

Digital Marketing Strategies for Creating a Sustainable Image in Tourism Companies

Cândida Silva¹, Susana Silva¹ and Karen Soares²

¹CITUR, ESHT, Polytechnic of Porto, Vila do Conde, Portugal

²ESHT, Polytechnic of Porto, Vila do Conde, Portugal

41230453@esht.ipp.pt

susanasilva@esht.ipp.pt

candidasilva@esht.ipp.pt

Abstract: The tourism sector, in addition to driving economic growth, plays an important role in encouraging and adopting sustainable practices. Digital channels emerge as the ideal means for this promotion and for raising awareness about sustainability. Thus, digital marketing presents itself as an effective tool for promoting an image of sustainability within organizations, both internally and externally. This study aims to understand how organizations' digital marketing strategies contribute to promoting a sustainable image within tourism companies, both internally with employees and externally with customers. To this end, a qualitative approach was adopted, through a multiple case study of 21 tourism companies. The results reveal that some invest in strategies such as email, WhatsApp, or intranet, while others still face limitations in internal communication. Regarding external communication with customers, the most effective digital strategies include social media, campaigns, and videos, which help strengthen companies' sustainable image. This study provides a better understanding of the connection between digital marketing and sustainability in the tourism sector, highlighting the relevance of consistent and integrated digital strategies to promote an image of sustainability.

Keywords: Digital Strategies, Sustainable Image, Digital Marketing, Sustainability, Tourism.

1. Introduction

The tourism sector is one of several sectors currently demonstrating a growing concern for sustainability. This reality drives a strategic redefinition of companies' positioning regarding sustainability. Sustainability is a necessity that requires new attitudes, employing appropriate and effective strategies that can reach everyone, both internally with employees and externally with consumers and stakeholders. It is undoubtedly a strategy for improving the image of organizations and for attracting more consumers, as a sustainable image always gains prominence.

According to Burgos & Mertens (2015), sustainable tourism emerges as a solution that seeks to balance the interests and needs of all parties involved. It aims to simultaneously highlight the advantages of a destination and contribute to reducing negative impacts. By preferring conscious practices, tourists play a fundamental role in preserving destinations.

The role of organizations is fundamental, as they have a responsibility to develop and promote sustainable practices and activities. Companies not only contribute to general well-being but also reinforce their image of sustainability in the market. Therefore, an effective communication tool becomes essential for promoting and disseminating these practices.

Digital marketing is essential for expanding knowledge about sustainability issues, encouraging the adoption of behaviors and attitudes that promote collective wellbeing. In a scenario where attention to the impacts of human practices on society and the environment is growing, the use of well-designed digital strategies helps organizations build a lasting and trustworthy online reputation, aiming for a more sustainable future. It is vital that organizations demonstrate a genuine commitment to sustainability by implementing digital marketing strategies geared towards this goal, which can strengthen the credibility and trust of consumers and employees who are increasingly seeking sustainable brands.

Brahmana & Cristina (2020) argue that internal marketing strategy has been a frequent topic of study in companies, analyzed through the communication of the company's vision and the recognition and development of employees.

Many argue that the first customer of an organization, regardless of its size, is its employee. Chipuca (2020) adds that motivation involves the responsibility of reaching, managing, and understanding employees, so that each one feels an integral part of the group, seeking both external and internal satisfaction.

For more effective and lasting internal communication, it is essential for companies to utilize digital channels. These platforms streamline the dissemination of information, speeding up processes, which sparks employees' interest in participating in company initiatives. They are an excellent tool for integrating sustainability values into company principles, fostering a more responsible and conscientious work environment.

Although there are many studies on sustainability and digital marketing in tourism (Paiva et al., 2023; Afren, 2024; Bassi et al., 2020; Jati-Morales et al. 2022), there is a significant lack of literature on how digital strategies directly influence the construction of organizations' sustainable image, both internally and externally.

Furthermore, few studies investigate how internal and external digital strategies complement each other to reinforce sustainable values (Kotler et al., 2020; Chaffey & Chadwick, 2019; Neiva, 2019). This study aims to contribute to this area of knowledge.

1.1 Digital Marketing

The pressure of the new technological world has transformed the world of information. The way we communicate today has changed, and this change, not only in forms and techniques, but also in the content transmitted (Maia, 2022).

The transfer of social interactions from the physical world to the online environment has enabled more agile communication between people in different locations. The adoption of digital technologies, which has enabled this greater connection, represented considerable progress in the trajectory of marketing (Moreira & Laraich, 2021).

McGruer (2020) argues that, today, an active digital presence is as crucial as a physical presence, since it is online that people research, buy, and interact. However, this digital revolution brings with it enormous challenges, requiring significant investments, both budgetary and resource wise. Therefore, the choice of digital communication strategies can be crucial.

Chaffey & Chadwick (2019) define digital marketing as the process of achieving objectives using digital channels, information, and technological tools. They emphasize that it is the results achieved with technology that determine investment in digital marketing, not the simple adoption of the technology itself. Digital marketing focuses on managing the different forms of an organization's online presence (applications, websites, social media), integrated with online communication techniques (search engine marketing, email marketing, social media marketing, online advertising, etc.).

The constant growth of digital technologies has transformed and will continue to transform traditional marketing practices. Today, marketers must learn to deal with an increasingly connected and intelligent audience, manage the vast amount of available data, and understand that, while the digital age offers countless opportunities for organizations to progress, it can also bring challenges and high costs. Therefore, planning, implementing, and measuring digital strategies that are tailored to today's consumers is crucial (Kotler et al., 2019).

1.2 Sustainability

The tourism sector is one of the largest industries in the world, having a significant impact on economic development. These activities, on the other hand, have negative effects on the environment and the community, jeopardizing the image of tourism organizations, which has led to the concept of sustainability and its implementation. Although the term "sustainability" has existed for several decades, the concern and attention given to it appears to be more recent.

The concept of sustainability is vast and establishing a precise and universally accepted definition is difficult. To be sustainable, organizations need to incorporate social, economic, and environmental responsibilities, both internally and externally (Paiva et al., 2023).

Boni et al. (2019) explain sustainability within organizations as the sum of actions implemented by the company, aiming for the sustainable development of a given community. The authors also state that this responsibility is not exclusive to large companies, as small and medium-sized enterprises can assist with actions and projects that benefit the community.

Paiva et al. (2023) describe sustainability as "enough, for everyone, everywhere, always," where it is necessary to reduce excesses and ensure decent living conditions for all, now and in the future. The great challenge lies in

collaborating on sustainability in harmony with the organizations' profit objectives. In this sense, the authors assert that organizations that adopt sustainable practices can ensure a pleasant environment for all involved and also obtain greater profits by adopting these practices.

Boni et al. (2019) also argue that the correct adoption of sustainable practices contributes to improving the company's sustainable image among its target audience, fostering greater awareness. The authors emphasize that concerns should not reside solely in the environmental dimension but rather maintain a commitment to society and to employees themselves, since everyone suffers the same consequences of the negative impacts of unconscious consumption.

Paskova & Zelenka (2019) argue that awareness of the harmful effects of the tourism sector on society and the environment encourages the adoption of sustainability practices in tourism, affecting both demand and supply.

The process of implementing sustainable practices in tourism organizations provides existing and emerging techniques and procedures to make tourism sustainable, and this implementation remains a challenge for these organizations.

It is important that government leaders adopt measures based on contributing to a healthier and more sustainable planet, achieving, through influence and power, an active role with positive results in contributing to environmental protection (Gonçalves et al., 2022).

The tourism sector is a massive phenomenon that moves millions of people and encompasses various activities and sectors, such as the hotel industry. This must be aligned with the SDGs, as there is a reciprocal relationship between them, in which they mutually benefit.

Due to the involvement of various stakeholders, tourism is strongly committed to sustainability. Therefore, it is essential that it be sustainable, contributing to environmental protection, educating people about environmental, social, and economic causes, raising awareness, among other aspects.

To stand out in the market, it is advisable to have a competitive advantage that remains in the minds of customers in the long term and maintains the survival of companies in the market. Organizations that choose sustainability for this purpose are more likely to achieve significant results, such as improved image, increased profits, attracting more customers, and even a competitive advantage (Bassi et al., 2020).

A sustainable organization that participates in social initiatives stands out from other companies in the market. Nowadays, employees and consumers seek sustainable organizations with which they can feel identified.

Market stability and growth are guaranteed for companies that demonstrate their commitment to sustainability.

2. Methodology

A multiple case study was conducted with the collaboration of 21 companies, in Porto metropolitan area, in the tourism sector recognized digitally for adopting sustainable practices, based on their presence on social media and institutional websites.

2.1 Study Design

This research adopted a qualitative approach, as it was considered the most appropriate for the exploratory nature of the study. Thus, the qualitative research aims to answer the research question "How do digital marketing strategies promote the creation of a sustainable brand image in tourism companies?" A multiple case study was conducted with the collaboration of 21 tourism companies recognized digitally for adopting sustainable practices.

2.2 Instrument

Data collection was conducted through interviews using a semi-structured interview guide, which allowed for an in-depth exploration of the companies' perceptions and sustainable practices. To this end, two guides were developed: one for employees and the other for marketing managers. The guides were developed based on the concepts from the literature review, along with the specific objectives of the study.

The employee guide consists of 20 open-ended questions, organized into two groups: (1) Sociodemographic characteristics (age, gender, marital status, education, role in the company, and length of tenure); and (2) Digital

marketing strategies for promoting a sustainable image internally: this study aimed to understand the internal marketing strategies that companies in the tourism sector use to promote a sustainable image internally.

The marketing managers' script consists of 22 open-ended questions, also organized into two groups: (1) Sociodemographic characteristics; and (2) Digital marketing strategies for promoting a sustainable image to understand the internal marketing strategies that companies in the tourism sector use to promote a sustainable image externally.

2.3 Sample

The interviews were conducted with employees of sixteen companies in the tourism sector, including travel agents, store managers, and tour guides. Subsequently, the second phase of interviews was conducted with marketing managers at seven companies, also including human resources professionals, store managers, and travel agents. All study participants were directly involved in the implementation and reception of digital sustainable communication strategies. In two of the companies, interviews were conducted with two different participants: an employee and a marketing manager.

2.4 Procedure

To obtain the highest possible response rate, initially, email was used to request participation in the study and schedule interviews. The interview was included in the final analysis process. Prior to data collection, an interview guide was presented to all participants, including information regarding the study's objective, an audio recording, and informed consent. All the interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim, and conducted remotely via Google Meets, according to the participants' schedules. To ensure confidentiality, participants were coded as "E1, E2, E3...". The average length of the interviews ranged from 15 to 40 minutes and were conducted between March and May 2025.

3. Results

Regarding employees' perception of the digital marketing strategies that the analysed companies use to promote an image of sustainability internally (n=16), five main themes were identified: Digital Communication, Sustainability, Culture, Digital Marketing and Organizational Climate.

3.1 Digital Communication

The theme "Digital Communication" refers to the digital channels and practices that companies use to communicate with employees about sustainable practices and initiatives. This theme emerged from four codes that demonstrate different realities regarding the promotion of sustainability to employees: Lack of information; Information Sharing; Training and WhatsApp. These codes demonstrate the frequent use of digital platforms, while also pointing to a lack of formal digital communication channels.

Training, in ten interviews, refers to the holding of training sessions for employees for professional development. These actions represent a powerful strategy for encouraging greater employee involvement in the acquisition of sustainable values.

Information Sharing, in seven interviews, describes the sharing of content on digital platforms, from superiors to employees and among them. Some organizations encourage the dissemination of information through digital channels (email, social media, newsletters), demonstrating a clear intention to raise employee awareness and keep them informed: "Because we have these groups and then we all share the information there" (E4).

On the other hand, Lack of information, in seven interviews, characterizes institutional contexts where there is no formalized digital structure for promoting sustainability practices. In some organizations, the absence of a sustainability-focused communication structure is evident, specifically the lack of specific platforms used to disseminate sustainability-related information. This characterizes a significant gap in internal processes: "It's not like that. We have WhatsApp groups and stuff, but beyond that, no" (E10).

Additionally, WhatsApp, identified in five interviews, presents itself as a digital communication channel for sharing information, from superiors to employees and among them. Some consider it an informal communication tool, but it is extremely effective in some organizations, as it enables the exchange of information and more direct interaction with employees.

3.2 Sustainability

The analysis of the interviews enabled the identification of some sustainability practices in companies in the tourism sector. The theme "Sustainability", covers employees' perceptions of sustainable practices in the organizational context, highlighting the different behaviours, actions, and types of organizational involvement: Responsibility; Compliance; Sustainable Practices; and Internal Awareness.

Sustainable practices, in six interviews, encompass a set of actions implemented by organizations, including social, environmental, and economic ones. Practices such as waste separation and Paperless, which reduces the use of paper in internal activities, opting for digital means for communication and documentation, stand out: "For example, with the delivery of documentation, we try to do everything digitally so that there is no need for the client, neither the client nor us, to waste paper" (E3).

Associated with it, Compliance stands out, with five occurrences, referring to adherence to the guidelines established by the organization, especially those of a sustainable nature, and the organization's own commitment to fulfilling its duties. Overall compliance with institutional best practices is notable: "And we are a company committed to sustainability" (E7).

Responsibility, in five interviews, represents the understanding of a personal and/or organizational commitment. This commitment reveals the importance employees place on performing their work properly and acting conscientiously regarding socio-environmental issues. This responsibility appears as a shared organizational value: "Employees try to do their best" (E15).

Internal awareness, with five occurrences, reveals employee awareness of the relevance of sustainability. This awareness aims to change mindsets, behaviours, and habits: "Everyone needs to internalize these needs" (E9).

3.3 Organizational Climate

The "Organizational Climate" resulted from nine codes and demonstrates how employees classify and experience the work environment and team dynamics: Company; Positive Evaluation; Positive Reflection; Suggestion for Improvement; Availability; Active Participation; Sectoral Division; Feedback; Verbal Communication. These codes allow us to understand not only the perceived workplace environment, but also how it affects interest and engagement in sustainable initiatives and internal communication.

Positive Evaluation reflects employee satisfaction with the company's environment and performance. Responses highlight a sense of inclusion and comfort within the organization: "So, in terms of inclusion, spectacular" (E12).

Feedback (in seven interviews) refers to formal and informal feedback provided to employees regarding the company's results and employee performance. Feedback is a constant practice: "They provide weekly, monthly, and annual feedback on the results of both the company as a whole and the team's specific store, and it's always honest, whether things are going well or poorly" (E15).

This environment is also reflected in the Positive Reflection, in seven interviews, which highlights the perception that the organization, through digital media promotion, effectively reflects the sustainable values it promotes. Employees recognize the consistency between the organization's discourse and its practices, as mentioned by one employee: "In terms of training and so on, what I've always noticed is that the company truly demonstrates its commitment to the employee's personal and professional development. It ends up being reflected" (E9).

Despite the positive aspects, Suggestions for Improvement also emerged, with six occurrences, with recommendations and proposals from the organization's employees, such as internal platforms, other types of communication, and increased sharing of sustainable information: "Maybe a different type of communication" (E9).

Availability, in six interviews, refers to employees' willingness to participate in sustainable initiatives. It is noteworthy that such participation often depends on their workload and schedule: "If everything is well-scheduled, then it's easier for us to know which activities we can and cannot attend" (E4).

This factor is related to Active participation, in six interviews, which addresses employee involvement in organizational activities and practices. Employees report direct involvement in company initiatives, as well as suggestions for promoting greater colleague participation in initiatives: "I think it's a bit like what I mentioned earlier, having some activities in person to try to motivate people a bit more" (E6).

Sectoral division, in five interviews, describes the existence of different departments in the organization and the distinct responsibilities of each. This division sometimes limits knowledge, interaction, and communication among employees: "Because those social and economic issues don't really translate here into customer service anymore" (E3).

The term Company, in five interviews, refers to employees' observations about the size of organizations, their differences from others, and some of the organizational challenges they face. It's worth noting that large companies are sometimes more prone to challenges than small companies: "But that doesn't just have to do with sustainability communication; it's a challenge we face due to the multidisciplinary nature of our team" (E16).

Finally, Direct Communication, with five occurrences, highlights the preference for direct oral communication between employees and superiors, rather than formal channels, which is more common in small companies: "That's why, since we're small, we rarely use verbal communication" (E14).

3.4 Digital Marketing

The data highlights the use of varied digital marketing strategies by the organizations analysed. The theme "Digital Marketing" resulted in six codes that reflect different levels of digitalization and the implementation of strategies to promote sustainability: Campaigns, Absence of Limitations, Transparency, Intranet, Email, and Instagram. These codes demonstrate how digital tools are used in internal communication to promote sustainability, highlighting channels, strategies, and employee perceptions.

Email, in twelve interviews, proves to be a digital channel for sharing and promoting content. It stands out as the most used digital communication method to inform employees about specific actions and updates: "And also by email. Email is very important; we always receive daily emails with information and updates" (E15).

Transparency, with nine occurrences, reflects clarity in digital communication regarding the organizations' sustainable values and their applicability. It highlights employee recognition of organizations' effective efforts to convey sustainable values through digital channels: "They're transparent. Whenever we have a goal and then achieve those results, they publicize it" (E5).

In this context, the Lack of limitations, in six interviews, highlights the absence of operational constraints in the digital environment. It's worth noting that digital marketing is a functional resource in some organizations: "I don't think there are any limitations" (E8).

The Intranet, in six interviews, refers to the internal channel for sharing and updating information, as well as company guidelines. In some cases, it is also mentioned as a suggestion for improvement: "We employees have a platform, the Intranet, that publicizes everything related to marketing" (E15).

Regarding digital strategies, Campaigns, in six interviews, refers to the dissemination of initiatives by organizations through digital campaigns. These campaigns target both external and internal audiences: "Fundraising campaigns for some institutions..." (E7).

Finally, Instagram, in five interviews, refers to one of the social networks used by organizations to promote internal sustainability. This platform is characterized as one of the main social networks for internal and external brand and sustainable practices promotion: "And we have a page there, I think the most active one is on Instagram, where we share some environmental activities we do, like races" (E4).

3.5 Culture

The "Culture" theme appears as one of the least developed, resulting from two main codes. It refers to the values, behaviours, and beliefs that influence employees in the workplace: "No Knowledge" and "Individual Relevance." The data reveal an interpretation of the absence of a solid organizational culture focused on sustainability.

No Knowledge, in nine interviews, reveals the lack of knowledge among many employees about the practices, values, strategies, and/or guidelines associated with sustainability in their company. This may indicate a lack of communication or elaborate practices that implement sustainability into organizational strategies: "I don't know to what extent it adds to us or involves us, to be honest" (E1).

Furthermore, Individual Relevance, in five interviews, reveals the perception that the adoption of sustainable practices often results from employee initiatives rather than from a generalized culture fostered by

organizations. This perception highlights that sustainability is understood as a personal choice: "I do my part not because I'm asked, but because it's the right thing to do" (E12).

Regarding marketing managers' perceptions of the digital marketing strategies used by the companies analysed to promote an external image of sustainability (n=7), two main themes were identified: Sustainability and Digital Marketing. This analysis also includes professionals from other fields due to the difficulty in interviewing marketing professionals from all the companies analysed.

4. Discussion

In general, organizations in the tourism sector highlight digital marketing as a crucial ally in driving sustainability. The use of digital tools has proven essential for giving visibility to sustainable initiatives, raising public awareness, and consolidating the brand image. However, not all companies analysed demonstrate a full understanding and widespread implementation of digital strategies. Externally, significant investment is noted in digital strategies with relevant visual and emotional appeal (campaigns, social media, websites). Internally, the implementation of digital strategies is less uniform: even with strategies such as email, training, and internal platforms, many employees report a lack of knowledge or an inability to actively participate in the organization's sustainable initiatives.

The specific objective—to identify the digital marketing strategies that companies in the tourism sector use to promote a sustainable image internally—was achieved with the codes "Email," "WhatsApp," "Training," and, in some cases, platforms such as "Intranet." From the employees' perspective, these strategies helped reinforce the organizations' messages, disseminate "Sustainable Practices," and encourage "Active Participation" in activities. Employees emphasize the importance of direct involvement in company initiatives. However, the frequency and impact of these strategies vary greatly across companies, revealing a lack of consistency. Some companies highlighted the lack of a formalized digital structure to promote sustainable practices and activities, evidenced by the code "Non-existent."

Once again, a lack of internal alignment is noted, which can hinder employee engagement. Clarity in communication and alignment in contributing to feelings of inclusion and commitment to the organization's mission are crucial. Thus, the lack of structure in digital communication in some companies reveals itself as a technical flaw, but also as an opportunity for improvement, highlighted in the "Suggestion for Improvement" code, particularly regarding the consistency of shared information. This idea aligns with Kotler et al. (2019), who demonstrate that internal digital communication is closely linked to employee engagement with the organization's values and the clarity of the information conveyed. This connection is essential to ensuring alignment with sustainability principles. The results also highlight that the adoption of sustainable practices by employees often results from individual initiatives rather than a generalized culture fostered by organizations. This perception, highlighted in the "Individual Relevance" code, demonstrates that sustainability is understood as a personal choice.

Regarding the specific objective—to identify the advantages of digital marketing strategies that tourism companies use to promote an image of sustainability internally, employees recognized that internal digital strategies, when used correctly, encourage "internal awareness," "information sharing," and feelings of inclusion, as revealed in the results. Transparency and consistency of digital content were highlighted as important for understanding the organization's sustainability goals. This view aligns with the ideas of Kotler et al. (2019), who argue that internal digital communication helps with strategic and cultural alignment. This recognition by employees demonstrates a greater understanding of the vital role of digital tools in developing and enhancing the organization's reputation. This view is also in line with the perspective of Cooper (2020) and Chaffey & Chadwick (2019), who highlight the importance and effectiveness of digital marketing in strengthening relationships with the target audience and solidifying a sustainable brand image, in which consistency and coherence are essential to increase credibility and trust.

The "Positive Reflection" code demonstrates the reality of some companies, highlighting the perception that the organization, through digital media promotion, effectively reflects the sustainable values it promotes. Employees recognize the coherence between the organization's discourse and practices. Regarding the specific objective – Identifying the limitations of the digital marketing strategies used by tourism companies to promote an image of sustainability internally – the greatest weaknesses identified were the lack of specific platforms, highlighted in the "Non-existence" code, irregular information sharing, and the concentration of communication in certain departments. These aspects sometimes make employees feel left out of the process or uninformed about the company's actions. This situation reduces the potential of internal digital marketing as a tool for

incentive and engagement. This observation may also indicate that, in certain contexts, the sustainable values promoted by organizations are not fully incorporated.

This perspective echoes the thinking of Neiva (2019), who states that when an internal culture is not consistently considered, it becomes difficult to foster feelings of inclusion and align employees with the organization's objectives. When employees do not recognize or identify with the values promoted by the organization, the impact of sustainable actions tends to be reduced. The author argues that organizational culture should be built based on the practical experience of company values, avoiding the risk of continuing as an organizational discourse disconnected from reality. Organizational culture reflects daily practices, and internal alignment is vital for employee cohesion and engagement with organizational objectives. Lack of awareness or limited employee involvement can mean that sustainability is understood as a responsibility of a specific department, rather than a cross-cutting value across the entire company.

Regarding the challenges of digital marketing strategies that companies in the tourism sector use to promote an image of sustainability internally, this was answered by the codes "Sectoral division" and "Availability." The challenges observed point to the existence of different departments, a lack of availability that hinders employee involvement in company initiatives, and the absence of an organizational culture that truly values sustainability across the board. The situation is exacerbated by the lack of clear and integrated communication, as Neiva (2019) point out. These aspects demonstrate the importance of fostering a collaborative environment and effective communication to ensure employee engagement in company strategies. It is important to highlight the direct influence of the environment on employee behaviour. Furthermore, the existence of multiple stores and different organizational realities impacts how employees experience the organizational environment, internal communication, and sustainability itself. This observation is consistent with the ideas of Chaffey & Chadwick (2019), who emphasize the importance of organizational structure and communication management in internal processes. This variety of reality requires the selection of adapted digital solutions to promote greater uniformity and a sense of inclusion among all members of the organization.

In short, although the tourism sector is increasingly interested in using digital strategies to drive sustainability, challenges remain in communication and structure, particularly in how the company communicates internally and how different departments interact. To effectively build a sustainable image, the coordination of internal and external communication will be crucial to reinforcing the image, both for customers and employees. Coherent action across environmental, social, and business dimensions are essential to ensure that the company is trustworthy, authentic, and legitimate.

5. Conclusions

It was possible to identify a set of digital marketing strategies used to promote a sustainable image among external audiences, including the consistent use of social media, digital campaigns, websites, and multimedia content. These strategies offer clear advantages, including increased credibility within the tourism market, strengthened brand positioning, and closer engagement with the target audience. They are effective in building companies' online reputations and reinforcing their sustainable image among consumers. However, significant limitations were also identified, such as the lack of metrics to evaluate the performance and impact of digital strategies, the lack of a comprehensive strategic vision (in some cases contributing to internal misalignment), and differences in the level of professionalization. Regarding external challenges, these were not mentioned with great emphasis by the interviewees, which may indicate a general perception of digital maturity or a possible lack of critical reflection on the challenges of the digital world. Regarding digital marketing strategies aimed at employees, it was found that these exist in some companies. These strategies include the use of institutional email, online training, and platforms such as intranets and WhatsApp. By applying digital strategies with precision and care, a positive impact was observed, including increased awareness, information sharing, and the strengthening of a more sustainable organizational culture, which encourages greater alignment with the company's principles. However, it was noted that not all organizations use digital tools equally, which may be due to the level of digital development, as well as limitations and difficulties in the transversal dissemination of sustainability practices and internal communication. The lack of clear communication and the impact felt by divisions between departments hinder the recognition of the effective role of digital strategies. The results indicate that, in some companies, sustainable values are not fully communicated among employees, which somewhat hinders the creation of a sustainable organizational culture. This finding becomes more evident in contexts where internal communication fails, leading to a lack of information or knowledge about the organization's goals and practices. It's important to highlight that this study offers important contributions as it provides a practical and in-depth connection between the concepts of digital marketing and

sustainability in the tourism context, considering both external and internal perspectives, and it contributes to the broader debate on sustainability.

The results provide practical suggestions for tourism organizations to reflect on how to improve internal and external digital communication, drive employee engagement in sustainable actions, and develop effective digital strategies. By identifying limitations, the study can help managers making decisions about how to invest in the digital field, aligned with the SGDs. Finally, this study reinforces the role of the tourism sector as a promoter of sustainability. Companies that implement digital strategies focused on sustainability increase their competitiveness and commit to fostering more conscious attitudes among employees, customers, and communities.

However, the study has some limitations that should be highlighted. The sample consisted of operational employees, with only three interviews with marketing directors, which may have limited the depth of the study. Furthermore, some interviews were brief and provided poorly developed answers, which limited the data density. It was also observed that participants attributed greater importance to the environmental dimension of sustainability during the interviews, rather than its combination with the economic and social dimensions, which makes the analysis less comprehensive. Finally, it is worth noting that there are few recent empirical studies that directly link sustainability and digital marketing strategies in tourism, which hindered a more in-depth theoretical discussion. After analysing the results and acknowledging the limitations founded, we recommend that future research explore this topic further, combining qualitative and quantitative analyses to better understand the reality of organizations. We also suggest conducting studies specifically focused on small and medium-sized enterprises to better understand the challenges they face compared to large companies. Furthermore, it is important for future research to delve deeper into the role of influencers in promoting sustainable content on digital platforms to increase knowledge about sustainability marketing.

Acknowledgments

This work is financed by national funds through FCT - Foundation for Science and Technology, IP, under the Project CiTUR UID/04470/2025.

Ethics Declaration

This work didn't require any ethical clearance.

AI Declaration

No AI tool was used to develop this work.

References

- Afren, S. (2024). The role of digital marketing promoting tourism business: A study of the use of the social media in promoting travel. *World Journal of Advanced Research and Reviews*, 21(1), 272-287.
<https://doi.org/10.30574/wjarr.2024.21.1.2668>.
- Bassi, W., Gasparotto, A., & Gonçalves, G. (2020). Sustainable development as a competitive advantage in generating value for business organizations. *Interface Tecnológica Journal*, 17(1), 279-290.
<https://revista.fatectq.edu.br/interfacetecnologica/article/view/705/469>.
- Boni, J., Sobral, E., & Ceconello, M. (2019). Business sustainability: a study in the city of Alta Floresta/MT. *Multidisciplinary Electronic Journal of the Faculty of Alta Floresta*, 8(1), 125-131.
- Brahmana, S. S., & Cristina, V. (2020). Mediating role of organizational commitment on the relationship between internal marketing and marketing performance. *International Journal of Psychosocial Rehabilitation*, 24(2), 3212-3221.
<https://www.psychosocial.com/index.php/ijpr/article/view/2015>.
- Burgos, A., & Mertens, F. (2015). The challenges of tourism in the context of sustainability: the contributions of community-based tourism. *PASOS Journal of Tourism and Cultural Heritage*, 13(1), 57-71.
<https://www.pasosonline.org/es/component/sobipro/749-?Itemid=0>.
- Chaffey, D., & Chadwick, F. E. (2019). *Digital marketing* (7th ed.). Pearson Education Limited.
- Chipuca, L. (2020). Analysis of motivation as a catalyst for satisfaction and professional performance of teachers in Benguela, Angola. *Management and Development*, 28, 229-272.
<https://doi.org/10.34632/gestaoedesenvolvimento.2020.9472>.
- Cooper, S. (2020). *Social media marketing 2020: How to use Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, and more to grow your business*. Charlie Creative Lab.

- Gonçalves, P., Costa, A., Gomes, A., Carvalho, S. & Pereira, V. (2022). Green marketing as an instrument of environmental sustainability - The campaign "The future of the planet is not recyclable" by the Portuguese company EGF. Public and non-profit marketing cases, 9, 79-85. <https://casos-aimpn.org/index.php/casos/article/view/119/125>.
- Jati-Morales, L., Salazar-Freire, J., & Ballesteros-López, L. (2022). Digital marketing for tourism businesses and ventures in Ecuador: a state-of-the-art review. 593 Digital Publisher CEIT, 7(4-1), 596–605. <https://doi.org/10.33386/593dp.2022.4-1.1205>.
- Kotler, P., Keller, K. L., & Chernev, A. (2019). *Marketing Management* (4th ed). Pearson Education Limited.
- Liu, Y. (2024). Social media tourism marketing optimization: Improving promotion effectiveness and broadening the consumer base. *Advances in Economics, Management and Political Science*, 80(1), 345-354. <https://doi.org/10.54254/2754-1169/80/20241906>.
- Maia, G. (2022). Digital marketing and social media: The importance for companies during the pandemic. *Ibero-American Journal of Humanities, Sciences and Education*, 8 (2), 929-950. <https://doi.org/10.51891/rease.v8i2.4249>.
- McGruer, D. (2020). *Dynamic digital marketing: Master the world of online and social media marketing to grow your business*. John Wiley & Sons Inc.
- Moreira, R., & Laraich, O. (2021). Digital marketing in small businesses. PUC Goiás Repository. <https://repositorio.pucgoias.edu.br/jspui/handle/123456789/2930>.
- Neiva, F. (2018). Organizational communication: A look at the importance of internal communication. *Media & Journalism*, 18(33), 61-73. http://scielo.pt/scielo.php?script=sci_arttext&pid=S2183-54622018000200005&Ing=pt&tIng=pt.
- Paiva, E., Barreto, M., Barbosa, L., Pereira, T., Silva, A., & Silva, F. (2023). Ethics and sustainability from an entrepreneurial perspective. *Journal of Contributions to Social Sciences*, 16(9), 16591-16607. <https://doi.org/10.55905/revconv.16n.9-167>.
- Paskova, M., & Zelenka, J. (2019). How crucial is the social responsibility for tourism sustainability?. *Social Responsibility Journal*, 15 (4), 534-552. <https://doi.org/10.1108/SRJ-03-2018-0057>.