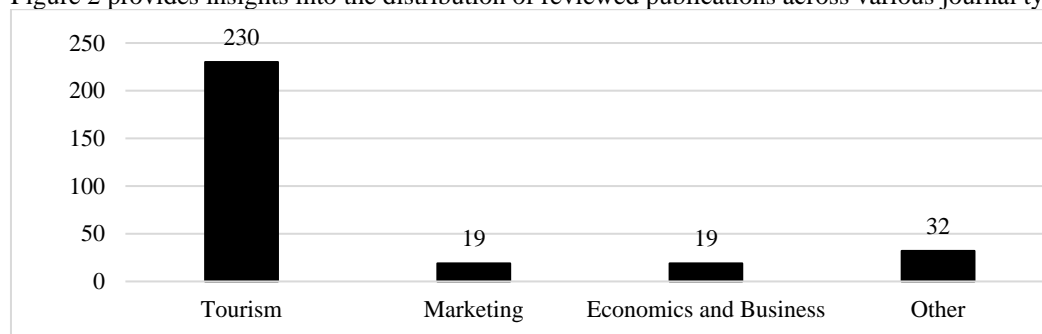


Figure 2. distribution of articles across journal categories

The topic of destination branding, and social media is usually published in journals specialising in the tourism knowledge area. The field of tourism has the most substantial representation, with a considerable amount of 230 articles under its banner.

Region (Global North / Global South)

The findings explain the geographical predilections within the academic research concerning destinations. The data categorises the destinations into three groups: GN, GS, and Both as shown in Figure 3. The distribution of articles according to their case study locations, highlighted the predominance of studies conducted in the GN. The vast majority of articles (n=181) centred on case studies within the GN region. In contrast, the GS region received comparatively less attention (n=81). Moreover, a smaller proportion of studies encompassed both the GN and GS (n=38), indicating a limited number of comparative studies.

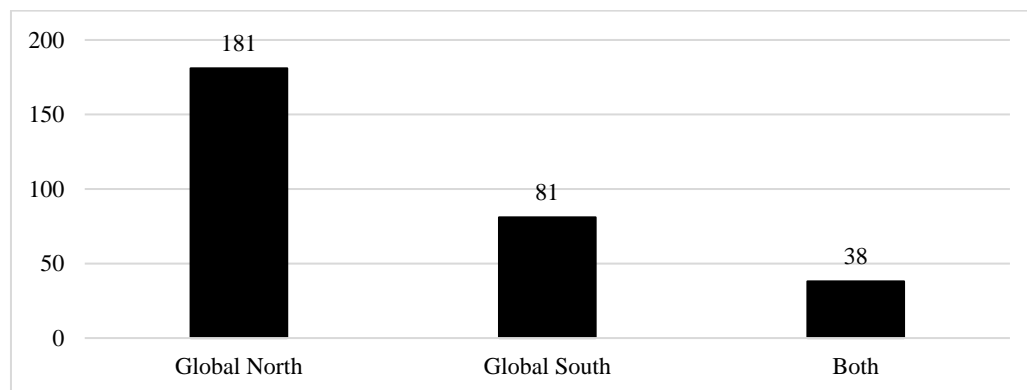


Figure 3: Research regions (GN and GS)

Region (continents)

In relation to the continental context of the case studies (Figure 4), there is a clear inclination of researchers towards European destinations (n=116), followed closely by Asian destinations (n=86). Less studies focused on multiple continents (n=34) and North American (n=28). Importantly, though not the least, African destinations received limited attention from researchers (n=20).

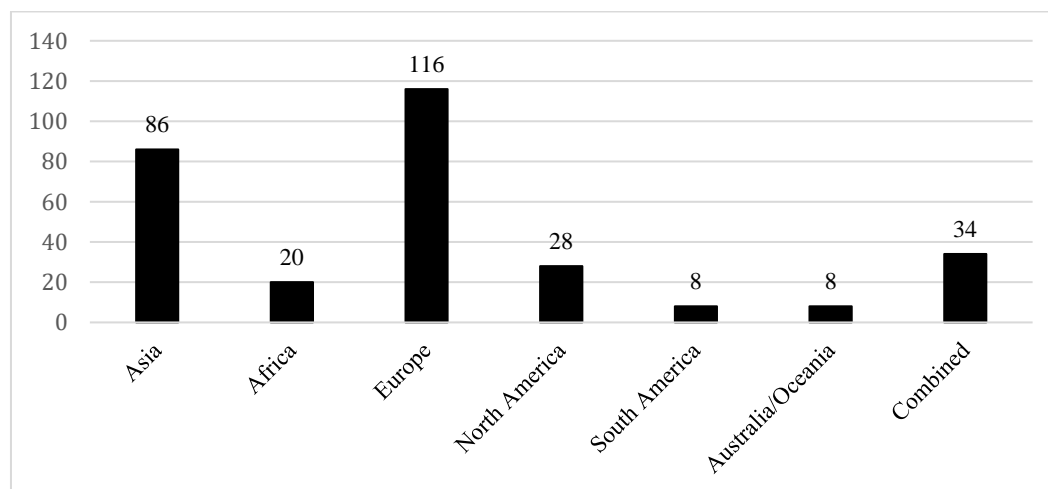


Figure 4: Continental base of case study destination

Research methods and design

Table 2 provides an overview of the methods, data types, and data collection techniques that can be employed in research design, reflecting the potential diversity of research practices in different fields of study. The research design employed in this study included quantitative (n=126), followed by qualitative (n=102), and mixed methods (n=58). Regarding data type, primary data is more commonly used (n=171) compared to secondary data (n=88), or both types of data (n=27). For data collection type, a majority of articles do not mention the data collection type (n=140), while those that do so indicate offline data collection as the most popular (n=80), followed by online (n=41), and both (n=14). Lastly, the data collection techniques used in this study were firstly the most popular method applied across tourism studies, namely structured survey questionnaires (n=155), aligning to the trend that quantitative studies are most popular. This was followed by interviews (n=63), observation studies (n=18) and unstructured questionnaires (n=16). Less frequent studies related to experiments (n=10), a technique that is growing in popularity. Least used for branding and social media studies were more qualitative techniques including checklists (n=6), focus groups (4) and telephonic interviews (n=3).



Table 2: Research methodology and design

Research design	
Method*	Frequency
Qualitative	102
Quantitative	126
Mixed	58
Data type	
Primary	171
Secondary	88
Both	27
Data collection type*	
Online	41
Offline	80
Both	14
Not mentioned	140
Data Collection *	
Structured survey questionnaire	155
Interview	63
Observation	18
Unstructured questionnaire	16
Experiment	10
Checklist	6
Focus group (discussion guide)	4
Telephonic Interviews	3
Literature reviews	3

n=286

* Some Articles did not indicate / indicated more than one

Figure 5 presents the frequency of the research on various branding dimensions. The branding sub-dimension that received the vast majority of research interest was Image (n=144). Following far behind was Loyalty (n=57). The other dimensions showed similar frequencies, ranging from Equity (n=29) to Quality (n=20), with Perception being studied least (n= 16).

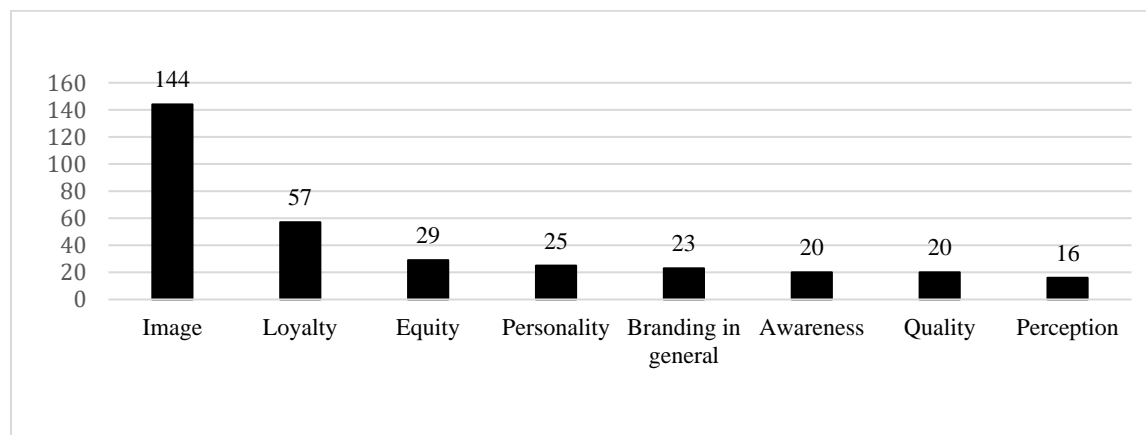


Figure 5: Brand dimensions studied.

Further distinction was made between the brand dimensions studied in GN, GS, or both regions respectively (Table 3). Both overall and between categories, brand image took the prominent role. A similar trend was observed between GN and GS studies on Loyalty. Though not depicted in the table, African perspective studies also featured Image most prominently (n=8), followed by Loyalty and Satisfaction (n=2 respectively). The remaining dimensions all featured at least once.

Table 3: Research methodology and design

Brand dimension	GN	GS	Both	Total
Image	90	38	15	143
Loyalty	36	16	4	56
Equity	18	8	3	29
Personality	15	5	5	25
Branding in general	11	8	4	23
Awareness	14	3	3	20
Quality	13	3	4	20
Perception	9	6	1	16
Satisfaction	6	5	2	13
Self-congruity	9	4	0	13
Value	11	1	0	12

Figure 6 presents data on the frequency of research studies conducted on different social media platforms. Facebook stood out as the most studied platform (n=40), followed closely by Twitter (n=33). YouTube and Blogs/Travel Blogs featured equally (n=17). Least studied, though very similar, were TripAdvisor (n=13), as well as Flickr and Instagram (n=11 respectively).

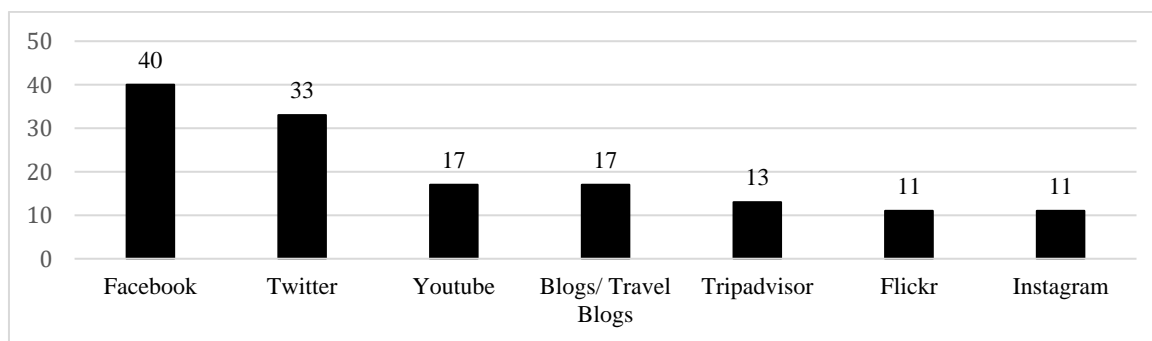


Figure 6: Frequency of research studies conducted on different social media platforms.

Following on the frequencies of social media platforms studied in general, a further distinction was again made between GN, GS, and both region articles (Figure 7). A notable discrepancy was evident in the attention given to social media platforms in destination branding studies between the GN and GS. Though not depicted in the table, African perspective studies only featured Facebook and Twitter (n=2 respectively), as well as Snapchat and YouTube (n=1 respectively).

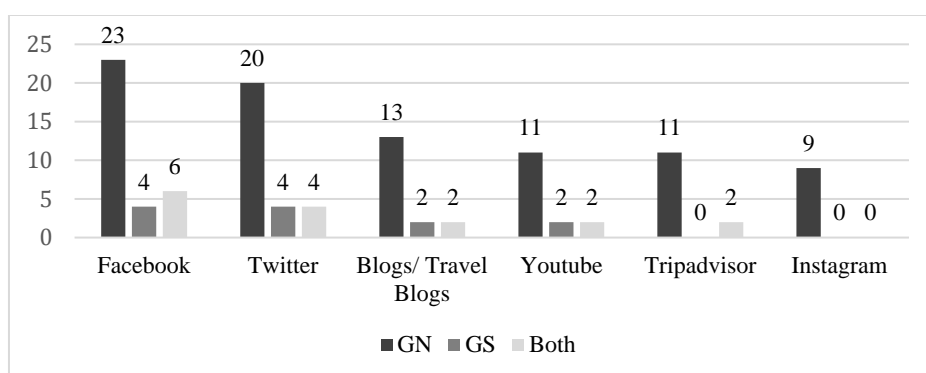


Figure 7: Social media studies in GN and GS

Cluster analysis

The cluster analysis revealed two types of articles, with both being significantly more from a GN perspective. Article Type 1 constituted the largest cluster, comprising the majority of the articles (74%). These articles primarily relied on primary data (81.9%), employed quantitative methodology (57.9%), and adopted a demand-side (tourist) perspective (67.3%). They exhibited a significantly lower number of DMO case studies compared to the articles in the second cluster (mean = 1.89 versus mean = 5.35). The case studies predominantly focused on regional or local contexts (56.1%) within the GN (67.8%). These articles focused more on brand loyalty (27.5%), personality (9.4%), quality (8.2%), and equity (13.5%) than the Type 2 articles. Article type 2 constituted 26% of the clusters and focused on GN (66.7%). These articles utilised significantly more qualitative methodology (81.7%) (than Article type 2). Secondary data (86.7%) adopted a supply-side (DMOs) perspective (83.3%) using a higher number of DMO case studies (mean = 5.35) at a national level (53.3%). They addressed studies on branding in general (16.7%) and studied Twitter (20%) Facebook (21.7% versus 8.2%), and blogs (10% versus 3.5%) more than Type 2 articles.

Discussion

Publications

Numerous studies have emphasised the significance of destination branding, often highlighted in academic publications focused on travel, tourism, hospitality, business, and marketing, illustrating the extensive relevance of destination branding across various disciplines (Tran & Rudolf, 2022; Zeng & Gerritsen, 2014). The prevalent trend in publishing reveals that researchers predominantly opt for tourism-related journals as their primary platforms for sharing destination branding research. The prominence of tourism journals in this area indicates a perceived effectiveness and suitability of these outlets for fostering academic discussions and advancing destination branding studies.

Geographical base

The prevailing body of research in destination branding and its interplay with social media revolves around destinations located within the GN, especially Europe and North America, as affirmed in the literature review studies by Tran and Rudolf (2022) and Zeng & Gerritsen (2014). The discernible emphasis on these regions has inadvertently cultivated a Eurocentric approach in tourism literature, with Western scholars predominantly shaping tourism epistemologies (Je, 2019; Wijesinghe et al., 2019). This bias marginalises the GS, notably Africa, resulting in significant lacunae and a diminished grasp of tourism dynamics inherent to these regions. This skewed representation not only constricts the breadth of discourse but also jeopardises the inclusion of pivotal insights from the GS, perpetuating an imbalanced academic narrative.



Research methodology and design

Various methodologies, encompassing both qualitative and quantitative approaches (Zeng & Gerritsen, 2014) were implemented. Rooted in these foundational tenets, scholars have judiciously harnessed both qualitative and quantitative research paradigms, with the majority of primary data being amassed through online survey research methods. Notably, structured questionnaires prevail as the preferred instrument among scholars. The surge in primary data collection, especially through structured survey questionnaires, signifies an academic intent to produce original data. Hays et al. (2013) and Walle (1997) posit that, within tourism studies, such empirical approaches are predominantly enlisted to gauge aspects ranging from tourists' knowledge reservoirs and perceptions. While face-to-face interviews have traditionally been the norm, online data collection methods are gaining traction.

Dimensions of branding

Destination branding has consistently garnered attention as a potent tool in marketing tourism (Hays et al., 2013; Tran & Rudolf, 2022). Studies on branding indicate that brand image is indispensable to potent branding, with significant contributions highlighting its role in fortifying brands (Shariq, 2018). This aligns with the notion that a well-established brand image can differentiate products or services, enhancing competitiveness in saturated markets (Varghese, 2013). Results showed that the most studied dimensions are image, loyalty, awareness, quality, and perception. Notably, this order of importance is consistent across the GN and GS, even though the research frequencies between these regions exhibit significant disparities. In the African context, for instance, while the image dimension predominates, its frequency of study pales in comparison to European and North American counterparts. Brand image is regarded as a critical evaluative component, as the image not only possesses intrinsic influence but also entwines intimately with the concept of brand identity (Wassler et al., 2019). It is intimately intertwined with the concept of brand identity, suggesting that the perception of a brand is closely linked with how it defines and presents itself (Ezeudji & Mhlongo, 2019; Garay, 2019). This intersection reinforces the importance of maintaining consistency and alignment between the perceived image and the actual identity of the brand (Saraniemi, 2011). Brand identity, though comparatively under-researched, is pivotal in creating a destination image in tourists' minds (Qu et al., 2011; Rodrigues et al., 2020). As studies suggest, a robust brand identity often reflects a strong brand image (Florek & Janiszewska, 2013; Linsner et al., 2021).

Brand awareness is an integral part of the branding process, the bedrock upon which other branding dimensions are built. Its significance extends beyond mere recognition, influencing travellers' decisions by enhancing brand familiarity (Dedeoğlu, et al., 2020; Mandina & Du Preez, 2022). Brand loyalty goes beyond mere repeat patronage, it encapsulates emotional ties and commitments to a destination (Cossío-Silva et al., 2019). Qualitative research, with its capacity for deeper insights into perceptions and motivations, proves especially potent in understanding this facet (Silverman, 2020). The quality of a destination plays a pivotal role in shaping the perceptions of tourists, subsequently influencing their intent to return (Dedeoğlu et al., 2020; Kim et al., 2018). Tourists' perceptions of quality hinge largely on its offerings, encompassing both aesthetics and hygiene, is posited to be instrumental in determining tourist contentment and propelling their proclivity to frequent the locale again (Sangpikul, 2017). Personality of a destination is crucial for discerning tourists' perceptions and underlining a destination's unique identity and attributes (Hultman et al., 2017; Souiden et al., 2017). The concept of destination personality is gaining traction as a meaningful framework for developing destination brands and establishing a distinctive identity for destinations (Ekinci & Hosany, 2006; Huaman-Ramirez et al., 2023; Kovačić et al., 2022). This perspective suggests that in the same manner, people have distinguishing personality attributes, and tourist destinations can also embody particular qualities that capture their core identity (Yen et al., 2020).

Social media

Social media marketing has been firmly integrated into the marketing lexicon of many organisations (Chamboko-Mpotaringa & Tichaawa, 2021). A mere presence in the digital environment is inadequate for enhancing the destination's image and increasing intentions to visit (Molinillo et al., 2018). Social media should be regarded as a strategic asset for destination branding (Kim et al., 2019). The importance of social media in tourism has been gaining traction and is becoming an increasingly prominent research topic (Zeng & Gerritsen, 2014). Specifically, Facebook, X, and Instagram are among the most popular social media platforms in tourism studies (Arefieva et al., 2021; Sahin & Sengün, 2015; Zeng & Gerritsen, 2014). Evidently, the research indicates that a significant portion of social media studies focus on destinations in the GN, whereas those in the GS are comparatively underrepresented. The three social media platforms are predominantly studied with destinations based in the GN. There is a possibility that destination branding researchers prefer to study developed countries in order to gain exemplary practices and benchmarks (Tran & Rudolf, 2022). The use of social media has changed the way that DMOs approach marketing rather than relying solely on traditional methods (Adeola et al., 2020; Leung et al., 2013). Literature suggests that growth in the use of social media in tourism marketing is due to millions of users generating and sharing content online (Oliveira et al., 2020; Romero et al., 2011). When studying brand equity, there were no studies that considered Facebook or Instagram. There were, however, very few studies that examined X. Facebook and X did not appear to be studied together when it came to brand awareness, only Instagram. In a study of brand image in relation to social media platforms, Facebook, X, and Instagram were found to be significant relationships. A very limited number of studies have been conducted on brand personality in conjunction with Facebook and X. There were no studies that investigated brand perception on any of the major



social media platforms. Social media platforms such as Facebook, X, and Instagram were studied in conjunction with branding in general.

Cluster analysis

The two groups within the cluster were separated along the research data type lines. The first article group contained primary data, while the second article group contained secondary data. Most of the studies in Article group two included secondary data used in a qualitative method of research in order to study destination branding. Branding in general was also studied in this manner as well as X and Facebook. Qualitative research based on secondary data from a supply-side perspective has not been conducted on brand loyalty, personality, and quality. Article 1 was underpinned by research data type, primary data, with quantitative research method as the main research method. This group studied destination branding from a demand perspective. The brand dimension, loyalty and branding in general is also studied in this manner. Social media platforms X, and Facebook, were studied in like manner inclusive of brand dimension personality, quality, and equality. Researchers use secondary data to increase the sample size of their studies and to use existing resources more efficiently and faster (Said et al., 2017). There are many secondary data sources available that can be accessed online, including public services departments, and libraries (Reddick & Turner, 2012).

Conclusion and recommendations

Over the past decade, the intersection of destination branding and social media has surged in tourism research, with a noticeable tilt towards the GN. Literature highlights destination branding as not just a strategic tool but also emphasises the transformative influence of technology, especially social media, in reshaping tourism. A systematic review of numerous databases indicated a research bias towards the GN, revealing a gap in research coverage for the GS. Importantly, there are far less GS studies that intertwine destination branding with social media. This is problematic because it hinders a comprehensive understanding of how destination branding operates within the unique socio-cultural, economic, and technological dynamics of the GS. Without such insights, there is a risk of overlooking valuable opportunities and effective strategies for harnessing social media's potential to enhance destination competitiveness. Differential preferences in research methods, social media platforms, and branding dimensions are evident and indicate gaps in existing literature. The study found the prevalence of publications related to destination branding and social media research in the field of tourism management journals, with a particular focus on the influential *Tourism Management Journal*. The increasing number of publications indicates a growing interest in the topics of destination branding and social media. The geographical base of destination studies is found to exhibit significant disparities, with most of the research focusing on destinations in the GN, particularly Europe, while destinations in the GS, especially in Africa, receive limited attention. This finding is consistent with previous literature reviews, emphasising the unequal distribution of academic research attention. The imbalance is attributed to disparities in resources, funding, and infrastructure, resulting in a Eurocentric bias and a lack of understanding of tourism complexities and challenges in the GS. Regarding methodological characteristics, quantitative research methods, particularly online survey research, are prevalent in tourism studies. These methods facilitate the examination of tourists' perspectives, such as destination knowledge, image, experience, and perception. The preference for primary data collection and structured survey questionnaires allows for easy data analysis and comparison, although online data collection methods are gaining popularity due to their convenience and cost-effectiveness.

The study was limited to articles published from 2010 to 2020. Given the significant changes in the tourism landscape post-Covid, a repeat study could shed light on changes in research resulting from emerging trends in the field. The study was also limited to articles in the English language, presenting a limited GS perspective. The study was also limited to three social media platforms and given the fast change in the digital marketing landscape, other platforms should also be considered and specifically those that are popular in non-English speaking countries. Future research can delve into the root causes of the discerned disparities and their implications for destination management and academic inquiry. Undertaking research from a cultural and regional preference standpoint, utilising qualitative tools like interviews and focus groups, can explore if cultural or regional biases influence the selection of research topics or destinations. Specifically, are there particular cultural narratives or regional tales that heighten the allure of GN destinations in scholarly research? What unique elements of GS destination branding exist that warrant investigation through contextually relevant methodologies? For practitioners, leveraging regional branding subtleties across the different dimensions of branding could be the key to more strategic utilisation of social media platforms. The study insights suggest an urgent need for balanced research that encapsulates both GN and GS perspectives, emphasising collaboration among researchers from these viewpoints. Such collaboration is essential as a tool for facilitating knowledge transfer amongst researchers (Gera, 2012; Makumbi, 2016).

Disclaimer

This article forms part of an unpublished doctoral study conducted by the main author.

Acknowledgements

The nGAP/UP postgraduate fund for financial assistance. Dr Pohl for assistance with data analysis.

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