e3 Revista de Economia, Empresas e Empreendedores na CPLP
Journal of Economics, Business and Entrepreneurship in the CPLP
ISSN 2183-7201 | V12 | Special Issue, Part. 3 | 2026

Designing Destinations, Communicating Experiences: The Case of Portuguese Regional Tourism Organisations on Instagram

Cristina Estevão [1, 2], **Diogo Salvado** [1], **Helena Alves** [1, 2], **Ana María Campón-Cerro** [1, 2, 3]

[1] University of Beira Interior, Portugal
[2] Research Centre for Business Sciences (NECE), Portugal
[3] University of Extremadura, Spain

Corresponding author: Cristina Estevão | cristina.estevao@ubi.pt
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2991-9139
DOI: https://doi.org/10.29073/e3.v12i5.1303

Received: 12/09/2026 | **Accepted**: 01/11/2026 | **Published**: 10/11/2026

Abstract

The image of a tourist destination is one of the central elements of contemporary tourism communication and promotion. In this context, Instagram has established itself as a strategic tool for tourism promotion and for building the image of destinations. The aim of this study is to analyse the image projected by the Regional Tourism Organisations (RTO) of Mainland Portugal through the communication of tourist experiences on Instagram. To this end, a qualitative methodology was adopted, based on content analysis of the textual descriptions of 1,018 posts published between May and December 2023 on the official profiles of the five RTO. The results reveal a predominance of experiences of an aesthetic nature, followed by those centred on entertainment and escapism, whilst educational experiences feature to a lesser extent. It is concluded that the RTOs' communication on Instagram projects a tourism image based on beauty, authenticity, wellbeing and leisure, highlighting the role of social media in shaping the image of tourist destinations.

Keywords: Destination Image, Tourism Experiences, Experience Economy, Regional Tourism Organisations, Instagram

1. Introduction

In recent decades, social media has profoundly transformed the way in which individuals, brands and organisations communicate with one another (Manning, 2014; Mariani et al., 2018). Social media has proven capable of altering and influencing behaviour, serving as an effective tool in digital marketing, given that consumers increasingly rely on opinions and reviews shared by other users on social media (Mangold & Faulds, 2009; Kotler, 2016). In the tourism sector, this phenomenon is particularly evident, not only due to the growing reliance on the sharing of information regarding destinations and tourist experiences (Hays et al., 2013), but also because of the central role played by social media in the sharing of visual and narrative experiences, which have a strong impact on tourists' decision-making processes (Fatanti & Suyadnya, 2015; Silva & Bezerra, 2020). Among the various social media platforms and online channels, Instagram has taken on a prominent role as one of the main channels for tourism communication and promotion, owing to its large user base, its visual nature and the ease with which it allows users to capture and share moments almost instantly (Huey & Yazdanifard, 2015; Silva, 2012).

Tourism communication on social media is a process in which, in addition to the information disseminated by tourism organisations, users are able to co-construct the image of a tourist destination through the content they produce, thereby dictating the success of various tourism products (Mak, 2017; Garay, 2019). As it is impossible to control all the content produced regarding a given tourist destination, this new dynamic has a direct impact on how

the image of tourist destinations is constructed, perceived and disseminated, given that user-generated content has become a determining factor in shaping that image (Michaelidou et al., 2013; Antolín-Prieto et al., 2021). At the same time, tourists are increasingly seeking authentic, immersive and memorable experiences, and are influenced by how these are portrayed online (Hosany et al., 2022; Rasoolimanesh et al., 2021).

In Portugal, the Regional Tourism Organisations (RTO) are the bodies responsible for building and promoting the image of the country's various tourist regions. Their presence on Instagram, as a communication tool, raises pertinent questions regarding their positioning and effectiveness, given their ability to communicate and project images and experiences associated with tourist destinations (Stojanovic et al., 2018; Muhoho-Minni, 2017).

Although the literature has dealt extensively with the topics of digital marketing (Torres, 2009; Kannan & Li, 2017), tourism communication on social media and tourist experiences at destinations (Hosany & Witham, 2009; Lane et al., 2022; Osmond et al., 2015), research has largely focused on the tourist's perspective. In this context, several studies have sought to understand how visitors perceive the image of destinations, experience tourism and develop subsequent behavioural responses, particularly in terms of satisfaction, loyalty, recommendation and intention to revisit (Beerli & Martín, 2004; Chen & Tsai, 2007; Stylos et al., 2016; Zhang et al., 2018). At the same time, Pine and Gilmore's (1998) Experience Economy model has been widely used to analyse how tourists interpret and evaluate the experiences they have at tourist destinations. However, there remains a scarcity of research that draws on this framework to analyse the perspective of Destination Management Organisations (DMOs), particularly in their capacity as entities responsible for the planning, promotion and communication of tourist experiences. Thus, whilst there is a well-established body of knowledge regarding tourists' perceived image and experiences, a gap remains regarding how DMOs design and communicate these experiences through digital media. This gap is particularly evident in the Portuguese context, where there are few studies focusing on the communication carried out by Regional Tourism Destination (ERTs) on Instagram and on how they represent destinations through the tourist experiences they promote via social media.

In this context, the overall aim of this study is to analyse the image projected by Regional Tourism Destination through the communication of tourist experiences on Instagram. To achieve this aim, the following research questions were defined:

- **RI1:** *Which experiential dimensions are most frequently promoted in the Instagram posts of the* Regional Tourism Organisations *of Mainland Portugal?*
- **RI2:** *How are the experiential dimensions promoted by the different* Regional Tourism Organisations *in Mainland Portugal distributed on Instagram?*
- **QI3:** *How are tourist experiences represented in the text descriptions of posts by the* Regional Tourism Organisations *of Mainland Portugal on Instagram?*

This study is structured into five sections. Following the introduction, the theoretical framework is presented, followed by the methodology, the analysis and discussion of the results, and, finally, the conclusions, limitations and future lines of research.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 Tourism Communication on Social Media

The nature of communication in the tourism sector prior to the internet and social media has undergone significant changes. Whereas previously this took place mainly through magazines and tourist guides to obtain information about a destination, digital

communication has made it possible to learn about a tourist destination in greater detail, even before visiting it (Jacinto, 2023). According to the same author, social media has altered the way in which people, businesses and organisations communicate and interact with one another, particularly in terms of how tourists perceive destinations and the relationships that tourism organisations establish with them.

Social media has contributed significantly to the development of the tourism industry worldwide, whilst also establishing itself as a low-cost communication tool for businesses in this sector, demonstrating an extremely favourable cost-benefit ratio (Mariani et al., 2018). These benefits provided by social media have been particularly evident in terms of the promotion and visibility of tourism products, including destinations, but also in relation to growing competitiveness within the sector. According to Jaramillo et al. (2023), popularity and reach on social media have a significant impact on the promotion of a tourist destination, through its attractions, reviews and experiences, enabling it to reach even people who were previously unaware of the place's existence.

The content and information found on social media may also come directly from destination management organisations (DMOs), highlighting how these bodies have increasingly used social media to communicate with potential tourists from around the world, as these platforms eliminate geographical and demographic barriers (De Jesús Santos et al., 2020). The use of social media also enables these organisations to better segment their audiences and achieve greater *engagement* by creating content that users are likely to share (Minazzi, 2015). Consequently, with the majority of travellers using social media as a source of information and inspiration when planning trips, the *online* profiles of tourist destinations have become a key tool for disseminating information and building relationships with the public (Cardona & María-Dolores, 2017).

In the tourism sector, Instagram has proved to be a revolutionary and increasingly indispensable social media platform, capable of providing its users and potential consumers with a wide range of detailed information from various sources relating to a diverse array of destinations (De Jesús Santos et al., 2020). Fiona et al. (2022) add that Instagram sparks tourists' interest in visiting certain destinations through the power of imagery, making this social media platform one of the most widely used for gathering tourism-related information and recommendations, as well as one of the most effective ways of promoting tourism products to potential consumers.

According to Parra-López et al. (2011), DMOs should prioritise user-generated content in *online* communication, as, according to Antolín-Prieto et al. (2021), it is through such content that the image of a tourist destination is built via social media. In the Portuguese context, Corrêa et al. (2025) demonstrate that Instagram plays a strategic role in tourism communication, enabling destinations' attributes to be showcased and their visibility among target audiences to be maintained.

2.2 The Destination's Projected Image

The image of a tourist destination is a concept that has been extensively studied in tourism literature and is characterised by its multidimensional and subjective nature. According to Hallmann et al. (2013), the destination image corresponds to the set of ideas, impressions and perceptions that individuals develop regarding a particular destination or tourism product. Similarly, Brea and Cardoso (2011) note that the destination image results from a mental representation constructed from the knowledge, beliefs, feelings and emotions associated with a particular place.

The literature recognises that the destination image comprises different components. According to Stepchenkova and Morrison (2008), the image consists of a cognitive component and an affective component. The cognitive component is associated with the knowledge and beliefs that individuals hold regarding a destination's attributes, whilst the affective component relates to the feelings and emotions evoked by that same place. The combination of these two dimensions contributes to the formation of the destination's overall image, influencing the way in which it is represented and interpreted.

In the context of tourism communication, it is important to distinguish between the perceived image and the projected image of a destination. Whilst the perceived image corresponds to the perceptions and interpretations developed by tourists, the projected image results from the communication efforts undertaken by the bodies responsible for tourism promotion. According to Neves (2012, p. 45), the projected image consists of the image 'conveyed to the target market through various media', seeking to highlight the attributes considered most representative and attractive of the destination.

In this regard, Destination Management Organisations play a central role in constructing the projected image. According to Santana et al. (2017), these organisations are responsible for communicating the attributes of destinations effectively, seeking to convey an image that is consistent with reality whilst simultaneously capable of arousing interest among potential visitors. The authors argue that destination communication should stimulate the search for information and reinforce the desire to visit, thereby contributing to the construction of a positive and distinctive image.

With the growth of digital media, the construction of a destination's image has also come to take place in the online environment. In this context, Mak (2017) notes that a destination's online image results from the interaction between the image projected by destination management organisations and the image perceived and shared by tourists. According to the author, the image projected online is constructed through content produced by DMOs, which seek to represent the attributes, resources and experiences considered most relevant to the promotion of the destination.

2.3. The Experience Economy and Tourist Experiences

The growing competitiveness amongst tourist destinations has led organisations in the tourism sector to seek ways of differentiating themselves that go beyond the traditional offering of products and services. In this context, experiences play a central role in value creation and are currently regarded as one of the most important resources for gaining competitive advantage (Hosany et al., 2022).

According to Pine and Gilmore (1998), an experience constitutes an economic offering distinct from goods and services, corresponding to a memorable event that engages the individual in a personal and meaningful way. According to the same authors, experiences are created when organisations combine goods and services in order to provide moments capable of generating engagement and remaining in consumers' memories. In this sense, the value of the experience lies not only in the consumption of a product or service, but above all in the sensations, emotions and memories generated throughout the interaction (Pine & Gilmore, 2013). Similarly, Boswijk et al. (2007) note that meaningful experiences result from interactions with the surrounding environment and from the emotions and learning that emerge from them.

In the context of tourism, the concept of experience takes on particular significance, as destinations are increasingly valued for their ability to provide distinctive and memorable

experiences. According to Hosany et al. (2022), a memorable tourism experience is one that is recalled positively after it has taken place. Consequently, tourist destinations no longer compete solely based on their physical resources or infrastructure, but also seek to provide authentic, immersive and distinctive experiences (Aroeira et al., 2016).

To understand the nature of these experiences, Pine and Gilmore (1998) propose a model based on two fundamental axes: the degree of the individual's participation in the experience, which can range from active to passive participation; and the nature of the relationship with the surrounding environment, which ranges from absorption to immersion. The combination of these two axes gives rise to four dimensions of experience: 'Entertainment', 'Educational', 'Escapism' and 'Aesthetic'.

The entertainment dimension is characterised by passive participation and a process of absorption into the experience, as occurs when watching a performance. The 'Educational' dimension involves active participation linked to processes of learning and the acquisition of knowledge. The 'Aesthetic' dimension refers to situations in which the individual is immersed in the environment, appreciating it in a contemplative manner, without altering its course. In turn, the escapism dimension combines active participation with high levels of immersion, directly involving the individual in the experience (Mehmetoglu & Engen, 2011).

According to Pine and Gilmore (1998), the most comprehensive experiences tend to incorporate elements from all four dimensions, although their combination may vary depending on the context and the intended objectives. Given its ability to characterise different forms of experiential engagement, this model has been widely used in tourism research and constitutes the conceptual framework adopted in this study to analyse the experiences communicated by Regional Tourism Destination in their Instagram posts.

3. METHODOLOGY

Given the objective of this research, an exploratory qualitative approach was adopted, as it seeks to deepen our understanding of phenomena that have as yet been little studied, thereby contributing to the clarification of concepts and the development of new research perspectives (Selltiz et al., 1976; Gil, 1999). The unit of analysis for the study consisted of the textual descriptions accompanying posts made by Regional Tourism Organisations (RTO) on the social media platform Instagram; this choice is justified by the fact that these posts constitute a central element of digital tourism communication, enabling the contextualisation of the visual elements of the posts, the description of activities, the conveyance of meanings and the communication of experiences associated with tourist destinations. As Mariani et al. (2018) point out, the content shared on social media constitutes an important source of information and inspiration for users, playing a significant role in the representation of tourist destinations.

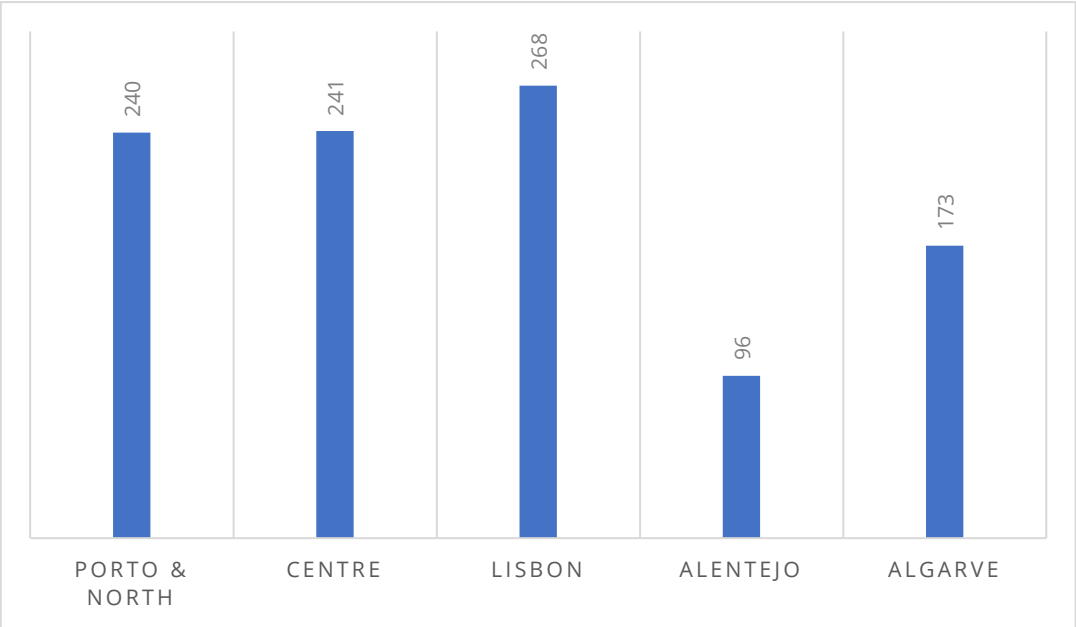
Furthermore, content analysis was chosen for its suitability for studying communication processes and interpreting the meanings present in textual messages. According to Bardin (2009), content analysis consists of a set of techniques that enable communications to be described and interpreted in a systematic and objective manner, identifying patterns and categories of meaning. In this study, this methodology enabled us to analyse how the RTO represent and communicate tourist experiences through the descriptions in their Instagram posts.

The study focused exclusively on the five RTO of Mainland Portugal, seeking to ensure greater homogeneity among the cases analysed. Delimiting the territorial scope made it possible to compare entities responsible for regional tourism promotion operating within

the same framework, thereby reducing potential structural differences that might hinder the interpretation of the results. This approach is consistent with Yin's (2005) recommendation regarding the selection of comparable cases in multiple-case studies.

The data were collected between January and February 2024 directly from the official Instagram profiles of the organisations under study: Turismo do Porto e Norte (@visitportoandnorth); Turismo de Lisboa (@visit_lisboa); Turismo Centro de Portugal (@centro_de_portugal); Turismo do Alentejo (@visitalentejo_br) and Turismo do Algarve (@visitalgarve), with all posts published between 5 May and 31 December 2023 being collected. The start date was selected as it coincided with the lifting of the Public Health Emergency of International Concern declared by the World Health Organisation, enabling an analysis of tourism communication in a post-pandemic context. The following chart provides an overview of the number of posts published on this social media platform by each Regional Tourism Organisations:

Chart1 - Total Number of Posts on Each Regional Tourism Organisation's Instagram Pages



Source: Author's Own Work

Following the extraction and organisation of the data, the textual descriptions of the posts were processed and analysed. Coding was carried out based on Pine and Gilmore's (1998) Experience Economy model, using a predominantly deductive approach. In this model, the four experiential dimensions proposed by the authors - 'Entertainment', education, 'Aesthetic' and 'Escapism' - were used as the main categories of analysis.

However, given the diversity of content found in the publications of the RTO, the analysis was not limited to the previously defined theoretical categories. Throughout the coding process, recurring content patterns were identified within the analysed corpus, leading to the creation of more specific codes within each of the experiential dimensions. This strategy enabled a more detailed understanding of the different ways in which the tourism experiences communicated by the RTO were represented.

Consequently, a hybrid approach was adopted, combining a deductive process—based on the categories defined by Pine and Gilmore (1998) - with an inductive process, through the progressive development of subcategories emerging from the data, as suggested by Braun

and Clarke (2006). Consequently, the experiential dimensions formed the main framework for analysis, whilst the empirically derived codes enabled each dimension to be operationalised and enhanced the consistency of the content classification.

The process resulted in the construction of a coding framework for the experiential dimensions

as shown in Figure 1, in which each experiential dimension comprises a set of specific codes associated with the different types of experiences identified in the publications analysed.

Figure 1 - Coding Structure of the Experiential Dimensions



Source: Author's Own Work, Adapted from Pine and Gilmore (1998)

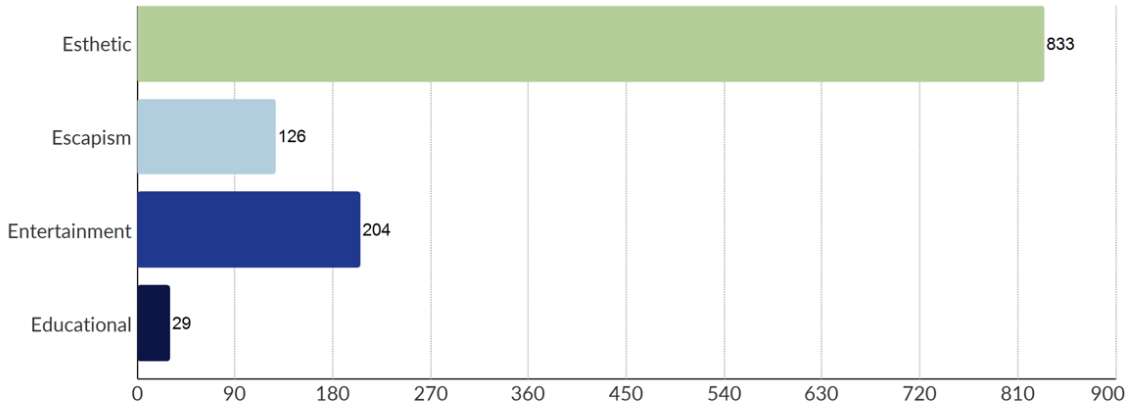
The coding was carried out by a single researcher, and no formal inter-coder reliability procedure was conducted. According to Neuendorf (2017), the assessment of inter-coder reliability is an important indicator of the consistency of the coding process, and the absence of this procedure should be considered when interpreting the results.

The analysis was carried out using NVivo 15 software, a programme designed to support qualitative and mixed-methods research, which enables researchers to organise and analyse unstructured data efficiently and systematically (Nodari et al., 2014).

4. Analysis and Discussion of the Results

The chart shows the absolute number of experiential dimensions reported by the Regional Tourism Organisations of Mainland Portugal in the descriptions of their Instagram posts, enabling the identification of the experiences most frequently promoted by the organisations analysed.

Chart 2 - Experiential Dimensions Promoted by the Regional Tourism Organisations on Instagram



Source: Author's own work

The 'Aesthetic' dimension is clearly predominant compared with the other experiential dimensions, accounting for the majority of references identified in the analysed posts. This result suggests that the Regional Tourism Organisations prioritise communicating elements associated with the contemplation of the landscape, heritage, authenticity and the surrounding environment of the destinations. This predominance is in line with the strategic resources highlighted by the Tourism Strategy 2027, namely the sea, nature, water resources, culture, history and the identity of the regions – elements that correspond closely with the 'Aesthetic' dimension (Turismo de Portugal, 2017). Furthermore, the results corroborate the study by Garrod and Dowell (2020), who identified the 'Aesthetic' dimension as one of the most significant components of the tourist experience, highlighting the role of contemplating environments and the attributes of destinations in creating meaningful experiences.

The 'Entertainment' dimension emerges as the second most frequently represented. This dimension is often associated with the promotion of events, cultural initiatives, gastronomic experiences and leisure activities – elements that feature prominently in the publications analysed. Its relevance is also consistent with the strategic assets defined for national tourism, namely gastronomy, wines, and cultural and sporting events (Turismo de Portugal, 2017). According to Crick-Furman and Prentice (2000), entertainment experiences play an important role in enriching the tourist experience, helping to make the visit more attractive and distinctive.

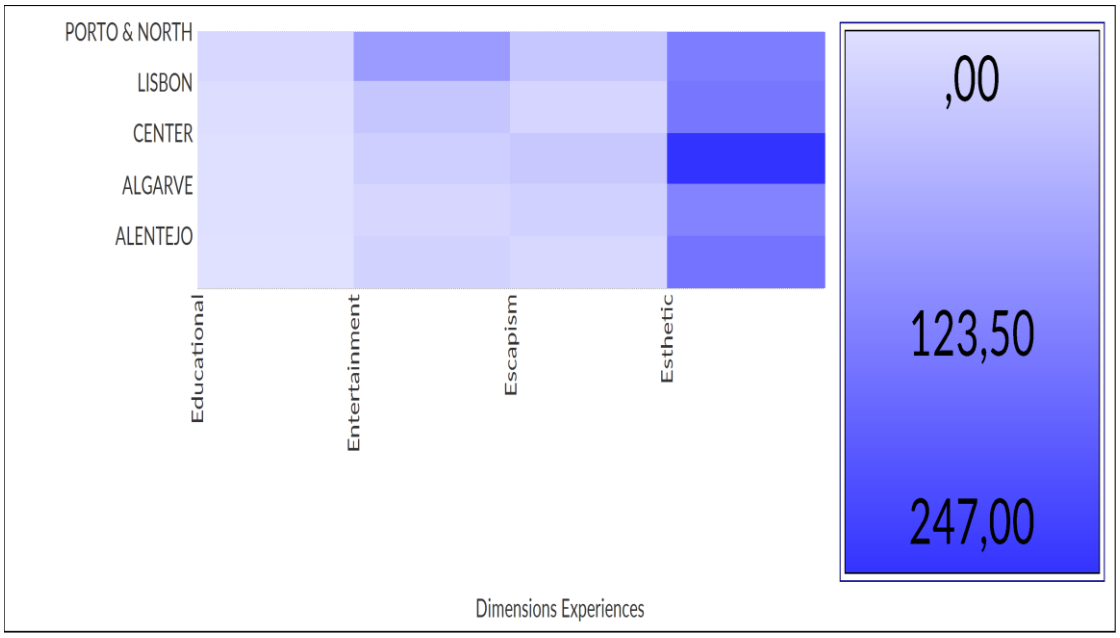
Thirdly, there is the 'Escapism' dimension, characterised by high levels of participation and immersion in the experience (Pine & Gilmore, 1998). The references identified in this category relate primarily to the promotion of outdoor activities, adventure experiences and active tourism practices. According to Şeker and Unur (2022), this type of experience allows individuals to temporarily step away from their daily routines through active engagement with the environment and the activities undertaken. The presence of this dimension suggests

that ERTs promote destinations not only as spaces for contemplation, but also as settings conducive to participation and the direct enjoyment of experiences.

Finally, the 'Educational' dimension is significantly less prominent than the others. Although many of the tourist resources promoted by ERTs possess educational potential, particularly in terms of historical, cultural and natural heritage, their portrayal tends to prioritise aspects related to 'Aesthetic' appreciation or leisure. Consequently, learning and the explicit acquisition of knowledge play a less prominent role in the communication analysed, when compared with the 'Aesthetic', 'Entertainment' and 'Escapism' dimensions. However, this does not imply an absence of educational content, but rather that this type of experience is less central to the image projected by the Regional Tourism Destination via Instagram.

Figure 3 shows the distribution of the four experiential dimensions identified by Pine and Gilmore (1998) across the five tourist regions of mainland Portugal.

Figure 3 - Distribution of Experiential Dimensions by Regional Tourism Authority



Source: Author's own work

Analysis of Figure 3 shows that the 'Aesthetic' dimension is the most prominent across all the Regional Tourism Organisations (RTOs) analysed, being particularly prominent in Center Portugal, followed by the Algarve and Lisbon. This result demonstrates a strong predominance of content geared towards the appreciation of the visual and sensory attributes of the destinations. According to Oh et al. (2007), aesthetic experiences are characterised by the contemplation and appreciation of the surrounding environment, allowing individuals to absorb the stimuli provided by the location without altering or directly influencing the experience.

In Center Portugal, the 'Aesthetic' dimension is primarily associated with the promotion of natural landscapes, heritage and historic villages. Notable examples include phrases such as 'the incredible scenery of the Serra da Lousã', 'the Capital of Natural Pools, home to 12 stunning treasures', 'Dornes, a small village in size but so great in charm and beauty' and 'Casal de São Simão, a village of beautiful landscapes and charming little houses'. These examples demonstrate an appreciation of nature, authenticity and scenic beauty as central elements of regional communication.

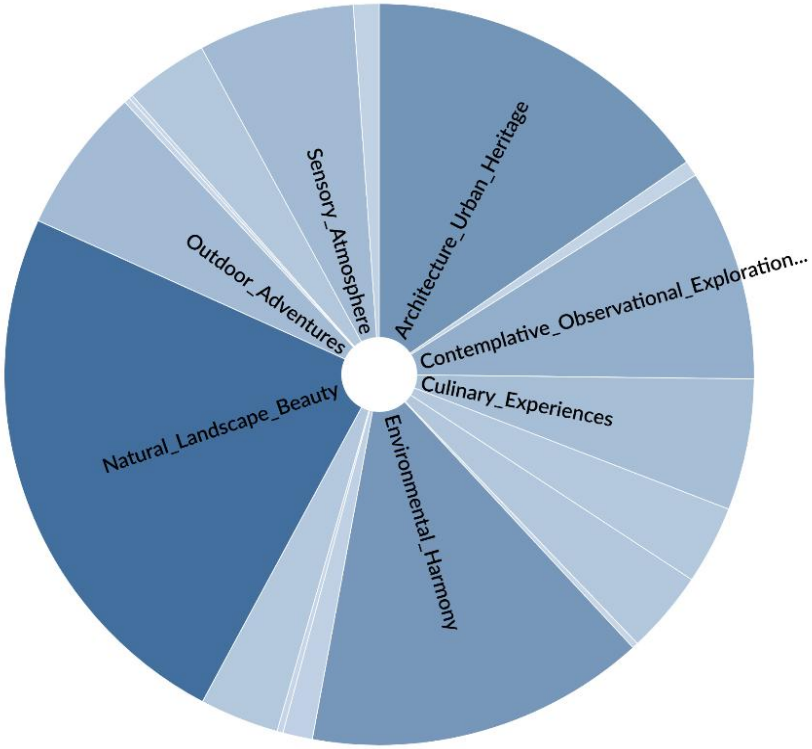
Regarding the 'Escapism' dimension, a more balanced distribution is observed across the different regions, although it is less prominent overall when compared with the 'Aesthetic' dimension. The Porto & North region shows the highest incidence of this dimension, followed by Center Portugal. According to Pine and Gilmore (1998), escapist experiences are characterised by the high degree of participation and immersion they offer individuals. In this context, the descriptions published by the Porto & North region include references to participatory and immersive experiences, such as 'a day of extreme activities', 'a cruise along the Douro' or activities linked to local traditions, such as 'grape harvesting and treading'.

The 'Entertainment' dimension generally corresponds to the second most frequently represented dimension, showing a relatively stable distribution across the different ERTs, although it is more prominent in the Porto & North region. According to Oh et al. (2007), entertainment experiences are associated with the enjoyment of leisure activities, events and occasions designed to provide pleasure and fun. In this region, references to gastronomic, cultural and recreational experiences stand out, such as 'sipping a glass of wine in the region's wine cellars', the traditional 'arroz de sarrabulho', the 'Spiritus' show or the 'Filigree Museum'. Similarly, Crick-Furman and Prentice (2000) note that this type of experience helps to enrich a destination's tourism offering. In turn, the 'Educational' dimension is the least represented of the four experiential dimensions analysed. Despite its presence in all regions, the frequency of references relating to learning and the acquisition of knowledge is relatively low. According to Pine and Gilmore (1998), educational experiences are characterised by active participation in processes of discovery and learning. In this dimension too, the Porto & North region shows the highest incidence, through references to "filigree workshops", "wine tourism experiences" and "educational courses and debates".

The results highlight differences in the distribution of experiential dimensions amongst the Regional Tourism Destination. Whilst Center Portugal stands out for the strong predominance of the 'Aesthetic' dimension, the Porto & North region exhibits the most balanced distribution across the four dimensions of experience. This diversity suggests a more comprehensive communication strategy, integrating content associated with 'Entertainment', 'Escapism', education and 'Aesthetic'. This observation is in line with the perspective of Pine and Gilmore (1998), according to which the most complete experiences tend to incorporate elements from multiple experiential dimensions. The remaining regions, however, exhibit relatively similar distribution patterns, characterised by a strong predominance of the 'Aesthetic' dimension and a more moderate representation of the other dimensions.

With the aim of understanding how tourist experiences are represented in the descriptions of publications by Regional Tourism Destination, a hierarchical analysis was carried out on the subcategories resulting from the coding process. Figure 2 presents the different experiential elements identified during the coding process, highlighting the main subcategories used to represent the tourist experiences reported by the RTAs.

Figure 2 - Representation of the Main Subcategories



Source: Author's Own Work

Analysis of the experiential subcategories identified in the publication descriptions shows that Regional Tourism Organisations predominantly represent tourist experiences by highlighting natural resources, cultural and architectural heritage, the atmosphere of places and the sensations associated with the regions. The results obtained highlight a clear predominance of elements related to contemplation, aesthetic appreciation and emotional engagement with the destinations, suggesting that the image projected by the Regional Tourism Organisations is based primarily on an experiential approach centred on the observation and appreciation of places. This trend is in line with the perspective of Pine and Gilmore (1998), according to which the 'Aesthetic' dimension is characterised by the individual's immersion in the surrounding environment, enhancing the experience through presence and contemplation.

The subcategory 'Natural Landscape Beauty' emerges as the main element representing tourist experiences. The descriptions frequently emphasise the scenic beauty of the landscapes, the diversity of natural resources and the uniqueness of the territories. Expressions such as 'Capital of Natural Pools, home to 12 stunning treasures', 'Dornes, a village small in size but so great in charm and beauty' or 'Let yourself be amazed by the region's natural and architectural beauty' demonstrate how ERTs use the landscape as a central communication resource. This emphasis on natural elements is in line with the work of Pan et al. (2013), who identify landscape as one of the most significant dimensions in shaping the image of tourist destinations, as well as with Kutlu and Ayyıldız (2021), who highlight the role of natural resources in creating memorable experiences.

The second most significant form of experience representation corresponds to the 'Architecture and Urban Heritage' subcategory. In this case, experiences are constructed by highlighting the castles, churches, historic centres, monuments and architectural heritage of the destinations. The descriptions frequently include references such as 'Visiting the

imposing Silves Castle is like travelling back in time', 'The Jerónimos Monastery is an attraction well worth visiting for its impressive Manueline architecture' or 'The Roman Temple of Évora is a must-see tourist attraction on a visit to the region'. Through these narratives, heritage is no longer presented merely as a physical resource but becomes an integral part of an experience of cultural and historical discovery. This trend reinforces the role of culture, history and heritage as distinguishing features of Portuguese tourist destinations, as argued by Beerli and Martín (2004) and by the Tourism Strategy 2027 itself.

Another of the most significant subcategories is 'Environmental Harmony', which portrays destinations through themes of tranquillity, wellbeing and a balanced connection with nature. The publications frequently use expressions such as 'the perfect place to unwind and leave all your worries behind', 'enjoy the tranquillity of the Alentejo', 'a trip where you can breathe in nature and tranquillity' or 'perfect for relaxing and reconnecting with nature'. The results suggest that ERTs seek to associate their destinations with e feelings of serenity and balance, meeting the growing demand for authentic and emotionally meaningful experiences described by Hosany et al. (2022).

The 'Contemplative Observation' category also reinforces the importance of the 'Aesthetic' dimension in ERTs' communication. The descriptions frequently invite users to observe, discover and appreciate the places being promoted. Examples include: 'Anyone who says it's not possible to travel through time has clearly never visited the village of Óbidos!', 'Have you ever had the privilege of getting lost in the streets of this city?' or 'Discover the unspoilt magic of Nazaré'. This type of language seeks to stimulate curiosity and contemplation of the destinations, making observation an integral part of the tourist experience. As Mehmetoglu and Engen (2011) point out, aesthetic experiences are characterised precisely by an immersive appreciation of the environment, without the need for active participation.

In turn, the 'Sensory Atmosphere' subcategory demonstrates that the ERTs' tourism communication is not limited to the visual elements of the destinations. The descriptions seek to engage multiple senses through references to sound, scent, light, colour and texture. Expressions such as 'the smell of wet earth', 'the sounds and flavours of Lisbon welcome you', 'a cool sea breeze' or 'let yourself be enveloped by the sounds of Lisbon at night' reveal an attempt to symbolically transport the user to the place being depicted. This form of communication is in line with the perspective of Boswijk et al. (2007), according to whom meaningful experiences result from emotions and sensory interactions with the surrounding environment.

Although less prevalent, there are also subcategories associated with more active experiences. The 'Outdoor Adventures' category highlights the presence of experiences related to hiking, trails, surfing, canoeing, cycling, walking routes and adventure activities. References such as 'learn to surf and master the waves', 'venture out on the Paiva Walkways', 'extreme sports' or 'hike the trails' illustrate this trend. These representations are associated with 'Escapism', a dimension characterised by the active involvement of participants and immersion in the experience (Pine & Gilmore, 1998; Şeker & Unur, 2022).

Finally, Culinary Experiences emerge as the main form of representation for entertainment experiences. The descriptions frequently highlight regional wines, traditional dishes, local produce, traditional pastries and gastronomic experiences associated with the regions. Examples such as 'savour a glass of wine in the region's wine cellars', 'you simply must try this traditional dish', 'try the wines of the Douro and Porto' or 'sarrabulho rice to delight your palate' illustrate this focus. As Crick-Furman and Prentice (2000) argue, gastronomic

elements are important components of the tourist experience, helping to enrich and differentiate what destinations have to offer.

5. Conclusions

This study analysed the image projected by the Regional Tourism Destination of Mainland Portugal through the communication of tourist experiences on Instagram, using Pine and Gilmore's (1998) Experience Economy model as a theoretical framework.

The results demonstrate a clear predominance of the 'Aesthetic' dimension, followed by the 'Entertainment' and 'Escapism' dimensions, whilst the 'Educational' dimension is represented to a much lesser extent. These results show that the RTOs' communication prioritises experiences associated with the contemplation of the landscape, heritage and atmosphere of the destinations, to the detriment of experiences centred on learning or the active participation of visitors.

Differences were also observed between the regions analysed. Center Portugal stood out for the strong predominance of the 'Aesthetic' dimension, whilst Porto & North presented a more balanced representation of the four experiential dimensions, revealing a more diversified communication strategy. The remaining regions exhibited relatively similar patterns, characterised by a strong emphasis on the 'Aesthetic' dimension and a more moderate presence of the other experiences.

It can also be concluded that tourist experiences are predominantly represented through the promotion of the natural landscape, architectural and urban heritage, environmental harmony, contemplative observation and the sensory stimulation offered by these places. The descriptions frequently employ narratives that highlight beauty, authenticity, tranquillity, territorial identity and a connection to nature, demonstrating that the image projected by the Regional Tourism Destination is strongly associated with the creation of aesthetically and emotionally engaging experiences. At the same time, gastronomic, cultural and adventure experiences help to complement this representation, diversifying the way in which tourist destinations are communicated to the public.

Overall, the results show that Instagram is used by Regional Tourism Organisations as a tool for constructing and projecting the image of destinations, going beyond the mere promotion of tourist resources. The communication observed seeks to associate the regions with experiences capable of conveying authenticity, distinctiveness and symbolic value, contributing to the construction of tourism images consistent with the attributes considered most distinctive of each region.

From a theoretical perspective, this study contributes to the literature on the projected image of tourist destinations by applying the Experience Economy model to the analysis of communication developed by destination management organisations on social media, focusing on the perspective of the promoting bodies rather than on tourists' perceptions. From a practical perspective, the results provide an understanding of which experiences are most highly valued in the digital communications of Regional Tourism Destination and identify opportunities to diversify the content promoted, particularly by emphasising educational and escapist experiences.

This study has some limitations, namely the exclusive analysis of the textual descriptions of the posts, the fact that the coding was carried out by a single researcher, and the differences in the volume of posts between the Regional Tourism Organisations analysed. Future research could simultaneously incorporate both the visual and textual content of the

publications, compare the image projected by the Regional Tourism Organisations with the image perceived by tourists, and extend the analysis to other digital platforms or tourist destinations.

REFERENCES

Antolín-Prieto, R., Sarmiento-Guede, J., & Antonovica, A. (2021). Instagram as a value co-creation tool for the image of tourist destination. Analysis of the case of Spain during COVID-19: The Balearic and the Canary Islands. *Espacios, 42*(12), 79–93. https://doi.org/10.48082/espacios-a21v42n12p07

Aroeira, T., Dantas, A. C., & de Sevilha Gosling, M. (2016). Experiência turística memorável, percepção cognitiva, reputação e lealdade ao destino: Um modelo empírico. *Turismo: Visão e Ação, 18*(3), 584–610. https://doi.org/10.14210/rtva.v18n3.p584-610

Bardin, L. (2009). *Análise de conteúdo*. Edições 70.

Beerli, A., & Martín, J. (2004). Factors influencing destination image. *Annals of Tourism Research, 31*(3), 657–681. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.annals.2004.01.010

Cardona, C., & María-Dolores, S. (2017). Análisis de la actividad y presencia en Facebook y otras redes sociales de los portales turísticos de las comunidades autónomas españolas. *Cuadernos de Turismo, 39*, 239–264. https://doi.org/10.17979/rotur.2016.11.1.1779

Corrêa, C., Alves, H., & Estevão, C. (2025). Adapting tourism promotion during crisis: A visual content analysis of Portugal's Instagram strategy amid Covid-19. *Revista Investigaciones Turísticas, 30*, 209–237. https://doi.org/10.14198/INTURI.26701

Chen, J., Huang, Y., Wu, E. Q., Ip, R., & Wang, K. (2022). How does rural tourism experience affect green consumption in terms of memorable rural-based tourism experiences, connectedness to nature and environmental awareness? *Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Management, 54*, 166–177. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jhtm.2022.12.006

Crick-Furman, D., & Prentice, R. (2000). Modeling tourists' multiple values. *Annals of Tourism Research, 27*(1), 69–92. https://doi.org/10.1016/S0160-7383(99)00041-9

De Jesús Santos, C., Campos, A., & De Jesus Barbosa, F. (2020). O Instagram como ferramenta promocional em agências de receptivo em Aracaju/Sergipe, Brasil. *TURYDES: Revista sobre Turismo y Desarrollo Local Sostenible, 13*(28), 135–154. https://dialnet.unirioja.es/descarga/articulo/7740372.pdf

Fatanti, M., & Suyadnya, I. (2015). Beyond user gaze: How Instagram creates tourism destination brand? *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences, 211*, 1089–1095. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sbspro.2015.11.145

Fiona, F., Sugeng, S., Nasution, & Putri, A. M. (2022). Digital marketing through social media Instagram as a promotion means to increase interest in visiting Bengkulu tourism objects. *Advances in Economics, Business and Management Research*. https://doi.org/10.2991/aebmr.k.220304.009

Garay, L. (2019). #Visitspain: Breaking down affective and cognitive attributes in the social media construction of the tourist destination image. *Tourism Management Perspectives, 32*, Article 100560. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tmp.2019.100560

Garrod, B., & Dowell, D. (2020). Experiential marketing of an underground tourist attraction. *Tourism and Hospitality, 1*(1), 1–19. https://doi.org/10.3390/tourhosp1010001

Gorji, A., Almeida-García, F., & Melé, P. (2023). Analysis of the projected image of tourism destinations on photographs: The case of Iran on Instagram. *Anatolia, 34*(2). https://doi.org/10.1080/13032917.2021.2001665

Hays, S., Page, S., & Buhalis, D. (2013). Social media as a destination marketing tool: Its use by national tourism organisations. *Current Issues in Tourism, 16*(3), 211–239. https://doi.org/10.1080/13683500.2012.662215

Hosany, S., & Witham, M. (2009). Dimensions of cruisers' experiences, satisfaction, and intention to recommend. *Journal of Travel Research, 49*(3), 351–364. https://doi.org/10.1177/0047287509346859

Hosany, S., Sthapit, E., & Björk, P. (2022). Memorable tourism experience: A review and research agenda. *Psychology & Marketing, 39*(8), 1467–1486. https://doi.org/10.1002/mar.21665

Huey, L. X., & Yazdanifard, R. (2015). How Instagram can be used as a tool in social network marketing. *International Journal of Management, Accounting and Economics, 2*(9), 1135–1144.

Jacinto, M. M. P. L. (2023). Meios de comunicação e imagem dos destinos turísticos: Uma revisão de literatura. *Revista Internacional em Língua Portuguesa, 44*, 13–27. https://doi.org/10.31492/2184-2043.rilp2023.44/pp.13-27

Jaramillo, F., Jaramillo, N., Jaramillo, J., & Paredes, M. (2023). Las redes sociales como medio de difusión de atractivos turísticos de la parroquia de Lloa. *LATAM Revista Latinoamericana de Ciencias Sociales y Humanidades, 4*(2), 2937–2943. https://doi.org/10.56712/latam.v4i2.80

Kannan, P., & Li, H. (2017). Digital marketing: A framework, review and research agenda. *International Journal of Research in Marketing, 34*(1), 22–45. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijresmar.2016.11.006

Kim, J., & Ritchie, J. (2013). Cross-cultural validation of a memorable tourism experience scale (MTES). *Journal of Travel Research, 53*(3), 323–335. https://doi.org/10.1177/0047287513496468

Kotler, P., Kartajaya, H., & Setiawan, I. (2016). *Marketing 4.0: Moving from traditional to digital*. John Wiley & Sons.

Kutlu, D., & Ayyıldız, H. (2021). The role of the destination image in creating memorable tourism experience. *Journal of Tourism and Services, 12*(23), 199–216. https://doi.org/10.29036/jots.v12i23.303

Lane, B., Kastenholz, E., & Carneiro, M. J. (2022). Rural tourism and sustainability: A special issue, review and update for the opening years of the twenty-first century. *Sustainability, 14*(10), Article 6070. https://doi.org/10.3390/su14106070

Mak, A. H. (2017). Online destination image: Comparing national tourism organisation's and tourists' perspectives. *Tourism Management, 60*, 280–297. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tourman.2016.12.012

Mangold, W., & Faulds, D. (2009). Social media: The new hybrid element of the promotion mix. *Business Horizons, 52*(4), 357–365. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.bushor.2009.03.002

Manning, J. (2014). Social media, definition and classes of. In K. Harvey (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of social media and politics* (pp. 1158–1162). SAGE Publications.

Mariani, M., Mura, M., & Di Felice, M. (2018). The determinants of Facebook social engagement for national tourism organizations' Facebook pages: A quantitative approach. *Journal of Destination Marketing & Management, 8*, 312–325. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jdmm.2017.06.003

Mehmetoglu, M., & Engen, M. (2011). Pine and Gilmore's concept of experience economy and its dimensions: An empirical examination in tourism. *Journal of Quality Assurance in Hospitality & Tourism, 12*(4), 237–255. https://doi.org/10.1080/1528008X.2011.541847

Michaelidou, N., Siamagka, N., Moraes, C., & Micevski, M. (2013). Do marketers use visual representations of destinations that tourists value? Comparing visitors' image of a destination with marketer-controlled images online. *Journal of Travel Research, 52*(6), 789–804. https://doi.org/10.1177/0047287513481272

Minazzi, R. (2015). *Social media marketing in tourism and hospitality*. Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-05182-6

Neuendorf, K. (2017). *The content analysis guidebook*. SAGE Publications. https://doi.org/10.4135/9781071802878

Mossberg, L. (2003). *Att skapa upplevelser: Från OK till WOW!*. Studentlitteratur AB.

Nodari, F., Soares, M., Wiedenhoft, G., & Oliveira, M. (2014). Contribuição do MAXQDA e do NVivo para a realização da análise de conteúdo. In *Anais do XXXVIII Encontro da ANPAD*. Associação Nacional de Pós-Graduação e Pesquisa em Administração.

Oh, H., Fiore, A. M., & Jeoung, M. (2007). Measuring experience economy concepts: Tourism applications. *Journal of Travel Research, 46*(2), 119–132. https://doi.org/10.1177/0047287507304039

Osmond, A., Chen, T., & Pearce, P. (2015b). Examining experience economy approaches to tourists' anticipated experiences: Mainland Chinese travellers consider Australia. *European Journal of Tourism Research, 10*, 95–108. https://doi.org/10.54055/ejtr.v10i.181

Pan, S., Lee, J., & Tsai, H. (2013). Travel photos: Motivations, image dimensions, and affective qualities of places. *Tourism Management, 40*, 59–69. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tourman.2013.05.007

Parra-López, E., Bulchand-Gidumal, J., Taño, D. G., & Armas, R. J. D. (2011). Intentions to use social media in organizing and taking vacation trips. *Computers in Human Behavior, 27*(2), 640–654. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2010.05.022

Pine, B., & Gilmore, J. H. (1998). Welcome to the experience economy. *Harvard Business Review, 76*(4), 97–105.

Rasoolimanesh, S., Seyfi, S., Hall, C., & Hatamifar, P. (2021). Understanding memorable tourism experiences and behavioural intentions of heritage tourists. *Journal of Destination Marketing & Management, 21*, Article 100621. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jdmm.2021.100621

Şeker, F., & Unur, K. (2022). The experience economy analysis of distinct destinations. *Journal of Multidisciplinary Academic Tourism, 7*(2), 31–43. https://doi.org/10.31822/jomat.2022-7-2-31

Selltiz, C., Wrightsman, L. S., & Cook, S. W. (1976). *Research methods in social relations* (3rd ed.). Holt, Rinehart and Winston.

Silva, A. (2012). Dinâmicas comunicacionais na vida cotidiana – Instagram: Um modo de narrar sobre si, fotografar ou de olhar pra se ver. In *Anais do XVII Congresso de Ciências da Comunicação na Região Sudeste*. Intercom – Sociedade Brasileira de Estudos Interdisciplinares da Comunicação.

Silva, C., Kastenholz, E., & Abrantes, J. L. (2018). A imagem da Serra da Estrela na perspetiva dos turistas. In A. Correia & P. B. Homem (Coords.), *Turismo no Centro de Portugal: Potencialidades e tendências* (pp. 281–298). Actual Editora.

Silva, F., & Bezerra, L. (2020). O Instagram como ferramenta de disseminação do turismo no destino Brasil. *Revista Turismo & Cidades, 2*(4), 56–75. https://periodicoseletronicos.ufma.br/index.php/turismoecidades/article/view/13888

Torres, C. (2009). *A Bíblia do marketing digital*. Novatec Editora.

Turismo de Portugal. (2017). *Estratégia Turismo 2027*. https://www.turismodeportugal.pt/pt/Turismo_Portugal/Estrategia/Estrategia_2027/Paginas/default.aspx

Zhang, H., Wu, Y., & Buhalis, D. (2018). A model of perceived image, memorable tourism experiences and revisit intention. *Journal of Destination Marketing & Management, 8*, 326–336. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jdmm.2017.06.004

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS (CRediT)

Conceptualization, CE, DS, AMCC; methodology, CE, DS; software, CE, DS; validation, CE, DS; formal analysis, CE, DS; investigation, CE, DS; resources, CE, DS, HA; data curation, DS; writing—original draft preparation, CE, DS; writing—review and editing, CE, DS, HA, AMCC; visualization, CE, DS; supervision, CE. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

FUNDING

This research was funded by the Portuguese Foundation for Science and Technology (FCT) through the Multiannual Funding Programme for R&D Units, under Grant UID/04630/2025 (DOI: 10.54499/UID/04630/2025), awarded to NECE – Research Centre for Business Sciences.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data supporting the findings of this study are available upon reasonable request.

ETHICS STATEMENT

This study was based exclusively on the analysis of publicly available textual content published on the official Instagram profiles of Regional Tourism Organisations. It did not involve the recruitment or direct participation of human subjects, nor did it involve the collection of personal or sensitive personal data. Therefore, ethical approval was not required.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors gratefully acknowledge NECE – Research Centre for Business Sciences for the institutional support and research environment provided.