

Promoting tourism literacy from an educommunicator's point of view

Promoviendo la alfabetización turística desde una mirada educomunicadora

Promovendo a alfabetização turística a partir de uma perspectiva educomunicadora

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This work contributes to the conceptualization of tourism literacy from the approaches of media literacy. In this case, through structured interviews made with Tourism Management Organizations from Algarve, Portugal, we investigate the roles and perceptions of tourism mediators in terms of their relationship with the media and their role as agents of tourism processes from an educommunicative perspective, obtaining relevant information for the systematization of the tourism literacy competence, in terms of the dimensions and indicators for its development.

KEYWORDS: Tourism literacy, media, educommunication, competences.

Este trabajo contribuye a la conceptualización de la alfabetización turística desde los planteamientos de la alfabetización mediática. En este caso, mediante entrevistas estructuradas hechas a Organizaciones Gestoras de Destinos (OGDs) de Algarve, Portugal, se indaga en los roles y percepciones de los mediadores turísticos en cuanto a su relación con los medios y en su papel como agentes de los procesos turísticos desde una perspectiva educomunicativa. Se obtuvo información relevante para la sistematización de la competencia en alfabetización turística, en lo concerniente a las dimensiones e indicadores para su desarrollo.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Alfabetización turística, medios de comunicación, educomunicación, competencias.

Este artigo contribui para a conceitualização da alfabetização turística, a partir da abordagem da alfabetização midiática. Neste caso, por meio de entrevistas estruturadas com Organizações de Gestão de Destino (OGDs) de Algarve, Portugal, investigam-se os papéis e as percepções dos mediadores do turismo em termos da sua relação com a mídia e do seu papel como agentes dos processos turísticos numa perspectiva educomunicativa, obtendo-se informação relevante para a sistematização da competência de alfabetização turística, em termos das dimensões e indicadores para o seu desenvolvimento.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Tourism literacy, mídia, educomunicação, competências.

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INTRODUCTION

Literacy must be viewed from an integral perspective, in connection with the development of the competencies that citizens require throughout their lives for their integration into society (Pérez-Rodríguez, 2020). This is a permanent and evolving process, particularly conditioned by the transformations and directions taken by the media, platforms and networks in the different educational contexts (both formal and non-formal). Consequently, people acquire tools which allow them to define their identity in all fields, whether physical or digital, in an autonomous way and with full awareness of their civic duties. Therefore, literacy is conceived as a social practice that unfolds through everyday activities, shaped not only by individual capabilities, but also by cultural patterns, social interactions, communication tools, and the general framework of human existence (Chakrabarty, 2020, p. 1). In this way, the various environments (including non-formal ones) participate in this continuous process, which incorporates multiple facets of knowledge.

From this perspective, we recognize that the understanding and use of symbolic and cultural codes/conventions, the ability to examine, interpret and generate diverse information sources, intertextual and dialogic understanding/creation, and in particular, communication skills are all generators of various literacies.

Within the spectrum of possible literacies, in this study we propose to establish the concept of *tourism literacy* (hereafter TL). To do so, we start with an analysis of the role of the mediators involved in the communication processes related to tourism, as well as their identity and modes of interaction through their communication channels. In addition, we explore how this literacy is developed as part of an educommunicative process, involving non-formal educators, stages of preparation, experience and learning, establishing all the actors and links by addressing the integral development of the individual.

For this study, a structured interview is used, with the aim of gathering direct and broad information, which contributes to the delimitation of aspects that allow us to define and systematize the possible dimensions and indicators to establish a conceptual map of the main characteristics of tourism literacy competence (hereinafter TLC). The purpose

is to show the close links between communication and the media, and media literacy, in tourism communication. This decisive relationship can help all those involved in tourism to carry out their tasks in a way that is more in line with the SDGs (Sustainable Development Goals) and the guidelines of the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), in accordance with sustainable and ethical tourism practices and intercultural dialogue.

DIGITAL TECHNOLOGIES AND TOURISM LITERACY: TRANSFORMING TOURISM MANAGEMENT IN THE DIGITAL AGE

Digital technologies, especially social media, are central to tourism today, influencing the management, promotion and shaping of the image of destinations (Zeng & Gerritsen, 2014). Destination Management Organizations (DMOs) in European and Latin American countries use these tools to connect with the public and generate economic impact (Zeng & Gerritsen, 2014). In Brazil, particularly in Bahia, tourism is considered a key industry for generating employment and income, prioritizing sustainability, innovation and communication (Governo do Estado da Bahia, 2022; Ministério do Turismo, 2024).

Entities like the Região de Turismo do Algarve (RTA) and Câmara Municipal de Faro (CMFaro) have developed strategic plans focused on communication and promotion to attract and retain tourists (Câmara Municipal de Faro [CMFaro], 2016; Região de Turismo do Algarve [RTA], 2021), highlighting the unique attributes of their destinations.

Digital media facilitate connectivity and support the tourism experience (França et al., 2021; Jauhari, 2017; Minazzi, 2015; Neuhofer et al., 2013; Zeng & Gerritsen, 2014), serving as platforms for the diffusion of messages and accessing User Generated Content (UGC), not forgetting that “digital word of mouth” (eWOM) significantly influences tourists’ decisions (Minazzi, 2015).

The creation of narratives and the use of visual resources (Du et al., 2020), the portability of media and the credibility of testimonials (Minazzi, 2015) are key aspects of effective tourism communication. The quality of the tourism experience, understood as a co-created process (Jauhari, 2017), is fundamental to the competitiveness of destinations (Minazzi, 2015; Tung & Ritchie, 2011).

Efficient communication requires all stakeholders to develop tourism literacy skills and media skills, which make up the TLC model, applicable in different geographical contexts and to different types of mediators, as in the example of Brazil and Portugal, providing benefits for those who live and work in tourism areas.

TOURISM LITERACY: A VIEW FROM LITERATURE

Santiago Jiménez and Morfin Herrera (2016) address the notion of “tourist literacy in the destination” which implies the assimilation of knowledge generated by solidarity, i.e., from the connections and references that travelers establish by making contact with the visited space, both socially and culturally. In this way, it transforms this reality into something of its own, turning this “strange” universe into a familiar one, through a process based on ethical principles and values, consideration for the territories, their inhabitants and the environment, seen as multi-referential, relational and accessible through tourist experiences. Elliot (2019) uses the term “literacy to travel” when referring to how the trip is organized and the preparations and information gathered beforehand, among which we highlight consulting travel guides and books, following travelers and their posts on social media, watching films and documentaries, learning languages, etc.

Furthermore, “geographic literacy” (National Geographic, n.d.), referring to the ability of tourists to assimilate, manage and use “geospatial information”, together with “literacy in travel and tourism” (Holistic Literacy Coach, 2020), highlight other characteristics referring to transport, communication and information media, which denote skills for the organization/implementation of actions and activities linked to tourism.

According to M. Potes Barbas, coordinator of the project *MovTour: Turismo e Cultura com e para a Sociedade, Portugal* (personal communication, September 27, 2020), “tourism literacy” also refers to understanding all the resources with which one interacts when traveling, whether they are natural, historical-cultural or socioeconomic, and how this knowledge is managed in terms of relevance, interest and appreciation for the promotion of sustainable and quality tourism.

Other studies, related to aspects that are very specific to the world of tourism (Luna-Cortés, 2024), address literacies like: carbon literacy (also known as environmental literacy), information literacy, leisure literacy, digital literacy, adult literacy, technology literacy, disaster prevention literacy, ocean literacy, cultural literacy, emotional literacy, feedback literacy and geographic literacy. In the specific case of tourism literacy, and focusing on its conceptualization, Koç et al. (2023) designed a questionnaire and a scale for assessing the degree of tourism literacy through six dimensions which aim to identify the skills of residents, tourists, guides, aspects related to food and drink, or tourism management.

Thus, in line with the above, literacy transcends the context of the development of coding/decoding skills and abilities and is oriented towards achieving social goals (Papen, 2010). Consequently, it can be deduced that, when travelling, given that learning and interaction take place, TL can be developed because there are relationships involving people when communicating and using media. This link is what has led us to propose our concept based on studies on media, audiovisual and transmedia competence (Ferrés & Piscitelli, 2012; Pérez-Rodríguez & Delgado-Ponce, 2012; Scolari et al., 2018).

The models proposed by these authors offer comprehensive frameworks to understand and develop skills in the current media environment. Ferrés and Piscitelli (2012) present six dimensions (languages, technology, interaction processes, production and diffusion processes, ideology and values, and esthetic) with indicators for each one. Pérez-Rodríguez and Delgado-Ponce (2012) propose a model which involves ten dimensions in three areas: knowledge, understanding and expression. Scolari et al. (2018) introduce the concept of *transmedia literacy*, extending the focus to collaborative practices and the production of content on multiple platforms. These models, although they each have a different focus, agree on the importance of developing skills which address both critical analysis as well as creative production in the contemporary media ecosystem. Based on this, our research aims to determine the competence resulting from tourism literacy (TLC).

METHODOLOGY

The process for carrying out this study follows a qualitative research approach, in which the main instrument used was the structured interview (Hernández-Sampieri et al., 2006), carried out with three Destination Management Organizations (DMOs) in the Algarve, Portugal: Região de Turismo do Algarve (RTA), Associação de Turismo do Algarve (ATA) and Câmara Municipal de Faro (CMFaro). It is important to underline that RTA and ATA are the organizations representing the central state and implement the measures defined by the government for the tourism sector. The CMFaro also plays a fundamental role. As the capital of the Algarve, Faro is a point of reference for visitors and, therefore, for the rest of the municipalities as well.

Tourism is a crucial sector for the global economy, and particularly for Portugal. In 2022, it contributed 12.2% of Portuguese GDP, surpassing key sectors such as the automotive and agriculture. The Algarve, as the country's main tourist destination, is where a large part of this activity is concentrated, with a steady growth in the number of visitors and overnight stays, especially after the pandemic. This success is largely due to the work of these organizations, which take it upon themselves to plan, promote and manage the Algarve brand and create a positive image of the destination, focusing on the diversification of what's on offer to tourists, beyond the sun and the beach, and promoting sustainable and responsible tourism which benefits the local community.

This study aims to systematize and conceptualize TL by defining the competencies and TLC skills that determine it, to create a model that allows the TL of the people who participate in tourism to be assessed. This is based on the consideration of whether or not there is a need for tourism literacy as a specific training.

The research has been carried out in three phases:

- Documentation phase: exhaustive analysis of specialized literature on media literacy and tourism communication.
- Empirical phase: conducting and analyzing structured interviews with key informants from the selected entities.

- Analytical phase: processing and interpreting the data obtained for the conceptualization of the TL and the definition of the TLC.

The sample includes professionals linked to the mentioned entities, selected for their strategic role in the tourism communication of the destination.

TABLE 1 DATA FROM THE INTERVIEWS		
Entity	Date of the interview	Interviewee
RTA	11/04/2021	Planning, Communication, Image and Quality Technician
ATA	11/15/2021	Executive Director
CMFaro	11/23/2021	Councilor for Tourism of the <i>Câmara Municipal de Faro</i> (CMFaro)

Source: The authors.

The dimensions and indicators provided in reference studies, such as those of Pérez-Rodríguez and Delgado-Ponce (2012), Ferrés and Piscitelli (2012) and Scolari et al. (2018), were taken into account in the development of the interview questions, which allowed for the systematization of a series of categories (5) and subcategories (13). The different answers obtained generated a corpus of information that was coded thematically, identifying patterns and emerging categories that made it possible to establish the fundamental dimensions of the TLC (see Table 2).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis of the interviews conducted identified several key elements that contribute to the conceptualization of TL and the determination of the dimensions of TLC. In this process, particular consideration has been given to some of the dimensions and indicators established for media competence, taken from the Pérez-Rodríguez and Delgado-Ponce (2012) model. The TLC proposal was judged by seven experts in fields related

TABLE 2
THEMATIC DIVIDE OF INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

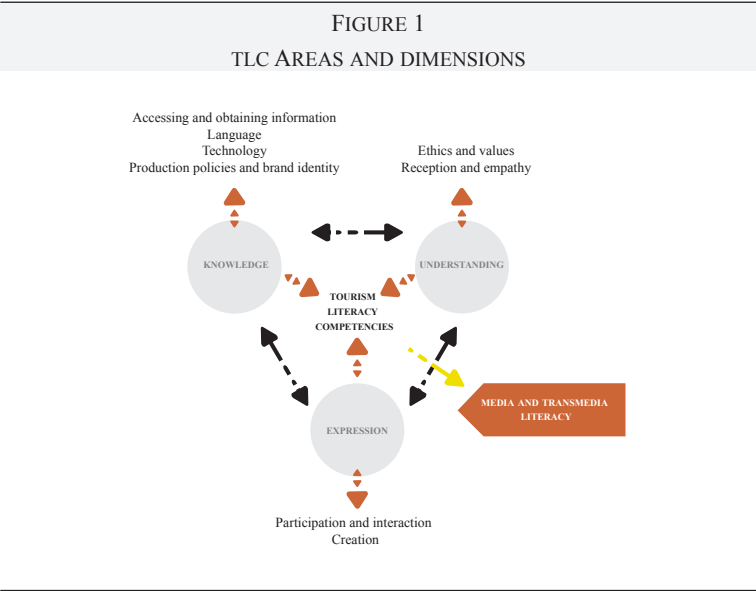
Category	Subcategory	Associated questions
Institution's area and function	Institution's area of action	1. Identification of the interviewee: name, age, sex, role, department 2. What role does your organization play in promoting tourism in the Algarve region? 3. Your department/sector has direct responsibility for communication and planning. Can you explain in detail what this responsibility entails?
	Role of institution	4. Can you identify what media/communication channels your institution uses (paper, digital, audiovisual, other)?
Institution's media and channels	Institution's media and channels	5. Your organization launches various communication campaigns every so often, what are the main concerns you have each time you launch a campaign?
		6. Can you identify the main communication campaigns currently taking place and what are their objectives?
Concern for campaigns and messages	Definition of the target audience	8. How is the target audience of each campaign determined?
	Definition of the messages	7. When it comes to planning the message of the campaign, are the differences in the audience taken into account or do you prepare general messages that can be adapted to any audience? Why?
		9. Are the messages that are created the same for all communication channels that you have/use? Why?

Category	Subcategory	Associated questions
	Type of messages used	<p>10. What type of message does your organization prefer to use: audiovisual, images, written? Why do think that's the case?</p> <p>18. Imagine that you're a tourist visiting the Algarve for the first time, what type of information would you look for and consider to be most important?</p>
	Different impacts of the messages	<p>12. Undoubtedly, there are messages that are perceived with different impact: some are better understood and spread quickly, while others are not. What do you think about this? What do you attribute it to?</p>
	Evaluation of the impacts	<p>13. How would you evaluate the success of your campaigns, i.e., what criteria and methods are used to know if it was successful or not?</p> <p>15. Do the people who visit the Algarve plan their trip with the help of your channels? How could you measure if that really happens?</p>
	Importance of the institution's communication for the region	<p>19. In your opinion, is your institution and your way of communicating important in defining the public image of the Algarve region? Please explain.</p>
Interaction with the target audience	Feedback and exchange of content after traveling	<p>14. Do you often receive comments from your audience about your organization's communication? How is this feedback given? Provide specific examples.</p> <p>16. After visiting the region, do tourist share with you what they have seen, learnt, appreciated, liked? How do they do this?</p>

Category	Subcategory	Associated questions
Tourism literacy	Tourism education as a communicative concern	11. When communicating through your campaigns on different channels and in different formats, do you think that, in a way, you are educating people and teaching them about tourism communication?
	Skills for planning, carrying out and communicating a trip	17. What skills do you think are important for tourists to plan, carry out and communicate their travel experiences?
	Definition of tourism literacy	20. What do you think tourism literacy is?

Source: The authors.

to this research (media literacy and tourism). The main findings are organized into three fundamental categories, as shown in Figure 1.

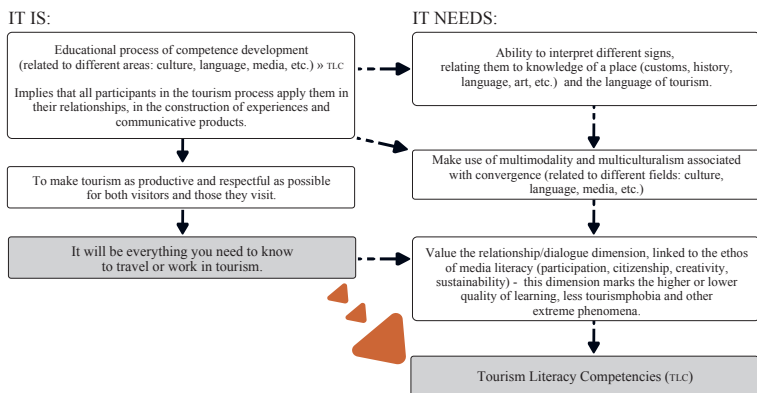


Source: The authors.

Participants agree that TL goes beyond the mere ability to access tourism information, encompassing a broader set of competencies. It is, therefore, a continuous learning process that involves: holistic understanding of the tourism phenomenon, the capacity for critical interpretation of information, ability to interact responsibly with the destination, awareness of the impact of tourism activity, and tourism communication at the destination.

The information gathered in the interviews allows the systematization of tourism literacy (TL) from the perspective of different skills, for example, the interpretation of different types of signs (written, visual, auditory) and, on the other hand, the knowledge acquired about a place (customs, history, art, etc.), as well as those of a more practical nature, such as the activities that can be carried out in the destination. As for the mediators, TL also involves the knowledge necessary to participate

FIGURE 2
CONCEPT OF TOURISM LITERACY



Source: The authors.

in a tourism activity, from preparation and planning, the search for information or the creation of an experience that provides satisfaction and learning. In this sense, mediators are identified as the media (traditional media, networks, platforms); tourism mediators (DMOs and tourism agents: interpreter guides, travel agents, municipal technicians, entertainers, hotel workers, etc.); hosts (whether or not they work directly in the tourism sector), and tourists.

The data collected in this study allow us to highlight some of the skills that determine TLC. An important component is related to the technology dimension (knowledge domain), which considers the skills and abilities linked to the facilities that technological development offers in order to communicate, manage information and to recognize and understand the level of engagement (degree of commitment/loyalty) and awareness (degree of perception of a destination). The importance of the dimension of reception and empathy (understanding) is also noted due to the impact of replicating influencers' experiences, or any information associated with celebrities, artists and influencers, leading tourists to identify with the product/destination of the tourist communication. In this sense, there are many examples of tourism cam-

paigns in which the posts and stories of certain places shared by influential people on Instagram achieve an increase in the number of tourists visiting these sites.

The creation dimension (field of expression) is another of these key aspects. In this sense, its development will allow emotions, experiences and sensations to become visible, to build experiences and impressions that are considered memorable in terms of what happened on the trip, the knowledge gained of the place, the products that were offered, etc.

In the interviews, RTA and ATA mentioned having social media channels: Facebook, Instagram, X (formerly Twitter) and YouTube, and all channels titled "Visit Algarve" are shared by the first two mediators. In addition, they all use more traditional media (offline, such as brochures, billboards, posters on public structures, etc.).

Regarding the target audience, RTA and ATA define it using rigorous segmentation that considers the country of origin, language, age, interests and motivations of the audience, as well as the objective of each campaign. The City Council of Faro (CMFaro) claims that, for economic reasons, it prepares campaigns for the general public, which does not necessarily imply a lack of knowledge about the reception and empathy competence, but rather external limitations to its application.

Also noteworthy is the use of publications that highlight awards/distinctions, media reports on the area and the rating of the posts by their audiences, with reposts on the official channels of these institutions. The interviews mentioned strategies like using hashtags, hiring influencers, receiving feedback through shares, interactions, comments and messages. In this sense, when content is shared by consumers, i.e., when there is connectivity and involvement, there is evidence of TLC, in terms of reception and empathy, in the area of understanding.

In the interviews, when asked specifically about tourism literacy, RTA, ATA and CMFaro identify competencies that they consider indispensable for tourists, such as:

- Being able to make organizational decisions for the purchase or selection of travel (products/services).
- Rigorously evaluating the destination (existing product/service offer), bearing in mind that personal, professional and family fac-

tors (available budget, health issues, experiences from other trips, habits and attitudes, opinions, recommendations and the tourist's perceptions, friends and family) can condition this process.

- Knowing how to access information on the Internet and social media, which is often very useful but can also be misleading (although they can plan without using these resources).

There is also less competition in terms of utilities to reach different target audiences through different channels and types of messages. CMFaró does not use metric tools, accepting as valid only the verbal communications of tourists, or those that reach them from various operators linked to the City Council. Despite identifying the need to adapt content to the specificities of each platform and audience, they do not choose to make other adjustments that could be more attractive and interactive, consistent with actions that lead to more real and effective participation by the recipients, applying aspects that improve the effectiveness of the circulation of the message, such as relevance, timeliness or memorability (Minazzi, 2015).

ATA and the CMFaró show a greater awareness of the educommunicative function that their communications can have, affirming that they influence tourists and their decisions to the extent that, by making them aware of factors such as the history, customs and traditions of the destination, they generate a feeling of "familiarity" for the prospective traveler that motivates and incites them to travel. RTA addresses the issue of the educational role of mediators by making a clear distinction between promotional messages and awareness-raising messages on issues such as environmental preservation, while clearly not looking at the communication process as a contribution to improving the literacy of its recipients. This point of view contradicts statements such as the following:

Today, the Internet is at the center of the information gathering process when choosing a holiday destination, as well as in the process of purchasing travel experiences and the full range of services associated with the destination. Therefore, it is fundamental that the strategy for communication

and promotion of the destination is very specific and personalized in terms of online presence, especially on social media, to achieve results with our target audience, tourists and visitors (RTA, personal communication, November 4, 2021).

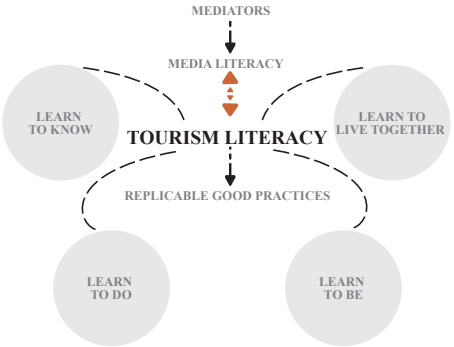
In this sense, if we consider that the use of short video platforms (such as TikTok) may be associated with the self-representation and social identity of communicators, especially in tourism-related products, facilitating personalization, self-esteem and the exchange of travel experiences, as well as the tourist intention of users (Du et al., 2020; Liu et al., 2023), it should be argued that the possibility of sharing one's own short videos, or those made by tourists and influencers, would develop the potential for interaction, both with users and with other platforms strongly linked to recreational activities.

Regarding mediation, the starting point is the objective of gaining access to knowledge for a given audience. Mediators are perceived as interfaces between the message and the recipient, that is, articulating instances that allow the latter to absorb the meanings implicit in the contents and collaborate in the creation of meaning. In other words, it is a fundamentally educational activity that contributes to the participants in a mediation process adopting a reflective stance (Silva, 2011, p. 249). According to Puertas (2008, p. 53), a direct connection is established between the place, the culture, the environment and the people.

According to the answers obtained, the TL mediator is, in a way, an assistant in an educational process (with intellectual, technical, economic and social motivations) that starts with the decision to visit a place and ends when one returns and shares one's experience. In this process, the providers of activities/experiences and the interaction between communities, the environment, the hotel sector and tourists are also identified, placing them between what is the destination itself (the referent) and the tourist's construction of it, i.e., the meaning or sign linked to the complex characteristics that make it up: geographical, socio-cultural, environmental, etc. (Buhalis, 2000).

The results show us the idea of the mediator as a guarantor in this learning relationship and the existence of information, offering attractive/

FIGURE 3
TOURISM LITERACY AND THE INTEGRAL DEVELOPMENT
OF HUMAN BEINGS



Source: The authors.

suitable support (with accessible, understandable messages adapted to the audience). A TL mediator will have the added responsibility of the educator’s perspective, in line with TLC, by checking for issues such as cognitive dispersion, ambiguous credibility, uncertainty related to information sources or data manipulation (Cortes-Moreira et al., 2024). The understanding of what mediation is and ethical considerations about the role of mediators are even more essential to understand this process and the underlying issues, such as accountability, authenticity, the level of business present in the activity, real-time co-creation, the presence of technologies and sustainability, among others (Puertas, 2008).

All those interviewed recognize themselves as participants in this relationship and the data shows that they strongly value the knowledge of these mediation processes linked to tourism. In this way and taking into account the TLC, its dimensions and indicators, a deeper understanding of tourism activity and its implications is achieved, recognizing instruments that allow the expansion of practices that favor a broader, sustainable and ethical social and behavioral development, leading stakeholders to identify and use these dimensions, areas and indicators of TLC.

CONCLUSIONS

In accordance with the purpose of this study, the contribution to the systematization and conceptualization of TL by delimiting the competences and skills of TLC, and based on interviews with tourism mediators, it is concluded that, in general, the actors involved possess skills and awareness of communication processes in today's society. In this sense, those related to the digital world stand out as a crucial element for the development of tourism. Thus, the importance of the digital world in decision-making and in the ways in which travel experiences are disseminated is noted (CMFaro, personal communication, November 23, 2021), including the search for destination knowledge (ATA, personal communication, November 15, 2021) and the planning of safe and personalized itineraries (RTA, personal communication, November 4, 2021).

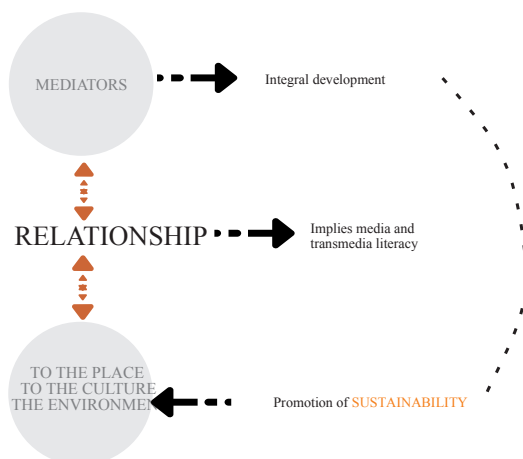
TL is closely linked to skills that promote participation and creativity, aspects that Fantin (Observatório da Qualidade no Audiovisual, 2023) points out are inherent to a literate citizenry. The Global Code of Ethics for Tourism (UNWTO, 2001) and the SDGs also encourage the promotion of ethics, interculturality, environmental protection and respect for and preservation of intercultural and historical assets.

This reflects the existence of TLCs, as mediators identify and relate them to the dimensions and areas that are part of the proposal presented. The relevance of skills that humanize the tourism processes are highlighted, as well as the aspects related to empathy, relation and communication, denoting closeness or familiarity.

Furthermore, in terms of expression and creation, multimodality (combining text, sound, photography and video) allows to communicate authenticity, emotion and unique aspects of each destination. Responses from RTA, ATA and CMFaro highlight the importance of using codes and narrative structures appropriate to each medium and format, demonstrating a link between media literacy skills and mediators' TL.

Although this study provides a foundation for understanding TL and TLC, there are certain limitations such as the limited geographical scope of the sample, the need for additional empirical validation of the proposed dimensions, and the constant evolution of the digital and media environment.

FIGURE 4
TOURISM LITERACY AND THE INTEGRAL DEVELOPMENT
OF HUMAN BEINGS



Source: The authors.

For future research, we suggest developing evaluation instruments that are specific to measuring TLC. We also suggest extending the study to different geographical and cultural contexts, interviewing other mediators, and even seeking the practical applications of the proposed competency framework, applying it in different tourism environments as a way of seeking replicable good practices (benchmarking). We believe that tourism literacy emerges as a promising field for future research, with the potential to contribute significantly to the development of more sustainable and conscious tourism.

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