

Rural place branding through social media: a stakeholder strategy perspective

Christiana Stylianou

*Department of Hospitality and Tourism Management,
Faculty of Tourism Management, Hospitality and Entrepreneurship,
Cyprus University of Technology, Limassol, Cyprus*

Kosmas Pipyros

*Department of Computer Science, School of Education and Sciences,
Philips University, Nicosia, Cyprus, and*

Anastasia Aslanides

*Department of Hospitality and Tourism Management,
Faculty of Tourism Management, Hospitality and Entrepreneurship,
Cyprus University of Technology, Limassol, Cyprus*

62

Received 13 December 2024
Revised 8 January 2025
Accepted 8 January 2025

Abstract

Purpose – This study explores the strategies employed and challenges faced by various stakeholder groups in Cyprus as they engage in rural place branding through social media.

Design/methodology/approach – Qualitative research is used through 14 semi-structured interviews to understand the perspectives of local community representatives, government entities and small business owners and entrepreneurs in rural areas.

Findings – The research underscores the crucial importance of social media in strengthening rural place branding. Using strategies such as storytelling, visual content creation and short-form videos, create the identity and visibility of rural areas. Moreover, rural place branding by various stakeholder groups necessitates digital skills upskilling and reskilling and precise online content dissemination and segmentation to address the varied needs of potential visitors.

Research limitations/implications – The relative homogeneity of professionals in the sample as well as their background and education, could generate agreement in some areas among respondents, leading to possible limitations in generalisations from the findings of this study.

Originality/value – The study was conducted in an island state where social media usage for rural place branding is at a relatively early stage.

Keywords Rural place branding, Social media, Stakeholder engagement, Qualitative research, Cyprus

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

The emergence of the Internet and social media (SM) platforms has revolutionised hospitality, travel and tourism branding strategies, which refer to the actions and techniques used by destinations to create a distinct identity (Rather *et al.*, 2021; Chu *et al.*, 2020). At the same time, how individuals gather information about places, plan their trips and share their experiences with fellow travellers has changed substantially (Lin and Rasoolimanesh, 2024; Vieira *et al.*, 2023). The rise of SM platforms such as TikTok, Facebook, Instagram, and LinkedIn, along with travel review sites such as TripAdvisor and booking platforms like Booking.com, has led to a significant increase in content that is available on the Internet in many forms (Narangajavana Kaosiri *et al.*, 2019), and sustainably affects travel decisions (Dwityas and Briandana, 2017).



In this context, place branding emerges as a strategic process for developing and promoting a unique identity or image for specific geographic locations—a city, region, or nation—to attract locals, businesses, visitors, and investors (Hanna *et al.*, 2021). The shift in place branding strategies is particularly evident when marketing rural areas as tourist attractions (Juliana *et al.*, 2023). Rural areas are destinations that can be characterised as “under tourism destinations” (Economou *et al.*, 2023). Therefore, SM which involves creating identities, facilitates rural place branding, setting rural areas apart from urban or popular tourist attractions that contribute to the phenomenon of over-tourism (De San Eugenio-Vela and Barniol-Carcasona, 2015). SM plays a vital role in conveying the unique values of rural destinations, attracting potential visitors, and improving the sense of community and authenticity in rural areas (Gulisova *et al.*, 2021, 2023; Campbell and Bickle, 2017).

Although place branding has been thoroughly examined in several global and regional settings (Swain *et al.*, 2024), there is a notable lack of research on understanding rural place branding through SM, especially from various stakeholders’ viewpoints (Soulard *et al.*, 2024; Chan, 2023; Zhou and Chen, 2023). For example, research on Cyprus island has primarily concentrated on urban and coastal districts’ place branding (Efstathiou and Zippelius, 2019; Deffner and Metaxas, 2010), neglecting rural areas where stakeholder involvement is vital.

Cyprus, known primarily for its coastal and urban tourism, has recently turned its focus towards developing rural tourism to diversify its offerings and reduce the pressure of over-tourism in urban centres (Boukas and Ziakas, 2016). Rural areas, with their rich cultural heritage and natural landscapes, offer alternative tourism experiences that align with emerging trends in sustainable and experiential tourism. Despite these opportunities, rural destinations face challenges in branding themselves as attractive alternatives to more established urban and coastal areas.

This paper explores the case of Cyprus to examine the impact of SM on rural place branding, focusing on the strategies and challenges faced by various stakeholder groups involved in the process. Specifically, it addresses two key research questions:

- (1) What specific strategies do stakeholders in rural areas in Cyprus employ when utilising SM for place branding?
- (2) What challenges do stakeholders in Cyprus face in utilising SM for rural place branding?

It aims to fill the gap in the literature on rural place branding through SM in Cyprus, a region where digital branding is still emerging. The findings are expected to offer insights that can support rural tourism development not only in Cyprus but also in other rural areas facing similar challenges.

Literature review

Social media and rural place branding

SM refers to online platforms and tools that allow individuals and organisations to create, share, and engage with content in real time (Kietzmann *et al.*, 2011). Examples include platforms like Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, Twitter, and YouTube. SM has transformed how people interact with information and each other, making content creation and dissemination faster and more accessible than ever before (Hysa *et al.*, 2022).

SM plays a crucial role in tourism since it enables destinations to communicate directly with potential visitors, showcase attractions, and build an online community around their identity (De las Heras-Pedrosa *et al.*, 2020). According to a systematic literature review by Tran and Rudolf (2022), the visual content shared through SM plays a vital role in shaping how a place is perceived, influencing traveller behaviour, and differentiating the location from competitors. Therefore, SM has become an essential tool for place branding, allowing for a strategic and real-time presentation of a place’s unique environment (Grebosz-Krawczyk, 2021).

In the context of rural place branding, SM is particularly valuable. Rural destinations are often less visible than urban or popular tourist areas (Lane and Kastenholz, 2015). Additionally,

according to [Kumar and Valeri \(2022\)](#), [Yang et al. \(2021\)](#), [Boyne and Hall \(2004\)](#), a trend in the promotion of “new” forms of rural tourism and recreation is through the promotion of specific activities since they help diversify the tourist offering and appeal to niche markets. Through SM, rural places can further brand their offered activities by providing an accessible platform to showcase these experiences to a broader audience, engaging potential visitors through visual content and interactive storytelling ([Goli et al., 2021](#); [Lowery et al., 2020](#)). Furthermore, as per [Tuncer and Kartal’s \(2024\)](#) research, influencer promotion and customer engagement on SM become crucial. The quality of information shared by both significantly impacts consumer perceptions, though influencer credibility plays a more prominent role in shaping purchase intent and willingness to pay more ([Tuncer and Kartal, 2024](#)). This insight is particularly relevant to rural place branding, where engaging influencers and visitors through high-quality, authentic online content can enhance the visibility and appeal of rural destinations.

Tourism and hospitality stakeholders in rural place branding

A stakeholder is any individual or group with the potential to influence or be influenced by the accomplishment of a corporation’s objectives, as defined by [Freeman et al. \(2020\)](#). For tourism studies, various categories of stakeholders have been examined in destination branding studies. [Sheehan et al. \(2007\)](#) highlighted three principal stakeholders: government, hotels, and Destination Marketing Organisations (DMOs). [Sartori et al. \(2012\)](#) analysed destination brand equity through the lens of stakeholders such as food, wine, and tourism boards. [Vasudevan and Kumar \(2021\)](#) emphasised that travel intermediaries, hotels, and resorts are essential stakeholders, too.

In rural place branding, the role of stakeholders is similarly important but distinct in certain ways ([Golestaneh et al., 2022](#)). Key stakeholders in rural areas include local farmers, artisans, small business owners, and community organisations, who contribute to the authenticity and cultural richness of the destination ([Gulisova et al., 2023](#); [Golestaneh et al., 2022](#); [Gulisova, 2021](#)). Local governments and tourism boards are also crucial in coordinating place branding efforts and ensuring sustainable tourism practices ([Donner et al., 2017](#)).

Due to the distinct needs of rural areas, stakeholders are called to coordinate their efforts carefully to address challenges such as limited infrastructure, seasonal tourism fluctuations, and the need to preserve local traditions and the environment ([Chan, 2023](#); [Rosalina et al., 2023](#); [Horlings, 2012](#)). Coordination among stakeholders involves forming partnerships between local businesses, tourism agencies, and government bodies to develop strategies that promote sustainable tourism growth while protecting the community’s unique cultural and natural assets ([Leite et al., 2023](#); [Liu et al., 2018](#)).

Despite their potential, rural destinations face several challenges when using SM for place branding. Limited digital marketing skills and resources often prevent local stakeholders from fully using SM platforms ([Gössling and Lane, 2015](#)). This issue is particularly prevalent in rural areas, where small businesses and local governments lack the expertise or budget to create high-quality content and maintain a consistent online presence ([Garay and Morales Pérez, 2017](#)). Furthermore, maintaining engagement over time can be difficult, especially during off-peak tourism seasons when fewer events or activities are taking place ([Hays et al., 2013](#)).

Another significant challenge is the fragmentation of stakeholder efforts. In many rural destinations, there is a lack of coordination between local businesses, government agencies, and community groups, leading to inconsistent messaging and missed opportunities for collaboration ([Benson, 2014](#)). Hence, in order for rural place branding through SM to be effective, it requires a consistent strategy, where stakeholders work together to present a unified identity that highlights the unique attributes of the destination ([Foroudi et al., 2018](#)).

Methodology

Sample and study area

This study examines the impact of SM on the place branding of rural areas in Cyprus. Its primary focus is to investigate the strategies and challenges encountered by different

stakeholders involved in this process. The three main groups of stakeholders targeted for this research are local community representatives, government entities, and small business owners and entrepreneurs based in rural areas. The local community representatives, such as the community councils of various villages, were selected due to their “valuable role as drivers, facilitators, or inspectors in the supplier development process” (Liu *et al.*, 2018). Simultaneously, government entities, such as the Deputy Ministry of Tourism in Cyprus, play a vital role in supporting, promoting and regulating the tourism industry (Edgell *et al.*, 2008). Lastly, small businesses, including tourism operators, accommodation providers, and entrepreneurs, are the primary drivers of the rural tourism economy and the main contact point for tourist interaction (Pröbstl-Haider *et al.*, 2014).

Cyprus, an island state in the Mediterranean, has witnessed a transformation in its tourism landscape over the last few years. Alongside the mass tourism sector, the country has experienced a rise in alternative forms of tourism, including agrotourism, cultural tourism, religious tourism and sports tourism (Garanti, 2022; Boukas, 2019; Boukas and Ziakas, 2016). As of 2023, the population of Cyprus stands at 1,268,467, with a rural population of 414,105 (Macrotrends, 2024). The rural population, defined as “those living outside urban centres” (Bennett *et al.*, 2019), has seen a 0.42% rise since 2021 (Macrotrends, 2024), showcasing the growing interest in developing and living in rural areas, especially in countries like Cyprus, where distances are shorter, and various amenities and facilities exist in nearby villages or cities.

The tourism industry in Cyprus has made a remarkable recovery, with international visitor arrivals almost reaching pre-pandemic levels in 2023. After a significant decline in 2020 due to the COVID-19 outbreak, tourist arrivals have rebounded, reaching over 3.8 million in 2023, just shy of the record-breaking 4 million visitors from 2019 (Statistical Service Cyprus, 2024). The recovery highlights the resilience and adaptability of the Cypriot tourism sector and the country’s ability to cater to the evolving preferences of travellers seeking authentic and diverse experiences.

Research design and data collection

This study employs a qualitative research approach, utilising semi-structured interviews as the primary data collection method. The decision to adopt a qualitative approach is based on the need to “gain in-depth insights into the perceptions, experiences, and strategies” (Patton, 2005) of the three stakeholder groups regarding the role of SM in rural place branding in Cyprus. The semi-structured interviews allow for a flexible and interactive dialogue, enabling the researchers to explore emerging themes (Adams, 2015).

Fourteen (14) semi-structured interviews were conducted from May to July 2024, with at least 4 participants representing each stakeholder group. The participants were selected using a purposive sampling technique, ensuring they had relevant experience and knowledge of rural place branding and SM usage in the Cypriot tourism industry. In addition, the interviews were conducted in person or via online video conferencing platforms (Zoom and Microsoft Teams), depending on the preferences and availability of the participants. Each interview lasted approximately 35–50 min, and with the consent of the participants, the interviews were audio-recorded for accurate transcription and analysis.

The data collected through the semi-structured interviews were analysed using thematic analysis, a method for “identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns (themes) within the data” (Braun and Clarke, 2006). The thematic analysis was conducted using qualitative data analysis software NVivo to facilitate the coding process and identify patterns and themes within the data.

It is important to note that the study adhered to the ethical guidelines the Cyprus University of Technology set forth. Before the interviews, participants were provided with an informed consent form outlining the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of their participation, and the measures taken to ensure confidentiality and anonymity. Participants were also informed that they could withdraw from the study at any time.

Table 1 outlines the interview protocol’s main themes and indicative content based on the study’s research questions.

Findings

This section presents the findings from the interviews with the 14 stakeholders. They come from diverse backgrounds and represent various stakeholder groups involved in rural place branding in Cyprus, as shown in **Table 2**.

Theme 1: identification of stakeholders in place branding efforts in Cyprus

According to the interview responses, the stakeholder map presented in **Figure 1** highlights four key categories for Cyprus’ rural place branding strategy: Government and policy;

Table 1. Interview protocol – indicative content

Main themes	Indicative content of the interview protocol
<i>Identification of stakeholders in rural place branding efforts of Cyprus</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Which stakeholders participate in Cyprus’ rural place branding strategy? - How are all identified stakeholders participating in Cyprus’s rural place branding?
<i>Strategies followed by stakeholders for the current rural place branding of Cyprus</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - What SM platforms are currently utilised by tourism and hospitality stakeholders in Cyprus for rural place branding? - What specific strategies do stakeholders employ in rural destinations to utilise SM in rural place branding?
<i>Challenges and barriers in Cyprus’ rural place branding</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - What challenges do stakeholders face when using SM to brand rural destinations?

Source(s): Authors’ own work (2024)

Table 2. Participants’ profile

Interviewee	Role	Experience	Education
Interviewee I	Chamber of Commerce Representative	10 years	Bachelor’s and Master’s in Hotel Management
Interviewee II	Tourism Board Representative	8 years	Master’s in Marketing
Interviewee III	District Development Agency Representative	12 years	Lyceum Graduate
Interviewee IV	Entrepreneur	5 years	Certification in Film and Media Studies
Interviewee V	Local Community Representative	10 years	Bachelor’s in Journalism
Interviewee VI	Deputy Ministry of Tourism	2 years	Master’s in Tourism Development
Interviewee VII	Deputy Ministry of Tourism	6 years	Bachelor’s in Law
Interviewee VIII	District Development Agency Representative	11 years	Bachelor’s in Public Administration
Interviewee IX	Entrepreneur	7 years	Bachelor’s in Business Administration
Interviewee X	Local Community Representative	15 years	Lyceum Graduate
Interviewee XI	Deputy Ministry of Tourism	9 years	Master’s in Public Affairs
Interviewee XII	Tourism Board Representative	7 years	Bachelor’s in Marketing
Interviewee XIII	Entrepreneur	10 years	Bachelor’s in Business Administration
Interviewee XIV	Entrepreneur	6 years	Master’s in Public Diplomacy

Source(s): Authors’ own work (2024)



Source(s): Authors' own work (2024)

Figure 1. Stakeholders participating in Cyprus' rural place branding strategy

business and industry; associations, academia, and non-governmental organisations (NGOs); and locals and tourists, where residents and domestic tourists play a vital role in promoting an authentic and culturally rich rural brand image.

According to the majority of interview responses, most of the identified stakeholders do indeed influence some of Cyprus's rural place branding efforts, though the degree of their participation varies:

The Deputy Ministry of Tourism plays a central role in shaping Cyprus' international image by coordinating tourism campaigns and supporting initiatives that promote the island, both for rural and urban areas. (Interviewee III)

Another respondent highlighted the following:

Local hotel and restaurant owners are essential to place branding as they provide the actual experiences that tourists take home with them, but their direct involvement in strategic decisions is limited. (Interviewee IX)

Additionally:

The average Cypriot unknowingly contributes to rural place branding through everyday interactions with visitors, although they are rarely consulted in formal branding initiatives. (Interviewee X)

Concerning the role of other main stakeholders, the below excerpts are representative:

Airlines, like Cyprus Airways, bring in tourists but are not directly engaged in discussions around place branding strategy, and even worse for rural place branding. However, such actors bring in tourists and market the destination in other ways, such as printed or digital journals found in aeroplanes, featuring interviews with local entrepreneurs in rural areas or promoting some authentic products, such as honey or commandaria. Through this type of marketing, they still make a very first impression on our tourists and rural areas. (Interviewee V)

The Chambers of Commerce promote economic development, but their role in branding rural Cyprus is limited. However, the Chambers of all cities are involved in various European-funded projects that relate to the development of villages to both meet the needs of tourists and residents. (Interviewee I)

Theme 2: strategies followed by stakeholders for the current rural place branding of Cyprus

Table 3 categorises the SM platforms each participant mentioned during their interview, summarising the SM platforms currently used for rural place branding in Cyprus:

In asking the participants what specific strategies stakeholders use for engaging audiences on SM platforms, Table 4 highlights that the participants emphasise a mix of strategies and content types, and the official accounts on SM of the Deputy Ministry of Tourism remain a primary source for engaging content.

The findings underscore that SM, through platforms such as Instagram, TikTok and Facebook, has become an indispensable tool for promoting rural destinations, helping them differentiate themselves from more popular urban and coastal areas. The use of visual online content has allowed rural areas to enhance their visibility and attract niche tourism, particularly those interested in authentic, cultural, and sustainable tourism experiences (Rinaldi and Bekhuis, 2021; Oliveira and Panyik, 2015).

Engaging storytelling and visuals using short-form videos and user-generated content have already enriched the island’s online presence in rural place branding. According to Lowery et al. (2020), storytelling can evoke emotions and create connections between potential visitors and the destination, making them more likely to choose that location for their travel. In addition, research by De las Heras-Pedrosa et al. (2020) emphasises that high-quality images

Table 3. SM platforms used for rural place branding in Cyprus

Participant	SM platforms mentioned
Interviewee I	Facebook, Instagram, TripAdvisor, Expedia
Interviewee II	Facebook, Instagram, TikTok
Interviewee III	Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn
Interviewee IV	Facebook, Instagram, TripAdvisor, YouTube
Interviewee V	Instagram, TikTok, Booking.com
Interviewee VI	Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, TikTok
Interviewee VII	Instagram, TripAdvisor, Booking.com
Interviewee VIII	Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, TripAdvisor
Interviewee IX	Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, LinkedIn
Interviewee X	Instagram, TikTok, Facebook, Booking.com
Interviewee XI	Instagram, Facebook, TripAdvisor, Airbnb
Interviewee XII	Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, Booking.com
Interviewee XIII	Facebook, Instagram, TikTok
Interviewee XIV	Instagram, TripAdvisor, Facebook, Booking.com

Source(s): Authors’ own work (2024)

Table 4. Participant-identified SM strategies and content types

Participant	Types of content used	Interviewee response
Interviewees VII, VIII and XI	Short-form videos, local experiences, events	<p><i>“The Deputy Ministry of Tourism primarily creates content. Short videos showcasing events have engaged audiences, receiving many comments, likes and shares.”</i></p> <p><i>“One particularly interesting campaign has been the promotion of wine routes across Cyprus through TikTok. This initiative featured various wineries owned by local entrepreneurs, who were called to share their history through short-form videos.”</i></p> <p><i>“Our official Instagram account has a substantial following and numerous tags, showcasing the richness of Cyprus through varied content that captures all aspects of the island, from its beautiful beaches to its rural villages. I think it’s one of the most effective means of communicating our messages.”</i></p>
Interviewee X	Interactive posts, user-generated content	<p><i>“We contribute occasionally, but most engaging content comes from the Deputy Ministry’s official channels or website. We rely on them for video promotions since we don’t have the necessary means and digital skills.”</i></p>
Interviewees II and XIV	Interviews with locals, cultural awareness	<p><i>“We’ve found that interviews with locals resonate well in promoting the villages on SM.”</i></p> <p><i>“Farm-to-table experiences, highlighted through interviews with local farmers or by covering significant events organised by community groups such as the Women’s Association of Rural Larnaka, play a crucial role in rural branding.”</i></p>
Interviewee XIII	Live streams, story highlights, visual storytelling	<p><i>“Live streaming local events has garnered interest. The Deputy Ministry leads the charge, but we collaborate by sharing our visual stories and experiences. For example, I have participated in many events showcasing how to basket weaving; I was explaining the process and calling the viewers to join me during the free workshops that the Ministry was organising for free to showcase our culture. During weekends, many people attended my workshops and kept saying that how I explained the process on Instagram was very attractive.”</i></p>
Interviewee XI	Education materials, infographics, testimonials, behind-the-scenes content	<p><i>“Educational materials shared on SM through various accounts play a significant role in helping people learn about the island’s villages, history and cultural heritage.”</i></p> <p><i>“Static images aren’t popular anymore.”</i></p> <p><i>“We’ve found that showcasing local events through infographics and behind-the-scenes content helps tell a more compelling story. Most of our stories go viral.”</i></p> <p><i>“Testimonials from visitors add credibility and encourage engagement. That’s why we lead many efforts to ask them to post reviews on TripAdvisor.”</i></p>

(continued)

Table 4. Continued

Participant	Types of content used	Interviewee response
Interviewees III and VIII	Short documentaries, TV shows	<p><i>“Engaging content often comes from short documentaries produced by local TV shows and series, including one featured on Netflix. Such efforts allow stakeholders to showcase authentic stories and cultural heritage, drawing attention to the unique aspects of rural destinations and enhancing their appeal to potential visitors.”</i></p> <p><i>“The collaboration between local chefs and food producers in these shows also creates opportunities for sustainable tourism.”</i></p>
Interviewee VI	Heartland of Legends	<p><i>“The Heartland of Legends project provides a fantastic framework for storytelling and authentic tourism experiences. We use this initiative to create SM content that showcases local myths and traditions, drawing tourists in.”</i></p>
Interviewee I	TikTok for younger tourists	<p><i>“We started using TikTok to attract young travellers by promoting the adventurous side of Cyprus, with a particular emphasis on experiences like the Akamas Safari.”</i></p>
Interviewees XII and IV	Collaboration with travel influencers	<p><i>“We’ve observed that many Cypriots excel as travel influencers for destinations abroad, prompting us to invite them to a morning brunch session to start collaborations to promote Cyprus as a travel destination as well. Many influencers have even created dedicated Instagram and TikTok accounts to showcase the island’s hidden gems and experiences.”</i></p> <p><i>“We recognise the value of international influencers who visit Cyprus and help raise awareness about our destination. As a hotel owner, I have taken the initiative to inform the Deputy Ministry of Tourism about their stays, enabling them to identify the influencers and collaborate with them.”</i></p>
Interviewees XIII, IX	Online reviews	<p><i>“Responding to positive and negative reviews shows that we value customer feedback. It helps build trust and can turn a dissatisfied customer into a loyal advocate.”</i></p> <p><i>“Engaging with online reviews allows us to highlight our strengths and address concerns.”</i></p>

Source(s): Authors’ own work (2024)

and videos can significantly increase engagement rates on platforms like Instagram and Facebook. For rural places in Cyprus, this means showcasing breathtaking landscapes, picturesque villages, and vibrant local markets through photography or short video clips. Finally, as [Lin and Rasoolimanesh \(2024\)](#) note, travellers often trust content created by their peers more than traditional marketing messages. Encouraging visitors to share their experiences through photos and reviews provides authentic images of the destination and fosters a sense of community among travellers.

Theme 3: challenges and barriers in Cyprus’ rural place branding

Reflecting on the challenges stakeholders face when using SM to brand rural areas, [Table 5](#) indicates a variety of obstacles.

As the seminal work of [Boyne and Hall \(2004\)](#) highlights, trends in the promotion of “new” forms of rural areas and recreation are moving towards emphasising the branding and marketing of actual activities rather than places. Therefore, there is a pressing need for increased content creation highlighting the authenticity and unique activities rural areas in Cyprus can offer. According to the interview discussions, stakeholders in Cyprus have already implemented such initiatives, and the campaigns become successful.

In addition, delivering the right content to the right audience is imperative to maximise the impact of rural place branding efforts ([Kumar and Valeri, 2022](#)). Understanding that different visitors have varying needs and intentions when visiting destinations is vital for better segmentation ([Liu et al., 2018](#)), especially in countries like Cyprus, where there are diverse activities and attractions. Furthermore, rural place branding is an essential component of

Table 5. Stakeholders’ identified challenges in using SM to brand rural areas

Participant	Challenges in using SM for rural branding	Interviewee response
Interviewee XI	Limited digital skills	<i>“One of the biggest challenges we face is that many local business owners lack the digital skills needed to use SM for branding. We want to assist them in enhancing their skills and start promoting their work better.”</i>
Interviewee VII	Maintaining consistent engagement	<i>“Keeping our audience engaged consistently is tough. They don’t want to see general posts. The interest can fade quickly, especially when fewer local events happen.”</i>
Interviewee I	Competition	<i>“We struggle to compete with other destinations with larger marketing budgets and more resources to promote themselves on SM.”</i>
Interviewee VII	Challenges in content creation	<i>“Creating high-quality content regularly can be overwhelming. We want to showcase our unique offerings, but the resources for professional content creation are limited.”</i>
Interviewee IV	Negative online reviews and feedback	<i>“Negative comments or reviews on SM are disheartening for us and make a negative impact on our business, although we are trying hard to accommodate the needs of everyone.”</i>
Interviewees XII, I, XIV	Lack of collaboration and digital skills	<i>“There’s a lack of collaboration between local stakeholders, which leads to fragmented messaging and missed opportunities for stronger branding.”</i> <i>“Many stakeholder groups don’t have the necessary digital skills to collaborate effectively with others, even for the most basic operations, like sending an email.”</i> <i>“There is a noticeable lack of collaboration between the stakeholder groups”</i> <i>“We are not involved in the decision-making process of the tourism strategy, although our voice is vital in order to give birth to rural areas”</i>
Interviewee XIV	Underdeveloped villages with less interesting content	<i>“Many underdeveloped villages struggle with less interesting content to share. We need more people with digital marketing skills to help bring out the unique stories of these areas.”</i>
Interviewee I	Digital marketing expertise	<i>“There’s a clear need for more local talent skilled in digital marketing. Without it, we can’t compete with other destinations.”</i>

Source(s): Authors’ own work (2024)

overall destination branding, but it is important to recognise that these two terms, although related, are distinct (Rather *et al.*, 2021). As such, tourism strategies in Cyprus should align with the unique characteristics of rural areas to create a cohesive and attractive narrative for potential visitors who wish to immerse themselves in the local culture and have a different tourism experience.

Moreover, one of the most significant barriers is the limited digital skills among stakeholders. The lack of expertise hinders their ability to fully utilise SM to their advantage. Reskilling and upskilling more professionals in digital skills and SM strategies is essential for sustaining and advancing the place branding efforts (Gulisova *et al.*, 2023). Finally, the fragmentation of stakeholder efforts, with limited collaboration between tourism boards, local businesses, and the government, leads to inconsistent messaging and missed opportunities for joint marketing initiatives. Addressing these challenges will require investment in capacity-building programs and the encouragement of stronger partnerships among stakeholders to create a compelling branding strategy for rural destinations (Goli *et al.*, 2021).

Conclusion

This paper examined the strategies and challenges faced by various stakeholder groups in Cyprus as they participate in rural place branding through SM. Through semi-structured interviews, stakeholders were mapped and positioned to explore their role in this process. The findings highlight the crucial role SM platforms play in shaping the identity of rural areas. Despite certain areas of agreement, likely influenced by the relative homogeneity and education level of the participants, which could lead to some findings' generalisations, the study shows that a wide range of SM platforms are used in Cyprus. They are universally recognised as essential tools for reaching potential visitors and boosting engagement, despite the challenges involved.

This study underlines the need to overcome key challenges such as creating impactful, up-to-date content, improving visitor segmentation based on specific needs, addressing digital skills gaps, and encouraging efficient stakeholder collaboration. Practical implications for tourism stakeholders include investing in digital skills upskilling and reskilling, developing more targeted and creative content strategies through short-form video and storytelling, and establishing cross-sector partnerships to modernise branding efforts. Addressing obstacles is essential for creating a sustainable and competitive tourism brand that appeals to a broader and more diverse audience, thereby contributing to the long-term success of rural tourism in Cyprus and similar destinations.

Future research will adopt a mixed-method approach, integrating qualitative interviews with quantitative analysis of SM metrics—such as engagement rates and the conversion rates of SM tourism campaigns—to more precisely assess the effectiveness of SM strategies in attracting visitors to rural areas. Additionally, as augmented reality (AR) and virtual reality (VR) technologies continue to evolve, future studies could explore their potential integration into rural place branding to offer immersive, engaging experiences for potential visitors. The use of such technologies may present a novel way to differentiate Cyprus' rural tourism offerings from those of competing destinations.

References

- Adams, W.C. (2015), "Conducting semi-structured interviews", in *Handbook of Practical Program Evaluation*, Jossey-Bass, pp. 492-505.
- Bennett, K.J., Borders, T.F., Holmes, G.M., Kozhimannil, K.B. and Ziller, E. (2019), "What is rural? Challenges and implications of definitions that inadequately encompass rural people and places", *Health Affairs*, Vol. 38 No. 12, pp. 1985-1992, doi: [10.1377/hlthaff.2019.00910](https://doi.org/10.1377/hlthaff.2019.00910).

- Benson, A.M. (2014), "Stakeholder perceptions of branding rural destinations: the case of North East England", *Tourism Review International*, Vol. 18 No. 3, pp. 215-226.
- Boukas, N. (2019), "Rural tourism and residents' well-being in Cyprus: towards a conceptualised framework of the appreciation of rural tourism for islands' sustainable development and competitiveness", *International Journal of Tourism Anthropology*, Vol. 7 No. 1, pp. 60-86, doi: [10.1504/ijta.2019.098105](https://doi.org/10.1504/ijta.2019.098105).
- Boukas, N. and Ziakas, V. (2016), "Tourism policy and residents' well-being in Cyprus: opportunities and challenges for developing an inside-out destination management approach", *Journal of Destination Marketing and Management*, Vol. 5 No. 1, pp. 44-54, doi: [10.1016/j.jdmm.2015.12.004](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jdmm.2015.12.004).
- Boyne, S. and Hall, D. (2004), "Place promotion through food and tourism: rural branding and the role of websites", *Place Branding*, Vol. 1, pp. 80-92, doi: [10.1057/palgrave.pb.5990007](https://doi.org/10.1057/palgrave.pb.5990007).
- Braun, V. and Clarke, V. (2006), "Using thematic analysis in psychology", *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, Vol. 3 No. 2, pp. 77-101, doi: [10.1191/1478088706qp063oa](https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa).
- Campbell, J.M. and Bickle, M.C. (2017), "Bridging the gap between millennial consumers, social media, and agricultural branding programs: a qualitative assessment", *Journal of International Food and Agribusiness Marketing*, Vol. 29 No. 4, pp. 346-365, doi: [10.1080/08974438.2017.1382421](https://doi.org/10.1080/08974438.2017.1382421).
- Chan, J.K.L. (2023), "Sustainable rural tourism practices from the local tourism stakeholders' perspectives", *Global Business and Finance Review*, Vol. 28 No. 3, pp. 136-149, doi: [10.17549/gbfr.2023.28.3.136](https://doi.org/10.17549/gbfr.2023.28.3.136).
- Chu, S.C., Deng, T. and Cheng, H. (2020), "The role of social media advertising in hospitality, tourism and travel: a literature review and research agenda", *International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management*, Vol. 32 No. 11, pp. 3419-3438, doi: [10.1108/ijchm-05-2020-0480](https://doi.org/10.1108/ijchm-05-2020-0480).
- Deffner, A. and Metaxas, T. (2010), "Place marketing, local identity and branding cultural images in Southern Europe: Nea Ionia, Greece and Pafos, Cyprus", in Ashworth, G. and Kavaratzis, M. (Eds), *Towards Effective Place Brand Management*, Edward Elgar Publishing.
- De las Heras-Pedrosa, C., Millan-Celis, E., Iglesias-Sánchez, P.P. and Jambrino-Maldonado, C. (2020), "Importance of social media in the image formation of tourist destinations from the stakeholders' perspective", *Sustainability*, Vol. 12 No. 10, p. 4092, doi: [10.3390/su12104092](https://doi.org/10.3390/su12104092).
- De San Eugenio-Vela, J. and Barniol-Carcasona, M. (2015), "The relationship between rural branding and local development: a case study in the Catalonia's countryside: territoris Serens (El Lluçanès)", *Journal of Rural Studies*, Vol. 37, pp. 108-119, doi: [10.1016/j.jrurstud.2015.01.001](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jrurstud.2015.01.001).
- Donner, M., Horlings, L., Fort, F. and Vellema, S. (2017), "Place branding, embeddedness and endogenous rural development: four European cases", *Place Branding and Public Diplomacy*, Vol. 13 No. 4, pp. 273-292, doi: [10.1057/s41254-016-0049-z](https://doi.org/10.1057/s41254-016-0049-z).
- Dwityas, N.A. and Briandana, R. (2017), "Social media in travel decision making process", *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science*, Vol. 7 No. 7, pp. 193-201.
- Edgell, D.L., Swanson, J., Allen, M.D. and Smith, G. (2008), *Tourism Policy and Planning: Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow*, Routledge, London.
- Efstathiou, A. and Zippelius, E. (2019), "Cultural tourism, destination branding and spatial experience design: contemporary hospitality design in Cyprus", in Kavoura, A. (Ed.), *Kefallonitis*, pp. 791-799, doi: [10.1007/978-3-030-12453-3_91](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-12453-3_91).
- Ekonomou, G., Kallioras, D., Menegaki, A.N. and Alvarez, S. (2023), "Tourist preferences for revitalizing wellness products and reversing depopulation in rural destinations", *Sustainability*, Vol. 15 No. 24, 16736, doi: [10.3390/su152416736](https://doi.org/10.3390/su152416736).
- Foroudi, P., Gupta, S. and Kitchen, P.J. (2018), "A framework of place branding, place image, and place reputation: antecedents and moderators", *Journal of Business Research*, Vol. 83, pp. 207-217.
- Freeman, R.E., Phillips, R. and Sisodia, R. (2020), "Tensions in stakeholder theory", *Business and Society*, Vol. 59 No. 2, pp. 213-231, doi: [10.1177/0007650318773750](https://doi.org/10.1177/0007650318773750).

- Garanti, Z. (2022), "Alternative and special interest tourism to mitigate the effects of tourism seasonality: the debate from Cyprus", *Worldwide Hospitality and Tourism Themes*, Vol. 14 No. 5, pp. 451-460, doi: [10.1108/whatt-07-2022-0083](https://doi.org/10.1108/whatt-07-2022-0083).
- Garay, L. and Morales Pérez, S. (2017), "Understanding the creation of destination images through social media: a case study of a rural tourism destination", *Journal of Destination Marketing and Management*, Vol. 6 No. 2, pp. 94-106.
- Golestaneh, H., Guerreiro, M., Pinto, P. and Mosaddad, S.H. (2022), "On the role of internal stakeholders in place branding", *Journal of Place Management and Development*, Vol. 15 No. 2, pp. 202-228, doi: [10.1108/jpmd-05-2020-0041](https://doi.org/10.1108/jpmd-05-2020-0041).
- Goli, A., Gholipour Soleimani, A. and Delafrooz, N. (2021), "The role of social media storytelling power in the development of Qeshm Island tourism destination", *Consumer Behavior Studies Journal*, Vol. 8 No. 3, pp. 117-139.
- Gössling, S. and Lane, B. (2015), "Rural tourism and sustainable development", *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*, Vol. 23 No. 1, pp. 1-11.
- Grebosz-Krawczyk, M. (2021), "Place branding (r)evolution: the management of the smart city's brand", *Place Branding and Public Diplomacy*, Vol. 17 No. 1, pp. 93-104, doi: [10.1057/s41254-020-00167-2](https://doi.org/10.1057/s41254-020-00167-2).
- Gulisova, B. (2021), "Rural place branding processes: a meta-synthesis", *Place Branding and Public Diplomacy*, Vol. 17 No. 4, pp. 368-381, doi: [10.1057/s41254-020-00187-y](https://doi.org/10.1057/s41254-020-00187-y).
- Gulisova, B., Horbel, C. and Noe, E.B. (2021), "Place branding and sustainable rural communities: qualitative evidence from rural areas in Denmark", *Journal of Strategic Marketing*, pp. 1-22, doi: [10.1080/0965254x.2021.2006274](https://doi.org/10.1080/0965254x.2021.2006274).
- Gulisova, B., Horbel, C. and Bjørnshave Noe, E. (2023), "Rural place branding processes: actor engagement in service ecosystems", *Journal of Place Management and Development*, Vol. 16 No. 3, pp. 415-439, doi: [10.1108/jpmd-11-2022-0105](https://doi.org/10.1108/jpmd-11-2022-0105).
- Hanna, S., Rowley, J. and Keegan, B. (2021), "Place and destination branding: a review and conceptual mapping of the domain", *European Management Review*, Vol. 18 No. 2, pp. 105-117, doi: [10.1111/emre.12433](https://doi.org/10.1111/emre.12433).
- Hays, S., Page, S.J. and Buhalis, D. (2013), "Social media as a destination marketing tool: its use by national tourism organisations", *Current Issues in Tourism*, Vol. 16 No. 3, pp. 211-239, doi: [10.1080/13683500.2012.662215](https://doi.org/10.1080/13683500.2012.662215).
- Horlings, L.G. (2012), "Place branding by building coalitions: lessons from rural-urban regions in The Netherlands", *Place Branding and Public Diplomacy*, Vol. 8 No. 4, pp. 295-309, doi: [10.1057/pb.2012.21](https://doi.org/10.1057/pb.2012.21).
- Hysa, B., Zdonek, I. and Karasek, A. (2022), "Social media in sustainable tourism recovery", *Sustainability*, Vol. 14 No. 2, p. 760, doi: [10.3390/su14020760](https://doi.org/10.3390/su14020760).
- Juliana, J., Sihombing, S.O. and Antonio, F. (2023), "An investigation between nostalgic value resonance and destination brand engagement in rural tourism", *International Journal of Design and Nature and Ecodynamics*, Vol. 18 No. 1, pp. 125-132, doi: [10.18280/ijdne.180114](https://doi.org/10.18280/ijdne.180114).
- Kietzmann, J.H., Hermkens, K., McCarthy, I.P. and Silvestre, B.S. (2011), "Social media? Get serious! Understanding the functional building blocks of social media", *Business Horizons*, Vol. 54 No. 3, pp. 241-251, doi: [10.1016/j.bushor.2011.01.005](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.bushor.2011.01.005).
- Kumar, S. and Valeri, M. (2022), "Understanding the relationship among factors influencing rural tourism: a hierarchical approach", *Journal of Organizational Change Management*, Vol. 35 No. 2, pp. 385-407.
- Lane, B. and Kastenzholz, E. (2015), "Rural tourism: the evolution of practice and research approaches – towards a new generation concept?", *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*, Vol. 23 Nos 8-9, pp. 1133-1156, doi: [10.1080/09669582.2015.1083997](https://doi.org/10.1080/09669582.2015.1083997).
- Leite, H.D.L.K., Binotto, E., Padilha, A.C.M. and de Oliveira Hoeckel, P.H. (2023), "Cooperation in rural tourism routes: evidence and insights", *Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Management*, Vol. 57, pp. 84-96, doi: [10.1016/j.jhtm.2023.09.005](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jhtm.2023.09.005).

- Lin, Z. and Rasoolimanesh, S.M. (2024), "Sharing tourism experiences in social media: a systematic review", *Anatolia*, Vol. 35 No. 1, pp. 67-81, doi: [10.1080/13032917.2022.2120029](https://doi.org/10.1080/13032917.2022.2120029).
- Liu, L., Zhang, M., Hendry, L.C., Bu, M. and Wang, S. (2018), "Supplier development practices for sustainability: a multi-stakeholder perspective", *Business Strategy and the Environment*, Vol. 27 No. 1, pp. 100-116, doi: [10.1002/bse.1987](https://doi.org/10.1002/bse.1987).
- Lowery, B., Dagevos, J., Chuenpagdee, R. and Vodden, K. (2020), "Storytelling for sustainable development in rural communities: an alternative approach", *Sustainable Development*, Vol. 28 No. 6, pp. 1813-1826, doi: [10.1002/sd.2124](https://doi.org/10.1002/sd.2124).
- Macrotrends (2024), "Population of Cyprus", available at: <https://www.macrotrends.net/global-metrics/countries/CYP/cyprus/population> (accessed 1 August 2024).
- Narangajavana Kaosiri, Y., Callarisia Fiol, L.J., Moliner Tena, M.Á., Rodríguez Artola, R.M. and Sánchez García, J. (2019), "User-generated content sources in social media: a new approach to explore tourist satisfaction", *Journal of Travel Research*, Vol. 58 No. 2, pp. 253-265, doi: [10.1177/0047287517746014](https://doi.org/10.1177/0047287517746014).
- Oliveira, E. and Panyik, E. (2015), "Content, context and co-creation: digital challenges in destination branding with references to Portugal as a tourist destination", *Journal of Vacation Marketing*, Vol. 21 No. 1, pp. 53-74, doi: [10.1177/1356766714544235](https://doi.org/10.1177/1356766714544235).
- Patton, M.Q. (2005), "Qualitative research", in *Encyclopedia of Statistics in Behavioral Science*, Wiley.
- Pröbstl-Haider, U., Melzer, V. and Jiricka, A. (2014), "Rural tourism opportunities: strategies and requirements for destination leadership in peripheral areas", *Tourism Review*, Vol. 69 No. 3, pp. 216-228, doi: [10.1108/tr-06-2013-0038](https://doi.org/10.1108/tr-06-2013-0038).
- Rather, R.A., Najjar, A.H. and Jaziri, D. (2021), "Destination branding in tourism: insights from social identification, attachment and experience theories", in *Tourism in India*, Routledge, pp. 53-67.
- Rinaldi, C. and Bekhuis, J. (2021), "The role of storytelling in rural tourism place branding: a narrative analysis", *Tourism Management Perspectives*, Vol. 38, 100775.
- Rosalina, P.D., Dupre, K., Wang, Y., Putra, I.N.D. and Jin, X. (2023), "Rural tourism resource management strategies: a case study of two tourism villages in Bali", *Tourism Management Perspectives*, Vol. 49, 101194, doi: [10.1016/j.tmp.2023.101194](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tmp.2023.101194).
- Sartori, A., Mottironi, C. and Corigliano, M.A. (2012), "Tourist destination brand equity and internal stakeholders: an empirical research", *Journal of Vacation Marketing*, Vol. 18 No. 4, pp. 327-340, doi: [10.1177/1356766712459689](https://doi.org/10.1177/1356766712459689).
- Sheehan, L., Ritchie, J.B. and Hudson, S. (2007), "The destination promotion triad: understanding asymmetric stakeholder interdependencies among the city, hotels, and DMO", *Journal of Travel Research*, Vol. 46 No. 1, pp. 64-74, doi: [10.1177/0047287507302383](https://doi.org/10.1177/0047287507302383).
- Soulard, J., Park, J. and Zou, S. (2024), "Pride in transformation: a rural tourism stakeholder view", *Journal of Travel Research*, Vol. 63 No. 1, pp. 80-99, doi: [10.1177/00472875221143487](https://doi.org/10.1177/00472875221143487).
- Statistical Service Cyprus (2024), "Tourist arrivals and returns of residents of Cyprus from trips abroad", available at: <https://www.cystat.gov.cy/en/PressRelease?id=68807> (accessed 7 May 2024).
- Swain, S., Jebarajakirthy, C., Sharma, B.K., Maseeh, H.I., Agrawal, A., Shah, J. and Saha, R. (2024), "Place branding: a systematic literature review and future research agenda", *Journal of Travel Research*, Vol. 63 No. 3, pp. 535-564, doi: [10.1177/00472875231168620](https://doi.org/10.1177/00472875231168620).
- Tran, N.L. and Rudolf, W. (2022), "Social media and destination branding in tourism: a systematic review of the literature", *Sustainability*, Vol. 14 No. 20, 13528, doi: [10.3390/su142013528](https://doi.org/10.3390/su142013528).
- Tuncer, İ. and Kartal, A.S. (2024), "Do the importance of influencer- and customer-generated content on social media affect willingness to pay more for potential customers?", *Journal of Consumer Behaviour*, Vol. 23 No. 2, pp. 1002-1013, doi: [10.1002/cb.2260](https://doi.org/10.1002/cb.2260).
- Vasudevan, S. and Kumar, F.P. (2021), "Distance to distrust: the dilemma for internal stakeholders in post COVID-19 hospitality", *International Journal of Spa and Wellness*, Vol. 4 Nos 2-3, pp. 118-137, doi: [10.1080/24721735.2021.1987637](https://doi.org/10.1080/24721735.2021.1987637).

- Vieira, B.M., Borges, A.P. and Vieira, E.P. (2023), "The role of social networks for decision-making about tourism destinations", *International Journal of Internet Marketing and Advertising*, Vol. 18 No. 1, pp. 1-27, doi: [10.1504/ijima.2023.10053065](https://doi.org/10.1504/ijima.2023.10053065).
- Yang, J., Yang, R., Chen, M.H., Su, C.H.J., Zhi, Y. and Xi, J. (2021), "Effects of rural revitalization on rural tourism", *Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Management*, Vol. 47, pp. 35-45, doi: [10.1016/j.jhtm.2021.02.008](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jhtm.2021.02.008).
- Zhou, G. and Chen, W. (2023), "Agritourism experience value cocreation impact on the brand equity of rural tourism destinations in China", *Tourism Review*, Vol. 78 No. 5, pp. 1315-1335, doi: [10.1108/tr-11-2022-0539](https://doi.org/10.1108/tr-11-2022-0539).

Corresponding author

Christiana Stylianou can be contacted at: cd.stylianou@edu.cut.ac.cy