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Researching destination branding in pandemic crises: A research agenda

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Abstract: COVID-19 posed challenges to all areas of society. This study aims to analyse the impact of COVID-19 on destination brand research between 2020 and 2022. Based on Scopus and Web of Science, the researchers analysed the impact of COVID-19 on destination branding research. Thus, the systematic literature review associated with the integrative review was the method used in the study. The combined research databases showed limited published research on COVID-19 and the investigated topic. It is surprising to see such a contrast in an area that has experienced continuous growth since 2005. This article is relevant for public policy planners, tourism professionals, researchers, and students interested in destination branding. It is still necessary to perform a study on the impact of COVID-19 on destination branding. It should compare the peak of the pandemic in 2020-2022 with the current situation in 2024. An in-depth case study would be an especially welcome addition to the literature. The COVID-19 pandemic has underscored the critical importance of destination brand management in addressing unprecedented challenges and crises.

Keywords: destination branding; tourism destinations; marketing destination; brand image; tourism marketing

1 Introduction

The pandemic affected the tourism industry, causing revenue decline and job losses. Before the pandemic, travel and tourism accounted for 10% of global GDP and more than 320 million jobs worldwide. COVID-19 affected tourism-dependent economies adversely as well, and probably for a longer period than other economies. The pandemic also influenced the hospitality and tourism industry, as well as the cities' trends (Gicić et al., 2021; Yurcu, 2021). According to Confetto et al. (2023), the current state of the tourism industry is intricate, characterised by profound crises and changes resulting from the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. Post-pandemic, tourist destinations need, more than ever, to reaffirm their brand in the global market. The global tourism industry must adopt alternative destination branding practices to achieve this objective. However, urban territories and destinations can no longer be conceived, planned, and managed as they were in the years prior to the COVID-19 pandemic (Almeida & Almeida, 2021).

Cities have been formulating strategies that can address tourist destinations and their management (Alramadan & Kasim, 2022). The COVID-19 outbreak has instigated new behaviours in people (Alsetoohy et al., 2021) and influenced emerging trends in tourist destinations (Cardoso et al., 2022; Nunna & Banerjee, 2022). It is important to emphasise that the tourism sector offers a promise based on credibility, security, and the overall visitor experience (Almeyda-Ibáñez & George, 2017). Tourism was one of the sectors most severely impacted by the ongoing pandemic, especially during its peak in 2020. However, the field of tourism is equally dynamic, adapting to local realities (Ngwira et al., 2022).

The problem issue encompasses: What is the impact of COVID-19 on articles published about destination branding in the context of regional tourism development?

This study aims to analyse the articles published on destination branding between 2020 and 2022 and correlate them with the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. For this, discussions on the theme of destination branding were sought in the literature found on the Scopus and Web of Science platforms, dated 2020-2022, highlighting the central themes of these publications and their relationship with pandemic crises and the development of regional tourism.

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The research justifications highlight the support of destination branding strategies in the long-term sustainability of a tourist destination (Kovačić et al., 2022), differentiating it from other destinations. Destination branding can also improve a negative image (Currie, 2020), generating multiple perspectives (Kotler et al., 2006), as there are relationships between destination branding and competitive advantages (Rop, 2022). One of these negative images is related to unsafe tourist destinations, such as those with a large influx of people. During COVID-19, tourists sought destinations with fewer visitors, allowing other areas to be discovered, such as rural, natural, and nautical destinations.

Destination branding strategies include enhancing the city's image (Liang et al., 2021). Utilising branding tactics helps destinations highlight their distinctiveness (Nowacki, 2019), and an effectively implemented destination branding process enhances competitiveness (Miličević et al., 2016). Furthermore, adapting policies and implementing sustainable urban tourism planning is crucial to reviving tourism in the post-COVID-19 era (Nientied & Toto, 2022). One of these strategies involved the adoption of health certification for countries (Cardoso et al., 2022).

The article follows this structure: first, it offers a literature overview on destination branding and tourism destinations to establish the foundation for this study. Next, it outlines the research methods employed for the investigation, followed by analysis of the gathered data. Finally, the article presents and discusses the results.

2 Theoretical Background

2.1 Destination branding

Destination branding plays a mediating role in engaging tourism destinations, including utilising competitive advantages for the destination (Chen et al., 2020). Trends related to this construct encompass social media, loyalty, strategy, place attachment, experience, customer-based brand value, and word-of-mouth communication (Ruiz-Real et al., 2020). According to Marzano and Scott (2009), destination branding represents a form of social power evident in a collaborative process. The influence of destination branding manifests in various ways, and a positive outcome can occur even without collaboration between stakeholders.

Pike (2015) defines destination branding as a collection of marketing activities aimed at cultivating positive perceptions of the destination. These perceptions encompass: 1) a name, symbol, brand, or graphical representation that encapsulates the essence of the destination, setting it apart from others; 2) the anticipation of experiences linked to the destination; and 3) an emotional connection forged between visitors and the destination. This process also aims to create a competitive edge that is beneficial to tourism.

One of the key objectives of destination branding is to solidify the destination's image to establish a prominent presence in the consumer's psyche (Otjen, 2013). This mental consolidation of the destination's image is achieved through associative memory embedded in a network of strategic information that triggers recollections between the brand and the identity of the destination (Pereira et al., 2018). There are four management functions included in destination branding: 1) brands as communicators, manifesting in names, logos, and legally registered trademarks; 2) brands as perceptual entities, involved in consumer/tourist emotions; 3) brands as value enhancers; 4) brands as means of consumer relationships (Hankison, 2004).

Destination branding has increasingly incorporated sustainability as an integral part of a destination's identity. Destinations are promoting sustainable practices and social responsibility as part of their branding strategies (Majeed et al., 2022). Authenticity has also become a key element in destination branding strategies. Destinations aim to showcase their local culture, traditions, and authenticity to attract visitors seeking genuine experiences (Ukpabi et al., 2023). Furthermore, the cognitive image of a destination influenced by the media during the COVID-19 pandemic has had effects on the willingness to support destinations and post-pandemic travel behaviour (Rasoolimanesh et al., 2021). Therefore, destinations need an innovative approach to destination branding that incorporates the safety factor.

Tourists' perceptions and interpretations of tourism destination brands are influenced by attribution and locus of control theories, providing insights for marketing strategies (Alamrawy et al., 2023). These strategies include destination health certifications (Cardoso et al., 2021). Such strategies are closely tied to the experiences provided by destinations. The destination brand experience impacts tourist satisfaction and attachment to protected natural areas, but satisfaction alone is not sufficient to create attachment and trust (Lin et al., 2023).

Therefore, destination branding management is an essential component in the development and promotion of tourist destinations. Trends such as social media, loyalty, strategy, local attachment, and word-of-mouth communication play a crucial role in creating positive destination images in the minds of consumers. Moreover, the consolidation of the destination's image and the activation of associative memory are key elements in branding management. The growing inclusion of sustainable practices and authenticity as integral parts of destination branding strategies emphasises the importance of highlighting local culture and traditions. The cognitive image of the destination, influenced by the media, also proves to be a significant factor, especially in times of crisis, such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, understanding and applying these trends in destination branding are essential for promoting tourism and attracting visitors seeking authentic and sustainable experiences (Buhalis, 2000; Almeyda-Ibáñez & George, 2017; Chen et al., 2020; Cieślikowski & Brusokas, 2022).

2.2 Tourism destinations

There are five distinct perspectives on the tourism destination construct, each rooted in different domains of knowledge: geography, economics, sociocultural studies, psychology, and management (Flores & Mendes, 2014). From a geographical perspective, a tourist destination is delineated by its physical boundaries and is an integral part of a tourism system that harnesses natural or human-caused resources to attract temporary visitors. From an economic viewpoint, a tourist destination takes on the form of a global product available within a specific geographical area, intertwined with tailored tourism services, all aimed at creating an experience that satisfies the desires of travellers (Almeyda-Ibáñez & George, 2017; Kovačić et al., 2022; Confetto et al., 2023).

In the sociocultural realm, a tourist destination emerges because of social and cultural practices entwined with tourism activities, shaping the identity of a place. The psychological perspective perceives the tourist destination as a source of gratifying experiences for tourists, delving into their motivations, expectations, perceptions, and the subjective meanings associated with the overall experience. Lastly, from a management perspective, a tourist destination is one that requires specific planning and the collective commitment of the local community, garnering the support of a particular group of stakeholders in the tourism sector (Flores & Mendes, 2014).

Framke (2002) highlights destinations with identities formed by a combination of interests, activities, facilities, infrastructure, and attractions situated within each location. This composition encompasses two interrelated dimensions: a static one stemming from the destination itself and a dynamic one originating from the place. Therefore, a tourist destination is characterised by four key factors: the geographical confines of the destination, destination content, collaboration within the destination, and the tourists (Framke, 2002).

Buhalis (2000), on the other hand, defines a tourist destination as the amalgamation of services, products, and experiences, which, as stated by Pimentel et al. (2006), involves various stakeholders, destination management, competitiveness, and the global market. Pimentel et al. (2006) underscore the responsibility of stakeholders in destination marketing and its alignment with the strategic, local, and regional objectives established for the destination.

The tourism industry has undergone a significant transformation, especially after the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic (Azmi et al., 2023). In this context, the creation of new tourist destinations and the offering of specific products have become popular strategies to enhance competitiveness. Destinations are increasingly segmented, adapting their branding strategies to cater to niche markets, such as adventure tourism, gastronomic experiences, medical tourism, and nautical activities, among others.

Cruz-Milán (2023) emphasises that collaboration between the public and private sectors plays a pivotal role in promoting and developing these destinations, involving joint branding campaigns, investments in infrastructure, and tourism promotion efforts. Furthermore, tourists' experiences, as highlighted by Azmi et al. (2023), play a crucial role in how the destination's extrinsic motivations relate to tourists' intrinsic motivations, thereby influencing the perceived image of the destination. The pandemic has not only impacted people's daily lives but has also reshaped social relationships and cultural meanings, as pointed out by Meneghello (2023), underscoring the need for destination recovery and the pursuit of more sustainable and secure objectives.

3 Methodology

3.1 Method

This study employed a hybrid approach (Chakma et al., 2021; Napierała et al., 2022) combining a conventional and

integrative literature review. Thus, a critical approach can be performed, and gaps can be found in the literature that can contribute to building a research agenda targeting destination branding in pandemic crises. This article is innovative by focusing on what was investigated in the theme of destination branding from 2020 to 2022, the period of the COVID-19 pandemic, and trying to understand the investigated scenarios of the emerging trends of tourist destinations that were formed during and post-pandemic.

The methodology involved a mapping strategy utilising tables, with a selection of 7 articles from Scopus and 5 articles from Web of Science. Duplicate articles were disregarded, resulting in 7 articles for in-depth investigation. Highlighted by Paul and Criado (2020) and further supported by Paul et al. (2020), even in situations where the number of articles is limited, the literature review remains appropriate for comprehending the emerging topic. Consequently, this study aligns with such a context.

3.2 Data collected

The data were collected from publications in the Scopus and Web of Science (WoS) databases, covering the period 2020-2022, which corresponds to the peak period of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The research phases involved searching the Scopus and WoS databases using the descriptors "destination branding" AND "COVID-19" during three distinct periods: 2020, 2021, and 2022.

Subsequently, articles containing the term COVID-19 in their title or abstract were selected. The chosen documents were categorised into different blocks, namely objectives, gaps, limitations, contributions, conclusions, and adopted methodologies. These documents were then compared among themselves. The next step involved analysing these documents to generate the study's results and conclusions.

The collected data were analysed by comparing publications discovered on the Scopus platform using inductive content analysis (Cardoso et al., 2021).

The research spanned from July 2022 to August 2023, with updates made in November 2023, thereby situating the study within the context of an action research project.

4 Results

The literature review, conducted across two databases, revealed the landscape within which publications on destination branding were situated.

Using the term "destination branding" without employing exclusion criteria, a total of 631 documents were identified, with 77.8% being full articles. The areas with the highest concentration of the investigated theme were Business, Management, and Accounting (518), along with Social Sciences (287), followed by Economics, Econometrics, and Finance (100). The highest point of publications on the theme occurred in 2019, with 67 publications, subsequently decreasing from 2020 onwards (Figure 1).

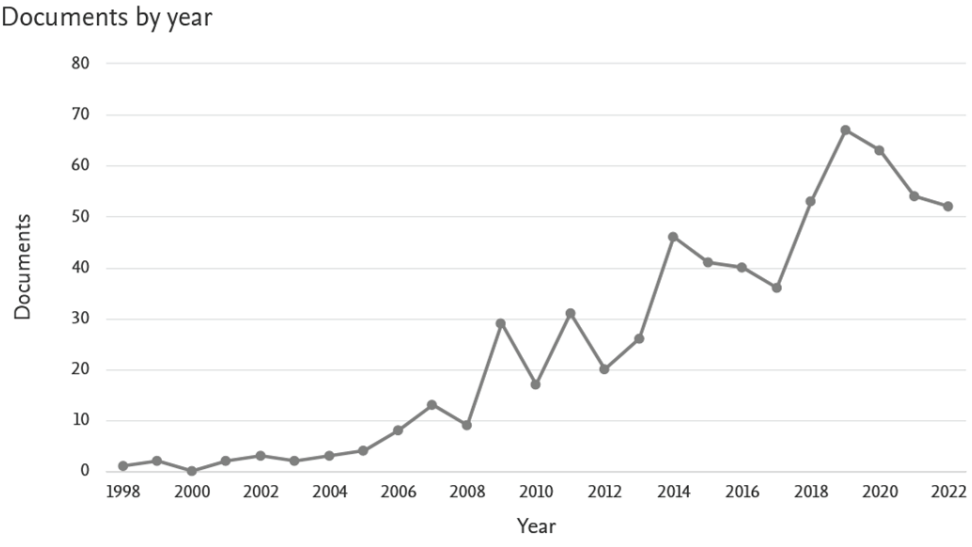

Figure 1: Publications on the destination branding 1998-2022
Source: Scopus (2022).

The first published article in this domain dates to 1998, authored by Pritchard and Morgan (1998), and was published in the Journal of Vacation Marketing. The keywords associated with this paper encompassed Destination Marketing, Fast Moving Consumer Goods, Mood Marketing, National Agencies, Spiritual Marketing, and Wales the Brand with a metric of 97.565 in the Prominence percentile within the topics of Destination, Public Diplomacy, and Brand Identity. This study delved into the application of branding techniques in destination marketing. In accordance with Almeida (2018), marketing and branding are distinct concepts; thus, destination marketing differs from destination branding. Consequently, the study on destination marketing was excluded from the research but recognised as the pioneering effort in laying the groundwork for the topic of destination branding.

In 1999, two additional articles emerged, both with the investigated theme in their title. They were authored by Crockett and Wood (1999) and Hall (1999), both from the United Kingdom, and both published in the Journal of Vacation Marketing. It was therefore deemed that the authors who published in 1999, particularly within the Journal of Vacation Marketing, were the trailblazers in the destination branding theme.

The keywords employed in the article by Crockett and Wood (1999) encompassed Brand WA, Destination Branding, Marketing, Partnership, Tourism, and Western Australia. On the other hand, the keywords for Hall's (1999) article were Branding, Central and Eastern Europe, Image, and Niche Marketing.

Between the two papers, Hall's (1999) study garnered more citations (93), a higher Field-Weighted Citation Impact (4.7), and a greater Views Count (40) in comparison to Crockett and Wood (1999), who received fewer citations (47), a lower Field-Weighted Citation Impact (0.58), and a smaller Views Count (19). This disparity underscores the greater impact of Hall's (1999) study despite both articles being published on the same topic, in the same year, and in the same journal.

Crockett and Wood's (1999) article specifically detailed the approach of the Western Australian Tourism Commission (WATC) to destination branding. Conversely, Hall's (1999) article delved into the interplay between tourism destination branding, niche marketing, and national image projection in the region. Hall's study concluded that the coordination between government actions and the promotion efforts of the tourism industry is essential for destinations to project a national and tourism image that contextualises and emphasises the quality of the visitor experience. The percentile prominence of both articles from 1999 was 97.565, submitted to the topics of Destination, Public Diplomacy, and Brand Identity.

4.1 Articles investigated in 2020

In 2020, 63 documents were identified in Scopus; however, only one of them included the term "COVID-19" in the abstract. This document was excluded from the analysis as it was identified as a book chapter. Notably, no documents related to the year 2020 were in the WoS database.

4.2 Articles investigated in 2021

In 2021, a total of 53 documents were identified, but only 6 were acknowledged by the Scopus search system. Two articles were disregarded as they were classified as book chapters, and an additional article was identified as a Symposium article, resulting in the exclusion of three documents. Consequently, only three articles were validated. Notably, none of these articles had the term "destination branding" in their titles, but three incorporated the term into their abstracts. The term "COVID-19" appeared in the title of one article and in the abstracts of two articles, one of which resulted from a Symposium that was discarded due to non-compliance with the research's inclusion criteria. Therefore, only one article from the year 2021 was analysed in this study, authored by Alsetoohy et al. (2021).

The study by Alsetoohy et al. (2021) delved into the influences of the Sustainable Local Food Supply Chain (SLFSC) of green fine dining restaurants on tourist dining experiences and destination branding in the United States. This article holds a prominence percentile of 97.844. The keywords employed include Consumption value, Destination branding, Food supply chain, Local food, Sustainability, Sustainable local food, Tourist experiences, and USA. Employing the partial least squares (PLS) technique on a sample of 232 respondents, this quantitative research developed and validated a scale for measuring the sustainability practices of local food supply chains in restaurants. The authors concluded that tourist dining experiences in their entirety mediated the relationship between the SLFSC and destination branding.

Interestingly, only one document was found in the WoS for the year 2021, which corresponds to the same article located in Scopus (Alsetoohy et al., 2021).

4.3 Articles investigated in 2022

In 2022, a total of 61 documents were published, and during the analysis, six documents were identified that included the term "COVID-19" in the title or abstract. These six documents met the criteria outlined in Table 2 for validation in this research. WoS independently found

Table 1: Publications 2021-2022

Autor	Title	Prominence percentile
Šerić et al. (2022)	Antecedents and moderators of positive word-of-mouth communication among tourist destination residents during the COVID-19 pandemic	99.948
Majeed et al. (2022)	Destination brand image and destination brand choice in the context of health crisis: Scale development	99.826
Wang et al. (2022)	Exploring How the Psychological Resilience of Residents of Tourism Destinations Affected Brand Ambassador Behaviour during the COVID-19 Pandemic	99.750
Gumede & Mdiniso (2022)	Sustaining Tourist Loyalty toward Cultural Heritage Tourism Sites Amid COVID-19: A Case of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa	98.762
Lin et al. (2022)	Gastronomic experience (co)creation: evidence from Taiwan and Catalonia	97.844
Pippirs & Steckenbauer (2022)	Case study–spa destination branding–a strategic realignment process of five Bavarian thermal spas	96.030
Alsetoohy et al. (2021)	COVID-19 pandemic is a wake-up call for sustainable local food supply chains: Evidence from green restaurants in the USA	97.844

*Articles with an asterisk (*) before the title are in both databases, Scopus and WoS

Source: Authors.

four documents, and these align with the documents identified in Scopus. The common documents are authored by Lin et al. (2022), Majeed et al. (2022), Šerić et al. (2022), and Wang et al. (2022).

4.4 Articles investigated in 2020-2022

Hence, only 7 articles published between 2021-2022 were subjected to analysis. The title examination of these publications indicates that the research was associated with destination branding communication, cultural behaviour, gastronomic experience, spas, and sustainable food production chains. According to Whittaker (1989), a title highlights the originality of a research article, and the audience expects the inclusion of crucial keywords.

Specifically addressing COVID-19, a correlation was identified with health crises (Majeed et al., 2022), destination branding ambassadors (Wang et al., 2022), cultural heritage (Gumede & Mdiniso, 2022), and local sustainable food supply chains focused on restaurants (Alsetoohy et al., 2021). The evidence points to studies linking COVID-19 with destination branding for health (1), culture (2), and business (3), with no studies focusing on the territorial or regional development of tourist destinations.

In 2020 and 2021, no studies on destination branding were identified in Scopus and WoS, as indicated in Table 2. Consequently, only three studies were found that utilised the term "COVID-19" in their keywords, namely Šerić et al. (2022), Majeed et al. (2022), and Gumede and Mdiniso (2022).

It is noteworthy that in 2020, the peak period of the COVID-19 pandemic, no publications were made due to the crisis in the tourism sector. Similarly, in the year 2021, only one publication was identified (Alsetoohy et al., 2021). Among these, only Majeed et al. (2022) delved into addressing destination branding in the context of the pandemic crisis. However, in accordance with Almeida (2018), brand and branding are not synonymous. The former refers to the product of specific management, the place branding, and the second refers to the product of this management, the territorial brand. Therefore, destination branding extends beyond merely a logo; it primarily involves the management of the destination brand.

With this understanding, it becomes evident that none of the papers analysed in Scopus addressed the impact of COVID-19 on the territorial and regional development of destination brands. This underscores the significance of this study within the field of tourism, particularly in the context of regional development.

Table 1 presents the "prominence percentile" per published article, a metric that reflects the topics of greatest interest in a specific scientific area (Cardoso et al., 2021). The results obtained indicate that from 2020 to 2022, 43% of scientific production related to destination branding is classified in the 99th percentile. Being in this percentile implies that these topics rank among the top 1% across all areas of research (Cardoso et al., 2021). This discovery allows us to assert that the primary topics investigated during the COVID-19 pandemic (2020-2022) include:

a) The analysis of residents' WOM communication (Šerić et al., 2022).
b) The selection of a destination brand during a health crisis (Majeed et al., 2022).
c) The impact of COVID-19 on the behaviour of brand ambassadors during the pandemic.

Table 2: Keywords publications 2021-2022

Ano	Autor	Keyword
2022	Šerić et al.	COVID-19; destination branding; residents; sociodemographic variables; Word-of-mouth (WOM) communication
2022	Majeed et al.	Brand image; COVID-19; destination crisis; tourism marketing; tourist behaviour
2022	Wang et al.	Brand ambassador behavioural intentions; cognitive reappraisal; psychological resilience; resident–tourist interaction
2022	Gumede & Mdiniso	Branding essentials; COVID-19 pandemic; Cultural heritage tourism; Kwazulu-natal; Sustainable tourist loyalty
2022	Lin et al.	Big data analytics; Catalonia; Gastronomic experience; gastronomic image; semiotic aspect; Taiwan
2022	Pippirs & Steckenbauer	Branding; process; Spa destination branding
2021	Alsetoohy et al. (2021)	Consumption value, Destination branding, Food supply chain, Local food, Sustainability, Sustainable local food, Tourist experiences, USA

It is crucial to highlight that, in the literature review, no studies were found that specifically addressed the regional development of tourist destinations and their unique impact during the COVID-19 pandemic. This gap in the research suggests that destination development was not a primary research focus during this period. The absence of dedicated studies on this topic implies that the academic community and researchers may not have recognised the significance of regional development in the context of destination branding during the pandemic. This situation could also indicate an untapped research opportunity, where future studies could concentrate on addressing this knowledge gap and exploring in detail how COVID-19 has influenced the development of tourist destinations at a regional level.

Thus, the absence of research on the regional development of tourist destinations during the COVID-19 pandemic not only underscores the lack of attention to this dimension but also signals the necessity for additional investigations to gain a better understanding of how regional dynamics can impact destination branding during public health crises. In this context, there exists an entire research agenda that can be dedicated to this topic alone, presenting opportunities to advance knowledge and enhance understanding of destination branding in a pandemic context.

5 Discussions

The theme of destination branding is predominantly linked to management and business (Ruiz-Real et al., 2020), with a focus on engaging tourism destinations (Chen et al., 2020), exploring their competitive advantages (Pereira et al., 2018; Almeida & Almeida, 2021) and collaborative processes (Marzano & Scott, 2009). Additionally, it serves the purpose of creating positive images through marketing strategies applied to tourism destinations (Pike, 2015; Pereira et al., 2018). The articles examined in the proposed review underscored these associations, with discussions around territorial and regional development remaining at the periphery of these thematic considerations.

Hankison (2004) delineated four functions for destination branding, and these functions were also identified in the analysed articles:

1. Brands as communicators (Šerić et al., 2022).
2. Brands as perceptual entities (Majeed et al., 2022; Wang et al., 2022).
3. Brands as value enhancers (Alsetoohy et al., 2021; Gumede & Mdiniso, 2022).
4. Brands as means of consumer relationships (Lin et al., 2022; Pippirs & Steckenbauer, 2022).

Moreover, the brand functions created a strategic information network that activated associations between the brand and destination (Pereira et al., 2018). This intention was perceived in the analysed articles, evident in the cases of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa (Gumede & Mdiniso, 2022), Case Taiwan and Catalonia (Lin et al., 2022), Case Bavarian thermal Spas (Pippirs & Steckenbauer, 2022), and the Case of USA restaurants (Alsetoohy et al., 2021).

Tourist destinations comprise various areas of knowledge, as observed by Flores and Mendes (2014). Destination management, which incorporates the concept of destination branding, is inherently tied to disciplines such as economics, administration, and business. This underscores the relationship between economic, cultural, and administrative factors within the realm of tourism.

The interconnectedness of these disciplines affirms that the study of destination branding is inherently interdisciplinary—a domain where multiple fields of knowledge converge to comprehend its complexity and impact.

However, it is crucial to note that, in the analysis of current literature, there are gaps that have not been addressed in publications on destination branding and other critical areas. Furthermore, the connection between destination branding and territorial and regional development also appears to be underdeveloped. These deficiencies in the literature underscore the need for deeper and more comprehensive investigations to explore these neglected connections.

Incorporating interdisciplinary studies that address the impact of COVID-19 on territorial issues within the context of destination branding can contribute to a more holistic understanding of tourism and tourist destinations, thereby enriching the existing body of knowledge. Therefore, there is a clear opportunity to expand research into these under-explored areas, filling crucial gaps in the literature and advancing our understanding of the complex dynamics of destination branding.

Destinations are formed by interests (Framke, 2002), product offerings (Buhalis, 2000), competitiveness, and local, regional, and global markets (Pimentel et al., 2006), based on safety, health, and attractiveness (Buhalis, 2000). The current pandemic has highlighted the fragility not only of tourist destinations but also the fragility of their brands. This scenario leads to the question of whether existing destination branding involves the strategic management of these brands. For Almeida (2018), the brand alone does not generate its management, being more related to isolated marketing and advertising strategies than global brand strategies, such as place branding. There are, however, differences between the nomenclatures adopted by the countries (Almeida & Cardoso, 2022). In this sense, for example, in Brazil and the USA, the terms branding, place branding, and destination branding include the management of the brands of places, territories, and destinations. Meanwhile, in Portugal, for example, these same terms need another term, management, to include the management of destinations in their brands. It was adopted in this study that branding involves management. Therefore, destination branding also involves management without needing an auxiliary term. However, the analysed research demanded efforts in brand strategies, but not in its management and even less in the analysis of the impact of COVID-19 on destinations with brands.

There has been a noticeable increase in researchers' interest in destination branding, reflecting the interdisciplinary nature of the field. However, the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic presents challenges for tourism, placing destination branding at the core of theoretical and empirical discussions. Simultaneously, destination branding has experienced a decline in publications, as illustrated in Figure 1, with just over 600 publications in the 24 years it has been under discussion (1998-2022). The profound impact of COVID-19 on the tourism sector is evident in the mere seven publications found in the world's largest scientific databases, Scopus and WoS. This poses challenges for the development of a post-pandemic COVID-19 knowledge base.

Mapping the topic of destination branding from 2020 to 2022 has unveiled a crucial observation. Despite the substantial impact of the global pandemic on the tourism sector worldwide, researchers focusing on the study of destination branding appear not to have integrated this impact as one of the emerging trends in tourist destinations that evolved during and after the two years of the pandemic. This observation is noteworthy because, even though the topic of destination branding is notably extensive and varied, the paucity of discussions concerning the relationship between destination branding and the COVID-19 pandemic on the two main research platforms, Scopus and WoS, is apparent. Furthermore, the existing literature does not reflect the importance of destination branding for territorial and regional development. The absence of discussions on the relationship between destination branding and territorial-regional development is particularly noteworthy, given the potentially significant influence that effective destination brand management can have in these contexts.

The disparity between academic literature and social practices, wherein the reality of the pandemic and the significance of destination branding for regional development appear under-represented in current research, underscores the pressing need to bridge these knowledge gaps and integrate the realities of public health crises into destination branding research. This endeavour will enhance the field and contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the challenges and opportunities confronting tourist destinations in a post-pandemic world.

The escalating interest in destination branding from 1998 to 2019 has revealed the field's interdisciplinary nature. However, the topic's decline from 2020 to 2022 presents a challenge to its post-pandemic COVID-19 knowledge base. Tourist destinations have a pivotal role to play. Nevertheless, destinations can no longer be planned and managed as they were in the years preceding the COVID-19 pandemic (Almeida & Almeida, 2021).

The concentrated influx of tourists in each destination, post-COVID-19 pandemic, can be perceived as an

unsafe space for people's health, negatively impacting the destination and its brand. Consequently, lesser-known destinations have garnered attention from tourists due to their lower population density. Destinations and their managers must formulate strategies for emergency crises, especially for ongoing global crises like COVID-19. Using a Health Seal for countries (Cardoso et al., 2022) and hygiene protocols has proven useful and effective in ensuring the safety of tourists and residents, prompting the adoption of new habits and behaviours.

This evolving scenario cannot be disregarded by destination branding, as it involves the very sustainability of destinations in the long term. Miličević et al. (2016) highlighted that the use of branding strategies associated with destinations can effectively position them, thereby enhancing the destination's competitiveness. However, if destination branding is perceived solely as a logo graphically representing a destination, it will amount to nothing more than an isolated marketing or advertising strategy (Almeida, 2018).

6 Conclusions

The objective of this study was fulfilled as it facilitated the analysis of destination branding publications during the years 2020-2022 regarding the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the research approach to regional tourism development. The topic is still emerging, with little more than 20 years of research. It is acknowledged that COVID-19 was (and still is) a severe pandemic, and there may be others in the future (medium and long term). Therefore, one cannot treat COVID-19 as a pandemic that will not be repeated in the future or as a 'fad.' In this context, more research is imperative on the impact of the pandemic on tourist destinations and their brands to update the management of these destinations, theoretically and empirically.

6.1 Main results

The results uncovered a scarce or virtually non-existent focus on research about destination branding in tourist destinations within the Scopus and WoS databases during the COVID-19 pandemic. This study has demonstrated that exploring destination branding has proceeded as if COVID-19 had not occurred, maintaining continuity from the pandemic period. Consequently, it is suggested that this gap becomes the focal point of a research agenda to emphasise the significance of managing a destination's brand and transcending its visual identity and logo.

The lack of research on the connection between destination branding and COVID-19 indicates the potential for increased awareness within the academic community regarding the transformative impact of the pandemic on the tourism sector and destination management. This scenario underscores the significance of additional investigations or a research agenda to delve into how destination brand management can adjust and evolve in response to public health crises like COVID-19. Moreover, it explores how such adaptations can contribute to the resilience and recovery of the tourism sector during times of adversity.

This research advocates for an innovative approach to expand comprehension of destination branding and its applicability in challenging contexts, such as a global pandemic. In doing so, the researchers underscore the significance of formulating adaptive branding strategies that consider the atypical and unpredictable events that can influence tourist destinations. This transformation positions the field of destination branding as a dynamic and pertinent subject of study for the contemporary world.

6.2 Contributions

The study introduces an innovative approach by suggesting an update to research on destination branding in the post-COVID-19 pandemic context. The primary objective is to bring a fresh perspective to the field of destination branding, highlighting the significance of taking into account the impact of the pandemic on destinations managed as brands.

The researchers emphasise the necessity of a research agenda that delves into how the management of a destination's brand can be impacted by crisis events, such as a pandemic. Destination brand management, involving the representation of a tourist site's identity through its brand, plays a pivotal role in shaping the perception and attractiveness of that destination. In this context, the brand becomes a potent tool for promoting the place, accentuating its unique features, and drawing visitors, investment, and business. Therefore, comprehending how a destination's brand management is influenced by crisis events, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, is essential to ensure the destination's competitiveness and resilience in the face of unprecedented challenges.

By recognising this gap in the current literature, the study initiates a crucial discussion on the role of destination branding in emergency situations, particularly pandemics. We aim to contribute to the advancement of

knowledge by providing valuable insights into how destination brands can adapt and strengthen in the face of extraordinary challenges. This discussion is pertinent to both the academic community and practical application, emphasising the significance of an up-to-date and proactive approach to destination management in times of crisis.

6.3 Theoretical implications

The study carries several theoretical implications. One of these is the challenge presented by the interdisciplinary nature of destination branding when applied to research, requiring the integration of insights from various disciplines such as tourism, marketing, branding, and regional development. Another implication concerns the influence of COVID-19 on scientific research approaches. Theoretical models and frameworks may need to evolve to incorporate the effects of the pandemic on regional tourism development. Additionally, the research reveals a shift in tourist behaviour, indicating a preference for less crowded and safer destinations in the post-pandemic era. Therefore, theoretical frameworks should encompass these emerging trends when discussing destination branding.

The conducted research underscores the importance of integrating sustainability and crisis management into destination branding. This suggests a theoretical shift from a narrow focus on logos to a broader consideration of how branding can ensure the safety and sustainability of destinations. Lastly, the researchers highlight a gap in the existing literature, emphasising the necessity for a research agenda that explores the impact of the pandemic on destination branding. Establishing an agenda with this focus implies that the theoretical foundations of destination branding need to be updated to align with the evolving post-COVID-19 landscape.

6.4 Social implications

In terms of social implications, researchers have observed several situations. The first relates to the tourism industry and public policies. Destinations now play a different role in the post-pandemic tourism industry, emphasising that they can no longer be managed in the same way as before the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. Understanding this scenario holds social implications for public policy planners, who must now consider the health and safety of tourists and residents in tourist destinations.

Another addressed issue is related to the use of health seals and hygiene protocols, which have proven effective during the peak of the pandemic in ensuring the safety of tourists and residents. This led to new behavioural habits among people who travel to these destinations. The research indicates that tourist preferences have shifted, with a preference for less crowded destinations. This shift has social implications for local governments, residents, tourists, and private stakeholders, who now need to adapt to these ever-evolving preferences.

The article further emphasises that, even in times of crisis, destination branding should focus on the constructed identity and image of a tourist destination, promoting sustainable regional development. This underscores the social impact of branding on the perception and reputation of a destination, moving beyond a mere association with logos that do not contribute to territorial and regional development. Additionally, it is crucial to highlight the importance of proper destination branding management in strategic decision-making and tourism planning in the post-pandemic period.

6.5 Practical implications

The article is of interest to public policy planners, tourism professionals with an interdisciplinary focus on tourism, marketing, branding, communication, cultural geography, and regional development, as well as researchers and students studying destination branding. Even in the context of emergency crises, destination branding should be planned and executed with a focus on the constructed identity and image of the tourism destination. Moreover, the proper management of destination branding assists in strategic decision-making and tourism plans for creating the image and identity of a tourist place, strengthening the social actors involved, including local government, residents, tourists, and private stakeholders.

6.6 Limitations and future research

The study was conducted exclusively in the Scopus and WoS databases, and comparing the results with those from other databases would be beneficial.

6.7 Final considerations

The significance of this study extends to a reassessment of tourist destination brands. This interdisciplinary discussion recognises the pivotal roles these brands play in various fields of knowledge. In the post-COVID-19 scena-

rio, it is believed that the management of destination brands will need to seek answers in a new context that remains diffuse and uncertain. Merely creating logos that identify destinations is no longer sustainable without considering the management of these locales and the impact of the ongoing pandemic on future research agendas.

The research conducted in scientific databases, encompassing publications between 2020 and 2022 during the COVID-19 pandemic on the theme of destination branding, is pivotal for understanding how academic discourse is adapting to the current context. This analysis offers critical insights for the field of destination branding, underscoring the necessity for more comprehensive and integrated approaches. The study reinforces that the management of destination brands must be regarded as a vital component in responding to unprecedented challenges and crises, such as the pandemic. Consequently, it is imperative that research continues to evolve and provide guidance for more resilient and effective destination management.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Bionotes

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