

Tourism management of World Heritage Sites. Perspectives on 10 years of integration of the University of Coimbra, Alta and Sofia in the UNESCO list

Gestão turística de Sítios Património Mundial.
Perspetivas sobre 10 anos de integração da
Universidade de Coimbra, Alta e Sofia na lista da
UNESCO

Norberto Santos ^{*1}, Claudete Oliveira Moreira ^{**2},
Carlos Cardoso Ferreira ^{***3} and Luís Silveira ^{****4}

¹*Departamento de Geografia e Turismo. Faculdade de Letras. Universidade de Coimbra, Centro de Estudos de Geografia e Ordenamento do Território*

²*Departamento de Geografia e Turismo. Faculdade de Letras. Universidade de Coimbra, Centro de Estudos de Geografia e Ordenamento do Território*

³*Departamento de Geografia e Turismo. Faculdade de Letras. Universidade de Coimbra, Centro de Estudos de Geografia e Ordenamento do Território*

⁴*Departamento de Geografia e Turismo. Faculdade de Letras. Universidade de Coimbra, Centro de Estudos de Geografia e Ordenamento do Território*

Abstract

Empirical research on World Heritage Sites rarely combines, in a comprehensive way, tourism competitiveness, smart destination strategies, and the Delphi method within the framework of the quadruple helix model. This study seeks to address that gap. Methodologically, it employs the Delphi technique applied to the quadruple helix model, involving representatives from public authorities, academia, the private sector, and civil society. The process was conducted over three rounds and completed by 23 participants. This research identifies the main challenges associated with managing Coimbra as a tourist destination in the decade following the inscription of the University of Coimbra – Alta and Sofia on the UNESCO World Heritage List. The focus lies on the impacts generated and the strategies required to foster adaptation, innovation, and entrepreneurship, in light of visitors' evolving expectations and the necessary adjustment of the city's tourism offer. Findings reveal four major challenges: (i) defining strategic positioning and priorities across diverse sectors; (ii) enhancing urban competitiveness; (iii) stimulating industry, commerce, and the local entrepreneurial ecosystem; and (iv) leveraging the UNESCO designation to strengthen Coimbra's international image. One limitation of the study stems from its focus on a single UNESCO-listed asset. Future research may broaden the panel by integrating other Portuguese destinations included in the World Heritage Sites. By analysing stakeholder perspectives on the inscrip-

Cadernos de
Geografia

doi: https://dx.doi.org/10.14195/0871-1623_52_10

Received on:
June 5, 2025

Accepted on:
October 30, 2025

* Email: norgeo@ci.uc.pt

** Email: claudete@fl.uc.pt

*** Email: carlos.ferreira@uc.pt

**** Email: luis.silveira@uc.pt

tion of the University of Coimbra – Alta and Sofia on the World Heritage List, this study offers relevant contributions to the scientific community and destination managers.

Keywords: Tourism destination management. Smart tourism. Delphi technique. Coimbra (Portugal). World Heritage Site.

Resumo

A investigação empírica sobre Sítios do Património Mundial raramente articula, de forma integrada, a competitividade turística, as estratégias de destinos inteligentes e o método Delphi no âmbito do modelo da hélice quádrupla. Este estudo procura colmatar essa lacuna. Do ponto de vista metodológico, recorre-se à técnica Delphi aplicada ao modelo da hélice quádrupla, envolvendo representantes das autoridades públicas, da academia, do setor privado e da sociedade civil. O processo desenvolveu-se em três rondas e foi concluído por 23 participantes. A investigação identifica os principais desafios associados à gestão de Coimbra enquanto destino turístico, na década subsequente à inscrição da Universidade de Coimbra – Alta e Sofia na Lista do Património Mundial da UNESCO. O foco centra-se nos impactos gerados e nas estratégias necessárias para promover adaptação, inovação e empreendedorismo, diante das expectativas em constante evolução dos visitantes e do ajustamento imprescindível da oferta turística da cidade. Os resultados evidenciam quatro grandes desafios: (i) definição de um posicionamento estratégico claro e estabelecimento de prioridades em diferentes setores; (ii) reforço da competitividade urbana; (iii) dinamização da indústria, do comércio e do ecossistema empresarial local; e (iv) valorização da designação da UNESCO como instrumento de fortalecimento da reputação do Destino Coimbra. Uma limitação do estudo decorre do facto de incidir sobre um único Bem classificado pela UNESCO. Investigações futuras poderão ampliar o painel, integrando outros destinos portugueses aos Sítios do Património Mundial. Por intermédio da análise das perspetivas dos *stakeholders* sobre a inscrição da Universidade de Coimbra – Alta e Sofia na Lista do Património Mundial, esta investigação oferece contributos relevantes para a comunidade científica e para os gestores de destinos.

Palavras-chave: Gestão de destinos turísticos. Turismo inteligente. Técnica Delphi. Coimbra (Portugal). Sítios Património Mundial..

1. Introduction

Coimbra is a tourist destination that has undergone significant changes in recent years, especially after the integration of *Universidade de Coimbra – Alta and Sofia* in the representative list of UNESCO World Heritage, in 2013. This resulted in changes (i) in the local tourist system, with a positive link between the local population, visitors and entrepreneurs, still with some “trepidation” and “ambivalence” (Terkenli & Georgoula, 2022); (ii) in the image, with loyalty being known to be less price-sensitive and more word-of-mouth enhancing (Xu et al., 2023) (Xu et al., 2023); (iii) in the tourist offer, as an encounter with the heritage legacy of the visitor and what it means as a heritage identity (Valverde-Roda et al., 2023) (Valverde-Roda et al., 2023); and, (iv) in the increase of the internationalisation of the destination, supported by the geographic, cultural and economic characteristics of the territories (Mira et al., 2021), mirrored in the tourist demand. This recognition and the brand

image of Coimbra in some of the tourists' places of origin, combined with the university function – promoting specific types of tourism (educational, scientific, events, cultural, and VFR) – and the insertion of new structures and equipment, deserve extra attention regarding the tourist management of this urban cultural destination.

Special attention is paid to the impacts and strategies of the city (Brandajs & Russo, 2023), with the economy achieving social transformation, defining areas of exclusion for the most vulnerable inhabitants. That is why we need to understand the necessary adequacy, innovation, and entrepreneurship to meet the new concerns of cultural visitors, increasingly connected with intangible offerings (Smith et al., 2022), and to the imperative adjustment of supply through cultural governance (King et al., 2023), without forgetting local communities as part of the city system (Charag et al., 2021; Li et al., 2022; Ramkissoon, 2023).

The paper is organised as follows: after the introduction, section 2 presents the literature review, focusing on urban cultural tourism, culture, sustainable development and governance. Section 3 is oriented towards the study area and methodology. The study area is Coimbra, a medium-sized city in the Portuguese urban system located in southern Europe. A city that has been a UNESCO World Heritage Site for 12 years (inscribed in 2013). In terms of scientific research methodology, the Delphi technique was applied and is explained, research procedures are also presented. A panel of agents and interest groups linked to Coimbra's tourism destination was formed, with the panel structure following the quadruple helix model (public authorities, academia, private sector, and civil society). Three rounds were carried out and took place from October 2020 to February 2021. The first round was attended by 32 experts and the third and final round was completed by 23 participants. Section 4 focuses on results and discussion; section 5 summarises the conclusions, research limitations and implications.

2. Literature review

The cultural attraction marks the image of the territory of Coimbra and assumes itself as a factor for the sustainable development of tourism territories (Duxbury et al., 2016; Fortuna & Gomes, 2010; Gomes, 2012; Grah et al., 2020; Moreira, 2013; Moreira et al., 2020; Santos, 2013). Cultural heritages diversify the supply and create forms of cumulative attraction (Nelson, 1958) or multi-attraction (Caldeira & Kastenholz, 2018; Hunt & Crompton, 2008) while at the same time value culture as the fourth pillar of sustainable development (Astara, 2014; Duxbury et al., 2016; Hawkes, 2001) and develop smart tourism offerings (European Commission, 2020; Koo et al., 2016; Santos, 2015; Scott & Cooper, 2010; Sigala, 2012). This appreciation of culture as a contributor to sustainable development leads to two other main subjects: destination competitiveness (Dwyer & Kim, 2003; García-Milon et al., 2020; Ritchie & Crouch, 2003) and management and governance (Bichler, 2019; Gispert & Clavé, 2020; King et al., 2023; Maruccia et al., 2020; Ramkissoon, 2023).

It's important to "recognise that culture is capable of being integrated within sustainable development in three more-or-less separate but never fully distinctive and indeed often interlocking ways, or 'roles'" (Dessein et al., 2015, p. 28). In fact,

culture can be seen as an aggregator to sustainable development, promoting it and serving as a main support and mediator between pillars. Culture could (or should) be the igniter of sustainable development itself (Dessein et al., 2015). As Duxbury et al. (2016, p. 7) say, “without culture, there is no future for cities: cities need vitality, meaning, identity and innovation, and citizens need to widen their freedoms”.

Today, urban cultural tourism requires “a cultural action, to lay the groundwork for a sustainable future, because initial strategies to achieve sustainability must be cultural ones” (Hawkes, 2001, p. 12). However, when we talk about tourism, we can think of other pillars or, at least, the valuation of other elements that in the tourism system can play a significant role. This is the case of i) the political decision and ii) the symbolic expression (Santos, 2014), which can, together with culture, fulfil an essential role in the understanding of sustainable development and good management, preferably smart, of tourist destinations. Indeed, as Astara (2014, p. 100) states, “a regenerated pluralistic concept of sustainable development should take into account the political, cultural, technological, ecological and economic content of the spectrum of local and global human communities and even recognize the most abstract and universal concepts of justice and equality”. Looking at tourism in Coimbra requires a careful analysis of how the management of the city and the tourist destination is being carried out. That is, as a living space, with multi-attraction being a fundamental element in the tourist experience and forcing the destination to become smarter, to respond to the multiplicity of demands of the new tourist (experiential, creative and thrill-seeking).

Governance as an integrated management process involving the municipal government, the private sector, the university and the community, must reflect that “citizens are at the centre of everything and no city can be intelligent if it does not offer services that citizens perceive as useful, that satisfy their needs and that increase their well-being and quality of life” (Cebreiros & Gulín, 2014, p. 15). It is necessary to integrate the role of civil society, media, culture (Carayannis & Campbell, 2009; Lew et al., 2018), and a technology-based economy linked to creative industries, values, lifestyles, art and creative class (Carayannis & Campbell, 2009). This will allow for a sustainable economic development, an improvement in the standard of living, considerable public participation in governance and – certainly important for the destination Coimbra – a sensible management of natural resources and built heritage. This combination of purposes requires, according to Maruccia et al. (2020, p. 3), the introduction of a fifth helix in which the “model is even broader and more comprehensive, contextualising the Quadruple Helix and additionally adding the helix (and perspective) of the ‘society’s natural environments.”

The optimization of resources, the sustainability and the improvement of the residents’ quality of life are very much associated with planning and shared management of information, which benefits everyone, as it is ultimately people who make cities “smart” (Maruccia et al., 2020). The European Commission (2020) defines four core concepts for smart tourism: i) accessibility, ii) digitalization, iii) sustainability and iv) cultural heritage and creativity. This interpretation promotes and contributes to the claim of this text to be a bridge between access to culture, the tourism market and smart urban management, taking to another level the concept of destination compet-

itiveness. The ability to offer travel experiences of better tourism quality than other destinations, with ICT and smart technologies, fundamental to the achievement of Smart Tourism (Lamsfus et al., 2015), is conjugated, combining action processes and human resources to better achieve these designs. The multi-attraction trend of tourists (Caldeira & Kastenholz, 2018) needs to have an organised and preferably networked offer with smart management in each attraction, in each place and all interacting in a systematic way, being, therefore, facilitators for travelling to smart destinations, before, during and after its accomplishment.

Stakeholders can significantly enhance the quality of their service, helped by the ease of accessibility and creation of platform economies (Werthner et al., 2015; Xue et al., 2020). The intelligent tourism destination also improves the tourist experience, achieving a more personalised and real-time service (Buhalis & Amaranggana, 2015; Buhalis & Sinarta, 2019), with the use of artificial intelligence, virtual reality, augmented reality, internet of things, location-based services (LBS), geotargeting, amongst others. In this way, it is possible to obtain win-win situations, amplified by the circumstance that the relationship technology / skilled human resource/people hospitality allows co-creation of value (Sigala, 2012; Yoo et al., 2015).

3. Study area and methodology

3.1. Study area

Coimbra, strategically located between Portugal's two major metropolitan areas and near the Atlantic coast, offers a diversified range of services in education, health, tourism, leisure, and decentralised local and regional administration. It thus asserts itself as a territory of considerable heritage, academic, and regional governance significance.

Leisure and tourism have played a central role in the revitalisation of the Historic Centre, which has been the focus of ongoing rehabilitation and enhancement initiatives extending into the surrounding areas. These interventions combine the dynamics of increasing tourism pressure with more personalised, experience-oriented offerings. UNESCO-designated heritage—most notably the University of Coimbra – Alta and Sofia—constitutes the city's principal tourism asset, significantly strengthening its capacity to attract visitors. As a result, mass tourism coexists with authentic experiences that foster meaningful engagement with local culture, supported by both tangible and intangible heritage. In this context, the role of local communities in hosting and welcoming visitors has become increasingly important.

Coimbra demonstrates a remarkable capacity for multi-attraction, derived from the diversity and quality of its offerings, embodied in an urban structure that integrates multiple historical layers activated by stakeholders across the tourism value chain. Its history, monumentality, intangible heritage, riverside and aquatic environments, hotel provision—traditional and non-traditional—regional, national, and international tourist entertainment, as well as the quality of life of its residents, all contribute to the continuous enhancement of the destination.

All these elements are directly or indirectly anchored in the tourism supply associated with the University of Coimbra – Alta and Sofia. However, the contempo-

rary interpretation of the destination—combining tangible and intangible, as well as cultural and natural heritage—has broadened its scope, positioning Coimbra as a leading urban cultural tourism destination that extends well beyond the boundaries of the Historic Centre. This expanded perspective encompasses colleges, convents, monasteries, academic and religious traditions, as well as new cultural spaces and narratives.

Regarding tourism demand, the number of overnight stays increased following the inclusion of the University of Coimbra – Alta and Sofia on the UNESCO World Heritage List in 2013. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, RevPAR rose from €20.3 in 2013 to €35.5 in 2019—the benchmark year—and reached €37.7 in 2022, the highest figure in the period analysed (the pandemic years registered sharp declines: €14.9 in 2020 and €20.0 in 2021). At the same time, the destination experienced increasing internationalisation: international guests accounted for 61.3% of the total in 2019, compared with 47.9% in 2013. In 2021, they represented only 35.5% (INE, 2023), reflecting the post-pandemic recovery phase.

3.2. The Delphi technique

In this application of the Delphi technique, an exploratory Delphi is chosen. The Delphi technique assumes a structured and systematic process of opinion gathering and sharing. To this end, it uses a series of questionnaires, one in each round, contemplating, as from the second round, a controlled feedback of the results of the previous round. In each round, the participant can add new facts that are important for reflection and discussion, as well as share more eccentric opinions, contrary to those that are more socially accepted.

The application of the Delphi technique obeys some assumptions. The participants are strategically selected according to their knowledge of the topic and the territory under study (Faucher et al., 2008; Garrod & Fyall, 2005; Linstone & Turoff, 2002; Moreira, 2013; Moreira & Santos, 2020; Roman et al., 2020).

Four phases usually involve this methodology. The first phase refers to the discussion of the topic under analysis, with everyone contributing with additional information that they consider relevant to the topic. The second phase involves the process of understanding what participants agree and disagree on and what their understanding is of relative terms such as importance, desirability, or feasibility. If disagreement in responses is significant, then the reasons behind their differences will be explored in the third phase and possibly evaluated. The fourth and final stage is the final evaluation. It occurs when the previously collected information has been initially analysed and sent for consideration (Linstone & Turoff, 2002).

The suitability of the Delphi technique to tourism research has been frequently evidenced (Garrod & Fyall, 2005; Moreira, 2013; Moreira & Santos, 2020). Over the decades and the succession of studies, the application has become more oriented towards promoting communication, generating ideas, setting objectives, defining priorities, identifying problems, outlining lines of action, and finding solutions to complex realities.

3.3. Research procedures

The implementation of the Delphi technique started with the construction of a framework consisting of four groups of experts: i) public authorities, ii) academics, iii) private sector and iv) civil society, following the quadruple helix analysis model (Figure 1). The participants were selected according to their extensive knowledge of the territory, from the point of view of the management of Coimbra as a municipality and as a tourist destination. The second criterion referred to the necessary representativeness of the stakeholders through the inclusion of several areas of society in the study. The initial panel of experts consisted of 72 people. Fifty-one agreed to participate in the study (first round).

In the 1st round, 32 questionnaires were obtained. The questionnaire *Coimbra: Futures of a City With a Past – Contributions for a Decade*, consisted of three parts, namely: 1 – Management of the city of Coimbra, 2 – Management of the tourist destination Coimbra, and 3 – Characterisation of the participants. There were 47 closed and open-ended questions, specifically closed answers through Likert scales with three, five and ten levels, closed answers through the selection of criteria, short open answers, and long open answers. Out of the 47 questions, nine were related to biographical and professional issues of the participants (Part 3). The remaining 38 questions were included in Parts 1 and 2. In the 2nd round, 28 stakeholders participated, and 23 participated in the 3rd round. The three rounds were conducted from October 2020 to February 2021.

4. Results and discussion

The management of the Coimbra tourist destination was present throughout the three rounds. Although some issues were made explicit in the first round, others continued into the second round and still others needed to be present in all three rounds to define consensus or identify guidelines for action. A certain lack of harmony is perceived, which is expressed in the four groups of specialists. The Public Authorities being the group that is closest to the average, Civil Society and Academics have a more negative perspective on the tourism offer, unlike the Private Sector. These data show that informed residents think that the tourism offer should be rethought and probably needs more participative decisions, applying quadruple helix proposals (Bramwell, 2010), benefiting from the adoption of holistic and critical frameworks.

A new tourist profile of Coimbra, identified by the respondents, is directly related to UNESCO's recognition, by integrating the *University of Coimbra – Alta e Sofia* in the representative list of World Heritage, in 2013. The selection made by the panel (Table 1a) shows that 75% of participants believe that the *Universidade de Coimbra – Alta e Sofia* asset should be an anchor to attract tourists and a source of visibility for the destination. To this element, it is important to add the promotion of diversification and valorisation of tourism products that the city already offers, but which may not yet be integrated (46.4%).

The remaining references made by the Delphi panel are indicative of existing weaknesses that are flagged up as issues to be resolved for the balanced supply of tourism at Coimbra: create networks and circuits to visit the city, create differentiated

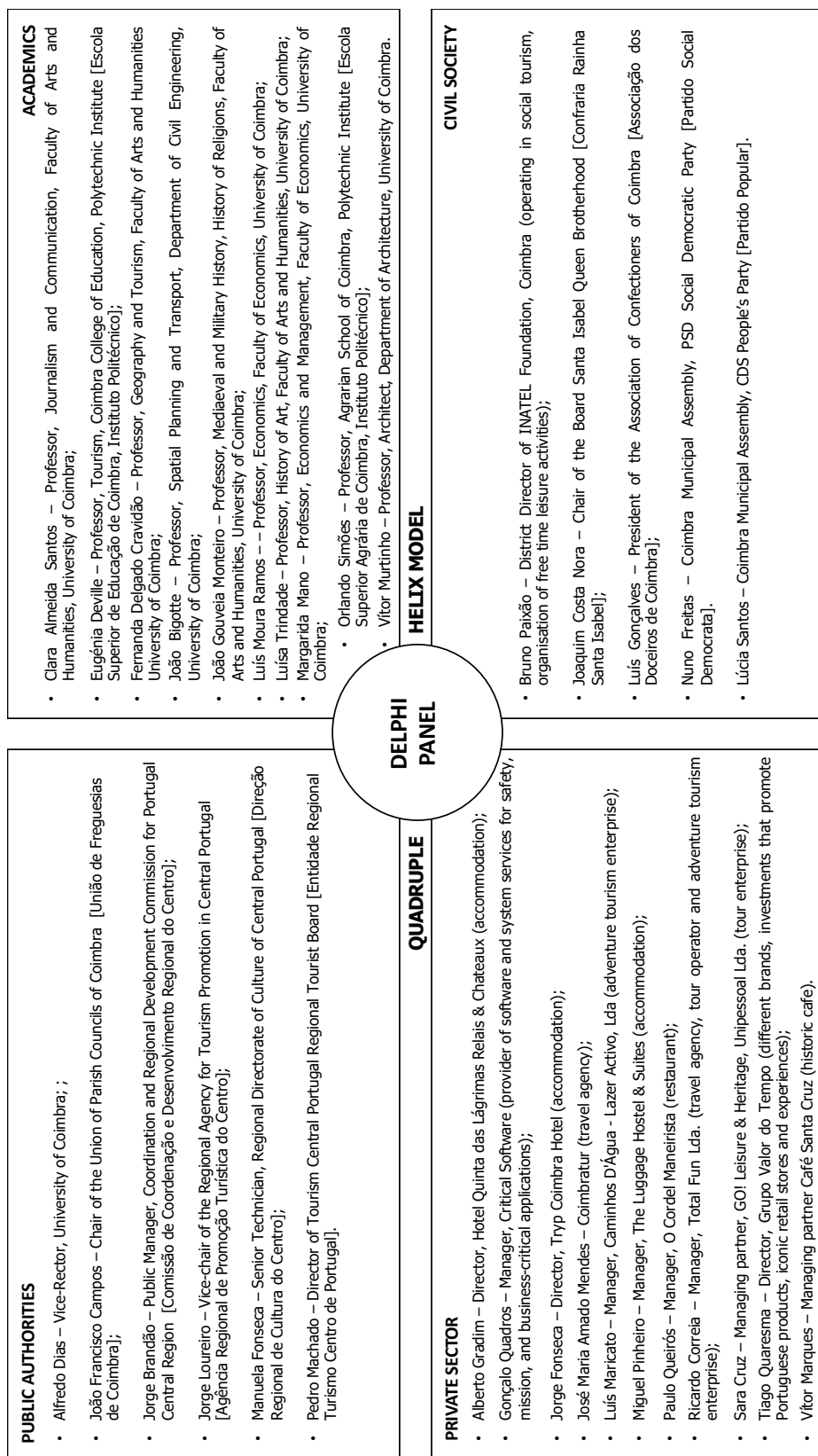


Figure 1. Delphi panel composition.

products of high value based on knowledge, enhance Sofia Street promoting the tourist flow towards it and create complementary tourist products.

Concerning essential elements to promote the diversification and valorisation of tourism products in Coimbra, rather than trying to diversify the city's attractions unbridled, it makes sense to take the existing ones (the University and what is related to it) and work them to their full potential (Delphi Panel, 2020), which has not yet been achieved. This relationship, complementarity and multi-attraction structure are fundamental to increasing the average length of stay of visitors in Coimbra. Although the quality, image and brand are present and are recognised nationally and internationally, the length of stay (Bam, 2023) in the destination has remained below what is desirable by hotel managers and tourism supply, in general. Questioned on the subject, the panel identified actions (Table 1b) as being important to increase the length of stay of visitors in Coimbra.

As this indicator is of great importance for tourism in Coimbra, the participants were also asked to indicate two tourism products in Coimbra's area of influence, whose strategic partnership could be an added value to increase the length of stay. The axis of Romanisation is an attraction that should be underlined, such as Gastronomy and Wines, which is becoming increasingly important in the region, as the Riverine and Sea Aquatic Environments, allowing to enhance the diversification of tourists' motivations.

Table 1. Elements, actions and projects contributing to tourism development in Coimbra**Table 1a***Elements that can contribute to the balanced development of tourism in Coimbra (%)*

Elements that can contribute to the balanced development of tourism in Coimbra	(%)
Be an anchor to attract tourists and a source of visibility for the destination	75.0
Promote the diversification and valorisation of the destination's different tourism products	46.4
To be the centre and engine of the tourism development strategy	39.3
To create networks and circuits to visit the city (UC + other points of interest)	39.3
To create differentiated products of high value based on Knowledge	39.3
Enhance Sofia Street and promote the tourist flow towards it	25.0
Create complementary tourist products	21.4

Table 1b*Actions that can contribute to an increase in the length of stay in the city (%)*

Actions that can contribute to an increase in the length of stay in the city	(%)
Integrate other products/destinations of the region into a structured offer	85.7
Make the city's diversity of attractions/products known to tourist operators	46.4
Create attractive and captivating initiatives and programmes	38.9
Greater integration/articulation of the existing offer	35.7
Increase the number of (differentiating) events taking place in the city	35.7
Diversify the tourism offer	35.7
Increase the quality and value of the supply	32.1
Structure tourism products based on (unique) experiences	32.1
Develop thematic and night-time circuits in the city	32.1
Create tourist products and develop new types of tourism	32.1
Promote adequately the offer and activities of the destination	28.6
Differentiate and communicate the Coimbra brand	27.8

Table 1c*Projects with investment potential for the future in Coimbra (%)*

	The route of cafés with history	Integrated Sports Complex of Coimbra	Taking advantage of the waterfront with a wider offer (space and diversity)	National Science Museum in Coimbra
I totally agree	42.9	14.3	92.9	64.3
Partially agree	42.9	50.0	3.6	28.6
Neither agree nor disagree	7.1	28.6	0.0	0.0
Partially disagree	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
I totally disagree	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
DK/NA	7.1	7.1	3.6	7.1

Source: Delphi Panel 1st and 2nd rounds.

Having identified and qualified the tourism products of the destination Coimbra and its surroundings, the panel was asked to give its opinion on various projects (Table 1c) that have been considered for possible future investment and application in the destination.

Total agreement identifies the *Taking advantage of the waterfront with a wider offer* (space and diversity) and the creation of a *National Science Museum* in Coimbra as the projects with the greatest receptivity from the Panel. Still, if the approach is broader, in terms of agreement (total and partial), the four projects are considered important since 85.8% of respondents agreed with *The route of cafés with history*, and 64.3% with the *Sports Complex of Coimbra*.

These products seem, therefore, good future investments for the Coimbra tourist destination; however, the Panel identified others that should be mentioned here.

Four main vectors have been identified. The first refers to the Systematic organisation and internationalisation of cultural and scientific events accordingly with Moreira (2018) and Lu et al. (2020). The second vector refers to the Enhancing gastronomy in the city of Coimbra through festivals, routes, and networks as argued by Hall and Sharples (2008), and Meneguel et al. (2019). The third vector consists of Enhancing Coimbra's musical heritage by creating a: i) Fado History Museum, ii) Music Museum, and iii) Coimbra Musical Circuit with similar ideas stated by Zhuang et al. (2023) and Fan et al. (2023). Other vectors were also suggested by panel members, namely: a) valuing Coimbra's connection to national history's happenings, namely those associated with the monarchy; b) creating mechanisms for the articulated action of the city's tourism and events promoters/operators, with a growing resilient approach (Jones & Pappas, 2023) looking to the sense of place (Pourbahador & Brinkhuijsen, 2023); c) taking advantage of and enhancing the potential of the River Mondego (Moreira & Santos, 2010), namely in terms of leisure and tourism; d) promoting sustainable mobility, through an exclusively electric public transport network and limiting circulation in historical areas to clean energy vehicles; e) creating a Museum on the history of Coimbra, Portugal and the Portuguese world.

Due to its complexity, the management of a destination usually involves the existence of several problems and constraints. In this sense, the panel was asked to identify the problems facing the management of Coimbra as a tourist destination.

The range of the most relevant problems that stakeholders identified in the management of Coimbra as a tourist destination is wide and diverse in nature. In these we can find more tangible and operative aspects, for example issues related to external accessibility – such as the distance and connectivity to international airports – but also intra-regional and intra-local accessibility, being referred to as problems of mobility and parking in the city or the reduced connections of the city to regional destinations.

The most expressive category of problems identified by the stakeholders' points to aspects of tourism governance in the city: low attraction of investors/investments, lack of structuring and integrated vision of the existing programme and offer and, above all, problems at the level of communication and interaction between different entities.

The content of the comments regarding this lack of articulation between entities oscillates between the reiteration and objectification of some criticisms but also of suggestions for the resolution of this constraint which, according to several stakeholders, includes: i) the creation of a professionalised technical structure, representative and with relative autonomy; ii) the more direct involvement of other players in the city's tourism management, complementing the preponderant role of the CMC and the UC; iii) the affirmation of an unequivocal and mobilising leadership. To the municipality is attributed some responsibilities in this identified problem, namely: the absence of coordinated and aggregative management; a mainly casuistic intervention and a management without a medium/long term strategic vision.

From a prospective point of view, the key players in the city's tourism sector highlight the challenges that Coimbra's destination management may face in 10 years. One of the most frequently mentioned challenges, symptomatic of the omnipresent role of the University – in physical and symbolic terms – in Coimbra's tourism, is precisely that of managing to “take off” from this omnipresence, creating other poles of attraction and an image of the destination that transcends the University element (67.9%).

However, it is the capacity to develop a joint strategy with a medium/long-term horizon that stands out as the challenge that brings together the greatest number of stakeholders (78.6%). To this we should add another challenge that will probably be part of the same strategy, which is to affirm Coimbra as an attractive and dynamic tourist destination (57.1%). In response to the main constraints identified, the ambition to diversify tourism supply and – from the point of view of demand – to create conditions to increase the average stay of tourists are also considered relevant challenges. As an alternative – or perhaps not so much so – another challenge is listed: that of renewing interest based on heritage, through its enhancement, recovery, and dissemination, investing in other heritage values, anchoring them to the University of Coimbra's assets – *Alta e Sofia*.

5. Conclusion

The competitiveness of tourist destinations is a multidimensional construct that encompasses accessibility, the availability of strategic infrastructure and facilities, the capacity to attract public and private investment, and the existence of a favourable business environment. Destination management must therefore operate through coordinated, strategic, and collaborative action among diverse stakeholders, recognising that civil society and academia often express more critical perceptions of the tourism supply—an aspect that requires particular attention.

In a highly dynamic and continuously evolving tourism system, sustainable competitiveness requires effective international communication and destination promotion, while simultaneously fostering entrepreneurship, innovation, and development grounded in cultural, environmental, economic, social, and institutional assets. Achieving this systemic objective demands adjustments to support services, health-care provision, hygiene, safety, human resource qualification, and talent attraction. Combined with heritage resources and regional creativity, these efforts contribute

to cultivating a sociocultural environment that is meaningful to residents, investors, and visitors alike. The integration of advanced digital tools—such as artificial intelligence, big data, IoT, cloud computing, and 5G networks—further enhances this potential.

According to respondents, a new visitor profile is emerging that should shape Coimbra's tourism positioning. The city faces a dual strategic opportunity: (i) its UNESCO designation, following the inscription of the University of Coimbra – Alta and Sofia on the World Heritage List; and (ii) the development of distinctive visitation networks and circuits based on high-value, knowledge-driven products. In this context, enhancing the value of Rua Sofia, strengthening its attractiveness, and integrating complementary intangible offerings throughout the Historic City become essential. Rather than diversifying for its own sake, it is argued that Coimbra should deepen and maximise the potential of its existing resources.

Mobile information and communication services have transformed visitors' expectations and their relationship with destinations before, during, and after the tourism experience. The ease of access to ubiquitous information and the capacity to personalise experiences have introduced new concepts—smart tourism, smart destinations, and innovative experiences—all of which are fundamental to strengthening competitiveness and increasing visitors' average length of stay in Coimbra. New strategic products have also been identified, including Roman Heritage, Gastronomy and Wine, and Riverine and Maritime Aquatic Environments.

Medium-sized cities in Portugal have increasingly sought to convert comparative advantages into competitive ones. Coimbra—both as a city and as a region—has been striving to assert itself within national and international tourism landscapes. A limitation of the present study lies in its focus on a single World Heritage city; future research should expand to include other Portuguese cities with UNESCO status, thereby enabling more comprehensive comparative analyses.

Despite recent progress, Coimbra still lacks a consolidated medium-term strategy for asserting itself as a tourism destination. The establishment of a stakeholder panel and the application of the Delphi technique, therefore, constitute appropriate methodologies for gathering expert opinions and achieving strategic consensus. Analyses conducted by tourism and urban management players highlight key challenges and potential pathways forward, particularly regarding the strengthening of the Coimbra brand and the integration of new structures and facilities into the urban fabric.

Particular attention must be devoted to processes of smartification, touristification, and gentrification, as well as to innovation and entrepreneurship, in order to respond to new visitor expectations and the imperative to adapt the tourism supply. Among the proposals put forward by specialists are the enhancement of the riverside area, the creation of a National Science Museum in Coimbra, the development of a historical cafés route, and the establishment of a Sports Complex. Coimbra's musical heritage—rooted in its history and associated with prominent national figures—should also be foregrounded as a distinctive asset with the potential to stimulate new cultural products beyond the university dimension.

Finally, the principal challenges identified include: clearly defining the destination's strategic positioning and investment priorities; strengthening competitiveness; attracting and energising economic activities; leveraging UNESCO heritage as an anchor for urban regeneration and for attracting investors, students, visitors, and tourists; and promoting multi-attraction dynamics that encourage the dispersion of demand across the territory.

Research Funding



This research received support from the Centre of Studies in Geography and Spatial Planning (CEGOT), funded by national funds through the Foundation for Science and Technology (FCT) under the reference UIDB/04084/2020.

References

- Astara, O. H. (2014). Culture as the fourth pillar of sustainable development. *Journal Sustainable Development, Culture, Traditions*, 1(2), 92–102. <https://doi.org/10.26341/issn.2241-4002-2014-2a-1>
- Bam, N. (2023). Analysis of tourists' length of stay in Pokhara, Nepal. *Advances in Hospitality and Tourism Research*, 11(1), 28–44. <https://doi.org/10.30519/ahtr.1073732>
- Bichler, B. F. (2019). Designing tourism governance: The role of local residents. *Journal of Destination Marketing & Management*, 19, 100389. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jdmm.2019.100389>
- Bramwell, B. (2010). Participative planning and governance for sustainable tourism. *Tourism Recreation Research*, 35(3), 239–249. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02508281.2010.11081640>
- Brandajs, F., & Russo, A. P. (2023). Smarter city, less just destination? Mobilities and social gaps in Barcelona. *Journal of Place Management and Development*, 16(2), 291–308. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JPMD-03-2022-0020>
- Buhalis, D., & Amaranggana, A. (2015). Tourism destinations enhancing tourism experience through personalisation of services. In I. Tussyadiah & A. Inversini (Eds.), *Information and Communication Technologies in Tourism* (pp. 377–389). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-14343-9_28
- Buhalis, D., & Sinarta, Y. (2019). Real-time co-creation and nowness service: Lessons from tourism and hospitality. *Journal of Travel & Tourism Marketing*, 36(5), 563–582. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10548408.2019.1592059>
- Caldeira, A. M., & Kastenholz, E. (2018). Tourists' spatial behaviour in urban destinations: The effect of prior destination experience. *Journal of Vacation Marketing*, 24(3), 247–260. <https://doi.org/10.1177/13567667177061>
- Carayannis, E. G., & Campbell, D. F. (2009). Mode 3 and Quadruple Helix: Toward a 21st century fractal innovation ecosystem. *International Journal of Technology Management*, 46(3), 201–234. <https://doi.org/10.1504/IJTM.2009.023374>
- Cebreiros, J., & Gulín, M. P. (2014). Guía smart cities. Cidades com futuro. Agenda digital local, Galicia-norte Portugal [Eixo Atlântico do Noroeste Peninsular].

- Charag, A. H., Fazili, A. I., & Bashir, I. (2021). Residents' perception towards tourism impacts in Kashmir. *International Journal of Tourism Cities*, 7(3), 741–766. <https://doi.org/10.1108/IJTC-11-2019-0202>
- Dessein, J., Soini, K., Fairclough, G., & Horlings, L. (Eds.). (2015). *Culture in, for and as sustainable development. Conclusions from the COST Action IS1007 investigating cultural sustainability*. University of Jyväskylä. <http://www.culturalsustainability.eu/conclusions.pdf>
- Duxbury, N., Hosagrahar, J., & Pascual, J. (2016). *Culture 21: Why must culture be at the heart of sustainable urban development?* United Cities and Local Governments. https://www.agenda21culture.net/sites/default/files/files/documents/en/culture_sd_cities_web.pdf
- Dwyer, L., & Kim, C. (2003). Destination competitiveness: Determinants and indicators. *Current Issues in Tourism*, 6(5), 369–414. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13683500308667962>
- European Commission. (2020). *Compendium of best practices 2019 & 2020 European capital of smart tourism competition* (Scholz & Friends Agenda Berlin GmbH European Office). European Commission. https://mint.gov.hr/UserDocImages/2022_sustainable/220429_Compendium_2020.pdf
- Fan, Y., Wong, I. A., & Lin, Z. (2023). How folk music induces destination image: A synthesis between sensory marketing and cognitive balance theory. *Tourism Management Perspectives*, 47, 101123. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tmp.2023.101123>
- Faucher, J. B., Everett, A., & Lawson, R. (2008). Applying a modified delphi approach to determine the current state of the concept of knowledge. *Proceedings of the 39th Annual Meeting of the Decision Sciences Institute*, 3, 4801–4806.
- Fortuna, C., & Gomes, C. (2010). Sobre o uso estratégico da imagem da centenária universidade de Coimbra [Programa de Pós-Graduação em Sociologia da Universidade Federal de Sergipe]. *Dossiê Cidades*, 16, 11–27. <http://hdl.handle.net/10316/43988>
- García-Milon, A., Juaneda-Ayensa, E., Olarte-Pascual, C., & Pelegrín-Borondo, J. (2020). Towards the smart tourism destination: Key factors in information source use on the tourist shopping journey. *Tourism Management Perspectives*, 36, 100730. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tmp.2020.100730>
- Garrod, B., & Fyall, A. (2005). Revisiting Delphi: The Delphi technique in tourism research. In B. W. Ritchie, P. Burns, & C. Palmer (Eds.), *Tourism research methods: Integrating theory with practice* (pp. 85–98). CABI. <http://hdl.handle.net/2160/3109>
- Gispert, O. B. I., & Clavé, S. A. (2020). Dimensions and models of tourism governance in a tourism system: The experience of Catalonia. *Journal of Destination Marketing & Management*, 17, 100465. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jdmm.2020.100465>
- Gomes, C. S. (2012). Novas imagens para velhas cidades? Coimbra, Salamanca e o turismo nas cidades históricas. *Sociologia*, 23, 37–49. <https://ojs.letras.up.pt/index.php/Sociologia/article/view/1419>
- Grah, B., Dimovski, V., & Peterlin, J. (2020). Managing sustainable urban tourism development: The case of Ljubljana. *Sustainability*, 12(3), 792. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su12030792>
- Hall, C. M., & Sharples, L. (Eds.). (2008). *Food and wine festivals and events around the world: Development, management and markets*. Butterworth Heinemann. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780080887951>
- Hawkes, J. (2001). *The fourth pillar of sustainability. Culture's essential role in public planning*. The Cultural Development Network, Common Ground.

- Hunt, M., & Crompton, J. (2008). Investigating attraction compatibility in an east Texas city. *International Journal of Tourism Research*, 10, 237–246. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jtr.652>
- Instituto Nacional de Estatística (INE). (2021). *Anuários estatísticos regionais 2021, dossier temático: Turismo*. Instituto Nacional de Estatística. https://www.ine.pt/xportal/xmain?xpid=INE&xpgid=ine_doc_municipios
- Jones, Z. M., & Pappas, T. (2023). Developing an identities-based approach to support more robust resilience and recovery in heritage planning and management. *Built Heritage*, 7, 2. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s43238-023-00082-4>
- King, B., Richards, G., & Chu, A. M. (2023). Developing a tourism region through tourism and culture: Bordering, branding, placemaking and governance processes. *Tourism Recreation Research*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02508281.2023.2207156>
- Koo, C., Shin, S., Gretzel, U., Hunter, W. C., & Chung, N. (2016). Conceptualization of smart tourism destination competitiveness. *Asia Pacific Journal of Information Systems*, 26(4), 67–384. <https://doi.org/10.14329/apjis.2016.26.4.561>
- Lamsfus, C., Martín, D., Alzua-Sorzabal, A., & Torres-Manzanera, E. (2015). Smart tourism destinations: An extended conception of smart cities focusing on human mobility. In I. Tussyadiah & A. Inversini (Eds.), *Information and communication technologies in tourism* (pp. 363–375). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-14343-9_27
- Lew, Y. K., Khan, Z., & Cozzio, S. (2018). Gravitating toward the quadruple helix: International connections for the enhancement of a regional innovation system in northeast Italy. *R&D Management*, 48(1), 44–59. <https://doi.org/10.1111/radm.12227>
- Li, J., Nguyen, T. H. H., Morrison, A. M., & Coca-Stefaniak, J. A. (2022). A measurement framework for socially sustainable tourist behaviour. *Journal of Responsible Tourism Management*, 1(2), 17–30. <https://doi.org/10.47263/JRTM.02-01-03>
- Linstone, H. A., & Turoff, M. (Eds.). (2002). *The Delphi method – techniques and applications*. Addison-Wesley Advanced Book Program. http://www.foresight.pl/assets/downloads/publications/Turoff_Linstone.pdf
- Lu, S., Zhu, W., & Wei, J. (2020). Assessing the impacts of tourism events on city development in China: A perspective of event system. *Current Issues in Tourism*, 23(12), 1528–1541. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13683500.2019.1643828>
- Maruccia, Y., Solazzo, G., Vecchio, P. D., & Passiante, G. (2020). Evidence from network analysis application to innovation systems and quintuple helix. *Technological Forecasting & Social Change*, 161, 120306. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.techfore.2020.120306>
- Meneguel, C. R., Mundet i Cerdan, L., & Vidal Casellas, M. D. (2019). From commercial to cultural: The role of the festival “Firatast unafira boníssima” in the promotion and appreciation of Catalan cuisine. *Journal of Convention & Event Tourism*, 20(2), 108–128. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15470148.2019.1576564>
- Mira, M. C., Mónico, L. M., & Breda, Z. (2021). Territorial dimension in the internationalisation of tourism destinations: Structuring factors in the post-COVID19. *Tourism & Management Studies*, 17(4), 33–44. <https://doi.org/10.18089/tms.2021.170403>
- Moreira, C. O. (2018). Portugal as a tourism destination. *Méditerranée*, 130, 10402. <https://doi.org/10.4000/mediterranee.10402>

- Moreira, C. O. (2013). *Turismo, território e desenvolvimento: Competitividade e gestão estratégica de destinos* [Doctoral dissertation, Universidade de Coimbra] [Tese de Doutoramento]. <http://hdl.handle.net/10316/24446>
- Moreira, C. O., & Santos, N. (2010). New opportunities for water environments. River tourism and water leisure activities. In E. Brito-Henriques, J. Sarmento, & M. A. Lousada (Eds.), *Water and Tourism. Resources Management, Planning and Sustainability* (pp. 47–68). Centro de Estudos Geográficos da Universidade de Lisboa. <http://hdl.handle.net/10316/20067>
- Moreira, C. O., & Santos, N. (2020). Tourism qualitative forecasting: Scenario building through the delphi technique. *Cuadernos de Turismo*, 46, 423–457. <https://doi.org/10.6018/turismo.451911>
- Moreira, C. O., Santos, N., & Silveira, L. (2020). O turismo na cidade de Coimbra após a inscrição do Bem Universidade de Coimbra – Alta e Sofia na lista do Património Mundial UNESCO. In C. Henriques, P. César, V. Herédia, & M. C. (Eds.), *Turismo e história – Perspectivas sobre o património da humanidade no espaço Ibero-americano* (pp. 107–133). UAlgarve, UMinho, ESHGT, CinTURs, CIS.NOVA.
- Nelson, L. R. (1958). *The selection of retail locations*. Dodge Corporation.
- Paulino, I., Lozano, S., & Prats, L. (2021). Identifying tourism destinations from tourists' travel patterns. *Journal of Destination Marketing & Management*, 19, 100508. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jdmm.2020.100508>
- Pourbahador, P., & Brinkhuijsen, M. (2023). Municipal strategies for protecting the sense of place through public space management in historic cities: A case study of Amsterdam. *Cities*, 136, 104242. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cities.2023.104242>
- Ramkissoon, H. (2023). Perceived social impacts of tourism and quality-of-life: A new conceptual model. *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*, 31(2), 442–459. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09669582.2020.1858091>
- Ritchie, J. R. B., & Crouch, G. I. (2003). *The competitive destination: A sustainable tourism perspective*. CABI.
- Roman, M., Varga, H., Cvijanovic, V., & Reid, A. (2020). Quadruple helix models for sustainable regional innovation: Engaging and facilitating civil society participation. *Economies*, 8, 48. <https://doi.org/10.3390/economies8020048>
- Santos, N. (2013). Coimbra: A organização da cidade e o centro histórico urbano. In J. R. Fernandes & M. A. Sposito (Eds.), *A nova vida do velho centro nas cidades portuguesas e brasileiras* (pp. 189–209). CEGOT. <http://hdl.handle.net/10316/21669>
- Santos, N. (2015). SmartCoimbra: Partnerships and trends for the development of tourism in Coimbra region. *Cadernos de Geografia*, 34, 91–100. https://doi.org/10.14195/0871-1623_34_10
- Santos, N. (2014). Turismo, gestão e território. *Caderno Virtual de Turismo*, 14(1), 66–86. <http://www.ivt.coppe.ufrj.br/caderno/index.php/caderno/article/viewFile/1025/411>
- Scott, N., & Cooper, C. (2010). Innovation for sustainable urban tourism: Some thoughts on best practice. *Revista de Administração Pública*, 44(5), 171–190. <https://doi.org/10.1590/S0034-76122010000500008>
- Sigala, M. (2012). Social networks and customer involvement in new service development (nsd). the case of www.mystarbucksidea.com. *International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management*, 24(7), 966–990. <https://doi.org/10.1108/09596111211258874>

- Smith, M. K., Pinke-Sziva, I., Berezvai, Z., & Buczkowska-Gołąbek, K. (2022). The changing nature of the cultural tourist: Motivations, profiles and experiences of cultural tourists in budapest. *Journal of Tourism and Cultural Change*, 20(1–2), 1–19. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14766825.2021.1898626>
- Terkenli, T. S., & Georgoula, V. (2022). Tourism and cultural sustainability: Views and prospects from cyclades, greece. *Sustainability*, 14(1), 307. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su14010307>
- Valverde-Roda, J., Solano-Sánchez, M. A., García-García, L., & Aguilar-Rivero, M. (2023). Cultural heritage tourism in granada. A multilayer perceptron approach. *Journal of Tourism and Cultural Change*, 21(3), 308–327. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14766825.2023.2167519>
- Werthner, H., Alzua-Sorzabal, A., Cantoni, L., Dickinger, A., Gretzel, U., Jannach, D., Neidhardt, J., Pröll, B., Ricci, F., & Scaglione, M. (2015). Future research issues in IT and tourism. *Information Technology and Tourism*, 15(1), 1–15. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40558-014-0021-9>
- Xu, H., Cheung, L., Lovett, J., Duan, X., Pei, D., & Liang, D. (2023). Understanding the influence of user-generated content on tourist loyalty behavior in a cultural World Heritage Site. *Tourism Recreation Research*, 48(2), 173–187. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02508281.2021.1913022>
- Xue, C., Tian, W., & Zhao, X. (2020). The literature review of platform economy. *Scientific Programming*, 2020, 8877128. <https://doi.org/10.1155/2020/8877128>
- Yoo, K., Sigala, M., & Gretzel, U. (2015). Exploring tripadvisor. In R. Egger, R. Gula, & D. Walcher (Eds.), *Open Tourism: Open innovation, crowdsourcing and collaborative consumption challenging the tourism industry* (pp. 239–256). Springer. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-642-54089-9>
- Zhuang, M., Zhang, H., Li, P., Shen, C., Xiao, X., & Zhang, J. (2023). Connecting tourists to musical destinations: The role of musical geographical imagination and aesthetic responses in music tourism. *Tourism Management*, 98, 104768. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tourman.2023.104768>