






## Article

# Sustainable Tourism Marketing Through Destination Image: An AHP Approach for UNESCO Creative Cities in Gastronomy—The Case of Popayán, Colombia

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**Abstract:** Popayán (Colombia) was the first city to be designated a UNESCO Creative City of Gastronomy in 2005, positioning itself as a symbolic ‘myth of origin’ within the network. In the context of growing demands for local strategies aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), it is pertinent to understand how founding cities manage and project their image through sustainable tourism marketing. Almost two decades later, this study examines how Popayán communicates and sustains its image within the UNESCO Creative Cities Network (UCCN), guided by sustainable tourism marketing principles. Methodologically, the study adopts an exploratory and descriptive case study approach, based on documentary analysis of institutional sources and the application of the adapted Analytic Hierarchy Process Image—UNESCO Creative City Gastronomy (AHPI-UCCG) model. The results provided the following: (1) a multidimensional analysis of Popayán’s image in the context of sustainable marketing; (2) an assessment of how the city’s image responds to current branding challenges, using the adapted AHPI-UCCG model; and (3) a proposal for a context-sensitive investment agenda aligned with sustainability objectives. These results support the development of a personalised strategy for Popayán and demonstrate the potential of this approach to inform analyses of other Creative Cities of Gastronomy, while recognising the unique symbolic role of Popayán as the foundational case.

**Keywords:** analytic hierarchy process (AHP); destination image; gastronomy tourism; sustainable tourism marketing; UNESCO Creative Cities Network



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## 1. Introduction

The relationship between sustainable tourism and marketing was discussed based on a robust review of the scientific literature covering a temporal period (1997–2020) marked by significant challenges in sustainability studies within the framework of global agendas, such as the 2000 Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), the 2030 Agenda and others. In summary, it became clear that perceived sustainability and destination marketing must be aligned to overcome challenges (Coutinho et al., 2024). Moreover, it was highlighted that

comparative research on tourism, sustainability and marketing provides an opportunity to align local and global market and destination expectations, which represents a growing trend in sustainable tourism marketing (Cavalcante et al., 2021). The bidirectional flow between academia and the market can foster positive feedback loops between scientific advances and practical applications in the professional sphere.

In this way, being part of a select group such as the UNESCO Creative Cities Network (UCCN), which is guided by the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of the 2030 Agenda, can help leverage a creative city as a creative tourism destination (Moreira et al., 2024). Thus, sustainable tourism marketing through destination image, as part of these complex discussions, deserves to be further explored from a scientific perspective. The UCCN is currently present in 350 cities (in more than 100 countries) in seven creative fields: (1) crafts and folk arts; (2) media arts; (3) film; (4) design; (5) gastronomy; (6) literature; and (7) music (UNESCO, 2023). Today the gastronomy cluster consists of 57 cities (Creative Cities Network—Grid, 2021). It should be noted that UNESCO itself proposes the paradigm of further enhancing active intangible heritage and leveraging regional development as the network's objective (Park et al., 2023), as well as promoting cooperation among the participating cities (Bütün & Öncel, 2019).

However, despite the growing number of studies on destination image and sustainability, few have addressed how foundational cities in the UCCG cluster communicate their strategic identity over time. This study fills that gap by analysing Popayán—the first UCCG city—as a symbolic benchmark and historical anchor for the network.

This study will focus on the case of the tourism destination of Popayán, in Colombia, as it was the first UNESCO Creative City of Gastronomy (UCCG) approved in 2005 (Popayán, 2023), becoming what we might call a “myth of origin” (Sousa, 2011).

It is important to clarify, as Sousa (2011) notes, that the understanding of the term “origin myth” does not refer to mythology in an allegorical sense; rather, it refers to a narrative that connects the past and the present through the values of significant events. In the social sciences, several studies employ the term “origin myth” when exploring a foundational event from the past that has influenced the present. For instance, Valladares (2005) analysed the concept of an origin myth in the social process of the invention of the favela. This concept applies to Popayán, which, as the first city to be accredited by the UCCN in the field of gastronomy, serves as an origin myth for other cities aspiring to this designation.

Although Popayán's foundational role is frequently mentioned in institutional discourse, its implications for sustainable image strategy have not been systematically studied using structured models.

The network was established in 2004, which means that it is approaching two decades of existence and, as such, requires revisions and strategies to address innovations in planning and management (UNESCO, 2023). In this regard, valuable contributions can be drawn from Echtner and Ritchie (1993) and Cardoso et al. (2018), who emphasise that the destination tourism image (DTI) serves as a powerful tool for tourism planning and management. This tool refers to the general perception tourists have of the destination they visit, which includes their opinions, impressions and emotional expressions. The DTI is of great importance for both the promotion and marketing of tourism destinations, and comprises three main dimensions: the cognitive image, the emotional or affective image and the overall image (Gartner, 1994; Wen & Xu, 2024).

The cognitive image includes the tourist's objective perception of the natural, social, and cultural characteristics of the destination, shaped by various sources of information and personal experiences (Wen & Xu, 2024). The affective image reflects the tourist's subjective evaluation of the reasons that motivate destination choice—why someone desires a

particular object or place (Gartner, 1994). The overall image is the synthesis of these two dimensions and represents the overall impression of the destination. Understanding these images is crucial for influencing the decisions of potential tourists and providing valuable insights to providers of tourism products and services. By understanding tourists' preferences and needs, destinations can develop more effective marketing strategies, thereby increasing their competitiveness in the global tourism market (Wen & Xu, 2024).

In this context, the Analytic Hierarchy Process (AHP) method has proven to be a valuable tool for structuring complex decisions by ranking criteria and assessing priorities in tourism (Dhami et al., 2017; Saaty, 1991). In addition to allowing the inclusion of multiple criteria in the decision-making process, it is an adaptable and transparent method (Saaty, 1991).

However, the model referred to as the Analytic Hierarchy Process Image—UNESCO Creative City Gastronomy (AHPI-UCCG) by Moreira (2024) emerges as a particularly useful tool for analysing behaviour of UCCG. Based on the AHP, the actor developed and tested this model in the context of the Brazilians UCCG, creating an interface with the DTI that integrates perspectives on marketing and sustainability (Moreira et al., 2025). This approach considers the image as a key component in the planning and management of destinations focused on sustainable tourism marketing (Aman et al., 2024).

Although previously applied in Brazilian UCCGs, this study marks the first adaptation of the AHPI-UCCG model to a non-Brazilian context. This enables a cross-cultural assessment of the model's explanatory potential and a test of its transferability to other UCCN environments.

The present study addresses a gap in the literature by analysing how Popayán, as the first UNESCO Creative City of Gastronomy, has positioned its destination image through sustainable tourism marketing. The AHPI-UCCG model is adapted and applied to provide structured insights into the city's branding and sustainability strategies. Thus, selecting the AHPI-UCCG model to analyse Popayán's case aligns with the sustainability principles of the UNESCO Creative Cities Network (UCCN) (Pearson & Pearson, 2017; Mission Statement, 2023), which is a core focus of this study. Sustainability was considered as one of the dimensions (criteria) included in the analytical matrix.

In this context, it is important to recall that the United Nations (UN) developed an agenda as an action plan to promote sustainable development, which was signed by numerous heads of state and became known as the 2030 Agenda (United Nations, 2015). The agenda includes, among its 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the specific goal 11: "Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable" (United Nations, 2015). This goal is directly related to the purpose of this research and, more importantly, to the principles of the UCCN, which identifies culture and creativity as essential levers for community development (Mission Statement, 2023).

Thus, the research problem addressed in this study is as follows: How does Popayán's (Colombia) tourism destination image align with sustainable marketing when analysed through the AHPI-UCCG model? Accordingly, the general objective of this study is to evaluate Popayán as a tourist destination that promotes and projects its image through the UNESCO Creative Cities Network (UCCN), guided by the principles of sustainable tourism marketing. The specific objectives of the research were as follows: (a) to analyse the image of Popayán through the lens of sustainable marketing within two specific contexts: its geographical-touristic setting and its gastronomic identity shaped by institutional frameworks; (b) to understand the behaviour of Popayán's image in response to the challenges of sustainable marketing using the AHPI model; (c) to propose a new investment agenda for Popayán's image as a UNESCO Creative City, in line with sustainable marketing strategies.

The findings allow for the development of a tailored investment agenda not only for Popayán, but also to inspire other UCCGs to reconsider their challenges and opportunities when treating images as a tool for tourism planning and management, in order to promote sustainable marketing. Additionally, this study can serve as a methodological guide for proposing development strategies for cities aspiring to join the UCCN, drawing inspiration from the case presented.

## 2. Literature Review

Integrating destination image into sustainable tourism marketing means projecting an image that respects the environment, the sustainability of tourism resources and local communities. In this way, it is possible to create compelling narratives and attract responsible tourists. Sustainable tourism requires destination marketing and image strategies (Liu et al., 2021). Sustainable tourism marketing promotes responsible travel by creating distinctive destination brands that highlight cultural and environmental attractions, thereby increasing revenues while promoting sustainability (Hudson & Ritchie, 2009; Ruiz-Real et al., 2020). Cardoso et al. (2023) address the specificities of the issue by focusing the discussion on specific types of tourism. S. W. Lee and Xue (2020) go further by explaining a destination loyalty model based on the integration of destination image. Sustainable tourism marketing plays a crucial role in shaping a destination's image, ensuring that cultural and environmental assets are preserved while attracting responsible tourism.

The integration of the Analytic Hierarchy Process (AHP) enables a structured evaluation of these efforts, providing quantifiable insights (Jamal Mahdi & Esztergár-Kiss, 2024; Arya et al., 2024).

This literature review is a narrative review and aims to address the Tourism Destination Image (TDI), an acronym used by Cardoso et al. (2018), as a tool for tourism planning and management, with the support of the hierarchical multi-criteria analysis method, better known as AHP (Section 2.1). In order to find a method that is compatible with the problem to be addressed, we describe, in this case, the AHPI-UCCG model (Section 2.2).

### 2.1. Image as a Planning and Management Tool in Tourism: The AHP Method

In general terms, understanding TDI as a planning and management tool in tourism depends on the very notion of these issues. Planning requires a vision of the present with results to be projected into the future, being strategic (long term), tactical management (medium term) and operational (short term) (Petrocchi, 2002). On the other hand, management can be understood as a process that implies the adoption of a systemic vision with several fronts, such as operations, marketing and finance, implying the consideration of all the levels that are targets for planning or replanning. It therefore implies a scientific approach, as (Zhang et al., 2019) point out the relevance of advances in image analysis in the context of tourism and hospitality in terms of scientific research. This shows the importance of feedback loops between theoretical, conceptual and practical advances, involving the different stakeholders, such as governments, industry and academia.

Therefore, TDI investment criteria should be defined as a strategic component in planning and managing UCCN in the gastronomy field, taking into account both the theoretical and practical aspects, from a methodological perspective. It should be emphasised that the AHP is a widely used tool for dealing with tourism problems. Additionally, Kundakçı et al. (2015) analysed attributes for selecting the location of a new tourist hotel, while Yang and Kong (2022) evaluated the performance of rural tourism services. Specifically, at the interface between tourism and gastronomy, it should be noted that the studies of Blešić et al. (2021) used the AHP instrument in the process of choosing traditional food in Serbia. The AHP was preceded by survey-type research from which the authors were able to analyse

the preferences of customers ( $n = 289$ ) of restaurants in the area of Vojvodina in Serbia. This research showed how the AHP can be the main method or combined with others in dealing with complex problems involving decision-making. Still in the context of the interface between tourism and gastronomy, [Saadat and Aghayari \(2016\)](#) identified strategies for the development of gastronomic tourism from the perspective of Iranian experts, reinforcing the method's flexibility and usefulness in planning and policymaking.

In technical terms, the AHP can provide solutions by creating hierarchical structures and establishing priorities between different alternatives identified by decision-makers. The study by [Chen and Gursoy \(2001\)](#) showed that destination preferences, including cultural experiences, safety and transport convenience, have a positive impact on tourist loyalty. Their path diagram suggests that previous experiences influence the dimensions of safety, cultural differences and convenient transportation, contributing to destination loyalty. On the other hand, in the study by [Vujčić et al. \(2020\)](#), the destination choice model assumes that internal and external forces, as well as three barrier dimensions (interpersonal, intrapersonal and extra-structural barriers related to time, finances and destination characteristics), influence the destination choice. Although these models were not created with the image of gastronomic and creative tourist destinations in mind, they do provide relevant evidence that the AHP can be an important methodological option for addressing the image problem as a tool for planning and managing tourist destinations, particularly in the context of the UCCN, since it allows a problem to be broken down into dimensions, attributes and indicators.

Understanding that TDI as a planning and management tool requires a robust model, [Moreira's \(2024\)](#) model stands out as it specifically targets the UNESCO Creative Cities of Gastronomy (UCCG), allowing decision-makers to identify investment priorities in tourism destination planning and management, based on the model's dimensions, which include the following: (1) Cultural Attractions; (2) Education; (3) Gastronomic Experiences; (4) Governance and Sustainability; (5) Destination Image, in the sense of Destination Promotion; (6) Infrastructure and Services. In addition, it should be explained that the AHPI-UCCG model used the AHP technique, based on the Saaty scale (1991), also using the SuperDecisions (version 2.10) and Excel (professional plus 2021 version) software when testing for the UCCG in Brazil. This model is contextualised and described below.

Although the AHPI-UCCG model was originally developed and tested in Brazilian cities within the UCCG network, its methodological structure allows it to be adapted to different geographical and cultural contexts, since the model is based on international literature and documents ([Moreira, 2024](#); [Moreira et al., 2024](#)). Therefore, in the case of Popayán, the main modification applied was the inclusion of technological gastronomy courses in the 'Education' dimension, thus broadening the scope of the model to consider more comprehensive training beyond higher education. This methodological flexibility demonstrates that the model can be applied internationally to analyse the image performance of different creative gastronomy cities from the perspective of the UCCN.

## 2.2. AHPI-UCCG Model

This subsection aims to describe [Moreira's \(2024\)](#) Image Analytic Hierarchy Process—UNESCO Creative City Gastronomy (AHPI-UCCG) model. However, it is important to first contextualise that the major challenges in the study of TDI, from the perspective of tourism destination planning and management, are often tied to a focus on either demand or supply. For example, scientific literature presents a number of studies focused on image from the perspective of demand, such as the case of ([Cardoso et al., 2019](#)), who studied two categories of destination brands: (1) Favorite Destination: focused on retrospective memory of positive experiences in situ; (2) Dream Destination: focused on the prospective

memory of tourists. Based on the differences found, the authors proposed a theoretical model of destination image, which not only advances from an epistemological point of view, but also makes valid contributions to destination marketing.

The AHP method, developed by Saaty (1980), allows the comparison of decision-making criteria. The AHPI-UCCG model derives from this method and structures the destination image into six main dimensions, specifically for the UNESCO Creative Cities of Gastronomy (UCCG), as shown in Figure 1.

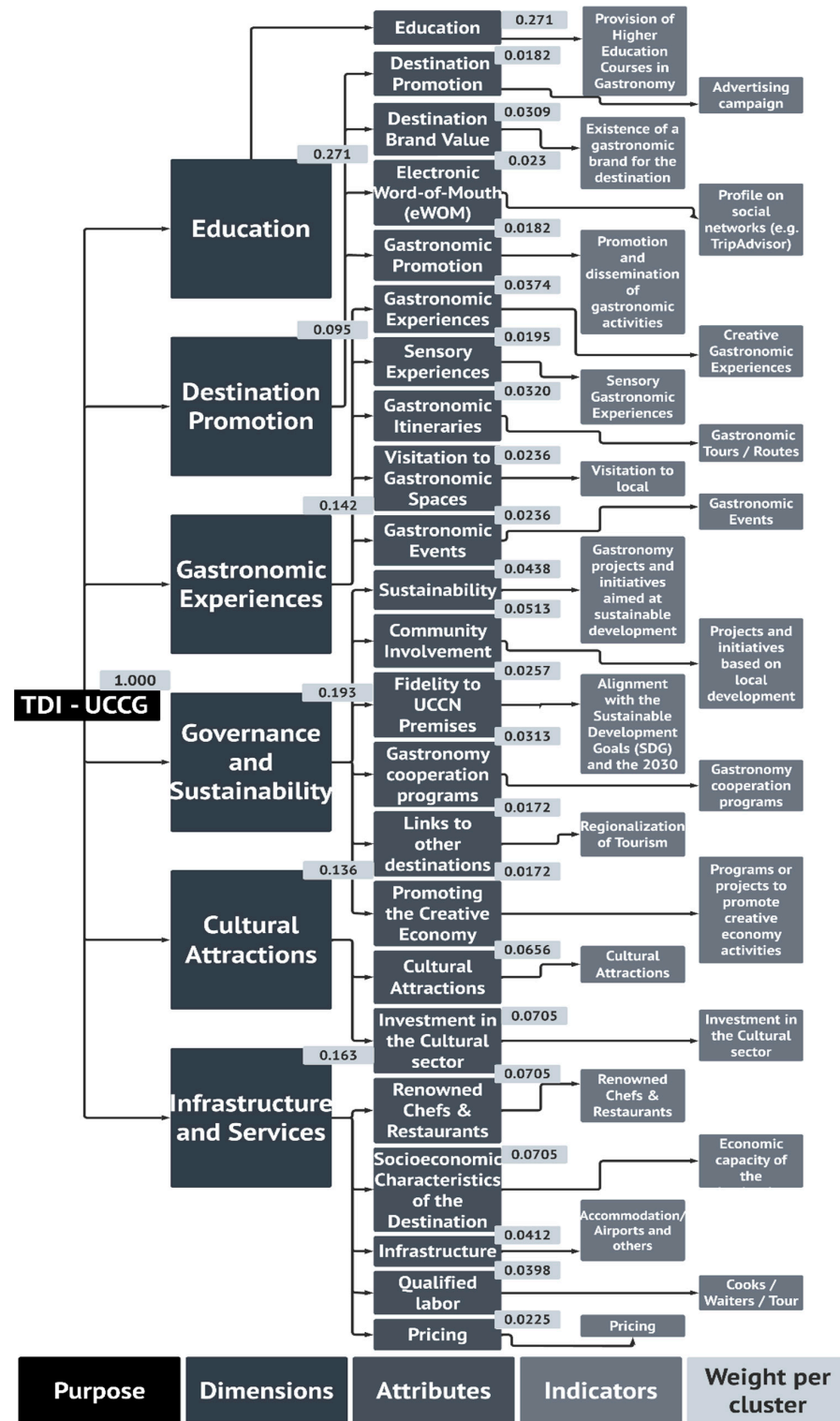


Figure 1. AHPI-UCCG model adapted for Popayán, Colombia. Source: Adapted from Moreira (2024).

With regard to the Objectives, Dimensions, Attributes and Indicators, it is anchored in the Systematic Literature Review (Moreira et al., 2024) and the Documentary Review and is consolidated through a panel of AHP experts (Moreira, 2024). Based on Figure 1, this theoretical model assigns judgements in the SuperDecisions software (version 2.10) to identify the importance of each dimension and attribute at a local level, i.e., within their respective categories.

Attributes and indicators were defined for each dimension, as described in Figure 1. The method is applied in three main rounds: (i) validation of the criteria, carried out with experts from all over Brazil, selected firstly by searching for academics who had already published on gastronomy and creativity in tourism within the following databases: (1) Web of Science (WoS); (2) Scopus; and (3) Publicações de Turismo of EACH-USP. It was also decided to search the Directory of Research Groups (DGP) Lattes (CNPq, 2023) in Brazil for leaders and vice-leaders of research groups related to the topics explored by Moreira (2024); (ii) assigning scores, in this phase, respondents from the first round, along with decision-makers involved in the submission and preparation of UCCG dossiers in Brazil, were invited; (iii) comparing the criteria and weights validated by the experts and decision-makers, where the same respondents from the second round were again consulted.

In addition to a global review, the most important criteria are reviewed according to the objective of the model. Table 1 shows the distribution of weights by dimension and their ranking.

**Table 1.** Weight distribution by dimensions in the theoretical AHPI-UCCG.

Dimension	Cluster Weight	Rank
Cultural Attractions	0.136	5
Education	0.271	1
Gastronomic Experiences	0.142	4
Governance and Sustainability	0.193	2
Destination Promotion	0.095	6
Infrastructure and Services	0.163	3

Source: Adapted from Moreira (2024, pp. 86–87).

Figure 1 and Table 1 clearly show the hierarchy of the AHPI-UCCG model and the weight distributions. To illustrate its application, a specific dimension's weight was calculated. For example, the dimension Infrastructure and Services received a weight of 0.163, as assigned by expert ratings. The normalisation process followed the methodology of Saaty (1991) using the SuperDecisions software (version 2.10).

The AHPI-UCCG model has potential applications beyond Popayán, particularly for other UNESCO Creative Cities Gastronomy (UCCG). Initially tested in Brazil, across four UCCGs in a comparative study (Moreira, 2024), its adaptability makes it a valuable tool for application in different cultural and economic contexts. Another application involved its combination with a sensitivity analysis of Brazilian UCCGs, allowing for further examination of the model (Moreira et al., 2025).

It should be noted that the successful conversion rate of potential tourist demand into actual tourist demand implies a process known as “destination choice” (Wondirad & Verheye, 2023). Planners and managers define the TDI on the basis of criteria for its consolidation with tourist consumers. Therefore, once the relevance of the TDI as a planning and management tool for tourist destinations is understood, the following section details the methodology used to apply the AHPI-UCCG model (Moreira, 2024) to test Popayán (Colombia) as a case study. Furthermore, this destination will be considered as the myth of origin of the UCCG.

The initial expert validation of the model occurred in Brazil. The AHPI-UCCG structure is based on UNESCO's global criteria, which allows for contextual adaptation. In Popayán, this involved integrating non-higher education training into the Education dimension to reflect local institutional practices and broaden the inclusion of gastronomic training. To our knowledge, this is the first time the AHPI-UCCG model is adapted and applied to a non-Brazilian context, allowing for cross-cultural testing of its explanatory power and strategic relevance. This contributes to expanding the model's generalisability and demonstrates its potential for international comparative research within the UCCN framework.

### 3. Materials and Methods

This study explores how Popayán communicates and sustains its image within the UNESCO Creative Cities Network (UCCN), guided by sustainable tourism marketing principles. It applies an exploratory and descriptive case study methodology, based on documentary analysis and the adapted Analytic Hierarchy Process Image—UNESCO Creative City Gastronomy (AHPI-UCCG) model. The aim is to evaluate Popayán's performance across six dimensions of sustainable image construction and propose context-sensitive recommendations that can guide its branding strategy and serve as a reference for other UCCG cities.

The general objective of this study is to evaluate Popayán as a tourist destination that promotes and projects its image through the UNESCO Creative Cities Network (UCCN), guided by the principles of sustainable tourism marketing (Aman et al., 2024; Hudson & Ritchie, 2009; Ruiz-Real et al., 2020). The specific objectives of the research are (a) to analyse the image of Popayán through the lens of sustainable marketing within two specific contexts: its geographical-touristic setting and its gastronomic identity shaped by institutional frameworks; (b) to understand the behaviour of Popayán's image in response to the challenges of sustainable marketing using the AHPI model; and (c) to propose a new investment agenda for Popayán's image as a UNESCO Creative City, in line with sustainable marketing strategies.

The research is exploratory and descriptive and combines qualitative and quantitative approaches. It uses Popayán as a case study representing the 'myth of origin' of the UCCG. The case study method applied to tourism destination image (TDI) has been used by several authors to examine perceptions among tourists and stakeholders (Li & Vogelsong, 2003; Liu et al., 2021). The Analytic Hierarchy Process (AHP), developed by Saaty (1980), is a multi-criteria decision-making technique used here to evaluate and prioritise alternatives based on multiple criteria. In this study, the AHPI-UCCG model was operationalised through three stages: validation of criteria, assignment of binary scores based on secondary evidence, and comparison between dimensions. Although expert validation was originally conducted in Brazil for model design, no local validation was performed in Colombia, which limits cross-contextual sensitivity. This limitation is acknowledged, and future research should seek to involve local stakeholders or expert panels in order to refine and validate the model contextually.

In order to apply the AHPI-UCCG in Popayán, the following methodological steps were taken: (1) Collection of secondary data from institutional and official sources for each of the dimensions in the model, ensuring an evidence-based approach; (2) identification of the necessary adaptations for the Colombian context, with the inclusion of technological courses in the "Education" dimension; (3) construction of the paired comparison matrices, weighting the criteria based on the relevance of the local weights (of the model) and the UCCN guidelines; (4) calculation of the weights assigned to each dimension and assessment of the consistency of the data using the SuperDecisions software (version 2.10) and Excel (Professional Plus 2021 version); (5) analysing the results to identify the strengths and

weaknesses of Popayán’s image, which will help formulate an investment agenda in line with sustainable marketing strategies.

According to Saaty (1980), the AHP method includes seven steps, which were considered in this study: (1) definition of the problem and objectives; (2) structuring the hierarchy; (3) construction of comparison matrices; (4) calculation of relative weights; (5) evaluation of alternatives; (6) consistency analysis; and (7) decision-making.

It should be noted that there are various studies on TDI that use the AHP, such as the one on bicycle tourism in Taiwan by (C.-F. Lee & Huang, 2014), the one on university students in tourism in South Korea by (Kim et al., 2017), and the one on rural tourism by González Ramiro et al. (2016). However, the study by Moreira (2024) focuses on the specificity of the problem presented here, which is the image as a planning and management tool for tourist destinations that are UCCG, and the research carried out by Moreira et al. (2025) also attempts to incorporate this model with a sensitivity analysis, making it even more robust.

The present research is divided into three phases: (1) a narrative review of the literature on TDI as a tool for planning and managing tourist destinations, in order to provide a conceptual theoretical basis (see Section 2); (2) application of the AHPI-UCCG model and analysis of Popayán’s behaviour (see Sections 4.1 and 4.2); (3) based on the scientific evidence found, the proposal of an agenda for UCCN in the context of gastronomy (see Section 4.3). It should be noted that four software packages were used, as described in phase 2 of the research and summarised in Table 2.

**Table 2.** Software support in Phase 2.

Research Phase	Descriptions	Software Support
	To characterise the geographical and tourist approach of the object of study.	(a) Geographic Tourism used ArcGIS (online version); (b) Institutional Gastronomy used Voyant Tools (online version).
Phase 2: Application of the Moreira model (2024) and analysis of the behaviour of Popayán	AHP application steps: 1. Define the problem and objectives; 2. Structure hierarchy; 3. Build comparison matrices; 4. Calculate relative weights; 5. Evaluate the alternatives; 6. Analyse consistency; 7. Decision-making (Saaty, 1980).	The Moreira model (2024) was tested using SuperDecisions (version 2.10) and Excel (Professional Plus 2021).

ArcGIS and Voyant Tools were employed as complementary tools for the visual and semantic characterisation of Popayán’s territory and institutional discourse. These tools supported the contextual understanding of the case study but were not used as analytical instruments for inferential conclusions. The primary analysis is based on the AHPI-UCCG scoring across six dimensions.

From this point, the model was tested in the context of Popayán using the defined criteria, with one adaptation: in the “Education” dimension, non-higher education culinary courses were accepted as relevant, considering their contribution to TDI in terms of sustainable tourism planning through the qualification of local professionals.

As in the original model, the variables were assessed using a binary logic: “yes” = 100% and “no” = 0%. This simplified system was adopted due to limitations in primary data

availability and is considered exploratory. A more nuanced gradation could be adopted in future studies, ideally validated through local stakeholder engagement.

The secondary data were obtained from the following official sources: (1) Cultural Attractions—Secretariat of Culture and Tourism of Popayán (Popayán, 2024c) and the Popayán City Hall (Popayán, 2024a); (2) Education—the Ministry of National Education (SNIES, 2024); (3) Gastronomic Experience—The Popayán Culture and Tourism Secretariat (Popayán, 2024c) and the Popayán Town Hall (Popayán, 2024a); (4) Governance and Sustainability—The Municipal Development Plan (Popayán, 2024b), the Popayán City Hall (Popayán, 2024a), and the Cauca State Secretariat (Cauca, 2024); (5) Destination Promotion—Profile on the TripAdvisor platform (TripAdvisor, 2024) and Popayán Culture and Tourism Secretaria (Popayán, 2024c); (6) Infrastructure and Services—the “El Colombiano” newspaper (El Colombiano, 2024), the Cauca State Secretariat (Cauca, 2024), the Ministry of Commerce, Industry, and Tourism (Colômbia, 2024) and Numbeo, a cost-of-living analysis website (2024).

## 4. Results and Discussions

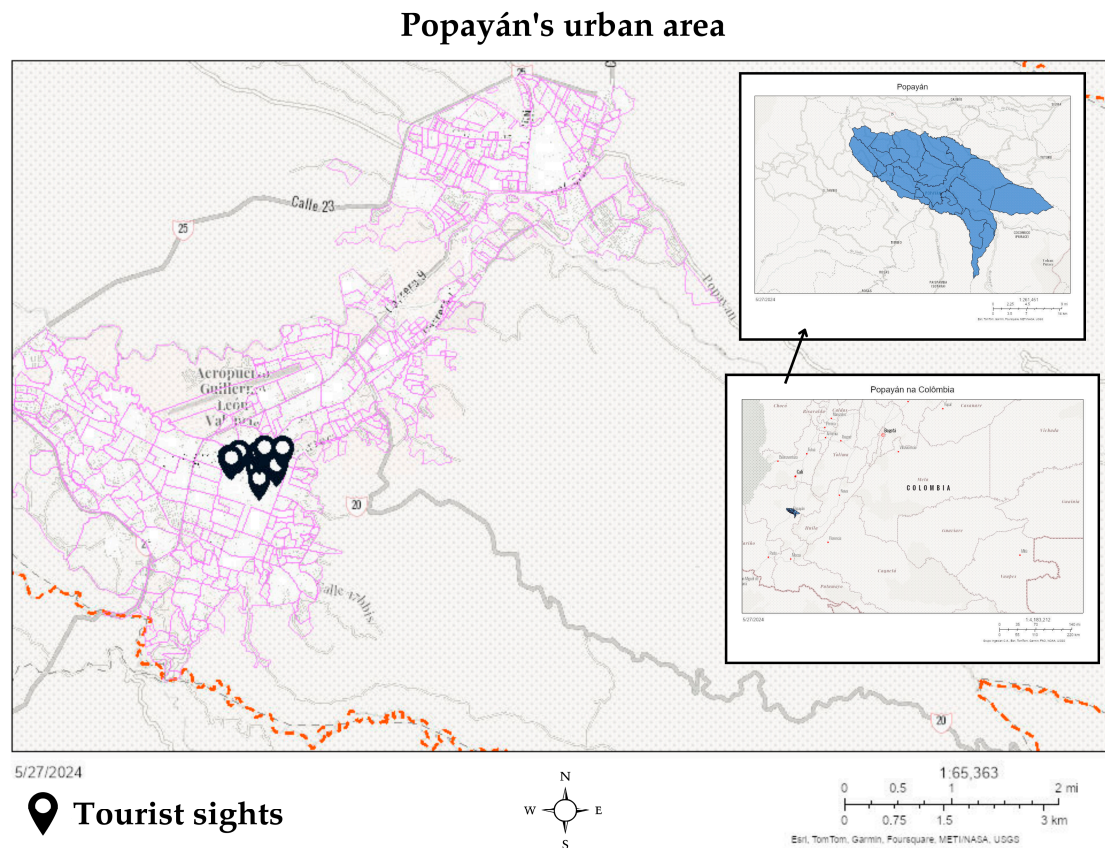
The geographical analysis provides insight into how Popayán’s location, accessibility and cultural landscape influence its branding and attractiveness as a creative gastronomy city (Section 4.1). Thus, techniques using ArcGIS and Voyant tools allowed characterisation of the study object, which served as the basis for testing the adapted AHPI-UCCG model (Section 4.2). From a methodological point of view, the ArcGIS and Voyant Tools served as complementary exploratory tools, supporting the visual and semantic characterisation of Popayán. However, these tools were used for descriptive purposes only, and no inferential claims were made based on them. Their function was to support contextualisation rather than serve as analytical evidence.

### 4.1. The Image of Popayán Through the Lens of Sustainable Marketing

In order to achieve the main objective of this study, two specific aspects have been adopted that cut across the lenses of sustainable marketing: (a) Geographic Tourism, with the support of ArcGIS software (online version); (b) Institutional Gastronomy, related to UNESCO recognitions, with the support of Voyant Tools software (online version), see Methodology. The geographical aspect of tourism is an innovation in sustainable marketing from the perspective of destination branding (Almeida et al., 2024; Aman et al., 2024). Still considering destination branding, it can be seen that the institutional gastronomic aspect is a key element, as evidenced by UNESCO’s own seal of approval (Pearson & Pearson, 2017). In other words, the image of Popayán through the lens of sustainable marketing, due to its tourist geography and gastronomic institutions, is a contextual innovation to observe and address both the object and the research problem.

However, it must be clarified that ArcGIS and Voyant Tools were used only for illustrative and contextual characterisation purposes. These tools did not serve as inferential methods or sources of evidence for scoring within the AHPI-UCCG model. Their role was descriptive and exploratory.

Before going into details, it should be noted that, historically, the city of Popayán, founded in 1537, is the capital of the state of Cauca, and one of the most important religious centres in Colombia (Colômbia, 2024). With an estimated population of approximately 270,000 inhabitants in its urban area, it is located at an altitude of 1738 m above sea level and is 596 km away from the Colombian capital, Bogotá, as can be seen in the map of the city (Popayán, 2024a) in Figure 2.



**Figure 2.** Tourist Attractions from Popayán to Colombia. Source: Own elaboration using ArcGIS (online version) for geovisualisation and [TripAdvisor \(2024\)](#) data (accessed May 2024).

Figure 2 allows an anchored analysis in two approaches:

- (1) **Geographic Tourism:** Figure 2 shows that Popayán is located in two very large biodiversity zones, the Andean and Sub-Andean forests, and is also crossed by the Cauca River, which flows more than 10 km from the city ([Popayán, 2024a](#)). This detail shows that the relationship between tourism and gastronomy through creativity can take into account these aspects of biodiversity. It should be added that Figure 2, in addition to geographically positioning Popayán as a Colombian municipality, also highlights the top ten favourite attractions of travellers on TripAdvisor's experience planning platform (2024). TripAdvisor ([TripAdvisor, 2019](#)) can be considered the largest travel platform in the world.
- (2) **Institutional Gastronomy:** The Popayán Tourism Board expresses its UNESCO recognition with two gastronomic events: (1) Semana Santa (Holy Week) and (2) The National Gastronomic Congress ([Popayán, 2024c](#)). In order to characterise Popayán as a myth of origin of the UCCN at a global level in the context of gastronomy, an initial semantic exploration was conducted using the online version of Voyant Tools.

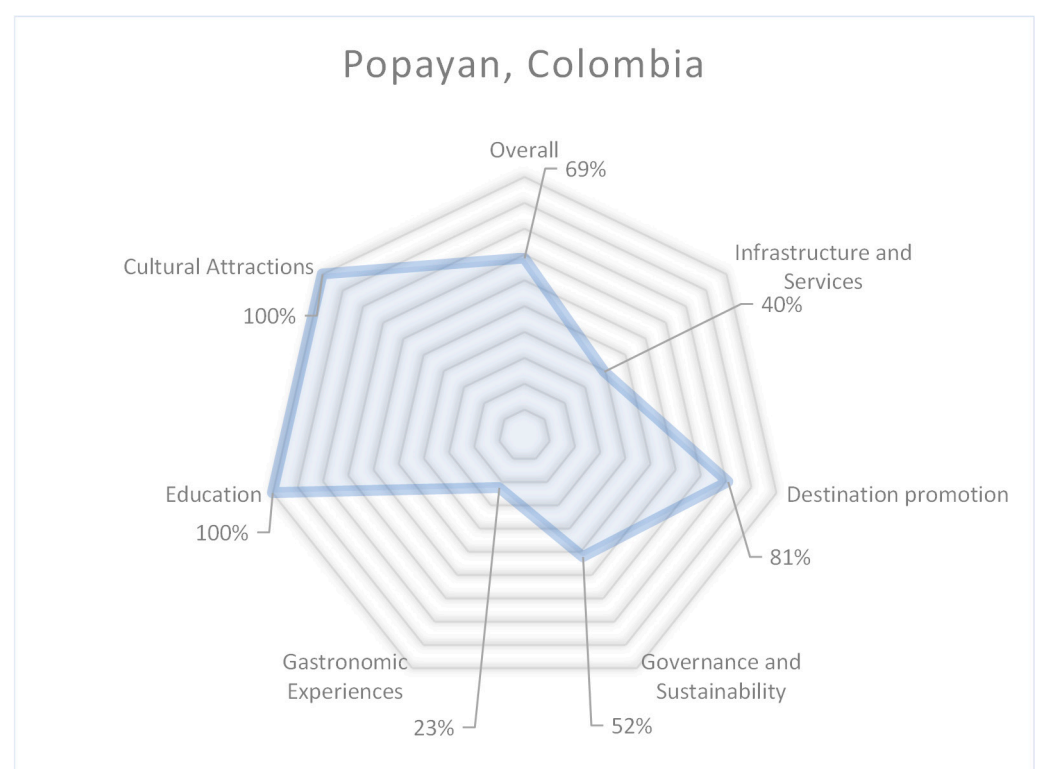
While this process resulted in a word cloud (Figure 3) representing the most frequent terms on the official UNESCO-related webpages, we opted for a more in-depth interpretive approach using keyword-in-context (KWIC) analysis ([Ohara et al., 2003](#)). This method enabled the identification of recurrent terms and their contextual meanings in institutional documents, promotional texts, and UNESCO profiles, particularly concerning gastronomy, sustainability, education, and innovation. Unlike simple word frequency, KWIC allows for a deeper understanding of how Popayán's image is linguistically constructed and projected as a Creative City of Gastronomy.



validation. The AHPI-UCCG model, detailed in the following section, provides a more structured framework for evaluating the city's performance across strategic dimensions.

#### 4.2. Behaviour of Popayán's Image in Response to the Challenges of Sustainable Marketing Using the AHPI Model

Considering sustainable marketing as a relevant asset for the image behaviour of Popayán (CO), this section aims to demonstrate and discuss the results of applying the AHPI-UCCG model in this case (Figure 4). Looking at the dimensions revealed in Figure 4 for Popayán, it can be seen that the Cultural Attractions and Education dimensions have a score of 100%, which shows that the image of a UCCG essentially depends on destination branding linked to tourist geography and gastronomic institutions. These two dimensions represent consolidated strengths in the city's branding strategy, particularly due to its historical heritage and the inclusion of technological training in gastronomy.



**Figure 4.** Behaviour of Popayán according to the AHPI model—UCCG de autor (2024). Source: Own elaboration using SuperDecisions (version 2.10) and Excel (professional plus version 2021).

However, the result also points out that innovations in terms of tourism marketing need to be made for the other four dimensions. For example, in scientific literature, the Infrastructure and Services dimension is increasingly prioritised, as illustrated by [Phuong et al. \(2022\)](#), who emphasise that the quality and accessibility of infrastructure—such as transport, hospitality and digital connectivity—are decisive for increasing competitiveness and visitor satisfaction. This serves as an opportunity for innovation in the case of Popayán, where infrastructural limitations, if not resolved, could undermine the effectiveness of branding efforts linked to its recognition by UNESCO.

The results achieved by applying the model to the case of Popayán are detailed below:

- (1) **Cultural Attractions:** One of the most publicised segments by the Secretariat of Culture and Tourism of Popayán ([Popayán, 2024c](#)). Therefore, it was possible to verify investments in cultural projects on the website of ongoing projects ([Popayán, 2024a](#)).

- (2) Education: Scored only because technological training was included in the model, in this case the gastronomy technologist course (SNIES, 2024);
- (3) Gastronomic Experience: No gastronomic or sensory experiences were found on the official Popayán websites (Popayán, 2024a, 2024c), as required by AHPI-UCCG model, which requires more investment in an image-relevant theme as a planning and management tool. Regarding gastronomic routes and tours, we found “Tour del Café y Ruta del Maíz” (Popayán, 2024c). Specifically, no information on visits to local producers was found on this official website (Popayán, 2024a). It should also be noted that, in terms of events in general, the city’s calendar was not functioning at the time of the consultation in May 2024. Therefore, it is not possible to evaluate the city on this attribute using data from the official website of Popayán (Popayán, 2024a).
- (4) Governance and Sustainability: Gastronomy projects aimed at sustainable development were consulted on the website page showing ongoing programmes and projects underway (Popayán, 2024a), but none were found. However, with regard to local development projects, we found projects that appeal to local identity and culture, as well as rural development (Popayán, 2024a). The guidelines of the municipal master plan were found to be in line with the SDGs of the 2030 Agenda (Popayán, 2024b). On the other hand, no gastronomic cooperation agreements with other municipalities were found, nor were any tourism regionalisation programmes found involving the city of Popayán, or even the state of Cauca (Cauca, 2024). However, projects were found within Popayán’s Department of Culture and Tourism, aimed at promoting the creative economy, which is relevant to creative cities in gastronomy.
- (5) Destination Promotion: It was noted that the fact that the city does not have a marketing plan, which is negative, but the fact that it has a brand that highlights unique characteristics due to its diversity and tradition, is a relevant issue in the context of tourism planning and management (Popayán, 2024a). As for electronic word of mouth (E-WOM), i.e., comments about travel in the case of the profile on the TripAdvisor platform (TripAdvisor, 2024). The profile was outdated at the time of the consultation (in May 2024), with no description or other information, but it does exist. It was noted that the main focus of gastronomic promotion on Popayán’s official website (Popayán, 2024c) is the event “National Gastronomic Congress”, with no mention of other gastronomic initiatives in the municipality.
- (6) Infrastructure and Services: To evaluate the restaurants, it checked the list of the 20 best restaurants in Colombia compiled by the British magazine Time Out and published by the newspaper El Colombiano (El Colombiano, 2024) was consulted. As for the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) per capita, no specific figure was found for the city. Therefore, based on Cauca (2024), that of the State of Cauca was used, which, taking into account the exchange rate of 28 May 2024 (Google, 2024), where R\$1.00 (one real) corresponded to PC 752.74 (seven hundred and fifty-two and seventy-four cents of Colombian pesos), the value in Brazilian currency was R\$22,394.10 (twenty-two thousand, three hundred and ninety-four and ten cents of Brazilian reais). In terms of transport accessibility, the presence of an airport and accommodation facilities in the city of Popayán were checked, scoring them. With regard to labour, an attempt was made to identify tourism professionals, but no success was achieved in any of the three government agencies consulted: Popayán (2024a), Cauca (2024) and Colômbia (2024). Finally, the cost-of-living indicator was looked up in Numbeo (2024), as this is the largest global database of prices reported by consumers. Although the city of Popayán was registered in Numbeo (2024), it didn’t have enough contributions to generate the cost-of-living index, so this attribute was omitted, which could have a negative impact on the image performance. From this secondary source research on

all the criteria included in the AHPI-UCCG model, it is possible to show Popayán's behaviour in relation to the six dimensions through attributes and indicators, as shown in Figure 4.

It is important to note that the binary scoring system used (100% for "yes", 0% for "no") reflects a simplified, exploratory approach based solely on secondary data. This limits the granularity and reliability of the analysis, particularly in the absence of stakeholder validation or performance indicators that assess actual outcomes rather than policy existence. Future applications of the AHPI-UCCG model should incorporate more nuanced rating scales and triangulate data through local interviews, surveys, or participatory workshops to ensure empirical robustness.

Despite these methodological limitations, Popayán remains the origin myth for UCCG worldwide. Only the dimensions of (1) Cultural Attractions (100%) and (2) Education (100%) have been focused on as good practices for the other UCCN cities in the context of gastronomy, or for those that intend to apply. It should also be remembered that in the Education dimension, technological courses in gastronomy were also taken into account, and not only higher education courses, as in Moreira's original model (2024). This adaptation was justified by the need to cover different levels of professional academic training. It should be noted that the application of the AHPI-UCCG to Popayán allowed a structured and hierarchical approach to the analysis of the destination's image, avoiding fragmented or purely qualitative assessments. The AHP method provided an objective basis for evaluating the image of destinations in order to prioritise investments in each of the dimensions, differentiating the analysis from traditional approaches based solely on narrative descriptions. Without this methodological framework, the assessment could lack comparability with other UCCG destinations and would not allow the precise identification of Popayán's strategic gaps.

Before going into the findings for new investments, it should be noted that the mere fact that Popayán (CO) was the first city does not, by itself, justify this study, but what is in perspective in terms of the gap to be filled by this research is the passage of time between its accreditation, the present, and the future. As explained, Popayán is the oldest UCCG (since 2005), so this objective allows us to understand the significant differences between (1) the factors that led to its accreditation, such as the Congreso Nacional Gastronómico, held since 2003, and the Holy Week Festival, among others (Popayán, 2024c), and its progress in institutional terms as evidenced by the Voyant Tools results, where the term "UNESCO" is notably prominent (see Figure 3), and (2) its present stance on a key issue: the ongoing challenges related to destination image in terms of marketing and sustainability. Twenty years ago, these issues were treated differently in studies on tourism and gastronomy planning and management, to the extent that the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) were only included in the UNESCO debate in 2015 (Moreira et al., 2024). Thus, the distinguishing factor of this study is that it proposes new investments, not based on historical trends, but rather on a rigorous analysis using a robust methodology (AHP), incorporating the adaptation and application of the AHPI-UCCG model, specifically designed for UNESCO Creative Cities in Gastronomy.

#### *4.3. New Investment Agenda for the Image of Popayán as a UNESCO Creative City, Aligned with Sustainable Marketing Strategies*

Obviously, the lessons learned in this section for new investments are useful for both Popayán (CO) and the rest of the UCCN to improve the destination management process. A new investment agenda, innovative and focused on sustainable marketing, is needed to improve Popayán's overall performance, which stands at 69%, as shown in Figure 4 (see General dimension, regarding the image of the UCCN). Therefore, the focus should

be on improving the allocation of resources, especially in providing more of the following: (1) Gastronomic Experiences (reached 23%); (2) Infrastructure and Services (reached 40%); and (3) Governance and Sustainability (reached 52%), since observing and treating the image through the lens of sustainable marketing requires a holistic perspective. In this sense, in order to learn from the myth of origin of the UCCN cities in the context of gastronomy, the new investment agenda for Popayán should include the following innovative aspects revealed by this perspective (Table 3).

**Table 3.** New investment agenda for the UCCG.

Dimension	Score	Strategic Recommendation
(1) Cultural Attractions	100%	Maintain strong cultural programming (e.g., Semana Santa), and strategically integrate these events with gastronomic branding to reinforce Popayán's leadership as a cultural-gastronomic hub.
(2) Education	100%	Expand gastronomy-related education beyond formal higher education to include continuing education, innovation labs, and culinary entrepreneurship programs. Encourage a multi-level training strategy.
(3) Gastronomic Experiences	23%	Create year-round gastronomic itineraries that integrate visits to local producers, culinary workshops, and traditional food tastings. Leverage the National Gastronomy Congress as a core experience anchor.
(4) Governance and Sustainability	52%	Establish inter-city cooperation agreements within the UCCG, promote participatory planning involving local stakeholders, and ensure alignment with the 2030 Agenda in gastronomy-related initiatives.
(5) Destination Promotion	>80%	Develop a formal city marketing plan with updated digital content, brand storytelling, and engagement on platforms like TripAdvisor. Leverage unique identity markers (tradition, creativity, diversity).
(6) Infrastructure and Services	40%	Improve local transport, signage, and digital infrastructure (e.g., public Wi-Fi, mobile connectivity). Ensure hospitality services meet international standards to support global gastronomic tourism.

To strengthen the applicability of this agenda, the recommendations were aligned with the limitations identified in local institutional sources and the results of the AHPI-UCCG model. While the proposals reflect established good practices, their effectiveness will depend on a participatory diagnosis involving local stakeholders, which could be incorporated in future implementation phases. Incorporating tools such as stakeholder workshops and feasibility assessments will be essential to transform these recommendations into context-adjusted operational strategies for Popayán.

Table 3 shows that Popayán (CO), as a myth of origin for cities in gastronomy and creativity on a global scale, can in many ways inspire other cities in the UCCN itself in the context of gastronomy, as well as those that intend to apply. Although sustainability is linked to the Governance and Sustainability Dimension in the theoretical model, it is clear that when dealing with the image of destinations from the holistic perspective of sustainable marketing, it is necessary to bring together strengths and weaknesses so as not to make the mistake of dealing with problems in a fragmented way. Thus, the Agenda's main innovation lies in its contribution to critical thinking, from a theoretical, methodological

and practical point of view, which makes it possible to act with the transversality of sustainable marketing required in the 21st century.

From this new perspective, the new agenda makes strong points about this, including the identification of Popayán's weaknesses as an opportunity full of challenges. On the other hand, having applied the AHPI-UCCG model in an adapted way to the "Education" dimension allows us to understand not only its robustness, but also its objectivity in having the image not just as a construct, but as an objective planning and management tool, useful for reflecting on investments with the rational allocation of resources, aiming at sustainable development, with long-term action planning, as also highlighted by [Coutinho et al. \(2024\)](#).

## 5. Conclusions

It is clear that accreditations such as those awarded by the UNESCO Creative Cities Network (UCCN) can serve as a competitive differentiator and symbolic asset in the global tourism market. However, their effectiveness depends on strategic reflection regarding investment priorities and the ongoing management of destination image, especially when interpreted through the lens of sustainable tourism marketing. This study reinforces that branding a city as a UNESCO Creative City of Gastronomy (UCCG) should not rely solely on heritage status, but must evolve through innovation, inclusiveness, and responsiveness to sustainability goals.

To address this challenge, this study applied the AHPI-UCCG model, structured into six key dimensions: (1) Cultural Attractions; (2) Education; (3) Gastronomic Experiences; (4) Governance and Sustainability; (5) Destination Promotion; and (6) Infrastructure and Services, using the Analytic Hierarchy Process (AHP) method. The model was adapted for the Colombian context—marking its first application outside Brazil—and specifically incorporated technological training in the Education dimension. This methodological adaptation demonstrates the model's flexibility but also calls for future validations with local stakeholder input. The study also argues that sustainable marketing should not be confined to a single dimension but treated as a transversal logic that permeates all aspects of city branding and tourism strategy.

In 2024, nearly twenty years after its UNESCO designation, Popayán maintains outstanding performance in Education and Cultural Attractions (both 100%). However, its overall image score of 69% indicates gaps in strategic dimensions such as Gastronomic Experiences (23%), Infrastructure and Services (40%), and Governance and Sustainability (52%). These findings informed the development of a new investment agenda, which is not only tailored to Popayán, but also offers a framework for other UCCG cities and aspirants seeking to strengthen their image and alignment with sustainable tourism principles.

Importantly, the empirical basis of this study relies exclusively on secondary sources and institutional documentation, without direct triangulation through stakeholder engagement. While this approach ensures comparability across model dimensions, it limits the depth of interpretation regarding actual implementation and impact. Future research should integrate primary data collection—such as interviews with city officials, tourism professionals, residents, or sentiment analysis from user-generated content—to triangulate the model's outputs with real-world perceptions and outcomes.

From a theoretical standpoint, this study contributes to the transferability of the AHPI-UCCG model by demonstrating its applicability to a non-Brazilian foundational case—Popayán. This confirms the model's potential for international benchmarking and comparative studies in sustainable destination branding.

Furthermore, the AHPI-UCCG model can be expanded and tested across other UCCG cities, allowing for longitudinal and comparative studies that explore how gastronomic cities evolve within the UNESCO framework. This would support a broader generalisation

of the model's explanatory power and promote the development of benchmarking tools for cultural policy and tourism management.

In an era of climate uncertainty and digital transformation, further refinements of the AHPI-UCCG model could include indicators for climate resilience, digital visibility, and contributions from the creative economy. These adjustments would strengthen the model's theoretical maturity and enhance its value as a planning tool aligned with emerging global challenges.

Finally, the choice of Popayán as the empirical case—not just for its historical status, but as a “myth of origin” within the UCCN—provides a symbolic anchor to reflect on institutional maturity and branding innovation in global creative cities. The results show that the legacy of origin must be continually updated through evidence-based investment strategies, ensuring that symbolic capital is converted into concrete development outcomes aligned with the 2030 Agenda.

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## Abbreviations

The following abbreviations are used in this manuscript:

CO	Colombia
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UCCN	UNESCO Creative Cities Network
UCCG	UNESCO Creative City Gastronomy
AHP	Analytic Hierarchy Process
TDI	Tourism Destination Image

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