Article

Digital Marketing's Impact on Rural Destinations' Image, Intention to Visit, and Destination Sustainability

Sónia Rodrigues [1], Ricardo Correia [1,2], Ramiro Gonçalves [3,4,5], Frederico Branco [4,5] and José Martins [1,3,4,*]

[1] Instituto Politécnico de Bragança, Campus de Santa Apolónia, 5300-253 Bragança, Portugal
[2] CiTUR Guarda—Centro de Investigação, Desenvolvimento e Inovação em Turismo,
6270-372 Guarda, Portugal
[3] AquaValor—Centro de Valorização e Transferência de Tecnologia da Água, 5400-342 Chaves, Portugal
[4] INESC TEC—Institute for Systems and Computer Engineering, Technology and Science,
4200-465 Porto, Portugal
[5] Department of Engineering, School of Sciences and Technology, University of Trás-os-Montes e Alto Douro,
5000-801 Vila Real, Portugal
* Correspondence: jose.martins@aquavalor.pt

Abstract: The relevance of the tourism industry to the overall sustainability of rural territories grows along with the demand for rural tourism destinations. Likewise, as the digital transition of rural tour operators takes place, their marketing initiatives also evolve towards a digital nature, which is why it is crucial to comprehend how the overall calibre of these activities might affect the perception of rural places, while also motivating tourists' travel intentions and, as a result, promoting the general sustainability of the destination. Thus, in this paper, we propose a novel conceptual model based on Delone and McLean's representative model of Information Systems Success Model, on Tan and Wu's arguments on tourism destinations' image relationship with tourists' visit intentions, and also on Verma's tourism destination brand equity concept. To validate the proposed model, an online focus group was developed involving several specialists whose opinions and perspectives corroborated the potential adequacy of the proposed artefact and, consequently, assumed its contribution and value. From this validation process, it was possible to highlight that digital marketing initiatives' overall quality influences both rural destinations' image and tourists' intention to visit these territories, that a positive image will trigger tourists' visit behaviour, and that these behaviours represent a valuable asset to rural destinations' global sustainability.

Keywords: e-marketing; rural tourism; destination sustainability; destination image; intention to visit; brand equity

1. Introduction

Rural areas have seen a setback in their development progress over the past 10 years. It is clear that the main causes of this slowdown were the ageing of the population; the desertification of certain regions; and the absence of a properly developed strategic approach to incorporating innovation into the various economic and social activities associated with rural areas (e.g., tourism, agriculture), to increasing public and private investment, and, as a result, to drawing in and keeping a young, highly educated population [1].

The tourism industry has had one of the most profound effects on the growth of rural territories, mainly due to its ability to create cooperation networks between the multiple economic operators in the regions, its ability to attract investment (public and private), and also the dynamics that tourists bring along during the periods in which they enjoy their rural tourism experiences [2].

The digital divide in the tourism sector is still there and is rooted in technological, social, and motivational factors. As a result, problems involving travellers and destinations are pretty easy to find [3]. Consequently, this issue is also a problem in rural areas since

these regions typically need more technology resources, human resources with specialised knowledge in information and communication technologies (ICT) fields, economic resources, and, most importantly, a culture supportive of innovation. The steady adoption of ICT and the implementation of communication solutions that enable rural regions to connect to the rest of the world are the main reasons why rural populations' additional efforts are beginning to pay off as new opportunities arise [4].

As argued by the existing literature [5,6], for rural regions and companies to fully combat the existing digital divide and inherently trigger (the so-desired) development and growth, it will be necessary to innovate and embrace the global digital transition paradigm. When, for instance, focusing on rural tourism, this shift to the existing mindset will lead to using ICT to plan and execute differentiating, innovative, and disruptive digital marketing projects.

From a theoretical standpoint, the concept of digital marketing is generally accepted to refer to a social method by which people and companies incorporate ICT to draw in new customers, learn more about their current clients, promote brands, fortify business relationships, and boost sales [7].

Tourism destinations' public image is increasingly associated with overall success, as it tends to significantly impact behavioural visit intentions, consequently triggering new socio-economic dynamics [8]. In the same manner, and complementing this perspective, several authors argue that due to the digital transition, digital marketing might have a significant role in developing a positive image for rural tourism destinations [9].

Thus, even though rural tourism destinations are highly recognised for their quality and hospitality [10], it is easily noticeable that this sector needs more than just the national market to ensure prolonged sustainability. That said, and as argued by Martínez et al. (2019) [11], the ability to attract the interest, and consequently the visit, of international tourists should be perceived as a necessary complement to the sustainability of rural tourism and a stimulus to the development of rural territories.

According to Trunfio and Della Lucia (2017) [12], although digital marketing represents an incredible potential for promoting and advertising tourism across the board, its impact is even more significant when we focus on rural tourism international target audiences and on the difficulty and cost associated with reaching them through traditional marketing initiatives.

Based on the material that is already available, it is clear that there is no systematic approach to digital marketing that is focused on the unique context of rural tourism locations, which simultaneously addresses the issues of the destination image, the need to ensure continued flows of tourists, and the brand equity associated with that destination and aims to ensure the continued sustainability of those rural territories and their socioeconomic context.

The abovementioned perception represents the primary postulation for this work, which, globally, aims at developing and validating a multidimensional conceptual model that, in parallel, tries to characterise digital marketing's potential impact on the sustainability of rural destinations.

The paper is organised as follows. Section 2 presents the theoretical foundations of our study, with a particular focus on digital marketing, rural tourism, rural destinations' image perception, overall brand equity, and global sustainability. Section 3 presents, in a concise manner, the conceptual background inherent to the acceptance and use of digital technologies. Section 4 details the proposed conceptual model and the operationalised online focus group to validate it. Section 5 holds the attained conclusions, the identified limitations, and the inherent future research.

2. Systematic Literature Review

A systematic literature review process was carried out that resulted in the scrutiny of 66 scientific articles—published in high-impact SCOPUS-indexed journals—that focus on the incorporation of innovation to (digital) marketing initiatives for the tourism sector and,

at the same time, on the different settings that must be taken into account when preparing for and carrying out those same activities. Hence, this section aims to represent a valid and valuable contribution to the scientific community and the various stakeholders in the tourism sector (companies, regulators, government entities, and tourists).

According to Paré et al. (2015) [13], the mere incorporation of innovation, or the creation of new artefacts, ought to be backed by prior knowledge, whether theoretical or practical. Hence, we can consider that executing a systematic literature review (SLR) represents a significant contribution to reducing the potential bias that can arise from the individual and unstructured analysis of the existing narrative and concepts [14].

That said, and drawing on Ovčjak et al.'s (2015) [15] arguments, for an SLR to be considered valid and accurate, the execution of a sequential set of tasks must be guaranteed, namely (a) identify the research question the literature review will attempt to address, (b) describe both the review and the evaluation procedures, and (c) systematise the achieved results. In parallel, authors such as Liberate et al. (2009) [16] contend that to enhance the output quality of an SLR even more, a technique for evaluating it must be devised that enables a thorough investigation of all sources of information taken into account (i.e., which databases are most relevant to the context, what period should be covered by the study, how the screening process should be implemented, what the inclusion and exclusion criteria are, how to implement the quality assessment procedure, and what the methods for extracting information are).

Hence, drawing on the abovementioned findings, the research question underlying this work is as follows: "How do innovative digital marketing initiatives impact rural tourism, rural destinations' sustainability, and tourists' behaviour intention to visit these destinations?" With regard to the sources of information that would be used for the SLR, after extensive consideration, it was decided that the SCOPUS database would be the repository of scientific knowledge that would serve as a foundation for the task of identifying possible contributions, as, currently, this is regarded as the most trustworthy source of scientific literature [17]. To execute the research procedure, the SCOPUS research form was used and the following search keywords were applied: (a) "Marketing", (b) "Rural", (c) "Tourism", and (d) "Innovate". Considering the primary research goal and also the suggestion of several authors [18], only articles published between January 2016 and the first quarter of 2022 in scientific journals belonging to the research areas of "computer science", "decision sciences", and "business" were included in the search results after being filtered.

Drawing on Keeles' [19] arguments, an initial analysis was carried out on each identified article, which allowed us to classify the articles as (a) seems relevant to our investigation, (b) seems potentially relevant but requires a more in-depth analysis, or (c) is not pertinent to our investigation and ought to be discarded. Following this initial approach, we used the defined procedure for quality and content assessment [20], which allowed us to recognise in a distinctive manner which of the initially identified articles represented relevant contributions to our research project.

2.1. Initial Results

The initial sample for our investigation comprised 65 articles that were found through bibliographical analysis to meet the defined criteria and demonstrate how innovative marketing strategies, supported by digital technologies, can spur the growth of rural tourism and the overall viability of rural destinations. Based on the methodology outlined before, each of the 65 papers that were referred to was evaluated for quality and applicability, yielding a final sample of 40 publications.

When analysing our article sample, it was possible to perceive that most of the selected articles were published in journals indexed in the SCOPUS 1st quartile (Figure 1). The *Journal of Place Management and Development*, the *Journal of Travel Research*, and the *Journal of Tourism and Hospitality Research* were the journals that published the most papers.

Papers Identified in SCOPUS Indexed Journals

- ■ 1st Quartile ■ 2nd Quartile ■ 3rd Quartile ■ 4th Quartile

Figure 1. Representation of the distribution of the analysed articles according to the SCOPUS quartile.

Analysing the publication chronology of the literature was crucial for understanding how the scientific community has been approaching the incorporation of innovation into rural tourism marketing and, ultimately, the sustainability of rural destinations. From the 40 analysed papers, 50% were published during the years 2020 and 2021 and almost 75% were published during the previous 4 years. As a result, it was feasible to conclude that this is a fairly current research issue.

The authors' keywords were collected from each of the articles under consideration in order to identify a set of key issues that best encapsulate the scope of the research in order to appreciate the diversity of research topics and phrases underlying the recognised literature.

The outcomes of this activity are shown in the form of a word cloud (Figure 2), where the most popular important subjects are emphasised by a dimension relation (i.e., the topic width and height are directly related to the number of times it has been detected).

Figure 2. Word cloud representing the most used keywords in the analysed literature.

2.2. Rural Tourism

Any tourism that occurs in a rural area, or in a region characterised by rurality, diminished population density, enhanced land usage, traditional populations, and a sense of community and heritage identity, can be referred to as rural tourism. Although the rural tourism concept is not widely accepted, authors such as Paresishvili et al. (2017) [21] argue that the essence of rural tourism is territories that live according to their ancestral customs and traditions and that it is a type of tourism based on outdoor activities, leisure, and recreation, thus making it possible to take full advantage of the natural and cultural-historical particularities of the destinations in which it is located.

Rural tourism has unique characteristics that differentiate it from other types of tourism, such as offering tourists an opportunity to experience cultural and gastronomic practices and traditions, combined with a personalised interaction with the tour operator. Nevertheless, the tourism industry grew alongside civilisations, becoming increasingly entangled in a digital transformation process that sees travellers, tour guides, and the locations themselves adopting, in a permanent manner, ICT as active and decisive tools [22].

The tourism sector digital transformation is, at the same time, making the available tourist offer evolve, exponentiating the value and diversity of the entire tourist experience itself, and enforcing evolution in terms of marketing and energising the sector and its products. Since marketing efforts targeted at these contexts can greatly benefit from opportunities for globalisation and the increased efficiency and effectiveness associated with the incorporation of new digital tools and technologies, this reality has an even greater impact on rural destinations and the tourist experiences developed in these contexts [23].

2.3. Digital Marketing—From Technology to Purpose

In particular, the way people relate to and communicate with organisations when trying to meet their material and economic requirements is significantly impacted by the advent and widespread use of new and more inventive digital platforms [24].

Today's society already makes use of digital platforms, search engines, websites, social networks, mobile applications, and email services, as highlighted by Kulkarni et al. (2020) [25], to communicate with one another, stay informed about local and global events, buy and sell goods and services, manage their finances, and, increasingly, perform professional duties.

The impact the context described before had on marketing as a field of endeavour was one of the most intriguing changes it brought about, because its fusion with new ICT and digital tools tends to result in more successful initiatives, is more easily controllable, and, most importantly, provides a more easily measurable return on investment [26].

From a conceptual standpoint, the initial and widespread perception that "digital marketing" refers to marketing products and services through digital channels has developed to the point where it is now characterised as a social process through which individuals and organisations use digital technologies to attract new clients, increase current clients' knowledge (so they can better meet their needs), promote brands, strengthen alliances, and boost sales [7].

Digital marketing, in the opinion of Chaffey and Ellis-Chadwick [27], is much more than just using a website. It is, in their opinion, a symbiosis between online platforms and digital marketing practices, content integration in theme-oriented portals, and institutional websites.

From a technical point of view, the main tools currently supporting the majority of digital marketing initiatives are [28] (a) social media marketing (SMM), (b) mobile marketing, (c) search engine optimisation (SEO), (d) web analytics, (e) search engine marketing (SEM), (f) interactive marketing, (g) affiliate marketing, (h) email marketing, and (i) digital content creation.

2.4. Tourism Destination Image

The influence of a destination's perceived image on tourists' decision processes and its relevance to the establishment of successful marketing initiatives have been the main foci of the study on the image of a tourism destination for numerous decades [29]. Similarly, a rural tourism destination's reputation ought to be seen as a major factor in its success, to the extent that it is crucial that managers of rural accommodations increasingly take this into account when creating and putting into practice marketing plans for promoting their tourist offerings [30].

In the context of rural tourism, the destination image may be defined as the perspective of travellers and tour guides regarding the features or attractions present in that specific location that are crucial in defining a plan to market the place [31]. This perspective is even more pertinent if we believe that, conceptually speaking, the destination image represents a person's subjective perception of the location as it is formed at three different points: (1) at the time of choosing the tourism location to visit; (2) during the actual tourist experience, when expectations and reality are compared; and (3) following the visit, when word-of-mouth promotion and the recommendation of the destination to family and friends are likely to occur [32].

Agapito et al. (2013) [33] claim that the relational combination of three aspects, namely the cognitive image, the conative image, and the emotive image, results in the image of a destination. The beliefs and information developed as a result of the process of analysing and assessing the (perceived) qualities and traits of a tourist location are included in the cognitive picture [34]. However, the affective image focuses on how travellers feel about their own destination [35]. The conative dimension, which is typically linked to concerns involving loyalty, indicates the traveller's aspirations to promote the tourist destination and to keep a positive outlook on the place [36].

Thus, the perception a traveller has of a particular tourist location is strongly tied to how they intend to engage with it, specifically through their plans to visit or suggest it to others [37].

2.5. Tourists' Perceived Intention to (re)Visit Tourism Destinations

As stated by multiple authors, there is a clear connection between the perception of a place (perceived destination image) and the desire to visit it. Particularly when they know less about the place and have never been there before, tourists prefer places with more substantial and positive images [38].

Rural tourism, which might be considered a market niche, comprises not just the rural setting but also lodging, which typically has fewer beds and a variety of tourist-friendly activities (landscape and nature, regional gastronomy, handcrafts, among others). A rural traveller who is comfortable with their experiences there and can relate to the area is more likely to have a connection to it, promote it, and go there [39].

The intention to visit a destination has a direct relationship between the perception and the value perceived by the tourist. A rural tourism destination that manages to convey to the tourist the real perception of its value tends to encourage the tourist to visit and to recommend it in the future. Visitors' intentions to visit a rural tourism location are significantly influenced by its attractiveness, the ability to provide them with what they want and need, and the adoption of a favourable destination image [40].

In addition, according to Ranjbarian and Pool [41], the pleasure of visitors and their desire to return to a tourism destination are directly influenced by their impression of the quality and value of the tourism destination. Thus, a destination that manages to convey its value and the real perception of its quality tends to impact tourists' intention to revisit [42].

2.6. Rural Destination Sustainability

The slowdown in development that rural areas have seen over the past 10 years is clearly caused by the ageing of the population, the desertification effect, and the lack of a properly established strategic approach to the incorporation of innovation in the various

activities associated with rural spaces (agriculture, tourism, livestock, food production, etc.). As stated by various authors [1], incorporating innovation tends to trigger investment and, inherently, appeal to younger and highly qualified populations.

The sustainability of a specific travel destination can be defined as the presence of efficient solutions to the demands of both tourists and regions, while adopting actions to promote future prospects, success, and wealth [43]. Long-term sustainability is reached when all of the endogenous assets are managed with a mindset on maintaining the integrity of indigenous cultures, natural processes, biological variety, and life support systems [44]. As a result, it is extremely challenging to ensure the sustainability of rural tourism, since resort regions must simultaneously optimise efforts and resources, while conserving expenses, and respond swiftly and efficiently to tourist needs. Involving the local community in the process of making strategic decisions is another requirement [45].

Due to its propensity to centre on economic, social, and market performance while converging on the customer, tourism sustainability is difficult in both financial and non-financial terms [46]. These three dimensions should be viewed as dimensions that are continually evolving and responding to the issues that arise, according to Pulido-Fernández et al. (2015) [47]. They should also be considered as dimensions that are always interacting with one another. Furthermore, market performance is also crucial for ensuring that the regions remain sustainable, as it enables the necessary long-term competitiveness [46].

3. Adoption and Use of ICT

The discussion about which factors influence the use, or the intention to use, a technology is not new. There are several models that intend to explain this same behaviour [48]. The acceptance, use, and adoption of technology models suggest that a certain set of independent variables can predispose the behavioural intention to the acceptance and use of technology, and for this reason, these models are increasingly used by researchers in their research projects [49].

3.1. The Information System Success Model

To the best of our knowledge, there is yet no consensual agreement on the significance of success when considering the evaluation of information systems and technologies. In this field of study, measuring success is considered a multidimensional concept, where each of the dimensions can be an indicator of success. Several studies have approached the success of information systems as a measure of continuous use [50]. Even so, the prospect of success may vary depending on the information system we are evaluating.

One of the best-known models for evaluating the success of information systems and technologies is the Delone and McLean model [51]. According to these authors, the success of a given ICT can be defined by a multidimensional concept comprising six categories, which include the factors of adaptation to the technology and factors that are a consequence of the use of the technology: quality of information, quality of the system, quality of service, use, intention to use, user satisfaction, and net benefits [52]. This model has been used to assess the success of different types of information systems and technologies.

3.2. Destination Brand Equity Framework

The destination brand equity, or overall value, has a number of components, including notoriety, image, quality, and loyalty, and it is connected to customers' brand knowledge [53].

The importance of brand loyalty has been evidenced over the years by the role it plays as a determinant in measuring the overall brand equity. In terms of marketing, the overall brand equity is mainly focused on the consumer's perspective, and not so much on the brand, as it can provide us with additional knowledge about consumer behaviour towards the brand [54].

According to Gartner and Ruzzier [55], the quality and brand image dimensions clearly represent the most important factors in the evaluation of a tourism destination, regardless

of whether it is a first visit or a revisit. Thus, the existence of a positive perception of the brand equity of a particular tourism destination can be an influence on the behavioural intention of tourists to (re)visit it.

3.3. Relationships between Destinations' Familiarity, Image, and Tourists' Visit Intentions

Over the years, the influence of the destination image has been supported by the existing literature not only on the destination selection process but also on tourist behaviour in general [56]. The fact that the intention to search a destination is globally perceived as a sign of customer loyalty towards the destination has led various academics to further research this topic and advance on the existing knowledge. This research tends to argue that the global image of a destination represents one of the most important factors regarding the intention to visit or revisit the destination [57]. The relationship between the destination image and tourists' intention to visit is of great importance for the study of rural destination sustainability.

Hence, familiarity with the destination, the destination image, and visit intention are the most used variables in marketing to investigate the relationship between the destination image and the intention-to-visit behaviour [58].

4. Conceptual Model

The proposed conceptual model (Figure 3) is based on Tan and Wu's arguments on tourism destinations' image relationship with tourists' visit intentions [58], on Delone and McLean's Information Systems Success Model [51], and on the context of global brand equity presented by Verma [53].
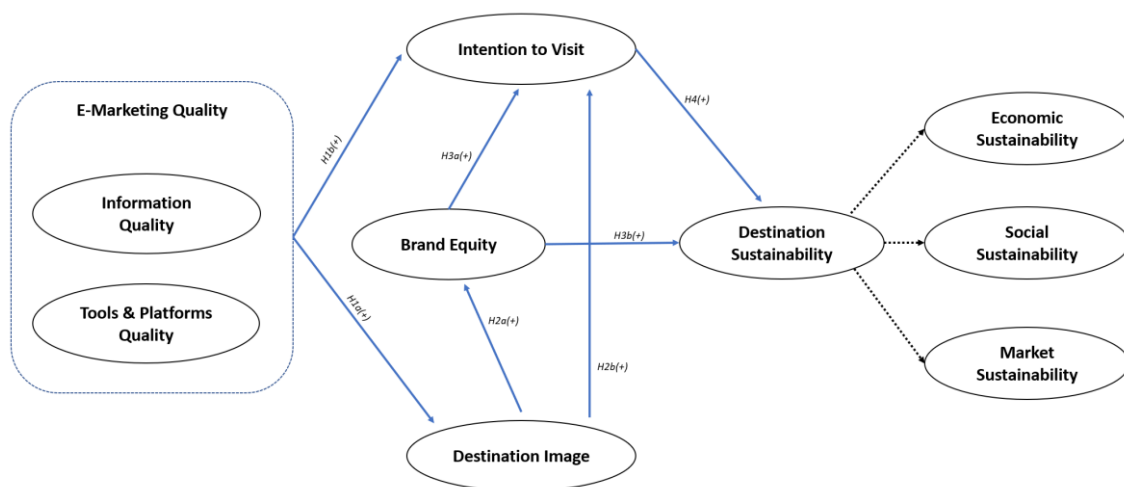

Figure 3. Proposed conceptual model.

The primary goals of the suggested model are, first, to comprehend potential connections between successful e-marketing initiatives and the development of a welcoming and positive rural tourism destination image, while building destination brand equity and enticing travellers to the location, and, second, to comprehend how a favourable and well-known perception of a rural tourism location, when coupled with a worldwide renowned brand and a firm intent to travel there, might affect the long-term sustainability of that region.

The proposed model comprises six primary constructs, whose conceptualisation is described in Table 1.

Table 1. Conceptual model variables' description.

Determinant	Description	Ref.
Information quality	Information quality, which is defined as the value of the information that a specific system is capable of keeping, supplying, or generating, is one of the most common dimensions along which information systems are developed. The quality of the information affects how satisfied a user is with the system as well as how likely they are to use it, which in turn affects how the system can benefit both the user and the company. According to a number of scholars, the factors of relevance, opportunity, interest, completeness of the material, and the calibre of the content development process are all important components of tourism-related marketing information's overall quality.	[59–61]
Tool and platform quality	E-marketing tool and platform quality is considered decisive for the assessment of a given initiative's quality, as they tend to impact how the initiative generates added value. High-quality tools and platforms are often the basis for high-quality e-marketing initiatives. Hence, when transposing this to the promotion of tourism destinations, it is also essential to assess the positive impacts that the structural quality of an e-marketing initiative might have on both the tourism destination and its tour operators.	[60,62]
Destination image	The main subjects of study are how the idea of a tourism destination affects travellers' choices and how it relates to marketing strategies. This idea has been prevalent in the literature for a number of decades. We can characterise the image of a tourism destination as being built in three distinct moments: (a) pre-visit, (b) during the visit, and (c) post-visit.	[32,63]
Brand wquity	A number of elements make up the concept of destination brand equity, including image, awareness, loyalty, and overall quality. It is related to customer brand knowledge and has also been the subject of numerous authors' studies. Tourists' behavioural intention to travel might be affected if there is a favourable perception of the brand equity of a particular tourism destination.	[53,64]
Intention to visit	The relationship between visitors' views of a location and the value of those perceptions has a significant impact on their intention to travel there. A rural tourism destination's chances of inciting people to visit and recommend it again are generally boosted when it can effectively communicate its worth.	[38,40]
Destination sustainability	A destination's sustainability can be viewed as a collection of various elements, including market, social, and economic sustainability. The literature also discusses the direct effects of these three factors—which are outlined as the fundamental tenets of sustainable tourism—on the economy, society, and environment.	[46,65]

4.1. Hypothesis Model

To be able to validate the potential impact of the proposed conceptual model, a hypotheses model was developed.

4.1.1. e-Marketing Quality

The effectiveness of using digital technologies and tools is seen from the standpoint of how well the information delivered through them is received [66]. According to Martins et al. (2019) [67], the overall quality dimension of information systems and technologies must be analysed considering that it is the combined result of the technology quality, the quality of the information or content provided, and the quality of the support service contexts.

The generalised quality of a project and, more importantly, the quality of the information supporting it are crucial for that initiative's success within the context of digital marketing, in particular within the context of its application to the rural tourism industry [68]. As a result, and according to Kim et al. (2017) [61], a good e-marketing strategy tends to have an impact on the creation of favourable perceptions of the rural destination. Similarly, Chiu et al. (2005) [69] assert that the effectiveness of a particular technology or tool might directly affect users' behavioural intentions. Applying this presumption to our study question, it is plausible to hypothesise that there is a correlation between the effectiveness of e-marketing campaigns in rural tourism areas and the tourists' intention to visit. Thus, based on this, the following propositions were established:

H1a. *The quality of e-marketing initiatives will impact in a positive manner the creation of a positive image of a rural tourism destination.*

H1b. *The quality of e-marketing initiatives will impact in a positive manner the tourist's intention to visit a given rural tourism destination.*

4.1.2. Destination Image

The literature on the subject indicates that when a particular destination has a favourable and well-known image that travellers tend to take as true and accurate, this global perception tends to encourage travellers' behavioural intention to travel to the location and take advantage of its attractions [70]. Similar to this, experts such as Faircloth et al. (2001) [71] contend that there is a propensity for positive correlations to form between a specific brand image and the brand's overall worth. Additionally, Pulido-Fernández and López-Sánchez [72] contend that the existence of a destination image that supports these sustainability ideals tends to inspire the sustainability of a certain tourism location.

Thus, using these arguments:

H2a. *Rural tourism destinations' image will positively influence the growth of the destinations' brand equity.*

H2b. *Rural tourism destinations' image will influence, in a positive manner, the intention of tourists to visit the destinations.*

4.1.3. Destination Brand Equity

As the result of the constant changes in the global economic context, businesses began focusing their efforts on building their brands in order to have a stronger market presence as well as to ensure that their brand attained a significant global asset value [28].

Before interacting in any way with intrinsic products, users frequently sense the need for a belief system connected to a certain brand [73]. Parallel to this, Bose et al. (2021) [74] contend that the presence of a behavioural desire for tourists to visit a specific tourism site serves as a trigger for positively assessing the brand equity of that destination. We presume that the theory backed by the existing literature may be used by transferring these presumptions into the context of rural tourism and fusing them with the known features of proximity, heritage, and personal attention intrinsic to the referred destinations.

Hence:

H3a. *Rural tourism destinations' brand equity will impact, in a positive manner, tourists' intention to visit those same destinations.*

H3b. *Rural tourism destinations' brand equity will impact, in a positive manner, the destinations' sustainability.*

4.1.4. Intention to Visit

Tourists' feelings towards a certain travel destination are related to the intention to visit that location. Whoever manages tourism destinations, and particularly rural destinations, must make sure that their true value is transmitted to the tourist to the point where it serves as a trigger to visit and recommend those destinations. The all-around sustainability of a destination is significantly impacted by how appealing rural tourism locations are to visitors, giving them what they want and seek [40]. Thus, in our research, the following propositions were established:

H4. *Tourists' behavioural intention to visit a rural tourism destination will influence, in a positive manner, the destination's sustainability.*

4.2. Qualitative Validation of the Proposed Model—Online Focus Group

To be able to validate the proposed artefact, a qualitative assessment of its assumptions and hypothesis was performed through an online focus group (OFG).

4.2.1. Context

According to Nunes et al. (2018) [75], the potential gathering of a collective and collaborative understanding of a given topic is critical for its validation and further development. This type of approach tends to stimulate the existence of interactive and constructive discussions between a group of specialists (typically with vast experience), which not only allow for the validation of the assumptions presented at the outset but also reach a set of new perceptions, and perspectives and further knowledge.

Even though it has existed as a qualitative data collection method for more than six decades and is eminently linked to the social sciences, there are several efforts (with reported successes) to adapt the focus group to other areas, namely to the exact sciences where quantitative methods tend to be more common [76].

From a conceptual point of view, a focus group depends on the aggregation of a previously selected group of specialists in a given field of study, with the aim of triggering an open and detailed debate on a given topic [77]. Although the scientific and academic community globally perceives it as a stable method capable of producing valid and valuable results, it is also easily perceived that this same method has evolved and is currently used in a more refined way than initially proposed.

One of the main elements associated with this evolution has been the transposition of the mechanisms used to support the interaction between the panel of experts, in the sense that this same interaction is now supported by digital technologies and tools and, consequently, can now be conducted in both synchronous and asynchronous manners by specialists who might be in totally different and geographically distant places [78]. From a nomenclature perspective, this combination of the typical "focus group" approach with this new digital component was given the name "online focus group" [79].

4.2.2. Online Focus Group Characterisation

The abovementioned online focus group was established in order to validate, in parallel, the conceptualisation and conceptual adaptation inherent to the various constructs that make up the proposed conceptual model, and also the various hypotheses that have been established.

The beginning of the development of an online focus group is based on the careful selection of the two main actors: the moderator and the participants. The role of the moderator should be assigned to someone with experience in moderating conversations and online forums so that they can easily involve the participants (those who will respond to the various questions that will be asked) and who can simultaneously stimulate these same participants to present their own convictions on the topic under discussion. In the

case of the participants, although they can be selected virtually through the use of digital technologies, they invariably have to undergo a pre-consultation in order to verify their personal data and their fit with the intended profile. Following Teixeira et al. (2018) [80], according to whom an online focus group should always include specialists in the subject inherent to the study itself, our specific context of this work, the group of participants will essentially include specialists in the areas of digital marketing, tourism, and promotion digital tourism.

4.2.3. Participants Characterisation

According to the existing literature, although the group of participants should have significant diversity, it should not exceed a size that can be considered adequate and that traditionally has between 6 and 10 members [81]. This argument serves the purpose of ensuring, in parallel, that the aforementioned diversity of profiles and perspectives is present and that the management and control of the group is also a feasible task without excessive efforts [82].

Thus, and with the aforementioned facts in mind, the online focus participants were selected according to the following three criteria: (1) specialisation area (digital marketing, tourism, and digital tourism promotion), (2) years of professional experience, and (3) academic degree. These same participants were also selected, considering that all professional contexts of society were covered, that is, there were participants with professional ties to the National System of Science, Technology and Higher Education (NSSTHE), to the business market, and to entities from the public sector (Table 2).

Table 2. Online focus group participant details.

	Activity Sector		Experience (Years)			Academic Degree		
NSSTHE	**Public Sector**	**Private Sector**	**0–5**	**5–10**	**>10**	**Degree**	**Master's Degree**	**PhD**
2	2	4	2	4	2	4	2	2

The members of the online focus group in this research project did not receive any financial compensation or any personal or professional benefit for their collaboration. This participation took place, albeit digitally, in an environment of positive sharing on the themes of digital marketing, tourism promotion, the sustainability of rural tourist territories, and the specific context of rural territories.

4.2.4. Study Characterisation

Aiming to achieve a qualitative validation of the proposed conceptual model, all the assumptions arising from this same artefact were exposed to the analysis, understanding, and validation of the various members of the online focus group. To previously structure the validation procedure, the following interaction sequence was established: (phase 1) discussion of the proposed conceptual model variables, (phase 2) discussion of the research hypothesis inherent to the relationships between the proposed model variables, (phase 3) discussion of the potential adequacy of the model to the specific reality of rural tourism and its sustainability, and (phase 4) analysis and discussion of all considerations reached during the various stages of the online focus group.

4.2.5. Data Collection

The beginning of the online focus group was a preliminary activity of customisation and availability of the online platform that supported all the interactions between the participants and the moderator. Taking into account Murgado-Armenteros et al. [83] argument, the use of digital learning management systems is an effective option as these tools can support the interaction between the various participants of the online focus group, the availability of documentation that supports that discussion, and also the facilitated use

of instruments to support the inquiry (e.g., questionnaires). That said, during this research, the use of the Moodle platform version 4.0 was established, which was made available through a dedicated domain and whose access was communicated individually to each participant of the online focus group.

After the initial customisation and deployment of the referred digital platform, the evaluation itself started with the creation of a module called "Phase 1—Validation of Constructs" and with the association to this same module of the set of information inherent to the various constructs that constituted the proposed conceptual model.

At the same time, a questionnaire was created asking the OFG participants to not only rate the potential importance that each of the presented constructs could have for the sustainability of the rural tourism destination but also present suggestions about other potential constructs that could have an impact on that same sustainability. After collecting the specialists' responses to the posed questions, the inherent data were systematised to make their interpretation more linear.

At the end of the first phase, we progressed to "Phase 2—Validation of the Hypothesis Model", where all the conceptual model hypotheses were considered by the participants of the OFG. To simplify their interpretation of the posed hypotheses, a set of documentation on each one was provided. However, to streamline the analysis of the participants' feedback, it was decided that the collection of that data would be based on a questionnaire where, in parallel, they could express their opinion on the presented hypothesis and were also able to indicate the potential existence of another hypothesis. After collecting all the responses from the participants, the inherent data were systematised in a tabular format for better interpretation.

After completing the validation phase of the hypotheses model, we moved on to "Phase 3—Validation of the Adequacy of the Conceptual Model", where the participants of the online focus group were asked to discuss the potential adequacy of the proposed conceptual model to the role it intends to play, that is, to act as a reference for characterising the impact dimensions such as the quality of digital marketing initiatives, the intention of tourists to visit the rural tourism destination, the existence of a high-quality image of the destination itself, and the global equity of the brand associated with that destination, have on the overall rural region's sustainability. After collecting all the feedback presented by the participants in the study, these data were systematised and subsequently compiled, together with the data resulting from the previous phases, thus making it possible to reach an overview of the participants' perceptions and considerations.

Having all the collected data structured and compiled, we advanced to the final phase of the online focus group, which was based on the creation of an active interaction/discussion activity between all participants and the study moderator and that focused on the knowledge extracted from the data collected thus far. After perceiving the existence of agreement and consensus regarding the knowledge generated through the study, the moderator also took advantage of the discussion forum created during this last phase to thank each of the specialists for their participation in the online focus group.

As a way of ensuring that the involvement and motivation of the participants were permanently maximised, and their participation was not conditioned by any personal and/or professional issue, the participants were never identified, and even their use of Moodle was made through generic users (e.g., "Participant 1").

The construction of the various questionnaires used was based on an analysis of the existing scientific literature [84–86] and supported with 7-point Likert scales.

4.3. Online Focus Group Results

The results achieved with the online focus group were quite disparate and allowed us to clearly understand the participants' perceptions of the various constructs that made up the proposed conceptual model, of the model of hypotheses adjacent to that same conceptual model, and, globally, of the potential of the proposed model for mapping the set of factors that can impact the overall sustainability of a rural tourism destination.

With regard to OFG phase 1, and as shown in Table 3, the vast majority of study participants considered that the quality of the information that supports digital marketing initiatives and the image of a tourism destination represent factors with significant importance for the overall sustainability of that same destination. At the same time, it is also possible to highlight from the interpretation of the achieved results that the various quality dimensions of the digital tools used for planning and executing digital marketing initiatives, as well as the existence of a permanent behavioural intention to visit a rural tourism destination, was considered a factors that is important for the sustainability of that same destination. Finally, the results achieved in phase 1 of the study also allowed perceiving that there are several reserves on the part of the participants regarding the potential impact that rural destinations' brand equity might have on the destinations' global sustainability.

Table 3. Results of the classification of the potential impact of the determinants for the sustainability of rural tourism destinations.

Determinant	1 (Not Important)	2	3	4	5	6	7 (Very Important)
Information quality	0	0	0	12.5%	12.5%	50.0%	25.0%
Tool and platform quality	0	0	0	0	37.5%	50.0%	12.5%
Destination image	0	0	0	0	12.5%	37.5%	50.0%
Destination brand equity	0	0	12.5%	37.5%	25.0%	25.0%	0
Intention to visit	0	0	0	0	37.5%	37.5%	25.0%

Regarding the results of phase 2 (Table 4), which concern the perception of the study participants regarding the adequacy of the various hypotheses established in terms of the proposed conceptual model, it is possible to acknowledge that hypotheses H1a, H1b, and H4 were considered, with an almost unequivocal view, highly suitable. With regard to hypotheses H2a and H2b, the participants, although considering them quite adequate, provided dispersed responses across the three upper levels of the 7-point Likert scale. Regarding hypotheses H3a and H3b, which concerned the potential impact of the rural destination brand equity on it's the destination's sustainability, none of the OFG participants considered that those hypotheses were absolutely adequate, even though they focused their responses on the antepenultimate and penultimate adequacy levels (5 and 6), which indicates, even so, that they consider them quite adequate.

Table 4. Result of the classification by the participants of the online focus group regarding the adequacy of the established model of hypotheses.

Hypothesis	1 (Not Adequate)	2	3	4	5	6	7 (Very Adequate)
H1a	0	0	0	0	0	62.5%	37.5%
H1b	0	0	0	0	0	62.5%	37.5%
H2a	0	0	0	0	12.5%	75.0%	12.5%
H2b	0	0	0	0	12.5%	75.0%	12.5%
H3a	0	0	0	0	50.0%	50.0%	0
H3b	0	0	0	0	50.0%	50.0%	0
H4	0	0	0	0	0	37.5%	62.5%

With regard to phase 3 of the study, we asked the participants to provide their perception of the potential of the proposed conceptual model to provide an innovative answer

for which factors can impact the sustainability of rural tourism destinations. From the discussion, which took place through the discussion forum functionality and remained quite active, with all the participants intervening on at least two occasions, it was possible to recognise the existence of a global consensus regarding the positive impact that digital marketing campaigns, duly aligned with the existing territorial development strategies and/or with the strategies for the tourism sector itself, might have on the overall sustainability of rural destinations. At the same time, it was also possible to perceive the existence of a positive expectation about the potential contribution that a positive image of a tourism destination can make to its sustainability.

Regarding the question of the existence of behavioural intentions, on the part of tourists, to (continuously) visit a tourism destination, it was unanimous that this will possibly be one of the main factors contributing to the sustainability of the destination itself, since it will tend to give rise to continued economic dynamics, which, consequently, will lead to changes in the socio-economic framework of the entire territory.

Interestingly, the results that were verified throughout phase 1 and phase 2 of the study with regard to the specific context of the impact that a territory's brand equity may have on its sustainability, the participants tended to show some caution in anticipating this impact, as, according to the general opinion, rural territories usually do not have duly established brands, and even those that that have a brand, for the most part, tend to also not to use it across the board, that is, even though regional bodies (of a public nature) may even do so, private entities tend not to realise the importance of simultaneously promoting their own business and the tourism destination itself.

After the end of the first three phases of the study, the achieved results were systematised and made available to the OFG participants to stimulate a final discussion of all the approached topics. Although greatly encouraged by the study's moderator, this discussion did not give rise to relevant considerations.

5. Conclusions

This work began by identifying a set of constructs and combining them in a conceptual model that translates a new perspective on the potential impact that carrying out quality digital marketing initiatives, together with other dimensions, such as the image of a rural destination, the equity value of the brand associated with that same tourism destination, and the existence of a behavioural intention aimed at the continued visit to the destination by tourists, can have on the future sustainability of the rural tourism destination. The proposed conceptual model, developed in line with approaches previously described in the literature [66,67,87], and composed of a set of constructs drawn from a systematic literature review process that analysed—in a detailed manner—40 SCOPUS-indexed journal articles, represents, to the best of our knowledge, a highly innovative artefact.

After the previously described stage, of a more conceptual nature, an online focus group assessed the proposed conceptual model validity. This option was taken in perfect alignment with the existing literature, namely with the works of Murgado-Armenteros et al. (2017) [83] and Stewart and Shamdasani [79]. The performed online focus group was operationalised with eight participants with different profiles and professional/contextual backgrounds, which provided the study with the diversity of opinion it needed.

From the online focus group, it was possible to perceive that the vast majority of the experts consider, as is explicit in a significant part of the literature [88], that digital marketing initiatives, when thought of strategically, when focused on producing quality content, and when executed professionally, can have a significant impact by not only creating public awareness about rural tourism destinations but also by positively contributing to the creation of new economic dynamics for these same territories through the generation of interest and engagement. Cumulatively, the various experts were also unanimous in agreeing that the referred digital marketing initiatives, when properly planned, structured, and based on quality content, can have a significant impact on the creation of a positive image of the destination itself.

Through the aforementioned study, it was also possible to perceive that its participants, in line with what is mentioned in the literature [89], also considered that the existence of a positive image of a tourism destination is a decisive factor for its overall sustainability. This argument is even more relevant for rural destinations, as these are not highly advertised and dynamic territories and have as their main selling point the image tourists have of them. When addressing the destination image construct, the OFG participants remained in line with the available literature, thus implying that they also maintained expectations about the potential impact that the referred construct might have on both the destination brand equity [90] and the rise of behavioural intentions to visit the territory [91].

Although several authors, such as Kumail et al. (2022) [92], argue that the existence of significant equity associated with the brand of a tourism destination tends to have a direct impact on tourists' visit intention, this same expectation was not fully supported by the members of the online focus group, mainly due to the low stage of maturity of rural destinations with regard to the idealisation, formalisation, and development of a representative identity brand. At the same time, these same members also did not show total agreement with the hypothesis that a brand's value is, considering the current situation, an impacting factor for the global sustainability of rural tourism destinations.

In what concerns the potential impact that the "intention to visit" factor might have on a rural tourism destination's sustainability, the OFG participants proved to be in perfect alignment with the existing literature [40], clearly showing their perception that the continued existence of a behavioural intention conducive to visiting a territory will lead to greater and more continuous volumes of tourists, which, inherently, will lead to more significant economic, social, and market dynamics.

From a global perspective, the achieved results align with the individual arguments in the literature, representing a relevant degree of validity for the proposed conceptual model. It is also essential to highlight the positive arguments that were stated by the OFG participants regarding the innovation factor associated with the proposal of a conceptual model that represented the potential impact that digital marketing might have on rural tourism destinations' sustainability.

Limitations and Future Work

As with a significant part of scientific work, this work also includes a set of limitations that, although not clouding the overall value of the achieved results, demonstrate an immediate future path that involves trying to address the identified issues.

One of the identified limitations is the low reproducibility of the study results, mainly because the panel of specialists who participated in the online focus group, despite fulfilling all the requirements established in the literature, ended up needing the desired level of diversity and size. Although relevant, this type of limitation is associated with a significant part of scientific studies based on qualitative approaches. Based on the existing literature [66,67,85], we plan to conduct a quantitative study in the future based on the distribution of questionnaires to target groups of representative dimensions and the analysis of results in light of structural equation models (SEM).

Carrying out the aforementioned quantitative study will make it possible to make more informed inferences about the potential impact each construct might have on the sustainability of rural tourism destinations. This knowledge will be an added value not only for other researchers who are focusing their attention on the area of rural tourism and the use of digital marketing as a dynamic tool for the sector and the inherent territories but also for regional and/or national entities that are in the process of creating or readjusting their tourism and marketing strategies.

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