Research Article

Communicating national identity markers in official tourism commercials: The challenge of overrepresentation

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
	This study investigates the representation of national identity markers (NIMs) in national tourism commercials of six countries from the Balkan Region and aims at identifying which NIMs are most prevalent. Based on mixed-methods, the study applies four main research tools: content analysis, cross-case analysis, a star rating approach, and visualization techniques. The analysis shows that the most frequently offered NIMs are the natural landscape, national symbols, cultural heritage, and national cuisine due to their significant association with national identity. However, the frequent recurrence of these markers results in a high degree of similarity in the tourism campaigns of geographically and culturally proximate countries and finally reduces the distinctiveness of national branding efforts. **Keywords:** official national commercials, national identity markers, overrepresentation, intangible cultural heritage, national tourism branding

INTRODUCTION

National identity represents a country's history, culture, and values. In tourism, it acts as a strong vehicle that influences perception, facilitates cultural exchange, and attracts visitors. Tourism commercials articulate national identity by using particular landscapes, cultural symbols, and historical discourses as modes of creating convincing and elaborate promotional campaigns. According to Park (2010), national identity markers (NIMs) in tourism can transform a travel into "an emotional journey into nationhood", thus strengthening national pride among domestic audiences. Additionally, national identity can have an influence on attraction loyalty formation, as suggested by Suhartanto et al. (2018). For example, Spain's flamenco can be seen as a deeply rooted construct in national narratives, and its symbolic status can be accepted as a tool for establishing cultural identity. Examining official tourism websites, Houliston et al. (2020) particularly explored the role of national biases in national online advertising, demonstrating how national identity and a sense of nationalism are employed in countries with shared geographical ties. With national identity elements utilized in promotional strategies, countries can differentiate themselves within the international tourism market (Adie, 2019; Białk-Wolf, 2025; Montenegro et al. 2014) and attract visitors (Johannes, 2018) while supporting local economies by showcasing national cuisine (Kim & Eves, 2012) or festivals as a means of emotional solidarity (Yozukmaz et al, 2020). Such strategies contribute to the overall attractiveness of the destination, a vast competitive advantage in tourism, and the development of international relationships through cultural proximity (Bertacchini et al., 2019; Jeuring & Diaz-Soria, 2018). Similar tourism endowments usually breed competition for overlapping tourist segments, so their tourism development strategies focus on similar cultural and historical ties. While the relationship between national identity and tourism has been widely explored–drawing on key theories such as Urry's "tourist gaze" (1990), MacCannell's "staged authenticity" (1976), and Butler's "heritage tourism and collective identity" (2014)–less attention has been given to the specific ways in which NIMs are represented in tourism commercials. Some of these markers encompass historical heritage, national symbols, folk traditions, cuisines, natural landscapes, and intangible heritage. The

strategic application of these markers in tourism campaigns builds cultural identity, helps create international perceptions, and fuels tourist decision-making. However, some markers are overrepresented while others are underrepresented, accounting for selective national branding choices.

This study explores how NIMs are specifically represented in national tourism commercials in the Balkan Region, Romania, and Türkiye, while also identifying patterns of potential overrepresentation. The goal is to determine which cultural and national elements are moderately used and, therefore, could be utilized in future tourism strategies. This research also suggests that tourists often favor the visitation of destinations that have cultural and historical ties with their home countries (Szytniewski et al., 2018). The idea of macro-destinations in the Iberian region (Spain and Portugal) or BeNeLux clearly indicates the opportunity for regional tourism cooperation. This is the same for the countries of the Balkan Region, Romania, and Türkiye, using their geographic and cultural connectivity to build unique and attractive tourism campaigns. The research aims to determine which markers of national identity in tourism commercials from six culturally and geographically proximate countries are most frequently highlighted, which are underrepresented, and whether these choices can further influence national branding strategies. Furthermore, it explores how a more balanced approach to national identity representation can enhance regional tourism strategies and contribute to a more authentic and inclusive vision of cultural heritage in tourism promotion.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Reviewing the Theoretical Foundations of National Branding

National branding relates to a broader concept of national branding (branding of the country as a whole), which displays the global image and reputation of a country beyond tourism. A well-grounded national brand benefits the tourism sector by attracting foreign audiences, which indicates its research potential. The idea of branding an entire country as a tourism destination gained strong in the late 1990's, emphasizing cultural, historical, and natural assets to establish a compelling national brand. The idea that a country itself functions as a brand has emerged quite prominently from nation-branding theories (Cai et al., 2009) and has a record in recent times (Dinnie, 2022). Scholars such as Anholt (2005, 2006) and Tasci and Kozak (2006) have highlighted the role of national identity in promoting tourism (Huibin et al., 2018; Hussin, 2018; Nobre & Sousa, 2022; Ohridska-Olsun, 2015; Zenker & Braun, 2018), while others have a focused approach directed to hospitality (Angelova & Stoimenov, 2022). Some interesting insights on YouTube advertising can be found in other discourses such as in post-COVID-19 advertising (Ali & Yang, 2022).

Additionally, one of the most significant branding concepts in consumption is still the "country of origin effect" (Genç & Bayraktaroğlu, 2017), which describes how nation's reputation influences consumer perceptions and opens the perspective of how it may also influence attitudes toward tourism-related products and services (Seabra et al., 2018). A strong national brand can affirm visitor expectations and positively influence travel decisions. In tourism, branding strategies often focus on specific unique national features, while some imply national identity as a competitive advantage (Kozak et al., 2005; Light, 2006; Light et al., 2020). A strong brand indicates fosters spatial competitiveness and helps solidity with a country's identity (Magnusson & Westjohn, 2021; Papadopoulos & Cleveland, 2021). Some researchers have reported studies that outline branding as part of economic growth and business output (Pop et al., 2020; Till, 2019), innovation (Angelova et al., 2019) and strategical implication (Atanasova & Yaneva, 2021), demonstrating that a good national image would attract visitors and investors.

National tourism policy has enhanced significantly intentions versus reality (Ivanova, 2020) and other improvements for national branding campaigns targeting improving tourism appeal facilitate such enhancement. In the sphere on national branding, good examples include campaigns such as "España te Espera" (Spain Awaits You) later changed to "I Need Spain" or "Visit Portugal! The Europa's Best Kept Secret", and the previously used slogan "Visit Britain" in the national tourism campaign has been replaced by "See Things Differently!". The examples illustrate that national branding campaigns play a critical role in searching for optimal visual and linguistic appeals to influence perceptions in reshaping tourism destinations' slogans. These marketing campaigns endorse countries as distinct travel destinations, thus providing evidence of the effectiveness of being careful with tourism branding. National tourism promotion is also closely related to

cultural proximity, which affects bilateral tourism relations (Bertacchini et al., 2019; Jeuring & Diaz-Soria, 2018; Szytniewski et al., 2018). Countries with similar cultural and historical histories are said to have developed stronger tourism ties while competing for similar tourist demographics. Thus, national tourism strategies are embedded in wider advertising campaigns to boost international visitor numbers.

National Identity in Balkan Region and Tourism Marketing

The Balkans have a rich and complex cultural identity shaped by a long and often turbulent history. With its distinctive diversity (Aminian Jazi & Kahl, 2023; Dragnea et al., 2023; Hinrichs et al. 2014; Mungiu-Pippidi & Pippidi, 2008), the Balkans provide a scientific perspective for various humanitarian and social scientific domains. Although previous regimes attempted to enforce cultural uniformity, i.e., the former Yugoslav republics, Bulgaria, Albania, Romania, this has fortunately not affected the region's cultural diversity. The recognition of each country's national identity has had a significant influence on the tourism industry at the macro-destination level. National identity in tourism marketing serves as one of the most prominent ways in which Balkan nations can distinguish themselves in the highly competitive European tourism travel and leisure industry.

The selected theoretical framework underlines the significance of the chosen subject and highlights how national tourism campaigns construct identity-driven contexts. Despite its importance, limited research has been conducted on the overrepresentation of national identity in official tourism campaigns. This study focuses on a selected region in Balkan countries (Bulgaria, Croatia, Greece, Serbia, and Romania) and Türkiye, and asks which NIMs are predominately featured in their tourism marketing. Applying the content analysis the research identifies *national cultural heritage*, *national symbols*, *traditions*, *cuisine*, and *national landscapes* as key NIMs. The major goal is to analyze common patterns of their representation and, in turn, to spark a discussion on the need to incorporate additional elements of intangible cultural heritage (ICH) or to shift toward more narrative-driven promotional scenarios.

METHODOLOGY

This study is designed as a cross-case analysis of national tourism promotion in selected geographically and culturally proximate counties, and utilizes qualitative research methods, including synthesis, visualization techniques, and star methods. The discussion of the theoretical framework is grounded in the concept of national identity within specific destination promotions (the Balkan Region, Romania, and Türkiye), providing a preliminary discussion of its applicability. The outcomes serve as directives to avoid the overrepresentation of NIMs in tourism campaigns. The study followed a four-stage structure of RQ1 and RQ4. The first stage of the analysis (the research area for RQ1) was developed based on content analysis, following the official tourism of commercials for the selected countries, including established tourism leaders such as Croatia, Greece, and Türkiye. To secure a more valid framework, RQ2 was set in the second stage, where its validity was scientifically secured based on the star method. The area of RQ2 identifies common themes that can be regarded as valid NIMs of overrepresentation, which is the subject of analysis in the third stage. The final stage synthesizes the findings, linking NIMs from each country's official tourism commercials to the degree of their presentation, and initiates a discussion featuring underrepresented elements or differentiated advertising approaches.

ANALYSIS OF THE NATIONAL IDENTIFICATION MARKERS IN THE OFFICIAL COMMERCIALS

As previously mentioned, the cultural and historical heritage of Balkan countries is a central component of their promotional destination campaign. Hereafter, the analysis begins with a brief synopsis of the NIMs of each country that can be found in audio-visual commercials from 2021 to 2024, mostly on YouTube and TV channels. The most well-known are given consideration because these commercials often promote particular types of tourism (such as cultural, coastal, and maritime tourism). Next, to determine which national identification markers have the highest value, a visualization technique was proposed. The final step of the analysis is a relational analysis that aims to discuss the overrepresentation of national identification markers
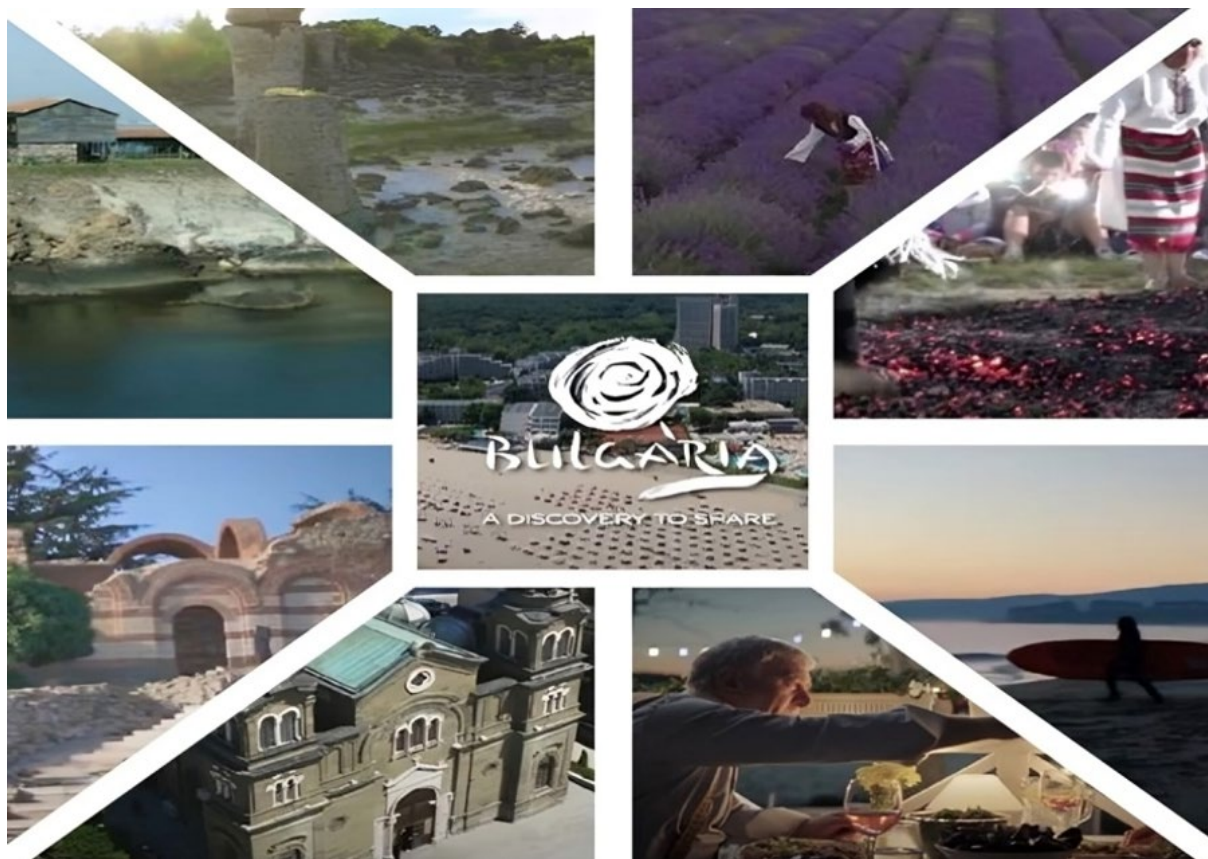
Figure 1. Visualization of NIMs in official commercials of Bulgaria (The author's own model) [Source: Fraport Bulgaria. (2022, April 27). Visit Bulgaria - A discovery to share in 2022. [Video]. *YouTube*. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9MXVbYtCv6s] [Images were extracted from video and used in the visualization with permission] © Bulgarian Ministry of Tourism.

and distinguish underrepresented markers. Based on these results, new approaches towards the presence of contextual links to nationality, nationalism, and identity are offered.

NIMs in the Official Tourism Commercials of Bulgaria

A comparatively small portion of Bulgaria's tangible cultural heritage and ICH is featured in official national commercials, with an emphasis on the Black Sea and its natural beauty. The scenery of the millennium-old city of Plovdiv and the Rila Monastery are key components of national identity, yet they appear in only two official commercials. Images of the intangible traditions of Kukeri and Nestinari (firewalking barefoot over hot coals) are featured only once. However, each commercial type included a significant number of traditional food scenes. The incorporation of Bulgarian music and the national symbol, the Kaba Bagpipe (a traditional bagpipe), reflects national identity and is displayed through a sense of national dignity. The most typical elements integrated into national tourism promotion are natural landscapes and symbols. **Figure 1** highlights the key aspects of NIMs in official audiovisual commercials.

NIMs in the Official Tourism Commercials of Croatia

Croatia' national advertising focuses on its coastal beauty, cultural heritage, and historical heritage. So far, most commercials have depicted Dubrovnik, the Dalmatian coast, and the most famous zone on the Brač-Zlatini Rat, which defines the state's tourism identity. The strategy revolves around economic nationalism projecting world tourism with spectacular and romanticized images of Croatia (Bhandari, 2022), especially with regard to natural attractions that always seem to dominate promotional space at the cost of disparate cultural representation.

NIM	Cultural and historical heritage	Natural landscapes	National symbols	National cuisine	National music	Intangible heritage	Average
	⭐ 6	⭐ 6	⭐ 6	⭐ 6	☆ 3	☆ 3	☆ 5

Figure 2. Average star rating of each NIMs (The author's own representation)

NIMs in the Official Tourism Commercials of Greece

In contrast, Greece adopts a much more balanced representation, integrating both tangible and ICH. The Meteora Monasteries and the old city of Astypalaia portray historical depth, while the Aegean and Mediterranean landscapes provide visual appeal. There is a good representation of intangible heritage as well, as epitomized by Sirtaki dance, Mediterranean cuisine, and symbolic olive groves, which strengthen national identity (Pitchford & Jafari, 2008). Greece's promotional strategy complements Tinson and Saren's (2022) argument that national tourism can enhance nationalism through cultural symbols that promote pride.

NIMs in the Official Tourism Commercials of Romania

In Romania, a balanced mix of historical imagery, folklore, and architecture tends to embody nation-associated tourism logos. TV advertisements highlighted the footage of Dracula's Castle as well as the grand architecture of the capital city, Bucharest, coined from both mythic and historical narratives. Over-commercialization, mainly concerning bad connotations for a historical figure, becomes an overreliance on Dracula imagery. Clancy (2011) warns against the repetitive media portrayal, which naturally results in the obliteration of other equally characteristic representations of national identity.

NIMs in the Official Tourism Commercials of Serbia

Serbia's tourism is built on a nature-based narrative, with a focus on the Uvac Special Nature Reserve and the Manasija Monastery. In contrast to Greece and Romania, Serbia paints a much duller picture, with an emphasis on spiritual and natural heritage rather than lively cultural traditions. This allows us to make the statement that national tourism branding in the Balkans often relates to landscapes, rather than cultural intricacies.

NIMs in the Official Tourism Commercials of Türkiye

Türkiye's approach to national tourism advertising incorporates both historical landmarks and national branding, including specific features of linguistic branding. The Ortaköy Mosque in Beşiktaş and the Cappadocian rock valleys symbolize the country's rich historical and cultural past. Notably, Türkiye has made efforts to reinforce its linguistic identity by internationally promoting the name "Türkiye" instead of "Turkey", a clear example of commercial nationalism in tourism branding (Bhandari, 2022). This linguistic rebranding strengthens a country's global identity while aligning with national sentiment.

Figure 2 shows the average star rating of each NIMs.

DISCUSSION

Overrepresentation of NIMs

Across all six countries analyzed, Bulgaria, Croatia, Greece, Romania, Serbia, and Türkiye, several NIMs are consistently emphasized in their official tourism campaigns. The overrepresentation concerns cultural historical heritage, natural landscapes, national symbols, and national cuisine, all of which receive high ratings for their effectiveness in tourism promotion. The prevalence of these markers reflects their significance in national branding strategies. Among the identified NIMs and closely related to the advertising discourse and visual narratives, special importance is given to the natural, appearing as a central theme in each country's promotional campaign.

A strong emphasis on nature finds expression in scenic beauty, which is among the most potent devices for attracting tourists, be it in the form of beaches, mountains, lakes, or even forests. In this sense,

overrepresentation in this case regards all scenes of commercial nationalism with romanticized portrayals of nature. Another highly rated NIM is cultural and historical heritage, which suggests that historical monuments, ancient cities, and folklore traditions are strong and effective elements of national branding. White (2017) emphasizes that historical narratives are frequently repackaged to serve tourism goals, reinforcing a country's identity while also making it accessible to international audiences.

The natural beauties that extend from the Dubrovnik of Croatia, through the Meteora of Greece, and end at the Manasija Monastery of Serbia exemplify this trend in showing how historical sites are actually turned into visual capturing features, which are high in national tourism promotion. National symbols displayed by emblematic monuments and portrayals are effective means. National symbols used as NIMs easily correlate with tourism and national branding. The strong representation of symbols, such as the olive tree in Greece, Kaba Bagpipe in Bulgaria, and Ortaköy Mosque in Türkiye, reflects their deeply ingrained cultural significance and is forwarded toward international audiences.

Advertising also uses national music to achieve cultural nostalgia, aimed toward reinforcing identity. However, the construction of an "authentic" experience through the use of music and folklore in tourism marketing campaigns was also recently revised by Pitchford and Jafari (2008), despite recent adaptations. Traditional music with the Kaba Bagpipe is often included in commercials, often across Bulgaria, to build pride and contribute to the passage of time.

National cuisine is yet another well-established NIM factor in tourism campaign discourse. Whether it is Mediterranean cuisine in Greece or the rural culinary traditions of Bulgaria and Romania, these foods bring gastronomy into the national branding discourse. Tinson and Saren (2022) argued that food constitutes an effective storytelling medium in that tourism can afford visitors a multisensory experience that introspects them toward a deeper emotional bond with a destination. Nonetheless, while national cuisine is a powerful tool in tourism campaigns, its appeal is heavily dependent on how it is packaged, either as an authentic local experience or a down-to-earth gastronomy attraction.

Underrepresentation of Intangible Cultural Heritage and National Music as a Way for Enhancing Memorability and Uniqueness in National Tourism Commercials

While tangible elements such as landscapes, symbols, and historical sites dominate promotional campaigns, ICH dominates across the six analyzed countries. This limited representation of traditional customs, rituals, and folklore are notably underrepresented, with a lower three-star rating. Despite its cultural significance, ICH appears in only a few countries' promotions, such as the Kukeri traditions in Bulgaria, folklore craftsmanship in Romania, and Sirtaki dance in Greece.

This imbalance means that, while grand historical landmarks and scenic landscapes provide a visually compelling and immediately recognizable identity, they fail to differentiate national tourism campaigns among countries with similar geographic and cultural characteristics. For example, the frequent use of medieval fortresses, seafront views, and ancient ruins across Balkan tourism advertisements has resulted in a homogenized regional image, making it difficult for individual nations to establish a unique tourism identity.

The potential of intangible cultural heritage

ICH has the capacity to mediate the issue of overrepresentation by offering more immersive and emotionally resonant stories that transcend static imagery. Aspects, such as folk rituals, storytelling practices, and traditional craftsmanship, can enhance national tourism branding, making it more personal and diverse. However, ICH frequently becomes fragmented and decorative rather than intricately woven into a strong tourism narrative. For example, while Greece sometimes includes Sirtaki dance in its advertisements, and Romania occasionally highlights folk embroidery and craftsmanship, these portrayals tend to be superficial and infrequent rather than forming a cohesive narrative structure. Clancy (2011) suggests that intangible heritage often takes a back seat in visually stunning elements because it demands deeper engagement and skillful techniques to truly resonate within advertising contexts.

National music: A missed opportunity for emotional engagement

Yet another underrepresented but strong NIM is national music, which could heighten emotional appeal and tourist recall. While some countries capitalize on traditional instruments (the Kaba Gaida in Bulgaria, Tamburica in Serbia, among others), this is often left inconsistent and patchy. Instead, tourists' campaigns normally rely on general cinematic soundtracks rather than subjecting them to authentic national music in a golden chance of evoking a multisensory connection with their audience. In addition to this discussion, Pitchford and Jafari (2008) also highlight that music carries nostalgic and cultural pride appeal-very important components in the welfare and reinforcement of identity. However, national music is usually less commercially viable than the archetypal visual-aided components of architecture and landscapes. A very small number of positive situations in which folk music is incorporated, such as the flamenco in Spain and tango in Argentina, indicate that when fully absorbed, music can leave its forte in the form of an identity signature in the advertising approach.

Limitations of the researched geographical area

This study was based on a comparative analysis of six nations with cultural and geographical proximity. The inclusion of additional countries could provide valuable insights into which NIMs are employed in different official national campaigns and whether patterns of underrepresentation exist. Additionally, cross-national comparison can be drawn in view of gender implications and for education purposes, as revealed by Fidalgo et all. (2024). Having other perspective focus, future research could also explore the presence of alternative NIMs in other regions such as Asia, Latin America, and the Middle East.

Variations in tourism marketing strategies across nations that are not necessarily geographically close can be used to identify whether similarities in overrepresentation or underrepresentation emerge. Case studies of countries with unique tourism branding strategies can indicate whether they are built on *a mix of NIMs* or employ *storytelling techniques* and if they can expand beyond official commercials to include social media campaigns. These additional dimensions of inquiry could significantly enrich our understanding of how nations position themselves competitively in the arrangement of global tourism and provide further recommendations for optimizing the portrayal of national identity in tourism marketing and national branding.

CONCLUSION

The marketing campaigns of Bulgaria, Croatia, Greece, Romania, Serbia, and Türkiye revealed some common patterns, which were identified as cases of overrepresentation of certain NIMs. The elements natural landscapes, cultural and historical heritage, national symbols, and even culinary items are part of each country's national image; however, their excessive recurrence across culturally and geographically similar countries leads to less distinctiveness. A key challenge, therefore, is how to achieve differentiation in national branding when neighboring countries share a common cultural and historical background. While Greece, Croatia, and Türkiye employ natural and cultural elements, Romania features its well-known historical narratives, Serbia and Bulgaria focus primarily on landscapes and national symbols. Consequently, the overrepresentation of similar NIMs has a negative effect and its function to positively convey unique identifiers fails. In contrast, the ICH, which opens perspectives to traditions, rituals, craftsmanship, and lesser-known folk music, remains underrepresented. In conclusion, despite being part of the national identity, these cultural elements are not sufficiently used as promotional tools, having features of intangibles as possible explanation.

A general conclusion of the research is that there is still room to explore options for better enhancement of the recall and uniqueness appeal of national tourism promotions. The study identifies the balance between national representation in tourism promotion and achieving differentiation as a key challenge. Regarding NIMs, aspects such as storytelling and local community engagement emerge as potential gaps in both theory and practice. Expanding the analysis to other regions could reveal whether similar patterns of over- and under-representation exist provide recommendations on how to avoid them.

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