Abstract: Digitalization-oriented transformation provides enormous possibilities to all sectors, ranging from manufacturing to the service industries. This study aimed to investigate the role of social media and its utilization by tourism operators/policymakers as a catalyst to enhance the image of a destination that is grappling with political deadlock and burdens of nonrecognition despite its abundance of tourism resources. The case of north Cyprus is an embodiment of a number of destinations that are challenged by political hurdles, conflicts, and nonrecognition, which result in economic hardship, political uncertainty, and social disappointment. This research aimed to investigate the role of social media in popularizing and marketing north Cyprus by placing it on the global digital tourism map. For the purpose of this study, a qualitative research method was employed and data collected through semi-structured interview questions. The interviewees were mainly public sector tourism officials, hoteliers, travel agency managers, and tourism academicians. Data analysis was conducted by applying Atlas.ti 9 (1.0.0.206) software. The findings reveal that tourism operators and policymakers have failed to take advantage of social media platforms—which have become a form of public goods—to mitigate the negative effects of the political impasse that has curtailed the tourism sector. The implications and contributions are also discussed.

Keywords: social media platforms; destination image; tourism; political deadlock; north Cyprus

1. Introduction

In today’s modern and interconnected world, the tourism industry is subject to numerous events, forces, and crises [1]. Whether these events or crises are due to natural disasters or manmade elements such as political conflicts, civil wars, and terrorism, they have a profound effect on how the image of a destination is shaped and sustained [2–4].

While the image of a destination is related to the totality of impressions, beliefs, ideas, expectations, and feelings accumulated toward a place [5,6], it is also composed of three broad components, namely, cognitive, affective, and conative elements [5]. Such characteristics add complexity to the destination image with ramifications for destination marketing. Moreover, destination image plays a profound role in destination viability and success in the global tourism arena [7].

Notwithstanding extensive studies of tourism destination images, there are no studies focused on the behavior and approaches of destination policymakers, planners, and managers in both private and public sectors that explore their level and extent of utilization of social media platforms to overcome some of the obstacles (e.g., image) of the tourism sector resulting from political conflict. This is the crux of this study. We assumed that in today’s world, which is highly digitalized, and in the context of “tourism,” social media can play an important role in bypassing some of the political hurdles. There are few studies in the literature examining the impact of dynamic political or security situations on tourism demand and flows [8]. The question is how a destination under political deadlock (e.g., north Cyprus) can portray its true image by utilizing social media. Can social media...
function as a catalyst to bypass the various obstacles that political deadlock inflicts upon a destination?

A comprehensive destination image “refers to the synthesis of people’s perception, impression and viewpoint of tourism destination, as well as the synthesis of the cognition and idea of the society, politics, economy, life, culture, tourism development and other aspects of the destination” [9]. With respect to the above definition, the role of social media in exhibiting a true image becomes instrumental as a modern communication technology in the marketing toolbox [10] that contains promotion, advertisement, word of mouth (WOM), printed materials, etc.

This paper suggests that the pathways rooted in social media platforms can be a source/means to overcome the challenges of political uncertainty that are coupled with sanctions in a tourism destination that is wrongfully affected by a distorted image due to a specific political environment. North Cyprus, a destination in the Mediterranean Sea, is a case in point where tourism resources abound, but the image of which is tarnished because of an ongoing political impasse [11–14]. To the best of the authors’ knowledge, there is no study that has investigated/explored the nature of the behavior of stakeholders in relation to the utilization of social media in a destination with political conflict to reduce the negative impacts of political conflict on tourism. In addition to this gap, “a qualitative discussion of the impact of social media in tourism are still needed, it is critical to encourage comprehensive investigation into the influence and impact of social media on all aspects of the tourism industry including stakeholder’s perspective” [15] (p. 34).

A few studies have focused on the image of destinations with political problems (e.g., [16–19]). However, the role of social media as an innovative phenomenon in tourism marketing and promotion and in terms of its contribution to image enhancement remains unexplored. Therefore, this study was an attempt to explore the extent of utilization of social media toward image enhancement while a destination is grappling with political uncertainty and straitjacketed by sanctions. We hypothesized that the role of social media in reducing and minimizing the negative impacts of political factors—as obstacles to genuine destination image formation—is paramount. Nevertheless, the social media and internet phenomenon has revolutionized the way that tourism is marketed and consumers are understood. The use of a new communication medium in tourism was discussed at the International Ecotourism Summit in Quebec in 2002 [20], which explored how the internet and its domain facilitate the exploration of new destinations.

In this study, the aim was to undertake a discursive analysis to explore the role of social media and the internet in the case of north Cyprus as a Mediterranean destination, which has been affected by the lack of a solution with regard to its political uncertainty over either uniting with south Cyprus or achieving recognition as an independent state. Furthermore, and as the crux of this study, the aim was to explore the behavior of tourism operators and destination policymakers’ behavioral responses to the utility of social media and the Internet in bypassing the dark cloud of political limbo that has negatively affected the image of north Cyprus for the last four decades. Moreover, the main aim was to explore tourism operators’/destination policymakers’ degree of utilization of and effort invested in social media to bypass and mitigate some of the challenges that north Cyprus is facing due to the present political deadlock. Specifically, in relation to the tourism sector, scholars agree that, with enhanced information technology and the popularity of social media, an induced and organic image of a destination can be conveyed to tourists [21–23] North Cyprus is endowed with attractive tourism resources and an advantageous location, but its image has been blurred due to an unresolved political impasse.

This study is also an attempt to overcome the lack of focus on an intriguing gap in the literature in terms of political conflict and destination image, as well as contextualizing the utility of social media as a catalyst in mitigating the negative image that is resulted from political conflict. “Traditionally, borders and border areas have been regarded as barriers to tourism—both from factual and perceptual aspects related to wars, political instability, territorial conflicts, social and/or economic conflicts, and psychological and administra-
tive obstacles” (as cited in [8]). However, social media has changed the communication landscape, as it has become a global public good [24].

Nevertheless, we assume that social media platforms are highly conducive to informing the tourists about the true image of the destination and, at the same time, mitigating the damaging impact of political stalemate, in the case of north Cyprus, and similar situations. Therefore, this study focuses on exploring the extent of tourism sector operators’ (i.e., public and private sectors) resolve and determination toward utilization of social media platforms to overcome some of the political hurdles that hamper the full potentials of the tourism sector to be realized in the case of north Cyprus. Notwithstanding the extent of numerous studies about the role of social media platforms in image formation [21,22,25,26] and information dissemination in the tourism domain, the role of social media and its effectiveness in positive image formation in destinations with political conflict is rarely studied. This study is an attempt to fill this gap. We hypothesize that north Cyprus, with its geospatial advantages and unique DNA, can bypass the looming political cloud if the destination managers utilize social media toward this aim effectively.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Destinations with Political Conflict

The tourism industry is highly vulnerable to natural and manmade crises and turmoil. The devastating impact of COVID-19 is a testament to such vulnerability [27,28]. However, some destinations, notwithstanding their advantageous location and abundance of resources, have suffered because of political conflict and uncertainty. Beirman [29] (p. 167) notes that “unlike natural disasters political crisis can continue to impact on the image of a destination for months if not years.” With that in mind, different destinations have succumbed to different forms of political pitfalls with a negative impact on the tourism sector [30–32].

Political conflicts of any form can affect the image of the destination through different channels. For instance, in the case of north Cyprus, the Greek Cypriots/south Cyprus has constantly pictured north Cyprus as a danger zone, to say the least. However, north Cyprus is one of the safest destinations in the world, and “it is argued that tourism development in Northern Cyprus holds enormous potential as the area remains one of the few unspoiled corners in the Mediterranean” [11]. TripAdvisor reported that north Cyprus is perfectly safe and has a far lower crime rate than south Cyprus [33,34].

The negative impact of political turmoil on tourism might take different forms; however, it affects the tourism sector unable to realize and achieve its full potentials either in terms of attracting tourists or in terms of developing tourism products [29,35]. One example of political conflict and its negative impact is manifested in the case of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. Isaac and Eid [36] (p. 1500) stated that “the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the Israeli occupation of Palestine have affected the tourism sector harmfully and left Palestine with a negative image, viewed in the media as a war and terrorism zone.” The same can hold true about north Cyprus, which is entangled due to the lack of political resolution with the neighboring south that is exacerbated by constant negative portrayal by the south tarnishing [37,38] the image of the north [39,40]. However, the nature of the political conflict in the island of Cyprus that has resulted in the partitioning of the island into two entities of north and south since 1974 is a unique one.

The unresolved conflict between the north and the south is wrongfully blamed on Turkey’s presence in the north that has become a pretext for the south side to constantly block and curtail the expansion of tourism in the north [41]. The rapid economic growth and higher standard of living that has been achieved in the north during the last two decades is the result of the contribution of Turkey through infrastructural, technological, and financial means. Turkey’s contribution manifested in north Cyprus’s achievement as the international educational hub and a formidable Edu-tourism destination [34,42–44].
North Cyprus’s political problem that hampers its tourism sector is not an isolated case. There are similar cases of partitioned nations in the past and even at the present wherein unresolved political conflict affected the overall socioeconomic development, in general, and tourism, in particular. For instance, China and Taiwan, North and South Korea, Northern and Southern Cyprus, and the former East and West Germany are examples of destinations with political conflict and uncertainty, which are typically known as “partitioned states” [45].

Political conflicts and disorders can have different effects depending on their type and nature. The devastating impact of some of the political problems is short lived, and destinations may return to their normal state [46]. For instance, despite the French terrorist attacks that took place in January and November 2015, the country is still at the top of the list of most visited destinations [47]. In contrast, political conflicts and disputes either between or within some destinations have become a pervasive political condition with continuous damage to the image and reputation of the destinations [48–50]. As Alvarez and Campo [18] pointed out, the hostility between destinations can have a profound effect on the affective dimension of the destination’s image. In the meantime, Hanon and Wang [51] revealed that internal political instability dampens tourism more than external political factor such as terrorism.

2.2. Destination Image

It is difficult to provide a comprehensive definition of the destination image because various factors influence its formation [9,52]. Some researchers consider the image of the destination as an important factor in creating job opportunities, attracting investment and skilled labor [53,54]. Others consider a positive destination image as a factor for greater customer satisfaction and loyalty, sharing experiences, and the intention to revisit [55]. Nevertheless, in the literature, destination image has been probed as a multi-dimensional construct composed of cognitive, affective, and conative components [56,57]. The three components are interrelated and form “the destination image concept as an attitudinal construct consisting of an individual’s mental representation of knowledge (beliefs), feelings, and global impression about a destination” [58] (p. 165). Marques et al. [56] added another component to the destination image concept as the unique destination image, which has not received deserved attention. In their view, the unique destination image plays a stronger role in differentiating the competitiveness of the destination. Juxtaposing the global impression of a destination with a unique image of the destination is significant when considering the role of social media [59,60] in mitigating the negative image that is propagated by the destinations that are entangled in conflict (e.g., in the case of north and south Cyprus). “This is particularly the case when trying to reverse a negative image. An accurate assessment of destination image can help a nation design effective positioning strategies to create, correct, or enhance the target travelers’ image of place” (as cited in [23] (p. 2)). According to Gunn and Var [61], each destination, including north Cyprus, has its unique image, which is also called the DNA of the destination. However, “tourism destination images are becoming increasingly fragmented and ephemeral in nature. The use of internet radically changes the communication process, from the traditional media of the ‘language of tourism,’ based on monologues and unilateral communication from Western senders (tour operators) to Western receivers (tourists), to the electronic ‘Word-of-Mouse’” [62] (pp. 977–978).

Destination image in the context of marketing is also significant, which is commonly accepted as an important aspect in successful tourism development due to its impact on the supply and demand aspects of marketing [7]. Other studies have emphasized the complex and ambiguous nature of destination image formation in terms of evaluating cognitive, affective, and conative components [63–65].
“The cognitive component is related to the beliefs and knowledge which one holds about the attributes of a certain place, that is, cognitive evaluation of image is based on factual knowledge, personal beliefs, meanings, and memories. On the other hand, the affective component is related to the emotions and feelings, which a person holds about a place, and it can be either favorable, unfavorable, or neutral” [56] (p. 2).

“A third component, conative, is derived from the evaluation of previous two and describes actions and behaviors in relation to the destination” [23] (p. 2). Some authors have also elaborated “three image-formation agents: induced (overt and covert induced information emanating from destination promoters), autonomous (independently produced reports, films, and newspapers) and organic (unrequested and solicited information received from persons mainly through word-of-mouth, or WOM, communication)” (as cited in [66] (p. 2)). Scholars [67,68] agree that destination image and competitiveness in tourism should be considered the main concern in research on top-level management in the context of political instability and security risks, which are key influential factors in models of destination image formation [17] (p. 840).

We assume that in the context of various models of destination image formation, social media platforms are conducive to the complex nature of destination image formation. Therefore, if utilized by tourism operators and destination planners as a source of data dissemination, the implications can be rewarding [69], especially in a destination with political issues since social media is a free, fast, and useful source of data about tourism destinations. Nowadays, researchers have also started to evaluate the data available in social media to assess tourists’ views (e.g., in TripAdvisor) regarding their cognitive and affective perceptions of the destination. Recently, social media has been highly instrumental in utilizing user-generated content to evaluate and analyze issues relevant to nature-based tourism, conservation, human–environment relationships, ecosystem service values, and environmental issues [70–73].

The content analysis of images and semantic analysis of associated text, for example, can provide insights for managers and tourism operators into how tourists view and value natural areas [69]. Thus, social media can be a powerful tool to nullify the wrong image [5] that conflictive parties/destinations spreading about each other, for instance, the wrong image that south Cyprus is spreading about north Cyprus. Nevertheless, one of the main factors that often have negative effects on the affective and cognitive dimensions of the destination image is related to the political evolutions and conflicts that govern a destination [74].

2.3. Social Media and Tourism

Digital-oriented transformation and social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and LinkedIn, etc. have removed the boundaries and restrictions on access to the dissemination of information. These platforms have created enormous opportunities for customers and suppliers of goods and services, especially in the tourism sector [23,36,75–80]. Li et al. [25] (p. 184) noted that “Trivago and TripAdvisor are some of the popular tourism social media platforms [that] enable hospitality and tourism firms to promote their brand to customers and develop connections with [tourists] beyond the service encounter.”

It is the attribute of “many-to-many” of social media that has revolutionized the processes of marketing and consumption. This is manifest in the way consumers/tourists “create an image” or “mental portrayal or prototype” [62] of what the destination and its tourism products might resemble. Furthermore, “technological advancement, the global media, and increased international competition affect the way in which destinations are imagined, perceived, and consumed. Image formation is no longer a one-way ‘push’ process of mass communication, but a dynamic one of selecting, reflecting, sharing, and experiencing” [62] (p. 978).
Furthermore, tourists’ travel behavior is also changing, as they tend to enjoy independent or personal tours rather than traditional group package tours [81]. Online travel bookings are expected to hit USD 817 billion by 2020. In addition, 700 million people will be booking their hotel rooms online by 2023. About 70% of travelers’ research travel on their smartphone [82]. Global social media states that there are 4.20 billion social media users around the world at the start of 2021, equating to more than 53 percent of the total global population [83]. Tourists are keen to search for and obtain destination information by themselves from weblogs and social media agents such as UGC and E-WOM [81,84]. TripAdvisor.com illustrated that 1 in 10 internet users visit this site before traveling [85].

Therefore, these features change the way tourists search, disseminate information, internalize destination image, and finally make a decision where to travel. Furthermore, with the available sources of information on different social media platforms, marketers do not have complete control of affecting the travelers and manipulating their destination decision. Filieri and McLeay [86] (p. 54) stated that “from the managerial side, hotel managers should be aware that through online reviewers (ORs) travelers [might] become marketers by producing reviews that influence other travelers’ decisions more strongly than traditional marketing communications.” One manifestation of the impact of social media platforms on traveler’s decision-making process is e-WOM: “e-WOM has been defined as any positive or negative statement made by potential, actual or former customers about a product or company, that is made available to a multitude of people and institutions via the internet” [86] (p. 44).

Therefore, as regards destinations with political problems, social media can promote the intended destination and decrease the perceived risk of visiting a destination. It is the responsibility of tourism operators (i.e., public and private sectors) how to distribute information, engage with online users, utilize social media platforms, and influence the travel decisions of the potential tourism market [84,87].

Social media platforms facilitate collaboration, interaction, and sharing of content among users [88], hence allowing tourists to shape their pre-expectations based on the information they receive regardless of who is the creator that shares that information. If they are fully confident in the publisher’s source, they will partially shape their perception of the destination [89]. Therefore, tourism destinations, especially ones with political obstacles, should have a good understanding of how social media functions, understand users, initiate positioning and branding, and have control over the quality of contents [90,91].

The utility and impact of social media and its influence on reshaping the image have already been established, especially in tourism as this industry “is an experiential product and that consumers tend to store information about experiences in memory in story format” [62] (pp. 980–981). In fact, social media platforms in the context of this new technology have enticed scholars to revise the previous assumptions about the destination image. Govers et al. [62] (p. 981) alluded that “utilizing the same technologies [social media] that have and will increasingly have a potent influence on image formation, such as the internet, the authors have attempted to de-construct image, challenging long-standing assumptions.”

Customer relationship management (CRM) has evolved into an “umbrella” term that encompasses strategy, practices, and technology. The CRM's ultimate goal is improving the customer-centric philosophy of the business/firm (e.g., hotel) by focusing on the human factor—customer or user of services. To achieve such an aim, CRM guides the firms to synchronize with various social media tools to communicate with new and loyal customers. It also monitors customer communication in detail to locate prospective customers. Finally, in the context of CRM, firms orchestrate promotional energies, which aim to capture loyalty, retention, lifecycle, value, satisfaction, and engagement [92–94]. Destination planners/managers can operationalize CRM in the context of social media, an industry that, according to Ballings and Van den Poel [95] is different from other industries as it contains numerous variables. In addition, social media contains various profiles, including geographical, demographical, professional, social, and personal information [95]. This
allows destinations to assess the important variables in social media and learn which one worth undertaking.

2.4. Case of North Cyprus

The island of Cyprus in the Eastern Mediterranean Sea has been partitioned into two enclaves between Greek Cypriots (i.e., officially known as the Republic of Cyprus) and Turkish Cypriots (i.e., Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus) since 1974. The Turkish enclave is also referred to as north Cyprus. The ethnic rift, which was going on before the partition, resulted in the separation of one-third of the island with dominant Turkish Cypriots as its inhabitants (see also Figure 1).

![Map of Cyprus with demarcations line](image)

Figure 1. Map of Cyprus with demarcations line [96].

Finally, during the post-partition, north Cyprus unilaterally declared its independence from south Cyprus on 15 November 1983 [97]. However, the self-declared state of north Cyprus, which comprises one-third of the island (i.e., 3354 km$^2$), is recognized only by Turkey. Nevertheless, north Cyprus has been functioning as a de facto [98] country with an established political and economic structure. North Cyprus has also representative offices in about 20 countries, including in Washington DC in the USA [99].

Nowadays, north Cyprus attracts about one million tourists and is home to 2 public and 17 private universities with a body of students mainly from the Middle East, Africa, and Asia. However, with its pleasant climate, advantageous location, and unspoiled beaches, the region has not been able to realize its full potentials. One of the major obstacles to its tourism growth and development lies with the lack of political resolution either as a recognized nation-state by the UN and international community [100] or unification with the rest of the island.

Nevertheless, lack of political resolution inflicted various obstacles and limitations to the overall socioeconomic development of north Cyprus and its tourism sector. These obstacles include lack of direct trade, lack of direct flight, lack of foreign investment, and dependency on Turkey for various national and international affairs [101,102]. These obstacles have been exacerbated by the constant negative portrayal by south Cyprus that conveys a negative image of the north in the international tourism market [103]. The outcome of the Greek Cypriot effort convinced the International Air Transport Association (IATA) to cancel the international direct flights to Northern Cyprus [40,104].
Therefore, we hypothesize that social media platforms are highly conducive to the mitigation of political obstacles in the case of north Cyprus as well as in similar cases. Consequently, this study tries to answer the following questions:

- What is the extent of tourism sector operators’ commitment to utilize social media platforms toward this aim?
- Moreover, are tourism operators aware of the practical value and power of social media platforms to disseminate a true image of the destination that is entangled in political uncertainty?

This study aimed to explore the answers to those questions by examining tourism sector operators in both public and private sectors in the case of north Cyprus, knowing that social media platforms have become a paramount component of modern tourism by value co-creation. Holmqvist et al. [105] (p. 115) argued that “after the interaction, customers continue to create value-in-use independently or in social co-creation with peers, both on social media and in real life.”

Nowadays, consumers’/tourists’ decisions through social networking can be influenced through value co-creation. This is because “co-creation is an activity that leads to value creation through close interactions of firm and consumer [tourists]” [106] (p. 246). The concept of value co-creation has also been studied in the context of social media, specifically in the fields of virtual communities, the service sector, and digital marketing [107,108].

Since the true image of north Cyprus as a tourist destination has been affected by political uncertainty and lack of resolution to the Cyprus problem, social media platforms can become a way of salvation. Duarte Alonso et al. [109] (p. 230) stated that “new insights into the use of winery owners/managers of website and social media could also be beneficial to tourism and local government agencies in their efforts to promote their region and raise their destination image.” The power of social media platforms is situated in their user-generated content. The user-generated content is a free-flow pool of information for the tourists. McCreary et al. [110] (p. 82) argued that “such user-generated content (UGC) can help tourism providers determine the dominant characteristics of destination images conceptualized by visitors and, based on this information, strategically set place-based management and marketing goals.” For tourism movement in north Cyprus, see Table 1.

### Table 1. Tourism movement in north Cyprus.

| MONTH     | TOTAL NUMBER OF ARRIVALS |
|-----------|--------------------------|
|           | 2019          | 2020          | % Change |
| JANUARY   | 105,630       | 112,232       | 6.3       |
| FEBRUARY  | 128,028       | 128,743       | 0.6       |
| MARCH     | 131,087       | 44,107        | −66.4     |
| APRIL     | 146,768       | 67            | −100.0    |
| MAY       | 129,844       | 37            | −100.0    |
| JUNE      | 150,051       | 477           | −99.7     |
| JULY      | 152,247       | 20,228        | −86.7     |
| AUGUST    | 159,250       | 35,119        | −77.9     |
| SEPTEMBER | 192,123       | 11,727        | −93.9     |
| OCTOBER   | 177,127       | 13,275        | −92.5     |
| NOVEMBER  | 148,408       | 14,552        | −90.2     |
| DECEMBER  | 129,416       | 8282          | −93.6     |
| TOTAL     | 1,749,979     | 388,846       | −77.8     |

Source: [111].
3. Conceptualization

For the purpose of this study, two theories were utilized. First, the social influence theory (SIT) [112] that posits social influence brings about changes in attitude and actions. These changes, according to the theory, are influenced by referent others (e.g., users’ generated information in social media) through three primary processes of influence: (i) compliance, which is assumed to occur when individuals accept influence and adopt the induced behavior to gain rewards. Such behavior is due to the social effect of accepting influence; (ii) identification, which is believed to occur when individuals adopt the induced behavior. Hence, people identify themselves with others in sharing the same benefits (e.g., desire to visit the same destination as others have and express their pleasure); (iii) internalization, which is assumed to occur when individuals are influenced by the opinions and actions of others (e.g., conforming to a new fad) [113–115]. Wang et al. [115] (p. 135) stated that “social influence can [affect] emotions, thoughts or behaviors of others in a variety of ways (e.g., through persuasion, compliance, conformity, social learning).” Nowadays, social media platforms have a profound influence on people by providing a toolbox for social learning, persuasion, and conformity [113]. This happens through internalization processes that allow users of social media to absorb the opinions of others into their own set of beliefs. One manifestation of this process is the followers of celebrity figures, sportsmen, politicians, and activists [116].

The second theory that framed our study is destination image theory (DIT) [117,118]. Alwan [118] noted that destination image has undergone a formation process in history, which evolved from the promotion of place for political, economic, and sociopsychological goals until the early 20th century. Then, the focus shifted to promote the place to market its particular aspects in the early decades of the 20th century: “For example, in response to the decline of traditional industries and the growing importance of the service economy, places started to adopt more market-oriented approach” [118] (p. 40). This process eventually culminated in a branding concept that initially applied to tangible products and then to intangible products (i.e., place branding for the purpose of visitation). Finally, with the explosion of mass tourism, destination marketers and tourism scholars began to develop the concept of destination image and its theorization [25,117]. Nevertheless, the destination image process is not static; rather, it is complex and changing. The complexity is manifest in Gunn’s [119] elaboration through seven stages including “(1) the accumulation of mental images about vacation experiences (i.e., organic image), (2) the modification of those images by further information (i.e., induced image), (3) the decision to take a vacation trip, (4) travel to the destination, (5) participation at the destination, (6) return home, and (7) modification of image based on vacation experience (i.e., actual firsthand experience)” (as cited in [25] (p. 2)).

Furthermore, Gunn [117] noted that destination image formation takes place through two stages, “organic” and “induced” images: “Organic image is rooted in non-touristic and noncommercial information sources such as news reports and books, while induced images are driven by commercial information sources such as advertising, or marketer-controlled information” [25] (p. 2). Nowadays, the induced image of destinations is disseminated through various social media platforms with defying power that can circumvent the negatives of political propaganda. Nonetheless, in this study, we highlight the role of social media platforms and explore how these platforms can ease up and bypass the existing political hurdles that emanate from lingering political conflict in a destination dependent on tourism. In addition, the study explores the tourism sector operators’ knowledge and awareness of social media platforms as tools for mitigating the negative image engendered by ongoing political conflict. For the conceptual model of the study, see Figure 2.
4. Study Method

The applied research method was carried out based on the qualitative model that is conducive to exploring and “understanding of individuals’ cultures, beliefs and values, human experiences and situations, as well as to develop theories that describe these experiences. This research approach emerged from the behavioral and social sciences as a method of understanding the unique, dynamic, and holistic nature of human beings” [120] (p. 44).

Unlike most tourism research, in this study, both authors have had the opportunity to observe the processes of tourism planning and development in a destination with political conflict that is struggling to hold on to its true image despite all the obstacles. Therefore, our observation through decades of living and working in the context of this field study (i.e., participant observation in north Cyprus) complemented with an in-depth interview based
on open-ended and unstructured interview questions. In total, 10 respondents participated in the interview, including academicians in the field of tourism, private sector tourism operators (i.e., hoteliers and travel agents), as well as, public sector tourism officials in the nature of purposive sampling. purposive sampling, which is also known as judgmental sampling, provided a theoretical and logical generalization [121]. The research process also included thematic analysis of the local newspapers (e.g., Kibris Gazetesi, Cyprus today, Diyalog, and Avrupa), as well as tourism associations and local government minutes.

5. Research Design

For the purpose of this study, we applied grounded theory, which is a vehicle to construct theory. Glaser and Strauss [122], who coined the concept of grounded theory, defined it as “the discovery of theory from data systematically obtained from social research” (p. 2). Grounded theory possesses several features that make it conducive to our applied qualitative research method. Those features elaborated by Corbin [123] (p. 301) as follows:

First, the concepts out of which the theory is constructed are derived from data collected during the research process and not chosen prior to beginning the research. Second, researchers do not enter into the research with a theoretical framework because doing so defeats the purpose of the method, which is to develop a theoretical explanation of a phenomenon from a specific set of data. Third, in grounded theory research analysis and data collection are inter-related.”

Nevertheless, as Glaser and Strauss [122] pointed out, the core aim of grounded theory is to generate or discover a theory. Then, the discovered theory can be tested by further research. The grounded theory also paves the way for analytic procedure throughout the qualitative research process by constant comparisons and asking questions to realize whether further data are needed to “fully develop each major concept or category” [123] (p. 302). The efficacy of grounded theory lies in its procedural strength in terms of data gathering and analysis.

Corbin [123] (p. 301) noted that “there are two types of research activities in grounded theory methodology: data gathering procedures and analytic procedures. Data gathering is based on two basic procedures: theoretical sampling and saturation. Analytic procedures include the use of constant comparisons, the asking of questions, and the doing of memos and diagrams. It allows for two significant principles in qualitative research (i.e., theoretical sampling and saturation)” [124].

Theoretical sampling is a process that guides the generation of further data to confirm and refute original categories. This takes place with purposive sampling of those who can provide information about the subject area. It is also “the process of data collection for generating theory whereby the analyst jointly collects, codes, and analyses his/ [her] data and decides what data to collect next and where to find them, in order to develop his/ [her] theory as it emerges” (as cited in [124] (p. 228)). Finally, the emerging theory “is fully articulated and supported by the voice of participants” [125] (p. 41).

Saturation in grounded theory, as Glaser and Strauss [122] elaborated, contributes to further refinement of the construct and answering the research questions. Khan [124] (p. 225) articulated that “to refine the construct and to answer the research questions, the researchers have to get data and analyze it and then again and again repeat this process until and unless new data stop emerging or the data saturation occurred.”

6. Data Collection

“The data for a grounded theory can come from various sources. The data collection procedures involve interviews and observations as well as such other sources as government documents, video tapes, newspapers, letters, and books—anything that may shed light on questions under study” [126] (p. 5).

As noted above, theoretical sampling signifies the process of data collection in the context of grounded theory in which, after initial data collection and its analysis, a concept is derived as the basis for further data collection. In the context of grounded theory, data collection is
performed simultaneously with analysis, which results in “constructing analytic codes and categories from data, not from preconceived logically deduced hypothesis” [124] (p. 227).

For the purpose of this study, data collection was accomplished through in-depth face-to-face interviews with key respondents/interviewees who were actively involved in the tourism sector, including public, private, and tourism educational/training institutions in north Cyprus. The interview questions and the nature of the study were submitted to the Ethical committee of Eastern Mediterranean University (EMU) for approval. The ethical committee approved the questions by ETK00-2 020-0208 code, and permission to conduct the research was rendered. An official letter was also drafted by the Dean’s office at the Faculty of Tourism for the researchers to refer to the organizations/institutions of the respective key informants to interview.

Overall, 19 semi-structured interview questions were developed based on the relevant literature, e.g., [5,25,39,56,69,100]. Interview questions were subjected to two pilot interviews for clarity [127]; as a result, some alterations were made before finalizing the questions. The questions were aimed firstly to determine the level of awareness of tourism sector operators on utilization of social media platforms to disseminate the true image of north Cyprus as a destination that is negatively affected by present political conflict, and secondly, to determine the extent of utilization of social media platforms to overcome the political barriers that impede the true image of this destination. For the list of interview questions, see Table 2.

Table 2. List of interview questions.

| Question                                                                 | Details                                                                 |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1. What do you think of role of social media in tourism?                |                                                                         |
| 2. Why social media has become vital in tourism sector?                |                                                                         |
| 3. Do you believe that social media can develop/create a new image for  |                                                                         |
| a tourism destination? If the answer is yes, ask the following question:|                                                                         |
| 4. Have you ever contemplated capitalizing/investing on social media    | (Knowing the fact that north Cyprus has been affected negatively by      |
| to boost the image of north Cyprus?                                    | political conflict and lack of recognition.)                            |
| 5. Have you allocated any budget towards utilizing social media for     | the purpose of tourism?                                                 |
| the purpose of tourism?                                                 |                                                                         |
| 6. To what extend the political problem and lack of recognition, in     | light of lack of solution, have affected North Cyprus’s Tourism?         |
| 7. While you have potential for alternative tourism in north Cyprus,    | you ever tried to use social media to advertise/market these potentials?|
| 8. Social media is a great platform for networking and sharing         | Do you know what I mean by alternative tourism?                          |
| experiences among visitors; have you considered benefiting from         |                                                                         |
| such potential of social media for your own good?                      |                                                                         |
| 9. How often do you evaluate and improve the effectiveness of your     | By the way, are you aware of various platforms of social media?          |
| webpages in social media?                                               |                                                                         |
| 10. Have you ever considered utilizing social media to market north    |                                                                         |
| 11. There are many negative comments by third parties’ platform        |Cyprus at the regional level/regional market?                           |
| and different social media, especially trip adviser; do you have any   |                                                                         |
| policy to minimize the impacts of these negative comments? Moreover,   |                                                                         |
| how often do you check the comments about north Cyprus?                |                                                                         |
| 12. Nowadays digital marketing is becoming very popular; what have you |                                                                         |
| done in this regard?                                                   |                                                                         |
| 13. The propaganda by south Cyprus labels north Cyprus as danger zone; |                                                                         |
| have you ever tried or considered to use social media to change such a   |                                                                         |
| false image?                                                           |                                                                         |
| 14. What is the extent of collaboration between public and private     |                                                                         |
| sectors to develop a marketing strategy based on social media?         |                                                                         |
| 15. What type of collaboration with the universities have been         |                                                                         |
| realized, especially to utilize social media to attract Edu-tourists    |                                                                         |
| (foreign students)?                                                    |                                                                         |
| 16. North Cyprus is a destination popular with sun, sea, sand,         |                                                                         |
| gambling and educational tourism; have you considered highlighting     |                                                                         |
| these attractions in social media?                                     |                                                                         |
| 17. Nowadays, destinations are becoming smart (smart destinations); do   |                                                                         |
| you have any idea about the concept of smart destination?              |                                                                         |
| 18. What are the main sectors that should be collaborating in order to  |                                                                         |
| build a smart destination?                                             |                                                                         |
| 19. Smart destination requires new idea and smart technology (social   |                                                                         |
| media, internet, and various applications); what have you done in this  |                                                                         |
| regard?                                                                |                                                                         |

Appointments for interviews were made by phone, and conversations contained a discussion on the topic and an overview of the nature of the study and questions. The conversation also included the consent of the respondents for an interview. This assisted the process by ensuring the willingness of the interviewees to commit to the time and
day of the interview. The interview process was based on an open-ended approach as “open-endedness allows the participants to contribute as much detailed information as they desire and it also allows the researcher to ask probing questions as a means of follow-up, which is also known as standardized open-ended interview” [128] (pp. 754–756). For the composition of the interviewees, see Table 3.

Table 3. Characteristics of the interviewees.

| Organization                                      | Interviewees’ Position                                      | Number |
|---------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------|--------|
| Eastern Mediterranean University                  | Professor of sustainable tourism                           | 1      |
| Eastern Mediterranean University                  | Assistant professor of tourism                              | 1      |
| North Cyprus Ministry of Tourism                  | Director of tourism ministry                                | 1      |
| North Cyprus Ministry of Tourism                  | Undersecretary of tourism ministry                          | 1      |
| North Cyprus Ministry of Tourism                  | Deputy director of promotion and marketing sector of tourism ministry | 1      |
| North Cyprus Ministry of Tourism                  | Visual communication and social media responsible of tourism ministry | 1      |
| Cyprus Turkish Tourism and Travel Agents’ Union (KITSAB) | Head of KITSAB, former director of marketing and promotion of tourism ministry, owner of a travel agency | 1      |
| Cyprus Turkish Tourism and Travel Agents’ Union (KITSAB) | General secretary of KITSAB, Pars tourism and travel agency director | 1      |
| Limak hotel                                       | Promotion and marketing manager of Limak hotel             | 1      |
| Paisan Educational and Immigration Institute      | Director of Paisan institute, social media Influencer with 61K followers | 1      |
| **Total**                                         |                                                             | **10** |

The overall period of the interview extended for three months (November 2020–February 2021). Duration of each interview varied from one to two hours. With the permission of the interviewees, the entire process of the interview was recorded, which was later transcribed verbatim. During the interview, the interviewer made sure to remain as neutral as possible to avoid emotional reactions to the responses [129]. Note taking also complemented the recording; however, in order not to affect the responses due to note taking [128], two interviewers were conducting the process of interview, one of whom asked the questions and recorded the responses, while the second interviewer took notes. Finally, the transcribed text became the data for analysis.

7. Data Analysis

The first step for data analysis began with transcribing the interviews and notes by converting them to text for content analysis. This process included multiple evaluations and reviews that eventually resulted in the identification of the main codes, themes, and categories. “In grounded theory, the analysis begins as soon as the first bit of data is collected” [126] (p. 6). This is also known as the ‘iterative’ approach. In this approach, “researchers continually consult collected data throughout all stages of qualitative research and use what they learn to shape and inform what they do next” [130] (p. 2016).
In total, 15 themes were identified and then fed into the Atlas ti-9 software [131] for the distribution of the ideas, concepts, and themes, which were coded to fit the categories. Due to the volume of the data, besides the identification of the main themes, subthemes were also revealed and highlighted. Baralt [132] (p. 3) noted that “in this case, the code needs to be broken down into subcodes in order to better organize the data” (see also Figure 3).

Since the method of research design is grounded theory, data collection and analysis continued throughout the research process [123]. This contributed to the clarification of the codes from the beginning of the process that was performed based on the interview questions. The foundation of data analysis in this approach is laid out by code generation through content analysis of the data and constant comparison that provides names for the codes based on the imagery they evoke, or, to use the actual words in the literature, “in vivo” [133]. Corbin [123] (p. 302) noted that “it is through constant comparisons during which data are compared for similarities and differences that concepts are identified, developed, and integrated.”

Nevertheless, the first step in the coding process began with reading the transcripts and identifying the incidents, events, and happenings as indicators of phenomena, which were given conceptual or theoretical labels. For instance, by far, the majority of respondents (by comparison) believed that social media platforms are powerful tools to advertise, market, and disseminate the true image of the destination to millions of people. The concept labeled as “influencer” is a manifestation of this phenomenon. In grounded theory, the coding process includes three steps. First, open coding, which allowed us to reveal new theoretical and conceptual possibilities based on the transcripts, which were then divided into distinct parts and coded/labeled. Second, axial coding, which allowed us to draw connections between constructed codes to form a category. Third, selective coding, which facilitates building a central category based on previously formed codes and categories that relates all the codes from the analysis, which also captured the essence of our research. Categories are concepts that indicate and allow the researcher to judge what are the themes and subthemes [123]. Validation of the themes and subthemes was accomplished by constant comparison of interviews and information obtained from respondents.

Finally, through a review of the themes and subthemes and flexible use of procedures, the development of a theoretical framework that fits the data emerged. Such a framework allowed the researchers to understand the extent of tourism operators’ commitments to utilize social media platforms to bypass the political impasse that curtails the tourism sector to realize its potentials.

Bracketing was applied to avoid possible presumption and bias/prejudice that can occur when researchers’ personal beliefs influence the choice of methodology and the research process. Fischer [134] (p. 583) stated that “Bracketing is not for the sake of gaining objectivity but rather of acknowledging our engagement in the development of consensual (but always evolving) understandings of our research phenomena and processes. This ongoing reflection on our own engagement with our collection and analysis of data often is referred to as reflexive; stressing one is looking back and inward in a self-aware manner.”
Furthermore, to increase the consistency of the data, which signifies the validity and reliability in qualitative research, we applied verbatim descriptions of participants’ accounts to support findings. We also initiated respondent validation by inviting participants to comment on the interview transcript to make sure the final themes and concepts created adequately and reflected the phenomena under investigation (respondent validation) [135,136]. To further the credibility of the results (confirmability/objectivity), triangulation of the findings was confirmed by two researchers (colleagues), which is a test for improving the validity and reliability of the research [137].

8. Findings and Discussions

The data analysis process proceeded through the creation of analytic codes, themes, categories, and concepts from data and not by preexisting conceptualizations (Figure 3). We adhered to the canons of the grounded theory method: “the purpose of grounded theory research is to identify, develop, and integrate concepts; persons are not the objects of analysis. Rather it is the concepts that persons provide through data that are the object of analysis” [123] (p. 301).

Figure 3. Grounded Theory research process. Source: Adopted from [123,133].
9. Extraction of the Themes and Subthemes

For extraction of the themes and subthemes that are fundamental in grounded theory, we adhered to Krueger’s [138] suggestion who recommended a framework in the context of grounded theory wherein raw data is analyzed, descriptive statements established, and interpretation opens the way for final themes and subthemes as the findings [139]. Extraction of the themes and subthemes is divided into two sections. First, the data analysis matrix focused on coding relevant to “social media” (Table 4). The second section focused on coding relevant to political deadlock and its implications (Table 5). In the first section, 12 themes and 33 subthemes were extracted, which were organized into three categories (Table 4). In the second section, 9 themes and 21 subthemes were extracted, which were organized in one category (Table 5). The most emphasized themes that indicated by the respondents in the first section of data analysis matrix were (i) acknowledgment of social media platforms’ significance, (ii) failure to capitalize on social media in the tourism sector, (iii) failure to utilize social media to bypass political obstacles, (iv) lack of social media infrastructure, (v) lack of utilizing social media toward reimaging, and (vi) failure to utilize social media for tourism marketing (refer to Table 4). The second section of the data analysis matrix, as shown in Table 5, reflects the respondents’ views through 9 themes and 21 subthemes with prevalent emphasis on political deadlock hampering tourism development. The main themes that coding produced in this section were (i) lack of direct flight due to political deadlock that hampers tourism, (ii) lack of recognition as a nation-state by the international community, (iii) lack of investment, (iv) negative propaganda by south Cyprus that creates a negative image for north Cyprus, and (v) lack of cohesive governance and clear policy (Table 5).

At the same time, findings reveal that notwithstanding the acknowledgment of social media platforms’ significance as a decisive medium to bypass the political barriers, tourism sector operators in both public and private sectors have failed to utilize these platforms to combat the negative propaganda by the opposing party in the political conflict. Furthermore, lack of commitment to the utilization of social media platforms, as the study revealed, is a failure in the supply side of the tourism sector [61] in the case of north Cyprus.

Nowadays, studies have revealed that digital platforms are playing a decisive role in destination marketing and image improvement [140,141]. Chester and Montgomery [142] (p. 3) noted that “as a consequence, the advertising industry played a central role in shaping the operations of platforms and applications in the digital media ecosystem. Digital marketing is now well established and thriving.” However, our study revealed that tourism operators and managers in both public and private sectors failed to take advantage of social media platforms to minimize the negative impacts of political deadlock. The majority of the respondents expressed that there is a “lack of budget, clear strategy and commitment to utilize social media platforms towards marketing and advertising north Cyprus’ tourism sector in the wider world.” Our study findings are also consistent with the findings of Pickering et al. [69], who explored how user-generated content on social media platforms enhanced the image of nature-based tourism in Australia and influenced the views of the tourists through geo-data from texts on Twitter. Scholars argue that “Analysis of geo-data from social media images, for example, has been found to be relatively fast, low cost and easier to obtain than some more traditional data sources including on ground visitor counter data, surveys of people, and biodiversity surveys of specific species” (as cited in [69] (p. 2)).

Lack of coherent policy on how to utilize and capitalize on social media to overcome the political barriers in the tourism sector was expressed by the respondents frequently in the context of the absence of formidable governance due to frequent changes of government in north Cyprus. Such disarray in governance and clear strategy contradicts the fact that “using the internet through various channels is essential in tourism, culture and business for new opportunities as the relations between consumers and products are changing” [143] (p. 250). When asked about the cooperation and partnership among the stakeholders, which are the principles of governance, respondents were critical of the lack of partnership
to strategize social media platforms toward positioning the tourism sector within the global tourism market. This was revealed in light of the fact that for governance, the principle of partnership and cooperation is essential if the aim is long term and targets sustainable visibility of the destination that is affected by political deadlock. As expressed by the respondents, tourism operators failed to realize “the significant economies of scale and greater brand visibility, as well as a qualified and differentiated interpretation in visitation through access to a multidisciplinary digital content and wide use” [143] (p. 250).

Overall, findings revealed that destinations with political conflict face numerous challenges, specifically if tourism is one of the main sectors for socioeconomic development. The framework and theoretical concept emanating from this study underscore the severity of the challenge.

However, with the invention of social media platforms and communication technology, the negative impacts of such a challenge can be mitigated if destination managers and tourism operators come up with a coherent policy and planning structure to utilize social media platforms. Lojo et al. [5] (p. 497) stated that “today, the internet is the primary image communication channel (as a secondary or external source) for private and public tourism organizations.”

We argue that social media has transformed the way destinations are imagined. Ghazali and Cai [26] (p. 75, 82) stated that “Information about destinations, for instance, has become abundant and easy to access through many types of social media sites. As a result, consumers are becoming more active in the search for information. Furthermore, social media platforms involve consumers sharing attitudes, opinions, or reactions about businesses, products, or services with other people, the way consumers express their emotions and satisfaction through social media sites has significant effects on brand awareness and its image among viewers.” According to social movement studies, Jensen [144] (p. 24) reiterated that “the role of social media in creating opportunity structures, organizational infrastructures, and spaces for the formation of counter-publics.”

| Themes/Codes Relevant to Social Media Platforms Utilization | Subthemes | Categories |
|-----------------------------------------------------------|-----------|------------|
| Awareness of social media | • Social media is a powerful tool (10) *<br>• Social media is inexpensive to utilize (8)<br>• Social media is a significant domain for dissemination of information (9)<br>• Social media can bypass the political obstacles that can popularize the destination (7) | |
| Social media and tourism | • The role of social media in tourism is paramount (9)<br>• Social media can reach worldwide audience<br>• Social media platforms have become the main source of information for travelers (10)<br>• Social media influencers motivate travelers (10) | |
| Social media and destination image | • Social media is a powerful tool for destination image building (9)<br>• Social media can provide virtual images about destination (8)<br>• Social media platforms are accessible worldwide (10) | |
| Investment in social media | • North Cyprus tourism institutions failed to invest in social media for the purpose of tourism (8)<br>• North Cyprus’s tourism sector failed to utilize social media intensively (7)<br>• North Cyprus’s tourism sector failed to invest in social media infrastructure (8) | |
Online sources and social media, in addition to facilitating information access and immediacy, are essential to the multilayered formation and transmission of destination image. The role of social media in tourism highlighted furthermore by Mirzaalian and Halpanny [145] (p. 1) who noted that “in the tourism context, [social media] SM has also significantly revolutionized the way tourists seek information, plan their trips and, more importantly, share travel experiences with others.” The findings of this study revealed two outcomes pertinent to the study’s research questions. First, destination managers and tourism operators failed to appreciate and utilize social media platforms and their efficacy in bypassing political barriers in tourism development and marketing. Secondly, the study revealed that in order for social media platforms to be implemented effectively, destination managers and tourism operators in north Cyprus need to have coherent governance [146], effective partnership [147], institutional cooperation [148], and allocation of adequate budget [149].

Table 4. Cont.

| Themes/Codes Relevant to Social Media Platforms Utilization | Subthemes                                                                 | Categories |
|----------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------|
| Commitment to utilizing social media                     | • Lack of commitment to social media platforms utilization (6)             |            |
|                                                          | • Rhetoric instead of action (9)                                           |            |
|                                                          | • Postponement of policies to improve human resources and budget (8)      |            |
|                                                          | • Lack of coordinated national policy to utilize social media platforms in tourism (9) |            |
| Social media and marketing                               | • Social media platforms are efficient marketing domain (10)               |            |
|                                                          | • Social media platforms are inexpensive marketing tool (8)               |            |
|                                                          | • Social media platforms catalyst to digital marketing (9)                |            |
| Social media and networking                              | • Social media platforms are efficient tools for networking (7)           |            |
|                                                          | • Social media platforms are efficient tools for communication (8)        |            |
|                                                          | • Social media platforms are efficient tools for information dissemination (9) |            |
| Social media and regional marketing                      | • Social media platforms are efficient tools for regional marketing (8)   |            |
|                                                          | • Social media platforms are efficient tools to enhance regional marketing share (6) |            |
| Lack of policy on social media                           | • Lack of clear policy on utilizing social media in tourism (8)           |            |
|                                                          | • Lack of strategy to capitalize in social media (9)                      |            |
| Budget deficiency                                         | • Insufficient budget for utilizing social media (10)                     |            |
| Lack of infrastructure                                    | • Inadequate social media infrastructure (10)                            |            |
| Lack of collaboration                                     | • Lack of collaboration between sectors, organizationsm and institutions (8) |            |
|                                                          | • Lack of information sharing among institutions (7)                      |            |
|                                                          | • Lack of collaboration among institutions (8)                            |            |

4A (n) * Number of sub-themes indicated by the interviewees.
Table 5. Data analysis matrix focused on implications of political deadlock.

| Themes/Codes Relevant to Political Deadlock Undermining Destination Image and Development | Subthemes | Categories |
|---|---|---|
| Lack of direct flight | • Lack of direct flight as the main obstacle to tourism (10) * | |
|  | • Insufficient transportation infrastructure (9) | |
| Lack of investment | • Lack of investment (8) | |
|  | • Difficulty attracting investors (9) | |
|  | • Uncertain political environment hampering investment (10) | |
| Lack of recognition | • Lack of recognition as a nation-state undermining development strategies (10) | |
| Frequency of governance | • Frequent changes of government undermining cohesive and long-term strategy (9) | |
|  | • Lack of established and sustainable governance (8) | |
|  | • Institutional disarray (8) | |
| Lack of partnership | • Lack of partnership between public and private sectors (9) | |
|  | • Lack of institutional collaboration (8) | |
| Lack of strategy | • Lack of long-term vision (10) | |
| Lack of collaboration with the universities | • There is a disconnect between tourism policymakers and universities (7) | |
|  | • There is hardly any collaboration with the universities on tourism projects or tourism co-creation (9) | |
| Lack of institutions | • Deficit of institutions (7) | |
|  | • Weak state of NGOs (9) | |
|  | • Absence of public participation in decision making (10) | |
| Distribution of negative image by political adversary. | • Constant propaganda by south Cyprus (9) | |
|  | • Hampering north Cyprus to represent in international tourism fairs (8) | |
|  | • Lack of genuine cooperation between south and north Cyprus (9) | |
|  | • Dissemination of negative image by south Cyprus in the international tourism market (8) | |

4B (n) * Number of subthemes indicated by the interviewees.

10. Managerial and Theoretical Implications

The findings of this study have several managerial implications for destinations with political deadlocks. First, while political deadlocks are hampering tourism development and creating the wrong image, social media platforms are means available for, and accessible to, destination managers and tourism operators to be utilized to market, advertise, and connect to millions of users. Such a vast target market should not be taken for granted and complacency of destination managers and planners, as revealed in this case, will result in a lack of competitiveness as well as sustainability. Baird and Parasnis [150] (p. 27) argued that “social CRM,” a novel concept that unites social media technology with customer relationship management, is gaining traction as a compelling approach to enhancing customer engagement. We assume that the lack of investing in social media infrastructure is tantamount to failure in laying the supporting factors as the foundation for a competitive and sustainable tourism system [151]. Secondly, this study informs the tourism operators and destination managers who are challenged by political conflicts to realize the value of social media in overcoming some of the challenges in the case of north Cyprus and similar cases. As the findings revealed, a unified strategy among the stakeholders toward
investing in social media is left to be desired. Third, there is a need for a governance model to unify all the stakeholders (i.e., knowing that tourism is an amalgamation of numerous organizations and agencies) [152] to collaborate under a common strategy, which is well integrated, well networked, and everyone is responsible for social media.

In terms of theoretical implications, this study offers an eye-opening contribution to research on social media platforms’ capability and engagement literature. Albeit north Cyprus’s case, which revealed a failure of a destination in the utilization of social media platforms, this study strengthens the role of social media in influencing tourists’ behavior during trip planning. This is the case as “the content quality that engages social media users directly influences reputation, which is fundamental for marketing tactics” [153]. This study is also in line with the findings of Song et al. [153], who rationalized that social media platforms facilitate engagement through actions such as like, comment, and share, which are effective elements to disseminate information and knowledge. Thus, destinations with political deadlock that camouflage their true image should invest in social media platforms for marketing and promotion. This study can also contribute significantly to the research on image destinations in the field of hospitality and tourism by calibrating social media platforms’ use, especially in destinations with challenges of political deadlock.

This is the first study to calibrate social media and the image (i.e., environment, culture, history, hospitality, and safety, etc.) of a destination that is tarnished because of unresolved political conflict. The study has focused on the tourism sector, which is negatively affected by the present political impasse. The study has also, for the first time, explored the destination policymakers’ attitude and extent of their utilization of social media to mitigate the negative impacts of the ongoing political deadlock. These gaps have been bridged to some extent; however, further studies are also suggested. For instance, the triangulation of the mixed method through quantitative and qualitative designs can provide better insights into the utility of social media to portray true image (e.g., induced image) [23] of a destination with political deadlock.

However, albeit the ubiquity of social media, it is up to the commitment of destination policymakers to utilize it toward an induced image that corresponds to the reality, which is distorted due to political situation. The contribution to the knowledge of this study is twofold. First, it strengthens the argument forwarded by social influence theory (SIT), which claims “individual behavior is affected by three social processes: compliance, identification and internalization” [22]. All three processes have been experienced with the online community [22]. Secondly, the study contributes to the field of crisis communication and image restoration in destinations affected by negative portrayal by opposing party. Finally, yet importantly, it provides a tangible framework for destinations entangled in a crisis period to commit to connecting to the online community.

The study has also enhanced our knowledge regarding destination image theory (DIT). Scholars concede that destination image consists of two components—organic image and induced image [21,23]. Induced image “is a consequence of exposure to advertisements and guidebooks from destination promoters” (as cited from [21] (p. 826)). “The organic image of a destination in people’s mind is developed over time from the information sources such as media, popular culture and schooling” (as cited in Wang et al., [21] (p. 861)). The relevancy and use of social media platforms are highly conducive to image formation, especially in the case of north Cyprus that is challenged by negative propaganda by the opposing party in existing conflict. This argument is highly plausible because “people have been used to read news from user generated content and participate in online discussion forums. It is important for destination marketing organizations to monitor the effects regarding the news of the destination in tourist origin countries/areas and adopt appropriate strategies to prevent or adjust distorted interpretations of the news reports” [21] (p. 872). Alas, destination marketers and tourism institutions in north Cyprus have failed to take advantage of social media to minimize the distorted image that is created due to political conflict.
11. Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

This study is not without limitations. The first limitation is related to the sample size. As the duration of the research continued through the COVID-19 pandemic, contacting and arrangement of interviews became a challenge. Nevertheless, the sample size generated enough data to justify the sample size. However, “determining sample size a priori is inherently problematic in qualitative research” [154] (p. 2). Nevertheless, in qualitative research, if the grounded theory is employed, the principle of “saturation” rectifies the sample size issue in terms of “informational redundancy,” as well as the adaptive and emergent nature of sample size in the qualitative method [155]. Another limitation is that we were not able to quantify the present encounter of tourists and social media domains relevant to north Cyprus. Future studies might consider this aspect. Future studies can also measure the “image” of north Cyprus and similar destinations in light of political deadlock and negative propaganda from visitors’ points of view.

12. Conclusions

This study highlighted the role and effectiveness of social media platforms in disseminating information, affecting the perception of tourists, and promoting the real image of destinations that are challenged by the political impasse. We examined the case of north Cyprus, which is an attractive tourist destination; however, it has been negatively affected by political deadlock that manifested in embargos and sanctions for over four decades [156]. In the meantime, north Cyprus is highly dependent on tourism with tremendous potentials for both mass and alternative tourism. Its advantages lie in its proximity to the main market (Europe) and year-round pleasant climate [157].

Nevertheless, the ongoing political impasse has resulted in north Cyprus’s real tourism image being camouflaged by various means including the constant spread of propaganda by the opposite side of the political conflict. In this context, this study tried to answer the question “what is the extent of utilization of social media platforms by destination managers and tourism operators to overcome the political hurdles that curtails this destination’s realizations of its potentials? (Knowing the fact that social media platforms have become formidable means in the dissemination of the true image of the destination’s promotion and marketing)” [25,26,153,158]. Alas, in the case of north Cyprus, findings revealed that tourism operators both in private and in public sectors failed to take advantage of the power of social media [153] to mollify the political obstacles in the tourism sector. To achieve this, destination policymakers, along with various stakeholders, need to strategize social media platforms in this case as well as in other cases with political challenges. Such a strategy should contain clear goals and a conspicuously detailed action plan. Last but not least, the significant and distinct role of social media platforms has been proven to be a powerful tool for marketing destinations [26,153]; however, it is the responsibility of the tourism practitioners and tourism institutions to utilize such ubiquitous domain which is available and accessible worldwide.

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