#ILoveLondon: An exploration of the declaration of love towards a destination on Instagram

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ABSTRACT

Travellers increasingly use a combination of photographs, texts and hashtags to expressing their attitude towards tourism destinations (TDs). Existing destination branding literature has not yet investigated how consumers express their love towards TDs on social media. This study addresses this knowledge gap and explores how destination brand love (DBL) is expressed on Instagram using a mixed-methods approach. Study one consists of a qualitative visual content analysis of 700 user-generated photographs; while study two adopts text analytics with a sample of 48,783 posts. The findings show Instagram users' declaration of DBL is expressed through photographs of some destination attributes (*natural & architectural, people, public transportation, food, weather*), accompanied by specific positive emotions (*amazement, attractiveness, pleasure, preference, enchantment, nostalgia, belongingness, intimacy*). The findings also illustrate how Instagram users express their love by providing emotional support when the destination goes through a crisis and that different stakeholders co-create the *emotional capital* of TDs.

1. Introduction

Destination branding enables tourism marketers to create a unique and differential image of the destination by combining a place's environmental, social and cultural capital within the destination brand (Campelo, Aitken, Thyne, & Gnoth, 2014). By showcasing the features and characteristics that make a destination distinctive and attractive (Blain, Levy, & Ritchie, 2005), destination branding helps destination management organizations (DMOs) in marketing the destination's identity, not only to visitors but also to residents (Blain et al., 2005; Pike, 2005; Pike & Page, 2014).

Nevertheless, destination brand image is not created by DMOs alone. Social media users today contribute to the co-creation of destination image through posting stories and digital photographs narrating their experience with the destinations' offerings. Moreover, travellers increasingly communicate their feelings about destinations, accommodations, and restaurants through social media (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010; Lo, McKercher, Lo, Cheung, & Law, 2011; Mak, 2017). Assisted by hashtags and geolocation services, social photography becomes increasingly popular, making destination brand image the inevitable product of consumers' social media conversations (Fournier & Avery,

2011; Kim, Lee, Shin, & Yang, 2017; Kladou & Mavragani, 2015; Mak, 2017; Oliveira & Panyik, 2015). Often the urge to share is intensified after satisfactory visits or encounters with destination stimuli and as a result of their DBL. DBL denotes the self-identification and passionate emotional attachment that one has toward a destination (Aro, Suomi, & Saraniemi, 2018). Such digital photographs shared to express DBL are particularly influential, acting as positive word-of-mouth (Bergkvist & Bech-Larsen, 2010; Donaire, Camprubí, & Galí, 2014; Filieri, 2015; Wallace, Buil, & de Chernatony, 2014), and can easily influence actual and prospect tourists' attitudes towards a destination (Kim & Stepchenkova, 2015; Lund, Cohen, & Scarles, 2017).

However, how images are deployed to express social media users' feeling towards a destination has only received scant research attention (Aro et al., 2018; Kladou & Mavragani, 2015; Oliveira & Panyik, 2015). Instead, extant research has focused on: the potential use of Instagram for destination branding purposes (Fatanti & Suyadnya, 2015), the socio-demographics of travellers who post travel-related pictures (Lo et al., 2011), the similarities and differences between visitors and residents' perceptions of a destination (Garrod, 2009), the differences between projected and travellers' destination image (Mak, 2017; Stepchenkova & Zhan, 2013), the role of culture in destination image

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perception (Stepchenkova, Kim, & Kirilenko, 2015), and the effect of travel photographs in forming attitude and destination visit intention (Kim & Stepchenkova, 2015).

Some studies touched on travellers' relationship with tourism destinations, examining the emotional bonds between people and places (Pan, Lee, & Tsai, 2014; Cheng & Kuo, 2015). Scholars investigated travellers' love towards a destination (Aro et al., 2018; Lee & Hyun, 2016; Swanson, 2015, 2017). Nevertheless, they paid little attention to how social media users express their love towards a destination through image-sharing, and specifically on Instagram, overlooking the point that a brand's reality often lies in the experience of its consumers, through their passionate brand identification and engagement (Kohli, Yen, Alwi, & Gupta, 2020). This oversight might explain why many DMOs are struggling to differentiate their destinations from competitors (Aro et al., 2018; Stepchenkova & Zhan, 2013), as they fail to observe how consumers express or declare strong emotions towards a specific destination using digital photographs.

Furthermore, very few studies have explored DBL in crisis situation, such as, when a destination suffers a terrorist attack. Although crises are assumed to have negative effects on a destination's reputation, attractiveness, perceived safety, and intention to travel (Sönmez, Apostolopoulos, & Tarlow, 1999), tourists sometimes manifest forms of emotional solidarity towards residents (Woosnam & Aleshinloye, 2013). By exploring the declaration of love prior to and during a time of crisis, this study also contributes to research on tourists' emotional solidarity during a crisis (Woosnam & Aleshinloye, 2013).

To address these research gaps, this paper asks the following research questions: how do Instagram users express their love towards a destination brand in their posts? And more specifically, which destination attributes, emotions, and hashtags are adopted in the declaration of love towards a tourism destination? How do Instagram users declare their love before, during and after a crisis?

We chose Instagram and London as the research setting. Instagram is the leading image-sharing social media platform, with one billion monthly active users (Statista, 2020). London is one of the most popular tourism destinations and ranks the highest on the global power city index (ONS, 2020; UNWTO, 2019). Since we focus on exploring how DBL is expressed, we chose to explore the user-generated posts published under the destination love hashtag #iLoveLondon on Instagram, which hosts over 1 million posts (i.e. 1,277,359; January 2021, Instagram). Adopting an abductive mode of reasoning, we adopted a mixed-methods approach to gain a comprehensive understanding of the researched topic (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004). Combing a visual content analysis of 700 Instagram photographs and a text analysis of 48,783 posts' text and hashtags, this study extends the depth and breadth of enquiry through method and data triangulation (Creswell & Miller, 2000; Torrance, 2012).

The study's findings can provide valuable insights to managers of destination management organizations (DMOs) and help them identify the destination attributes and the most appropriate hashtags used to express love towards a destination. As such, this paper extends previous understandings of DBL, by specifically illustrating how love is expressed through social image-sharing on Instagram and unravelling the emotional bond between people and places (Cheng & Kuo, 2015).

2. Literature review

2.1. Destination brand love (DBL)

Destination image is commonly defined as *the sum of the beliefs, ideas, and impressions that a person has of a destination* (Crompton, 1979, p. 18). Baloglu and McCleary (1999, p. 870) defined image as *an individual's mental representation of knowledge (beliefs), feelings, and global impressions about a destination*. Destination image comprises an affective component, namely an individual's feelings towards a destination (Echtner & Ritchie, 1993). Baloglu and Brinberg (1997) reveal that the dimensions

of the affective component of tourism destinations change across both *positive* (arousing, exciting, pleasant, and relaxing) and *negative feelings* (sleepy, gloomy, unpleasant, and distressing).

DBL is the highest manifestation of the affective component and refers to individuals' emotional bond with a certain place (Aro et al., 2018). Forming a working definition of 'love' is a challenging task. The Oxford English Dictionary defines love as an intense feeling of deep affection or a great interest and pleasure in something. Love is a psychological process that can happen towards trademarks, people, ideas, activities, objects and places (Aro et al., 2018; Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006). BL is defined as consumer's affective attachment towards certain brands or non-human objects (Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006). BL reflects *the degree of passionate emotional attachment a satisfied consumer has for a particular trade name* (Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006, p. 81) and *can be formed and become apparent in different ways for different persons but which typically includes identification with a brand to some degree* (Aro et al., 2018, p. 73). Caroll and Ahuvia suggest that many consumers do have intense emotional attachment towards some "love objects," and that there are fundamental similarities between interpersonal love and love in consumer contexts, which assumption is also supported by research (Whang, Sahourym & Zhang, 2004; Thomson, MacInnis, & Park, 2005; Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006).

Compared to the growing research attention in marketing on consumer BL (Batra, Ahuvia, & Bagozzi, 2012; Kaufmann, Loureiro, & Manarioti, 2016; Roy, Eshghi, & Sarkar, 2013), research on place or DBL is still scarce in the context of tourism (Aro et al., 2018). Scholars have attempted to define DBL; according to Aro et al. (2018) DBL involves satisfied tourists' self-identification and emotional attachment toward a destination. Other scholars view DBL as a multi-dimensional construct including passionate love, emotional attachment, and self-brand integration (Lee & Hyun, 2016; Tsai, 2014). Swanson (2017) identified three different types of destination BL towards different destinations, based on Plato's symposium: *philia*, which is closer to feelings of friendship, wherein respect and reciprocity are expected; *storge*, which refers to natural affection between family members, showing resilience against negatives; and *eros*, which refers to a more passionate form of love and indicates intimacy, expressing the sense of awe (Swanson, 2017).

Furthermore, only a few studies have been published on place and destination BL (i.e. Swanson, 2015, 2017; Lee & Hyun, 2016; Aro et al., 2018). Swanson (2015) outlined the theoretical context for the study of BL in the context of places and affirmed that tourists can develop BL towards specific destinations. Lee and Hyun (2016) conducted a quantitative study based on a survey with 417 Korean tourists in Japan using structural equation modelling to investigate the relationships between destination ability, tourists' destination BL and their loyalty in the particular context of post-Nuclear disaster. Aro et al. (2018) carried out a qualitative case study in the Finnish region of Lapland and discussed the antecedents and consequences of destination BL. The *antecedents* included brand experience dimensions (i.e. satisfaction, interaction frequency, length of relationship, etc.), tourist dependent antecedents (tourist self-identification) and place dependent antecedents (i.e. uniqueness, self-expressiveness, etc.). Consequences of BL were divided into *emotional* and *behavioural*, the former included attitudinal loyalty, interest in wellbeing of the brand, resistance to negative experiences, longing and memories, anticipated separation distress, positive attitude, whilst *behavioural consequences* included word of mouth, declaration of love, willingness to invest, price insensitivity, and destination loyalty (Aro et al., 2018; Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006; Kaufmann et al., 2016; Thomson et al., 2005). Interestingly Aro et al. (2018) also found that not all Finnish participants find it easy to declare love towards a destination, although their relationships with the destination demonstrated many elements of BL. This finding may be explained by the fact that some people struggle to see places as love objects, or because there is a potential cultural difference in the use of the word love in the Finnish *versus* the English language. Although not focused on DBL, other studies established that brand love influences directly and indirectly brand

loyalty in the context of wine products (Drennan et al., 2015) and switching resistance loyalty in the hotel brand context (Tsai, 2014).

Nevertheless, extant research did not go in-depth to discuss how destination BL is declared or expressed on social media through user-generated digital photographs, hashtags, or emotions. In the next paragraphs, we will explain the relevance of and current research on user-generated photographs on social media.

2.2. Instagram and the rise of user-generated travel photos

Various social media platforms may offer similar functionalities (e.g. networking, content sharing, photo sharing), however their usage vary based on the nature of the medium. For example, Facebook, the first social network, is mainly based on connecting and keeping relationships between friends and acquaintances; Twitter is a microblogging platform where users interact with short text messages known as tweets; YouTube is a video-sharing platform where users can post and comment on videos; Instagram focuses on users' sharing of digital photographs.

While Flickr, the earliest photo-sharing social media platform, emphasises on offering a library of photos of professional quality, Instagram focuses on the connection of people with the same interest in photo sharing, especially via hashtags (Guo et al., 2017). Instagram enables its users to connect and interact with the photographic content shared by its users through shares, likes and comments. Furthermore, Instagram provides users with a variety of functions, such as photo sharing, editing, localization, captions, tags and comments (Weilenmann, Hillman, & Jungselius, 2013).

One way Instagram users share images with the selected audience is via hashtags. Hashtags are used in social media posts to reach a larger audience who is interested in the theme of the photo. A hashtag includes a hyperlinked keyword that indicates the topic of the post and, when clicked, links to a public listing of all Instagram posts on the same subject. The use of a specific hashtag (e.g. brand or independent) indicates a high degree of engagement of the user, probably higher than the behavioural dimensions of engagement (i.e. liking, sharing and commenting). Hashtags on a specific topic (i.e. tourism destination) are added by users while sharing pictures on the platform and they are purposive in reaching larger audiences. Hashtags give users the opportunity to search and browse photographic topics of interests posted by other users with similar interests on Instagram. By following hashtags, Instagram users can get notifications of the photos posted by other users who share the same interest and use the same hashtag, forming virtual communities, similar to brand communities (Muniz & O'guinn, 2001; Cova & Pace, 2006). For example, they can choose between general travel hashtags such as #travel or hashtags related to a destination or place (i.e. #hiddenscotland, #London). Most of these hashtags have been created by users while others are managed by DMO such as #visittrentino.

Instagram is the fastest growing social media mobile application and counts more than one billion monthly active users (Statista, 2020), up from 600 million in 2016 (Sheldon & Bryant, 2016). Gibbs et al. (2014) showed that Instagram has become an empowering self-presentation medium, especially among Millennials and Generation Z. Having a performative nature (Schöps, Kogler, & Hemetsberger, 2020), Instagram users utilise digital photographs to become popular (Chatzopoulou, Filieri, & Dogruyol, 2020) or to express their personalities, lifestyles and taste, under five primary social and psychological motives, including social interaction, archiving, self-expression, escapism, and peeking (Lee, Lee, Moon, & Sung, 2015). It reflects a visual culture wherein images are central to how meaning is created and communicated in the world (Johnson, Mathis, & Short, 2019).

Scholars explain the strong, almost inseparable, connection between leisure travel and photography (Garrod, 2009; Lo et al., 2011; Markwell, 1997). An increasing number of travellers capture their travel experience through photography and share them with others on various social media platforms (Haldrup & Larsen, 2003; Lo et al., 2011). Accordingly,

Sheldon and Bryant (2016) investigated college students' Instagram usage behaviour and found that consumers are more likely to use Instagram for documentation when they travel.

User-generated photographs of a destination are particularly important for DMOs, as they can easily influence previous and potential tourists' preconceived attitudes towards a destination (Kim & Stepchenkova, 2015). According to Urry (1990, p. 140) *photographic images organize our anticipation or daydreaming about the places we might gaze on*. Visual images are excellent for inducing imagination (Ye & Tussyadiah, 2011) and the use of images therefore enables tourists' evaluations of a destination by narrowing the set of attributes being considered regarding each destination (MacInnis & Price, 1987). As such, it is important to understand and study destination photographs because they *communicate images that shape and reshape tourists' destination perceptions* (Kim & Stepchenkova, 2015, p. 29).

Social photography is a type of user-generated content (i.e. eWOM) (Filieri, 2016) and it is based on the interactions among individuals who take, post, and comment photos on social media. In social photography, people who post photos are aware of the fact that their photos may be viewed by either their small networks, such as friends and family, or by a broader range of online audiences (Weilenmann et al., 2013). With the popularisation of smartphones having cameras, social photography becomes easily accessible to many people and allows them to capture ordinary, yet creative, self-represented moments in their everyday life (Weilenmann et al., 2013; Gibbs et al., 2014). The convenience of internet access and the 'always-on' nature of smartphones facilitate individuals' social interactions, offering travellers greater possibilities and opportunities to share their personal experiences of destinations through images, giving them more power to define what the destination looks like from their own point of view (Fournier & Avery, 2011).

2.3. Travel photography research

Scholars have used travel pictures to study tourists' perception of destination image (e.g. Lo et al., 2011; Mak, 2017). For instance, Garrod (2008) compared the photos of visitors and residents of Aberystwyth in Wales, and found no major difference in the perception of destination image. In a subsequent study, the author's findings revealed that while tourists' photographs are more *social* as they often portray travellers (i.e. family), professional photographs tend to focus on spectacular views of Aberystwyth (Garrod, 2009). Lo et al. (2011) studied the socio-demographic profile of individuals who post travel photographs online. Stepchenkova and Zhan (2013) used 530 DMOs' photos and 500 Flickr photos and compared the image conveyed by Peru's DMOs and by Flickr users and found that in both samples the three most frequent attributes of the Peruvian image were Nature & Landscape, People, and Archaeological Sites; however, while travellers were more interested in the Peruvian way of life, the projected image highlighted the distinctive Peruvian culture, traditions, and art. Pan et al. (2014) adopted 145 photos and captions published in the travel section of The New York Times to analyse the relationships between image dimensions and affective feelings and reveal that mountains, water bodies, and flora and fauna have a prominent role in fostering affection towards a place. Stepchenkova et al. (2015)'s exploratory study focused on the cultural differences in American and Korean's perception of a tourism destination (i.e. Russia) with differences in a number of dimensions (i.e. people, place, space, activities, transport & infrastructure, architecture, and state power). Kim and Stepchenkova (2015) analysed the effect of explicit and latent tourist photographs of Russia taken by American and Korean tourists and posted on Flickr and travel blogs on their attitude and desire to visit Russia. Fatanti and Suyadnya (2015) described how Instagram can be used to brand a tourism destination like Indonesia. Nixon, Popova, and Onder (2017) argued that images to promote a destination on Instagram can influence travellers' perceived destination image. Mak (2017) studied the perceived and projected digital destination image of Eastern Taiwan manifested in user-generated content

and national tourism-generated content (textual and visual contents) to identify the potential differences. Nikjoo and Bakhshi (2019) studied how human presence is configured in travel photos using a sample of 812 photos shared on Facebook from 186 tourists who travelled to Iran in 2015.

As it is evident from the review of this literature no study has analysed the declaration of love through photography on social media. Below we discuss the main argument and research questions of the study.

2.4. Declaration of love

The declaration of love is often discussed as a consequence of BL (e.g. Aro et al., 2018; Fournier, 1998), reflecting the element of positive word-of-mouth (Bergkvist & Bech-Larsen, 2010; Wallace et al., 2014). Consumers who love certain brands see these brands as reflections of their personality, thus they manifest their love towards such brands, and at the same time they express their own consumer identity (Albert, Merunka, & Valette-Florence, 2008; Aro et al., 2018; Batra et al., 2012; Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006). For example, by declaring one's love towards a certain destination, an individual is constructing his/her extended self through self-reflection, presentation, confession, which helps people feel better and get closer to their ideal self (Belk, 2014). For instance, Aro et al. (2018) show that consumers in love with Lapland tend to share and post their own photographs on social media about the stories, restaurants and activities in Lapland because sharing their love about the destination help them construct their identity narrative. Thus, using a hashtag to publicly express the love towards a place or destination constitutes BL and more specifically a declaration of love.

Aro et al. (2018) also mentioned the emotional consequences of destination BL, such as attitudinal loyalty, care, resilience to negativity, longing, and memories, are likely to be expressed as a consequence of destination BL. Emotions encompass drives, feelings, and instincts; emotions are fundamental in leisure tourism because tourism is a pleasure-seeking activity (Gnoth, 1997). According to Ekman (1992), emotions are generated by a specific stimulus or by the recalled or imagined representation of a stimulus. Expressing emotions is therefore regarded as a way in which consumers respond to outside stimuli as they are processed by the brain (Damásio, 2003). Nevertheless, little research has examined the emotions associated with the tourism destination in general (Pan et al., 2014; Hosany, Prayag, Deesilatham, Causevic, & Odeh, 2015) or destination love in online settings, in particular.

Consumers who have a strong emotional attachment, such as the love towards a brand, are more likely to actively engage and write positive comments about it (Loureiro, Gorgus, & Kaufmann, 2017; Wallace et al., 2014). With the fast spreading of social media, travellers nowadays can easily express their attitude towards brands and places by using 'likes', 'dislikes', or even 'love' signals on various social media platforms. However, no study has investigated the key attributes and characteristics of the love towards a destination that are being captured in the digital photographs shared on social media when expressing DBL.

Considering consumers' DBL is likely to include a mixed set of complex emotions, including friendship-like feeling, family-like ties and passionate love (Swanson, 2017), research attention is therefore required to unravel how and which emotions are elicited in travellers' expression of love towards a destination through photographs. Furthermore, whilst existing literature affirms the influential role of pictures on destination image formation (e.g. Fatanti & Suyadnya, 2015; Kim & Stepchenkova, 2015; Miller & Stoica, 2004), little research has been conducted on how consumers declare their love towards a destination brand on Instagram, through a combination of digital photographs, textual comments, and hashtags. We adopt user-generated pictures because they are considered *the lenses through which visitors' affective feelings and images for a destination can be studied and identified* (Pan et al., 2014, p. 59).

To address these research gaps, this paper explores how Instagram users express their DBL towards London, focusing on identifying how the specific destination attributes are being portrayed, the hashtags used, and the various emotions elicited in their love expression. Other important unanswered research questions are the following: What are the emotions and feelings associated to DBL? How are hashtags used in the expression and sharing of DBL? How do Instagram users declare their love before, during and after a crisis? Addressing these specific research questions would help advance the theory of destination BL and to reveal the points of differentiation that distinguish one destination from another in the mind of the consumers.

3. Research methods

3.1. Research context, data collection and sampling

As explained in the introduction, London was chosen as the research context because it is one of the world's most visited tourism destinations (ONS, 2020; UNWTO, 2019) and has more than one millions of user-generated posts declaring feelings of love towards London on Instagram. Taking on a consumer-centric approach to branding (Kohli et al., 2020), we took the stance to accept that when Instagram users post under relevant destination love hashtags such as #iLoveLondon, they are expressing and declaring DBL towards London in their own rights. We respect their self-declaration and accept the performative nature of hashtags (Chatzopoulou et al., 2020; Schöps et al., 2020), as the research focuses on exploring how DBL is communicated, expressed and declared on Instagram, rather than challenging or judging whether their self-declared feeling of DBL is genuine. DBL focuses on users' self-identification and emotional attachment towards a destination (Aro et al., 2018) and accepts that there are different type of emotional attachment, from feeling of friendship, affection between family members to a more intensive and passionate love (Swanson, 2017). The #iLoveLondon satisfies both the self-identification with a destination (London) and the performative declaration of user's emotional attachment towards the specific destination (LoveLondon) (Schöps et al., 2020).

#iLoveLondon has one of the highest number of posts, compared against other similar London love hashtags, such as #londonlove (622,966 posts) #ilovelondon♥ (19,153 posts), #lovelondonweekend (6377 posts), and so on. There are 1,277,359 posts (Instagram, January 2021) on Instagram within the #iLoveLondon, which provides the ideal context to explore how people express their DBL using visual images. Using the social media tracker provided by Picodash, all #iLoveLondon posts were downloaded for the period May–July 2017. Picodash shows the date and time, number of likes, comments, account usernames and a URL link for each Instagram post (see screenshot in Appendix 1).

All the posts consisted of three elements: digital photographs, textual captions and hashtags. Whilst all three elements provide us vital information to understand how people express their DBL, two separate studies were conducted to analyse the data. We used different research methods in order to validate the findings through data triangulation (Denzin, 2010; Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004). Triangulation is purposive in reducing bias resulting from a single method by validating the interpretation of data and the resulting findings using multiple and different sources of information (Creswell & Miller, 2000). Furthermore, this mixed-methods approach affords us a comprehensive account of the phenomenon under investigation (Torrance, 2012) and helps to get a more valid and nuanced understanding of the investigated phenomenon (Denzin, 2010). Table 1 below describes how these two studies complement each other in achieving our specific research objectives.

3.2. Study one

To understand how destination love is expressed in user-generated photographs, study one focused on analysing the manifest and latent meanings of the posted pictures, using visual content analysis, the

Table 1
Research methods adopted in the two studies.

	Study One	Study Two
Approach	Visual content analysis	Text analytics
Focus	Manifest and latent meanings derived from the posted photos	Latent meaning derived from textual captions and hashtags
Sample Period	31st May to 6th June 2017	May 1st to June 30th, 2017
Sample size	700 posts	48,783 posts

approach followed in other tourism studies (e.g. Kim & Stepchenkova, 2015; Mak, 2017). We discussed the description of the photography content, how the content is expressed, with our interpretation from the lens of DBL (Johnson et al., 2019; Raaphorst, Roeleveld, Duchhart, Van der Knaap, & Van den Brink, 2020). This helped identify key destination attributes (including features and characteristics), and relevant emotions that are expressed to assist people's declaration of DBL towards London.

We employed a systematic random sampling approach by randomly selecting 100 posts each day, for the week of 31st May – 6th June 2017, leading to a total of 700 user-generated posts. This specific week was chosen because the city of London suffered a terrorist attack on June 3rd. Observing the posts in this particular week would help identify all possible themes and codes, linked to the declaration of love prior to and during a time of crisis. Whilst previous research has not observed DBL in crisis situation, this is believed to add new insights to the understanding of DBL. During data checking and cleaning phase, we noticed that some pictures were not available anymore on Instagram (N = 15), while others were irrelevant for the analysis because they showed different destinations' attractions or were simply social marketing posts that used the destination hashtag to promote their products or brands (N = 18). These posts were replaced with other randomly selected posts from the same week. Before analysis, all user names were anonymised to protect the Instagram users' identity (Mak, 2017).

To create a reliable coding frame, the team of researchers started a manual coding process, looking at 50 posts each to identify key features and emotions. The posts' captions and hashtags were used as supportive clues to assist the manual coding of the digital photographs, as this is how other Instagram users would have seen and reviewed these posts. Then the research team met to match and discuss the codes. Some differences were spotted and discussed, leading to two agreed coding frames, where thematic codes emerged (Nowell, Norris, White, & Moules, 2017). One focuses on the manifested features and characteristics depicted in the digital photographs, including architectures, building, people, weather and transportation. Another focuses on the expressed emotions, which require the research team's interpretation of both manifested and latent meanings derived in the digital photographs.

Following the two agreed coding frames, one author completed the manual coding of the 700 posts to ensure consistency. It is important to note that user-generated photos, often, foster the expression of complex feelings and emotions. For instance, sometimes a single photograph revealed expressions of amazement, pleasure, and attractiveness. Furthermore, some photos included several manifested features, such as the sunset, a landmark (e.g. Big Ben), and an iconic public transport (e.g. red double-decker bus). We did not restrict the number of codes associated with each post.

While the research team interpreted and coded the data from the theoretical lens of DBL, we felt it was important to validate our analysis. As such, we asked three independent marketing and tourism academics to each code a sample of pictures (N = 100), using our two sampling frames. They identified the same features and characteristics depicted in the pictures (total 96% of agreement), approving the validity of first coding frame that focused on destination attributes, including features and characteristics (Table 2). Regarding the interpretation of emotions, they also identified similar emotions in most of the cases. There was

Table 2
Manual Thematic analysis. Main themes, sub-themes and frequency in the declaration of Love (31 May - 06 June 2017).

Main Theme	Sub-themes	Frequency	%	Sub-Total
Architectural and Natural Attributes	Flowers	122	7.39	59
	Houses/Buildings	112	6.78	
	Big Ben	100	6.06	
	Westminster	94	5.69	
	River Thames	80	4.84	
	Tower Bridge	80	4.84	
	Chelsea	60	3.63	
	St.Paul's Cathedral	60	3.63	
	Skyscraper views	58	3.51	
	Neal's Yard	30	1.81	
	London Eye	28	1.69	
	Red Telephone Box	26	1.57	
	Borough Market	24	1.45	
	Street Art/Graffiti	24	1.45	
	West End	24	1.45	
	Camden Town	22	1.33	
	Public Parks & Green Areas	22	1.33	
	Greenwich	22	1.33	
People & Celebration	People	56	3.39	12
	Celebrating family	52	3.15	
	Celebrating friendship	46	2.78	
	Celebrating weekend	26	1.57	
Weather	Sunset	70	4.24	10
	Rain	36	2.18	
	Sunshine	34	2.06	
	Sunrise	26	1.57	
Public Transport	Double-decker red bus	66	4	9
	Black cab	62	3.75	
	London tube	28	1.69	
Food	Breakfast & Desserts	36	2.18	4
	Main course	26	1.57	
Miscellaneous	Vintage cars	46	2.78	6
	Fashion	28	1.69	
	Union Jack Flag	24	1.45	
Total		1650	100	100

some disagreement regarding the interpretation of intimacy and nostalgia, but the overall percentage of agreement was around 80%, above the recommended threshold of 70% (Lu & Stepchenkova, 2012).

3.3. Study two

Whilst study one focuses on exploring also the non-codified meanings present in photographs, study two mainly focuses on codified meanings expressed via textual comments, captions and hashtags in digital photographs. Hence, study two attempts to extend and validate the existing findings through data triangulation (Creswell & Miller, 2000; Denzin, 2010) and pays attention to the frequency of these pieces of text present in the posts, in order to present a complementary, quantitative perspective of the phenomenon. Using user-generated content to analyse consumer perceptions (and satisfaction) is an established practice in travel research (Cheng & Jin, 2019; Filieri, Galati, & Raguseo, 2020; Xu & Li, 2016; Zhu, Cheng, Wang, Ma, & Jiang, 2019). In our case, it can help shed light on identifying the most recurring hashtags, emotions, and destination attributes that are commonly used in the declaration of DBL toward London from a larger and more generalizable sample.

Using Picodash again, all posts published on Instagram under the #iLoveLondon within May and June 2017 were downloaded, leading to a total number of 48,783 posts. The textual data were converted into a word document, accounting for 4,082,322 words and 18,562 pages. The data were subsequently converted into a PDF document to be analysed using Leximancer, which is a particularly suitable text analytics software

for exploratory purpose (Davies et al., 1994; Sotiriadou, Brouwers & Le, 2014), with increasing popularity in tourism research (i.e. Sun, Zhang, & Ryan, 2015; Cheng & Edwards, 2019; Li & Ryan, 2020). The software uses various algorithms that adopt nonlinear dynamics and machine learning for data analysis (Smith & Humphreys, 2006). Leximancer combines natural language processing and text-mining, allowing us to analyse, visualize and interpret the content of the textual documents collected (Smith & Humphreys, 2006). Leximancer is based on Bayesian statistical theory, where fragmented pieces of evidence can be used to predict what is happening in a system (Smith & Humphreys, 2006) and is believed to generate a more objective and text-driven review of large datasets with reproducible and reliable concept extractions and thematic clustering (Angus, Rintel, & Wiles, 2013; Edwards, Cheng, Wong, Zhang, & Wu, 2017; Randhawa, Wilden, & Hohberger, 2016; Smith & Humphreys, 2006).

Before converting the file for data analysis with Leximancer, we removed frequent irrelevant words such as ilovelondon, londonlove, Great Britain, England, and UK. Subsequently, we separated hashtags, feelings, and destination attributes to provide a more systematic analysis of the declaration of love. Some words were further excluded because

themes, *Architectural and Natural attractions* appeared most frequently (59%), followed by *People and Celebrations* (12%), *Weather* (10%), *Public transport* (9%), *Food* (4%) and others (6%).

4.1.1. Architectural and natural attributes

Interestingly, amongst London's attributes, architectural and natural attractions are harmoniously intertwined and create a unique theme. Accordingly, flowers are the most frequently quoted code (7%), followed by houses (6.7%), which very often come together in the same picture. It is somehow surprising how houses and flowers are adopted, more frequently than iconic landmarks like the Big Ben, in the declaration of love towards the London destination.

London's house aesthetics please consumers' senses and minds; Chelsea and Notting Hill's houses and flowers raise emotions more than other neighbourhoods. Typical features of houses in these neighbourhoods are colourful facades, period decorations and front doors, often surrounded by plants and flowers. The pastel colours, and resulting aesthetically-pleasing façade of London houses trigger Instagram users' affective response to the destination.

ID: 100. Sub-Themes: Flowers, Pink Roses, Pink Building, Cake shop

ID: 89. Sub-Themes: Flowers, Wisteria, House, Front yard, façade, garden

they were not relevant for the analysis, such as: World, Europe, much, take, official, show, many, featured, around, shooters, know, walk, another, Londres, que, De, and la. Finally, we manually connected words linking to attributes that were separated in the Leximancer output but that, *de facto*, belonged to the same destination attribute (e.g. Hyde and Park, Regent and Street). The results helped us to identify the most frequently mentioned words in terms of count and weighted percentage as well as to compare the similarities and differences with study one's findings.

4. Research findings

Considering this paper focuses on exploring how destination BL is expressed through: *a)* key destination attributes and characteristics, *b)* emotions and feelings *c)* hashtags; the findings section will be presented discussing the findings derived from study one and from study two.

4.1. Key destination attributes of London love declaration - study one

The findings of study one show that there are six themes, referring to key destination attributes that are employed by people in their declaration of love on Instagram. As shown in Table 2 below, amongst the six

Under destination architectural attractions, it is not surprising to see that cultural landmarks, such as Big Ben, Westminster, Tower Bridge, Saint Paul's Cathedral are often used to aid Instagram users' declaration of love towards London, again together a natural attraction (the River Thames). However, it is surprising to note how views of the British capital from skyscrapers (i.e. The Shard) as well as the iconic telephone box, and street art/graffiti are key attributes of the love declaration.

I just love these houses in London with flowers in the frontyard! ! [ID 89].

Pretty colourful streets, London, England, UK. ❤ 🤎🤍🤎🤍 [ID 119].

4.1.2. People and celebrations

Table 2 shows that the declaration of London love is often accompanied by the celebration of relationships with significant others, including family and friends. Consumers portray London as a loved destination, where to celebrate special family and friends' events. In particular, friendship is celebrated by posting group selfies and tagging friends in the post. For instance, many Instagram users tag their friends in their posts: *Surrounded by love #mightyhoopla @brynchristophermusic @lababbette @djmessyxjessy @rae_forbes #loveconquersall #iLoveLondon.*

Weekends are also celebrated as special occasions to escape from everyday life and mundane routine during the week (Larsen, 2008). Tourism and everyday life are often conceptualized as belonging to different ontological worlds, while weekends resemble the world of the extraordinary and escape, weekdays represent the ordinary routine that is often associated with work and everyday life (Larsen, 2008). As such, hedonic celebration of weekends and the escape from busy workdays or the 'ennui' of normal life (Caruana & Crane, 2011) are captured through weekend recreational activities, from walking leisurely alongside the river bank, meeting up with friends in the park, to luxury shopping at high-end department stores.

4.1.3. Iconic public transport

London's iconic public transportation such as the double-decker bus, the black cabs, and the London Metro very often trigger the love declaration towards the destination. The iconic and unique design, i.e. the Britishness of public transportation, stimulate people's emotional reactions just like iconic attractions (the Big Ben and Tower Bridge):
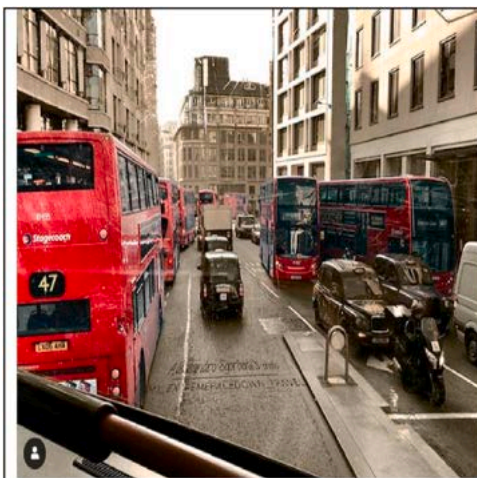
Lose my way in London on these amazing double-decker buses …. . I really love It! [ID 10].

ID: 107. Sub-themes: Celebrating friendship, public park, bench, view.

ID: 227. Sub-themes: Celebrating friendship, family, London docks, riverfront, river Thames, weekend,

ID: 10. Sub-themes: double-decker red bus, black cab, street traffic, street view, buildings.

ID: 88. Sub-themes: double-decker red bus, black cab, street view, traffic, cross-road.

4.1.4. Weather

British weather is known to be cold and rainy throughout the year and different from many other areas in Europe and the rest of the world. Limb and Spellman (2001) reported that British domestic tourists regard rain as a natural risk, and not necessarily a major negative experience. It is important to point out that weather is not a distinct and isolated factor, but rather it is embedded in the travellers' experience and it is not necessarily perceived negatively when the weather is bad (i.e. rainy and cloudy). Nevertheless, the unpredictable and changing weather is regarded as a distinctive attribute of Britain, as it provides residents and visitors a good conversation starter and sources for various British humour established on irony and sarcasm, also evident in the posts of Instagram users. Interestingly, the pictures on Instagram show that the British weather is something that elicit mixed emotions (positive and negative) and that immerge the traveller in the destination context.

Tuesday morning and it looks like summer is over! Gotta love the British weather ☺ [ID 689].
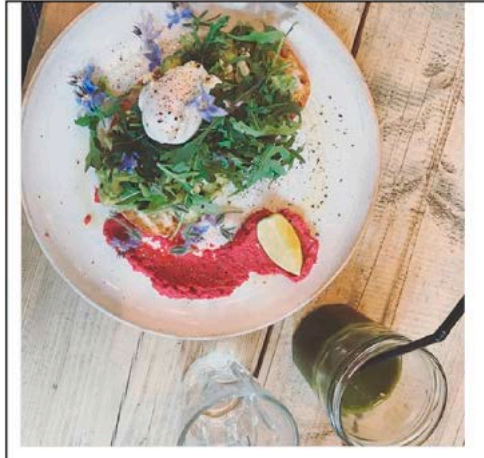
4.1.5. Food

Hospitality and tourism often go hand in hand, complementing each other prosperously. Research shows that local food is increasingly an important ingredient of the sustainable and authentic tourism experience that travellers seek (Quan & Wang, 2004; Sims, 2009). This explains why local food, especially high quality food and dishes, is a key attribute of the expression of love towards a destination, and specifically London. Instagram users frequently post pictures of well-presented traditional British dishes and English breakfast; but also revisited, modern English breakfast variants such as in post 5 and post 605.

Good morning world! My wonderful English breakfast is chilling and city is waiting for me. Have a nice day friends [ID 605].

So happy to see my local food market Borough Market back open today ☺ [ID 120].

ID: 76. Sub-themes: rain, umbrella, wet street, view, Tower Bridge, shops.

ID: 689. Sub-themes: sky, Tower Bridge, double-decker red bus, bridge, traffic.

ID: 5. Sub-themes: breakfast, eggs, revisited English breakfast, rocket salad, beetroot puree, juice, glasses

ID: 605 Sub-themes: English breakfast, eggs Benedict, croissants, muffins, jam, orange juice

Table 3
Quantitative analysis with Leximancer. Content that triggers the declaration of *Love* (May–June 2017).

Main Theme	Sub-themes	Frequency	Weighted percentage
Architectural and Natural Attributes	Hyde Park	3582	0.2
	London Bridge	3394	0.19
	Regent Street	3180	0.18
	Borough Market	2517	0.14
	Tower Bridge	2289	0.13
	Notting Hill	2327	0.13
	Big Ben	2266	0.13
	St.Paul's Cathedral	1898	0.1
	Royal Palace	1757	0.1
	Shard View	1739	0.1
	Kensington Grdens	1590	0.08
Public Transport	Victoria station	1549	0.08
	King's Cross	766	0.04
People	People	1169	0.07
Architectural and Natural Attributes	Tate Gallery	66	4
	Square	62	3.75
	Westminster	28	1.69
	Chelsea	1061	0.06
	House	1056	0.06
	Palace	984	0.06
	Road	964	0.06
	Museum	945	0.05
	Thames	570	0.03
	Shoreditch	568	0.03

4.2. Key destination attributes - study 2

Study two adopts text analytics and a dataset of 48,783 posts and the findings of the analysis partially confirm the findings of study one. Compared to study one, we can see similarities and differences in terms of the destination themes that are used in the declaration of love. For example, some of the destination themes that were relevant in the previous analysis (i.e. food, iconic public transport, weather, and celebrations) did not emerge back in study two.

Table 3 below shows that there are some differences also in the destination attributes that are most frequently used in the declaration of love; these attributes were: Hyde Park, London Bridge, Regent Street, Borough Market, Tower Bridge, Notting Hill, Big Ben, and Covent Garden. Furthermore, houses were less frequently adopted in the love declaration in study two; while Hyde Park, Covent Garden, Tate Gallery, Kensington Gardens, Royal Palace, Shoreditch were not used in the love declaration in study one. Finally, some attributes show their relevance in

both studies (i.e. London Bridge, Saint Paul's Cathedral, Chelsea, River Thames, Big Ben, Camden Town, Westminster, view from the skyscrapers, i.e. The Shard).

We tried to provide an explanation for these findings: although many pictures in study two still show flowers, public transport, food, weather conditions, or people celebrating friendship, these attributes are rarely codified in the post captions (or in the comments of other users). Thus, we can speculate that the quantitative analysis only reveals the tip of the iceberg, i.e. the codified meanings of Instagram posts, and gives more relevance to these elements in the picture (i.e. caption), which often corresponds with the location or the key attraction (i.e. Tower Bridge), while the non-codified elements are not detectable through text analytics.

Another explanation is that the word 'Chelsea', although mainly associated to pictures of houses, counts more times than the word 'house' in the textual quantitative analysis because the geo-location information is present in almost all posts, consequently they appear more frequently in the data corpus compared to other captions (i.e. flowers, types of flowers, house front yard and the like). Although these themes were not often used in textual captions, they emerged in the qualitative analysis of study one. Hence, these findings enable to value the complementarity of qualitative and quantitative methods in the analysis of social media user-generated content, and specifically of Instagram posts.

4.3. Relevant emotions of London love

4.3.1. Study one

Using a manual coding frame and guided by the theoretical lens of destination BL (Pan et al., 2014; Kaufmann et al., 2016; Aro et al., 2018), the results of study one revealed twelve emotional themes that were related to Instagram users' expression of love towards London. These included feelings of *amazement, attractiveness, pleasure, preference/favouritism, enchantment, nostalgia, belongingness, and intimacy* whereas those that emerged after the London's terrorist attack included: *unity, sadness, sympathy,* and *concern*. In the following section, each of the emotions identified under the declaration of #iLoveLondon are discussed with posts as examples.

4.3.2. Amazement

Amazement is the most frequently used theme to express the love towards London, it appears in 33% of the posts (see Table 4). Amazement is a feeling of great surprise or wonder, which is often driven by the perception of novelty and or greatness, expressing the sense of awe and the 'wow' factor of the destination, indicating a passionate love towards

Table 4
Feelings used to express *Love* towards London (31 May–6 June).

Key Themes	Dates							Total Frequency	%
Post Dates	31 May	1 June	2 June	3 June	4 June	5 June	6 June		
Post Number	1–100	101–200	201–300	301–400	401–500	501–600	601–700		
Amazement	60	90	80	84	26	50	54	444	33
Attractiveness	54	34	52	42	34	32	26	274	21
Pleasure	50	52	38	44	0	14	14	212	16
Favourite	20	12	14	4	10	6	14	80	6
Enchantment	26	24	14	0	0	4	6	75	6
Belongingness	6	12	6	6	2	2	0	34	3
Intimacy	2	8	4	2	6	4	6	32	3
Nostalgia	8	8	0	0	0	0	10	26	2
THEMES EMERGED MAINLY AFTER THE LONDON'S TERRORIST ATTACKS									
Social Unity	0	0	0	4	30	10	0	44	4
Sadness	0	0	0	6	20	2	2	30	2
Sympathy	0	0	0	4	18	6	0	28	2
Concern	0	0	0	2	22	2	0	26	2
Grand Total	226	240	208	198	168	132	132	1.304	100

the destination's attribute (Swanson, 2017). The adjectives that are more often used to declare amazement by Instagram users included: *amazing, awesome, wonderful, stunning, superb, magnificent, and outstanding.* Amazement is often triggered by stimuli that are so extraordinary or remarkable, hence exceeding users' expectations. Similarly, post 15 captures the coloured lanterns floating across the sky with the Big Ben in the foreground, triggering the user's expression of love towards London.

Managed to get this great picture of Whitehall whilst on the London Eye. Just look at that London cloud cover, magnificent. [ID 17].

an individual has about a destination's ability to provide satisfaction in relation to his or her special vacation needs. Based on our analysis, the destination's attributes attractiveness trigger Instagram users' declaration of love towards London. Destination attractiveness is expressed through the following words and hashtags: *beautiful, pretty, nice, gorgeous, cute, sweet, charming, and fascinating* and hashtags like *#prettycitylondon, #theprettycities, #prettylittlelondon, #mydarlingLondon,* and *#cute.* Destination attractiveness is often facilitated by the colourful houses located in the neighbourhoods of Notting Hill and Chelsea as expressed by:

ID: 15

ID: 53

4.3.3. Attractiveness

According to Hu and Ritchie (1993, p. 25) the perceived attractiveness of a travel destination reflects *the feelings, beliefs, and opinions that*

Beautiful houses in London. Walking along this felt like I had travelled back in time to a cute village … [ID 6].

How gorgeous are these colourful houses in Notting Hill? You might have seen this cute, signature pink car @lepinkfigaro out and about around London … Paired with the beautiful houses of Notting hill, we think it makes the perfect combination … [ID 290].

ID: 390

ID: 588

4.3.4. Pleasure and happiness

Fodness (1994) asserts that one of the five reasons for leisure tourism is 'reward maximization' (or pleasure and sensation seeking). Before the expression of pleasure can be defined, it may be wise to reflect on the difference between two basic human emotions: pleasure and happiness.

Yesterday the weather in London was absolutely fantastic. 25° of pure happiness, beauty and joy. Clear skies, flowers, people on the river bank chilling and having fun. It has been incredible. And it has made me so happy! [ID 360].

ID: 161   ID: 332

The experience of pleasure is motivated by one's external circumstances in a specific location (London, in this case) or moment in time (Friedlander, 2013). It is temporary, fleeting by nature, and the feeling it arouses can shortly become neutral or even unpleasant. On the other hand, happiness is constant and a state of inner fulfilment (Friedlander, 2013). Typical expressions of pleasure shown in the photos tend to be about smiling and laughing, some Instagram users were also captured posing next to architectural attractions. Pleasure and happiness are positive feelings, they are expressed using words and hashtags like *happy, content, happiness, joyful, enjoy, #happydays, #happygirl #enjoythelittlethings, #happylondonlife*. These expressions are often associated with events (i.e. birthdays), weather condition, or the weekend, acting as facilitators.

Always so happy to be back in the city I once called home [ID 61].

I just love love love summertime in London. The parks are busy, flowers are blooming outside trendy stores and everyone is happy. ❤ ❤ ❤ [ID 122].

4.3.5. Favouritism/preference

In the Oxford dictionary, favourite is defined as a person or a thing that is preferred to all others of the same kind. In our analysis, favourite is often employed by Instagram users as a way of expressing their particular preference and fondness of London. Cardoso, Dias, de Araújo, and Marques (2019) explains that when a destination is recognised as favourite, it refers to a place that tourists have already visited and considered the best destination based on their retrospective memory, against other similar competitive destinations (Cardoso et al., 2019). Different from the so-called "dream destination" that people have not actually visited before, people tend to describe their favourite destinations using more tangible aspects (Cardoso et al., 2019), such as the city, its attractions, and specific neighbourhoods like Notting Hill, Camden Town or public parks like Hyde Park.

London - always my favourite place in the world. Will celebrate New Years at the Big Ben to welcome 2018. For a change. I love London 👀 [31].
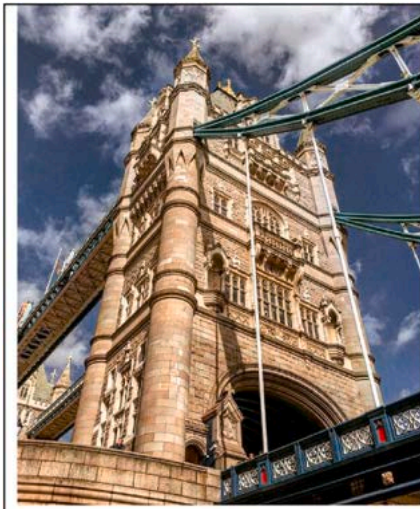
| ID: 103 | ID: 660 |

4.3.6. Enchantment

Enchantment expresses a feeling of magic, of mystical pleasure and in this study was often accompanied by expressions like *fantastic, incredible, unreal, magical, mystical, otherworldly, heavenly, dreamy, and fabulous.* Enchantment feelings enable individuals to express the dreamy-like state caused by experiencing London. An example of enchantment is a consumer evaluating her decision to visit London by saying:

I've been dreaming of visiting London since I was a young girl and so far it's exceeded all my expectations. This city is absolutely breathtaking! [22].

To the beautiful city of London, my heart goes out to you. This past week here was magical for me and was a dream come true to get to explore everything you have to offer. [199].

This house reminds me so much of the Hansel and Gretel fairytale and of the ginger bread house. With the pink rhododendron bush and perfectly shaped greenery in front of the light dreamy blue coloured house … would definitely do not mind living there. A little enchanted home in a big enchanted city 🏚 [ID 167].

4.3.7. Intimacy

Intimacy *is an interpersonal process within which two interaction partners experience and express feelings, communicate verbally and nonverbally, satisfy social motives, augment or reduce social fears, talk and learn about themselves and their unique characteristics, and become 'close' (psychologically)* (Reis & Shaver, 1988, p. 387). Thus, intimacy is represented by such attributes as psychological closeness and connectedness. In this study, intimacy refers to the emotional closeness between Instagram users and the city of London. Social media profiles provide people with the online settings wherein intimate storytelling is practised (Garde-Hansen & Gorton, 2013), as people tell personal stories about their relationships, families, and travels. Consumers feel in such a deep relationship with the destination that reveal their personal, intimate stories or celebrate intimate moments like the marriage proposal of the couple in the post below:

2 years ago during the walk along the Thames I heard dedication to me and my (now) husband and then my favourite romantic song 'Perfect' by #edsheeran I didn't know what is going on … Few minutes later I heard THIS question! And of course I said YES! I was shaking and I was (I still am)

| ID: 167 | ID: 305 |

the happiest woman in the world! It was perfect men, perfect place and perfect song [140].

ID: 140 | ID: 243

4.3.8. Belongingness

Belongingness is mostly expressed through *home feelings* while visiting or living at the destination. Instagram users exhibit a strong bond with the destination:

I probably feel more at home there than anywhere else in the world. [ID 9].

City of the possibilities and my home for the last 13- odd years. I love how vibrant, full of life, and connected London is [ID 200].

You always go back where you belong. 🏠💙 *[ID 207]*.

I think my soul belongs in London♥ *[ID 677]*.

4.3.9. Nostalgia

Sierra and McQuitty (2007) define nostalgia as the desire for the past or affection for possessions and activities linked with the past and is happened when individuals feel separated from an era to which they are attached. Stern (1992) distinguishes between personal and historical nostalgia and defines nostalgia as an emotional state in which an individual yearns for an idealized or sanitized version of an earlier time period (i.e. historical nostalgia) or a sentimental longing for something far away (i.e. personal nostalgia), where the distance referred to here is both spatial and temporal (Stephan, Sedikides, & Wildschut, 2012).

Nostalgia towards the destination is often manifested by the poster or by those who comment on a post that reminds them about a memory of

ID: 200 | ID: 207

their travel or living experience in the city that they miss. Nostalgia is often accompanied by expression *MissU, missing, memories, nostalgia* and hashtags like *#imisslondon, #nostalgic*, such as in the following post: *Watermelon juice at Borough market, last Saturday. I had an amazing time in London, such a beautiful and cheerful city. I miss it so much. [ID 74]*.

Today I'm missing London … a lot ❤; *Gonna miss London so much! Such a short trip! Mama and i's headed back home to Canada [ID 118]*.

London, I am coming back, yeah ☺*!!! Nostalgie is ending! [ID 304]*.

This park really brings back so many happy memories of younger and simpler days with family and friends. Miss it all. [ID 676].

Londoners are made through posts of pictures and statements, claiming to be united or joined as a whole with the destination. Instagram users express feelings of deep sadness, which are generally triggered when the loved object or the loved person is threatened by others.

With all the horrendous news lately and the tragic loss of innocent life I feel so sad with the world ☺ *[ID 586]*.

For example, the following Instagram user states the importance of community as follows:

London is a happy and lively city and nothing and no one will ever take that away from us. Today we will not be scared or intimidated and we will

ID: 74 | ID: 676

### 4.4. Emotions in the love declaration in time of crisis: social unity, sadness, sympathy and concern

As shown in Table 4, it is important to note that the expression of *social unity, sadness, sympathy and concern* did not emerge in the earlier posts, from 31st May to June 2, 2017. However, immediately after the London's terrorist attack on June 3rd, they were very much expressed and associated with the expression of love towards London. In the Instagram posts, social unity, solidarity, and the support to London and

*continue enjoying life in the city that we all call home #unitedwestand #londonbridge #boroughmarket #alwaysprettylittlelondo*n. *[ID 505]*.
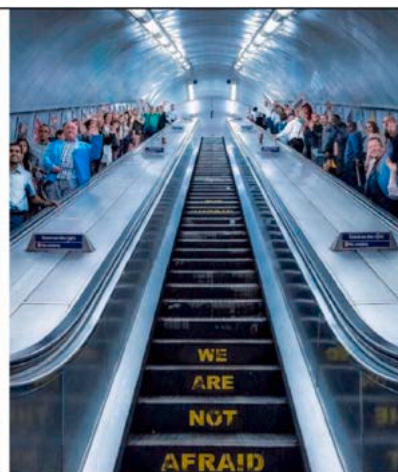
Another example can be found in post number 558, in which the user felt the need to pray for London and the suffering people after the terror attack.

Please be safe out there. Let's help each other. #iLoveLondon #pray-forlondon #besafe #peace #love' [ID 558].

Below other examples representing the best-suited expressions of *social unity*.
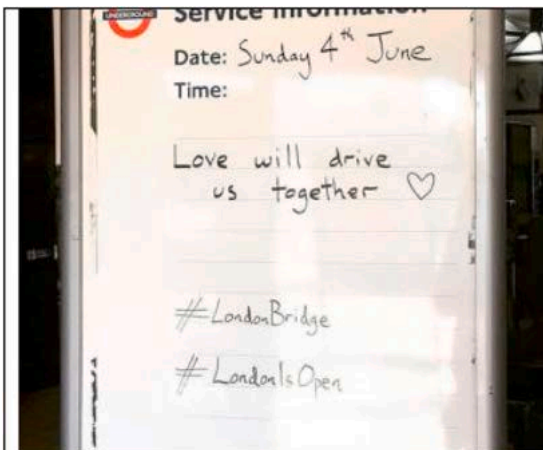
ID 443 | ID 503

The love & solidarity of London, Manchester & the whole UK is something truly special ♥~ we will never be beaten & will carry on as we always do #WeAreNotAfraid #londonlife #ILoveLondon [ID 599].

London. Manchester. Kabul. Paris. Berlin. Iraq. Syria. Cairo. Wherever evil acts, love and peace and unity and compassion will always be stronger and mightier. Because we are united with our values of friendship, multiculturalism, happiness and democracy, upholding with determination and resilience this open and free way of life. No dogma, no hate, no death will defeat us. We are many, we are plural, we are freedom, we are not afraid, we are peace. [ID 426].

ID: 426   ID: 592

In this case, expressing social unity with the destination connects to the co-creation of love and support for London among Instagram users, tapping into their existing friendship and community bonds both online and offline. Together with solidarity is the expression of sympathy, which is defined by Eisenberg, Eggum, and Di Giunta (2010, p. 3) as *an understanding of another's emotion and includes an emotional response, but it consists of feelings of sorrow or concern for the distressed or needy other rather than merely feeling the same emotion the other person is experiencing or is expected to experience.*

In this study, the London's terrorist attack acts as a stimulus for sympathetic responses towards the citizen of London, who suffered because of the terrorist attack.

My heart is aching for all those caught up tonight in this nightmare [ID 389].

My heart bleeds for those who were directly affected. [ID 400].

In addition, when it comes to photos that communicate sympathetic feelings, it is interesting to note that no human figure is portrayed in the photographs. All pictures are scenic photos of London, taken from different locations by Instagram users, mostly of cultural institutions, such as the Big Ben and the Thames River. Furthermore, by diluting or darkening the original photo colours using Instagram filters, sympathetic feelings are expressed. Moreover, some cultural institutions act as concrete objects that people can use to express sympathy and concerns.

This time though as we've been going about our tourist business, we've frequently thought about the other people that were doing exactly the same, enjoying the sights or a relaxing drink, when their lives were changed forever by a terrorist act, and we've been touched with sadness at this while exploring this wonderful city [ID 592].

4.5. Relevant emotions – study two

The analysis of textual data in study two further confirms the findings derived from study one, with some exceptions. As shown in Table 5, in study one some of the most frequently used words to express love towards London did not include the feelings of *social unity*, *sadness*, *sympathy* and *concerns*. However, these feelings were experienced only during the London's terrorist attack. This suggests that these emotions accompany the declaration of love over a short period of time and because of an exceptional crisis, thus they may be statistically irrelevant when a longer span of time is taken into account. The table below pro-

vides an overview of the frequency of each of the feelings used to express the love towards the destination, including *attractiveness*, *happiness*, *amazement, favourite, belongingness,* and *nostalgia* feelings. The feelings of *intimacy* did not emerge in this analysis. Accordingly, intimacy emerged in the interpretative analysis of Instagram users' pictures, however this feeling was not codified in the natural language, hence it cannot be detected through quantitative data analysis.

Table 5
Most frequently used words to express the feelings of *Love* towards London.

Theme	Word	Frequency	Weighted Percentage
Attractiveness	Pretty	11,345	0.59
Attractiveness	Beautiful	7717	0.39
Happiness	Enthusiast	3644	0.19
Happiness	Happy	2396	0.14
Attractiveness	Like	1671	0.09
Amazement	Amazing	1651	0.09
Favourite	Best	1057	0.06
Amazement	Great	1134	0.06
Nostalgia	Back	1120	0.06
Happiness	Enjoy	1058	0.06
Enchantment	Magic	849	0.05
Belongingness	Home	845	0.05
Attractiveness	Lovely	819	0.05
Favourite	Favourite	585	0.03

Table 6
Hashtags associated with the declaration of *Love*.

Hashtag	Frequency	Weighted percentage	Hashtag	Frequency	Weighted percentage	Hashtag	Frequency	Weighted percentage
#travel	4560	0.26	#instadaily	1347	0.08	#vscocam	756	0.04
#prettylittlelondon	4354	0.24	#ukpotd	1272	0.07	#nofilter	753	0.04
#londoner	4344	0.24	#iglondon	1248	0.07	#londonguru	751	0.04
#londontown	3590	0.20	#vsco	1244	0.07	#metropolis	732	0.04
#thelondonlifeinc	3398	0.19	#londonbylondoners	1208	0.07	#eastlondon	723	0.04
#londonpop	3373	0.19	#britain	1187	0.07	#unlimitedlondon	721	0.04
#shutup	3228	0.18	#beautiful	1169	0.07	#riverthames	715	0.04
#londres	2988	0.17	#summer	1143	0.06	#londoncityworld	707	0.04
#streetphotography	2931	0.16	#streetart	1125	0.06	#photo	702	0.04
#architecture	2920	0.16	#bbctravel	1087	0.06	#streetlife	698	0.04
#londonist	2484	0.14	#westminster	1045	0.06	#londonstyle	696	0.04
#mylondon	2427	0.14	#ldn	1030	0.06	#traveling	696	0.04
#bigben	2266	0.13	#nature	1005	0.06	#like4like	672	0.04
#instagood	2200	0.12	#igers	1001	0.06	#photosofengland	668	0.04
#photooftheday	2185	0.12	#londonisopen	1001	0.06	#londonbaby	655	0.04
#travelgram	2072	0.12	#ldn4all	997	0.06	#canon	647	0.04
#londonforyou	2031	0.11	#londongram	996	0.06	#sky	644	0.04
#photography	1960	0.11	#sunset	920	0.05	#theshard	630	0.04
#bnw	1927	0.11	#cityscape	891	0.05	#prayforlondon	625	0.04
#vscolondon	1913	0.11	#travelawesome	881	0.05	#traveller	624	0.04
#picoftheday	1886	0.11	#cityoflondon	867	0.05	#travelblogger	619	0.03
#instatravel	1797	0.10	#topeuropephoto	849	0.05	#traverselondon	616	0.03
#londonlove	1775	0.10	#thames	845	0.05	#landscape	613	0.03
#city	1759	0.10	#londonstreets	837	0.05	#londonvisionaries	605	0.03
#mydarlinglondon	1715	0.10	#citylife	833	0.05	#architecturelovers	598	0.03
#londoncalling	1639	0.09	#visitbritain	822	0.05	#londonblogger	591	0.03
#wanderlust	1581	0.09	#rsa	820	0.05	#visitlondonofficial	587	0.03
#travelphotography	1514	0.08	#londonmoment	818	0.05	#theprettycities	585	0.03
#londonbridge	1482	0.08	#trip	818	0.05	#лондон	584	0.03
#igersuk	1438	0.08	#traveling	794	0.04	#weekend	578	0.03
#art	1393	0.08	#justgoshoot	791	0.04	#tourist	576	0.03
#street	1355	0.08	#flowers	773	0.04	#londonarchitecture	575	0.03
#europe	1353	0.08	#urban	763	0.04	#nottinghill	569	0.03

4.6. Associated hashtags

The quantitative analysis of the hashtags show that Instagram users employ various hashtags in association to the expression of love (Table 6). We have attempted to categorize these hashtags and, interestingly, the majority of them are 'local', namely hashtags used by Londoners or people living within the destination every day, to post about their daily life or about London's lifestyle, such as #londoner, #londontown, #thelondonlifeinc, #londonpop, #londonist, #mylondon, #citylife and #streetlife. Among the residents' hashtags, photographers were among the most active co-creator of love towards London with hashtags like #streetphotography, #photography, #picoftheday, #londonguru, #cityphotography, #cityscape, #travelphotography.

It is also interesting to see the presence of many relevant travel-related hashtags used in association with ilovelondon's; these can be distinguished between *popular hashtags* related to travel in general such as: #travel, #travelgram, #instatravel, #wonderlust, #travelawesome, #trip, #traveling, #traveller, #travelblogger, #traverselondon; and *hashtags* related to the *most loved tourist attractions/places* in London such as #bigben, #londonbridge, #westminster, #thames, #riverthames, #eastlondon, #theshard, and #nottinghill. Interestingly, the hashtag analysis also provides us with some information about the most loved attributes of London, which again include *natural* and *architectural attributes* together, including #nature, #sunset, #flowers, #sky, #landscape, #skyline, #architecture, #londonstreets, and #londonarchitecture.

Finally, the presence of 'inclusive' hashtags such as #londonforyou #londonisopen #ldn4all, #londoncityworld, show that Instagram users love the cosmopolitan personality of London, a city that welcomes and is open to everyone.

5. Discussion

Instagram is increasingly used by travellers to narrate their travel experience and share them with their peers and the extended social media network (Haldrup & Larsen, 2003). This study sought to achieve an in-depth explanation of the declaration of love towards a destination brand on social media. While there is increasing interest in travel photography (e.g. Kim & Stepchenkova, 2015; Lo et al., 2011; Lo & McKercher, 2015; Mak, 2017; Nikjoo & Bakhshi, 2019), little is known about the destination attributes, feelings/emotions that are adopted to express the love towards a destination. The comments and posts analysed were predominantly emotional and positive, proving that consumers who are in love with a destination are likely to engage in the declaration of love on social media through posting pictures associated with emotional contents and hashtags. Previous studies in marketing emphasized the role of brand love as an antecedent of electronic word-of-mouth on Facebook (Loureiro et al., 2017; Wallace et al., 2014).

This study has adopted a mixed-methods approach (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004) to fill a relevant knowledge gap by showing how destination BL is expressed and co-created through photos, captions, and hashtags on social media, which has not received research attention in the marketing as well as the travel & tourism literature. By eliciting how love is expressed as a consequence of destination BL through specific destination attributes and characteristics, emotions and hashtags, we make several theoretical contributions to marketing and travel & tourism (and specifically destination BL) literatures.

Firstly, we reveal that some destination attributes foster the declaration of destination love, such as *architectural and natural attributes*, *people and celebration*, *weather*, *public transportation*, and *food*. The findings show that the *natural and architectural* attributes are the most important destination attributes that motivate Instagram users to express their love towards London. It is interesting to note that houses and

flowers trigger the love declaration even more frequently than the most well-known tourist attractions such as the Big Ben, Westminster and Tower Bridge. Previous studies suggest that cultural and historical attractions are the principal reasons that generate tourism trips (Prentice, 1993), while Pan et al. (2014) reveal that natural resources (i.e. mountains, water bodies, and flora and fauna) have a prominent role in fostering affection towards a place. People and celebration reflect instead the *social* nature of tourists' photographs (Haldrup & Larsen, 2003). Increasingly, transportation, weather, and food, which have been considered as ancillary services, i.e. simple extension of the daily experience to the tourist journey (Quan & Wang, 2004), play a prominent role in the declaration of love. These findings confirm that food & beverage and transportation are considered as interesting and worth-mentioning in user-generated content (Mak, 2017). These attributes are photographed, interacted, displayed, shared and commented as symbols of the destination brand love.

By identifying the attributes that are employed by Instagram users in their self-expression of love towards London, we highlighted the key destination attributes regarded as having the highest 'emotional value'. This is particularly relevant in terms of destination co-created brand image, such findings offer direct insights to the DMOs of London and could help managers understand how travellers (and residents) feel about the destination and what triggers the love towards London. The analysis of Instagram pictures could also help destination managers promote London differently, i.e. as an *emotional destination* to various stakeholders so as to stimulate the desire to visit or revisit. Hence, DMOs can uncover new attributes that tourists love about the London's destination, for example the colourful flowers (i.e. wisteria flower) that grow on the front yard of private houses or shops (i.e. Peggy Porschen cakes), as well as some of the *architectural elements* such as the views of the London's sunset from skyscrapers, the vintage cars parked near heritage sites or the colourful houses in the neighbourhoods of Chelsea, Notting Hill, Kensington, and Camden Town. This result shows that, while on the one side most of tourist co-crated image tends to reinforce the existing and well-established image of a destination (Schmalleger & Carson, 2008), on the other side, an emotional image of the destination exists and it is co-created by user-generated photographs through uncodified and codified feelings and emotionally valenced hashtags.

Accordingly, DMOs should be aware of the 'emotional' image projected by tourists and whether this image is consistent with the image that is promoted through marketing communications. It is evident how the results of the analysis of the image perceived by tourists can be useful for the branding activity of DMOs (Donaire et al., 2014; Stepchenkova & Zhan, 2013). In this study, we highlight a specific facet of the destination image, namely the affective dimension (San Martín & Del Bosque, 2008), and more specifically the expression of destination love. Although we focus on destination love, this study also contributes to the travel & tourism research that adopts user-generated photographs to study destination image perceptions (Donaire et al., 2014; Kim & Stepchenkova, 2015; Mak, 2017; Nikjoo & Bakhshi, 2019; Stepchenkova et al., 2015; Stepchenkova & Zhan, 2013; Pan et al., 2014).

Secondly, limited studies have explored social media users' relationship with a tourism destination, examining the emotional bonds between people and places (Baloglu & Brinberg, 1997; Bigné, Andreu, & Gnoth, 2005; Pan et al., 2014; Cheng & Kuo, 2015), and specifically destination brand love (e.g. Aro et al., 2018). This paper shows that destination love is seldom expressed on its own, but it is accompanied and expressed through a specific set of emotions, such as *amazement, happiness (& pleasure), attractiveness, favourite/preference, enchantment, intimacy, belongingness, and nostalgia*. By doing so we develop a better understanding of the consumers' feelings concerning tourism destinations beyond positive and negative affect (Laros & Steenkamp, 2005). Hence, these findings advance travel & tourism as well as marketing literature by revealing the specific feelings associated with the declaration of destination love, contributing to debate on emotions related to marketing activities, consumption, and post-purchase (e.g. Batra &

Holbrook, 1990; Batra & Ray, 1986; Havlena & Holbrook, 1986; Holbrook & Westwood, 1989; Ladhari, 2007; Laros & Steenkamp, 2005). The findings of this study can also inform the development of a scale that measures the emotional dimensions of love towards a brand. The findings extend previous debate on DBL (Aro et al., 2018) by offering a more comprehensive illustration, wherein DBL is expressed through uncodified and codified meanings, photographs of destination attributes, as well as hashtags. By illustrating how specific emotions are expressed to assist people's expression of love towards London, this paper shed new light to the understanding of destination BL, in particular the expression of love.

Finally, we show how social media users who love a destination are likely to express their love towards the destination on social media in time of crisis (i.e. terrorist attack). Specifically, we showed that when the tourism destination was under attack, some Instagram users were keen to provide emotional support to the destination to help its recovery. Feelings that emerged after the London's terrorist attack refer to *social unity, sadness, sympathy, and concern*. The study shows that individuals who love a destination will spontaneously attempt to minimize the negative impact of major crises, such as a terrorist attack, through declaring their emotional attachment, support, empathy, and closeness in their posts of the destination. This result is observable in the current coronavirus outbreak, where travellers express sympathy, closeness and concern to those living in the destinations (e.g. Milan in Italy, New York in the US) most affected by the virus. This finding advances our knowledge of the outcomes of DBL (Aro et al., 2018; Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006; Thomson et al., 2005), by stressing its expediency in mitigating the negative effect of crisis on tourism destinations.

5.1. Theoretical contribution

This study contributes to the growing literature on value co-creation in travel & tourism research (Prebensen, Vittersø, & Dahl, 2003; Binkhorst & Den Dekker, 2009; Buhalis & Foerste, 2015; Lin, Chen, & Filieri, 2017). We explored value co-creation in the social media context, specifically focusing on how *destination love is co-created* on Instagram. Travellers experiencing love towards a destination are more willing to engage in an active co-creation behaviour in the context of online communities based on hashtags; hence, supporting proposed relationships in the academic literature on brand communities (Kaufmann et al., 2016). Further, we add to general management literature on stakeholders' value co-creation to social media (Vallaster & Von Wallpach, 2013; Singaraju, Nguyen, Niininen, & Sullivan-Mort, 2016), by showing how, on social media, love towards a destination can be co-created by various stakeholders such as photographers, residents, tourists, and mass media (i.e. BBC) using various hashtags. These stakeholders co-create the emotional image of the destination by expressing their destination love through posting photos portraying the destination and its attributes, using positive feelings and emotional content/hashtags. We speculate that the more a tourism destination engages various stakeholders and motivates them in expressing their love, the higher is the so called *emotional capital* of a destination. Nahapiet and Ghoshal (1998, p. 243) define social capital as: "the sum of the actual and potential resources embedded within, available through, and derived from the network of relationships possessed by an individual or social unit". We define emotional capital as the amount of emotional content and feelings that destination hashtag followers generate when they express their love and bond towards a destination. By integrating together the two concepts of social capital and emotional capital, we shed light on two important aspects: *1)* the destination's network of relationships with tourists, residents and other stakeholders who are emotionally attached to a destination and *2)* the amount and quality of resources (i.e. content) shared through social media platforms (i.e. positive emotions, attractive pictures). Accordingly, some destinations have larger social networks and/or their followers are more likely to elicit love emotions than others, hence these destinations can benefit more of the use of

emotional hashtags and posts, which contribute to accumulate *emotional capital*. The *emotional capital* of a destination brand is a new type of capital that emerged from this study and should be expressed in destination branding, in addition to the pre-existing environmental, social and cultural capital (Campelo et al., 2014).

5.2. Methodological contribution

Furthermore, there is a lack of mixed-methods research in travel & tourism research in general, and on brand love in particular. More specifically, there is limited studies integrating qualitative analysis and text analytics with a large pool of data. This study adopted a mixed-methods approach, by combining qualitative visual content analysis of a limited number of user-generated photographs and quantitative textual analysis using a large dataset. If the qualitative analysis' strength is to enable a more in-depth understanding of the emotions and feelings, linked to the declaration of love, as well as of the non-codified meanings of the pictures, it also informs the subsequent quantitative analysis, in which a ranking of the themes and concepts most frequently used to express the love towards a destination is produced. The analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of each approach advances our understanding of the value of mixed-methods research in the analysis of visual data in travel & tourism research, as well as, potentially, in social science research. Previous research focused on a limited number of pictures in their studies (Garrod, 2009; Lu & Stepchenkova, 2012; Pan et al., 2014; Nikjoo & Bakhshi, 2019). Although using a limited number of data can produce valuable insights, we show how a mixed-method approach using both textual and visual content, can be used to provide a more comprehensive picture of the phenomenon investigated.

6. Managerial implications

Whilst Instagram as a social media platform is actively employed by users through photo sharing, interacting, tagging and discussions, to communicate, display and declare their love towards places and destinations, the findings highlight the potential of such customer-to-customer practice in value co-creation. The findings are going to be of interest for DMOs of the most loved tourism destinations such as London, New York, Rome, Paris, and increasingly Barcelona, Amsterdam, and Istanbul. The study proposes an approach to identify the most loved destination attributes and associated feelings.

This study also emphasises the potential for destination BL co-creation with tourists and residents; DMO can, for example, develop (or monitor) hashtags and organize photography contests where tourists and residents articulate, communicate and share their love for a destination. The insights generated through the analysis of user-generated data can also produce insights about tourists and residents' perception of the destination, hence the destination image. Acknowledging tourists and residents as active value co-creators, DMOs are therefore suggested to consider their role and involvement in value co-creation activities that involve the sharing of feelings and emotions.

By showing that flowers and plants climbing colourful period homes, skyscrapers, iconic public transportation, people and their celebrations, as well as the weather and food are key attributes that trigger the London love, DMOs should try to engage the posters by liking and commenting on their posts, which might motivate a continuous co-creation process and sharing the London love towards the associated London destination's DMO hashtags.

Furthermore the insights generated through a qualitative and quantitative analysis can help identify new, key destination attributes that can be used in the DMO's marketing communication to promote or renew the image of a destination to tourists, residents and other stakeholders. This way, DMOs could use user-generated pictures to create a more distinct (emotional), credible and authentic image of London.

The analysis of the hashtags also enabled us to identify the most active and influential hashtags and stakeholders that more frequently contribute to co-create the love towards the London destination. These influencers and the related hashtags can be useful information for destination managers, who can try to engage them further in order to reach a larger number of followers in their branding activities.

7. Limitations and future research directions

The research suffers from the following limitations. Firstly, the data was collected from one platform (i.e. Instagram) and at a specific point in time. Although this is one of the most popular platforms to post travel experiences (Fatanti & Suyadnya, 2015; Sheldon & Bryant, 2016), it is not the only one. Hence, future research could use a combination of social media platforms where travellers post pictures of the destination they visit such as Pinterest, Facebook, Weibo, and WeChat. Moreover, data was only captured during the summer season, hence the results could be affected by seasonality. Hence, flowers and parks may be photographed and posted more often during the seasons of Spring and Summer. Future research should sample Instagram posts at the different seasons to gather a more conclusive view and reduce the seasonality bias.

Secondly, whilst the relationship between people and places is very much context-specific, future studies are also encouraged to look at how people declare and communicate their love towards other destinations. While our findings prove that destination love is expressed through a combination of key attributes and characteristics specific to the destination, together with emotional attachment, future studies are recommended to explore how destination love is expressed towards other destinations in order to further validate our findings and provide specific advice to different DMOs.

Thirdly, this study focused on brand love which is probably the most intense positive emotion that consumers feel toward brands (Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006). However, there is a dearth of studies on the negative emotions toward brands, and specifically on the concept of brand hate, which is, perhaps, the most intense negative emotion that consumers may feel toward a brand (Zarantonello et al., 2016; Shuv-Ami, Toder Alon, Loureiro, & Kaufmann, 2020).

Fifth, it is important to note that many Instagram users may have different motivation to post sympathetic comments during a crisis like a terrorist attack; accordingly research has established that the desire to become popular and gets more likes is one of the reasons why Instagram users post using an hashtag (Chatzopoulou et al., 2020).

Finally, visual content analysis may reflect a certain level of subjective interpretation. Individuals' own cultural backgrounds may affect how they encode or decode the meanings derived from the same picture/photograph. Tourists from a specific cultural background may emphasise some elements in their posts more than the others (Kim & Stepchenkova, 2015). Thus, future research is advised to take the cultural lens into account in their analysis and discuss whether destination love could be triggered or expressed by the same set of destination attributes, among tourists from different cultures.

Impact statement

We contribute to the destination brand love literature by exploring how travellers declare their love towards a destination (attributes, emotions, hashtags) on Instagram

Credit roles

Raffaele Filieri: Conceptualization; Data curation; Formal analysis; Funding acquisition; Investigation; Methodology; Project administration; Resources; Software; Validation; Visualization; Writing – original draft; Writing – review & editing, Dorothy A. Yen: Conceptualization; Data curation; Formal analysis; Investigation; Methodology; Project administration; Resources; Supervision; Validation; Visualization; Writing – original draft; Writing – review & editing, Qionglei Yu:

Conceptualization; Data curation; Investigation; Validation; Visualization; Writing – original draft; Writing – review & editing

Declaration of competing interest

None.

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