



# Marketing and Communication Strategies in the Face of Media Influence During Image Crisis in Tourist Destinations: the case of Ouro Preto and the Dam Breaks

### Gabriela Maria de Lana Pinto

Mestra em Turismo e Patrimônio pela Universidade Federal de Ouro Preto – UFOP, Ouro Preto /MG, Brasil.

E-mail: gabriela.lana98@gmail.com

# **Elielton dos Santos Oliveira**

Doutorando em Administração pela Universidade Federal do Paraná – UFPR, Curitiba/PR, Brasil.

E-mail: elielttonsantos@gmail.com

# Carolina Lescura de Carvalho Castro Volta

Professora associada da Universidade Federal de Ouro Preto – UFOP, Ouro Preto/MG, Brasil.

E-mail: carolina.volta@ufop.edu.br

# **Marcos Eduardo Carvalho Gonçalves Knupp**

Professor Associado na Escola de Direito, Turismo e Museologia (EDTM), – UFOP, Ouro Preto /MG, Brasil.

E-mail: marcosknupp@ufop.edu.br

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# **ABSTRACT**

This study addresses the marketing and communication strategies adopted by the public authorities of Ouro Preto in response to adverse news resulting from mining dam collapses in the region, and how these strategies influence the formation of the tourist destination's imagery. Ouro Preto is a historically and culturally significant tourist destination of international relevance, with tourism playing a crucial role in the local economy. Events such as the mining dam collapses in the region prompt reflections on crisis management and the media's influence on shaping the destination's image. The objectives include understanding the marketing and communication strategies employed by the public authorities of Ouro Preto in the face of adverse news, as well as the media's influence on the formation of the tourist destination's imagery. The study is qualitative in nature and is based on a literature review, analysis of interviews with representatives from both public authorities and the private sector, as well as an analysis of the main headlines disseminated by the media. The results analyze the marketing strategies adopted by the Ouro Preto municipal government and the main news headlines associated with the city's name, providing insights into how destinations face and respond to crisis situations, while also contributing to a broader understanding of decision-making processes and visitor perception.

**Keywords:** Ouro Preto. Tourism marketing. Crisis. Destination image.

# 1. INTRODUCTION

Ouro Preto, a World Heritage city, is one of the most important historical and cultural tourist destinations in recent Brazilian history. Founded in 1711 and now with over 310 years of existence, the city is renowned worldwide for its old mansions, monuments, cuisine, alleyways, and the everyday life of its inhabitants. Tourism in the area holds great significance, particularly in the historical and cultural tourism segment.

Tourism presents various complexities in its execution, as it can foster the idealization of imaginary representations through imagery. The image of a destination can encompasses the set of beliefs, impressions, and ideas that individuals have access to regarding a specific subject or place (Lin et al., 2009; Yüksel & Akgül, 2007), which can be influenced by external communicational interferences since it involves working with individuals' perceptions who aim to fulfill a desire or a dream.

Moreover, the consumer decision-making process involves a series of subjective factors (Moutinho, 1987; Medeiros & Cruz, 2006), which can be altered through direct or indirect stimuli provided by the media. During adverse periods, communicational actions should aim to prevent or reduce the negative outcomes that influence the relationship between tourists and the

destination. Based on this, the present study aims to comprehend the marketing and communication strategies undertaken by the public authorities of Ouro Preto in response to the influence of news regarding the breaches of the mining waste dams of Fundão and Córrego do Feijão, located in territories adjacent to the municipality (Mariana and Brumadinho, respectively). Additionally, it seeks to understand how the media shapes the creation of an imagery of the destination in tourists, particularly in adverse contexts.

To conduct this qualitative study, a literature review was carried out in national and international scientific journals focusing on destination marketing and image, tourism communication, crisis management, and media related to tourist destinations. Additionally, six interviews were conducted with key stakeholders in the local tourism industry, including four representatives from the public sector and two from the private sector. Furthermore, the main headlines published by media outlets such as G1, Folha de S. Paulo, Estado de Minas, among others, were analyzed as complementary sources of information.

The significance of this study is rooted in understanding the dynamics of tourism in historical-cultural destinations, especially in adverse scenarios. Ouro Preto, as a UNESCO World Heritage Site, represents an emblematic case, where tourism plays a crucial role in the local economy. However, events such as the mining dam collapses in the region prompt reflections on crisis management and the media's influence on shaping the destination's image. In this context, analyzing the marketing and communication strategies adopted by the public authorities of Ouro Preto in the face of these challenges is essential to comprehend how destinations cope with and respond to crisis situations. Furthermore, investigating the formation of tourists' imagery amidst adverse news contributes to a broader understanding of decision-making processes and visitor perception. Therefore, this study offers relevant insights not only for the tourism management of Ouro Preto but also for similar destinations facing similar challenges.

# 2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

# 2.1 Images of Tourist Destinations and Their Relationship with Communication

Tourism is a phenomenon that entails various complexities. Beyond its economic aspects, the tourism activity generates and reproduces relationships while creating new forms of sociability with and for destinations (Neves, 2007). Tourist destinations are spaces where tourism activities take place, and with the advent of globalization and the Fourth Industrial

Revolution, characterized by the presence of media, the internet, and technological advancements (Sanson, 2017), tourism becomes an environment conducive to the idealization of dreams through visual representations. In this vein, Emmendoerfer et al., (2023, p. 1065) suggest: "We can assume that tourist destinations are places where visitors and tourists tend to move in search of new experiences, consumption of products and services, especially in the construction of memories, through images and feelings."

The image of a tourist destination encompasses a set of attributes. According to several authors, it can be defined as the collection of beliefs, ideas, and impressions about a place, which results in an internally accepted mental construct (Lin et al., 2009; Yüksel & Akgül, 2007). According to Neto et al., (2018), the perceptions that tourists have about a tourist attraction, its space, and the desires it evokes in their empirical view, relate to everything they have observed in their sensory world.

As mental representations, images express how people perceive and represent an object. They are subjective structures of knowledge resulting from individuals' experiences and some form of contact with the object of the image (Boulding, 1968; Machado, 2010). The fact that the tourism sector (re)produces and disseminates an image of destinations to consumers contributes to creating meaningful places bound by the identities of these destinations (Santos Solla, 2008).

According to Cooper, Fletcher, and Wanhill (2011: p.71), "an individual's view of the world is formed through experiences, learning, emotions, and perceptions, or more precisely, the cognitive evaluation of such experiences [...]." Supporting this idea, Hack Neto et al. (2018) emphasize that this view can be understood as knowledge, which produces a specific image of the world and plays a significant role in shaping preferences, motivation, and behavior of individual consumers of tourism destination products, "[...] as it provides a boosting effect that results in different demand forecasts" (Cooper, Fletcher & Wanhill, 2011: p.71).

Urry and Larsen (2001) highlights that when tourists travel, they tend to seek the images and experiences they have visualized in photographs. These images are constructed in a way to seduce the viewer, invoking anticipation as well (Augusto, 2016). "Commercial photographs are typically composed to allow the viewer to dream about the image while awaiting the fulfillment of their desires and pleasures" (Urry & Larsen, 2011, p. 175).

The images of tourist destinations are closely related to communication because, beyond the image itself, there is also discourse that is produced to add value to the image. The consumer decision-making process involves not only subjective desires but also stimuli that shape the intentions of choosing products or destinations (Moutinho, 1987). According to Hack Neto et

al., (2018), these stimuli can be linked to positive or negative advertising, both direct and indirect, about the destination, carried out through various media channels such as newspapers, magazines, TV, the internet, among others. Furthermore, the authors state that this purchase or behavior influenced by media vehicles in the destination can differ from the existing landscape and compromise or influence the sustainability of the place, as highlighted by Kotler (1998: p.97), "We do not consume products, but the image we have of them."

In parallel to this, it is observed that the image of a place does not solely depend on a cleverly crafted campaign but is the result of accumulated knowledge about it, derived from various sources and through different processes, which discussed the means/channels of communication and their products related to the destination in question. How Ahmed et al., said:

This image destination is formed as the development of mental construction based on the number of information obtained by tourists from promotions conducted by travel agencies such as travel brochures, posters, travel agents, opinions from people who have travelled to the area such as families, friends or neighbors. In addition, information is also obtained through newspapers, magazines, books, television and movies (Ahmed et al., 2018, p. 33).

The primary goal of marketing professionals in the tourism sector is to promote a positive perception of the destination, using advertising strategies and other forms of communication to stimulate demand for visiting the locality. However, it is important to note that institutional communication is not the only source of information available to consumers, and the image conveyed by the destination may not necessarily correspond to the image that consumers actually absorb (Santos & Silva, 2015).

Considering the relationship between communication and the mental formation of destination images in tourists, tourism marketing emerges as an essential tool for controlling the destination's image. In this regard, it is necessary to understand the relationship between the image of the tourist destination and the media, as the primary mediator of events, especially in times of crisis when the destination's image is shaken by an adverse event.

# 2.2 Tourism Marketing, Media, And Crisis Management

According to Kotler, Bowen, and Baloglu (2022), marketing is a process in which companies seek not only to provide value to consumers by meeting their needs but also to contribute to the well-being of society as a whole. The authors emphasize that in contemporary marketing, whether in the 4.0, 5.0, or now 6.0 era, the emphasis goes beyond the product, placing customer relationships as a fundamental element for business success. Kotler, Bowen, and Baloglu (2022) outline five stages in this process: understanding the consumer, developing a value-oriented strategy, creating a marketing plan that delivers superior value to the customer, building strong relationships, and capturing customer value, culminating in harvesting this value through sales, profits, and long-term customer equity.

In the context of tourism marketing, this process unfolds from the experiences and imagery of the tourist regarding the possibilities of traveling to a particular destination. For Kotler, Bowen, and Baloglu (2022), consumer needs are met through products that can be defined as a combination of tangible components, information, and experiences. Although the term "product" is often associated with something tangible, in the case of tourism, the wide variety of products is intangible, stemming from customers' desire for experiences linked to a place's image. This process incorporates a new layer stemming from the context of social networks, digital marketing, defined by Peçanha (2022) as the set of online activities carried out by companies or individuals with the aim of attracting new business, building relationships, and developing a brand identity.

One strategy to attract customers is influencer marketing, which arises as a consequence of content creation on social networks by influencers, considered opinion leaders who can increase the influence of information on others (Jalilvand, 2017). Pop et al., (2021) highlights that, in the context of the customer journey, the relationship with a product begins before the purchase, with consumers seeking information about destinations through videos and images shared by other consumers, such as influencers, to reaffirm their opinions. Influencer marketing can also be seen as a partnership between brands and content creators, who shape products or services with their personalities and communicate them to their target audience (De Veirman et al., 2017).

According to Lemon and Verhoef (2016), the purchase stage involves a complete interaction with the brand, as consumers select and acquire the travel package they consider ideal. After the purchase, travelers compare their travel experiences with their initial expectations, which can result in a positive or negative attitude, often shared on social networks (Kang & Schuett, 2013), potentially influencing the decisions of other travelers. Lemon and

Verhoef (2016) emphasize that trust plays a crucial role in the customer experience, and a positive experience can strengthen this trust.

According to Glaesser (2008), a crisis is a dangerous and extraordinary situation in which a decision needs to be made under the pressure of time. Furthermore, the same author states that a crisis, as an unwanted and often unexpected process, with a defined time frame, can have potentially ambiguous outcomes. Supporting this notion, Tito and Araújo (2019) report that a crisis can either have negative impacts on an organization or create opportunities for new business ventures. In this context, communication emerges as a key tool, as stated by Spence, Lachlan, and Griffin (2007). Communication in times of crisis aims to prevent or minimize the negative consequences of a specific event and serves two main functions: informative and persuasive.

Toubes and Brea Fraiz (2012) indicate that when a natural disaster occurs in a locality engaged in tourism activities, operational actions should be implemented aimed at achieving a rapid recovery to overcome the media repercussions, thereby avoiding the negative imagery construction regarding the place. This image construction is closely related to the process of mediatization. According to theories established by Esser and Strömbäck (2014), Hjarvard (2013), and Lundby (2014), mediatization can be defined as the processes through which the influence and importance of the media in culture, society, and social institutions are transformed and intensified. This phenomenon results in the cultural domains' dependence on media logics.

Hjarvard (2023) exemplifies that in the Scandinavian region, two interrelated developments occur: the increasing independence of the media, becoming in some aspects autonomous social institutions, and their increasingly deeper integration into diverse cultural and social contexts. Consequently, the media exert influence on the public agenda and become essential elements in multiple local contexts of everyday life, functioning as institutionalized tools for communication and interaction in various spheres, such as family and work. This dual role of the media, as material and symbolic resources for social action and as a set of formal and informal rules for meaningful interactions, underscores its integration both in society in a broader context and in local communities. For Hjarvard (2023), media logics co-structure the development of culture and society, influencing both global and local contexts of modern life. According to Gonçalves (2013), negative images of a destination may arise as a direct result of a crisis or disaster, ultimately affecting consumer trust, the decision-making process, and, ultimately, the choice and behavior towards the destination.

In this context, the city of Ouro Preto, located in the state of Minas Gerais, Brazil, has emerged as a tourist destination that has had its image shaken in recent years due to the frequent news of disasters occurring in nearby cities. As a result, the next topic will address the dam breaches in Fundão in Bento Rodrigues and in Córrego do Feijão in Brumadinho, and their relationship with the news coverage of the city by the mainstream media.

# 3. METHODOLOGY

This article aims to understand the actions carried out by the public sphere of the city of Ouro Preto in relation to tourism marketing in the face of adversity. The specific objectives are to describe the positioning of the city's image in the context of crises caused by dam breaches and to understand how the media influences the creation of an imaginary destination for tourists, especially in adverse contexts.

For this article, a qualitative approach was adopted, with the research being exploratory and descriptive in nature. Initially, a literature review was conducted using national and international scientific publications on Destination Marketing, Destination Image, Communication and Tourism, Crisis Management in Tourism, Media, and Tourist Destinations to establish a close relationship with the topic. According to Boccato (2006):

Bibliographic research aims to address a problem (hypothesis) through theoretical frameworks published, analyzing and discussing various scientific contributions. This type of research will provide insights into what has been researched, how it has been approached, and from what perspectives the subject presented in scientific literature has been addressed. (Boccato, 2006, p. 226).

In addition to the literature review, six in-depth interviews were conducted with key stakeholders in the tourism field in the municipality, using semi-structured interview scripts. Among the interviewees, four represent the Municipal Government of Ouro Preto (Secretary of Government of the Municipal Government of Ouro Preto - MG (administration 2021-2024); Director of Tourism of the Secretariat of Tourism, Industry, and Commerce of the Municipal Government of Ouro Preto - MG (administration 2021-2024); Press Superintendent of the Municipal Government of Ouro Preto - MG (administration 2021-2024); Communications Coordinator of the Municipal Government of Ouro Preto (administration 2017-2020); and two represent the Convention Visitors Bureau (Executive Director and President), a non-profit organization with the mission of promoting the economic and social development of the destination it represents.

The selection of these stakeholders was based on their proximity to the topic and their role in promoting the tourist destination of Ouro Preto and because they were directly involved in managing the destination's image, especially at the time of the dam breaches, particularly in Brumadinho. According to Gil (1999), interviews are one of the most commonly used data collection techniques in social research. Oliveira (2011) also states that this technique is suitable for obtaining information about what people know, believe, expect, and desire, as well as their reasons for each response. The interviews were conducted through the Google Meet video conferencing platform and subsequently transcribed for better analysis of the content derived from the interviewees' statements.

Furthermore, an analysis of the main headlines published by major media outlets such as G1, Folha de S. Paulo, Estado de Minas, Veja, among others, regarding the dam breaches was conducted to understand the information and its relation to the interviewees' discourse. The research on the headlines was conducted using the Google search engine, using keywords such as "dam breaches in Minas Gerais," "Ouro Preto and dams," "dam collapses," "Brumadinho," "Bento Rodrigues," "Mariana," "tragedy," "Vale," among others, on the news websites themselves. The first pages of news results and the relevance of the newspaper to the Brazilian national media were considered. We emphasize that the selected websites, identified through searching for headlines revealing news about the dam breaches, are considered credible communication channels according to the Ranking Research Institute.<sup>1</sup>

After collection, the interview recordings were transcribed and analyzed through content analysis (Bardin, 2011). The most recurring topics in the interviewees' speech that met the purpose of this article gave rise to the analysis categories, which will be presented in the next section. According to Bardin (1977), content analysis is a "[...] set of techniques for analyzing communications [...]" (Bardin, 1977, p. 30) that aims to enrich reading and overcome uncertainties, extracting content behind the analyzed message (Oliveira, 2011).

# 4. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION: OURO PRETO FACING NEWS ABOUT THE DAMS

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> Available at: https://rankingpesquisa.com.br/noticias/pesquisa-aponta-os-meios-de-comunicacao-mais-confiaveis-no-brasil/. Accessed on April 24, 2024.

In the past 9 years, two environmental crimes have occurred in the state of Minas Gerais, Brazil. On November 5, 2015, around 4:20 PM, the Fundão dam of the mining company Samarco Mineração S.A. - a joint venture between Brazilian mining giant Vale S.A. and the Anglo-Australian company BHP Billiton - suffered a rupture and collapsed (Silva; Falhaber, 2020). The devastated area was the sub-district of Bento Rodrigues, located 35 km from the city of Mariana.

The small community of Bento Rodrigues was the first to be hit by the tailings due to its proximity to the dam. The districts of Paracatu de Baixo, Gesteira, the municipality of Barra Longa, and some communities in the Camargos district were also affected (Silva; Falhaber, 2020). With approximately 35 million m³ of tailings released, the collapse of the Bento Rodrigues dam was considered the largest environmental disaster in recent Brazilian history. In terms of human impact, the Bento Rodrigues disaster resulted in the loss of 19 lives, although some bodies were not found. Unfortunately, the tragedy in Bento Rodrigues was not enough to take precautions regarding dams, as there was an imminent risk of further breaches. A few years later, on January 25, 2019, at 12:28 PM, another dam, also owned by Vale S.A., collapsed in the municipality of Brumadinho.

The dam breach constitutes one of the largest environmental crimes and workplace accidents in Brazil, as the majority of the 270 victims were workers who were operating in the vicinity of the company. All of this was the result of negligence related to the operation of the tailings dam, which was operated and the responsibility of Vale (Polignano; Lemos, 2020).

According to the National Human Rights Council, in the dam breach of Vale S.A. in Brumadinho, the mud swept away operational equipment (such as trains, vehicles, and ore beneficiation machinery) and the Vale administrative center, destroying offices, changing rooms, and a cafeteria, thus killing hundreds of workers who were working and having lunch at the site (Cndh, 2019).

Both disasters resulted in tragic environmental losses in rivers of great importance to various populations - the Doce River and the Paraopeba River, which were contaminated by highly harmful heavy metals to human health - as well as the death of biomes, various species of fauna, and the displacement of nearly 600 people in the case of Bento Rodrigues.

In addition to the consequences in the specific environments affected by the disasters, the repercussions of the dam collapses have had significant effects on various other sectors (Pardini, 2019), including tourism.

As mentioned earlier, tourism is an area that, due to its connections with various other sectors and its multiplier effect, can easily enter into a crisis. Both natural disasters and man-

made disasters can expose tourist destinations to situations that jeopardize their activities (Pardini, 2019). Due to the significant impact of these events, the media, especially national media, focused its attention on the two tragedies. According to Gutmann (2016), individuals have their social lives influenced by the media, which not only shapes what they think but also influences how they think.

The way in which the news about the dam disasters was processed allowed for interpretations that led to some misconceptions. According to Silva (2018), the headlines that circulated to represent the collapse of the Samarco's Fundão dam, which devastated the sub-district of Bento Rodrigues, linked the name of the city of Mariana with words like "disasters" or "tragedy" and showed images of Bento Rodrigues. The municipality of Mariana, like the city of Ouro Preto, has numerous historical heritage sites. By associating the tragedy of Bento Rodrigues with Mariana, it opened the door to the interpretation that the entire city of Mariana had been destroyed by the mud (Pardini, 2019). According to Silva (2018), Mariana experienced a drastic decline in tourism, largely due to the negative image that Mariana acquired as a result of the media coverage.

The city of Ouro Preto, located in Minas Gerais, Brazil, was also affected by the events related to the dam breaches. The main access road (BR-356) from Belo Horizonte to Ouro Preto was closed on February 21, 2019, due to the risk of the Vargem Grande dam, also owned by Vale S.A., collapsing in Nova Lima (Pardini, 2019). According to Pardini (2019), the breach of the Vargem Grande Dam would not directly impact Ouro Preto. However, the main access to the city was closed, meaning that the route potential tourists would take to reach the city was compromised. Travelers had an alternative route, but the association of the city's name with the dam breach may have led to the abandonment of the idea of visiting the city instead of considering the alternative route (Pardini, 2019). Two other dams were also related to the city of Ouro Preto: Forquinha I and III.

Despite several publications emphasizing that the flood zone in Ouro Preto would be limited to rural areas and would not immediately affect the urban area of the city, sensationalist headlines can lead to the mistaken interpretation that the entire municipality would be affected. This distorted perception can deter tourists from visiting the city, even though the reality is different. It is important to highlight the need for clear and accurate communication to avoid misunderstandings and preserve the tourism flow in a city known for its tourist attractions (Pardini, 2019).

Tourism, being an activity that works with the unconscious desires of individuals, has an antagonistic relationship with communication and the media. On one hand, it has autonomy to choose what it desires for the promotion of a tourist destination, but on the other hand, it sees itself as a victim of the influence that the media has on those who visit the promoted locations. In this sense, it is necessary to understand the strategies that a tourist destination employs to mediate the image imposed by the media and how this relationship unfolds.

Ouro Preto and the importance of its name as a heritage and tourist destination.

The city of Ouro Preto, as a destination that holds the title of World Heritage Site, has an image associated with great historical value, and news about dam breaches in neighboring areas may lead consumers to believe that this destination could be compromised. According to interviewee 2, regarding the communication efforts of the municipal government in relation to news impacting the destination of Ouro Preto:

[...] our focus has always been to have conversations and disseminate information in the clearest and most objective way possible. That's why we made a point of structuring the possibility of live broadcasts. In the past, we relied on other media outlets, the local press, to conduct live broadcasts, official announcements, and transmissions. Now, here at the ASCOM (Communication Office), we have the capability to conduct these live broadcasts so that the population can have access to complete information, you know? (Interviewee 2).

The dependency of the municipality on unofficial media outlets weakens the persuasive power of information about the city when compared to mainstream media. As stated by Interviewee 1:

[...] if a report on Fantástico [Brazilian TV show] claims that the dam will reach Ouro Preto, it already causes a great destruction of the city's image and safety, and the reveler or tourist will not want to be there at that moment, even if I go on Fantástico or go on Globo [TV network] or if they have a segment on Jornal Nacional [Brazilian news program], a small part for me to say that this is not true, that it will happen 90 kilometers away from Ouro Preto, if it happens, the damage has already been done (Interviewee 1).

Based on searches on the Google search engine, it was possible to find the main headlines that linked the city of Ouro Preto to the potential dam breaches. These reports are from media outlets with wide reach and significant influence in national and state journalism.

Figure 1

### Headline G1



# Barragens da Vale em Ouro Preto chegam a nível máximo de alerta e sirenes serão acionadas

Source: G1. Available at < <a href="https://g1.globo.com/">https://g1.globo.com/</a>> Accessed on June 17 2021

Figure 2

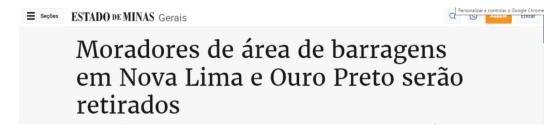




Source: Veja. Available at <a href="https://veja.abril.com.br//">https://veja.abril.com.br//> Accessed on June 17. 2021</a>

Figure 3

# Headline Estado de Minas



Source: Veja. Available at <a href="https://em.com.br/">https://em.com.br/</a> Accessed on June 17. 2021

Figure 4

Folha de S. Paulo



Source: Folha de S. Paulo. Available at <a href="https://https:/folha.uol.com.br/">https://https:/folha.uol.com.br/</a> Accessed on June 17. 2021

Figure 5

Headline G1 e Estado de Minas



Source: G1 and Estado de Minas. Available at < <a href="https://g1.globo.com">https://em.com.br/> Accessed on June 17. 2021</a>

According to the interviewee 3, the mentioned dams in the news articles are Forquilha I and II, located approximately 73.5 km from the center of Ouro Preto, according to Google Maps data. However, this information is not highlighted in the news, and the mention of "Ouro Preto" leads the reader to imagine the historic city center, a postcard of the city, being destroyed by mud.

[...] When the press reports on these dams, they don't specifically mention the location. So, they say "The dam rupture was stopped," and that created a great fear. In general, many parents would talk to their children, saying, "Oh, I saw in the newspaper that there is a dam in Ouro Preto just like the one in Brumadinho, let's leave Ouro Preto." But no one explained that the Forquilhas dam is 15 km away from Ouro Preto. It doesn't affect Ouro Preto; it only affects seven houses that are in the territory of Forquilhas. However, the dam completely destroys Itabirito, and they never mentioned Itabirito in the news at any moment. (Interviewee 3).

Ouro Preto, as a historically renowned city with an extraordinary cultural heritage, attracts both domestic and international tourists. Due to the city's high visibility, the use of its name in headlines, rather than directly linking the potential dam ruptures to their actual location, generates more clicks on news websites. This is because the inclusion of the city's name in the headlines leads readers to believe that the core of the destination will also be affected.

The action of the municipal government in response to the dam breaches.

The municipal government made an attempt to minimize the impact of the news about the dam breaches that bore the name of the city of Ouro Preto, albeit unsuccessfully. The interviewees 1 and 2 agree on the efforts made by the municipal government to understand the communication flaws and their constant endeavor to mitigate the impact of such news on Ouro Preto as a tourist destination.

[...] We have a crisis management system in place at the Ouro Preto municipal government, and the Communication Department is responsible for managing these crises. We prioritize maintaining good relationships with local and regional media outlets and conduct ongoing studies within the Communication Department itself. We currently have a director dedicated to crisis management who maintains open dialogue with the press at all times. We have established a group that includes representatives from ASCOM (Communication Department) and all local and regional media outlets, including radio, TV, and print media. We strive to work on news stories before they are published, which involves constant communication and an open channel. We always encourage reporters to inquire before writing, giving the municipality the opportunity to explain or understand the issue. In cases where this doesn't happen, such as with the dam incident, we may even resort to legal action to seek a right of response. (Interviewee 2)

The ASCOM of the Ouro Preto municipal government is responsible for the municipality's communication with the local community. According to Interviewee 2, ASCOM handles communication for both the mayor's office and the other 14 municipal secretariats. Within this department, there are different teams responsible for communication with local radio stations and the mainstream media. However, the reliance on external media outlets for the production of informational materials, such as live broadcasts published on the municipality's social media channels, has led to misunderstandings regarding certain topics, such as the dam incidents.

Regarding the city's image, the interviewees agree that the news stories linking Ouro Preto to the dam incidents had a significant impact on tourism. Many people decided not to visit the city because they believed it was on the verge of destruction, highlighting the influential role of the media in shaping people's perceptions and imagination.

The news stories were published close to the date of the 2019 Carnival, a highly anticipated event for the municipal government of Ouro Preto due to the large number of visitors it attracts and the revenue generated for the tourism industry and the municipality as a whole. According to the interviewees, due to the headlines, it was one of the worst Carnivals in Ouro Preto. In addition to losing visitors to the neighboring city of Belo Horizonte, the news stories affected the arrival of tourists who had planned to spend the holiday in Ouro Preto.

According to Hack Neto et al. (2018), studies on tourism perceptions and the influence of communication reveal that culture is also created through the images that are disseminated. Images such as the photo of the burned girl fleeing naked after her village in Saigon (Vietnam) was devastated by the Americans in 1972, the photo from July 1989 showing a student standing against tanks in Tiananmen Square in China, the image of the Moon landing, and the photos and videos of the September 11th attacks on the World Trade Center (Hack Neto et al., 2018) are examples of images that remain in people's minds and contribute to the recognition of a specific place based on the images associated with it. Given this, the visual association of the dam disasters in Bento Rodrigues and Brumadinho with the city of Ouro Preto in news stories about possible dam breaches creates an image in the reader's mind that links the tragedy with the city's historical assets, which are its main tourist attractions, as well as its events such as Carnival, Holy Week, and the Winter Festival.

The lack of communication among key actors for tourism marketing in adverse situations.

This lack of communication between Vale S.A. and the municipality of Ouro Preto, as mentioned by interviewee 3, further contributed to the crisis of the city's image. According to

the interviewee, Vale S.A. released a statement to the press stating that it would suspend activities in Miguel Burnier, a district of Ouro Preto, due to the possibility of dam failure, but this information was not communicated to the municipality. This lack of transparency and communication from the mining company created a sense of distrust and further fueled the negative perception of the situation. The absence of coordination between the company and the local government hindered the ability to effectively address the crisis and provide accurate information to the public.

[...] At six in the morning, Globo called me and said, "Can I go to Miguel Burnier? Vale is suspending operations there." And I said, "I'm not aware of that." Globo found out before us at the municipality. I said, "I don't know that Vale is suspending operations. I will find out this information." (Interviewee 3)

The issue with the note was that it was published close to the Easter Week event, which took place right after the Carnival of 2019. Easter Week is another significant event that attracts tourism to the city due to the decorated carpets and religious ceremonies. Many tourists from different parts of Brazil and the world come to the city to witness and participate in the event. With the note and the subsequent media coverage on the dams, there was a possibility of decreased tourist flow to the municipality, leading to a decline in revenue and, consequently, a perception of insecurity in the destination, as had occurred during Carnival.

When a tourist destination faces a crisis in its image, it is necessary to implement well-established tourism marketing actions to help the destination recover from the adverse situation. Additionally, a strong official communication strategy is crucial to combat misinformation. Indeed, as advocated by Emmendoerfer et al. (2023), the entities responsible for governance and administrative policies are the ones with the power to represent and determine the planning, management, and development of the destination. Interviewee 1 emphasized that the previous mayor (2017-2020) preferred not to inform the population about potential events, as he believed that if strategic institutional communication were produced before something actually happened, it would imply that the municipality contributed to inaccurate publicity, which would be detrimental to the city's image.

The situation is partially related to the belief that Ouro Preto, due to its grandeur and uniqueness, sells itself, and therefore, there is no need to implement any tourism marketing strategies to develop the destination's image, as highlighted by Interviewee 5.

The whole trajectory of Tarsila do Amaral, Mário de Andrade, allowed Ouro Preto to gain worldwide prominence and later receive the title of World Heritage by UNESCO. Since then, people have only enjoyed this great marketing action, but many things have changed since then. There are already many destinations that are globally recognized by UNESCO, so the competition has increased, and we are still here with expectations. I know entrepreneurs who say that we don't need to worry because tourists will come to Ouro Preto regardless. (Interviewee 5)

Furthermore, according to the interviewees, in the previous administration (2017-2020), there was a lack of autonomy for the communication and tourism agencies of the municipality to develop strategies that could contribute to improving the destination's image.

According to interviewee 6, most communication actions focused on tourism are carried out by the Tourism Department of the municipality in a specific department of Tourism Communication and Marketing, which reports to the municipality's Communication Department. However, there is no marketing plan, which leads to a lack of planning and perspectives for the development of the image of the tourist destination of Ouro Preto in the near future and in times of crisis, such as the case of the dam disasters.

Attempts to mitigate the media image created for Ouro Preto during a crisis experienced due to the dam breaches.

In relation to the marketing and communication strategies to minimize the impacts of the news on the tourist destination of Ouro Preto, the following actions were taken according to interviewees 1 and 3:

- Alternative route map when BR 356 was closed;
- Special feature arranged by the municipality's communication department to showcase that Ouro Preto was safe, which aired on February 26, 2019, on MGTV 2 and also on Bom Dia Minas on February 27, 2019;
- Creation of Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) developed by Converso Comunicação, a company hired by the Hospitality and Food Service Entrepreneurs Network of Ouro Preto. The content was based on the main questions asked by potential tourists at Estalagem de Minas Gerais and Sesc.
- TV Record came to Ouro Preto to produce a report titled "Ouro Preto (MG) is out of the route of tailings dam mud";
- Press conference on April 5, 2019;

- Coverage by TV Globo on April 15, 2019, during Holy Week;
- Organization of the Procissão do Fogaréu (Procession of the Torches).

Many of the actions taken aimed to attract media attention in an attempt to reverse the impact of the news about the dams, especially during the "second wave" of headlines related to the statements released by Vale S.A., close to the Holy Week period. The goal was to prevent these headlines from further damaging the destination's image. According to one of the interviewees, one of the strategies adopted was the massive promotion of Holy Week, including the revival of the Procissão do Fogaréu (Procession of the Torches), which had not taken place for many years.

The interviewees believed that the actions undertaken were successful in trying to reverse the destination's image. However, they emphasized that isolated actions are not enough to strengthen the destination and give it control and autonomy over the information generated about it. In light of these events and with a new administration in the municipality of Ouro Preto, the relationship between communication and the tourist destination has taken on a new perspective, seeking to use information as the main means to strengthen the locality. However, the creation of a comprehensive marketing plan to transform the city's image into a reference is still underway at a slow pace. Despite the clear importance recognized by the interviewees, the implementation of the Marketing Plan has not yet been put into practice, possibly as a precautionary measure by the administration.

# 5. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATION

The city of Ouro Preto possesses an exuberant wealth and authentic experiences that go beyond its historical and cultural tourism. However, the construction of the destination's image is largely limited to the massive valorization of its historical heritage, while the city holds a welcoming and mystical essence that promotes genuine and lasting relationships. This unique characteristic could be explored in the construction of the destination's image.

It is evident that the municipality has been affected by media influence and the relentless pursuit of clicks on online news sites. The media has the power to shape imaginaries and influence consumer perceptions. However, both the public administration and the private sector should not limit their actions only to moments of crisis or when the destination's image is fragile. A structured marketing plan, continuous investment, and care for the destination's image are necessary.

Ouro Preto has a potential that extends beyond its physical boundaries, but it is crucial to have well-planned marketing and communication strategies to stand out in the tourism market and neutralize media influence. Building a strong image requires hard and consistent work, aiming for the desired positioning in the minds of visitors.

The crisis resulting from the dam incidents has brought valuable lessons, and specific measures were taken to address the destination's image crisis. These experiences can serve as a catalyst for public administration and private entities responsible for promoting the destination to understand the importance of a solid instit utional marketing and communication plan to preserve the destination's image. It is crucial to envision new paths and structure strategies to face potential crises in the future, especially considering the current global context with the COVID-19 pandemic imposing additional challenges on the tourism sector. Preserving and strengthening the destination's image are fundamental in this scenario.

Thus, the presented study offers an important discussion on the marketing and communication strategies adopted by the public authorities of Ouro Preto in the face of crisis situations, such as the mining dam breaches. However, some limitations and gaps deserve highlighting. Firstly, there is a possibility of selection bias among the interviewees, which could influence the representativeness of opinions and the understanding of the data. Additionally, there are alternative interpretations of the data that could be explored for a more comprehensive analysis. Moreover, external factors not addressed in the research, such as tourism seasonality and political changes, may impact the effectiveness of marketing and communication strategies.

Finally, regarding future work, it would be interesting to delve deeper into the role of social media in shaping the destination's image and explore innovative approaches to digital marketing. The theoretical contribution of this study to the understanding of crisis management processes and image construction in tourist destinations is also noteworthy. Further research is needed to enhance the understanding of these phenomena, especially given the challenging global context marked by the COVID-19 pandemic.

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