Reframing Communication and Marketing in Tourism and Hospitality: Sustainability, Technology, and Strategic Transformation.

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INTRODUCTION

Tourism and hospitality are currently undergoing a profound and multidimensional transformation, shaped by the convergence of sustainability imperatives, digitalisation, changing consumer expectations and the growing strategic relevance of marketing and communication. In contemporary tourism systems, value creation is no longer assessed solely through economic performance, but increasingly through the capacity of destinations and organisations to integrate environmental responsibility, ethical governance, technological innovation and meaningful stakeholder engagement (Buhalis & Sinarta, 2019; Gössling, Scott, & Hall, 2021).

Digital technologies have emerged as a central driver of this transformation. Platforms, mobile applications, data analytics, artificial intelligence and immersive technologies are reshaping how tourism products are designed, communicated and experienced, while simultaneously redefining the relationships between destinations, firms, tourists and local communities (Buhalis, 2020; Neuhofer, Magnus, & Celuch, 2021). As a result, marketing and communication are no longer peripheral operational functions, but strategic

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infrastructures that mediate interaction, personalization, co-creation and long-term competitiveness within tourism and hospitality ecosystems.

At the same time, sustainability has evolved from a normative aspiration into a strategic and communicative imperative. Research consistently shows that environmental, social and economic sustainability influence destination image, brand legitimacy and tourist behaviour, particularly in contexts where sustainability narratives are effectively embedded into marketing and communication strategies (Font & McCabe, 2017; López-Sánchez & Pulido-Fernández, 2023). International policy frameworks and academic research increasingly emphasise the need for tourism systems that are not only sustainable, but also resilient and regenerative, capable of adapting to crises, reducing structural vulnerabilities and generating long-term value for host territories (UNWTO, 2022; Hall, Prayag, & Amore, 2018).

Parallel to these developments, tourists themselves are becoming more informed, digitally connected and value-oriented. Expectations regarding transparency, ethical conduct, accessibility, personalization and meaningful experiences are reshaping consumption patterns and intensifying the communicative responsibilities of tourism organisations and destinations (Tussyadiah et al., 2020; Gretzel et al., 2020). This shift has accelerated the adoption of co-creation models, in which tourists, residents, volunteers and other stakeholders actively participate in the production of experiences, narratives and destination meanings through digital and social media environments (Campos, Mendes, do Valle, & Scott, 2018).

Within this context, emerging technologies—particularly artificial intelligence, augmented reality and user-experience–driven digital interfaces—are playing a dual role. On the one hand, they enhance operational efficiency, decision-making and service personalization; on the other, they raise new challenges related to ethics, trust, accessibility and the human dimension of tourism experiences (Gretzel et al., 2020; Dwivedi et al., 2023). These dynamics reinforce the need for integrated, human-centred and ethically informed approaches to marketing and communication in tourism and hospitality.

It is against this backdrop that this Special Issue of the International Journal of Marketing, Communication and New Media brings together a selection of peer-reviewed papers presented at the International Conference on Tourism and Hospitality Management (ICTHM2025), held on 10 and 11 July 2025. The Special Issue aims to advance contemporary debates on communication and marketing in tourism and hospitality by

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addressing strategic foundations, sustainability and resilience, cultural and symbolic processes, digital innovation and future-oriented learning practices.

Collectively, the contributions reflect the increasing theoretical maturity and methodological diversity of tourism and hospitality research, while offering critical and applied insights into how communication and marketing function as key mechanisms for navigating complexity, fostering sustainability and shaping the future of tourism systems.

STRUCTURE OF THE SPECIAL ISSUE

To reflect the breadth and coherence of the contributions, the Special Issue is organised into five thematic sections, each capturing a key dimension of contemporary tourism and hospitality research.

Section I — Mapping the Field & Strategic Foundations

The opening section establishes the conceptual and strategic foundations of the Special Issue, offering macro-level perspectives on competitiveness, management models and financial performance in tourism.

The **bibliometric study on tourism and destination competitiveness (2000–2023)** provides a systematic mapping of the scientific landscape, revealing the multidisciplinary nature and growing analytical sophistication of this field. This contribution offers a valuable intellectual baseline for understanding how competitiveness has been theorised and operationalised over time.

Complementing this macro perspective, the conceptual framework on **Revenue Management in the tourism industry** synthesises fragmented literature across tourism sub-sectors, highlighting emerging trends, strategic challenges and research gaps in pricing and demand optimisation.

At the organisational level, the case study on the **Balanced Scorecard as a communication and strategic alignment system** demonstrates how management accounting tools function not only as control mechanisms, but also as vehicles for strategy communication in small and medium-sized hospitality enterprises.

Finally, the empirical analysis of **working capital and free cash flow in Portuguese accommodation firms** introduces a financially grounded perspective on strategic flexibility and liquidity generation, reinforcing the importance of sound financial management for sustained market-facing activity.

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Together, these contributions position strategy, governance and performance as communicative and systemic processes rather than purely technical ones.

Section II — Sustainability, Ethics, and Resilient Tourism Systems

Sustainability emerges in this Special Issue not as an isolated theme, but as a **transversal strategic logic** shaping governance, marketing and stakeholder relations.

The study on **fairness in agrifood systems** explores how ethical supply chain practices can function as marketing signals, enhancing legitimacy, trust and competitive differentiation while contributing to food waste reduction goals.

The analysis of the **European Green Capital Award** examines how sustainability recognition influences territorial positioning and destination branding, highlighting the communicative power of environmental performance in shaping reputational value.

Financial resilience is further addressed through the longitudinal analysis of **economic and financial sustainability in Portuguese tourism firms**, revealing significant differences across firm size and regions and underlining the strategic role of small enterprises in sectoral resilience.

Extending sustainability debates into critical theory, the paper on **tourism fields and symbolic disputes in Latin American cities** applies Bourdieu's framework to reveal tourism as a space of power, inequality and social struggle, opening new avenues for critical and transformative tourism research.

Section III — Culture, Heritage, and Destination Image

The third section foregrounds **communication, culture and symbolic production** as central to destination image formation and experiential value creation.

The study on **themed hotels and cultural heritage in Portugal** demonstrates how narrative-driven hospitality experiences function as experiential micro-destinations, reinforcing territorial branding and cultural identity.

Tourist behaviour and sustainability awareness are explored through the analysis of **nature-based tourists**, identifying the emergence of an "aware tourist" whose attitudes and behaviours contribute to destination sustainability.

The cross-cultural study on **social norms and sustainable air travel** integrates cultural values into the Theory of Planned Behaviour, revealing the limits of individual-level communication and the importance of collective norms in fostering behavioural change.

The section closes with the examination of **volunteer-generated media in cross-border regenerative tourism**, positioning volunteers as relationship-based content creators

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whose narratives influence destination image and behavioural intentions, offering actionable insights for integrated marketing communications.

Section IV — Digital Marketing, Emerging Technologies and Artificial Intelligence

Technology constitutes a central pillar of this Special Issue, examined through the lenses of **experience design, user interaction and ethical evaluation**.

The study on **Augmented Reality in hospitality marketing** positions AR as an interactive communication touchpoint capable of strengthening brand love and loyalty through immersive digital experiences.

The proposed **UX-based evaluation model for AI-enabled booking engines** advances methodological innovation by integrating service design, user experience and ethical considerations, responding to the growing need for trustworthy and human-centred AI in tourism services.

A bibliometric review of **digital accessibility and emerging technologies in cross-border tourism** highlights the consolidation of inclusive tourism research while identifying persistent gaps in the articulation between technology, accessibility and territorial cooperation.

Section V — Innovation, Learning and Future-Oriented Practices

The Special Issue concludes with a forward-looking perspective on **learning, engagement and innovation**.

The systematic literature review on **geocaching as a technology-mediated experiential communication practice** reframes location-based gamification as a strategic tool for destination marketing, learning and community-level value creation, highlighting its potential for experiential engagement and place-based storytelling.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Collectively, the contributions in this Special Issue offer a **multidimensional and integrated perspective** on communication and marketing in tourism and hospitality. They demonstrate that sustainability, technology and strategic management are inseparable from communication processes that shape meaning, trust, engagement and long-term value.

By bridging theoretical reflection and empirical application, this Special Issue provides insights not only for scholars, but also for practitioners, policymakers and destination managers navigating increasingly complex tourism ecosystems.

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