

RETHINKING INSTAGRAM'S ROLE IN NATIONAL DMOS' MARKETING STRATEGIES: A LONGITUDINAL PERSPECTIVE

Abstract

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Purpose – Destination Marketing Organisations (DMOs) have increased the use of Instagram to potentiate social media-induced tourism. Based on the agenda-setting theory, this research longitudinally analyses DMOs' marketing strategies on Instagram (2020–2023) to compare them in crisis, post-crisis (short and long term) and return to normalcy periods. For that, the National DMOs of France's and Spain's Instagram profiles (the two most visited countries worldwide) were studied. Besides, the Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) model was used to investigate their followers' interaction across their customer journey in the four examined years.

Methodology/Design/Approach – Through a mixed methodology (quantitative content analysis and thematic analysis), this study comparatively and longitudinally examined the visual and text content of both Instagram profiles and their respective audiences' interaction.

Findings – Both DMOs' profiles' institutional agendas coincided in content and tourism products and differed in the format and storytelling narrative. As for the interaction, audiences reacted better to the most promoted content and tourism products and preferred photographs to videos. However, a huge decrease in both audiences' interaction is observed across the four studied periods.

Originality of the research – This research provides insights for DMOs' planning and development of Instagram marketing strategies in post-crisis stages in the long term.

Keywords Instagram marketing, social media-induced tourism, Instagram, DMOs, post-crisis

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INTRODUCTION

Social media has revolutionised the tourists' decision-making process in the different phases of the customer journey, from the planning stage to exchanging information with other travellers or when booking tourism products or services (Čuić Tanković et al., 2025). Therefore, businesses have increasingly implemented social media in their marketing strategies, aware of the challenges and opportunities provided by these digital platforms (Leung et al., 2021).

Particularly for the tourism sector, Instagram has consolidated as an immense visual database for travellers, and an essential tool for DMOs' marketing strategies on social media to impact potential visitors (Filieri et al., 2021). Tourists use this platform to seek inspiration and information to plan their trips (Asdecker, 2022) and DMOs' Instagram profiles are among the first sources of information for travellers (Siyamiyan Gorji et al., 2023). Moreover, many tourists are fuelled to visit a destination depending on how 'instagrammable' it is (Siegel et al., 2023). Therefore, DMOs plan and develop their marketing strategies on Instagram to influence tourists' behaviour (Díaz-Pacheco et al., 2024), a phenomenon defined as social media-induced tourism (Siegel et al., 2023).

This study specifically aims to examine how National DMOs' Instagram marketing strategies and audience interaction evolve across distinct crisis and post-crisis stages, namely the crisis period, short-term recovery, long-term recovery, and return to normalcy. The selected time frame (2020–2023) captures these phases, which have been widely recognised in recent tourism recovery literature as a period characterised by the progressive restoration of travel demand and shifts in tourist behaviour (UNWTO, 2023a; 2023b; 2024). Furthermore, the Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) paradigm is used to examine the audience's interaction, complemented with a thematic analysis of the text features that potentiate that interaction. France and Spain were selected for this research since they have traditionally been the two most visited countries globally in recent years (UNWTO, 2023a, 2023c).

To the best of the knowledge of the authors of this study, it is the first longitudinal and comparative research of National DMOs' Instagram marketing strategies across different post-crisis periods and their respective audiences' interaction. While previous studies have analysed DMOs' social media strategies during or immediately after crises, longitudinal analyses that compare how these strategies and their effectiveness evolve across different recovery stages in the long-term, or their comparison with a regular marketing period, remain limited (Filieri et al., 2021; Mele et al., 2023; Taecharungroj & Pattaratanakun, 2023). Therefore, this research contributes by providing a comparative and longitudinal perspective that allows identifying dynamic changes in both institutional communication strategies and audience responses over time.

1. LITERATURE REVIEW

1.1 Instagram Marketing

Instagram has become one of the most used digital spaces for visual communication between netizens (Garner & Myers, 2025). In 2023, it was the third most popular social media worldwide (tied with WhatsApp) after Facebook and YouTube and in 2024, it registered over 2 billion monthly global users— over 500 million daily active users—, a trend that is expected to continue in 2025 (Hootsuite, 2024). For brands, Instagram has consolidated a valuable marketing tool, and it is preferred by marketers over Facebook and Twitter in social media advertising, for its influence on the customer journey's phases (particularly awareness, consideration, and purchase) (Sheng et al., 2024).

1.1.1 Instagram marketing for DMOs

Instagram has converted into an immense visual database for tourists (Filieri et al., 2021), and it is most frequently used in the awareness phase of their customer journey to seek inspiration and information to plan their trips (Asdecker, 2022). In this information search process, DMOs' profiles have arisen as one of the first sources of inspiration for travellers (Siyamiyan Gorji et al., 2023). Tourists also use social media in other customer journey phases, such as consideration—searching for information, reading reviews—, purchase—e.g., booking accommodation— or advocacy—exchanging information through user-generated content (UGC)— (Čuić Tanković et al., 2025). UGC is also relevant in the awareness phase, as many travellers are encouraged to travel to an '*instagrammable*' destination after watching it in other travellers' profiles (Siegel et al., 2023).

Therefore, DMOs thoughtfully plan and disseminate content on social media, showing destinations' hot spots, tourism products and services to influence tourists' behaviour (Díaz-Pacheco et al., 2024). Social media is also crucial for DMOs to promote their destinations' image (Hervás Cortina et al., 2025). A lack of presence of a destination on social media involves the risk of being invisible in the market, and therefore, it could entail not attracting tourists to that destination (Garner & Myers, 2025). Besides, a value-oriented storytelling on social media posts increases destinations' competitive advantage, promising potential visitors a memorable experience (Ferdinand et al., 2024). Consequently, tourists' travel intention is influenced by exposure to that content, which results in social media-induced tourism (Siegel et al., 2023).

Accordingly, a comprehensive understanding of how social media content induces tourists to travel to a destination is vital for DMOs (Garner & Myers, 2025). Despite the extensive academic literature related to the use of social media by DMOs, some aspects, such as the socio-technical (e.g. use of tags in texts) and content (e.g. destinations' attractions and tourism products) perspectives of social-media tourism, and how the communication process is developed (e.g. institutional strategies) have been understudied (Shin and Xiang, 2019).

1.2 Agenda-setting theory

Pioneered by Lippmann, (1922), this theory states that the issues emphasised by the media and placed on the public agenda can harder impact on audiences than those not enhanced (Ozdora Aksak, 2023). Regarding social media, the affective agenda-setting theory argues that their emotional content can influence audiences' emotions (Kim et al., 2017), or shape audiences' perceptions of specific issues (Hur et al., 2022).

Furthermore, the format and type of visual content on Instagram may influence audiences' feelings. In the tourism sector, as for the intangibility of travel experience, social media visual content is useful for travellers to enjoy a virtual experience of the destination (Vidić, 2022). Images inform about the destination, create a sense of fantasy, and build tourists' expectations before a trip (Yu & Egger, 2021). On their part, videos facilitate the communication of users' experiences and emotions more effectively than photographs (Huertas & Martínez-Rolán, 2020). Additionally, Instagram followers demonstrate a preference for quality over quantity (Sagapova et al., 2022).

Consequently, visual content is a valuable tool for DMOs' marketing strategies on Instagram to promote destinations' most attractive spots or tourism products with photographs, or how tourists behave in them with videos (Huertas & Martínez-Rolán, 2020). To address the impact of the visual content and tourism products shown in DMOs' profiles on Instagram to encourage social media-induced tourism, the following research question is posed:

RQ1: How are different types of visual content and tourism products related to audience interaction in National DMOs' Instagram posts?

1.2.1 France's and Spain's crisis and post-crisis marketing plans

Compared to previous events, DMOs' crisis communication shifted during the COVID-19 pandemic, due to the lockdowns, globalisation, and development in the post-digital era (Pascual-Fraile et al., 2024). During the lockdowns, online consumption exponentially rose (Femenia-Serra et al., 2022), and the global reach and duration of the crisis prevented destinations' images from being damaged (Geysi & Yalçinkaya, 2023). In the post-pandemic scenario, DMOs' audiences preferred messages of COVID-19-safe destinations with the enhancement of destinations' attributes, authentic local experiences, open-air spaces, and the pleasures of travelling (Singh et al., 2022). Besides, the DMOs' post-crisis marketing campaigns tried to channelise the huge pent-up demand for international travel after two years of restrictions (UNWTO, 2023b).

In this context, France's marketing strategy during the pandemic focused on information about the disease, reassurance, and return to the fundamentals of the destination (ecotourism combined with cultural and culinary tourism) (Atoute France, 2020). For the different post-pandemic periods, the French DMO opted to return to the pre-pandemic marketing strategy, potentiating a diversified tourism offer — with a particular stress on ecotourism and cultural tourism — and also observing the new demands of the tourists—, centred on open-air experiences and rural and adventure tourism (French Government, 2021). As for Spain, its proposed marketing strategic axes were based on promoting cultural and rural tourism, combined with a pro-social campaign to recommend tourists stay at home during the pandemic (Tourinews, 2020). In the post-crisis scenario, Spain focused on the promotion of their diverse destinations' offer— urban and rural tourism or ecotourism—, highlighting its best-known worldwide tourism product in summer: seaside tourism (TourSpain, 2020).

Based on the agenda-setting theory, this research comparatively and longitudinally analysed the marketing strategies on Instagram of the two globally most-visited countries across four years, comprising the COVID-19 pandemic, the post-crisis stages (short and long term), and the return to normalcy. Still, academic literature lacks longitudinal studies of Instagram marketing strategies of National DMOs in the medium to long-term post-crisis phases or comparative research between post-crisis stages and the return to normalcy (Filieri et al., 2021; Mele et al., 2023; Taecharungroj & Pattaratanakun, 2023).

1.3 Instagram users' interaction

Some authors, such as Xie-Carson et al., (2024), defined interaction (addition of likes and comments) as the most common metric to measure users' participation on social media. This metric is the most effective to observe customers' involvement on social media (Andrade-Cuha et al., 2025), understood as the consumer's level of energy, time and effort employed to interact with brands (Mele et al., 2023). Through likes and comments, social media followers show that their content is relevant to them (Blanco-Moreno et al., 2024). Some scholars, such as Hollebeek et al., (2023), even distinguished between likes and comments interaction, as it requires diverse users' energy level, effort, and time spent. This interaction results in a process of co-creation, where social media users acquire a central role with their involvement in the posted content (Andrade-Cunha et al., 2025).

1.3.1 Text features and interaction

In addition to quantifying interaction on Instagram through the addition of likes and comments, some scholars, such as Chen et al., (2021), have underscored the text features that contribute to potentiating it. Geotags are one of the most frequently employed by DMOs on Instagram, as they facilitate the retrieval of visual content and the search for other posts with the same destination tags (Chan et al., 2022). DMOs also often use the call to action (CTA) to arouse followers' instantaneous responses (Chen et al., 2021). In other instances, DMOs tag their followers or influencers with users' tags to strengthen relationships between a poster and a tagged follower (Kang et al., 2022). DMOs normally collaborate with influencers to promote destinations, aware of these endorsers' potential persuasive effect among online communities (Avelino et al., 2020). To discover their use in DMOs' marketing strategies, the following research question is posed:

RQ2: What is the relationship between text features used on DMO's Instagram posts (geotags, users' tags and calls to action) and their audiences' interaction?

1.4 The Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) framework

Originally developed by Mehrabian & Russell, (1974) the S-O-R theoretical model is valid to analyse how environmental stimuli (S) influence individuals' cognitive and affective reactions (O), and thus, these reactions lead to response behaviours (R). On Instagram, in the tourism sector, for instance, the S-O-R model has been applied to the study of users' engagement with *foodstagramming* images (Casales-Garcia et al., 2025) or interaction with DMOs' photographs (Aramendia-Muneta et al., 2021).

In this research, we used the S-O-R framework to identify how and which attributes and formats of DMOs' Instagram visual content and text features (stimuli) provoke interaction with their followers through likes and comments (organism), and thus, this interaction contributes (or not) to influencing tourists' travel intention (response). Therefore, the following research question is posed:

RQ3: How does the relationship between content, tourism products and formats and audience interaction evolve across the different crisis, post-crisis and return to normalcy periods?

2. METHODOLOGY

This study was developed with a mixed methodology, combining quantitative content analysis (Clark et al., 2021) and thematic analysis (Bryman, 2016), based on the agenda-setting theory for social media (Hur et al., 2022; Kim et al., 2017) and the application of the S-O-R theoretical framework to Instagram (Aramendia-Muneta et al., 2021). For the quantitative content analysis, each post was considered a unit of analysis for the study and interpretation of the analysed phenomenon (Krippendorff, 2011). For the qualitative analysis, the text features that contribute to enhancing the audience's interaction were considered (Avelino et al., 2020; Chan et al., 2022; Chen et al., 2021; Kang et al., 2022). In the S-O-R model, French and Spanish DMOs' Instagram visual content was the stimulus, the addition of likes and comments (audiences' interaction) was the organism, and the promotion of social media-induced tourism was the expected response.

2.1 Sample

The sample is based on the National DMOs' official profiles of Spain—@Spain and France—@explorefrance on Instagram from 2020 to 2023. France and Spain were selected for analysis since both nations have historically occupied the top positions in global visitor rankings. From 2017 to 2019, France received the most visitors, followed by Spain, with an increasing trend in the number of travellers (UNWTO 2023a). Despite the global decline in international tourist arrivals in 2020 due to the pandemic outbreak, France still held this ranking, and Spain was in fifth place. They continued their increase in the number of international travellers' arrivals, and by December 2023, they had already surpassed the 2019 data (UNWTO 2023a, 2023b).

The present study analysed all posts from four selected periods (2020-2023). The information is shown in total and average data, due to the differences in the sample volume in each country. The analysed time ranges from March to June coincides with the previous months of the summer campaign for both countries, the period with the highest booking activity (75% of international travellers plan their summer holidays between four to six months and 15 days in advance) (Statista, 2023).

The field research was conducted from 1st May to 22nd July 2023, concluding one month after the final posts of both countries. The number of likes and comments was registered during the research phase and recorded 30 days after the final posts. This final record was conducted to avoid changes in interaction data due to the timeliness of the Instagram algorithm, which presents only the most recent posts to users. Therefore, the number of likes and comments can vary around the date of data collection (Blanco-Moreno et al., 2024).

2.2 Quantitative analysis

The quantitative content analysis was used to examine the content, format, and tourism products of both DMOs' posts' visual content and audiences' interaction. The interaction resulted from the addition of likes + comments in both Instagram profiles (Xie-Carson et al., 2024). Besides, content, format, and tourism products were correlated to observe their dependence and analyse whether they were predictor variables of interaction.

2.2.1. Coding of the variables

To determine the studied variables, a codebook based on epistemic audio-visual and content analysis was designed (Zhao et al., 2021). It comprised nominal variables: i) post title, ii) post URL, iii) date of the post, iv) type of images' content, v) posts' image format and vi) tourism products; and scale variables: vii) likes and viii) comments in each post (Bonilla del Río et al., 2021).

The categorisation of the variables (12) regarding the visual content followed the guides of Mele et al., (2023) and Siyamiyan Gorji et al., (2023). For their part, tourism products were classified into 15 categories according to Camilleri, (2020) and Jin et al., (2017) (see Table 1).

Table 1: **Items analysed, content and tourism products**

ITEM	CONTENT	TOURISM PRODUCT
Food and beverage, desserts, aperitifs, local food, etc.	Gastronomy	culinary tourism, wine tourism
Royal palaces, imperial palaces, prehistoric and historic monuments, castles, vigilance towers, traditional houses or buildings, and singular architecture.	Heritage	cultural tourism, rural tourism, urban tourism
Open-air and indoor leisure and adventure activities: sky, snowboarding, sailing, swimming, kayaking, hiking, etc.	Leisure and sports	adventure tourism
Beaches, forests, steppes, meadows, mountains, deserts, rivers, lakes, trees, coves, jungles, geographic phenomena, etc.	Nature and landscapes	ecotourism, rural tourism, urban tourism
Locals, residents, or tourists, one person or a group of people in their daily routines in public or private spaces.	People	all products
Urban and rural areas: skylines, villages and cities' spots, streets, parks, singular buildings, etc.	Places	rural tourism, urban tourism
Religious ceremonies, sacred sanctuaries, churches, mosques, other cult places, spiritual locations	Religious	religious tourism, rural tourism, urban tourism
Local, regional, or national ceremonies.	Rituals and festivals	events
Weather situations: snow mountains, ice, seasons, spring blooming, leaves falling in autumn, etc.	Spaces	ecotourism, rural tourism, urban tourism
Handcrafted and trade objects made by locals, like traditional vestments, ornaments, or designs.	Traditional objects	events, shopping tourism
Airports, roads, bus stops, train rails, highways, harbours, bridges, transport (e.g. taxis, etc.)	Transport and infrastructure	rural tourism, urban tourism
Flora and fauna, ecological shelters, etc.	Wildlife	ecotourism, rural tourism

Source: own elaboration

Regarding the format, they were catalogued in three categories: a sole photograph, video, or carousel (a series of images presented together in a single post), following Romero-Coves et al., (2020). Lastly, the audience's interaction with the posts' visual content was studied with the addition formula of Excel of likes and comments in both institutions' profiles— itemised data by each country and period and addition of total data (Bonilla-Quijada et al., 2021; Catalina-García & Suárez-Álvarez, 2022; Mele et al., 2023; Blanco-Moreno et al., (2024); Xie-Carson et al., 2024).

In the coding process, the first two authors in this paper jointly coded the results. Firstly, they calculated its reliability with a sample of 25% of the total posts (Spain=218; France=94). They studied all the variables, and Krippendorff's Alpha (α) was applied to measure the agreement among them, which must be over 0.8 to ensure concurrence (Krippendorff 2011). The three analysed variables obtained an average value of KAlfa=0.97. Therefore, the variables presented a high level of reliability: content KAlfa=0.94, tourism products=0.95 and formats=0.98. The rest of the coding (75%) was conducted through open communication between those authors to address any potential queries or concerns that may arise during the research process.

2.2.2. Data analysis

To comparatively and longitudinally analyse the marketing strategies' patterns and tendencies of both National DMOs' Instagram profiles' visual content, a linear regression analysis through R-squared (R^2) or coefficient of determination was used to identify associations, temporal trends and patterns, rather than to test causal relationships (Chicco et al., 2021). For this quantitative analysis to address RQ1, the dependent variable was each analysed period, and the independent variables were content, format, and tourism products. For the content, the DMO's Instagram profiles' visual content was analysed, as well as the tourism products shown (see table 1) in three different formats (photograph, carousel or video).

Afterwards, Pearson's chi-square (X^2) tests were used to determine the correlation between the following variables: content, formats and tourism products and the audience's interaction to address RQ3. The audience's interaction variable was composed of the addition of likes and comments. For these calculations, the software Real Statistics Resource Pack (Release 8.5) was used. The S-O-R model was also used to corroborate the correlation between those variables and the expected response.

2.3 Qualitative analysis

The thematic analysis was used to investigate the DMOs' Instagram posts' text features contributing to audiences' interaction, based on the affective agenda-setting theory (Hur et al., 2022; Kim et al., 2017). In each of the four studied periods, the French and Spanish DMOs' 25 posts with the highest interaction were selected, resulting in a total sample of 200 posts. The coding process and analysis were conducted using a thematic approach, based on Braun and Clarke, (2006). The variables analysed to address RQ2 were the type of CTAs (question or contest), the type of destinations' tags (geotags or DMOs'), and the type of users' tags (influencers' tags or anonymous users' tags). NVivo 15 software used the previous manual coding and was utilised to aggregate the codes (Table 2):

Table 2: Thematic analysis of text features to potentiate the interaction on Instagram posts

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND	PRELIMINARY CODES	TOPIC CODES	NVIVO 14 CODES CODIFICATION		
Chen et al., (2021)	Question about which photo users like the most in a carousel	Question	Call to action	Question	
	Question if the follower has previously visited the destination				
	Question about which spot the users prefer between the various spots shown in the same post				
	Question about which activity (cultural, outdoor, sport...) the users prefer among the various ones shown in the same post	Contest		Contest	
	Question about whether the user will be willing to participate in a cultural activity				
	Question about whether the user will be willing to participate in a sport/outdoor activity				
Avelino et al., (2020), Chan et al., (2022), Kang et al., (2022)	Tags with destination identification	Geotags	Tags	Destinations' tags	Geotags
	Tags to regional DMOs	DMOs' tags			DMOs' tags
	Tags to local DMOs	Destinations' tags		Users' tags	Anonymous users' tags
	Tags to the profile followers	Anonymous users' tags			Influencers' tags
	Tags to influencers	Influencers' tags			

Source: own elaboration

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

During the four analysed periods, both countries published a total of 1,115 posts on Instagram, and Spain almost doubled the volume and tripled the frequency of posts compared to France (Spain=734 posts, 66% of the total, 1.84 daily posts; France=381 posts, 34% of the total, 0.99 daily posts). As for the evolution across the four periods, it was also different in both profiles: France did not significantly vary its publishing frequency, whereas Spain registered the lowest level of publishing in 2020 and almost tripled the number of posts in each of the following periods compared to 2020.

Regarding the interaction, in total values, the Spanish National DMO's profile registered better data than the French one across the four periods. The addition of likes and comments in both NTOs' Instagram profiles reached 5,639,954 (5,564,670 likes and 149,405 comments). Of that total, 78% of likes (n=4,356,800) and 66% of comments (n=51,141) were registered in Spain, whereas in France those percentages represented 22% of likes (n=1,207,870) and 32% of comments (n=24,143).

In average values, Spain also obtained a clearly better interaction in the number of likes than France (Spain=5,935, France=3,170). However, the average values for comments were similar in both countries (69 in Spain and 63 in France). These results indicate that Spain's DMO profile posted content that was more interesting for its audiences than France's in the four studied periods, as through interaction, audiences show that the posted content on social media is relevant to them (Blanco-Moreno et al., 2024).

Those findings also reflect that the Spanish profile's followers showed a more passive behaviour and less involvement in their interaction than the French ones, as comments require more effort and time than likes to be done (Hollebeek et al. 2023). Table 3:

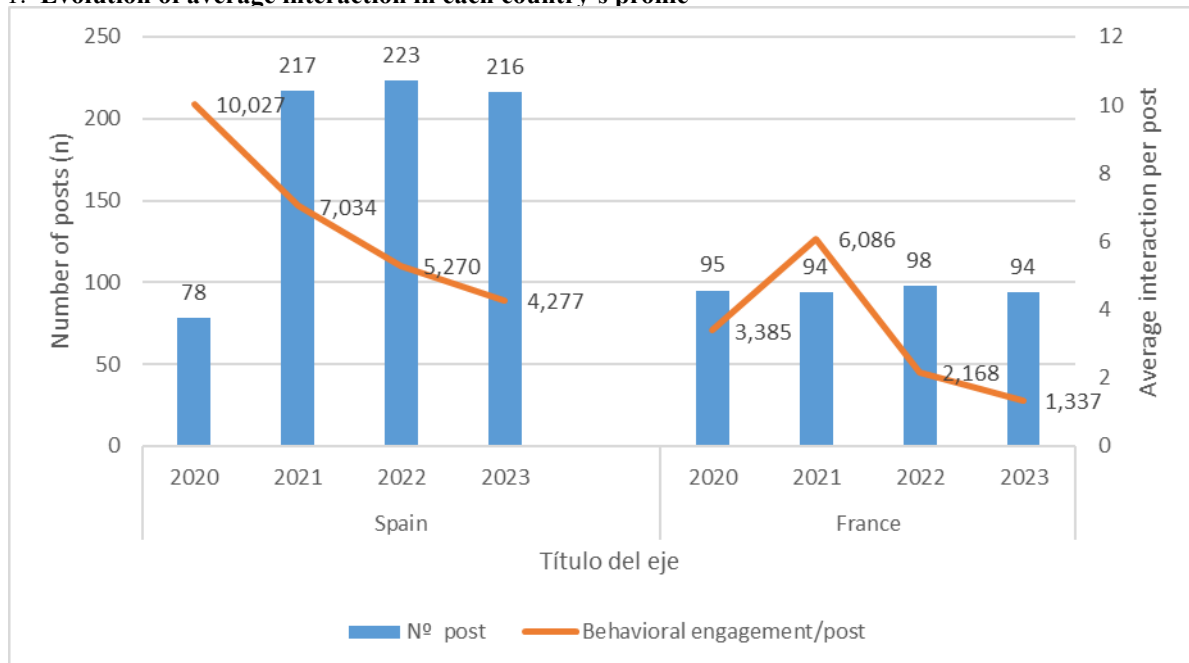
Table 3: Evolution of average interaction in each country

	TOTAL INTERACTION		LIKES		COMMENTS	
	SPAIN	FRANCE	SPAIN	FRANCE	SPAIN	FRANCE
2020	10027	3385	9916	3347	111	38
2021	7035	6086	6964	6012	71	74
2022	5271	2168	5212	2049	59	119
2023	4277	1337	4212	1318	65	20

Source: own elaboration

The evolution across the four periods of the average interaction values per post presents substantial differences between the two countries. The best response from the Spanish National DMO's profile followers was recorded in 2020 (10,027), and in the French profile (6,086) in 2021. However, one of the most noteworthy results of this study is the coincidence of the substantial drop in audience interaction from 2021 to 2023 in both profiles. Spain decreased 57% in 2023 compared to 2020 and France decreased 78% in 2023 compared to the peak in 2021. (Figure 1):

Figure 1: Evolution of average interaction in each country's profile



Source: own elaboration

Note: Bars show the number of posts (n); the line shows average interaction per post.

The continuous drop in the audience's interaction implies a decreasing interest of the audience in the content posted by the two DMOs. The findings could indicate a potential misalignment between DMOs' Instagram strategies and evolving audience preferences after the pandemic (Singh et al., 2022). These patterns may also reflect the evolving dynamics of the Instagram algorithm, particularly its increasing prioritisation of formats such as reels, which were not incorporated into DMO strategies during the analysed period. In addition, the examined DMOs may not have fully captured the evolution of potential travellers' customer journey across the different post-crisis periods, which could have limited their ability to provide content aligned with users' preferences. With a huge pent-up demand for international travel from 2022, after the two-year pandemic restrictions (UNWTO, 2023b), travellers may have overcome the awareness phase of their customer journey, and they were on the consideration or purchase stages.

Moreover, despite the increase in tourist arrivals during the studied period (UNWTO, 2024), in contrast with the continuous decline in interaction, these results may suggest that Instagram did not play as central a role in supporting social media-induced tourism or promoting destination image for the French and Spanish DMOs as might be expected (Hervás Cortina et al., 2025). Those results contradict Garner & Myers' (2025) research, as these authors argued that destinations that are not present on social media risk being invisible in the market, and consequently, they also risk not attracting tourists to that destination.

Therefore, these patterns may be related to strategic choices or to how DMOs have considered travellers' customer journey stages, rather than to a lack of presence, and may also reflect a saturation of traditional formats on the platform. These divergences do not diminish the relevance of Instagram as a marketing tool; rather, it points to a potentially evolving and more complex role within the broader digital tourism ecosystem. In this context, DMOs are encouraged to further investigate whether their institutional social media profiles remain key sources of information and inspiration for tourists (Siyamiyan Gorji et al., 2023).

3.1 Quantitative analysis of content, tourism products, format and interaction

3.1.1 Content

In terms of content, the French and Spanish National DMOs devised a thematic institutional agenda enhancing the same categories: 'places' — iconic spots in cities and villages—, 'nature and landscapes', and 'heritage' across the four studied periods. The remaining studied categories accounted for less than 10% of the total posts in each country. However, each country decided to highlight them differently (France enhancing the most 'nature and landscapes' and Spain 'places'). Additionally, each country developed different marketing strategies across the four periods.

As for the forthcoming Instagram content in the French National DMO Instagram profile, the trend analysis of R^2 regression suggests a clear reinforcement of 'places', to enhance destinations' urban or rural areas, 'nature and landscapes' registers also an increasing tendency, while 'heritage', with an R^2 closer to 0 than the previous values, displays a relatively stable tendency across the four periods (see figure 2). In the case of Spain, the future tendency points to an enhancement of 'places' and 'nature and landscape' categories with a positive tendency to the detriment of 'heritage', with a plain tendency an R^2 close to 0 (see Figure 3).

Figure 2: R^2 regression analysis of content in France

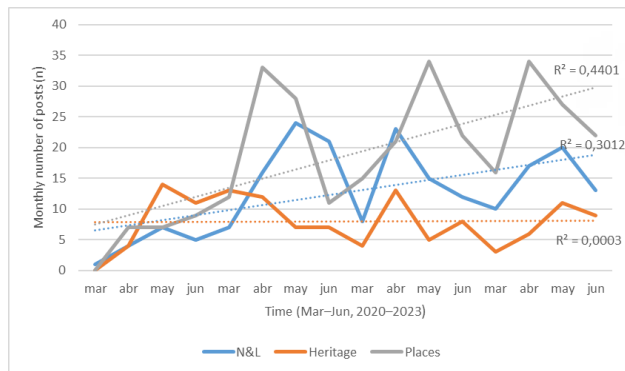
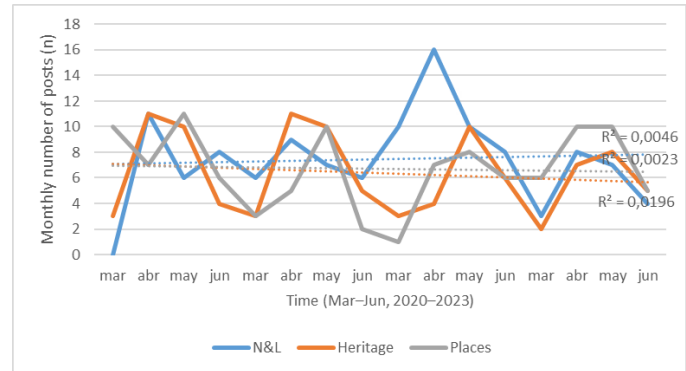


Figure 3: R^2 regression analysis of content in Spain



Source: own elaboration

Note: Monthly number of posts (n) by content in the Spanish and French National DMO profiles (Mar–Jun, 2020–2023). Dotted lines show linear trendlines and corresponding R^2 values.

Therefore, following the S-O-R framework, across the studied years, as stimuli, both DMOs planned an institutional agenda of offering a varied Instagram visual content to serve as a source of information and inspiration for potential tourists (Siyamiyan Gorji et al., 2023). This strategy tried to obtain an impact on the awareness phase of the customer journey, to impact tourists' travel intention by exposure to that content, which is known as social media-induced tourism (Siegel et al., 2023).

Concerning the audience's interaction with content (the organism in the S-O-R framework), both countries registered their best audiences' responses to their respective most promoted contents across the four periods: Spain— 'places'=1,885,104; France— 'nature and landscapes'=1,055,678. However, one remarkable exception to that direct relationship between a high interaction and the most promoted content was observed in both profiles with the content 'gastronomy': France— likes=33,111, number of posts=1—; Spain—likes=20,345; number of posts=3. The relationship between interaction and content was confirmed by Pearson's chi-square significance value for both countries Spain=1.285 ($p < 0.05$); France=21.797 ($p < 0.05$).

Those findings demonstrate that both countries' institutional content agenda were effective in achieving the highest levels of audience interaction with the most widely posted content. France succeeded during the pandemic with its return to the fundamentals of the destination, based on gastronomic, eco-friendly and cultural experiences (Atoute France, 2020), and when observing the tourists' new demands for open-air activities in the post-crisis periods (Singh et al., 2022), with the potentiation of 'nature and landscapes' (French Government, 2021). Moreover, to counteract the progressive decline in interaction and considering the results of the future tendencies, France could have decided to change its future content agenda, potentiating the category 'places', which includes not only rural areas but also urban destinations. In the case of Spain, during the pandemic, this DMO focused on a reminder of their heritage richness while recommending tourists not to travel (Tourinews, 2020) and in the post-crisis periods, they amplified their theme agenda to highlight a diversified offer of content (TourSpain, 2020).

This content diversification obtained a better audience response than in the French case, as the drop in interaction across the four studied periods was lower than in France.

3.1.2 Tourism products

Despite the differences in the evolution across the four studied periods, with that almost coinciding content agenda, both countries emphasized the promotion of the same three tourism products— 'rural tourism', 'urban tourism' and 'cultural tourism'—, but, again, with a different relevance in each Instagram profile: France enhanced the most 'cultural tourism' while Spain opted for 'rural tourism'. The remaining tourism products registered values below 10% of the total posts, except 'seaside tourism' (16%) in Spain— the country's fourth most promoted tourism product, and one of the most demanded products by tourists in the pre-pandemic years (National Statistics Institute 2019).

The future tendency for France marks an increase in the promotion of 'urban tourism'. As shown in the R^2 regression analysis in Figure 4, R^2 values are low, except for the 'urban tourism' ($R^2 = 0,31$), and 'rural tourism' and 'cultural tourism' present a decreasing tendency. The Spanish DMO's future tendency coincides with the French one to enhance 'urban tourism'. The R^2 regression analysis for Spain indicates rising tendencies in 'rural tourism' ($R^2=0.29$) and 'urban tourism' ($R^2=0.32$). The tendency in the 'cultural tourism' product is practically neutral, with an R^2 close to 0 (Figure 5):

Figure 4: R^2 regression analysis of tourism products in France

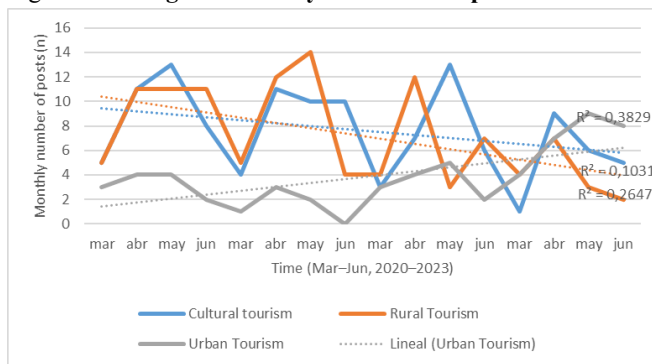
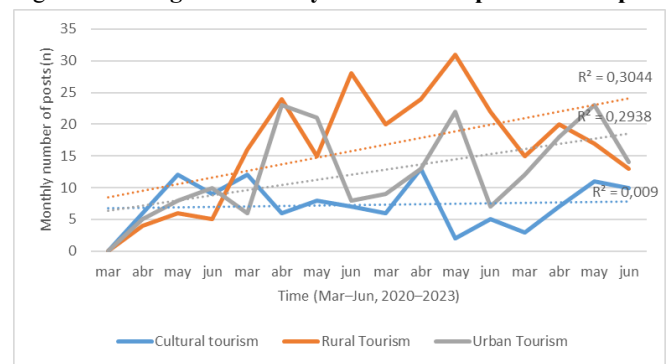


Figure 5: R^2 regression analysis of tourism products in Spain



Source: own elaboration

Note: Monthly number of posts (n) by product in the Spanish and French National DMO profiles (Mar–Jun, 2020–2023). Dotted lines show linear trendlines and corresponding R^2 values.

Regarding the audience's response to the tourism products, in contrast to the content, the most promoted tourism products did not elicit the highest interaction in each profile. In the French case, the tourism product with the highest interaction was 'rural tourism' (507,003), while the most promoted one in the four studied periods was 'cultural tourism'. In Spain, 'urban tourism' registered the highest interaction (1,461,458), while the most promoted tourism product across the four periods was 'rural tourism'.

Moreover, the interaction registered in both profiles with other tourism products also shows dissonance with the expected outcomes— normally, a larger number of posts ensures a better audience response, as in the case of the content. For instance, 'adventure tourism' in Spain obtained a good audience's response (comments=1,372), and in France, 'culinary tourism' was in the third position of the ranking of interaction in 2021, with a sole post. The study of the relationship between interaction and tourism products through Pearson's chi-square test revealed an existing relationship among those concepts in both countries' data—Spain=376 ($p<0.05$); France=5.346 ($p<0.05$).

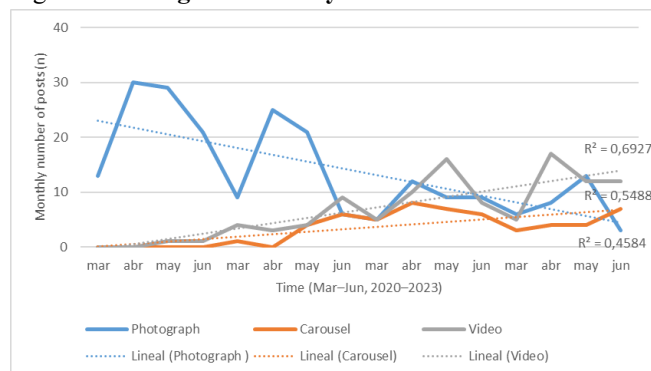
These exceptions confirmed the research of Sagapova et al., (2022). These authors asserted that Instagram followers tend to prefer quality over quantity. Besides, considering the S-O-R model, these exceptions points to a potential misalignment in both DMOs' institutional agendas, as the most promoted tourism products (stimuli) did not always obtain the highest level of interaction (organism) and, therefore, they may not have achieved the expected response (encouraging social media-induced tourism). This potential misalignment in the DMOs' agendas could also explain the decrease in the interaction across the four studied periods, despite their efforts to stop the decline with a shift in their most promoted tourism products towards the enhancement of 'urban tourism' in the return to normalcy. Both countries tried to promote more crowded and lively urban destinations, beyond 'rural tourism', with open-air experiences, preferred in the early stages of the post-crisis (Singh et al., 2022). Spain may have softened the drop in interaction with a more diversified offer of tourism products than France, and by enhancing its traditional and best-known tourism product, 'seaside' (TourSpain, 2020), with a notable level of interaction.

4.1.3 Formats

As for the agenda planning for the most used format, both countries predominantly employed photographs (sole image or carousel) in their Instagram marketing strategies across the four periods. However, France presented a more varied range of formats than Spain. In the Spanish posts, 91% were photographs (89% a sole image; 3% carousel), and the rest were videos (8%). In France, 72% of posts were photographs (59% a unique image, 14% a carousel), and 28% were videos. However, both countries' agendas evolved across the four periods, from a high preference for photographs to a major presence of videos. In Spain, this tendency was more linear than in France (Spain increased 2.6% and France 46%).

The tendency to use videos to the detriment of photographs is expected to continue in the future in France. The R^2 regression analysis for France indicates a plain tendency of the carousel format (R^2 above 0.6), and a decrease in photographs. In the Spanish Instagram profile, a major presence of videos in the future is also expected, with a plainer tendency for carousel than the French one, and an increasing tendency in photographs and videos (both R^2 values above 0.3). (Figures 6 and 7):

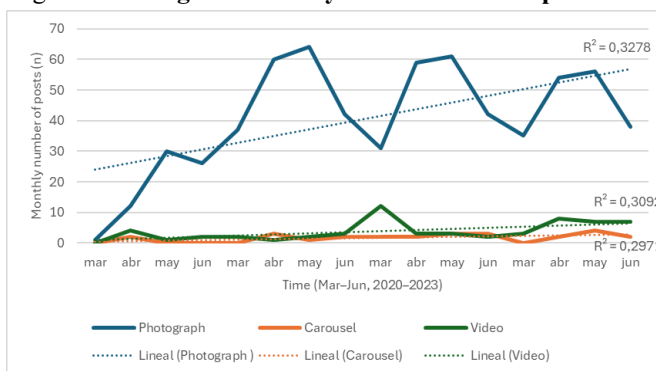
Figure 6: R^2 regression analysis of formats in France



Source: own elaboration

Note: Monthly number of posts (n) by format in the Spanish and French National DMO profiles (Mar–June 2020–2023). Dotted lines show linear trendlines and corresponding R^2 values.

Figure 7: R^2 regression analysis of formats in Spain



As in the case of the content, both marketing strategies succeeded in obtaining the best audience interaction with the most frequently used format (sole photographs). However, the increasing use of videos also had a good response among the Spanish and French National DMOs' Instagram followers, especially in Spain (2021) and France (2022). The relationship between interaction and format is confirmed for both countries by the significance value for Pearson's chi-square—Spain = 2.096 ($p < 0.05$); France = 10.467 ($p < 0.05$).

The future trend of both countries' Instagram profiles to potentiate the use of videos corroborates Huertas & Martínez-Rolán's (2020) research, when asserting that videos surpass interaction with audiences over photographs for their potential to better show tourists' experiences and emotions. DMOs may have planned this strategy to increase interaction, as, according to the affective agenda-setting theory for social media, emotional content can influence audiences' emotions and behaviours (Kim et al., 2017). This result is also corroborated by the S-O-R paradigm, as across the four studied periods, the DMOs adapted their type of visual content (stimuli), observing the changing audience's interaction, preferring the video format (organism), obtaining a better tourists' reaction (response). However, this evolving preference for the video format was not sufficient to prevent the decline in interaction. DMOs should have considered the changes in the algorithm favouring other popular formats on Instagram, such as reels, which had strongly emerged during the studied periods, and were not used by any of the two studied DMOs.

4.2 Qualitative analysis of text features to potentiate engagement

The French and Spanish NTOs designed different institutional agendas about Instagram posts' text features that contribute to potentiating the audience's interaction (Chen et al., 2021). Both countries used the DMOs' most common marketing strategy with text features to improve the audience's reaction: highlighting geotags (99% of the total posts). These destinations' tags are used to identify and facilitate the search for the promoted locations (Chan et al., 2022). It is noteworthy that, despite this extensive utilisation of geotags, both DMOs rarely used regional or local DMOs' tags across the four studied periods.

As for the users' tags, the marketing strategies of both DMOs differed not only when using tags to their respective Instagram followers or tagging influencers, but also in their evolution. The French DMO focused on enhancing the collaboration with influencers across the four periods. On the contrary, the Spanish one opted to enhance followers' tags, featuring photographs captured by them in different destinations, especially in 2020 and 2021. However, in 2022 and 2023, Spain completely changed this marketing strategy to use influencers' tags over followers' tags, due to influencers' potential persuasive endorsement among digital communities (Avelino et al., 2020). In both DMOs' strategies, the use of users' tags was the only text feature to potentiate interaction that implies a process of co-creation with their followers, involving social media users in the posted

content (Andrade-Cunha et al., 2025). This strategy was successful for the Spanish DMO during the pandemic and the first post-crisis stage, as the shift to the potentiation of collaboration with influencers coincides with the highest drop in its audience interaction in the long-term post-crisis stage and the return to normalcy.

Regarding the CTAs, both countries followed the same agenda during 2020 and 2021 and differed in 2022 and 2023. In 2020, France and Spain included questions in their posts, but in 2021, those CTAs were changed in both countries to a more direct language to stimulate social media-induced tourism. In 2022 and 2023, Spain maintained the CTAs based on questions, while France reduced the questions and included some contests, which comprised regional or local DMOs' tags and hospitality venues' tags (absent in the case of Spain). Therefore, the use of the CTAs varied in each studied country, despite both aimed at arousing followers' instantaneous responses (Chen et al., 2021). Therefore, the strategy of the Spanish DMO about the text features was more linear across the four examined years than France's. However, the highest shift in its strategy, the increase of influencers' tags over users' tags, coincided with the greatest descent in audience interaction. It may have been identified as an exclusion of the co-creation process by Spanish followers (Andrade-Cunha et al., 2025).

CONCLUSION

Based on the agenda-setting theory, the main contribution of this study is providing a comprehensive overview of how National DMOs plan their institutional agenda on Instagram aligned with their respective strategic marketing axes to promote social media-induced tourism across four different periods (crisis, post-crisis in the short term, post-crisis in the long term and return to normalcy). Additionally, using the S-O-R framework, the study analysed the audience's interaction with DMOs' profiles on Instagram, which indicates followers' interest in the DMOs' posted content (Blanco-Moreno et al., 2024). This comparative analysis covers a gap in research about longitudinal and comparative studies of National DMOs' Instagram marketing strategies in the medium to long-term post-crisis stages, or comparing the post-crisis stages with a regular marketing period (Filieri et al., 2021; Mele et al., 2023; Taecharunroj & Pattaratanakun, 2023).

The findings about the DMOs' Instagram institutional content planning agenda demonstrated that both countries promoted a diversified tourism product offer with photographs and an increasing presence of videos, with a high level of audience interaction in each studied period. Moreover, France and Spain widely used the text features that potentiate interaction. It is noteworthy that, in the Spanish case, the DMO promoted more than the French one the followers' co-creation process through users' tags during the first two studied years, which resulted in its best audience interaction. Therefore, following the S-O-R framework, DMOs used the right stimuli in their Instagram posts, both in visual and text content, obtaining a high level of audience interaction (organism), which can contribute to potentiating social media-induced tourism towards their destinations (response).

However, the exceptions registered in some content and tourism products (hardly promoted but with a high level of interaction) and the huge and continued decrease observed in the audience's interaction across the studied periods can be interpreted as a dissonance between DMOs' stimuli, audience interaction and the expected results. It could also suggest misalignments in both studied DMOs' institutional agendas or a lack of consideration in the constantly changing Instagram algorithm or users' preferences on the new formats provided by the platform, such as reels, also favoured by the algorithm.

According to the results of the regression analysis conducted in this research, useful to determine the patterns in the evolution of the use of content, tourism products and formats across the four studied periods and future trends, both DMOs' institutional agendas evolved from the crisis period to the return to normalcy. The results of future trends point to a potentiation of the content 'places' to overall promote urban tourism through videos (France) or videos and photographs (Spain) at the detriment of other content related to 'heritage' or cultural tourism, and the use of the carousel format. Those future trends suggest an attempt to adjust both DMOs' posts' content on Instagram to their respective audience's demands in the long-term post-crisis period and the return to normalcy towards more crowded and lively tourism experiences after the pandemic, mainly shown in videos.

Moreover, contrary to the decline in interaction observed in this research, the data of international travellers' arrivals showed that France and Spain continued leading the ranking of the world's most-visited countries at the end of the longitudinal study (UNWTO, 2024). Consequently, this drop in the audience's interaction may also be related to external factors beyond the DMOs' agenda planning regarding content, tourism products and formats or a lack of observation of Instagram changing algorithm. It may be due to a decrease in the interest of Instagram followers in DMOs' institutional profiles, or a lack of observation of their visitors' customer journey phase or the Instagram constantly changing algorithm. During the pandemic, DMOs' Instagram profiles may have served as an inspirational channel for tourists in the awareness phase of their customer journey to plan their future travels. In the different post-crisis periods, tourists' use of social media and their customer journey phase evolved. With a huge pent-up demand created by the pandemic, tourists may have outpaced the awareness phase of their customers' journey to be in the consideration or purchase stages. Thus, tourists may have preferred online direct sales channels over social media with inspirational content, such as the one included in DMOs' Instagram profiles.

Theoretical implications

This research aims to contribute to amplifying the scope of agenda-setting theory for social media with the study of National DMOs' definition and implementation of marketing strategies on Instagram to promote social media-induced tourism. Moreover, the institutional DMOs' agenda for Instagram was also observed to determine that the awareness phase was the most impacted over the rest of the phases of the travellers' customer journey. Furthermore, with the analysis of the text features that potentiate Instagram followers' interaction, this study contributes to the investigation of the affective agenda-setting theory. The results showed that the best text feature that influence audience's emotions and reactions are users' tags, as they involve the DMOs' followers in a co-creation process and stimulate interaction. Besides, the S-O-R framework is useful in this research to investigate the relationship between DMOs' content on Instagram (stimuli), the audience's interaction (organism) and social media-induced tourism (the expected response). Another contribution of this study to agenda-setting theory is its potential to shed light on possible inconsistencies in DMOs' institutional strategies when developing their Instagram marketing approaches, particularly by highlighting the dynamic relationship between institutional priorities and audience responses in a longitudinal context.

Practical implications

This study could provide practical recommendations for DMOs to plan and develop their institutional content agenda on Instagram. They should be based on maximising the potential of Instagram visual content and text features to boost interaction, and thus, social media-induced tourism towards their promoted destinations. They are also encouraged to constantly monitor followers' interaction, as well as other external factors, such as their audiences' changing preferences. DMOs may also consider the most popular content and format currently demanded by Instagrammers, such as influencers' content or the use of reels. They are also encouraged to consider the over-time changing Instagram algorithm, and other metrics provided by the platform, such as impressions, saves, shares or reach, to have more information about their followers' interest in the posted content.

Beyond the posted content planned in their agendas, DMOs should consider other factors impacting audience interaction. It is relevant to consider including the Instagram followers in a process of co-creation, through UGC or users' tags, to make social media users acquire a central role and boost their involvement with the posted content. Besides, it is vital to contemplate the customer journey phase of destinations' potential visitors, to disseminate content and implement marketing strategies aligned with their demands. Further than posting inspirational content which impacts tourists in the awareness phase of their customer journey, DMOs could also take advantage of Instagram Shopping, to reach those audiences in the consideration and purchase stage of their customer journey to simplify their acquisition process and, thus, increase their interaction with DMOs' Instagram profiles.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

The limitations of this study are related to the sample (period and months under analysis, and the selection of Instagram profiles) and the methodology used. The limitation in the sample may provide a bias in the results regarding tourism products and contents, due to the seasonality of the tourism offer of these two countries. Further research may be replicated in other periods or on other destinations with different tourism products. Another limitation of the sample is the absence of reels or interactive formats in the analysed DMOs' profiles. Future investigation should consider discussing the broader strategic use of Instagram, especially currently, when Instagram algorithms prioritise video content.

The main methodological limitation of the research is the metric used to measure the audience's interaction, based on the addition of likes and comments, as it is not valid to observe users' cognitive or emotional aspects of customers' engagement. Future research to overcome this limitation and observe the effectiveness of DMOs' marketing strategies on Instagram could be focused on analysing other aspects of customers' engagement beyond the audience's interaction. This research could be conducted with a survey of DMOs' followers to analyse all the factors affecting it, with interviews with DMOs' marketing managers to investigate how they planned and developed their strategies, or considering other metrics, such as saves, shares or reach of Instagram's posts, to fully examine customers' engagement.

Another limitation of the study related to the metric used is the lack of consideration of the changing Instagram algorithm that potentiates other formats, such as reels, that may contribute to raising more interest in Instagram audiences, and therefore, in their interaction. Future research could be based on the examination of other profiles using those formats.

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