

Game of Thrones and Destination Authenticity: A Comparative Analysis of DMO Social Media Practices

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Instagram is a key visual social media platform that enables tourism organisations to showcase destinations. Understanding how destination image is constructed on social media and how the destination's identity and authenticity are promoted is crucial for effective destination marketing strategies. However, promotional practices might vary among tourism organisations, i.e. local, regional, and national, potentially creating different identities and authenticity. With Dubrovnik gaining worldwide attention through the popular TV series *Game of Thrones*, the study examines the strategies employed by national and local tourism organisations in the city's social media promotion. Using a summative approach, we conducted a content analysis of 1,034 photographs posted between 2016 and 2020 on the official Instagram profiles of national and local tourism organisations. Findings reveal that Dubrovnik's relationship with *Game of Thrones* is highly leveraged at the national level, constructing a fabricated sense of authenticity. However, the social media communication by the local tourism organisation emphasises heritage and nature, thereby safeguarding its authenticity. This discrepancy underscores distinct communication strategies and highlights the importance of understanding these differences for effective destination marketing.

Keywords: film tourism, social media, destination image, authenticity, Dubrovnik, *Game of Thrones*



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Introduction

Film tourism has emerged as a significant global phenomenon, attracting increasing scholarly attention despite being a relatively recent topic in tourism studies (Bolan & Williams, 2008; Hua et al., 2021; Vila et al., 2021). Films and television series can shape destination image, create a sense of place, and influence travel decisions, making film-induced tourism an important driver of visitor flows (Kim & Richardson, 2003; Di Cesare et al., 2009). However, the relation-

ship between film and tourism is complex, involving both positive and negative impacts, and requires closer collaboration between the film and tourism industries to ensure sustainable destination management (Kim & Richards, 2003; Hudson, 2011).

Historically, film-induced tourism gained prominence with iconic examples such as Disneyland and the global success of *The Lord of the Rings* film trilogy, which significantly boosted tourism in New Zealand (Connell, 2012). Television series have also

played a pivotal role in promoting destinations, as seen in Hawaii's popularity during the era of *Hawaiian Eye*, *Hawaii 5-0*, and *Magnum* (Hudson & Ritchie, 2006). Destination management organisations (DMOs) leverage films and social media to create a favourable destination image, recognising the influence of user-generated content (UGC) on consumer perceptions and behaviour (Hays et al., 2013; Egger et al., 2022). Hence, social media channels like Instagram, with its high visual nature and extensive reach, have become essential tools for co-creating content with tourists and enhancing destination authenticity (Conti & Lexhagen, 2020). On the other hand, authenticity plays a critical role in film-induced tourism, as destinations must balance real and fictional identities to maintain credibility and appeal (Buchmann et al. 2010; Larson et al., 2013). Despite growing interest in this topic, there is limited research examining how DMOs promote authenticity through social media in the context of film tourism.

In this paper, we investigate how the authenticity of a well-known European tourism destination is communicated and how local and national tourism organisations use user-generated content on social media. The study focuses on the Croatian city of Dubrovnik, a UNESCO World Heritage Site and filming location for the TV series *Game of Thrones*. Due to its appearance in the TV series, tourism arrivals in Dubrovnik increased by nearly 40% (Tkalec et al., 2017), and the national tourism organisation of Croatia actively capitalised on this opportunity through social media campaigns (Šegota, 2018b). However, it remains unclear whether the local and national tourism organisations adopted different strategies and what identity and authenticity of Dubrovnik they communicated on social media.

To address this gap, we conducted a visual content analysis of images posted on the official Instagram profiles of Croatia's national tourism organisation and Dubrovnik's local tourism organisation between 2016 and 2020. With this approach, we gained insights into DMO practices and strategies for promoting film-induced tourism and destination authenticity.

Destination branding and destination image

Like product marketing, destination branding extends beyond creating brand names, logos, or symbols that help identify and distinguish a place, and encompasses a multi-phase process (Kavaratzis & Hatch 2003; Kavaratzis 2017). Eliciting the local authentic essence is the first phase of this process (Kavaratzis, 2017) and is integral to the construction and communication of place identity. Place identity, understood here as a location's core identity, is central to branding because it encapsulates a place's core characteristics and meanings (Kavaratzis & Ashworth, 2005). When done effectively, branding makes it easy for travellers to link these symbols with the destination (Blain et al., 2005). The characteristics of destination branding differ from those of product branding, as destination brands are intangible, perishable, and variable (Gürsoy, 2003; Gürsoy & Gavcar, 2003). As highlighted by Qu et al. (2011) and Hsu et al. (2009), destination branding primarily aims to cultivate a positive image of a destination. Forming an image can be exceedingly demanding (Bolan & Williams, 2008), since it involves the creation of a mental picture and comprises several ongoing dimensions that significantly influence the perception of a destination, i.e. diverse sources and channels through which tourists gather information and shape their views regarding a destination (Gartner, 1994).

The growing accessibility and credibility of visual media, particularly film and television, profoundly shape perceptions of destinations by vividly conveying their culture, landscapes, and attractions. Ren and Blichfeldt (2011) emphasise that destinations possess multiple, coexisting identities rather than a singular, fixed one. Such identities – encompassing product, construction, identification, representation, and sense of belonging (Kavaratzis & Ashworth, 2005; Clavé, 2010) – may coexist harmoniously or in tension. They emerge from the interplay between material and affective dimensions, shaped by internal and external stakeholders (Kavaratzis & Hatch, 2013). Conceptualised as 'hot' (Cohen & Cohen, 2012), destination identity is socially constructed and remains in flux through ongoing representations, practices, and interactions between agents and visitors.

When making destination decisions, travellers are primarily influenced by a place's image (Baloğlu & Brinberg, 1997; Lin et al., 2007), which significantly shapes behavioural intentions and actions (Chi & Qu, 2008). An individual's fascination with a specific destination, its impressions, visual appeal, and the availability of easily accessible information are all potential indicators of whether to visit it (Seddighi & Theodorou, 2002). As a result, efforts to enhance a destination's image encourage devoted travellers to return or exhibit certain behaviours, making them essential to the continued growth of destination tourism (Chen & Tsai, 2007).

The Role of Film in Destination Image Formation

Destination marketers utilise visual promotional materials, including brochures, guidebooks, commercials, and social media, to attract tourists and foster a positive perception of their destination. It is crucial to note that other information sources do not share this goal; among these are television shows and films, which also significantly shape travellers' perceptions and travel decision-making (Kim & Richardson, 2003; Vila et al., 2021).

Films, along with other associated media, can use images, sounds, and characters to emphasise the appealing attributes of the destination, such as cultural heritage sites and locations where the film was recorded, thereby attracting potential tourists (Cardoso et al., 2017). For this reason, film tourism is often referred to as film-induced tourism (Connell, 2012).

Films can effectively promote tourist destinations by increasing awareness and familiarity with the destination and encouraging first visits (Iwashita, 2008). Awareness or familiarity with a destination is often crucial before a visit (Isa & Ramli, 2014). In addition, film as a popular culture element can increase the destination's allure; popular culture reaches audiences that travel agencies cannot pay to contact (Tooke & Baker, 1996), making it an effective promotional tool for DMOS (Hanlan & Kelly, 2005).

DMOS were initially slow to recognise films as a powerful promotional tool, but this has shifted as marketers acknowledged their influence on destinations and travellers' preferences. For instance, following the

1995 release of the film *Braveheart*, which significantly boosted perceptions of Scotland, the Scottish Tourist Board capitalised on film tourism (Bolan & Williams, 2008). While marketing campaigns cannot rival a film's popularity, travel industry stakeholders should engage earlier and align their strategies with the film's underlying themes.

Film-induced Tourism and Destination Authenticity

As film-induced tourism seeks to attract tourists, a key approach is to showcase the destination's essence or the authentic filming location (Hall, 2003). Authenticity in tourism products is associated with higher economic worth and more frequent purchases (Yi et al., 2017). Authenticity, often associated with cultural uniqueness and real experiences, is not absolute; it is framed as negotiable (Cohen, 1988) and subjective (Timothy & Ron, 2013). Wang (1999) identifies three forms of authenticity. Objective authenticity refers to the inherent genuineness of destinations and objects, assessed by objective standards (Kolar & Žabkar, 2010). Constructive authenticity is socially constructed or recognised as authentic, echoing Cohen's (1988) earlier work. Existential authenticity concerns being true to oneself (Wang, 1999). Building on Wang's (1999) conceptualisation and subsequent research (Reisinger & Steiner, 2006), authenticity can be understood as a multidimensional construct that manifests in several forms, thereby requiring destination management organisations (DMOS) to engage with authenticity across multiple levels (Lorentzen, 2009). This complexity challenges travellers' ability to discern genuineness, influencing their decision-making. Thus, truth, reality, genuineness, and meaning – as well as their dialectical opposites, untruth, unreality, counterfeit, and meaninglessness – become intrinsically interpretable and dynamic, making authenticity an essential process of negotiation. Being able to negotiate these intricate, constantly evolving notions underscores the significance of authenticity (Lovell & Hitchmough, 2019). Authenticity in the context of film-induced tourism is somewhat subjective, as every individual has a different experience with a film and the location it features. Social media and user-generated content have intensified this fluidity. Moreover,

tourists motivated by a movie often have conflicting feelings about how accurately the destination is portrayed in the movie (Frost, 2009).

Larson et al. (2013) conducted a study on the *Twilight* film series to investigate its impact on filming locations and the authenticity strategies. In their study, they examined how the *Twilight* vampire franchise affected destination identity and authenticity across four filming locations. It was shown that Forks, Washington, relied on a constructed, fictional reality to shape its destination's authenticity (Frost, 2010; Larson et al., 2013). They fabricated their authenticity using this strategy to modify their destination's perception and gain recognition as a mythological world (Peterson, 2005; Larson et al., 2013). To increase visitor numbers, they developed a miniature version of *Twilight* Disneyland, featuring various services, including *Twilight* tours, themed hotels, and memorabilia (Larson et al., 2013). Comparable findings were obtained in a study by Jones and Smith (2005) on New Zealand and *The Lord of the Rings*. The 'guarding the authenticity' strategy was used by the Italian towns Volterra and Montepulciano (Larson et al., 2013). Recognising that film-induced tourism may alter destination image (Dredge, 2010), they chose to preserve existing attributes and maintain destinations' original authenticity (Larson et al., 2013). Lastly, the case of Vancouver in British Columbia illustrates the final film-induced tourism strategy: adopting no strategy at all. This approach assumes that filmmakers would have access to the destination for filming, but that destination managers would not actively link the destination's promotion to its being featured in a film (Larson et al., 2013). This contrasts with the guarded authenticity approach, as DMOS adopt no measure to manage the destination's authenticity, leaving fans to associate it with the film organically.

Larson et al. (2013) note the complexity of managing film-induced tourism as it introduces new visitor segments and can radically reshape destination image. Hence, they suggested that marketing strategies must consider how films portray destination authenticity, with social media helping craft and communicate the desired destination image (Shuqair & Cragg, 2017).

Linking Social Media to Film-induced Tourism

Social media has accelerated the creation of user-generated content (UGC), a dynamic and often unconscious interaction among consumers and others (Payne et al., 2008) that functions as electronic word-of-mouth (ewow), reaching global audiences without direct contact. UGC has grown significantly (Amaral et al., 2014) and plays a crucial role across industries, with tourism being particularly dependent on it (Šegota et al., 2022). It appears in various forms and strongly influences consumer decisions at all stages (Schröder et al., 2025). Travellers frequently share images, comments, and experiences on social media, offering insight and documenting their travels (Sotiriadis, 2017). Consequently, travel-generated content (TGC) has at times replaced UGC in tourism (Gkritzali et al., 2017).

Compared to DMOS' advertising activities, ewow exerts a stronger influence (Lange-Faria & Elliot, 2012; Šegota et al., 2022) and significantly shapes online destination images (Kim et al., 2017; Aboalghanam et al., 2025). Since UGC can change people's perceptions of the destination's image, this is observed and utilised as a significant marketing tool for DMOS (Hays et al., 2013; Aboalghanam et al., 2025). Reposting UGC on the DMO's social media sites can make its posts more credible, thereby strengthening tourists' trust (Pagel & Aebli, 2014; Yamagishi et al., 2024). According to Lim et al. (2012), DMOS utilise specific hashtags for these particular post types. Research suggests that consumers consider UGC a more valuable and reliable source when selecting a possible destination for their next trip (Hays et al., 2013; Wijaya et al., 2024; Yamagishi et al., 2024). However, given the power social media has to shape tourists' perceptions, DMOS should carefully consider their self-promotion strategies and tactics to project the desired image of a destination (Pahor Žvanut & Zabukovec Baruca, 2025). Instagram is increasingly popular with tourists and marketers who use it to create effective marketing campaigns (Yu et al., 2020; Blanco-Moreno et al., 2024). This social media channel bridges imagined and actual destination representations (Egger et al., 2022), creating an information network of posts that inspire travel and offer recommendations. Users actively seek others' reviews

and experiences, shaping demand and altering perceptions of destinations (Nixon et al., 2017; Yamagishi et al., 2024). However, Bernkopf and Nixon (2019) highlight the difficulty DMOs face in finding the right balance between aesthetically pleasing and authentic photographs to promote their destinations.

Conceptual Framework Based on the Case of Dubrovnik

The city of Dubrovnik in Croatia traces its origins back to the twelfth century. Using a range of structures, such as Gothic, Renaissance, and Baroque churches, monasteries, and palaces, UNESCO (n.d.) describes Dubrovnik as the Pearl of the Adriatic and an influential city in the Mediterranean. Its inclusion as a UNESCO World Heritage Site enhanced destination branding and highlighted the city's aesthetic appeal. As a result, by the middle of the 1960s, there were more than a million overnight stays; two decades later, that figure had risen to nearly five million (Kobašić, 1993).

Dubrovnik served as a filming site for the immensely popular TV series *Game of Thrones*. The TV series highlights the violent conflicts of wealthy families during a turbulent time when threats are arising simultaneously from the north and the east (Šegota, 2018a, 2018b). According to HBO (2016), *Game of Thrones* is among the most successful television series, having received 39 Emmy awards and averaging 20 million viewers per episode. In addition to all the awards, the final episode of the *Game of Thrones* TV series was broadcast simultaneously in 171 countries, setting a Guinness World record (Contu & Pau, 2022).

In her study, Šegota (2018b) draws attention to the strategy implemented by the Croatian national tourism organisation (hereinafter, NTO), noting its deliberate choice to fabricate authenticity. This strategic approach involved promoting Dubrovnik as a *Game of Thrones* destination, leveraging the show's immense popularity to enhance the city's appeal to tourists. Indisputably, the social media activities of the Croatian NTO have contributed to more than a million tickets sold for entry to the city walls in Dubrovnik, and to three million overnight stays in 2015 – a year during which Dubrovnik experienced a surge in tourism

due to the filming of *Game of Thrones*. Moreover, research has shown that Dubrovnik's tourism arrivals increased by almost 40% following its appearance in the TV series (Tkalec et al., 2017).

Croatia's administrative structure comprises multiple tiers of tourism organisations, including national, regional, and local entities (Čorluka, 2019). Occasionally, differences may arise between the actions of the national and local tourism organisations. However, our primary focus is to understand which authenticity strategy was used to promote Dubrovnik on Instagram from both national and local DMO perspectives. Therefore, this research is initiated by the following research question:

RQ1: *What destination branding practices have been used by the national and local tourism organisations in promoting Dubrovnik as a filming location for Game of Thrones?*

Social media platforms enable users to share diverse content – text, images, videos, and audio – to disseminate information and opinions (Safko & Brake, 2009). Instagram was chosen for this study due to its photo-sharing capability (Oliveira & Panyik, 2015). As a visually driven social media channel, it allows users to capture, edit, share and engage with photos and videos, while hashtags enhance content visibility (Šegota, 2018b). Šegota's research (2018b) showed that the Croatian national tourism organisation leveraged UGC in promoting Dubrovnik on Instagram. However, little remains known about how tourism organisations at the national and local level leveraged Dubrovnik's *Game of Thrones* association after 2016, prompting us to raise the following research question:

RQ2: *What was the role of visual user-generated content in co-creating Dubrovnik's destination image?*

Our focus now turns to Dubrovnik's identity and authenticity, examining how it is promoted as a *Game of Thrones* filming site, a cultural landmark, and a seaside destination. We also aim to identify the prevailing visual representations and define the induced identity presented by the national and local tourism organisations through the following research question:

RQ3: *Which strategies of promoting destination identity and authenticity have been applied to Dubrovnik's portrayal on Instagram?*

Methods

In this research, we adopted the interpretive paradigm advocated by Cohen et al. (2007), which prioritises understanding social occurrences through participants' perspectives rather than solely from researchers' viewpoints. This approach was applied in our investigation of photo use on the Instagram profiles of the Croatian national tourism organisation and the Dubrovnik local tourism organisation, particularly of the incorporation of UGC. Interpretive researchers examine data collected over a long period, allowing the identification of themes and patterns and the creation of theories based on findings, in contrast to the deductive method, which creates theories before collecting data (Grix, 2004). We aimed to examine how the destination's authenticity, tied to film-induced tourism, is being promoted to a broader audience within the tourism industry. Hence, we used the qualitative content analysis method to analyse the collected data. Based on Hsieh and Shannon's (2005) recommendations, we find the summative approach the most suited to our objectives.

After gathering the data, we focused on three specific hashtags: *#gameofthrones*, *#dubrovnik*, and *#kingslanding*. At least one of these hashtags must have been present in a photograph to be eligible for analysis. Furthermore, our analysis included pictures geotagged to Dubrovnik but without explicit hashtags. Additionally, we carefully analysed each photograph to determine whether it was UGC, specifically by verifying whether the person taking the photo was tagged in the description.

The creation of codes was focused on the data, i.e. the photographs, enabling the analysis of visual elements that shaped Dubrovnik's representation on Instagram. We examined the presence of historic architecture, natural landscapes and activities, including film-related imagery such as *Game of Thrones*.

Our primary data sources were the Instagram profiles of the Croatian national tourism organisation and the Dubrovnik local tourism organisation. We

found that Instagram is the most widely used visual social media platform and thus provides valuable research data (Blanco-Moreno et al., 2024). We collected a total of 1,034 photographs, covering four years, from the 1st of August 2016 to the 31st of August 2020. However, as the first post on the official Instagram profile of the Dubrovnik local tourism organisation was made on the 27th of September 2017, the analysis began on that date and ended on the 31st of August 2020, covering slightly less than three years. In the findings, we present results as percentages to balance for differences in the number of research units. The adjustment was made because we examined 679 of the 727 photographs the Dubrovnik local tourism organisation posted on Instagram during the period, and 355 of the 5,264 photos posted by the Croatian national tourism organisation on Instagram.

We formed 50 codes, organised into eight categories: geotag, hashtag, UGC, heritage and landmarks, natural wonders, offerings and activities, the *Game of Thrones* influence, and people. The first category, *geotag*, provided valuable information about where the photo was captured and is often used in photo-sharing social media platforms such as Instagram (Kim et al., 2024). Since *hashtags* provide us with information about posts and could be interpreted as keywords (Turanci, 2019), they made up our second category, which consisted of eight codes: None, *#Dubrovnik*, *#Kingslanding*, *#Gameofthrones*, *#Dubrovnik* and *#Kingslanding*, *#Dubrovnik* and *Gameofthrones*, *#Kingslanding* and *#Gameofthrones*, and all three – *#Dubrovnik*, *#Kingslanding* and *#Gameofthrones*. To be considered in the analysis, photos must include at least one listed hashtag, unless they are geotagged, which can be analysed even without hashtags. UGC falls into the third category, and the codes are 'yes' and 'no'. The photo, including UGC, is where the Dubrovnik LTO and the Croatian NTO tagged or credited the photographers in the caption.

The following categories were linked to the visual contents. The fourth category, *heritage and landmarks*, included iconic historical sites, architectural marvels, and cultural landmarks within the city of Dubrovnik. There were 17 distinct codes, each representing a specific heritage site or landmark. By categorising con-

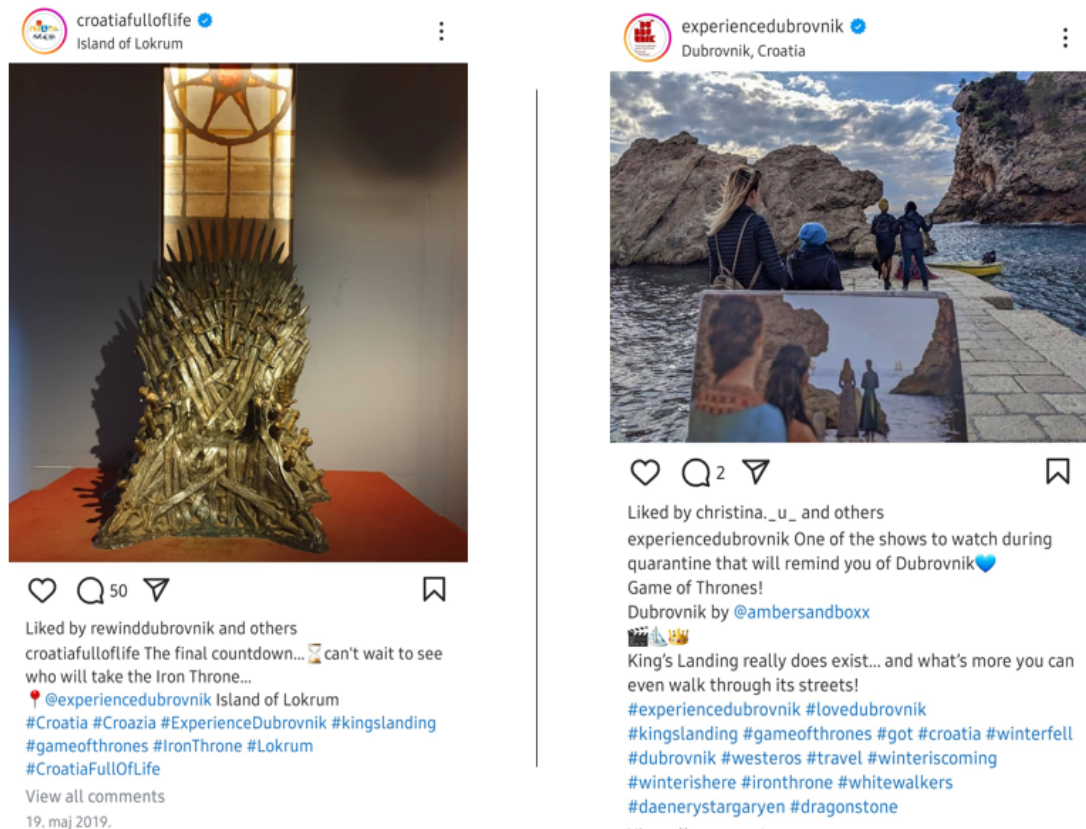


Figure 1 Example of *Game of Thrones* Influence Code Category

Source Instagram profiles of Croatian NTO (2019) and LTO of Dubrovnik (2020).

tent under these codes, we aim to systematically analyse and interpret the portrayal of Dubrovnik's rich cultural heritage and architectural landmarks across both Instagram profiles. However, some of these landmarks were featured in *Game of Thrones*, which is why the website King's Landing Dubrovnik (n.d.) helped us to create codes.

The fifth category was *natural wonders*, capturing the natural landscapes, coastal vistas, and beaches within and around Dubrovnik. The sixth category, *offerings and activities*, captured the diverse range of experiences and attractions available to visitors in Dubrovnik. The *Game of Thrones* influence was the seventh category, capturing the significant impact of the acclaimed television series on Dubrovnik's tourism. By systematically analysing these codes, we aimed to explore how the *Game of Thrones* phenome-

non is portrayed and experienced within the context of Dubrovnik's tourism industry, providing valuable insights into the intersection of popular culture and destination marketing. Lastly, the eighth category was dedicated to *people*, focusing on the presence and portrayal of individuals in Dubrovnik.

Findings and Discussion

Dubrovnik and Destination Branding Practices of the NTO

Based on the thematic analysis and corresponding codes, we derived results for the Croatian NTO. Detailed information is presented in Appendix 1. All percentages in Appendix 1 refer to the average over the four years from 2016 to 2020.

Within the first category, the most common geotag was Dubrovnik, accounting for 90.42% of the posts.

Table 1 Branding Dubrovnik by Croatian NTO on Instagram (2016–2020)

Year	Heritage and land-marks	Natural wonders	Offerings and activities	Game of Thrones influence	People
2016	St. John's Fortress (16.29%)	Sea, nature and beach (37.14%)	Festivals/Celebrations (16.29%)	—	Small group (13.33%)
2017	Dubrovnik Panorama (20.00%)	Sea, nature and beach (59.38%)	Beachcombing (8.75%)	—	One person (14.38%)
2018	Dubrovnik Panorama (29.41%)	Sea, nature and beach (64.71%)	Beachcombing (7.84%)	Filming process, scene's recreation, peacock (1.96%)	One person (25.49%)
2019	St. John's Fortress (28.00%)	Sea, nature and beach (76.00%)	Festivals, spots, beachcombing (4.00%)	Scene's recreation, peacock (4.00%)	One person (16.00%)
2020	Dubrovnik Panorama (35.71%)	Sea, nature and beach (71.43%)	Tours, beachcombing (7.14%)	Scene's recreation, peacock (4.00%)	One person (28.57%)

Furthermore, hashtags indicate a more varied approach, as the three leading hashtags – #Dubrovnik, #Kingslanding, and #Gameofthrones – appear in around 60% of posts. Notably, nearly 90% of the photographs constitute UGC.

The branding strategy of the Croatian National Tourist Board (NTO), as reflected in the promotion of Dubrovnik on its official Instagram profile, places considerable emphasis on the city's natural beauty, both independently and in combination with other destination attributes (Table 1), a pattern that was particularly evident in 2019 and 2020.

Besides natural beauty, Dubrovnik's architecture was portrayed in 86.19% of the photos from 2016 to 2020. Most photos did not showcase any activities or offerings. Approximately 25% of the photos featured festivals and celebrations, such as New Year's, Christmas, Carnival, and other food or religious festivals. Even fewer photos were posted on the Croatian NTO's Instagram account with *Game of Thrones* references (filming process, scene recreation, etc.). Interestingly, most *Game of Thrones*-related images were taken in 2018 and 2019, during the airing of the final two seasons of the TV series. The majority of the posts

(63.38%) did not feature people. However, when they were included in the photo, they were usually solitary individuals or small groups.

The findings indicated that the branding strategy employed by the Croatian NTO prioritised promoting Dubrovnik's natural beauty, heritage, and attractions over images featuring people, festivals, and film-related content. The study of Šegota (2018b) showed that the Croatian NTO relied heavily on *Game of Thrones*-related content; however, the author was comparing the Instagram accounts of national tourism organisations where the filming of the TV series took place. Therefore, the content of the two studies may not be comparable, as their focuses differ.

On the other hand, Battour et al. (2017) suggested that promoting external attributes, such as nature and heritage, is crucial for developing a competitive destination and for incorporating effective branding practices. Similarly, Dai et al. (2022) found that a destination's designation as a cultural heritage site and an area of natural beauty improves its reputation and strengthens its branding, encouraging more tourists to visit and return. Our findings showed that the Croatian national tourism organisation mostly portrayed

Table 2 Branding Dubrovnik by LTO on Instagram (2017–2020)

Year	Heritage and landmarks	Natural wonders	Offerings and activities	Game of Thrones influence	People
2017	Stradun Street (22.00%)	Sea, nature and beach (32.00%)	Festivals/ Celebrations (24.00%)	—	Small group (16.00%)
2018	Random street/buildings (12.69%)	Sea, nature and beach (51.15%)	Festivals/ Celebrations (6.54%)	Peacock (0.38%)	Large group (13.08%)
2019	St. John's Fortress (14.29%)	Sea, nature and beach (50.22%)	Festival/ Celebrations, Promotion (6.49%)	The Iron Throne (1.30%)	Large group (16.02%)
2020	Random street/ Buildings (16.67%)	Sea, nature and beach (60.14%)	Sports (4.35%)	Scene's recreation (0.72)	One person (7.25%)

Dubrovnik's landmarks and natural attractions, coinciding with the ceasing airing of the TV show.

Dubrovnik and Destination Branding Practices of the LTO

As Table 2 illustrates, the branding strategies implemented by the Dubrovnik LTO on Instagram highlight architectural elements, which accounted for around 78.50% of the photos from 2017 to 2020.

The posts of the local tourism organisation most frequently displayed Stradun Street, St. John's Fortress, and various other streets and buildings. The natural attractions, such as Dubrovnik's nature, sea, and beaches, were shown slightly less prominently than on the Croatian NTO's Instagram profile. Nevertheless, the Dubrovnik LTO's branding practices continued to prioritise preserving and promoting the city's natural beauty. Offerings and activities played a relatively minor role in the Dubrovnik LTO's branding practices, with only 25% of photos featuring them. Among the minority that showcased offerings and activities, festivals and celebrations emerged as the most prominent, followed by local gastronomy.

Of all the photos taken between 2017 and 2020 (see Appendix 2), very few (about 1%) include elements associated with the popular TV series *Game of Thrones*. During the *Game of Thrones* season finale in 2019, the

most significant concentration of these photos was the famous peacock, the Iron Throne, and the recreations of scenes. Looking at the photos posted by the LTO of Dubrovnik, more than 50% did not feature people. If people were featured in the photos, it was larger groups that were typically depicted, followed by fewer portrayals of small groups and individuals.

The Dubrovnik LTO's Instagram account strategically used branding techniques to highlight the city's rich architectural heritage and natural beauty. It aimed to offer tourists an authentic experience of living like a local by deliberately portraying the historic streets, buildings and scenic landscapes. This branding approach helped strengthen tourists' attachment to the destination and enhanced their satisfaction and connection to it (Paulauskaite et al., 2017). The Dubrovnik LTO's Instagram promotion was therefore in line with these findings, effectively using social media to highlight the city's authentic and immersive experiences.

The Role of UGC in Co-creating Dubrovnik's Image

UGC accounted for almost 90% of the content shared on the Croatian NTO's official Instagram page between 2016 and 2020. Interestingly, the year with the highest UGC consumption was 2018, suggesting a deliberate reliance on real, organic content produced by users and fans. On the other hand, the lowest utilisation

tion was observed in 2016, suggesting a possible improvement or modification to the content approach over time. The Croatian NTO's dedication to utilising users' genuine experiences and viewpoints to highlight Dubrovnik's varied attractions and to co-create its image for a worldwide audience is demonstrated by its consistent emphasis on UGC.

On the other hand, the Dubrovnik LTO's Instagram profile shows a notable difference in its UGC approach compared to the Croatian NTO. In particular, almost 80% of the photos posted in 2017 were not UGC. In the whole observed period, from 2017 to 2020, more than half of the shared photos were not UGC. However, in 2020, there was a noticeable change, with the distribution of user-generated and non-user-generated information almost evenly balanced. Given the growing recognition of the importance of incorporating real tourist experiences in co-creating the image of Dubrovnik, this shift points to a possible revision of the Dubrovnik LTO's content strategy.

However, UGC poses challenges for DMOS. Wipperfurth (2005) termed this brand hijacking, where consumers' brand direction is overtaken by users, i.e. visitors. Xingyang et al. (2014) note this occurs when UGC's impact exceeds that of DMOS, and when their

desired destination images diverge. Additionally, the credibility of UGC can be questioned, as it is generated by strangers rather than trusted sources (Park et al., 2007). Moreover, negative portrayals may distort brand perception (Lee et al., 2008). Smith (2018) warns that incorporating UGC into a destination's marketing plan can commodify destination imagery, while Fernández-Cavia et al. (2020) stress that DMOS must choose between control and adaptation. Dubrovnik's LTO prioritised the destination's authenticity more than the NTO by limiting UGC and *Game of Thrones*-related posts, which we believe was done to remain competitive and in line with trends on social media (Egger et al., 2022).

Hashtags and Geotags in Building Destination Identity

The Croatian NTO consistently used hashtags on Instagram in 96.06% of photos posted between 2016 and 2020 (see Figure 2).

All three hashtags – #dubrovnik, #kingslanding, and #gameofthrones – were consistently employed, collectively appearing in approximately 63.38% of the photos. The analysis showed that the Croatian NTO actively promoted Dubrovnik's identity as a top desti-

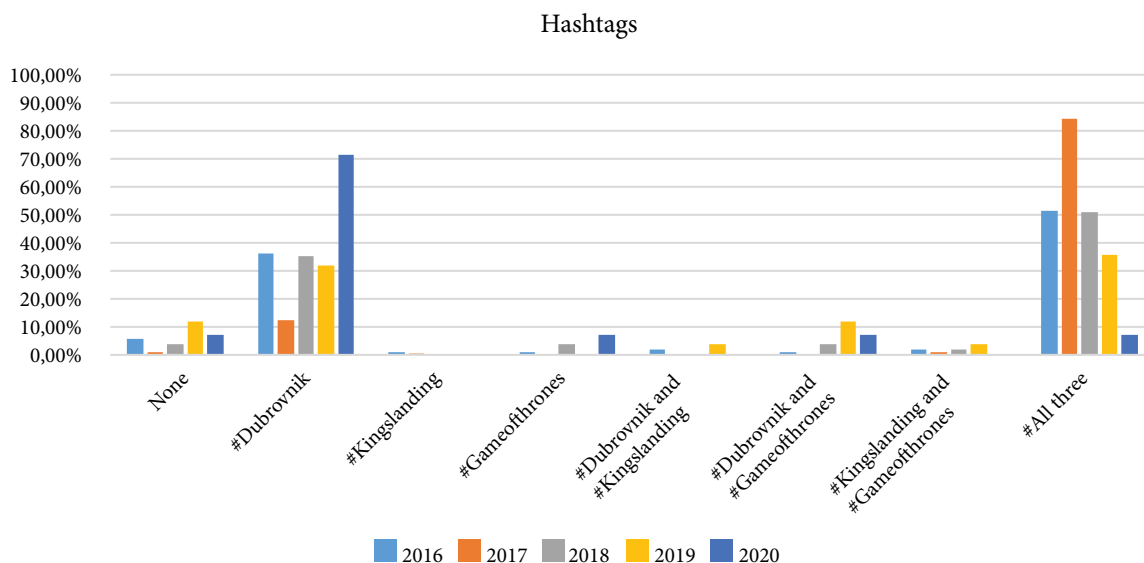


Figure 2 Hashtags Used by Croatian NTO (2016–2020)

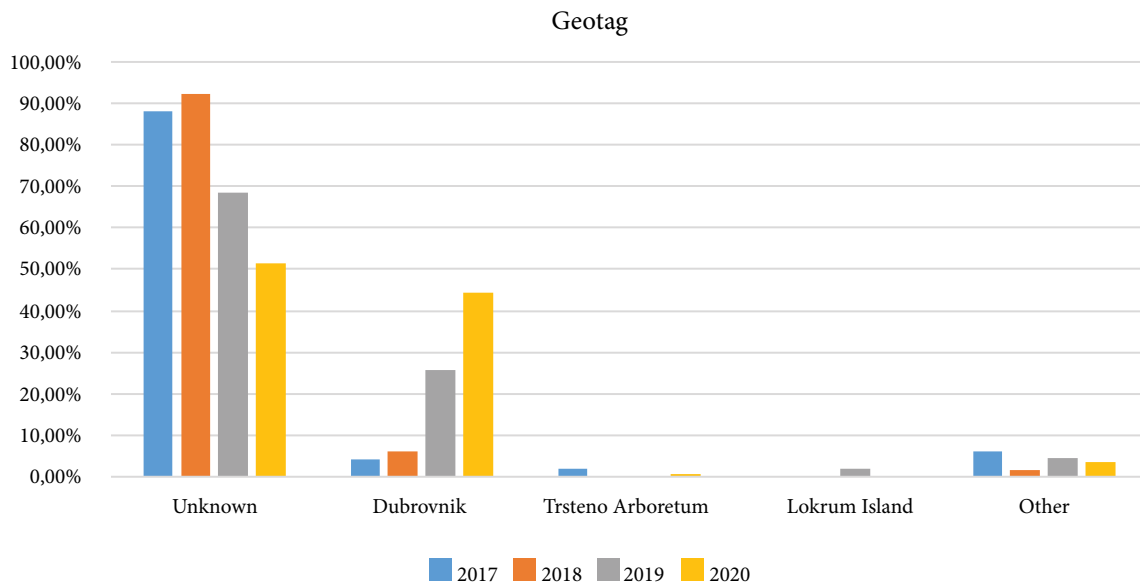


Figure 3 Geotag Sed by Dubrovnik LTO (2017–2020)

nation for film tourism from 2016 to 2019. In 2020, we noticed the dominant use of the hashtag #dubrovnik (71.43% of the photos posted that year) as opposed to the other two hashtags with apparent links to the TV series. The latter indicated an apparent shift in hashtag usage, intended to draw attention to Dubrovnik's distinctive features and attractions beyond its association with *Game of Thrones*.

Between 2016 and 2020, the Croatian NTO used the geotag 'Dubrovnik' in 90.42% of its Instagram posts. This deliberate geotagging strategy significantly shaped Dubrovnik's destination identity by ensuring its presence in location-based feeds and search results, enhancing online visibility and reinforcing its status as a major tourist location. Geotagging promoted a strong, recognisable brand that showcased the city's natural, historical, and cultural appeal globally. While other geotags, such as Trsteno Arboretum and Lokrum Island, were rarely used, limiting the portrayal of Dubrovnik's diversity, the dominant Dubrovnik tag emphasised its core attributes. In the case of the Dubrovnik LTO, a review of data from 2017 to 2020 indicated a noticeable focus on a single hashtag, #dubrovnik, which was present

in 86.76% of photographs with hashtags (98.53%). On the other hand, only 4.12% of the photos used all three hashtags (#dubrovnik, #kingslanding, and #gameofthrones), with each hashtag used only occasionally. Prioritising the #dubrovnik hashtag marks a shift away from *Game of Thrones* branding, focusing instead on the city's unique attributes. This strategy strengthened Dubrovnik's identity and enhanced its appeal as an independent, attractive destination.

As presented in Figure 3, the Dubrovnik LTO did not geotag 75.55% of its Instagram photos between 2017 and 2020.

Though it was used occasionally, the geotag 'Dubrovnik' was far less common in posts by the LTO than the Croatian NTO. For this reason, it is possible that the Dubrovnik LTO missed opportunities to increase the city's visibility in location-based Instagram feeds and searches by failing to geotag its photos regularly (Salem & Twining Ward, 2018). The Dubrovnik geotag was undoubtedly used primarily to draw attention to posts featuring important landmarks or natural beauty, thereby boosting the city's online visibility. Although it did not maximise the potential benefits

of geotagging as effectively as the NTO, this technique helped progressively develop Dubrovnik's identity.

Strategies for Building Destination Identity

By utilising the authenticity strategy defined by Larson et al. (2013), our findings indicated that fabricated authenticity, or authenticity created for economic gain from the film-induced tourism (Jones & Smith, 2005), became a crucial element of promoting the city and its identity on social media by the Croatian NTO. This prime example has been demonstrated through the NTO's strategic use of the TV series *Game of Thrones* to enhance Dubrovnik's appeal on Instagram, through hashtags and the effective incorporation of fabricated authenticity through film-induced posts.

In contrast, the Dubrovnik LTO adopted a strategy aimed at preserving authenticity by emphasising the city's cultural heritage, natural environment, and historical identity rather than popular cultural references (Larson et al., 2013). While DMOS seek to build a strong reputation and a favourable image (Moreno et al., 2015), social media tools such as UGC, hashtags, geotags, etc., play a key role in shaping destination branding (Huertas & Mariné-Roig, 2015). Analysis of the Croatian NTO and Dubrovnik LTO Instagram ac-

counts reveals two distinct approaches: the Croatian NTO uses hashtags and *Game of Thrones* allusions to create a commercialised image of the city while fabricating authenticity. The Dubrovnik LTO, on the other hand, is committed to protecting tangible cultural assets and authentic local experiences. This dual strategy produces an induced image of Dubrovnik that blends fabricated and guarded authenticity. Figure 4 illustrates the framework developed from these findings, rooted in the film-induced authenticity strategies by Larson et al. (2013).

Conclusion

Destination branding is a complex yet essential process for DMOS, relying on a distinctive, consistent image and effective marketing communication strategies (Blain et al., 2005; Kavaratzis & Hatch, 2013). This study examined the Instagram branding strategies of the Croatian national tourism organisation and the local tourism organisation of the city of Dubrovnik, focusing on how they use social media tools to promote Dubrovnik. Particular attention was given to practices linked to the destination's role as a *Game of Thrones* filming location and to the contribution of visual user-generated content to co-creating Dubrovnik's destination image.

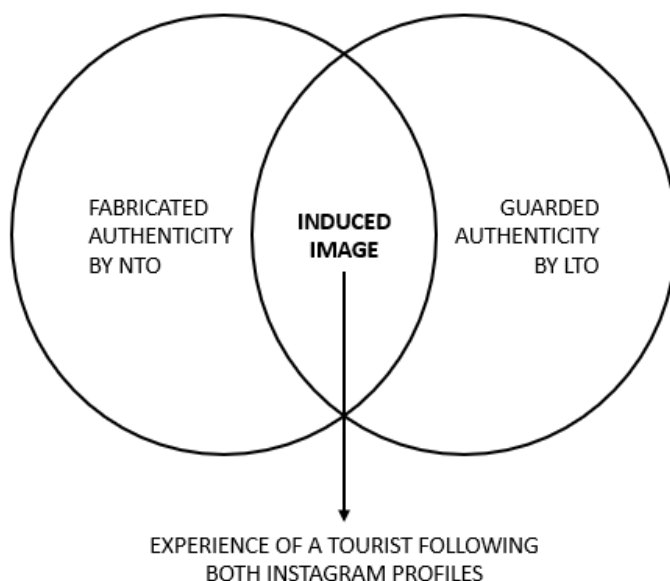


Figure 4 The Authenticity of Dubrovnik on Social Media, with Links to *Game of Thrones*

Our findings revealed that the NTO and LTO predominantly showcased Dubrovnik's landscapes and heritage, with limited explicit reference to *Game of Thrones*. However, the Croatian NTO strategically used *Game of Thrones*-related hashtags even in posts about nature and heritage, indicating an intent to leverage the show's global popularity to attract a wider audience. In terms of visual user-generated content in co-creating Dubrovnik's destination image, the Croatian NTO relied heavily on UGC, making it a key component in shaping the city's image. This strategy enriched Dubrovnik's portrayal by incorporating diverse tourist perspectives, enhancing its appeal and relatability. Conversely, the Dubrovnik LTO used UGC far less, favouring professionally curated content while occasionally integrating user perceptions to convey authenticity on Instagram. Lastly, regarding strategies of building destination identity and authenticity, our analysis showed that the Croatian NTO most frequently fabricated authenticity by presenting Dubrovnik as a popular destination for film tourists. The NTO consistently utilised the geotag 'Dubrovnik' and hashtags related to the TV series, strengthening the link between the city's real identity and its *Game of Thrones* depiction. In contrast, the Dubrovnik LTO primarily used the hashtag #Dubrovnik and occasionally included geotags, signalling a stronger emphasis on protecting the city's authenticity.

The above findings indicate that local and national DMOS differ in their branding approaches for Dubrovnik. The NTO is utilising the city's links with the popular TV series, while the LTO is more reserved. As other studies have shown, the city's visitations and overnight stays have increased substantially due to film-induced tourism (Tkalec et al., 2017), yet it is the local organisation that has direct insight into the impact of these increases, rather than the national organisation. Therefore, we can only speculate that the LTO decided to safeguard place authenticity amid the imbalances in the city over the past 15 years (Šegota, 2024). Additionally, differences in destination branding strategies suggest a lack of communication between the organisations. There must be a unified city image, and its communication to (potential) visitors should be unanimous.

This study is not without limitations. Since the data is derived only from Instagram posts, it may not fully capture the broader marketing strategies employed by the tourism organisations. Additionally, the findings focused exclusively on one city – Dubrovnik, challenging their application to other destinations. Furthermore, the findings were based on analysing Instagram photos posted between 2016 and 2020, thereby excluding discussion of trends and strategy changes, which would have been possible if a longer period of social media marketing communication had been observed.

Despite these limitations, this study advances understanding of destination branding and social media marketing communication by revealing how popular culture, such as film tourism, can be integrated into Instagram strategies and UGC in ways that either preserve or compromise destination authenticity. These findings offer a foundation for future research on the interplay between film tourism and destination branding.

Our research highlights the need to balance authenticity and popular culture in destination branding. While national tourist organisations often leverage film tourism to attract a broader audience, local tourist organisations tend to prioritise preserving the destination's authenticity and identity. These divergent goals can create tension in complementarity within branding strategies. Recognising and managing these differences enables DMOS to craft narratives that remain authentic, yet compelling, ensuring destinations stay competitive and resonate with diverse audiences.

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Appendix 1*Table 1* Results of the Content Analysis: Croatian NTO (@croatiafulloflife)

Category	Level	Code name	2016 (%)	2017 (%)	2018 (%)	2019 (%)	2020 (%)
1		Geotag					
1	0	Unknown	2.86	0.63	3.92	—	—
1	1	Dubrovnik	88.57	91.25	90.20	92.00	92.86
1	2	Trsteno Arboretum	3.81	1.25	—	4.00	7.14
1	3	Lokrum Island	0.95	3.13	3.92	4.00	—
1	4	Other	3.81	3.75	1.96	—	—
2		Hashtag					
2	0	None	5.71	1.25	3.92	12.00	7.14
2	1	#Dubrovnik	36.19	12.50	35.29	32.00	71.43
2	2	#Kingslanding	0.95	0.63	—	—	—
2	3	#Gameofthrones	0.95	—	3.92	—	7.14
2	4	#Dubrovnik and #Kingslanding	1.90	—	—	4.00	—
2	5	#Dubrovnik and #Gameofthrones	0.95	—	3.92	12.00	7.14
2	6	#Kingslanding and #Gameofthrones	1.90	1.25	1.96	4.00	—
2	7	All three	51.43	84.38	50.98	36.00	7.14
3	UGC						
3	0	No	16.19	10.00	7.84	16.00	14.29
3	1	Yes	83.81	90.00	92.16	84.00	85.71
4		Heritage and landmarks					
4	0	Not shown	15.24	14.38	11.38	8.00	14.29
4	1	St. John's Fortress	16.19	18.75	11.76	28.00	21.43
4	2	St. Lawrence Fortress	—	4.38	7.84	4.00	—
4	3	Bokar Fortress	2.86	1.88	1.96	—	—
4	4	Fortress Interior	—	0.63	—	—	—
4	5	Walls of Dubrovnik	3.81	3.75	—	4.00	—
4	6	Walls of Dubrovnik and Fortresses	10.48	6.88	5.88	4.00	—
4	7	Rector's Palace	—	—	—	—	—
4	8	Stradun Street	14.29	3.75	3.92	8.00	—
4	9	Pile Gate	—	4.38	7.84	8.00	7.14
4	10	Porporela	—	1.25	1.96	4.00	—
4	11	Churches/Monasteries	9.52	8.75	—	—	—
4	12	Museums	—	—	—	4.00	—
4	13	Random street/buildings	7.62	5.63	3.92	4.00	14.29
4	14	Dubrovnik Panorama	9.52	20.00	29.41	20.00	35.71

Category	Level	Code name	2016 (%)	2017 (%)	2018 (%)	2019 (%)	2020 (%)
4	15	Red Rooftops	7.62	4.38	5.88	—	7.14
4	16	Other	2.86	1.28	7.84	4.00	—
5	Natural wonders						
5	0	Not shown	26.67	10.63	13.73	16.00	7.14
5	1	Nature	5.71	6.25	3.92	—	7.14
5	2	Sea	29.52	23.75	15.69	8.00	14.29
5	3	Beach	0.95	—	1.96	—	—
5	4	All three	37.14	59.38	64.71	76.00	71.43
6	Offerings and activities						
6	0	Not shown	64.76	77.50	75.43	88.00	85.71
6	1	Festivals/ Celebrations	16.19	4.38	5.88	4.00	—
6	2	Cuisine	2.86	1.25	—	—	—
6	3	Proposals/ Weddings	—	—	—	—	—
6	4	Promotion	1.90	1.25	—	—	—
6	5	Sports	9.52	6.25	3.92	4.00	—
6	6	Tours	—	0.63	3.92	—	7.14
6	7	Beachcombing	4.76	8.75	7.84	4.00	7.14
7	Game of Thrones Influence						
7	1	Not shown	100	100	94.12	92.00	92.86
7	2	Filming process	—	—	1.96	—	—
7	3	Scene's recreation	—	—	1.96	4.00	—
7	4	The Iron Throne	—	—	—	4.00	—
7	5	Peacock	—	—	1.96	—	7.14
8	People						
8	1	Not shown	63.81	66.25	56.86	64.00	50.00
8	2	One person	8.57	14.38	25.49	16.00	28.57
8	3	Couple	3.81	2.50	1.96	4.00	—
8	4	Small group	13.33	10.00	5.88	4.00	14.29
8	4	Large group	10.48	6.25	9.80	8.00	7.14
8	5	Celebrities	—	0.63	—	4.00	—

Appendix 2*Table 2* The results of Content Analysis: LTO of Dubrovnik (@experiencedubrovnik)

Category	Level	Code name	2017 (%)	2018 (%)	2019 (%)	2020 (%)
1 Geotag						
1	0	Unknown	88.00	92.31	68.40	51.45
1	1	Dubrovnik	4.00	6.15	25.54	44.20
1	2	Trsteno Arboretum	2.00	—	—	0.72
1	3	Lokrum Island	—	—	1.73	—
1	4	Other	6.00	1.54	4.33	3.62
2 Hashtag						
2	0	None	4.00	0.38	1.30	2.90
2	1	#Dubrovnik	96.00	92.31	79.65	84.78
2	2	#Kingslanding	—	0.38	—	—
2	3	#Gameofthrones	—	—	—	—
2	4	#Dubrovnik and #Kingslanding	—	1.54	4.33	3.62
2	5	#Dubrovnik and #Gameofthrones	—	2.69	6.93	1.45
2	6	#Kingslanding and #Gameofthrones	—	—	1.30	2.90
2	7	All three	—	2.69	6.49	4.35
3	UGC					
3	0	No	80	57.69	68.83	51.45
3	1	Yes	20	42.31	31.17	48.55
4 Heritage and landmarks						
4	0	Not shown	14	20.38	26.41	18.12
4	1	St. John's Fortress	14	12.31	14.29	11.59
4	2	St. Lawrence Fortress	4	4.23	4.76	3.62
4	3	Bokar Fortress	2	1.54	—	0.72
4	4	Fortress Interior	2	0.77	—	0.72
4	5	Walls of Dubrovnik	—	2.69	1.30	0.72
4	6	Walls of Dubrovnik and Fortresses	6	5	3.46	9.42
4	7	Rector's Palace	6	1.15	2.16	—
4	8	Stradun Street	22	12.31	13.85	9.42
4	9	Pile Gate	4	2.69	1.73	1.45
4	10	Porporela	2	1.54	1.30	1.45
4	11	Churches/Monasteries	8	3.46	2.60	6.52
4	12	Museums	—	—	1.30	—
4	13	Random street/buildings	10	12.69	10.82	16.67
4	14	Dubrovnik Panorama	2	11.54	8.66	15.94

Category	Level	Code name	2017 (%)	2018 (%)	2019 (%)	2020 (%)
4	15	Red Rooftops	2	5	4.76	3.62
4	16	Other	2	2.69	2.60	0.72
5	Natural wonders					
5	0	Not shown	44	34.62	35.50	25.36
5	1	Nature	24	8.46	8.23	6.52
5	2	Sea	—	5	5.63	7.97
5	3	Beach	—	0.77	0.43	—
5	4	All three	32	51.15	50.22	60.14
6	Offerings and activities					
6	0	Not shown	60	75	71.86	84.06
6	1	Festivals/ Celebrations	24	6.54	6.49	2.17
6	2	Cuisine	6	6.15	6.06	2.90
6	3	Proposals/ Weddings	—	0.38	0.87	—
6	4	Promotion	6	5.38	6.49	2.17
6	5	Sports	—	3.08	2.60	4.35
6	6	Tours	4	0.38	0.87	0.72
6	7	Beachcombing	—	3.08	4.76	3.62
7	Game of Thrones Influence					
7	1	Not shown	100	99.62	97.40	99.28
7	2	Filming process	—	—	—	—
7	3	Scene's recreation	—	—	0.87	0.72
7	4	The Iron Throne	—	—	1.30	—
7	5	Peacock	—	0.38	0.43	—
8	People					
8	1	Not shown	68	66.15	59.74	76.81
8	2	One person	4	8.08	8.23	9.42
8	3	Couple	—	1.92	5.19	1.45
8	4	Small group	16	8.85	8.66	5.07
8	4	Large group	12	13.08	16.02	7.25
8	5	Celebrities	—	1.92	2.16	—