

## Article

# Geotourism Destinations Online Branding Co-Creation

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**Abstract:** The application of brand theory to destinations has grown in the last few decades, with the destination brand personality being a viable metaphor for creating and positioning destination brands. An often-overlooked tourism typology is geotourism; more specifically, volcanic tourism, since it can be a passive element of any tourism form or active nature tourism. However, its potential is relatively unexplored in terms of online branding. For this reason, the present study analyzes online brand image co-creation, using 300 websites related to three unique volcanic tourism destinations—Iceland, the Azores, and the Canary Islands. Three different types of sources (destination marketing organizations, commercial, and editorial websites) created these contents. The results demonstrate significant differences between the communication of the three destinations, with Iceland, where there is less aligned communication, most valuing geo elements in their communication, and the Azores, where all stakeholders communicate similar brand personality traits, displaying more aligned communication regarding brand personality. In the Canary Islands geotourism is less explored as a destination offer and is consequently less communicated. Acknowledging the different brand positioning and the parity and differentiation points among destinations with the same baseline offer—volcanic tourism—can be helpful for destination brand managers to reignite tourism and promote a unique tourism experience.

**Keywords:** geotourism; destination; tourism management; online branding; brand personality



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## 1. Introduction

Tourism has grown rapidly in the past decades, originating from a wide range of tourism typologies that vary in target and experience offered, which are anchored in more passive or more active tourism activities [1]. One of the newest concepts within tourism studies, geotourism [2,3], with its sub-niches of volcanic and geothermal tourism, has been relatively underexplored [2]. Geotourism is a form of nature tourism that provides a more immersive experience between traditional nature tourism and geology [4]. Landscape elements and geological formations, in their natural form or explored as thermal springs and spas, offer richer and more holistic experiences for visitors [2,5].

The COVID-19 pandemic has challenged tourism in several ways, particularly through locking people down in quarantine and suspending access to foreign tourists through closed borders. In this situation, destinations are impelled to revisit their brand management and find unique brand elements to communicate online, which can give potential tourists incentive to start dreaming of travel and encourage tourists to visit the destination to reignite its tourism activities [6]. Several authors have studied the adoption of brand theory in destination marketing. However, there are still areas within the different tourism fields where brand theory is not entirely explored, such as in the online branding of geotourism destinations. Thus, this article examines the online communication of tourism destinations and compares the differences in brand personality traits and attributes transmitted online through three destination marketing organizations (DMOs), commercial, and

editorial websites. For this purpose, Aaker's brand personality model was used, following the approach adopted by Borges-Tiago, Arruda [7].

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows: Section 2 reviews the most well-known definitions of geotourism, emphasizing and analyzing the subcomponents of volcanic tourism from the different perspectives found in the previous literature. This review of the multi-disciplinary origin and evolution of the concept leads to a new perspective that guides the remainder of the work through online branding and identity formation. Section 3 describes the materials and methods this study used, and Sections 4 and 5 present the main results and their implications. The final section concludes the paper by providing some final considerations and highlighting paths for future research.

## 2. Background

Geotourism was first defined in 1995 by Thomas Hose under the strict perspective of "geological tourism" and has since undergone several changes. Nowadays, it is considered an opportunity for tourists to receive aesthetic impressions and knowledge about the local geosystem. Geotourism is a sub-niche of nature tourism characterized by being environmentally innovative and focusing specifically on landscape and geology [8]. According to Dowling and Newsome [9], geotourism has expanded to encompass a number of attributes—geology, tourism, geosites, visits, and interpretation—and needs to be considered not as a type of nature tourism but as an approach to nature [9] and sustainable tourism [10].

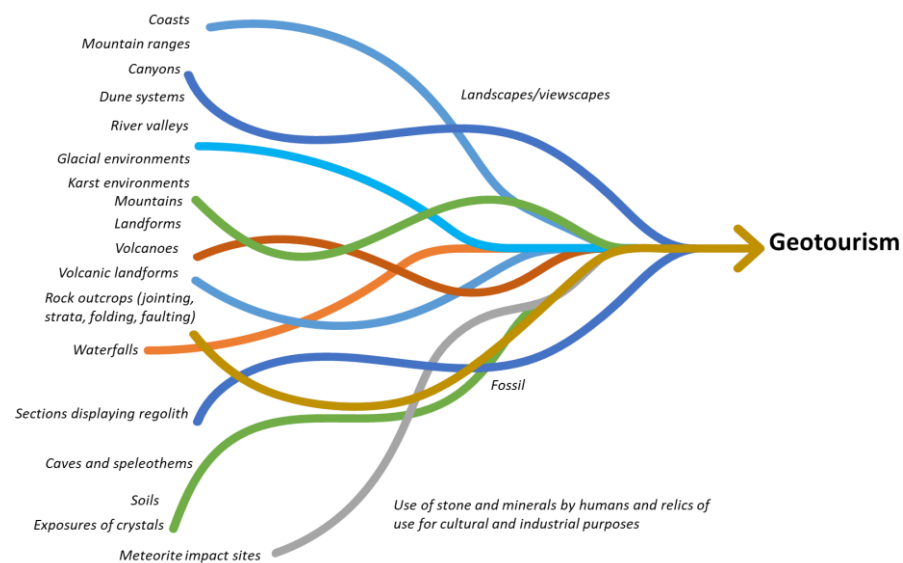
According to Dowling [8], geotourism, like other nature-based tourism types that foster environmental and social responsibility, promotes more sustainable tourism. Besides promoting tourists' visits to geosites, and supporting the driven social-economic benefits, geotourism reinforces the local need to value and preserve the geodiversity.

The difference between these two approaches to geotourism relies on the lens adopted: the "geographical" perspective sees geotourism as sustainable tourism, while the "geological" perspective sees it as a form of traditional tourism. Geotourism products can promote and leverage the economic, environmental, and sociocultural triple-bottom-line dimensions, since they help build wealth and community while promoting and communicating local geological heritage [8].

Geotourism is generally understood as a tourism niche where geotourists visit areas with geological attractions, alone or in groups, and explore natural or urban/built areas [11]. With the growth of geotourism, a classification scheme of geological features arose that considered the site's geological value and reflected the tourists' perceptions and evaluations [12].

Newsome, Dowling, and Leung [11] proposed an initial classification system of peculiar geological and geomorphological phenomena that can be considered attractions to students, independent travelers, or tourist groups. This classification system can help marketing efforts to promote the destination by supporting the site's interpretation while protecting and enhancing geotourism interest. It comprises a set of branches, all interconnected and sometimes overlaid, projecting tourists' perceptions of geological attractions (see Figure 1).

However, as pointed out by Mikhailenko, Nazarenko, Ruban, and Zayats [12] tourists' interest in geotourism experiences does not rely only upon "purely geological facts". In addition to the classification scheme proposed by Newsome, Dowling, and Leung [11], the aesthetic properties of the geosite need to be acknowledged [12]. These authors proposed a geological structures aesthetics-based classification system that reflects tourists' perception and image description and establishes a more comprehensible format to appreciate a geosite's heritage.



**Figure 1.** Scope and focus of geotourism. Source: Adapted from Newsome, Dowling, and Leung [11].

Figure 1 presents different types of geoattractions. Similar to the roots of a tree that connect to ground and support the tree, the unique combinations of different landscape elements and their integration create the uniqueness of the geotourism destination. As such, there are no two equal geosites, even when rooted in the same type of landscape, becoming an attraction to tourists.

The distinctive landscape elements and geological formations of geoattractions provide an experience that is richer than the sum of its parts [8], pleasing visitors with varied interests, especially tourists coined as belonging to geological tourist tribes [13]. Additionally, geotourism involves the community; local businesses and civic groups promote and provide distinctive and authentic experiences to tourists [8]. The number of geological tourists exploring volcanic and geothermal resources increases [14], reflecting spaces becoming accessible, public visibility, and the emergence of a new adventure tourism segment, “the lava seekers”.

In the last two decades, volcanoes have been explored as tourism attractions in many destinations, ensuring tourism development while promoting the conservation and protection of geoheritage. Iceland and Hawaii are well-known examples of destinations that have developed a wide range of activities surrounding active and non-active volcanoes [15]. A news article in National Geographic (2021) noted that even during a pandemic, “thousands of people in Iceland hiked into the Geldingadalur valley to watch fiery lava splatter and spill from the crater of the Fagradalsfjall volcano after it erupted for the first time in nearly 800 years.”.

Regardless of its popularity, volcano tourism is still an under-researched field of study within tourism [16]. The earliest research works tend to focus on volcanic attributes and their value for those planning the destination offer [16,17]. Other studies have focused on risk assessment and natural hazards (Heggie, 2009), and more recent attention has centered on tourists’ motivations, satisfaction, and risk perception concerning volcanic activities [18–21].

Volcanic and geothermal tourism is an essential part of geotourism [15] as well as sustainable tourism. This geotourism subcomponent explores the geodiversity and geological heritage of a particular destination. More specifically, there are attractions related to active volcanoes and geothermal environments [22]. This form of tourism is quite rich and adaptable because it combines the traits of adventure tourism and passive tourism, allowing tourists to choose their level of involvement in volcano-driven activities.

As in other environmentally innovative forms of tourism, the whole geotourism sphere of perception should produce an experience that appeals to the tourists' five senses [23,24]. Volcanic areas are the most appropriate for meeting these requirements:

- (a) Vision—volcanic areas are not just static landscapes; they also have live movement, depending on whether the volcano is active (see Figure 2).
- (b) Hearing—tourists can listen to volcanic activity (such as eruptions), geysers, or sounds produced by hydrothermal activity.
- (c) Taste—tourists can explore taste in exceptional and punctual cases (such as in the Azores and Hawaii, where tourists can taste the food cooked underground. The method consists of digging a hole where food is deposited and slow-cooked, exploiting volcanic activity to steam cook food).
- (d) Smell—tourists can experience the odorous gases that often accompany the volcanic activity.
- (e) Touch—tourists can not only touch volcanic rocks to obtain tactile sensory experiences but can also experience high soil temperatures in geothermal areas.



**Figure 2.** Volcano tourist taking a photo in Iceland—March 2021. Source: National Geographic, retrieved from <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/travel/article/is-volcano-tourism-safe> (accessed on 15 April 2021).

The motivations impelling tourists to seek out volcanoes are broader than the five-sense experience [18]. As in other nature-driven tourism experiences, tourists are invited to submerge into a close relationship with nature, contemplating Mother Nature's show. However, this rewarding contact can come with a range of hazards [25].

In most geothermal areas, hot spring formations do not require magma to reach high temperatures. As water passes through underground rocks, the geothermal temperature gradient combined with time and the intense pressure of the earth forms thermal springs rich in minerals and metallic elements. The effect of heated rocks under the surface can cause several processes, some of which manifest as geothermal phenomena such as thermal springs, fumaroles, geysers, boiling lakes, heated steam currents, and boiling mud puddles [26].

It is increasingly common to see adventure-driven tourists visit volcanic sites [27,28] as they search for active, dormant, or extinct volcanos. Nonetheless, active volcanoes and geothermal areas have risks and hazards associated with volcanic eruptions and other volcanic-nature manifestations that must be considered [29]. Erfurt-Cooper [30] posits that

some risks can be mitigated through a suitable communication process and the adoption of preparedness measures.

Aquino and Schänzel [21] noted the existence of different pull and push factors in volcanic tourism. Two pull factors are associated with disasters and cultural heritage, driven by volcanic and geological attributes. In comparison, four push factors are related to serious leisure attributes: relaxation and escape, novelty seeking, volcano knowledge seeking, and socialization. The authors found different motivation patterns between domestic and foreign tourists. The former value escape, relaxation, and socialization motives, while the latter value novelty and focus on the experience of visiting a volcano. These findings are helpful for destinations that want to develop and market volcano-based geotourism. Despite tourists' motives and interests, destinations face relentless competition [31], which impels DMOs to search for the points of parity and difference that enhance destinations' attractiveness from the tourist's viewpoint.

Such points of parity and difference emerge from the destination experience, which can encompass the impressions, ideas, and beliefs formed in one's mind during travel [32,33]. Ren and Blichfeldt [34] argue that "One clear identity! One clear image!" is the key for successful destination branding. However, we must acknowledge that what the DMOs communicate is a brand identity that, when absorbed by tourists, becomes the destination's image. Kislali and Kavaratzis [33] noted that technology has enhanced the number of information sources regarding destinations, leading to a more complex and richer image-formation process.

For someone who has not yet visited a particular volcano tourism destination, the destination's image is created by combining different sources of information [35], such as media content, intermediaries, visitors, and other tourism and hospitality agents [7,36]. Additionally, the possibility of interacting with websites with multimedia and social networking capabilities allows tourists to "experience" destinations, without having to visit them physically [37,38].

Clear destination identities are expected to make tourists compose clear destination images so that they start dreaming of visiting the destination [6]. As a result, volcano tourism destinations need to establish a congruent and aligned online presence that supports precise image formation.

Chung and Lee [39] demonstrated that the quality of information on DMOs' (Destination Marketing Organizations) webpages indirectly affects tourists' intentions to visit a particular destination. The images presented by the content on the DMOs' webpages are often different from those presented by other online sources (for example, the websites of tour operators and travel agencies, online travel communities, online travel magazines, and travel blogs [40,41]).

For some, the destination image can be seen as a subset of a broader field that uses the image measurement. It comprises information created and shared related to specific features or attributes that overcome the holistic impressions [35]. Therefore, several authors' studies have illustrated and analyzed destination images [42].

Destination image, projected by the destination stakeholders and co-created by tourists, is considered a determinant since it reflects and allows a better understanding of travel behavior, while it allows designing effective marketing and communication strategies.

The relevance of this topic is evident when significant research can be found over several disciplines other than tourism, ranging from psychology and environmental planning to marketing and geography.

This image formation occurs as a mental process, where impressions are chosen from different information sources and integrated as a solo perception that can evolve. Therefore, developing methodologies that allow a comprehensive and accurate measurement of the destination image is necessary.

Over time, authors have adopted different approaches around two main concepts: image functional and psychological components and holistic image. The functional components are considered to be all features or elements directly observable or measurable, while

the psychological characteristics are related to psychological states that cannot be directly measured. For example, in geotourism or volcanic tourism, the functional components are linked to the geodiversity observed and acknowledged, whereas the psychological is related to feelings promoted by the experience.

The destination's overall impressions can be achieved when combining this state of mind with the holistic image of the destination. The brand personality model, developed by Aaker [43], is quite suitable to measure a destination's holistic image [44].

The model groups brand personalities into five broad categories, subdivided into personality traits and strengths, provided by several adjectives linked to each dimension (see Figure 3).

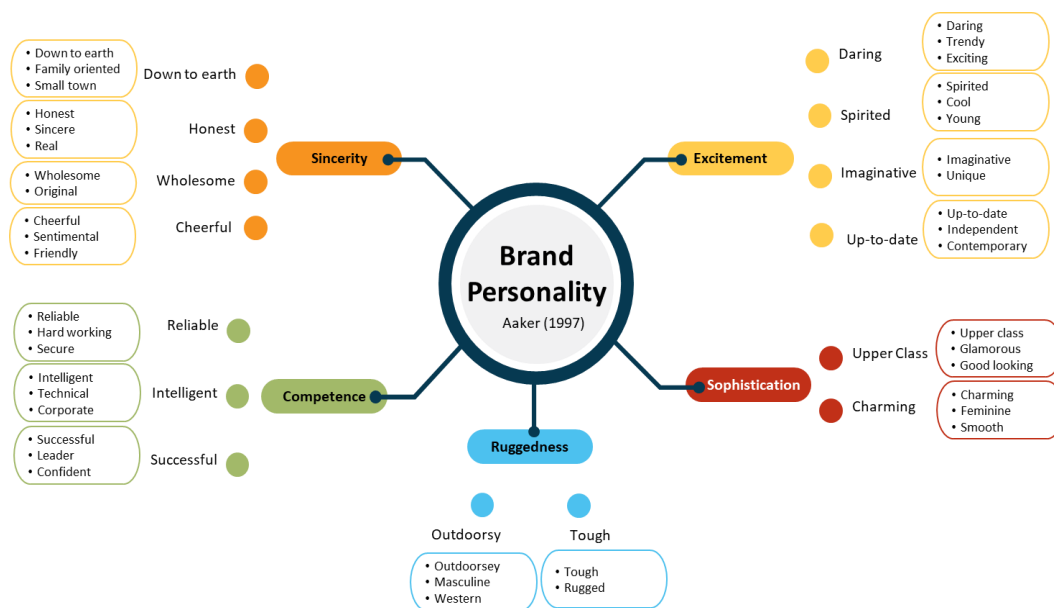


Figure 3. Brand personality model. Source: Adapted from Aaker [43].

This model has been widely applied to destinations [44–49]. The sincerity trait is associated with destinations that provide a transparent experience and use real-life experiences, along with the facts, to promote itself and what it offers. The excitement trait is linked to destinations that provide tourists with an unforgettable experience, since they encourage them to experience a journey of discoveries, creating much hype around the experience. The competence trait reflects the destination's commitment to quality. Destinations that present a sophistication trait combine luxury and superiority offers. Finally, the ruggedness trait is associated with destinations that focus on an outdoorsy and nature-centered experience. Thus, a destination brand personality that positively resonates with tourists will have the edge over competitor's destinations [49].

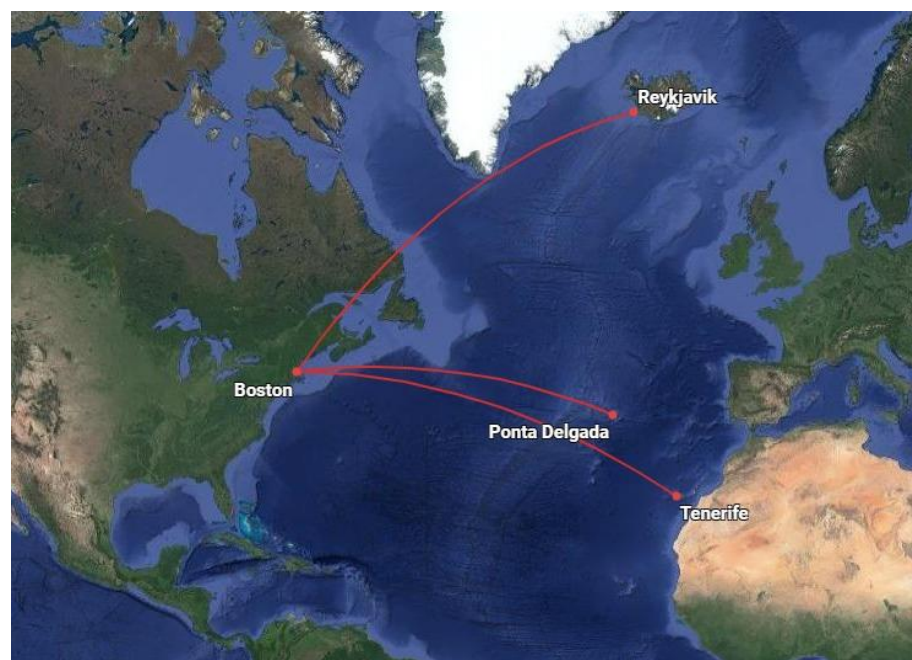
Therefore, destination-image formation is not simple. It includes the brand identity created by the DMO and the tourists' own image-formation process, integrating DMO-projected identity with other sources of image creation (peers and firms) in an ongoing brand image co-creation [7]. Considering this, this research addresses the following questions about volcanic destinations:

- RQ 1. What points of difference are explored by volcano tourism destinations?
- RQ 2. What points of parity are explored by volcano tourism destinations?
- RQ 3. What are the most prevalent brand personality traits communicated online?
- RQ 4. Are there significant differences between DMO, firm, and editorial-type content communicated online?

### 3. Materials and Methods

To answer these research questions, since systematically collected data on volcano tourism destination branding are non-existent, this study began with a data-gathering process that drew on the rich body of online information for different volcanic destinations. So far, most studies focus on well-known volcanic areas around the world, mostly located outside of Europe. From the list of European volcanoes presented by Erfurt-Cooper [42], the first three listed destinations were chosen: Iceland, the Azores, and the Canary Islands. Iceland was chosen because it is one of the few regions established as leading tourism offering geotourism or volcanic tourism, boosted by the late eruptions [50]. Looking at the tourism figures for Iceland, almost 27% of tourists are from North America, mainly from the United States of America. The Azores were chosen due to their geodiversity richness, encompassing 27 main volcanic systems, with 16 major central volcanos [51]. Like Iceland, the Azores explore volcanic tourism and are a focal destination for North Americans. The Canary Islands also explore their geodiversity, and since 2010, volcanic tourism has been considered an integrated component of the tourism in these islands [52].

Considering the relevance of North American tourists to Iceland and the Azores, and the almost equidistance found of these three destinations to Boston (see, Figure 4), a proxy was adopted considering the online searches from North American tourists.



**Figure 4.** Route map from Boston (USA) to the three destinations.

This exploratory study adopted a mix of qualitative and quantitative analyses. Although quantitative data are essential, in situations where the main focus is on aspects that cannot be measured, qualitative analyses, when performed through direct contact with the object of study, offer conditions for understanding, decoding, and explaining the field of research [53].

The three destinations chosen as case studies to illustrate the contrasting online communication are islands with active (Iceland), dormant (the Azores), or extinct (the Canary Islands) volcano sites.

Different stages of tourism maturity can be found when confronting tourism development in these three peripheral European regions. All these regions have volcanic origins, with peaks and craters defining the unique landscapes, but present distinctive approaches to geotourism and, more specifically, to volcanic tourism.

### 3.1. Iceland

Iceland is located north of the Atlantic Ocean, to the south of the Arctic Circle. With an area of 103,000 km<sup>2</sup>, Iceland is the 18th largest island globally and the 2nd largest in Europe after Britain. It is one of the most volcanically active countries in the world. Iceland has a unique geology and a dynamic natural landscape that has long attracted global visitors. In fact, one-third of the lava to emerge on the Earth's surface in the last 1000 years is of Icelandic origin [50]. The island has 22 active volcanoes, 250 geothermal areas, 780 thermal springs, and the world's 3rd largest ice cap.

Much of Iceland's attraction is due to the dynamic processes that still shape its landscape, combined with the country's own wild natural environment. Iceland is often described as a geoscience laboratory [54], as, in geological terms, it is located in a dynamic hotspot in the Mid-Atlantic Ridge, where the boundaries of the American and Eurasian tectonic plates are constantly moving away from each other in the North Atlantic, forming the Mid-Atlantic Rift.

In fact, one novel thing about Iceland is that it is the only region in the world where the Mid-Atlantic Ridge can be seen on the surface; it is 90% submerged throughout the Atlantic Ocean (Figure 5).



Figure 5. Iceland. Source: [www.amusingplanet.com](http://www.amusingplanet.com) (accessed on 10 March 2020).

Iceland offers a wide variety of tours, some covering large areas, while others focus on smaller ones. Nature tours focus mainly on magnificent landscapes, young lava fields, sparkling waterfalls, and majestic ice caps. Currently, Iceland has two geoparks: Katla Geopark with 59 geosites and Reykjanes Geopark with 55 geosites.

### 3.2. The Azores

The Azores archipelago is located in the North Atlantic Ocean at the junction of the Eurasian, North American, and African tectonic plates. The archipelago consists of 16 large volcanic buildings (polygenetic), nine of which are dormant [51]. The volcanic landscape consists of approximately 1750 monogenetic volcanoes, including slag and spatter cones, domes, coulées, tuft rings, cones, and eruptive fissures, which are all scattered along the flanks and calderas of the polygenetic volcanoes and integrate 11 basalt fissure volcanism zones [51]. Usually, tourists visiting the Azores look to its volcanic landscapes and the

surrounding sea for contemplation and pleasure during various activities in the natural environment [55], and seek the experience of eating food cooked underground.

The international importance of the Azorean territory's geological heritage, its scientific, scenic, and educational value, and the high number and quality of its geosites were recognized with the creation of the Azores Geopark, supported by the Regional Government of the Azores, and the site's subsequent integration into the UNESCO European and Global Network of Geoparks [55,56].

The Azores Geopark comprises 121 geosites spread over the nine islands of the archipelago and surrounding seabed, and the park: (a) ensures the geodiversity that characterizes the Azorean territory; (b) reflects the historical and geological eruptions of the last 10 million years; (c) promotes common conservation strategies; and (d) is based on a decentralized management structure with support on all islands [51].

### 3.3. The Canary Island

The Canary Islands, located near Europe and North Africa in the North Atlantic Ocean, consist of seven volcanic islands and several islets with a spring-like climate throughout the year. Its contrasting landscapes and mild climate create an ideal environment for diverse species and habitats [57].

The volcanoes of the Canary Islands are significant socio-economic resources for the local inhabitants, who have used the materials resulting from the pyroclastic and lava currents since the beginning of settlement in the archipelago [58].

The characteristics related to volcanism are very important attractions for tourism in the Canary Islands. Tourist routes include several sites with geological heritage. Some of the most significant geosites include the picturesque volcanic cones at Lanzarote, El Hierro, and La Palma; the impressive volcanoes of Teide, Teneguía, and Taburiente; the archipelago's volcanic tunnels or lava caves; and the rock formations of Las Cañadas in Tenerife [58–61].

Five Canary Islands are designated as a Biosphere Reserve (UNESCO), including two islands in their entirety (Lanzarote and Fuerteventura). Geotourism in the Canary Islands archipelago has grown mainly since the creation of the geoparks. The island of El Hierro constitutes a geopark with 53 geosites, and the Lanzarote and Chinijo Islands Geopark includes the entire island of Lanzarote and the small islands surrounding La Graciosa, Montaña Clara, Roque del Este, Roque del Oeste, and Alegranza, known as the "Chinijo Islands".

Despite the geological richness of these European regions, their tourism maturity level and commitment towards innovative sustainable tourism approaches are considerably different (see Table 1).

### 3.4. Method

The research method consisted of geo-localized content analysis to identify relevant brand personality traits and attributes. The brand personality models have been applied to different tourist destinations, aiming at a deeper understanding of perceived and projected destination brand personalities [44,45,47,49,61,62].

Brand personality can be associated with a set of unique and favorable characteristics and memories that a tourist possesses from a certain place [49]. Moreover, destinations are rich in terms of symbolic values and personality traits, since they consist of a set of tangible and intangible components (such as tourist attractions, hotels, and people) associated with particular values, stories, events, and sensations [45].

**Table 1.** The three destinations.

Compared Dimensions	Iceland	Azores	Canary
Product life cycle [61]	Fast growth	Fast growth	Maturity/awareness of problems
Type of volcanic activity	Active	Dormant	Inactive
Island characteristics	One big island and thirty small islands Primary industries: fish-related industries, aluminum, and ferrosilicon, and lately tourism (average of 2 million visitors per year, before COVID-19)	Nine volcanic islands Primary industries: agriculture, dairy farming (for cheese and butter products primarily), livestock ranching, fishing, and lately tourism (average of 1 million visitors per year, before COVID-19)	Seven islands Primary industries: tourism (average of 12 million visitors per year, before COVID-19)
Government	Island-state	Autonomous region from Portugal	Autonomous region from Spain
Past offer type	Unfocused	Unfocused	Mass tourism
Current offer strategy	Boosterism and volcanic tourism approach	Boosterism and exploring volcanic tourism within sustainable tourism approach	Economic and sustainable approach, with volcanic tourism on the agenda since 2010

Taking into account the Big Five Model of Human Personality, Jennifer Aaker [43] developed the Brand Personality Scale (BPS—Brand Personality Scale), which better describes the personality attributes of products and brands and that is adopted in the present research to establish the brand image alignment online.

Thus, the first phase consisted of finding valid keywords for information on the three geotourism destinations under study that potential visitors in the target market (USA) used in online searches, which were performed using the Google search engine. The method used the Google search engine because it is the most popular search engine worldwide (72.47% market share), according to 2018 data from netmarketshare (netmarketshare.com (accessed on 10 January 2020)). Similarly, the method targeted Google's Chrome browser because it is the world's most used browser (61% market share).

To obtain the right keywords for searches, potential keywords were pre-filtered to be relevant using Google search trends.

We then used the Adwords “Keyword Planner” tool, a well-known tool belonging to the Adwords program, which is Google's advertising program. This tool aims at creating advertisements for companies, making valuable information related to search engine optimization (SEO) available, such as the estimated monthly search volume for each word or keyword (a related word or term) (see, Figure 6). The Keyword Planner always uses records for the previous 24 months. This tool was chosen because it has been used in similar academic studies [63–65].

**Figure 6.** Google search trends for the three destinations.

The researchers applied geo-filters in both tools to set the USA and the English language as the search location and language to emulate searches conducted by North American tourists, who were previously accounted as relevant to these destinations. The

achieved keywords were defined for the subsequent phase, where they were used to select and collect data from the relevant web pages and for content analysis. This phase used the previously defined keywords to obtain a list of 300 web addresses relevant to the study (100 for each geotourism destination).

One of the objectives of this study is to understand the differences in brand personality attributes transmitted, on the one hand, by the web pages promoting tourist destinations and, on the other hand, by the web pages assessing tourist destinations. This necessitated designating three categories of web pages: DMO, commercial, and editorial.

The study chose these specific categories because the content presented had different orientations and approaches to the market. While commercial web pages intend to sell a product to capture visitors aiming, of course, at a profit, editorial web pages refer to individual evaluations of and experiences at the destinations. Finally, DMO web pages are controlled by the official entities of tourist promotion in each region; their data are necessary to fulfill one of the specific objectives of this work of determining the role of DMO in online branding communication.

After obtaining the 300 relevant web addresses and attributing the respective categories, the entire textual content of each web page was extracted for 49 commercial web pages for each destination (totaling 147 commercial web pages), 49 editorial web pages for each destination (totaling 147 editorial web pages), and 3 DMO web pages. In total, more than 1500 pages of text were compiled in Word documents and analyzed using the QDA Miner software.

#### 4. Results

The first analysis was performed on the raw, non-hierarchical, and non-categorized contents of the DMO web pages. This resulted in a general analysis of the topics, expressions, and words most frequently used by the DMOs (see Table 2).

The topics list comprises the main issues expressed in the communication process, while the expressions were combinations of words used in phrases.

The primary expressions found on the Azorean DMO website were "Natural Park," "Nature Reserve", "Furna do Enxofre", and "Sete Cidades". The most relevant expressions found on the Canary Islands' DMO were "Gran Canaria", "La Gomera", "El Hierro", "National Park", and "Biosphere Reserve". Finally, the most relevant expressions found on the Icelandic DMO were "National Park", "North Atlantic", "Thermal springs", "whale watching", and "lava fields".

The words most used by the Azorean DMO website were "Landscape", "Fajã", "Lava", "Caldeira", "Cave", "Lagoon", "Endemic", "Environmental", "Interpretation", and "Furnas". The Canary Islands' DMO website used "Gomera", "Forests", "Family", "Experiences", "Flora", "Fish", "Endemic", "Learning", "Fauna", and "Environment". Finally, the Icelandic DMO website used "Nature", "Raykjavik", "Glacier", "Geothermal", "Atlantic", "Energy", "Mountains", "Lava", "Arctic", and "Trails".

References to the geosites and geoparks in the DMOs' communication established a point of parity among the three destinations. The following points of differentiation emerged: for the Azores, underground cooked food and the cows and horses; for the Canary Islands, family activities and the cultural festivities; and for Iceland, glaciers and whale watching. From the perspective of the five-sense model, it can be noted that the only destination that explores the five senses is the Azores, given attention to taste.

The researchers analyzed all data using a predefined brand personality dictionary developed by Opoku, Abratt and Pitt [66]. This dictionary uses the five dimensions of Aaker's Brand Personality Scale, including 42 personality traits, that help compare brand personalities in different categories. This analysis resulted in each region's online brand personality traits (and the traits for each defined category) (see Table 3).

**Table 2.** Most used words by DMOs.

N°	Topic	Eigenvalue	Frequency
<b>Iceland</b>			
1	Vibrant; Young	8.54	148
2	Rural fields; Cultural festivities	4.64	142
3	Vales; Medidas	3.69	86
4	Vatnajökull; National park	3.6	138
5	Whale watching; Species	3.46	186
6	Tectonic plates; American plate	3.13	5
7	Glaciers; Rivers	3.08	111
8	Stand; Period	3.07	106
9	Swimming pools; Geothermal	2.96	143
10	Heritage; Celebration	2.84	122
<b>Azores</b>			
1	Sulphur; Cave	8.81	147
2	Espírito Santo; Cultural festivities	4.31	116
3	Livestock; Livestock	3.89	169
4	Latitude; Central group	3.47	136
5	Horse; Gruta	3.44	128
6	Training; Importance	3.22	249
7	Figs; Chains	3.07	135
8	Hydrangeas; Ponds	2.94	127
9	Fleets; English	2.89	87
10	Gotic	2.82	146
<b>Canary</b>			
1	Gardens; Breeze	8.28	318
2	Cultural festivities; Celebrations	3.49	165
3	La Gomera; Gomera	3.33	840
4	Geomorphological; Interest	3.22	399
5	Hectares; Fields	2.96	487
6	Lobos; Ilha	2.85	209
7	Gran; Canaria	2.73	464
8	Beach; Areia Negra	2.64	639
9	Gui Gui; Time	2.52	527
10	Laurissilva; Caves	2.5	1112

A chi-square test was performed, and a relationship was found between brand personality dimension communicated and source of the communication,  $X^2(3, N = 13,445) = 23.45$ ,  $p < 0.001$ . At this point, we can infer that the source of the communication highly influences brand personality traits.

It is possible to observe the differences between brand personality attributes transmitted by the analyzed DMO websites. Thus, it can be concluded that, in the case of the Azorean DMO website, the dimension that stands out the most is Sincerity (38%), and the one that stands out the least is Robustness (12%).

In turn, for the Canary Islands' DMO website, the dimension that stands out the most is Sincerity (31%), and the one that stands out the least is Competence (14%).

Finally, the Icelandic DMO website shows considerable differences compared to the other two regions. The dimension of Excitement stands out the most (30%), and the dimension of Competence stands out the least (9%).

Observing the differences between the brand personality attributes transmitted by commercial websites, the dimension that stands out the most in the Azores is Sincerity (29%), while in Iceland and the Canary Islands, Sophistication (29%, each) stands out.

**Table 3.** Brand personality traits communicated.

Dimensions/Frequency	Iceland	Azores	Canary
DMOs	(sig. = 0.003)		
Sincerity	25%	38%	31%
Competence	9%	22%	14%
Excitement	30%	15%	20%
Sophistication	13%	13%	20%
Ruggedness	23%	12%	15%
Commercial websites	(sig. = 0.001)		
Sincerity	27%	29%	22%
Competence	7%	10%	10%
Excitement	21%	18%	19%
Sophistication	29%	28%	29%
Ruggedness	16%	15%	20%
Editorial websites	(sig. = 0.000)		
Sincerity	29%	34%	28%
Competence	8%	10%	11%
Excitement	21%	16%	16%
Sophistication	23%	20%	25%
Ruggedness	19%	20%	20%

Concerning editorial websites, the dimension that stands out the most in all three destinations is Sincerity (29%, 34%, and 28%, respectively). Although with different weights, this is the source with a more extensive alignment between the three destinations.

## 5. Discussion

At least before the pandemic, choosing a destination became very easy over time. Then, with a simple click and a set of keywords, tourists search online for the next “big adventure” or experience. Thus, understanding how the destination image is created and projected can help manage the brand image destination and position the destination.

As previously acknowledged, brand image formation is a dynamic process that conceals the elements planned by the organization and the pieces of content created and shared online by all other stakeholders [7].

Therefore, when promoting a volcanic tourism destination, since it is prominently under the umbrella of geotourism, it is expectable to find references to the geological features that one can observe, fostering environmental and cultural understanding.

In the present case, there are apparent differences between the most frequent topics, expressions, and words used in the web pages of the analyzed DMOs. The highlighted topics retrieved from the Azorean DMO website were related to geology (sulfur and caves), traditions and culture (Espírito Santo and festivals), regional economy (livestock farming), and the geographical location of the archipelago.

The outcome of the analysis of the Canary Islands’ DMO website highlighted the spring-like climate of the archipelago, its gardens and breezes, its culture (festivities and celebrations), and various elements related to geotourism and geosites as prominent topics.

Finally, the main topics found on the Icelandic DMO website highlighted the destination’s youth and vibrance, its geological elements (lava fields), its valleys and national parks, and whale watching.

In general, the Icelandic DMO website presents a greater coherence between its main topics, expressions, and words, which are strongly oriented toward geotourism compared with the websites for the Azores and Canary Islands. This can be linked to the fact that after the 2010 eruption, Iceland started to actively promote more tourism linked to volcanic activity. In contrast, the Azores promote a more “watch and taste” kind of volcanic tourism experience that explores dormant and active volcanic manifestation. At the same time, the Canary Islands promote passive volcanic tourism with a focus on extinct volcanoes.

These results allow us to validate and verify that the brand personality model is suitable for geotourism destination branding, as in previous tourism destination image studies [45,49].

Moreover, volcanic tourism aims to foster tourism development opportunities with innovative offers for active, dormant, or extinct volcano sites, while protecting the geoheritage attributes. These innovative experiences can be divided into contemplative or active experiences. Hence, besides observation remarks, it was expectable to find the messages anchored on more adventurous and active brand personality traits, such as Excitement.

Looking at the findings related to the brand personality traits communicated online by the different stakeholders (see Table 4), Sincerity was the most evident trait communicated in the editorial web pages of the three analyzed regions, which mirrors the communication of the Azorean and Canary Islands' DMOs. Commercial websites highlighted Sophistication, and editorial webpages pointed to Sincerity. On the other hand, the Icelandic DMO promoted Excitement, which takes more advantage of the uniqueness and innovation underlying this type of tourism.

**Table 4.** Communicational alignment.

Source/Dimensions	Iceland	Azores	Canary
DMOs	Excitement	Sincerity	Sincerity
Commercial websites	Sophistication	Sincerity	Sophistication
Editorial websites	Sincerity	Sincerity	Sincerity
Alignment between sources	Small	High	Medium
Type of volcano	Active	Dormant	Inactive
Official positioning alignment with the type of volcano	High	Medium	Small
Five senses explored	Vision, hearing, and smell	Vision, hearing, taste, and smell	Vision and touch

Thus, the brand personality transmitted by a region's DMO does not always coincide with the brand personality transmitted by tourist agents, stakeholders, blogs, and online travel magazines. Although applying a different study approach, the outcomes of this study reinforce those found by Kim and Lehto [47] related to the discrepancy between perceived and projected destination brand personalities.

Crosstabbing the type of volcano with the communication produced by the DMO, Iceland presents the higher alignment since it has active volcanoes and explores the Excitement trait.

## 6. Conclusions

In today's competitive environment, creating and managing appropriate brand identity and image with the right personality has become vital to effectively positioning a value proposition. Destinations are not immune to this phenomenon [34,49]. Thus, understanding online branding and image formation can be the key to attracting tourists and reigniting the tourism and hospitality industry post COVID-19. Volcanic tourism destinations are traditionally perceived as offering similar experiences in a more or less active format. After the 2010 volcanic eruption in Iceland [50], the appeal of and propositions for volcanic tourism destinations evolved to focus more on the destinations' distinctive features, highlighting the adventurous dimension, especially when targeting "lava seekers."

Knowledge of brand image composition can help volcano tourism destination marketers promote better ways to differentiate their destinations and enhance the capabilities of building lasting emotional bonds between tourists and destinations [26,30]. The general purpose of this research is to check whether the DMOs of volcanic destinations explore the potential of volcanic tourism and how the image projected by the different stakeholders is aligned. The specific objectives explore how three different European regions with distinctive types of volcanic activity promote volcanic and geotourism.

As far as volcanic tourism is concerned, the three destinations have completely distinctive offers, because Iceland has active volcanoes, the Azores have dormant volcanoes, and the Canary Islands are an inactive volcanic region. However, the results obtained show that all destinations use geosites and geoparks in their positioning strategy. This positioning may indicate the growing importance of geotourism and volcanic tourism and raises questions regarding destination differentiation. Moreover, it has been observed in the content analysis that the differentiation points are linked exclusively to cultural or natural unique features not linked to the volcanoes. The richness of the volcanic-driven experiences and the differentiation potential is not fully explored.

Considering the volcanic tourism framework and its configuration as a tourism product, two dominant brand personality traits associated with these destinations were expected: Excitement and Sincerity. Although the DMOs supported their communication of these traits, the commercial websites were not fully aligned in the three destinations. Iceland is the destination that explores a more dynamic and immersive volcanic tourism experience. The Azores' communication of all stakeholders projects a more consistent brand image focused on the Sincerity trait. Using daily-life testimonials, the different Azorean stakeholders tend to create a clear and trustworthy image.

The lessons learned from these three cases can shed light on everyday issues, implying that destinations should audit competitors' brand communication and compare it with their own. Moreover, it adds that personality traits need to be more effectively defined in online branding. Additionally, it reveals that there is still space to explore and communicate the unique characteristics of the existing volcanos and tourism-related experiences. Finally, this work sets the basis for future dedicated empirical work on volcanic tourism.

Destination marketers should develop promotional campaigns that emphasize the destination's image and the distinctive brand personality traits that differentiate volcanic destinations and their points of parity. Furthermore, as a destination's personality serves as a mediator in the relationship between the destination image and the tourist and destination relationship, developing a clear destination image can help not only to develop solid and attractive destination characteristics, but also increase the strength of the relationship between tourists and destinations.

This work also showed that using both the holistic image and the functional and psychological image is necessary, not only as a marketing tool but to strategically differentiate the destination from competitors.

This study has several limitations that can be addressed in future research works. First, both geotourism as a sub-niche of nature tourism and the study of brand personality applied to tourist destinations are still new topics that require further research for support. It was possible to find and reference several studies comparing the brand personality attributes of different tourist destinations. However, it was not possible to find a study comparing brand personality attributes explicitly between geotourist destinations, making this study a novel piece of literature. Second, although it totals more than 1500 text pages, the sample (the textual content of 300 webpages) this study obtained may not be representative. Future studies should compare destinations with larger samples. Third, the personality traits were studied using the Aaker brand personality scale, originally developed for application to goods and products. Thus, the personality attributes this study referred to may not reflect all the personality characteristics of the analyzed destinations.

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