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## The role of functional associations in building destination brand personality: When official websites do the talking.

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### ABSTRACT

Destinations ‘talk’ about themselves via online media to build strong brand personalities. However, previous research points to the influence of other associations linked to the destination in determining the credibility of the aforementioned personality. This research aims to identify the potential of certain types of functional associations —attractions— in strengthening projected personality through discourse. With this aim in mind, we analyze the content of twelve official European urban destination websites. The results expand on previous research by identifying how different aspects of what a destination has to offer help portray personality traits. There is huge potential to use attractions to better project desired personality traits, which leads to a better fit between the personality and the overall projected image. The findings have significant implications both for brand managers to enable them to optimize their communication, and for future research. The projected personality of destinations should not be studied independently from the functional dimension of brand image.

**Keywords:** official websites; projected brand personality; destination branding; destination image; destination brand personality; destination marketing; online communication

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## 1. Introduction

It has long been acknowledged that online communication has a far-reaching impact on destination branding and, in particular, on destination image construction (Standing, Tang-Taye, & Boyer, 2014). In the era of the information society, international communication channels are much more accessible to all kinds of destinations, and also far more important (Xiang, Wang, O’Rielly, & Fesenmaier, 2014). During pre-visit planning, potential tourists perceive the information disseminated via the media as the “reality” of the place (Avraham & Ketter, 2008). In this context, destinations use online media to ‘talk’ about themselves in order to forge a strong, positive brand image which is a key influencer in the behavior of travelers (Qu, Kim, & Im, 2011). Now more than ever, destinations need to be sure about what they say.

The attractiveness of destinations depends on the range of available attractions and is also linked to an aesthetic value with many associated symbolisms (de San Eugenio Vela, 2011). Destinations need to communicate their meanings beyond functional benefits (Kim & Lehto, 2013). In this process, the concept of brand personality has garnered great attention in recent research due to its influence on the decision-making process of tourists (Kressmann et al., 2006; Stokburger-Sauer, 2011). However, brand personality is not an isolated variable and its credibility also depends on the consumer’s perception of other functional associations related to the product characteristics (Ang & Lim, 2006; Kum, Bergkvist, Lee, & Leong, 2012). In other words, it is the sum of functional and symbolic associations with the destination name that comprises the overall destination image (Daye, 2010; Qu et al., 2011). Therefore, Destination Marketing Organizations [DMOs] need to highlight their unique symbolic and functional traits by communicating them (Beerli & Martín, 2004; Foroudi, Gupta, Kitchen, Foroudi, & Nguyen, 2016). They need to create tailored messages to project a robust destination image that may have an actual effect on consumers’ perceptions (Torkington, 2012).

This research aims to contribute to an understanding of projected image and brand personality inference by analyzing the official websites of the twelve most popular European urban destinations. The study explores how information about the attractions of a destination and about the destination brand itself help to convey personality traits via website content. We establish a link between two major destination marketing constructs: brand image and personality. Accordingly, this study contributes to theoretical advancement while also helping destination managers to optimize their communication practices.

## 2. Destination image and personality through discourse

Destination image is a key construct in enhancing the competitiveness of destinations: it plays a significant role in destination choice (Heitmann, 2011; Um & Crompton, 1990), it has a positive effect on tourist loyalty (Zhang, Fu, Cai, & Lu, 2014), and it affects the intention to recommend a particular destination (Bigné, Sánchez, & Sánchez, 2001). It is the mediating construct between the brand and consumer behavior (Qu et al., 2011); an associative network comprising nodes of information linked to the core brand name (John, Loken, Kim, & Monga, 2006; Zenker, 2014). Of these, brand personality arises as a key symbolic association that interacts with the self-concept of consumers and influences their decisions (Hosany, Ekinci, & Uysal, 2006; Keller, 2008). It is broadly understood as “the set of human characteristics associated with a brand” (Aaker, 1997, p.347) and

has been shown to have an effect on brand loyalty, brand relations, purchase intention and other consumer behavior (Kressmann et al., 2006; Tuškej, Golob, & Podnar, 2013). Nonetheless, less is known about how communication practices can influence these associations and, in particular, what personality may be inferred from the communication messages.

## 2.1. Functional and symbolic associations of destinations

While brand associations comprise any node of information linked to the brand in the consumer's mind (Kapferer, 2012), there is broad acceptance of the dual nature of these associations: functional vs. symbolic (Daye, 2010), utilitarian vs. representational (de Chernatony & McWilliam, 1989), or perceptual vs. affective (Baloglu & McCleary, 1999).

On the one hand, the functional dimension encompasses all the attributes, which are perceived to be utilitarian, rational, tangible or physical characteristics related to the product (Souiden, Ladhari, & Chiadmi, 2017). According to Enright and Newton (2005), the attractions of a destination constitute the primary elements of its appeal, and include physiography, culture and history, activities, events, etc. Considering the complexity of the tourism offer, building a functional destination image that covers the wide range of attractions is a great challenge (Pike, 2005). As a result, destination brands must be sufficiently unique to distinguish themselves from competitors, but also broad enough to encompass all the elements of a destination's appeal. On the other hand, the symbolic dimension is the set of characteristics that go unnoticed in a consumer's cursory reading: intangible, abstract, and emotional components that are intrinsic to any brand. As Kim and Lehto (2013) indicate, brand significance transcends the functional benefit. The symbolic dimension of destination brands allows tourists to use these brands to express something about themselves, raising self-esteem and social approval (Hankinson, 2005).

In the network of interlinked associations, every node of information, both functional and symbolic, is important and plays a different role in forging the overall destination image (Beerli & Martín, 2004; Qu et al., 2011). Accordingly, the relationship between these associations is also important. Early on, Russel and Pratt (1980) noted the need to explore the relationship between certain attributes of the offer and other symbolic associations. However, only recently have empirical studies supported this relationship. For instance, Souiden et al. (2017) proved how functional components of the brand image act as an antecedent of the psychological formation of a brand's personality. This has remarkable implications for practitioners, helping them understand how their consumers perceive the brand and how they infer brand personality from the messages communicated.

## 2.2. Gauging the personality of a destination brand

Brand personality theory is still developing in several respects (Puzakova, Kwak, & Taylor, 2013). In particular, this research contributes to the understanding of how to promote personality associations by combining dimensions of brand personality with other functional associations. However, one of the major areas of discussion and disagreement has been the use of different scales to gauge this personality.

The original Brand Personality Scale [BPS] (Aaker, 1997) distinguishes five dimensions of brand personality: competence, excitement, sincerity, ruggedness, and sophistication. However, although it is the most commonly used scale, it has been criticized on multiple levels. For instance, its lack of cross-cultural validity (Ekinci & Hosany, 2006), its inclusion of traits that go beyond strictly human personality traits, such as social class or gender (Azoulay & Kapferer, 2003), the potential for generalization of the model on an individual brand level, and lack of within-brand variance have been matters of discussion (Austin, Siguaw, & Mattila, 2003).

Nevertheless, Eisend and Stokburger-Sauer's (2013) meta-analysis of 74 empirical studies using the BPS yields interesting results that support the transferability of the five-factor personality model to brands. Their research suggests that differences in the methodological approach could explain the variations observed in the results of various research projects, which is the actual source of some of the problems attributed to the BPS. In particular, their research highlights only slight variation across cultures and proves the non-dependency of the scale on data aggregation across brands. They state that "the BP scale does not vary due to data aggregation across brands or respondents" (Eisend & Stokburger-Sauer, 2013, p.957).

Similarly, the appropriateness of including traits beyond those strictly accepted in human personality can be debated. As Avis et al. (2012) point out, there are three foundations to understanding brand personality: humanlike, researcher metaphor, and consumer metaphor. The first explains brand personality as consumers literally perceiving brands as human-like entities (Avis et al., 2012). Consequently, the need for a strict personality scale in accordance with the psychological basis is justified. However, the authors point to a lack of academic evidence surrounding this phenomenon. Instead, our research is rooted in the researcher metaphor foundation, a more flexible definition of brand personality. According to Avis et al. (2012, p.315) "theorists are using metaphors of personalities and relationships to help them understand the way that consumers perceive the world".

Furthermore, many researchers have developed ad-hoc scales for specific types of brands, such as the city brand personality scale developed by Kaplan, Yurt, Guneri, & Kurtulus (2010), based on the data compiled on three Turkish cities. However, both the variance in the methodology and the lack of scope for generalization show that more needs to be done to develop a globally accepted and generalizable brand personality scale. In this context, the BPS is still a suitable scale for a comparative brand personality study (Eisend & Stokburger-Sauer, 2013; Ekinci & Hosany, 2006; Kim & Lehto, 2013). Therefore, this study uses the BPS as the framework to analyze destination personality, while remaining aware of the scale's limitations.

### 2.3. Projected image and inferred personality

The concept of projected image is used to describe the contribution of DMOs in promoting brand associations and instilling them in consumers' minds through communication (Daye, 2010; Keller, 2008). It is through the discourse they produce, understood as the language in use (Torkington, 2012), that destination managers seek to influence the cognitive process of tourists, i.e., their perception of the brand (Schmitt, 2012). Potential tourists tend to rely on communication practices, such as a website's discourse, when inferring the brand's attributes. This has a direct effect on the perceived value of the brand (Jiang, Luk, & Cardinali, 2018), meaning that how a destination image is

formed can be considered a consequence of the way tourists process this discourse (Wang, Chan, & Pan, 2015).

However, official messages exert their influence in a complicated environment where a variety of messages are offered to potential visitors through a range of available communication channels (Kislali, Kavaratzis, & Saren, 2016). The official communication is not the only element: personal observation, word of mouth, the media, etc., are other points of contact with the brand (Avraham & Ketter, 2008). Consequently, there is often a mismatch between desired and perceived images (Kim & Lehto, 2013; Költringer & Dickinger, 2015). The challenge of the official communication is to reflect the variety of attributes and the symbolism as a consistent network of information (Cai, 2002). Even though this complexity makes it more difficult to construct a stable image, destinations need to be consistent and recognizable through different messages (Qu et al., 2011; Vinyals-Mirabent & Mohammadi, 2018).

In this context, online communications became the key channel for tourism information consumption (Buhalis & Law, 2008; Law, Qi, & Buhalis, 2010; Standing et al., 2014). In particular, official destination websites become the destination's representative on the Internet, a reflection of everything that the destination has to offer (Luna-Nevarez & Hyman, 2012). For this reason, the quality of website discourse is important (Fernández-Cavia & Castro, 2015; Fernández-Cavia, Vinyals-Mirabent, & López, 2013). The quality and persuasiveness of content are critical variables to the success of destination websites (Fernández-Cavia, Rovira, Díaz-Luque, & Cavaller, 2014; Li & Wang, 2010; Park & Gretzel, 2007) and need to be strategically designed (Fernández-Cavia, Marchiori, Haven-Tang, & Cantoni, 2017).

Since consumers infer image associations from the discourse (Gardial, 1993 in Puzakova et al., 2013), communicating consistent and appealing tailored messages is critical to achieve the desired image (Govers, 2015; Pike & Page, 2014; Torkington, 2012). However, while functional elements are easier to identify in the discourse (i.e., information about different attractions), managing personality in communication is a bigger challenge, partly because it is related to the notion of identity. Any discourse that aims to transmit identity traits appealing to the consumer (such as, personality) attempts to create worlds of meaning where identities interact with specific experiences (de Fina, 2006). The type of content provided is significant, as is the way it is expressed.

It has been proven that the language used in the discourse contributes significantly to enhance the inference of personality (Ang & Lim, 2006). Tone, vocabulary, phrasing or other discourse characteristics can trigger the inference of personality traits (Aaker, Fournier, & Brasel, 2004). Conversely, disparate information about the destination makes the brand more ambiguous (Opoku, 2009) and leads to scarce personality inference (Johar, Sengupta, & Aaker, 2005). Furthermore, not all brands are at liberty to project diverse personalities. Brands representing more functional products are limited by expectations linked to the product type. According to Ang and Lim (2006), brands behind utilitarian products, such as toothpaste, are perceived as more sincere and competent than symbolic products, such as perfumes. As Kum et al. (2012) point out, marketers should be aware that the characteristics of the product may affect the credibility of a specific proposed personality. In other words, destinations need to 'talk' about a wide variety of attractions which will presumably influence the inference of brand personality in different ways.

Projecting personality traits therefore centers predominantly on the way destinations talk about their functional associations. For instance, in attempting to create balanced messages, the official websites combine content dedicated to their main attractions with content directly addressing aspects of the destination brand, such as the mission, values, commitments, etc. (Campbell, Papania, Parent, & Cyr, 2010; Opoku, Abratt, & Pitt, 2006). Moreover, while information about the product tends to be evaluated in terms of functionality, content referring directly to the brand is evaluated based on its symbolic value and is more closely associated with personality inference (Daye, 2010).

To conclude, it is crucial for the discourse of the official website to project a consistent personality through 'the way it talks', which is the center of our research. Coherent messages promoting a clear brand image would lead to better inference of the desired personality (Prayag, 2007). This would have a significant effect on tourist behavior (Stokburger-Sauer, 2011) and, ultimately, would make consumers less receptive to information inconsistent with it (Keller, 2008). This research explores the characteristics of website content by analyzing both content related to the attractions of the destination and content directly describing the destination brand. In particular, we aim to identify the potential of certain types of content, such as information on attractions, and the contribution these make to strengthening the inference of specific destination personality traits.

### 3. Research design, sample and analysis

This study uses a quantitative content analysis to transform qualitative information, such as website discourse (in this case text), into numeric variables and items (Halliburton & Ziegfeld, 2009). This quantitative approach enables comparative studies to be conducted and has been proven reliable for the study of websites from a branding perspective (Choi, Lehto, & O'Leary, Joseph, 2007; Collis & Hussey, 2009; Halliburton & Ziegfeld, 2009; Kim & Lehto, 2013). This makes it possible to quantify content dedicated to the different attractions in the destinations and, subsequently, to analyze the vocabulary used in the content and its relationship with brand personality traits.

The research consists of three phases: [1] identifying each content unit and linking it to a category related to the attractions; [2] searching for terms related to personality traits within the content dedicated to the various attractions; and [3] weighting individual data and analyzing the average results. Version 10 of the Nvivo software was used to perform the analysis.

#### 3.1. Sample selection

The Mastercard Global Destination Cities index was used to identify the most popular European destinations using a macroeconomic indicator. It estimates the total number of international visitors and their spending in each destination city (Hedrick-Wong & Choong, 2016). The official websites of the 12 most popular cities in Europe from 2011 to 2016 were included (see Table 1). The home page plus all the sub-pages in the first two levels of the hierarchy were downloaded in PDF format. Previous work had proved the validity of the two first levels in gathering significant data on brand image (Kim & Lehto, 2013). The samples were collected during the peak tourism season between July 15 and August 15, 2016. Altogether, a total of 779 pages were downloaded.

### 3.2. Codification of the content units

In the first phase, two coders were trained to identify and code the different content units of the pages. Content units are considered to be independent proposals representing a single idea or topic (Neuendorf, 2017; Strijbos, Martens, Prins, & Jochems, 2006). In other words, we considered the information contained in separate visual blocks of content to constitute different content units (i.e., different <div> forming the page). Only manifest textual content was analyzed.

Coders classified these content units into broad categories related to the attractions of the destination. Several studies were explored in order to define a final list of 19 attractions commonly offered in urban destinations (Beerli & Martín, 2004; Choi, Lehto, & Morrison, 2007; Enright & Newton, 2005; Prayag, 2007; Tang, Choi, Morrison, & Lehto, 2009; Vinyals-Mirabent, 2018, 2019; Wong & Teoh, 2015): landscape and natural resources; cultural attractions and activities; leisure attractions and activities; architecture and heritage; local culture and history; events, fairs, and festivals; food and drink; shopping; nightlife; sports; social life and locals; infrastructure and transportation; accommodation; tourism products and packages; weather; service; political and economic factors; safety; and wellness. Holistic content units directly related to the brand (Echtner & Ritchie, 2003), such as mottos, slogans, and content describing the brand in general, were coded separately (e.g., discover romantic Paris). There was high level of agreement between coders (an average Kappa coefficient of 0.93 agreement).

### 3.3. Personality thesaurus

In the second phase, the content was examined to identify words related to personality traits. Along the lines of previous research on destination personality assessment, the analysis consisted of identifying synonyms for personality traits within the content (De Moya & Jain, 2013; Kim & Lehto, 2013; Pitt, Opoku, Hultman, Abratt, & Spyropoulou, 2007). Therefore, the authors compiled a thesaurus of brand personality synonyms (Pitt et al., 2007). Unlike previous research, the researchers used the database WordNet 3.1 to build the thesaurus, which incorporates a large English lexical database developed by Princeton University. While it resembles a thesaurus, by grouping nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs based on their meanings, it also takes into account the conceptual-semantic relations between words ([www.wordnet.princeton.edu](http://www.wordnet.princeton.edu)).

The process of creating the thesaurus consisted of 4 different stages. Firstly, two different researchers familiar with the topic of brand personality selected the most suitable synonyms for personality traits. Secondly, both lists were compared and merged into a single list. The coders agreed on 94.38% of words. Thirdly, the list was then reduced by eliminating words identified in the same stemming group. Lastly, the polysemy of certain words was disambiguated using the word embedding technique (a technique of distributional semantics that uses vector representation to map words in space) (Mikolov, Chen, Corrado, & Dean, 2013). This process identified 928 suitable synonyms that were included in the thesaurus and distributed among the five dimensions: sincerity, excitement, and competence are each linked to 21% of the synonyms, and sophistication and ruggedness to 18%.

## 4. Findings

### 4.1. Codification and descriptive results

During the first stage of our research, the 779 pages from the 12 websites were separately coded assigning each content unit to a category as shown in Table 1. A total of 9,592 content units were found to be linked to the various attraction categories while 580 focused on brand information. To proceed with the analysis, all the content units were weighted considering the characteristics of each website. Since a direct comparison of the total content units would skew the results, the following phases in the research used the percentage of content units rather than absolute numbers. To ensure there would be a sufficient number of observations (content units) to infer consequences in the theory (King, Keohane, & Verba, 1994) and ensure representativeness of the data to explain the characteristics of the category (Ritchey, 2008), only the most prevalent categories were further analyzed. The coding process identified eight categories representing more than 5% of the total content: tourism products and packages; cultural attractions and activities; food and drink; infrastructure and transportation; architecture and heritage; landscape and natural resources; accommodation; and shopping.

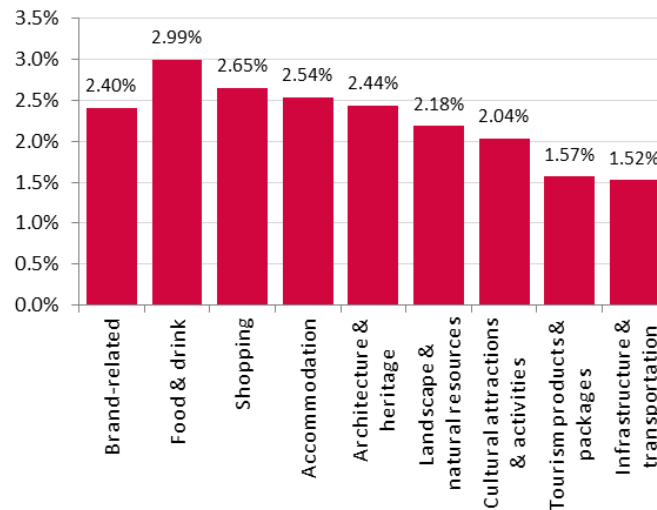
Table 1. Number of coded content units and personality synonyms identified

	N. of Pages	Content units		Total words on the website	Vocabulary related to personality	
		Attractions	Brand		N. of synonyms	%
Amsterdam	76	608	30	35,909	882	2.5%
Barcelona	31	313	13	9,700	226	2.3%
Frankfurt	32	245	7	4,857	99	2.0%
Istanbul	64	527	10	24,644	438	1.8%
London	92	1,671	180	41,690	825	2.0%
Madrid	33	432	28	9,734	167	1.7%
Milan	52	402	28	6,833	147	2.2%
Munich	100	812	10	25,423	724	2.8%
Paris	124	1,374	180	47,913	964	2.0%
Prague	74	1,429	23	33,321	807	2.4%
Rome	46	513	24	21,255	232	1.1%
Vienna	55	1,266	47	32,630	858	2.6%
Total:	779	9,592	580	293,909	6,369	2.1%

Furthermore, of the total of 293,909 words contained in the coded content, 6,369 terms matched personality synonyms in the thesaurus. On average, personality synonyms represent 2.1% of the total vocabulary of the websites. However, when assessing the correlation between these terms and the type of content offered —brands or attractions— the results indicate a different proportion of personality synonyms depending on the content type. As seen in Figure 1, the projected personality synonyms are not spread evenly among the categories.



Figure 1. **Volume of personality traits projected by different content types**



At one end, food & drink, shopping, accommodation, and architecture & heritage content appear to be significantly richer in personality-related vocabulary. With slightly lower figures, landscape & natural resources, and cultural attractions are closer to the average of 2.1%. At the other end, tourism products & packages, and infrastructure & transportation information show a significantly low percentage of vocabulary projecting personality traits. Accordingly, certain attractions' content has a higher capacity to project personality traits than others. Indeed, the percentage of personality-related vocabulary projected by food and drink content is almost twice that projected by infrastructure and transportation content.

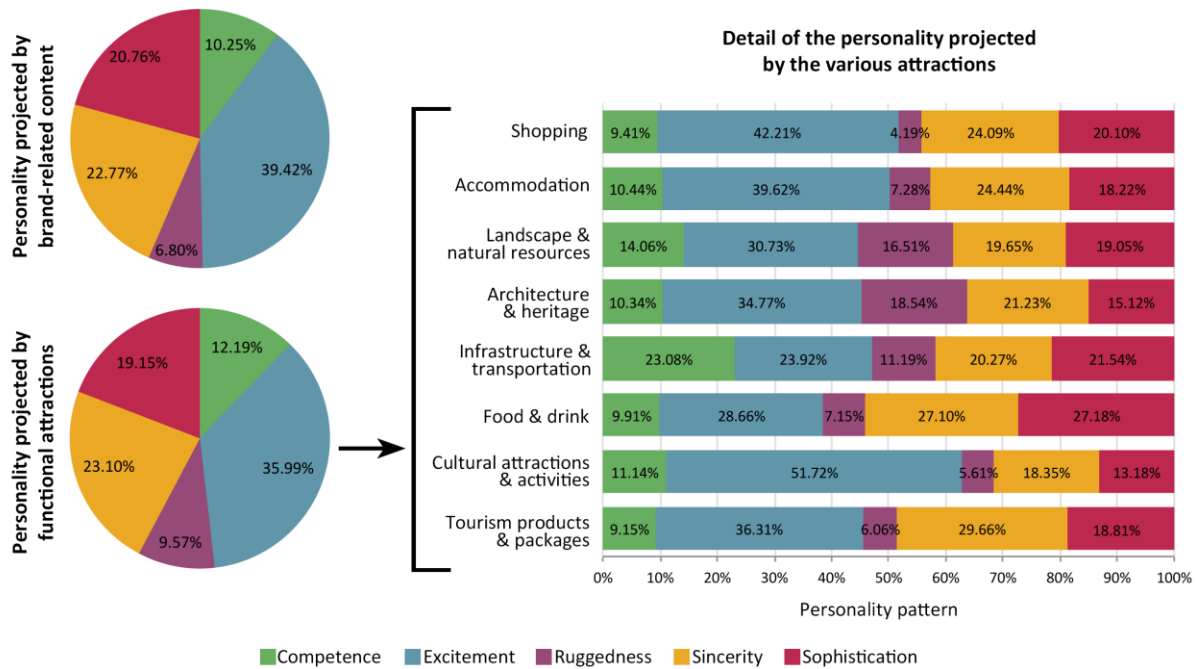
Our findings also revealed that content directly related to the brand appears to make moderate use of this type of vocabulary; only 2.4% of the content is related to personality traits (Figure 1). Unlike previous studies (Campbell et al., 2010; Daye, 2010), brand content appears to project personality to a lesser extent than certain information about attractions. As a result, the potential to infer personality traits is greater in content on gastronomy, shopping, accommodation, and architecture than in content referring directly to the destination brand.

#### 4.2. Personality coherence among content types

The final stage of the analysis identified the relationship between personality synonyms and different dimensions of brand personality. To ensure a sufficient amount of observations in each category and personality dimension, only those cases projecting a higher amount of personality synonyms were used to conduct the analysis. Based on the standard deviations, all average scores appear to effectively represent the summarized data.

The data illustrates the coherence between overall content related to the different attractions and content directly related to the destination brand (Figure 2). The data shows a consistent trend between the personalities projected by these two types of content. Broadly speaking, European urban destinations project personalities with strong traits in terms of excitement, followed by traits of sincerity and sophistication, and less characterized by competence and ruggedness. There are only minor variations indicating that functional information contributes more to the dimensions of sincerity, competence, and ruggedness of a destination's personality compared to brand content that projects a more exciting and sophisticated personality.

Figure 2. **Personality patterns projected through different content types**



Upon closer inspection, we identified variations between the different attraction-related content in more detail. Although the overall personality projected by the sum of attractions-related content matches the trend set by content related to the brand, it shows significant variations between content relating to various attractions. As seen in Figure 2, the attractions of the destination contribute differently to the various dimensions of personality. Consequently, the personality projected by the functional content varies depending on the specific attraction the content is referring to.

Firstly, the excitement dimension of the destinations' personality is strongly reinforced by content related to cultural attractions and activities. 51.72% of the personality synonyms displayed in this type of content are related to excitement traits; more than 10 points more than in the second most exciting category and much higher than that projected by brand-related content (39.42%). Similarly, content related to shopping also contributes to projecting a personality with higher levels of excitement. Instead, the remaining attraction categories project personalities significantly lower in excitement than those projected by brand-related content. Secondly, the infrastructure and transportation category contributes to projecting a personality richer in competence. With 23.08% of the personality vocabulary linked to competence, it is almost 10 points higher than the second most competent category. The tendency of this category to use vocabulary related to competent personalities appears to be to the detriment of the projection of the excitement dimension, which scores significantly lower than average. Thirdly, ruggedness —the least-projected personality dimension in brand-related content (6.8%) — appears to be strengthened by two particular attractions: landscape & natural resources, and architecture & heritage. Both project a high percentage of vocabulary related to rugged personalities: 16.51% and 18.54%, respectively. Lastly, sophistication and sincerity present the lowest variance between the content about different attractions. Nevertheless, sophisticated personality is clearly better projected through content

related to the gastronomy of the destination (27.1%). Food & drink projects a considerably more sophisticated personality than that projected at brand level (20.76%). Also, sincerity —the most stable personality dimension among the functional categories— appears to be better projected through content relating to tourism products & packages: 29.66%.

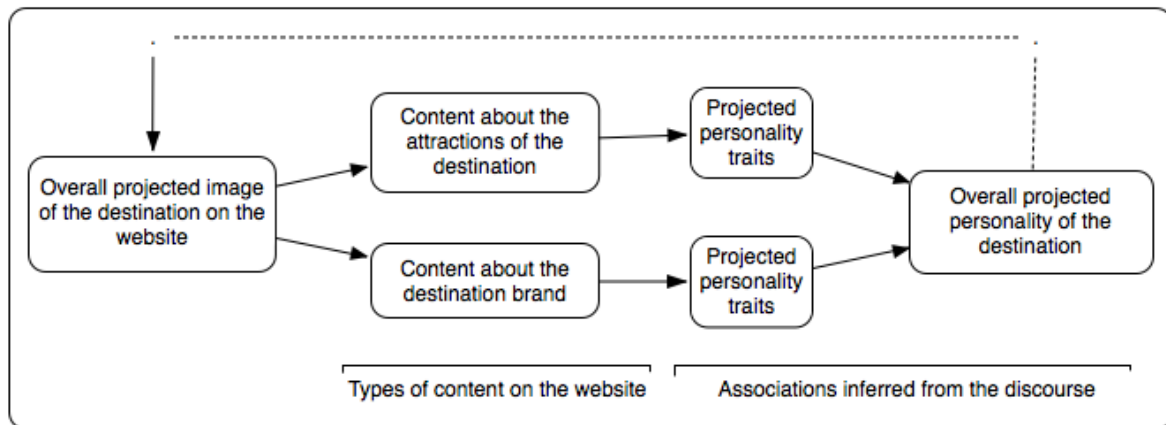
This data confirms the fact that product type has an influence on the characteristics of the personality projected. The overall personality pattern is influenced by the content related to functional categories which are naturally biased towards specific personality dimensions. However, balancing the presence of the information about several attractors shapes the overall personality projected by the functional associations to match that projected by brand-related content. In other words, managers can manipulate the personality projected by balancing website content not only through the vocabulary chosen but also through an emphasis on specific categories of attractions. For instance, the tendency of the overall functional content to project less exciting and sophisticated personalities is balanced by greater emphasis on content related to cultural attractions and food and drink which strengthens these dimensions. Manipulating this emphasis creates more coherence between the personality projected by attraction-related content and brand-related content.

## 5. Discussion and conclusions

This study contributes to an understanding of the projected personality of destination brands leading to useful conclusions about how the vocabulary used on the website influence certain attributes. It is consistent with previous research concerning the impact of product type on brand personality inference (e.g., Kum et al., 2012). Unlike most other studies, instead of analyzing how consumers infer these personality traits, this research investigates how marketers promote personality in their official website discourse. The results expand on previous research by identifying different elements of the destinations' offer and how they contribute to projecting different personality traits (e.g., information about infrastructure strengthens personality in terms of competence). The findings have significant implications both for further theoretical development and for destination brand management from a practitioner's perspective.

Previous research on projected personality has analyzed this construct as a general result of the information source overall, i.e., a unique personality profile based on all information available on the websites (Kim & Lehto, 2013; Pitt et al., 2007; Rojas-Méndez & Hine, 2017). Although this research conveyed useful implications, it overlooked relevant information by isolating brand personality from other variables, such as its attractions, influencing destination image overall. In other words, the projected personality of destinations should not be studied independently from the functional dimension of the brand image. On the contrary, there is significant potential for using the functional attributes of the destination to project desired personality traits, by strategically employing selected vocabulary, something that leads to a better fit between the brand personality and the projected destination image. Figure 3 shows how different types of content contribute to the formation of the overall destination personality. It describes the reciprocal relationship between projected image and brand personality through the projected personality traits of functional and brand-related content.

Figure 3. Framework of projected image and personality



Various elements of a destination's offering promote different personality characteristics. This makes it difficult to communicate coherent messages that project a robust and stable destination brand personality, particularly compared to commercial brands. It is important to consider that an unbalanced volume of information about specific products affects the overall projected personality. These findings are especially relevant for research analyzing sources of information about specific elements of the offer, such as TripAdvisor. For instance, as our study shows, a destination's gastronomy will be associated with a more sophisticated personality. Similarly, information about infrastructure/transportation will skew the projected personality towards a more competent personality. Indeed, these results would only represent a partial reflection of the overall personality. This variability of the projected personality among the information about the different attractors is significant when studying the strength of communication messages and their potential to project a strong and coherent brand image. Striking a balance between the content related to the various attractions would lead to greater stability of the projected personality and, thus, better inference of the desired personality (see Johar et al., 2005).

Furthermore, the results have interesting implications to enable marketers to optimize their communication practices. The use of certain vocabulary contributes to the accessibility of personality traits by potential tourists (de Fina, 2006; Johar et al., 2005). Marketers should strategically plan the desired personality in order to emphasize it in the discourse and use the vocabulary carefully. In this regard, the results show that there is still room for improving the persuasive effect of content directly related to the brand by strengthening personality-related vocabulary in the discourse. Moreover, brand managers need to pay attention to the consistency of this projected personality within the information provided on the various attractions a destination has to offer. It is essential for marketers to be aware that a higher presence of specific topics in their discourse will skew the projected personality (e.g., the prevalence of content related to cultural attractions will sharpen an exciting personality).

## 6. Limitations and further research

Not free of limitations, this study has three weaknesses that future research could address. Firstly, even though this research compares twelve cases, these are representative only of the urban

destinations' market. Future research could broaden the study sample to encompass different types of destinations (e.g., coastal locations). Similarly, as Avraham and Ketter (2008) point out, different media sources contribute in varying ways to the perception of a destination's image. As a result, analyzing the characteristics of the attractions and the personality projected through other types of discourse, aside from official websites, would also contribute to an understanding of this relationship. Lastly, a different methodological approach, such as experimental research, may also make it possible to assess how this relationship functions in audiovisual content.

Furthermore, additional research could attempt to refine the framework suggested here and clarify the relationships involved. For instance, it would be interesting to assess how using vocabulary that is not naturally associated with the type of attraction would have an impact on tourist perception. This would make it possible to see whether creating a discourse that contradicts tourists' preconceptions about the attraction would lead to a more coherent destination brand personality or diminish its credibility.

## 7. Acknowledgments

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