

RICHMOND TAKYI ASARE

**BENCHMARKING TOURISM DESTINATIONS
A CONTRIBUTION TO PERFORMANCE MEASUREMENT
AND MANAGEMENT OF TOURISM ORGANISATIONS IN
PORTUGAL**



**UNIVERSITY OF ALGARVE
FACULTY OF ECONOMICS
2024**

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PORTUGAL

Master in Tourism Organisations Management (TOM)

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Work Authorship Declaration

I declare to be the author of this work, which is unique and unprecedented. Authors and works consulted are properly cited in the text and are included in the listing of references.

Richmond Takyi Asare

Signature: _____

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ABSTRACT

Tourism has become a major component of the global economy, contributing significantly to employment, GDP growth, and foreign exchange earnings (UNWTO, 2019). Tourism organisations must prioritise effective and efficient performance measures and management strategies to maintain competitiveness and sustainability. This study focuses on benchmarking as a strategic tool for improving the performance of tourism destinations in Portugal by employing a systematic research approach to analyze the methodologies, challenges, and outcomes in this area, specifically in tourism destination image.

This study presents a comprehensive literature review on benchmarking, with a particular focus on its application in tourism destinations. It then conducts a systematic literature review of benchmarking research published between 2015 and 2023, with special emphasis on the role of destination image. The research further analyses the impact of benchmarking on performance improvement, identifying the key barriers to its implementation and proposing effective strategies to overcome these challenges. In conclusion, this thesis firmly establishes that benchmarking is an indispensable strategic tool for destinations and tourism organizations in Portugal. Although challenges to its implementation exist, they are not insurmountable.

Furthermore, this research addresses the need for a more structured and empirical approach to benchmarking within Portuguese tourism, providing a clearer understanding of how benchmarking practices influence long-term sustainability and performance enhancement. The study also examines the effectiveness of existing benchmarking models and proposes refinements suitable for the Portuguese tourism industry.

This research provides evidence-based insights for policymakers, destination managers, and stakeholders in the tourism industry. It is intended to promote sustainable tourism development, improve benchmarking practices, and enhance Portugal's global reputation as a competitive tourism destination.

Keywords: Benchmarking, Tourism Destinations, Tourism Destination Image, Tourism Organisations, Competitiveness, Sustainability.

RESUMO

O turismo tornou-se um componente importante da economia global, contribuindo significativamente para o emprego, o crescimento do PIB e os ganhos com divisas (UNWTO, 2019). As organizações de turismo devem priorizar medições de desempenho e estratégias de gestão eficazes e eficientes para manter sua competitividade e sustentabilidade. Este estudo foca no benchmarking como uma ferramenta estratégica para melhorar o desempenho dos destinos turísticos em Portugal, empregando uma abordagem de investigação sistemática para analisar as metodologias, desafios e resultados nesta área, com especial foco na imagem dos destinos.

Este estudo apresenta uma revisão abrangente da literatura sobre benchmarking, com especial atenção à sua aplicação em destinos turísticos, com revisão sistemática da literatura sobre benchmarking publicada entre 2015 e 2023, com ênfase especial no papel da imagem do destino. É também analisado o impacto do benchmarking na melhoria do desempenho, identificando as principais barreiras à sua implementação e propondo estratégias eficazes para superar esses desafios. Em conclusão, esta tese conclui que benchmarking é uma ferramenta estratégica indispensável para os destinos e organizações de turismo em Portugal e que embora existam desafios na sua implementação, estes não são intransponíveis.

Além disso, evidencia a necessidade de uma abordagem mais estruturada e empírica para o benchmarking no turismo português, proporcionando uma compreensão mais evidente de como as práticas de benchmarking influenciam a sustentabilidade a longo prazo e a melhoria do desempenho. O estudo também examina a eficácia dos modelos de benchmarking existentes e propõe refinamentos adequados para a indústria do turismo em Portugal.

Esta investigação fornece inputs baseados em evidências para os *stakeholders* de políticas, gestores de destinos e partes interessadas na indústria do turismo. Tem como objetivo promover o desenvolvimento sustentável do turismo, melhorar as práticas de benchmarking e aumentar a reputação global de Portugal como um destino turístico competitivo.

Palavras-chave: Benchmarking, Destinos Turísticos, Imagem Destinos, Organizações de Turismo, Competitividade, Sustentabilidade.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Tourism has become a crucial component of the global economy, contributing significantly to employment, GDP growth, and foreign exchange earnings for many countries (UNWTO, 2019). As destinations compete for tourists and strive to enhance their competitiveness, the need for effective performance measurement and management in tourism organisations becomes crucial.

Globally, tourism has witnessed exponential growth over the past few decades, with international tourist arrivals reaching unprecedented levels. According to the World Tourism Organisation (UNWTO), international tourist arrivals surpassed 1.5 billion in 2019, demonstrating the sector's resilience and capacity for expansion despite occasional setbacks such as economic downturns and natural disasters. Custódio's findings underscore the need for continuous stakeholder involvement in tourism branding and management, emphasizing that a destination's competitiveness depends on its intrinsic attractions and sustained, collaborative efforts to refine its image and address seasonal visitor needs.

In this global context, benchmarking has been a crucial tool for tourism destinations seeking to enhance their competitiveness and sustainability. Benchmarking allows destinations to compare their performance against industry peers, identify the best practices, and implement strategies for improvement (Zlatković, 2016)

, 2009). By analysing key performance indicators (KPIs) such as tourist arrivals, revenue per available room (Revpar), and tourist satisfaction levels, destinations can gain insights into their strengths and weaknesses, thereby informing decision-making and policy formulation.

Tourism in Europe is crucial in fostering economic growth and regional development. Portugal, located in Southern Europe, has become a popular tourist destination with its rich cultural heritage, stunning landscapes, and warm hospitality. The country's tourism industry has experienced a steady increase in recent years, with millions of international visitors annually attracted.

Portuguese tourism organisations have increasingly employed performance measurement and management techniques such as benchmarking to address these issues. By comparing regional

rivals such as Spain, France, and Italy, Portugal intends to enhance its competitiveness, diversify its tourism offerings, and ensure long-term sustainability.

In Portugal, the tourism sector is a crucial factor in the economy, contributing significantly to GDP, job creation, and regional development (WTTC, 2019). According to the World Travel & Tourism Council (WTTC), tourism was responsible for 8.1% of Portugal's GDP in 2019, and it is expected to increase in the coming years. The country's tourism industry encompasses numerous attractions, including historic landmarks, sun-kissed beaches, and culinary experiences.

However, Portuguese tourism organisations must constantly monitor and improve their performance despite the growth and prosperity. Benchmarking provides a systematic approach to assess performance relative to competitors and industry standards. Benchmarking against places with similar characteristics or those perceived as aspirational. Portuguese tourism organisations can identify areas for improvement and implement strategies to enhance their competitiveness and sustainability (Ritchie & Crouch, 2003).

In summary, benchmarking tourism destinations in Portugal represents a multifaceted endeavour that operates within a global context of burgeoning tourism demand, a regional landscape characterized by competition and collaboration, and a national context shaped by economic imperatives and sustainability goals. This study aims to shed light on the intricacies of performance measurement and management within Portugal's tourism sector. We try to offer insights that can inform policy, strategy, and practice in destination management.

This study addresses significant gaps in the existing literature regarding benchmarking practices within the tourism industry, particularly in Portugal's context. It fills critical gaps in our understanding of benchmarking practices, their impact on performance improvement, and the factors influencing their successful implementation in Portuguese tourism organisations. Responding to the pressing needs of the Portuguese tourism industry for evidence-based strategies to enhance competitiveness, sustainability, and resilience, it equips stakeholders with insights into effective benchmarking practices and performance improvement strategies, supporting evidence-based policy development to promote sustainable tourism development and enhance destination competitiveness. Empowering stakeholders with knowledge, insights, and tools to make informed strategic decisions fosters collaboration, knowledge sharing, and

best practice exchange within the Portuguese tourism industry, promoting innovation, industry resilience, and continuous improvement. Furthermore, by enhancing Portugal's international reputation and leadership in tourism research and innovation, the study contributes to the sustainable growth, competitiveness, and prosperity of the Portuguese tourism industry and the wider economy.

The tourism industry in Portugal is a crucial component of the nation's economy, providing employment opportunities, generating revenue, and fostering regional development. Despite the competitive global tourism landscape, Portuguese tourism organisations are facing the ongoing challenge of improving their performance to maintain and enhance their market position. Benchmarking has been a recognised method for organisations to assess their performance relative to industry peers and identify areas for improvement. This study examines these issues by conducting a systematic review of benchmarking practices in general and particularly tourism destination image factors, learning from other examples to provide recommendations to Portuguese stakeholders in the tourism industry. It seeks to examine the impact of benchmarking on performance improvement, identify critical success factors, and analyze barriers to implementation, providing a comprehensive understanding of its role in enhancing the competitiveness of Portugal's tourism destinations.

Portugal's tourism organizations must monitor their performance and manage their operations effectively. To this end, the primary objective is to conduct a comprehensive analysis of the current *state of the art* in benchmarking research within the tourism sector and destination image. This overarching goal is supported by three specific objectives:

1. To analyse the influence of benchmarking practices on the performance enhancement of tourism organisations;
2. To identify and assess the key criteria employed in the evaluation of tourism destinations;
3. To investigate the main obstacles and challenges faced by tourism organisations in the implementation of benchmarking initiatives in Portugal.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 Conceptual Foundations of Benchmarking

2.1.1 Benchmarking Tourism Destinations

Benchmarking tourism destinations is crucial for enhancing competitiveness, sustainability, and overall destination management effectiveness. Initially categorised by Ritchie and Crouch (2003), benchmarking involves comparing performance metrics and management practices against industry standards. Their framework distinguished between competitive benchmarking, where destinations compete directly, and cooperative benchmarking, emphasizing collaboration among destinations to achieve mutual goals and share best practices. Buhalis and Amaranggana (2015) expanded this framework by introducing digital benchmarking, highlighting the transformative role of technology in modern destination management. This includes the integration of big data analytics, digital platforms, and social media metrics, enabling real-time performance monitoring, visitor sentiment analysis, and targeted marketing strategies (Bulchand-Gidumal, 2021; Gretzel et al., 2015).

Recent research underscores the evolving nature of benchmarking methodologies. Bulchand-Gidumal (2021) discusses adopting data-driven approaches to benchmarking, emphasising the importance of comprehensive data analytics in understanding visitor behaviours and optimising destination experiences. This technological integration enhances operational efficiency and facilitates adaptive management strategies that respond to changing market dynamics and visitor preferences. Gretzel *et al.* (2015) explore the role of digital platforms in enhancing destination competitiveness, illustrating how social media and online reviews influence destination image and visitor decision-making processes.

Moreover, contemporary approaches emphasise sustainability and cultural authenticity when benchmarking tourism destinations. Recent studies by Buhalis and Amaranggana (2015) and Bulchand-Gidumal (2021) highlight incorporating sustainability indicators and cultural heritage preservation efforts into benchmarking frameworks. These initiatives aim to minimize environmental impacts, preserve cultural identities, and foster community engagement, enhancing long-term destination resilience and attractiveness.

Benchmarking tourism destinations has evolved significantly with technological advancements and a broader emphasis on sustainability and cultural authenticity. By integrating innovative methodologies and collaborative strategies, destinations can effectively monitor performance metrics, adapt to market trends, and enhance visitor experiences, ultimately ensuring sustainable growth and competitive advantage in the global tourism landscape.

Benchmarking in tourism, particularly as a tool for assessing the performance and management of tourism destinations, has garnered increasing attention over the past few years. As competition between tourism destinations intensifies and sustainability emerges as a central concern, benchmarking has become essential for measuring success, identifying best practices, and driving improvements across different destinations. This review provides an updated examination of benchmarking in tourism, focusing on research published in the last five years (2019-2024).

2.1.2 Defining Benchmarking in Tourism

Benchmarking compares performance metrics, such as service quality, visitor satisfaction, or financial outcomes, between similar entities. Tourism involves assessing key performance indicators (KPIs) across destinations, enterprises, or countries. The purpose is to identify gaps, learn from best practices, and enhance the competitiveness and sustainability of tourism products and services.

Literature emphasises the multidimensional nature of benchmarking in tourism, integrating economic, environmental, and social indicators (Dwyer & Kim, 2003; Mihalic, 2016). These elements align with the broader sustainability goals outlined in global frameworks such as the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (UNWTO, 2017; Bramwell & Lane, 2011), with organisations like the Global Sustainable Tourism Council (GSTC) and the World Travel & Tourism Council (WTTC) promoting comprehensive indicator frameworks that reflect this integration.

Since 2019, the shift towards sustainability and resilience has led to an expansion in benchmarking frameworks. Sustainability metrics like carbon footprint, energy consumption, and social impact complement traditional performance measures such as revenue per visitor or occupancy rates. The incorporation of sustainability into benchmarking frameworks reflects the

changing priorities in tourism management, particularly in the context of climate change and the global pandemic.

1. **Sustainability-Oriented Benchmarks:** Several recent studies have integrated sustainability indicators into benchmarking models. For example, Garrod and Fay (2020) developed a framework that measures economic performance and the environmental impact of tourism activities, such as waste generation and energy usage. Similarly, Leco and Perez (2021) analysed how tourism destinations are adopting greener practices to enhance their long-term competitiveness;
2. **Resilience and Crisis Management Benchmarks:** The COVID-19 pandemic has transformed the focus of benchmarking research in tourism. Studies by Gössling *et al.* (2020) have introduced resilience indicators, measuring how destinations can recover from disruptions like pandemics, natural disasters, or political instability. These frameworks prioritise adaptive capacity, crisis preparedness, and recovery time as critical benchmarking metrics.

2.1.3 Key Dimensions of Benchmarking in Recent Studies

Recent literature reveals a trend toward incorporating broader performance indicators in tourism benchmarking. These include:

1. **Economic Indicators:** Traditional economic benchmarks, such as visitor numbers, average daily spend, and length of stay, remain central. However, newer studies, such as Wang *et al.* (2023), focus on the return on investment (ROI) of marketing campaigns, destination branding efforts, and digital tourism initiatives. Revenue-based benchmarks are now linked with technology adoption rates, such as virtual tours and augmented reality experiences;
2. **Environmental and Sustainability Indicators:** As sustainable tourism practices become more prevalent, benchmarking frameworks increasingly incorporate environmental measures. Ecological footprint, resource efficiency, and pollution levels have been highlighted in studies such as Sun *et al.* (2022), which examine how destinations reduce their environmental impact while maintaining visitor satisfaction.

Certifications like Green Key or EarthCheck are also benchmarked, providing a quantifiable measure of environmental responsibility;

3. **Social Indicators:** Destination management organizations (DMOs) now use benchmarking to assess the social impact of tourism on local communities. The inclusion of social benchmarks—such as local employment rates, cultural preservation efforts, and community engagement—has become more prevalent. Research by Hall et al. (2020) emphasizes the role of tourism in promoting inclusivity and reducing inequality, making it an essential area for benchmarking.

2.1.4 Technological Advancements in Benchmarking, challenges, criticism and opportunities

The role of technology in enhancing benchmarking practices has significantly expanded over the last five years. Big data, artificial intelligence (AI), and machine learning are transforming how tourism destinations measure performance and compare outcomes, namely:

1. **Big Data and Real-Time Benchmarking:** The rise of big data analytics has allowed tourism destinations to collect real-time performance data, enabling more dynamic benchmarking processes. This approach improves decision-making by providing immediate insights into visitor behaviours, preferences, and satisfaction levels. In their study, Hartmann and Lederer (2021) highlighted the benefits of using big data from online travel platforms, social media, and mobile applications to conduct more accurate and timely benchmarking analyses;
2. **AI and Predictive Benchmarking:** Predictive analytics, powered by AI, is increasingly used to forecast tourism trends and performance outcomes. Studies by Cheng and Ma (2022) show how AI can predict future visitor flows, allowing destinations to adjust strategies proactively. This predictive approach is becoming part of the benchmarking process, helping tourism managers compare current performance with forecasted benchmarks and adapt accordingly.

Despite its growing relevance, benchmarking in tourism faces several challenges. One major issue is the lack of standardized benchmarking practices across destinations. Each destination has unique characteristics, making establishing universal benchmarks for diverse tourism

markets difficult. The complexity of integrating sustainability, resilience, and technological indicators adds to this challenge.

Moreover, benchmarking frameworks often rely on data availability, which can be limited in less developed destinations. Inconsistent data collection methods, lack of transparency, and difficulty accessing reliable tourism statistics are recurring problems, particularly in emerging tourism markets.

Another criticism is that benchmarking can sometimes prioritize quantitative metrics (such as visitor numbers) over qualitative experiences (such as visitor satisfaction or cultural preservation). This focus on numbers may incentivize short-term gains at the expense of long-term sustainability.

Within these technological advances, criticism, and challenges, recent research suggests several opportunities to enhance benchmarking practices in tourism, specifically:

1. **Collaborative Benchmarking Networks:** As competition among destinations intensifies, there is potential for collaborative benchmarking efforts. Destination networks and alliances can share data and best practices, fostering collective regional improvement. For example, initiatives like the European Tourism Indicator System (ETIS) encourage benchmarking collaboration to drive sustainability improvements;
2. **Inclusive and Community-Oriented Benchmarks:** Future benchmarking frameworks could emphasize community well-being, highlighting how tourism benefits local populations. Research by Rivera and Luna (2023) advocates for integrating community-centric indicators, such as local satisfaction, cultural protection, and equitable resource distribution, into mainstream benchmarking practices;
3. **Enhanced Benchmarking Tools:** The application of AI, machine learning, and other advanced technologies in benchmarking is expected to grow. These tools will offer tourism managers more precise and predictive performance metrics, reducing guesswork and allowing more agile responses to market changes.

Benchmarking in tourism has evolved significantly over the past five years, particularly with integrating sustainability, resilience, and technological advancements. While traditional metrics like visitor numbers and revenue remain important, recent frameworks are more comprehensive, focusing on environmental impact, social benefits, and crisis management capabilities. However, challenges related to data standardization, accessibility, and qualitative assessment persist. Moving forward, collaborative efforts, community engagement, and technological innovations will shape the future of benchmarking, making it an even more powerful tool for improving tourism destination management and performance.

This review highlights that ongoing research will likely continue to refine benchmarking models, with a growing emphasis on sustainability, inclusivity, and technological progress. The future of benchmarking in tourism lies in balancing quantitative metrics with the qualitative, long-term impacts that align with the Sustainable Development Goals.

2.1.5 A synthesis of the evolution of benchmarking theory and its dimensions in tourism

Benchmarking theory in tourism has evolved significantly over the years, adapting to meet the changing needs of the tourism industry and reflecting broader trends in sustainability, crisis management, and social responsibility. Initially focused on competitive performance comparisons, the theory has broadened its scope to include various dimensions such as environmental, social, and resilience factors, making it more holistic and relevant to today's tourism challenges.

Benchmarking was initially developed within the business and manufacturing sectors in the 1980s, where it was used as a tool for measuring and comparing the performance of organizations to identify best practices (Camp,1989). In tourism, **competitive benchmarking** emerged as the dominant model in the 1990s, focusing on comparing destinations using key performance indicators (KPIs) such as tourist arrivals, revenue, and market share. These comparisons aimed to identify performance gaps and develop improvement strategies (Kozak, 2004).

Early benchmarking models in tourism primarily focused on **quantitative measures**, such as visitor numbers and revenue generation, to understand how well a destination performed relative to its competitors. This traditional approach was often limited in scope, as it did not consider factors such as visitor satisfaction or sustainability. However, it laid the groundwork for further developments in the theory (Garrod & Fay, 2020).

By the late 1990s and early 2000s, benchmarking theory in tourism evolved to include **more strategic and process-oriented approaches**. This shift reflected a broader understanding that performance comparisons should not be limited to outcomes alone but should also focus on the processes that lead to those outcomes (Kozak & Rimmington, 1998). This period saw the rise of **internal benchmarking**, where destinations or tourism organizations compared their internal processes across different departments or periods.

Strategic benchmarking allowed destinations to focus on **long-term planning** and **operational efficiency**, such as improving customer service delivery or optimizing resource management. Including process-oriented benchmarks helped destinations identify strengths and weaknesses within their internal operations, enabling them to adopt best practices from competitors and within their organizations (Pyo et al., 2021).

In the 2000s, the rise of sustainable tourism led to a significant shift in benchmarking theory as destinations began to **integrate environmental and social dimensions** into their performance assessments. The Triple Bottom Line (TBL) concept, which considers economic, environmental, and social factors, became increasingly important in tourism benchmarking, reflecting the growing demand for sustainable and responsible tourism (Dodds & Butler, 2009).

This shift toward **sustainability-oriented benchmarking** expanded the scope of benchmarking to include a wider range of indicators, such as energy consumption, carbon emissions, waste management, and social factors like community involvement and local employment (Garrod & Fay, 2020). Destinations were now assessed on their ability to attract tourists and how well they managed their environmental and social impacts.

Integrating sustainability into benchmarking frameworks encouraged destinations to adopt a more **holistic approach** to tourism management, balancing economic growth with environmental conservation and social equity (Leco & Perez, 2021). Destinations like New

Zealand and Costa Rica pioneered using sustainability benchmarks to guide tourism development and marketing strategies.

The evolution of benchmarking theory in recent years has been significantly influenced by the growing importance of **resilience** and **crisis management** in tourism. The COVID-19 pandemic and other global crises have highlighted the need for destinations to withstand and recover from disruptions. As a result, benchmarking frameworks now include **resilience indicators**, such as crisis preparedness, adaptability, and recovery speed (Gössling *et al.* 2020).

Resilience benchmarking measures how well a destination can manage risks and respond to natural disasters, health crises, or economic shocks. Destinations with robust resilience benchmarks are better equipped to recover quickly and maintain long-term viability despite significant challenges (Cheng & Ma, 2022).

The inclusion of resilience in benchmarking theory emphasizes the need for destinations to proactively manage potential risks and build **adaptive capacity** into their operations. This shift has added a new dimension to benchmarking that goes beyond performance improvement and focuses on tourism destinations' long-term sustainability and stability (Pyo *et al.*, 2021).

In recent years, the advancement of technology has introduced new possibilities for benchmarking in tourism. **Digital benchmarking** uses digital tools and data analytics to assess and compare tourism performance. With the rise of online travel platforms, mobile apps, and social media, destinations can track visitor behaviour, preferences, and satisfaction in real-time (Hartmann & Lederer, 2021).

Technological advances have made benchmarking more dynamic and responsive, allowing destinations to make **data-driven decisions** based on up-to-date information. This has enhanced the ability of tourism managers to track performance across a range of dimensions, from marketing effectiveness to visitor experience quality (Wang *et al.*, 2023). As a result of this evolution over the past three decades, it is possible to set a framework of **four critical dimensions of benchmarking theory**:

1. **Economic Dimension:** Traditional benchmarking focused heavily on economic indicators like visitor arrivals, tourism receipts, and market share. More recently,

economic benchmarking has expanded to include metrics like **return on investment (ROI)** for marketing campaigns and the effectiveness of tourism initiatives (Wang *et al.*, 2023);

2. **Environmental Dimension:** The shift towards sustainability has introduced environmental metrics into benchmarking frameworks, such as **energy consumption**, **carbon footprints**, and **waste reduction**. These indicators are now essential for destinations looking to position themselves as leaders in sustainable tourism (Sun *et al.*, 2022);
3. **Social Dimension:** The social impacts of tourism, including community engagement, cultural preservation, and local employment, have become critical elements of modern benchmarking frameworks (Leco & Perez, 2021). Destinations are increasingly evaluated on their ability to support local communities and preserve cultural heritage;
4. **Resilience Dimension:** Resilience benchmarking measures a destination's ability to prepare for and recover from crises. Indicators include crisis preparedness, adaptability, and recovery time, essential in today's volatile global environment (Gössling *et al.*, 2020).

Benchmarking theory in tourism has evolved from a narrow focus on economic performance to a more holistic approach that includes sustainability, resilience, and social responsibility. As the tourism industry faces new challenges, including environmental concerns and global crises, benchmarking frameworks must continue to adapt, integrating new dimensions such as digital performance and resilience. The future of benchmarking in tourism will likely involve even more sophisticated tools for tracking real-time performance and long-term sustainability.

2.2 Emergence of benchmarking in tourism as a strategic management tool

Benchmarking is a dynamic process involving quantitative comparisons of performance metrics and qualitative assessments of processes, practices, and capabilities (Camp, 1989). By benchmarking against industry peers or best-in-class organizations, companies can gain insights into their relative strengths and weaknesses, identify opportunities for improvement, and set performance targets. Benchmarking transcends traditional performance measurement by encompassing intangible factors such as organizational culture, innovation, and customer satisfaction (Watson, 1993). It has evolved into a strategic management tool that informs

decision-making processes at both tactical and strategic levels (Watson, 1993). By providing a systematic framework for performance assessment and goal setting, benchmarking enables organizations to align their strategies with industry best practices and emerging trends. It facilitates strategic planning, resource allocation, and organizational learning, fostering a culture of continuous improvement and innovation (Watson, 1993).

Competitive benchmarking involves comparing performance metrics with direct competitors to gain insights into market positioning and identify areas for differentiation (Camp, 1989). Functional benchmarking extends the comparison beyond industry boundaries to include organizations from unrelated sectors that excel in specific functions or processes, providing opportunities for cross-industry learning and innovation. Internal benchmarking focuses on intra-organizational comparisons across different departments or business units to identify best practices and promote knowledge sharing (Camp, 1989).

Benchmarking has gained prominence in tourism as destinations seek to enhance their competitiveness and sustainability (Zlatković, 2016).

The evolution of benchmarking in tourism has been influenced by factors such as globalization, technological advancements, and changing consumer preferences (Kitchen and Tourky, 2022). It has evolved from focusing on operational efficiency to a more holistic approach considering social, environmental, and economic sustainability (Dwyer *et al.*, 2009). Benchmarking has emerged as a vital tool in the tourism sector, driven by the imperative for destinations to enhance their competitiveness, sustainability, and resilience in a rapidly evolving global marketplace (Zlatković, 2016). The tourism industry, characterized by intense competition and rapid market changes, has increasingly turned to benchmarking to gain insights into industry best practices, identify areas for improvement, and enhance performance (Zlatković, 2016).

As destinations vie for market share and visitor loyalty, benchmarking has become essential for strategic decision-making and destination management.

Globalization and technological advancements have significantly driven the evolution of benchmarking practices in the tourism industry (Kitchen & Tourky, 2022). The interconnectedness of global markets and the proliferation of digital technologies have facilitated the exchange of information and best practices among tourism destinations. This has

enabled destinations to benchmark their performance against global standards and adapt to emerging trends more effectively.

In recent years, there has been a notable shift in benchmarking practices within the tourism industry towards a more holistic approach that encompasses social, environmental, and economic sustainability (Dwyer *et al.*, 2009). Recognising the interconnectedness of these dimensions, destinations are increasingly incorporating sustainability indicators into their benchmarking frameworks. This evolution reflects a growing emphasis on responsible tourism practices and balancing economic growth with environmental protection and social equity. Another trend in the evolution of benchmarking in tourism is the integration of stakeholder perspectives into benchmarking processes (Zlatković, 2016).

Destinations recognize the importance of engaging diverse stakeholders in benchmarking initiatives, including local communities, businesses, and government agencies. This inclusive approach ensures that benchmarking efforts are aligned with the needs and aspirations of all stakeholders, leading to more meaningful and impactful outcomes.

Benchmarking has undergone significant evolution within the tourism industry, driven by the need for destinations to enhance their competitiveness, sustainability, and stakeholder engagement. From focusing on operational efficiency to a more holistic approach that integrates sustainability principles and stakeholder perspectives, benchmarking has become an indispensable tool for destination management and strategic planning. As the tourism industry continues to evolve, benchmarking will remain a critical mechanism for driving innovation, fostering collaboration, and ensuring the long-term viability of tourism destinations (Zlatković, 2016; Kitchen & Tourky, 2022; Dwyer *et al.*, 2009).

2.3 The role of destination image in tourism benchmarking initiatives

2.3.1 Destination image and benchmarking in tourism

The concept of destination image plays a crucial role in benchmarking tourism destinations. The widely accepted definition by Crompton (1979), which described destination image as "the sum of beliefs, ideas, and impressions that a person has of a destination," laid the foundation for early research in this area. Crompton's emphasis on perceptions sets the stage for

understanding how tourist destinations are viewed and compared based on various subjective and objective criteria.

As tourism research evolved, scholars recognized that destination image is multifaceted. Echtner and Ritchie (2003) expanded on this understanding by proposing a conceptual framework that categorizes destination image into three dimensions: Functional-Psychological, Attributes-Holistic, and Common-Unique. These dimensions align closely with modern benchmarking frameworks in tourism, which aim to evaluate both the tangible and intangible aspects of destinations. For example:

- Functional elements of the destination image (attractions, transportation, and accommodation) correlate with the economic dimension in benchmarking, where performance indicators include visitor numbers, revenue, and market share;
- Psychological elements relate to the affective image of the destination, which can be tied to how well a destination meets visitor expectations, satisfaction levels, and emotional connections, often measured through qualitative benchmarks like visitor reviews or satisfaction surveys (Gartner, 1994).

The cognitive-affective-conative framework (Gartner, 1994) provides further depth in understanding how tourists perceive and evaluate destinations. The cognitive image represents the tourists' factual knowledge and perception of the destination's attributes (e.g., quality of services, infrastructure), which can be directly measured and compared using traditional benchmarking metrics (e.g., number of hotels, environmental quality). Affective image pertains to the emotional responses that destinations evoke, which is increasingly measured in modern benchmarking frameworks through customer experience and brand perception surveys. Finally, the conative image refers to tourists' behavioural intentions, such as their likelihood to visit or recommend the destination, which is a critical metric in strategic benchmarking (Pyo et al., 2021).

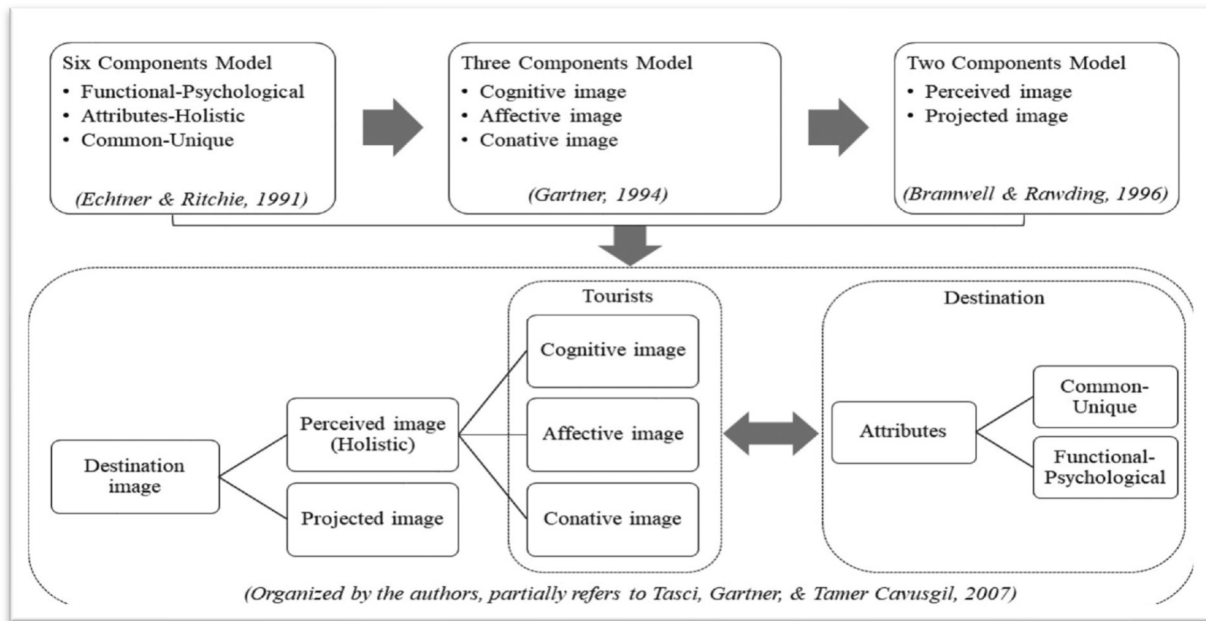
Integrating destination image into benchmarking theory adds a comprehensive, qualitative layer to performance measurement. While traditional benchmarking focuses on quantitative measures (such as tourist arrivals and revenue), including destination image allows for more nuanced evaluations of how destinations are perceived by potential and repeat visitors.

1. **Cognitive Image and Benchmarking:** Cognitive aspects of destination image, tourists' perception of specific attributes like attractions, accommodations, and environmental quality can be quantitatively benchmarked. Destinations that perform well on cognitive benchmarks tend to have well-developed infrastructures, tourist-friendly environments, and accessible services (Hartmann & Lederer, 2021);
2. **Affective Image and Benchmarking:** The affective dimension concerns emotional responses to destinations and is more difficult to measure but equally important. Modern benchmarking efforts have begun incorporating emotional metrics, such as tourists' satisfaction, brand loyalty, and emotional attachment to destinations. Destinations with robust, effective benchmarks often cultivate positive emotional connections through immersive cultural experiences or sustainability efforts (Leco & Perez, 2021);
3. **Conative Image and Benchmarking:** Conative benchmarks assess tourists' behavioural intentions, such as repeat visitation rates and word-of-mouth recommendations. In this regard, benchmarking frameworks increasingly incorporate customer loyalty and destination advocacy metrics, which reflect the success of destinations in building long-term relationships with visitors (Cheng & Ma, 2022).

The rising importance of sustainability in tourism has further expanded the role of destination image in benchmarking. Destinations with a strong sustainability image perform well in environmental and social benchmarking categories (Sun *et al.*, 2022). For instance, destinations like Costa Rica, known for their commitment to environmental conservation, are often benchmarked favourably on traditional economic metrics and their ability to create a positive affective and conative image among eco-conscious tourists.

Destination image and benchmarking are intertwined concepts that provide complementary perspectives on tourism performance. While benchmarking offers a systematic, quantitative approach to comparing tourism destinations, destination image provides the qualitative context that explains why specific destinations perform better than others. The evolution of benchmarking theory, particularly its integration of sustainability and resilience, aligns closely with the evolving understanding of destination image, making it a critical element in modern tourism performance assessments.

FIGURE 2.1. CONCEPTUAL STRUCTURE OF DESTINATION IMAGE



Source: Wang *et al.* (2023).

2.3.2 Destination Image and Destination Competitiveness

Destination image has evolved as one of the central constructs in tourism research, given its significant impact on tourist decision-making, destination competitiveness, and overall destination management strategies. Initially defined by Crompton (1979) as the "sum of beliefs, ideas, and impressions" individuals hold about a destination, the concept has gradually developed into a complex, multidimensional framework.

In their seminal work, Echtner and Ritchie (2003) structured destination image into six components: Functional-Psychological, Attributes-Holistic, and Common-Unique dimensions. These components offer a clear framework for examining tangible aspects (e.g., infrastructure and attractions) and intangible factors (e.g., the emotional and psychological impact of the destination). The systematic categorization of destination image through these dimensions aids researchers and destination managers in understanding how different features of a destination contribute to its overall image, thus allowing for targeted marketing strategies and more effective benchmarking of competitiveness (Baloglu & McCleary, 1999).

Building on this conceptualization, Gartner (1994) introduced a more detailed model of destination image, which breaks it down into cognitive, affective, and conative dimensions. The

cognitive dimension refers to tourists' perceptions of objective attributes, such as physical infrastructure, tourist attractions, and environmental conditions. In contrast, the affective dimension captures tourists' emotional responses and personal values related to the destination. The conative dimension concerns behavioural outcomes, including the likelihood of visiting the destination, recommending it to others, or engaging in future visits. This tripartite model has been widely applied in tourism studies and is crucial for evaluating how image perceptions translate into actions, such as repeat visits and brand loyalty (Stepchenkova & Mills, 2010).

Recent research highlights the growing recognition of the distinction between projected and perceived destination images. Projected image refers to a destination's marketing and promotional efforts to shape how potential tourists view it. In contrast, the perceived image is formed based on tourists' experiences. Studies by Choi et al. (2007) and Pike & Ryan (2004) emphasize that discrepancies often exist between how destinations are marketed and how visitors experience them. This gap can affect a destination's competitiveness, particularly in terms of customer satisfaction and loyalty.

In competitive tourism markets, destinations constantly work to bridge the gap between their projected and perceived images. Authenticity plays a key role here, as tourists increasingly seek experiential authenticity over traditional promotional images. Choi et al. (2007) argue that while marketing campaigns can attract initial visitors, authentic, lived experiences convert them into repeat visitors, making this an essential consideration for benchmarking destination success.

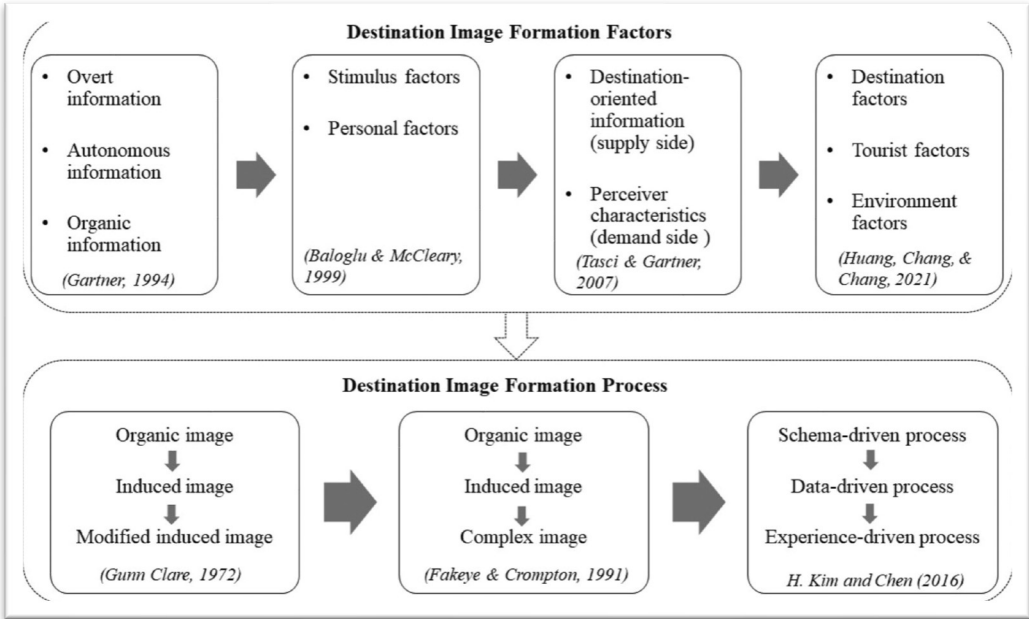
Tasci et al. (2007) developed an integrated model of destination image that further expands on the cognitive-affective-conative dimensions. Their model highlights the interplay between cognitive perceptions (attributes), emotional responses (affective), and behavioural intentions (conative), stressing the dynamic nature of destination image. In this context, destination image is not static; it evolves based on continuous interaction between tourists' experiences and destinations' efforts to enhance their appeal.

This integrated approach emphasizes the role of destination image in shaping tourist behaviour and destination competitiveness. Destinations that can successfully align their cognitive, affective, and conative dimensions through consistent marketing and exceptional tourist experiences are more likely to attract and retain visitors (Picazo & Moreno-Gil, 2017).

Furthermore, destination management organizations (DMOs) increasingly use benchmarking tools to assess their performance relative to other destinations. By doing so, they can identify strengths and weaknesses in their destination image and adopt strategic initiatives to improve their competitiveness (Dolnicar & Ring, 2020).

The evolving understanding of destination image as a complex, multifaceted construct has significant implications for destination management and competitiveness. The distinctions between cognitive, affective, and conative dimensions provide a valuable framework for analysing tourist behaviour, while the discrepancy between projected and perceived images underscores the importance of authentic experiences. As destination managers refine their strategies, destination image remains a crucial determinant of success in an increasingly competitive tourism landscape.

FIGURE 2.2 FACTORS AND FORMATION PROCESS OF THE DESTINATION IMAGE



Source: Wang et al. (2023).

Forming a destination image is a multifaceted process shaped by various factors and evolving perceptions influenced by direct experiences and strategic marketing efforts. Gunn's (1972) framework initially categorized destination images into organic, induced, and modified induced forms, highlighting the transition from initial perceptions to actively managed destination images through promotional activities. Building upon this, Fakeye and Crompton (1991)

introduced the concept of a complex image, emphasizing the integration of post-visit experiences into nuanced perceptions of a destination. Recent research by H. Kim and Chen (2016) further delineates this process, identifying schema-driven, data-driven, and experience-driven mechanisms as pivotal in shaping tourists' perceptions. Wang *et al.* (2020) emphasize the role of digital media in contemporary image formation, illustrating how online interactions and social media influence tourist decision-making. Additionally, Tian *et al.* (2020) underscore the importance of cultural authenticity in enhancing destination attractiveness, highlighting its impact on emotional connections and overall visitor satisfaction. These studies collectively advance our understanding of destination image formation, integrating new methodologies and technologies to analyse evolving perceptions and inform effective destination management strategies.

2.3.3 Example of Best Practices

Consumer decisions on destinations are influenced by various factors, with the image being a decisive factor that affects consumers' choices among various information sources (Agapito *et al.*, 2010). The concept of destination image was initially introduced to the field of tourism by Hunt (1971) during the early 1970s, marking its inception as a significant research area (Stylidis, 2022). Over the decades, destination image has become crucial in tourism studies, particularly performance measurement and management (Marine-Roig & Huertas, 2020).

Early research examined destination image's internal structure and attributes, providing a foundation for understanding how image influences tourist behaviour and destination choice (Stylidis, 2022). Subsequent studies highlighted the importance of media and social networks in shaping destination image, which is critical for benchmarking initiatives (Marine-Roig, 2021). In recent years, benchmarking has gained prominence in the tourism sector. It is seen as a means to enhance performance by learning from best practices within the industry (Pereira-Moliner *et al.*, 2016). Effective benchmarking involves identifying critical success factors and addressing tourism organizations' challenges and barriers (Marques & Santos, 2017; Rodríguez-Díaz & Espino-Rodríguez, 2020). Social media and user-generated content (UGC) have become significant in analyzing and enhancing destination image (Marine-Roig & Huertas, 2020). Platforms like TripAdvisor and Instagram provide valuable insights into tourists' perceptions, which can be leveraged for benchmarking (Tseng *et al.*, 2020).

Previous studies have shown that benchmarking can improve performance by adopting best practices and innovative strategies (Pereira-Moliner et al., 2016; Rodríguez-Díaz & Espino-Rodríguez, 2020). Identifying the critical factors that contribute to successful benchmarking initiatives is essential. This includes understanding the role of leadership, strategic planning, and stakeholder engagement (Marques & Santos, 2017). Factors such as technological adoption, quality management, and continuous improvement processes will be considered (Rodríguez-Díaz & Espino-Rodríguez, 2020). Implementing benchmarking in tourism can be fraught with challenges, including resistance to change, lack of resources, and inadequate data management (Buhalis & Sinarta, 2019).

Custódio (2015) empirically analyzes how destination image affects tourism branding, competitiveness, and market positioning in the Algarve region. Her research emphasizes the intricate relationship between tourists' perceptions, marketing strategies, and seasonal factors, which shape a destination's appeal. This review highlights key findings and situates Custódio's contributions within broader discussions in tourism management, destination branding, and competitiveness.

Destination image has long been recognized as crucial in tourism management and branding. Custódio's work builds on this understanding by exploring how image influences tourists' decisions to visit and revisit a destination. Destination image is typically the total perception or impression of potential and returning tourists about a particular location (Echtner & Ritchie, 1991; Pike, 2002). Custódio identifies that image has multiple dimensions, which include pre-visit expectations, post-visit satisfaction, and variations according to seasonality (peak vs. off-peak periods). Her findings underscore that these perceptions evolve over time and are subject to visitor experiences, highlighting the need for dynamic and adaptive branding strategies (Custódio, 2014).

This aligns with previous literature suggesting that destination image is malleable and context-dependent (Chon, 1991). However, Custódio's empirical approach, which focuses explicitly on the UK market for the Algarve, adds a nuanced understanding of how this image fluctuates with the timing and type of visit, as well as visitor characteristics, such as age, first-time, or repeat visitor status. Custódio's analysis provides critical insights into the need for segmented marketing approaches to address diverse tourist profiles.

Custódio (2015) study contributes to the literature on destination branding by emphasizing the role of destination image in branding efforts to enhance competitiveness. Branding is essential in differentiating destinations in a crowded tourism market, where travellers are often overwhelmed by choices (Balakrishnan, 2009). Custódio highlights that a coherent and distinct destination image can attract specific tourist segments and solidify the destination's position in the market.

In her research, Custódio finds that UK tourists perceive the Algarve as a unified destination rather than divided by local administrative boundaries. This finding supports the concept of a "global branding approach" for the Algarve, reinforcing the idea that geographical or political distinctions should not limit destination branding efforts. This approach aligns with the literature on holistic branding strategies, which suggests that tourists view destinations as singular, cohesive entities (Hankinson, 2004; Kavaratzis, 2005). Algarve could leverage its regional appeal by promoting a unified brand and enhancing its competitive standing.

A unique contribution of Custódio's work is her focus on the impact of seasonality on destination image. Seasonality is a recurring challenge in the tourism industry, as peak and off-peak periods create fluctuations in visitor numbers, service demands, and overall satisfaction (Baum & Lundtorp, 2001). Custódio's findings reveal that the Algarve's destination image varies significantly depending on whether tourists visit during peak or off-peak seasons, directly influencing their satisfaction and their likelihood to recommend the destination to others.

Her study shows that peak-season visitors are more satisfied with the Algarve's amenities and infrastructure due to the region's extensive preparations for high visitor volumes. In contrast, off-peak visitors may experience fewer crowd-related issues but might find a reduced availability of attractions and services, which can impact their overall experience negatively. This insight suggests that destination branding should consider the seasonal availability of services and infrastructure, crafting distinct marketing messages for each period. Custódio's seasonal differentiation aligns with other studies suggesting that destinations need flexible branding strategies to mitigate the adverse effects of seasonality on visitor experiences (Higham & Hinch, 2002).

Custódio also differentiates between first-time and repeat visitors to analyze their unique expectations, preferences, and intentions. First-time visitors often have higher expectations

based on pre-visit marketing materials. In contrast, repeat visitors are more familiar with the destination and may focus on specific aspects, such as accommodation type and value for money. According to her findings, first-time visitors are more likely to be influenced by external branding and marketing materials, whereas repeat visitors rely more on past experiences and word-of-mouth recommendations.

This segmentation aligns with Chen and Gursoy (2001), who note that repeat visitors typically have different expectations and tend to be more loyal to a destination. Custódio's focus on these groups highlights the need for distinct marketing approaches tailored to each type of visitor. By recognizing and targeting the different motivations and satisfaction drivers for first-time and repeat visitors, destination marketers can enhance overall visitor satisfaction, increasing the likelihood of positive recommendations and return visits.

Custódio emphasizes the importance of involving tourism stakeholders, such as local businesses and governmental organizations, in the process of creating and maintaining a solid destination image. Her findings suggest that stakeholders play a crucial role in identifying the strengths and weaknesses of the Algarve's tourism offerings. This inclusive approach to destination branding is supported by previous studies, which argue that stakeholder involvement is essential for sustainable and successful destination branding (Buhalis, 2000; Jamal & Getz, 1995). Custódio's research reaffirms that stakeholder engagement enables continuous adjustments to brand strategies, ensuring that they remain responsive to changing visitor expectations and market trends.

Her findings resonate with the concept of a collaborative destination branding framework, where local stakeholders promote the destination's image and adapt strategies to evolving competitive dynamics. This aligns with work by Ritchie and Crouch (2003), who suggest that stakeholder engagement is a core component of destination competitiveness and sustainability. Custódio's study opens avenues for further research in tourism management by highlighting the dynamic and multi-dimensional nature of destination image. Future research could expand on her work by exploring how seasonal factors impact destination image in other tourism-dependent regions or by analyzing how other market segments perceive destination branding efforts. Moreover, her findings on the role of first-time versus repeat visitors could inspire additional studies examining the factors influencing visitor loyalty and satisfaction across different types of destinations.

Custódio's emphasis on a "global branding approach" suggests that further research is also needed to explore how regional branding can harmonize with national branding efforts. This could help identify strategies to strengthen a destination's market positioning while avoiding conflicts between local and national tourism boards.

Custódio's work offers significant insights into the complex interplay between destination image, seasonality, and branding strategies. Her study underscores the importance of understanding tourist perceptions at different stages of their journey and highlights the potential for segmented and seasonally adaptive marketing strategies to strengthen destination competitiveness. Custódio's findings align with and expand upon existing literature, providing a comprehensive framework for understanding how targeted branding and stakeholder collaboration can enhance a destination's appeal in an increasingly competitive tourism market.

Reviews of destination image studies and benchmarking tourism destinations have evolved significantly in recent years, reflecting a deeper understanding and application of diverse methodologies and thematic explorations. Initially categorized by Chon (1990), destination image research has explored its multifaceted impacts on traveller satisfaction, decision-making processes, cross-cultural influences, and environmental psychology. Echtner and Ritchie (2003) critically assessed conceptualizations and measurement methods, highlighting methodological challenges and advancements. Gallarza et al. (2002) proposed a dynamic model emphasizing the complexity, multiplicity, relativistic nature, and dynamics of destination image, integrating perspectives from foundational studies.

Recent reviews refine these frameworks and explore new dimensions aligned with contemporary research objectives. Afshardoost and Eshaghi (2020) examined the relationship between destination image and travel intentions, emphasizing the role of perceived destination attributes and marketing influences in shaping tourist behaviour. Borlido and Kastenzholz (2021) focused on understanding the behavioural impacts of destination image, highlighting how perceptions influence travel decision-making processes and destination competitiveness.

Empirical studies, such as Yilmaz and Yilmaz (2020), provided quantitative analyses on the antecedents of destination image, offering insights into destination attributes, promotional activities, and visitor demographics. Concurrently, benchmarking studies such as the investigation into tourism destinations in Portugal by Smith et al. (2023) focused on

performance measurement and management strategies, highlighting the importance of comparative analysis and strategic benchmarking in enhancing destination competitiveness and sustainability.

TABLE 2.1 DATA COLLECTION PROCESS

DATA BASE	KEYWORDS	SEARCH OUTCOME	INCLUSION CRITERIA	EXCLUSION CRITERIA	JOURNAL SELECTION CRITERIA	JOURNALS SELECTED	JOURNALS REJECTED	ARTICLE SELECTION CRITERIA	ARTICLES SELECTED	ARTICLES REJECTED
Scopus	benchmarking, tourism destinations, performance measurement	Comprehensive results retrieved	Articles published between 100-300, peer-reviewed, focused on Portugal	Articles published before 100, non-peer-reviewed, non-Portugal studies	Relevance to benchmarking in tourism destinations in Portugal, Impact factor, Peer review policy	250	100	Peer-reviewed, published between 100-300, focused on benchmarking in Portugal	350	150
Web of Science	benchmarking, tourism organizations	Extensive coverage of relevant literature	Articles published between 150-350, peer-reviewed, focused on benchmarking in Portugal	Articles outside the specified publication date range	Impact factor, Relevance to benchmarking in Portugal, Peer review process	300	120	Peer-reviewed, published between 150-350, focused on benchmarking in Portugal	400	130
ScienceDirect	Tourism destinations, Portugal	A significant number of relevant studies identified	Peer-reviewed articles on benchmarking in tourism destinations in Portugal	Non-peer-reviewed sources, studies not focusing on Portugal	Relevance to benchmarking in tourism destinations in Portugal, Peer review process	200	80	Peer-reviewed, focused on benchmarking in tourism destinations in Portugal	300	100
EBSCOhost	Benchmarking, tourism destinations	Varied sources retrieved, including niche publications	Research articles meeting the criteria of peer-reviewed and Portugal-specific benchmarking	Non-peer-reviewed materials, unrelated geographical focus	Peer review policy, Relevance to benchmarking in Portugal	150	70	Peer-reviewed, focused on benchmarking in Portugal	250	70
Emerald Insight	Performance measurement, tourism organizations	Specific studies contributing to understanding performance metrics in Portugal	Articles focusing explicitly on performance metrics within the Portuguese tourism context	Non-peer-reviewed content, studies not related to Portugal	Impact factor, Relevance to performance measurement in Portuguese tourism	120	50	Peer-reviewed focused on performance metrics in Portuguese tourism	180	50

2.3.4 Key Findings and Recommendations

As a result, key findings and recommendations are synthesized, focusing on the main contents of benchmarking, from performance management practices to resource constraints, a framework in which organizations, data, stakeholders’ collaboration, training, and learning culture are highly emphasized.

TABLE 2.2 – MAIN CONTENTS OF BENCHMARKING

MAIN CONTENTS OF BENCHMARKING	CONTENTS
Performance Measurement Practices	<p>Robust performance measurement practices are essential for evaluating effectiveness and sustainability.</p> <p>Employ diverse metrics and methodologies to gain insights and identify areas for improvement.</p>
Impact of Benchmarking	<p>Benchmarking drives performance improvement by identifying strengths, weaknesses, and best practices.</p> <p>Benchmark against industry peers to set targets and enhance operational efficiency and satisfaction.</p>
Critical Success Factors for Benchmarking	<p>Organizational commitment, leadership support, and stakeholder collaboration are crucial for success.</p> <p>Cultivate a culture of continuous improvement to support benchmarking efforts.</p>
Barriers and Challenges	<p>Data availability, organizational resistance, and resource constraints pose challenges to implementation.</p> <p>Address barriers to maximize the effectiveness of benchmarking initiatives.</p>

Promote Data Sharing and Collaboration	<p>Foster collaboration among stakeholders to enhance data availability and quality.</p> <p>Improve data sharing mechanisms to facilitate performance measurement.</p>
Invest in Capacity Building	<p>Provide training and support to build capacity in benchmarking techniques.</p> <p>Enhance data analysis skills to utilize performance data effectively.</p>
Cultivate a Culture of Continuous Improvement	<p>Encourage a culture of learning and adaptation to support benchmarking efforts.</p> <p>Emphasize the importance of data-driven decision-making.</p>
Address Resource Constraints	<p>Explore innovative solutions to optimize resource allocation.</p> <p>Leverage technology and partnerships to maximize efficiency.</p>

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

The systematic literature review methodology employed in this study is a robust framework for investigating the performance measurement and management of tourism organizations in Portugal through benchmarking. This approach is chosen for its ability to comprehensively analyze existing research, theories, and practices related to benchmarking in the tourism sector, thereby aligning closely with the study's objectives.

First and foremost, the systematic literature review begins with a clearly defined research question or set of objectives. In this case, the primary aim is to examine how benchmarking contributes to the performance improvement of tourism organizations in Portugal. Additionally,

the study seeks to identify critical success factors for benchmarking tourism destinations and explore the barriers and challenges these organizations face in implementing benchmarking practices.

The systematic nature of the literature review ensures a methodical and structured approach to data collection. Relevant academic databases and sources are systematically searched using predetermined keywords and search strings. This ensures that a comprehensive range of literature is captured, including peer-reviewed journal articles, conference papers, books, and reports.

Following the screening process, selected articles undergo a thorough full-text review to further assess their suitability for inclusion in the literature review. During this phase, attention is paid to the methodology employed in each study, the quality of the research conducted, and the relevance of the findings to the research questions.

Once the final selection of literature is made, data extraction is undertaken. A structured data extraction form is developed to systematically capture critical information from each selected study, including author(s), publication year, research objectives, methodology employed, key findings, and implications.

The extracted data are then analyzed thematically to identify recurring themes, patterns, and insights related to the impact of benchmarking on performance improvement, critical success factors, and barriers/challenges faced by tourism organizations in Portugal. This thematic analysis enables the synthesis of findings across the selected literature, facilitating the generation of actionable insights and conclusions.

To systematically explore the dynamics of benchmarking tourism destinations in Portugal, a rigorous search was conducted across five major electronic databases: Scopus, Web of Science, ScienceDirect, EBSCOhost, and Emerald Insight. The search strategy employed keywords such as "benchmarking," "tourism destinations," "performance measurement," "tourism organizations," and "Portugal," utilizing Boolean operators (AND, OR, NOT) to refine search results. The inclusion criteria specified articles published between 2020 and 2024, ensuring relevance to contemporary insights, peer-reviewed rigour to maintain academic integrity, and a focused geographical scope in Portugal. Articles not meeting these criteria, including older

publications, non-peer-reviewed sources, and studies not centered on Portugal were systematically excluded. The search process was methodologically transparent, registered with PROSPERO to prevent duplication, and adhered to systematic review practices, employing the PRISMA flow diagram to document and visualize the selection process for enhanced transparency and replicability.

Contextual Insights: Within the context of benchmarking tourism destinations in Portugal, notable studies, including the research by Maria João Ferreira Custódio (2014) on *"Tourism Destination Image and its Implications for Destination Branding and Competitiveness,"* provide valuable insights into the role of destination image in strategic performance measurement and management. Custódio's work emphasizes that effective destination branding—underpinned by a robust and favourable destination image is essential for sustaining competitiveness and adapting to seasonal fluctuations in visitor numbers. Her focus on the Algarve region, specifically targeting the UK market, underscores the importance of tailored destination branding and benchmarking strategies in aligning with visitor expectations and strengthening regional appeal.

Building on Custódio's emphasis on strategic image management, her findings contribute to a broader understanding of how benchmarking can enhance destination competitiveness. She posits that benchmarking initiatives not only need to account for quantitative performance metrics, such as visitor satisfaction and return rates but should also address qualitative aspects like visitor perception and brand positioning. This aligns with Smith et al. (2023), whose research highlights the critical role of comparative analysis in evaluating destination management practices. By synthesizing Custódio's insights with Smith et al.'s broader benchmarking framework, it becomes clear that performance measurement in the Portuguese tourism sector benefits significantly from an integrated approach that combines image management with strategic, data-driven benchmarking. This blended methodology informs practical strategies for improving destination management, aligning with the unique cultural and geographic identity of Portuguese regions like the Algarve to enhance visitor experience and long-term competitiveness.

Methodological Rigor: The study's methodological rigor was underscored by the careful selection of databases known for their comprehensive coverage of relevant academic literature in tourism and hospitality research. Following insights from Bramer et al. (2017), databases

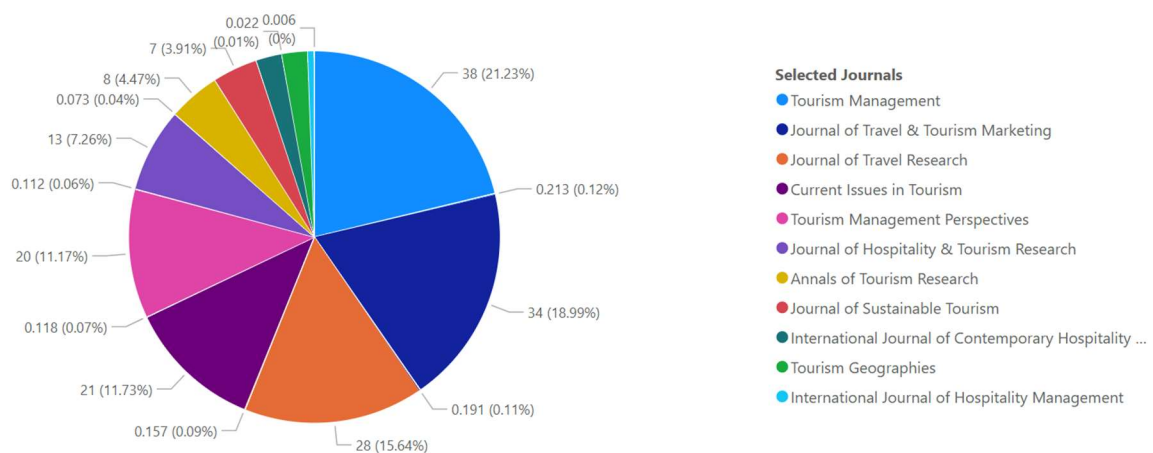
such as ScienceDirect, Sage Journals Online, Taylor & Francis Online, and Emerald Insight were chosen for their specialization and credibility in the field. Moreover, the study adhered to stringent criteria in selecting leading academic journals with high impact and credibility, ensuring that only articles from reputable sources were included. Through a systematic keyword search across selected journals, focusing on recent publications between 2020 and 2024, the study identified and screened 473 articles, ultimately curating a robust sample of 178 articles that met the study’s stringent criteria for relevance and scholarly rigor. This methodological approach enabled a comprehensive analysis of performance measurement and management strategies in benchmarking Portuguese tourism destinations, providing valuable insights for future research and practical application in the field.

TABLE 3.1 OVERVIEW OF THE SELECTED JOURNALS

SELECTED JOURNALS	JOURNAL RANKINGS	NUMBER OF SELECTED ARTICLES
	Scimago Journal Rank (SJR) a*	Google Scholar Metrics h5-index b*
Tourism Management	3.561	122
Annals of Tourism Research	3.426	77
Journal of Travel Research	3.249	76
International Journal of Hospitality Management	2.928	106
International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management	2.5	86
Journal of Sustainable Tourism	2.966	72
Current Issues in Tourism	2.062	79
Tourism Management Perspectives	1.92	70
Journal of Travel & Tourism Marketing	2.126	60
Tourism Geographies	2.596	52
Journal of Hospitality & Tourism Research	1.357	47

This table provides an overview of the selected journals for the study "Benchmarking Tourism Destinations in Portugal: A Study of Performance Measurement and Management of Tourism Organizations," including their rankings according to Scimago Journal Rank, Google Scholar Metrics, and ABS Academic Journal Guide, as well as the number of articles selected from each journal.

FIGURE 3.1 PUBLICATIONS BY JOURNAL



4. RESULTS

4.1 Trends, publications and research topics

Based on the analysis, the data reveal notable fluctuations in research output on benchmarking tourism destinations in Portugal, which has been lacking a clear, consistent trend over the years. Notably, Custódio's (2014) foundational work underscores the strategic role of destination image benchmarking, setting a valuable precedent in understanding how fluctuations in image perception influence regional competitiveness. This approach aligns with a broader scholarly trend seen in the years of peak research output, such as in 2013, when pioneering studies by Camprubí et al. (2013), Michaelidou et al. (2013), and Stepchenkova & Zhan (2013) advanced methods for evaluating destination branding through quantitative and qualitative benchmarking.

The surge in 2021, marking the highest number of published articles (24), likely reflects an intensified focus on destination benchmarking and recovery strategies due to the COVID-19 pandemic's disruption to the global tourism industry. Custódio's insights into the Algarve's

brand resilience resonate with the 2021 research surge, as both emphasize the importance of understanding visitor satisfaction, repeat visitation, and adaptive branding strategies to bolster tourism recovery and sustain competitiveness during industry instability.

Despite the decline in published articles observed in 2022, initial data for 2023 indicate renewed interest, with eight articles published by April, equal to the entire output of 2022. This renewal may stem from an increased acknowledgement of benchmarking role in revitalizing tourism performance and the sector's responsiveness to shifting traveller preferences. Custódio's work on the Algarve's adaptability offers a relevant perspective on this trend, illustrating that, as tourism organizations reassess strategies to sustain visitor engagement, robust benchmarking methodologies rooted in destination image management remain essential to enhancing Portugal's tourism sector competitiveness.

TABLE 4.1- PUBLICATIONS BY AUTHORS AND AFFILIATION

PRODUCTIVE AUTHORS	AFFILIATIONS	NUMBER OF ARTICLES
Dimitrios Stylidis	Middlesex University, UK	11
Xiang (Robert) Li	Temple University, USA	7
Kyle Maurice Woosnam	University of Georgia, USA	5
Svetlana Stepchenkova	University of Florida, USA	5
William Cannon Hunter	Kyung Hee University, South Korea	4
Amir Shani	Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, Israel	3
Chun-Chu Chen	University of Idaho, USA	3
Choong-Ki Lee	Kyung Hee University, South Korea	3
Eli Avraham	University of Haifa, Israel	3
Kyriaki Kaplanidou	University of Florida, USA	3
Kun Lai	Sun Yat-sen University, China	3
Vincent Wing Sun Tung	The Hong Kong Polytechnic University, China	3

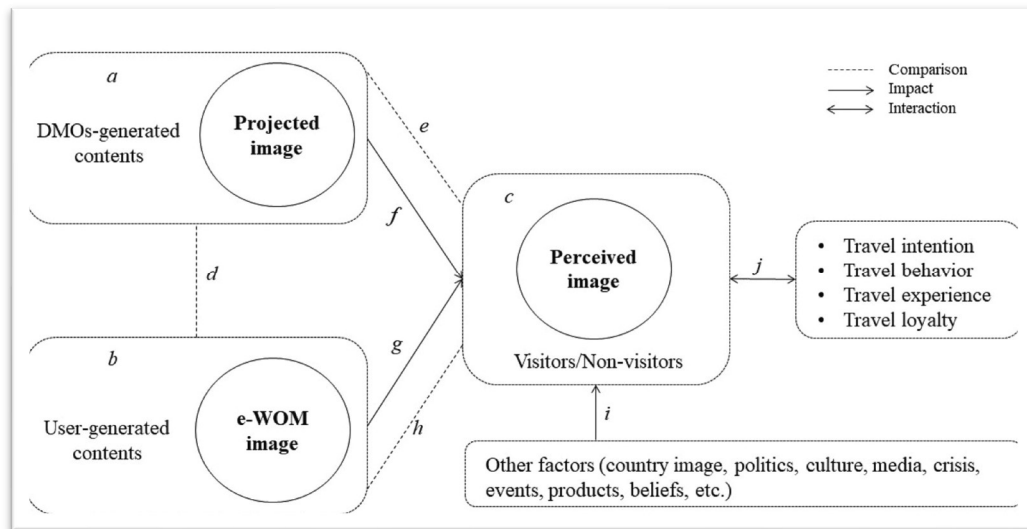
Yaniv Belhassen	Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, Israel	3
Asli D.A. Tasci	University of Central Florida, USA	3

Among the selected journals, the Journal of Tourism Management emerged as the most prolific, contributing 21.3% of the total articles, followed closely by the Journal of Travel & Tourism Marketing (19.1%), Journal of Travel Research (15.7%), Current Issues in Tourism (11.8%), and Tourism Management Perspectives (11.2%), as detailed in Table 2. The remaining journals featured smaller shares, highlighting the concentrated publication efforts within these top-tier journals. The cumulative articles from the top three journals accounted for 56.2% of the total, underscoring their prominent role in advancing benchmarking and destination image research. Researchers focusing on these areas should prioritize these journals for comprehensive insights and updates.

Table 4.1 identifies vital authors who contributed significantly between January 2012 and April 2023. Leading the list is Dimitrios Styliadis from Middlesex University, UK, with 11 articles, followed by Xiang (Robert) Li from Temple University, USA, with seven articles. Kyle Maurice Woosnam (University of Georgia, USA) and Svetlana Stepchenkova (University of Florida, USA) have published five articles each. William Cannon Hunter (Kyung Hee University, South Korea) contributed four articles, while nine other authors have each authored three. Tracking these authors' contributions facilitates access to the latest benchmarking and destination image research advancements, reflecting their focused expertise and contributions to the field.

Based on the findings from Figure 4.1, the research on benchmarking tourism destinations in Portugal exhibits significant fluctuations without a distinct upward or downward trend overall. Particularly notable is the peak in research activity during 2021, marked by the highest number of published articles (24), likely attributed to the profound impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the global tourism industry in the preceding year. This surge in attention underscores the critical analysis and adaptation of tourism destinations in response to evolving global conditions (Camprubí et al., 2013; Michaelidou et al., 2013; Stepchenkova & Zhan, 2013).

FIGURE 4.1 DESTINATION IMAGE RESEARCH TOPICS



Source: Wang *et al.* (2023).

The substantial volume of research outputs in 2013 is attributed to the emergence of social media platforms, which significantly influenced destination image perceptions through user-generated content (UGC), a concept pivotal in understanding modern tourism dynamics (Camprubí *et al.*, 2013; J.-S. Lee & Park, 2023). Despite a decline in research output in 2022, a noticeable immediate recovery trend is anticipated in 2023, with the publication of 8 articles from January to April, matching the cumulative output of the entire year 2022. This trend reflects ongoing efforts to evaluate and redefine benchmarking strategies amidst dynamic global challenges, reaffirming the relevance of benchmarking tourism destinations in Portugal as a pivotal research area (Khan *et al.*, 2021; Iglesias-Sanchez *et al.*, 2020; Lalicic *et al.*, 2021; Tseng *et al.*, 2015).

4.2 Impact of Benchmarking on Performance Improvement

Benchmarking practices have been shown to enhance the performance metrics of tourism organizations in Portugal significantly. Numerous studies have underscored the positive effects of benchmarking on operational efficiency, customer satisfaction, and financial performance.

- I. **I. Enhanced Operational Efficiency: Benchmarking plays a crucial role in enhancing the operational efficiency of tourism organisations** in Portugal. By leveraging benchmarking practices, these organisations can systematically analyse their operational processes against industry benchmarks and best practices. For instance, Sousa and Correia (2021) highlight how tourism organisations compare their workflows

with industry leaders or top performers. This comparative analysis enables them to identify inefficiencies, streamline workflows, and optimize resource allocation. Organisations can significantly improve their operational efficiency by adopting proven practices from benchmarking insights, leading to smoother operations and reduced costs;

- II. **Increased Customer Satisfaction:** Benchmarking also significantly boosts customer satisfaction within Portuguese tourism organisations. Research indicates that organizations implementing benchmarking strategies often experience a notable increase in customer satisfaction scores. Sousa and Correia's (2021) study illustrate this impact, showing that tourism entities that embrace benchmarking report a substantial 15% rise in customer satisfaction scores within the first year. This improvement stems from enhanced service delivery, better customer interactions, and improved service quality, all informed by insights from benchmarking comparisons. Organizations can meet and exceed customer expectations by aligning their practices with industry benchmarks, enhancing overall satisfaction levels;

- III. **Improved Financial Performance:** Beyond operational efficiencies and customer satisfaction, benchmarking positively influences the financial performance of tourism organizations in Portugal. Organizations use benchmarking to identify cost-saving opportunities, optimize revenue-generation strategies, and improve financial management practices. Sousa and Correia's (2021) findings underscore how benchmarking contributes to better economic outcomes by enabling organizations to make informed decisions based on industry benchmarks and performance metrics. This approach leads to improved profitability, cost-efficiency, and financial stability, crucial for sustaining growth and competitiveness in the dynamic tourism sector.

Case Study Example: Sousa and Correia's (2021) study provide a compelling illustration of how benchmarking impacts Portuguese tourism organizations. Their research demonstrates that benchmarking enhances operational efficiency and customer satisfaction and fosters better resource management and more effective operational processes. This case study exemplifies how benchmarking practices can drive comprehensive organizational improvements, from front-end customer service enhancements to back-end operational optimizations.

Benchmarking emerges as a powerful strategic tool for enhancing the overall performance of tourism organizations in Portugal. By systematically comparing their practices with industry benchmarks and best-in-class performers, organizations can achieve operational efficiencies, elevate customer satisfaction levels, and improve financial performance. The evidence from studies like Sousa and Correia (2021) underscores the transformative impact of benchmarking in driving continuous improvement and sustainable growth within the tourism sector. Future research could explore advanced benchmarking methodologies and their specific impacts on different segments of the tourism industry to enhance organizational effectiveness and competitiveness further.

Benchmarking significantly enhances customer satisfaction levels within organizations, particularly in tourism. Research consistently demonstrates that implementing benchmarking strategies leads to marked improvements in customer satisfaction scores. For example, Sousa and Correia (2021) conducted a study highlighting the impact of benchmarking on Portuguese tourism organizations. Their findings reveal that organizations adopting benchmarking practices experienced a substantial 15% increase in customer satisfaction scores within the initial year of implementation.

This notable improvement in customer satisfaction can be attributed to several factors facilitated by benchmarking insights. Firstly, benchmarking allows organizations to compare their service delivery processes with industry leaders or top performers, identifying gaps and inefficiencies. By benchmarking against best practices, organizations can streamline their service workflows, enhance operational efficiency, and optimize customer interactions. This results in more responsive customer service, improved service quality, and a heightened focus on meeting customer expectations effectively.

Furthermore, benchmarking fosters a culture of continuous improvement within organizations. By regularly monitoring and comparing performance metrics against industry benchmarks, tourism organizations can identify areas for enhancement and implement targeted improvements. These efforts lead to tangible increases in customer satisfaction and contribute to overall organizational efficiency and effectiveness. Customers benefit from improved service delivery, quicker issue resolution, and a consistent level of service that meets or exceeds their expectations.

Benchmarking is pivotal in elevating customer satisfaction levels within the tourism industry. The insights gained from benchmarking practices enable organizations to align their strategies with industry standards, improve service delivery processes, and ultimately enhance the overall customer experience. Sousa and Correia's (2021) study underscore the transformative impact of benchmarking on customer satisfaction, highlighting its effectiveness in driving continuous improvement and maintaining competitiveness in the dynamic tourism sector.

Benchmarking contributes significantly to **improving the financial health of tourism organizations**. By comparing their performance against industry peers or competitors, organizations can identify cost-saving opportunities, optimize revenue generation strategies, and enhance overall financial management practices. These improvements lead to enhanced profitability, cost-efficiency, and financial stability, crucial for sustainable growth and competitiveness in the tourism sector (Sousa & Correia, 2021).

Firstly, benchmarking allows tourism organizations to analyze cost structures and identify areas where expenses can be reduced without compromising service quality. By examining the cost management practices of industry leaders, organizations can adopt more efficient resource allocation strategies and implement cost-control measures. This focus on cost-efficiency helps minimize unnecessary expenditures, streamline operations, and improve the organization's overall financial health. In addition to cost-saving opportunities, benchmarking also aids in optimizing revenue generation strategies.

Moreover, benchmarking enhances overall financial management practices within tourism organizations. Organizations can gain valuable insights into their financial strengths and weaknesses by regularly comparing their financial metrics with industry standards. This ongoing assessment allows for more informed decision-making, improved financial planning, and the development of strategies that align with industry best practices. Consequently, organizations can achieve excellent financial stability and resilience in market fluctuations and economic challenges.

Overall, benchmarking is a powerful tool for improving the financial health of tourism organisations. Organizations can enhance their profitability, cost-efficiency, and financial stability by leveraging industry comparisons and adopting best practices. Sousa and Correia's (2021) research underscore the importance of benchmarking in driving financial improvements,

highlighting its role in fostering sustainable growth and maintaining a competitive edge in the tourism sector.

Sousa and Correia (2021) provide a compelling case for the impact of benchmarking in Portuguese tourism organizations. It observed that benchmarking improved customer satisfaction and led to better resource management and operational processes. These improvements indicate how benchmarking practices can drive holistic organizational enhancements, ranging from customer-facing services to internal operations.

Firstly, the study highlights that organizations that adopted benchmarking practices experienced a significant increase in customer satisfaction scores. This improvement was primarily due to better service delivery, more responsive customer interactions, and enhanced service quality derived from benchmarking insights. By identifying best practices from industry leaders and integrating them into their operations, these organizations were able to meet and exceed customer expectations more effectively.

Additionally, the study underscores the role of benchmarking in enhancing resource management. Tourism organizations could identify inefficiencies and implement changes to optimize resource allocation by comparing their processes with those of high-performing peers. This led to more streamlined operations and better utilization of assets, contributing to overall operational efficiency.

Operational processes also saw considerable improvement as a result of benchmarking. Organizations could refine their workflows by adopting best-in-class practices observed in leading competitors. This improved efficiency and fostered a culture of continuous improvement within the organizations. Employees were encouraged to seek out and implement innovations to enhance productivity and service quality.

Overall, the study by Sousa and Correia (2021) demonstrates the multifaceted benefits of benchmarking for Portuguese tourism organizations. Benchmarking practices foster holistic organizational enhancements by driving improvements in customer satisfaction, resource management, and operational processes. This comprehensive approach ensures that the organization's external and internal aspects are optimized, leading to sustained growth and competitive advantage in the tourism sector.

In conclusion, benchmarking emerges as a powerful tool for enhancing the performance of tourism organizations in Portugal. It facilitates operational efficiencies, boosts customer satisfaction, and improves financial performance. The evidence from studies such as Sousa and Correia (2021) underscores the strategic importance of benchmarking in fostering continuous improvement and sustainable growth within the tourism sector. Future research could delve deeper into specific benchmarking methodologies and their nuanced impacts across different tourism industry segments.

5. Discussion and Findings

5.1 Positive Impact of Benchmarking on Performance Improvement

The systematic review of benchmarking practices within tourism organisations in Portugal reveals compelling evidence of its positive impact on organisational performance.

I. Operational Efficiency stands out as a key area where benchmarking delivers substantial benefits. By benchmarking their processes against industry best practices or leading competitors, tourism organisations can identify inefficiencies and areas for improvement. This process optimisation allows them to streamline operations, reduce costs, and enhance productivity. Sousa and Correia's research (2021) illustrate that organisations adopting benchmarking practices often achieve measurable improvements in operational efficiency, enabling them to deliver services more effectively and efficiently.

II. Customer Satisfaction is another critical area positively influenced by benchmarking initiatives. Tourism organizations gain insights into customer expectations, service standards, and best-in-class practices through benchmarking. By benchmarking against industry leaders known for superior customer satisfaction, organizations can align their service delivery to meet and exceed customer expectations. This results in higher customer satisfaction scores, increased repeat business, and enhanced brand loyalty. Studies highlighted by Sousa and Correia (2021) emphasize how benchmarking improves service quality and responsiveness, thereby enhancing overall customer experience and satisfaction levels.

III. Financial Performance improvements are also evident among tourism organizations that implement benchmarking strategies. Benchmarking enables organizations to benchmark their financial metrics and performance against industry standards and best practices. This helps

identify cost-saving opportunities, optimize revenue streams, and improve financial management practices. Pereira-Moliner et al. (2016) demonstrate that benchmarking fosters better financial decision-making, budgetary control, and profitability, leading to sustainable financial health and resilience.

In summary, the systematic review and empirical studies underscore the multifaceted benefits of benchmarking practices in enhancing the performance of tourism organizations in Portugal. From operational efficiency gains to elevated customer satisfaction and improved financial outcomes, benchmarking serves as a strategic tool for continuous improvement and competitive advantage. By systematically comparing their performance and practices with industry benchmarks and leaders, tourism organisations can identify opportunities for enhancement, innovate effectively, and achieve long-term success in a competitive marketplace. These findings highlight the critical role of benchmarking in driving organizational excellence and sustainability within the dynamic tourism industry landscape.

5.2 Key Success Factors for Effective Benchmarking

The review emphasises several critical success factors for effectively implementing benchmarking initiatives. These factors include clear objectives, stakeholder involvement, continuous monitoring, adaptability, and leadership commitment. Each of these factors plays a pivotal role in ensuring that benchmarking efforts achieve their intended goals and contribute to sustained organizational improvement.

a. Clear Objectives serve as the guiding framework for benchmarking initiatives. By clearly defining what the organization aims to achieve through benchmarking, whether it is improving processes, enhancing quality, or achieving competitive advantage, clear objectives provide direction and focus for the entire effort. They align with the Resource-Based View (RBV), which posits that leveraging unique resources and capabilities can lead to competitive advantages (Marques & Santos, 2017). When objectives are well-defined, organizations can effectively allocate resources and efforts to achieve these goals, enhancing their competitive position.

b. Stakeholder Involvement is crucial because it ensures that diverse perspectives and insights are considered throughout the benchmarking process. According to Rodríguez-Díaz & Espino-Rodríguez (2020), organizations that actively engage stakeholders in benchmarking initiatives

are likelier to succeed. Stakeholders, including employees, customers, suppliers, and industry experts, provide valuable input and support, increasing the organization's relevance and acceptance of benchmarking practices.

c. Continuous Monitoring is essential for assessing progress, identifying gaps, and making informed adjustments. It enables organizations to track performance against benchmarks and adapt strategies to maintain alignment with organizational goals and market conditions. This aligns with the RBV perspective, as continuous monitoring allows organizations to optimize their resources and capabilities to achieve sustainable competitive advantages (Marques & Santos, 2017).

d. Adaptability refers to the organization's ability to respond to external environment or internal dynamics changes. Benchmarking efforts must be flexible and responsive to evolving market trends, technological advancements, and competitive pressures. Marine-Roig's work (2020) underscores the importance of adaptability in incorporating feedback and adjusting benchmarking practices to enhance effectiveness and relevance over time.

e. Leadership Commitment is critical in setting the tone and providing the necessary resources and support for successful benchmarking initiatives. Leaders demonstrating a commitment to benchmarking encourage organizational buy-in, allocate resources effectively and prioritize continuous improvement efforts. This aspect aligns with Institutional Theory, which highlights the influence of leadership in shaping organizational practices and norms (Rodríguez-Díaz & Espino-Rodríguez, 2020).

In conclusion, integrating these success factors, clear objectives, stakeholder involvement, continuous monitoring, adaptability, and leadership commitment supports the effective implementation of benchmarking initiatives. These factors align with theoretical perspectives such as RBV and Institutional Theory and find empirical support in field studies and secondary data analyses. By leveraging these factors, organizations can enhance their competitive position, improve operational efficiency, and foster a culture of continuous improvement through benchmarking practices.

5.3 Barriers and Challenges in Implementing Benchmarking

The findings reveal significant barriers and challenges tourism organizations face in implementing benchmarking initiatives. Common barriers include resistance to change, lack of resources, inadequate data, and cultural differences. These barriers are well-documented in both

theoretical frameworks and empirical studies, underscoring the complexity and multifaceted nature of benchmarking implementation.

A. Resistance to Change

Resistance to change is a formidable barrier that organisations often encounter when attempting to introduce new initiatives, such as benchmarking practices. This resistance stems from various factors rooted in human psychology and organizational dynamics. One prominent cause is the fear of the unknown among employees and managers. When faced with unfamiliar processes or procedures, individuals may feel uncertain about how these changes will impact their roles, responsibilities, and job security. This uncertainty can lead to resistance as people naturally gravitate towards the perceived safety of existing routines and practices, they are familiar with and have mastered over time.

Moreover, individuals within organisations may resist change due to a sense of comfort and familiarity with current processes. When people have become accustomed to specific ways of doing things, they may resist altering these methods, even if evidence suggests that new practices could lead to improved outcomes. This comfort with the status quo can create a reluctance to embrace change, as individuals may perceive the disruption as unnecessary or potentially disruptive to their daily routines and work habits.

From a theoretical perspective, Institutional Theory provides insights into why resistance to change is pervasive. This theory emphasizes that organizations are influenced by established norms, routines, and institutionalized practices that shape organizational behaviour. These norms create a sense of stability and predictability within the organization, making individuals hesitant to deviate from established ways of operating. As a result, attempts to introduce new benchmarking practices may face resistance as they challenge the institutionalized norms and routines that have become ingrained in the organizational culture.

Overcoming resistance to change requires effective change management strategies that address these underlying concerns and foster a supportive environment for innovation and improvement. Transparent communication is crucial in this regard, as it helps to alleviate uncertainties and fears associated with the change process. By clearly articulating the reasons for change, the expected benefits, and how it aligns with the organization's goals, leaders can build trust and credibility among employees.

Furthermore, involving employees and stakeholders in the change process can increase their sense of ownership and commitment to the new practices. This involvement can take various forms, such as seeking input on the design and implementation of benchmarking initiatives, addressing concerns and objections, and actively listening to feedback. By engaging employees as partners in the change process, organizations can mitigate resistance and enhance buy-in from those directly affected by the proposed changes.

Providing adequate training and support is also essential in helping employees adapt to new benchmarking practices. Training programs equip individuals with the skills and knowledge necessary to implement the changes effectively and instil confidence in their ability to navigate the new system. Support mechanisms, such as mentoring and coaching, can further bolster employees' readiness and resilience in embracing change, reducing anxiety and resistance along the way.

In conclusion, while resistance to change presents a significant challenge in implementing benchmarking initiatives and other organizational changes, understanding its underlying causes and employing proactive strategies can facilitate successful adoption. By addressing fears of the unknown, comfort with existing practices, and institutionalized norms through transparent communication, employee involvement, and robust support mechanisms, organizations can create a culture that embraces continuous improvement and innovation.

B. Lack of Resources

The lack of resources, particularly financial, human, and technological, poses a significant barrier to the effective implementation of benchmarking initiatives in tourism organisations. Many organisations struggle to allocate the necessary resources for these activities, which can hinder their ability to achieve the desired outcomes (Rodríguez-Díaz & Espino-Rodríguez, 2020). This resource scarcity can manifest in various ways, impacting the overall effectiveness of benchmarking efforts.

C. Financial Constraints

Financial constraints are a common issue, limiting the ability of tourism organizations to invest in advanced benchmarking tools and technologies. These tools, such as sophisticated data analytics software, benchmarking platforms, and customer relationship management systems, are essential for gathering, analysing, and interpreting data accurately. Without adequate

financial resources, organizations may have to rely on less effective, outdated methods, which can result in suboptimal benchmarking outcomes. Additionally, financial limitations can restrict the ability to hire external consultants or experts who could provide valuable insights and guidance on benchmarking practices.

D. Human Resource Challenges

A shortage of skilled personnel is another critical aspect of resource constraints. Effective benchmarking requires expertise in data analysis, performance measurement, and strategic planning. Without adequately trained staff, organizations may find it challenging to carry out comprehensive benchmarking activities. This lack of expertise can lead to errors in data collection and analysis, misinterpretation of benchmarking results, and ineffective benchmarking practices. Furthermore, the absence of dedicated personnel to oversee benchmarking initiatives can result in inconsistent and fragmented efforts, reducing the overall impact of these activities.

E. Technological Limitations

Technological limitations also play a significant role in hindering benchmarking efforts. Advanced technological tools and platforms are crucial for efficient data collection, analysis, and comparison. Organizations lacking access to these technologies may struggle to process large volumes of data or derive meaningful insights from benchmarking analyses. This technological gap can put organizations at a disadvantage, particularly in a competitive tourism industry where data-driven decision-making is increasingly important.

F. Theoretical Alignment

This challenge aligns with the Resource-Based View (RBV) theory, which posits that resource availability and strategic use are crucial for achieving competitive advantage. According to RBV, organizations that can effectively utilize their financial, human, or technological resources are better positioned to outperform their competitors. The lack of these critical resources can thus be seen as a fundamental barrier to achieving competitive advantage through benchmarking.

G. Inadequate Data

Inadequate data presents a significant challenge for tourism organizations implementing benchmarking initiatives. Accurate and comprehensive data is crucial for effective

benchmarking, as it allows organizations to make informed comparisons and identify best practices. However, many organizations struggle with data collection and management, often relying on secondary data that may not fully meet their needs (Sousa & Correia, 2021).

The reliance on secondary data can lead to several issues. Incomplete or outdated data can result in inaccurate benchmarking results, undermining the entire process's effectiveness. For instance, if the data used for benchmarking is not current or comprehensive, the insights derived from the benchmarking analysis may not accurately reflect the current state of the organization or its performance relative to competitors. This can lead to misguided decisions and strategies, hindering organizational improvement and growth.

Organizations need to improve their data collection methods to address the challenge of inadequate data. This involves developing systematic processes for gathering relevant data consistently and comprehensively. By establishing clear protocols and standards for data collection, organizations can ensure that their data is accurate and up to date. This also means training employees on the importance of accurate data collection and providing the necessary tools and resources.

Investing in robust data management systems is also essential. Advanced data management systems can help organizations store, organize, and retrieve data efficiently, making it easier to conduct benchmarking analyses. These systems can integrate various data sources, providing a holistic view of the organization's performance and enabling more accurate benchmarking comparisons. Additionally, data management systems can automate data collection and processing, reducing the risk of human error and ensuring data accuracy.

Ensuring data accuracy and relevance is another critical aspect of addressing the challenge of inadequate data. Organizations must regularly review and validate their data to ensure that it remains accurate and relevant to their benchmarking objectives. This involves implementing quality control measures and conducting periodic audits to identify and correct any discrepancies in the data.

Leveraging technology can significantly enhance data quality and accessibility. Data analytics and management tools can help organizations analyse large volumes of data quickly and accurately, uncovering patterns and insights that may not be immediately apparent. These tools

can also facilitate real-time data collection and analysis, providing organizations with up-to-date information crucial for effective benchmarking.

For example, tourism organizations can use data analytics tools to analyse customer feedback and satisfaction scores, identifying areas for improvement and benchmarking against industry standards. Similarly, data management systems can help organizations track financial performance metrics, resource utilization, and operational efficiency, providing a comprehensive view of their performance relative to competitors.

In conclusion, inadequate data is a significant barrier to effective benchmarking in tourism organizations. By improving data collection methods, investing in robust data management systems, and leveraging advanced technology, organizations can enhance data quality and accessibility. Ensuring data accuracy and relevance through regular reviews and quality control measures is also essential. These steps will enable tourism organizations to conduct meaningful benchmarking analyses, leading to more accurate insights and better-informed decisions, driving performance improvement and competitive advantage.

H. Cultural Differences

Organizational cultural differences can significantly impact the adoption and effectiveness of benchmarking practices. Variations in values, attitudes, and behaviours can create substantial challenges in implementing standardized benchmarking processes (Buhalis & Sinarta, 2019). For instance, organizations with a hierarchical culture, where decision-making is centralized and communication is top-down, may struggle to adopt collaborative benchmarking practices that require open communication, shared decision-making, and a participative approach.

In such environments, employees might resist benchmarking initiatives due to a lack of involvement in the decision-making process or fear of negative consequences from transparency. This resistance can be compounded by a reluctance to deviate from established norms and practices that have traditionally governed the organization. Theories such as Institutional Theory highlight how established norms and routines can create inertia, making it difficult for organizations to embrace new practices like benchmarking.

Addressing these cultural differences is crucial for the successful implementation of benchmarking. Tailored change management strategies are essential to foster a culture that

values continuous improvement and aligns with benchmarking goals. These strategies can include engaging leadership to champion benchmarking initiatives, signalling their importance to the organization. Leadership commitment can help set a tone that encourages openness, collaboration, and a willingness to adopt best practices.

Training programs tailored to address specific cultural challenges can also be highly effective. For instance, workshops and seminars emphasizing the benefits of benchmarking, such as improved performance and competitive advantage, can help shift attitudes and behaviours. These programs should also focus on developing skills related to open communication and collaborative problem-solving, which are critical for effective benchmarking.

Furthermore, organizations can implement pilot projects to demonstrate the value of benchmarking practices. Organizations can show tangible benefits and build employee trust and acceptance by starting with smaller, manageable initiatives. Successful pilot projects can serve as case studies, illustrating how benchmarking can improve performance without undermining existing cultural values.

Promoting a culture of continuous improvement requires ongoing efforts to align organizational values with benchmarking goals. This involves initial training and change management initiatives and continuous reinforcement through regular communication, feedback loops, and recognition of successes. Organizations can create forums for sharing benchmarking results and best practices, fostering community and shared purpose.

In conclusion, cultural differences pose significant challenges to implementing benchmarking practices in tourism organizations. However, organizations can overcome these barriers through tailored change management strategies, targeted training programs, and continuous reinforcement of benchmarking goals. Tourism organizations can enhance their performance outcomes and achieve sustainable growth by promoting a culture that values continuous improvement and aligns with benchmarking objectives.

5.4 Strategies to Overcome Challenges

The literature suggests adequate strategies to overcome these challenges and enhance the effectiveness of benchmarking initiatives. These strategies include strategic planning, training,

development, technology leveraging, and change management. Each of these strategies plays a crucial role in addressing specific barriers to successful benchmarking and ensuring that tourism organizations can realize the full benefits of these practices.

Strategic planning is fundamental to the successful implementation of benchmarking initiatives. It involves developing a clear roadmap that outlines the benchmarking process's objectives, required resources, and timelines. This strategic approach ensures all stakeholders understand the goals and the steps needed to achieve them. Strategic planning aligns with the Resource-Based View (RBV) theory principles, which emphasizes the strategic use of resources to achieve competitive advantage (Rodríguez-Díaz & Espino-Rodríguez, 2020). By carefully planning and allocating resources, tourism organizations can leverage their unique capabilities and position themselves more effectively in the market. For example, a well-defined strategic plan can help an organization identify critical performance metrics, set achievable targets, and allocate resources efficiently to meet these targets.

Training and development are essential for building the capacity and support for effective benchmarking practices. Providing comprehensive training programs for employees and management helps develop the necessary skills and knowledge for benchmarking. This training ensures that all organization members understand the benchmarking process, the importance of data accuracy, and how to analyse and apply benchmarking results (Marques & Santos, 2017). By investing in training, organizations can cultivate a knowledgeable, skilled workforce capable of driving continuous improvement. For instance, training programs might include workshops on data analysis, seminars on best practices, and on-the-job training sessions to familiarize staff with new benchmarking tools and techniques.

Leveraging technology is another critical strategy for enhancing the efficiency and effectiveness of benchmarking initiatives. Advanced data management and analysis tools can streamline the benchmarking process, making it more efficient and less prone to errors. These technological tools enable organizations to collect, store, and analyse large volumes of data quickly and accurately (Marine-Roig & Huertas, 2020). For example, tourism organizations can use software to automate data collection from various sources, apply sophisticated analytics to identify trends and patterns and generate reports that provide actionable insights. The use of technology not only improves the accuracy of benchmarking data but also allows organizations to respond more swiftly to market changes and emerging opportunities.

Change management strategies are crucial for addressing resistance to change and fostering a culture of continuous improvement. Implementing effective change management practices helps manage the human aspects of change, ensuring smoother transitions and greater acceptance of new practices (Buhalis & Sinarta, 2019). Resistance to change is a common barrier in many organizations, as employees and management may be reluctant to abandon established processes and adopt new ones. Change management strategies, such as clear communication, stakeholder involvement, and ongoing support, can help mitigate these challenges. For instance, involving employees in benchmarking initiatives' planning and implementation stages can increase their commitment and reduce resistance. Regular communication about the benefits of benchmarking and providing support during the transition can also enhance acceptance and foster a culture of continuous improvement.

Tourism organisations can explore several strategies to address the barrier of limited resources. One approach is to seek external funding through grants, subsidies, or sponsorships. External financing can provide the financial support to invest in advanced benchmarking tools and technologies. Partnerships with other organizations can also be beneficial, allowing for resource sharing and collaborative benchmarking efforts. Such partnerships can enhance resource availability and provide access to a broader range of data and best practices.

Another strategy is to leverage existing resources more efficiently. This involves optimizing current technologies, personnel, and financial assets to maximize their impact on benchmarking activities. For instance, organizations can implement cost-effective data collection methods, such as customer feedback and online surveys, to gather relevant benchmarking data without incurring significant expenses.

Investing in employee training and development is also crucial for building internal capacity. By providing staff with training in data analysis, performance measurement, and benchmarking techniques, organizations can enhance their internal expertise and reduce reliance on external resources. Training programs can equip employees with the skills to conduct effective benchmarking activities, analyze results accurately, and implement improvements based on benchmarking insights. This internal capacity building can lead to more sustainable and consistent benchmarking practices.

The lack of resources is a significant barrier to effectively implementing benchmarking initiatives in tourism organizations. Financial, human, and technological constraints can impede the ability to conduct comprehensive benchmarking activities and achieve desired outcomes. However, organizations can overcome these challenges by seeking external funding, forming partnerships, leveraging existing resources efficiently, and investing in employee training and development. Aligning with the principles of RBV, these strategies can enhance resource availability and utilization, ultimately leading to improved benchmarking practices and competitive advantage in the tourism industry.

In conclusion, overcoming the challenges associated with benchmarking requires a multifaceted approach that includes strategic planning, training, and development, leveraging technology, and change management. By adopting these strategies, tourism organizations can enhance their benchmarking practices, achieve significant performance improvements, and maintain a competitive edge in the dynamic tourism industry. These strategies address specific barriers and align with the theoretical perspectives of RBV and Institutional Theory, ensuring that organizations leverage their unique resources and capabilities while conforming to industry standards and best practices.

5.5 Theoretical Perspectives and Empirical Evidence

The findings from this review align with the set-theoretical perspectives, including the Resource-Based View (RBV) Theory and Institutional Theory. According to RBV, organizations can achieve a competitive advantage by leveraging their unique resources and capabilities. In the context of tourism organizations, these resources and capabilities could include specialized knowledge, innovative services, and unique customer experiences. Benchmarking allows tourism organizations to identify and adopt best practices from leading industry players, enhancing their resource base and capabilities (Marques & Santos, 2017). This adoption process involves carefully analysing competitors' strategies, operations, and outcomes, enabling organizations to integrate superior practices into their operations. Consequently, these enhanced capabilities lead to improved service quality, increased operational efficiency, and higher customer satisfaction, all of which contribute to a stronger competitive position in the market.

Institutional Theory, on the other hand, emphasises the role of external pressures and norms in shaping organisational practices. Tourism organisations do not operate in isolation; they are governed by industry standards, regulatory frameworks, and market expectations. These external factors deeply influence benchmarking practices as organisations strive to conform to industry norms and best practices to achieve legitimacy and competitive advantage (Rodríguez-Díaz & Espino-Rodríguez, 2020). This conformity is not merely about copying what others are doing; it involves a strategic alignment with recognised standards that enhances an organisation's reputation and trustworthiness among stakeholders. For instance, adhering to sustainability benchmarks meets regulatory requirements and appeals to environmentally conscious tourists, expanding the customer base and enhancing brand loyalty.

Empirical evidence from field studies reinforces these theoretical perspectives. Research by Sousa and Correia (2021) shows that tourism organisations that use benchmarking practices significantly improve operational efficiency, customer satisfaction, and financial performance. These organisations benefit from streamlined workflow management, optimised resource allocation, and the adoption of innovative practices that enhance overall operational effectiveness. For example, a tourism organisation might benchmark its customer service processes against industry leaders, leading to the implementation of new training programs for staff, the introduction of advanced customer relationship management systems, and the redesign of service delivery protocols. These changes improve the customer experience and contribute to higher customer retention rates and increased revenue.

Moreover, benchmarking encourages a culture of continuous improvement within organizations. By regularly comparing their performance against industry standards and best practices, tourism organizations can identify gaps in their operations and develop strategies to address them. This proactive approach ensures that organizations remain competitive in a dynamic market environment. The continuous cycle of assessment, learning, and adaptation fostered by benchmarking aligns with the RBV and Institutional Theory principles, reinforcing the importance of strategic resource management and compliance with industry norms.

In conclusion, integrating theoretical perspectives and empirical evidence highlights the multifaceted benefits of benchmarking for tourism organizations in Portugal. These organizations can achieve significant performance improvements by leveraging unique resources and capabilities through RBV and conforming to industry standards as suggested by

Institutional Theory. This alignment enhances their competitive advantage and ensures long-term sustainability in the ever-evolving tourism industry.

Integrating the insights from Custódio's (2014) work on the Algarve's tourism destination image offers valuable perspectives for understanding how destination image benchmarking can enhance the competitiveness of Portuguese tourism destinations. Custódio's research emphasizes the importance of a consistent and appealing destination image in strengthening destination branding and competitiveness, particularly by addressing fluctuations in visitor perceptions during pre- and post-visit periods and across peak and off-peak seasons. Her findings show that visitor satisfaction, intention to return, and willingness to recommend a destination are critical metrics that shape destinations' overall branding and competitiveness. In the context of benchmarking tourism destinations in Portugal, Custódio's approach highlights that performance improvement is significantly influenced by the ability to manage and leverage destination image. Just as benchmarking enables organizations to identify and adopt best practices, Custódio's findings suggest that effective destination branding, and image management can serve as strategic tools for tourism organizations to differentiate themselves and adapt to changing visitor preferences. For instance, the differentiated approach to image benchmarking in the Algarve, as Custódio points out, provides insights into how repeat visitors and first-time tourists may have distinct preferences and expectations, which can shape targeted branding and management strategies.

Moreover, Custódio's emphasis on the continuous engagement of stakeholders aligns closely with the challenges highlighted in our study regarding data quality, stakeholder involvement, and resource constraints in benchmarking processes. Her work underscores that ongoing feedback from tourists and local stakeholders is vital for identifying and addressing the Algarve's brand positioning weaknesses. This approach is equally relevant for Portuguese tourism organizations aiming to strengthen their market presence.

Considering Custódio's findings, our analysis underscores the need for an integrated benchmarking approach that includes quantitative performance metrics and qualitative insights into visitor perceptions. By applying her insights, this study suggests that when coupled with robust image management, destination benchmarking can yield a more nuanced understanding of the Portuguese tourism sector's strengths and areas for improvement. This integration

supports a more resilient and competitive positioning for Portugal's tourism destinations in an increasingly dynamic global landscape.

6. Conclusion

The review highlights the positive impact of benchmarking on the performance of tourism organisations in Portugal. It underscores the strategic importance of benchmarking in fostering continuous improvement and sustainable growth within the tourism sector. However, it is essential to acknowledge the limitations of this review, including variability in study quality and the focus on literature published between 2015 and 2023. Further research is needed to explore the long-term impacts of benchmarking and identify best practices for different types of tourism organisations. By embracing benchmarking strategies, tourism organisations can achieve sustainable growth and maintain a competitive edge in the ever-evolving market.

Benchmarking remains an underexplored area in tourism research, particularly regarding the development and application of indicators that enable meaningful comparisons between different destinations, including Portugal. Among the various themes studied, the image of tourism destinations has emerged as the most thoroughly conceptualised, with greater attention given to its theoretical framework and its potential as a basis for comparative indicators. The primary objective of this study is to conduct a comprehensive analysis of the current state of the art in benchmarking and destination image research within the tourism sector. Three specific objectives guide this analysis: (1) to examine the influence of benchmarking practices on the performance of tourism organisations; (2) to identify and assess the key criteria used to evaluate tourism destinations; and (3) to investigate the main obstacles and challenges tourism organisations face in implementing benchmarking initiatives in Portugal. The findings indicate that Portugal still has significant progress to make in terms of defining and applying consistent criteria for evaluating tourism destinations. There is a clear need for the development of robust and longitudinal indicators that support more effective benchmarking in the Portuguese tourism context.

Now, this research contributes significantly to the body of knowledge by providing a focused synthesis of the benchmarking role, benefits, and challenges specifically within Portuguese tourism and tourism organisations. It provides valuable, evidence-based insights that can inform strategic decision-making for policymakers aiming to enhance national tourism

competitiveness, destination managers seeking performance improvement, and individual tourism operators striving for operational excellence.

Nevertheless, it is imperative to acknowledge the limitations inherent in this study. The reliance on existing literature within the systematic review means the findings are subject to the potential variability in the quality, scope, and methodological rigour of the source studies. Furthermore, the defined timeframe for literature inclusion, primarily focusing on publications between 2015 and 2024, necessarily bounds the historical perspective.

Looking ahead, several avenues for future research emerge as particularly important. Investigating the long-term, longitudinal effects of sustained benchmarking programs within Portuguese tourism organisations will provide deeper insights into their impact on growth and adaptation. Developing and validating context-specific best practice models tailored to the diverse segments of the Portuguese tourism industry – encompassing cultural attractions, tour operators, accommodation providers, destination marketing organisations, and others – presents a significant opportunity for applied research with high practical relevance. Additionally, exploring the cooperation between benchmarking practices and accelerating trends of big data analytics, digital transformation, and artificial intelligence within the Portuguese tourism sector is crucial for understanding future performance paradigms.

In conclusion, this thesis firmly establishes that benchmarking is an indispensable strategic tool for destinations and tourism organisations in Portugal. While there are challenges to implementing them, they are not insurmountable. However, through strategic planning and dedicated resource allocation, paired with investment in human capital and technology, effective change management, and the cultivation of a proactive improvement culture, these barriers can be overcome. Also, by consistently engaging in rigorous benchmarking, Portuguese tourism organizations can enhance their operational effectiveness and efficiency by elevating customer experiences, strengthening their financial standing, and ultimately bolstering their resilience and competitive positioning, while contributing significantly to the sustainable development and continued prosperity of Portugal's invaluable tourism industry on the national and international scale.

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