

Social media as a digital brand tool to promote a tourism destination

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Abstract | In the current tourist scene, places and especially destinations compete against each other in an increasingly globalized market. In order to successfully compete, destinations work on developing a strong brand identity through effective positioning and the digitalisation has caused the business ecosystem to change the way businesses compete in the marketplace as well as the way that tourism services are perceived, consumed and. This means that a destination needs a strong marketing activity to exist. Thus, it is a current practice for destinations to work the marketing and branding activities to position the destination in the minds of the visitors by creating a strong, distinctive, specific, and attractive brand identity. This process of positioning and differentiating a destination is called destination branding. The growing possession of indispensable technological devices among tourists has increased their access to e-marketing channels. The way tourists search, and purchase tourism products and services are changing. Therefore, for destinations to compete in today's marketplace, they need to have the most effective digital marketing tools to provides them a significant advantage. This study aimed to understand how social media is used to develop a digital brand and promote a tourism destination. More specifically, we aimed to characterize how digital marketing is used by municipalities as a strategy to promote a tourism destination; and how communication digital tools such facebook and instagram are used in the promotion of a tourism destination. An exploratory qualitative study was developed. All the hashtags in the social media Instagram and Facebook defined by the municipalities of Vila do Conde and Póvoa de Varzim were analyzed. The data was collected using the platform Apify. The results show that the municipalities have different views of the role of hashtags in promoting the brand.

Keywords | Digital brand, Digital marketing, Social media, Tourism destination

1. Introduction

Nowadays, the use of digital marketing is fundamental in destinations management. In fact, in a time where destinations compete against each other in an increasingly globalized market (Garcia, Gómez & Molina, 2012), destinations work on developing a strong brand identity through effective positioning and the digitalisation has caused the business ecosystem to change the way businesses compete in the marketplace (Kannan & Li, 2017) as well as the way that tourism services are perceived, consumed and accessed (Mariani, Di Felice & Mura, 2016; Ukpabi & Karjaluoto, 2017).

Currently the internet can not only connect people with digital media but can also be used as a link between consumers. In addition, digital marketing makes it easier for destinations management to monitor and provide tourists and visitor's needs. This digital era characterized by social media can cover all internet users wherever they live without any area or time restrictions. Through social networks it is possible to create a virtual community around a brand allowing users who wish to inform themselves and interact with the publications made by the brand itself. In touristic destinations these social networks stand out as a channel to obtain and disseminate information on travel experiences, being of great influence on the part of tourists when making a travel decision. In this way, it is interesting to know how tourist destinations use these social networks to carry out their marketing strategies. Thus, in this study we propose to analyse the activity and effectiveness of Facebook and Instagram as official social networks for tourism promotion in Póvoa de Varzim e Vila do Conde municipalities.

2. Literature Review

In the current tourist scene, places and especially destinations compete against each other in an increasingly globalized market (Garcia, Gómez & Molina, 2012). To successfully compete, destinations need to work on developing a strong brand identity through effective positioning.

The growing possession of indispensable technological devices among tourists has increased their access to e-marketing channels (Kotoua & Ilkan, 2017). Digitalization has caused the business ecosystem to change the way businesses compete in the marketplace (Kannan & Li, 2017) as well as the way that tourism services are perceived, consumed and accessed (Mariani, Di Felice & Mura, 2016; Ukpabi & Karjaluoto, 2017). For destinations to thrive and compete in today's marketplace, they need to have an effective and efficient e-marketing channel. Thus, digital marketing has become one of the key focus areas for tourism businesses and destinations all over the world. Therefore, for destinations, using the most effective digital marketing tools is crucial as it provides them with a significant advantage. Magano and Cunha (2020) support the notion that understanding digital marketing and harnessing the power of digital marketing tools is crucial to achieving success in the tourism industry. Pike (2020) emphasizes the role of destination branding in influencing traveller decisions, while Kannan and Li (2017) highlight the

importance of digital marketing frameworks in shaping consumer perceptions. Mariani et al. (2016) provide a comprehensive analysis of how social media can enhance destination marketing. By comparing these perspectives, we can understand the multifaceted impact of digital tools on tourism branding. Specifically, Pike's focus on brand identity complements Kannan and Li's broader digital marketing strategies, while Mariani et al.'s insights on social media engagement offer practical applications for real-time consumer interaction. Lon Safko (2010) pointed out that the meaning of social media is determined by the concepts created by the users and defines social media as a set of tools used by organizations to reach existing customers and target groups. Social media are becoming more important every day, not only in social life, but also in the tourism business (Katsoni and Laloumis, 2013).

In fact, social media is a digital marketing tool that is frequently used by tourists as a source of information as well as engagement (Barcelos, Dantas & Sénécal, 2019; Villamediana, Küster & Vila, 2019; Molina, Gómez, Lyon, Aranda & Loibl, 2020). Social media allows users to form virtual communities (Mariani et al., 2016; Molina et al., 2020) and plays an important role in influencing decision making when people publicly share their travel experiences (Magano & Cunha, 2020; Perakakis, Trihas, Venitourakis, Mastorakis & Kopanakis, 2016).

The ability for tourists to instantly share, follow, like, rate and discuss various types of content helps to keep friends and family up to date about ongoing (travel) experiences (Jansson, 2018; Srinivaasan & Kabia, 2020; Vassiliadis & Belenioti, 2017). In addition, social media postings appeal to the emotional needs of potential customers (Molina et al., 2020). Social activities (such as real-time texting and video sharing) facilitate online social contact among people and peer-to-peer communication (Molina et al., 2020). Social media also allows tourists to post online reviews of destinations. Online reviews have gained popularity as an important source of information and an influencer of consumer decision-making (An, Ma, Du, Xiang & Fan, 2020; Tran, 2020). The use of emoticons (graphic demonstrations of facial expressions) when reviewing destinations has become a common and convenient tool for online customers to better express their ideas or feelings (Huang, Chang, Bilgihan & Okumus, 2020). According to Huang, more than eighty-five percent of travellers read online reviews during their pre-trip stage (Huang et al., 2020). This means that the majority of customers rely on the opinions of others to make their travel decisions (Tran, 2020). From a marketers' perspective, social media is an important communication and engagement platform (Mariani et al., 2016; Mariani, Mura & Di Felice, 2018). For customers, social media is a crucial source of information that affects consumers' decision-making processes (Leung et al., 2019).

With the growing trend of travellers now using social media for all travel information, it has been found that tourists prefer to find more focused travel-related information when searching for travel information (Önder, Gunter & Gindl, 2020), which led to the increasing usage of hashtags (#) since the use of hashtags makes social media a better source of information.

The most popular example of social networks today is Facebook. Founded by Mark Zuckerberg in February 2004, Facebook is a social network that aims to allow people to communicate with other people and exchange information. Nowadays, Facebook advises internet users on how to share on their Facebook page and how they can achieve their goals. Facebook enables businesses to create pages which potential customers can “like” in order for them to access and stay up to date with new content as well as to directly interact with the business (Perakakis et al., 2016). This interaction feature allows administrators to understand how customers engage with the business page (Perakakis et al., 2016). The use of social media in the tourism industry has affected both the demand and supply sides of tourism marketing. Facebook, as the largest community and interactive social media platform (Trunfio & Della Lucia, 2019), provides organizations with a strong media presence hence Facebook’s popularity makes it an attractive marketing platform (Önder et al., 2020; Trunfio & Della Lucia, 2019). Through Facebook, businesses can send private messages directly to their customers and marketers can create and send content links of videos, texts and audio.

Instagram, which is the most widely used social media channel, is actively producing and managing content. Founded in October 2010 by Kevin Systrom and Mike Krieger primarily Instagram, a photo and video based social media tool, allows users to express themselves through personal sharing and create their own content.

Digital storytelling allows for the visualization of tourism experiences through audio clips, photos and videos and in so doing, provides concrete evidence of the experiences (An et al., 2020). Digital storytelling stimulates a desire to travel by engaging with the imagination, anticipation and prolonging the experience for tourists.

The concept of hashtag, which we know through Twitter and entered our lives rapidly, is the most important factor in reaching the target audience in the fastest way by identifying the issues that the photos we share in Instagram are relevant and enabling the brand to receive more likes and followers. The Internet entrepreneur uses Instagram effectively to ensure that messages represent their brand identity and corporate culture accurately and effectively, with images they share their brands with allows to promote correct visual sharing to the right target audience.

3. Methodology

This exploratory study uses a qualitative methodology to answer the research question How social media (Instagram and Facebook) platforms are used to promote a tourism destination? With this question our main objective is to characterize the kind of attributes that are associated with the promotion of the tourist destinations: Vila do Conde and Póvoa de Varzim. Vila do Conde and Póvoa de Varzim are two contiguous cities located in the north of Portugal. These cities share common characteristics and dynamics. In particular concerning traditions, gastronomy, the main sectors of activity, cultural and territorial dynamics.

To develop this study, we analyze all the publications in Instagram and Facebook between November 2021 and December 2023. We consider this timeline because it corresponds to the beginning of the new local government body. The Facebook's page of the municipality of Vila do Conde was created on 26.03.2014, and Instagram's page in January 2021. Instagram has 2428 publications and 8402 followers. The Facebook's page of the municipality of Póvoa de Varzim was created on 21.01.2014, and its Instagram on March 2017. Instagram has 5569 publications and 11,3 thousands of followers.

For the data collection, we consider all the hashtags defined in both platforms for each one of the cities. For Vila do Conde it was considered #viladoconde, #municipioviladoconde, #camaramunicipalviladoconde; and for Póvoa de Varzim #ébomviveraqui. The data was collected using the platform Apify. All the content was transferred to an Excel file. We analyzed information related to the date of publication, the kind of publication (text, photo, or video), the number of comments, the number of likes, the profile type of the user (individual or organizational), and the text written in the publication. The text was analyzed according to context analysis procedures (Bardin, 2011) considering the following categories: Gastronomy, Cultural heritage; Natural heritage; Geographical location (sun and sea), Organization promotion; Traditions; Events (sports, cultural, religious), and Others. All ethical procedures were considered. Each post could have more than one category according to the content.

Our sample is composed of 303 results, that represent all the posts published with the hashtags considered for both municipalities during the research period. Which means that the Apify platform collected the whole posts published in Instagram and in Facebook of both municipalities using the hashtags defined by them. Regarding the social media platforms of Vila do Conde, we collected 54 publications from Instagram and 108 publications from Facebook. From the Póvoa de Varzim platforms, it was collected 40 publications from Instagram and 101 publications from Facebook. In Table 1, we can observe that, in Vila do Conde case, the Instagram and Facebook platforms are used similarly. On Instagram #viladoconde and #municipioviladoconde are the most used hashtags. Although, on Facebook the most used hashtags are #viladoconde and #camaramunicipalviladoconde. In the Póvoa de Varzim case, the Facebook platform is more used than Instagram.

Table 1 | Number of publications used in Instagram and Facebook according to the hashtags used

	Instagram	Facebook
Vila do Conde		
#viladoconde	42	50
#municipioviladoconde	42	9
#camaramunicipalviladoconde	20	49
Póvoa de Varzim		
#ébomviveraqui	40	101

Source: Own elaboration.

4. Results

The results are going to be presented for each one of the cities: Vila do Conde and Póvoa de Varzim. The results from Vila do Conde showed that on Facebook 106 are Portuguese publications, 1 was made by Brazilian, and 1 from Indonesia. One hundred and three are organizational publications and five are individual publications. All the publications had 1705 comments and 31393 likes. We observed posts in 2022 (n=5) and in 2023 (n=195). Regarding the months, most of the posts were made in December (n=35), 26 posts in November, nine posts were made in March and July each. The months with fewer posts were January and September with only one post each. We also observed that 80 publications were videos, 17 were photos and 10 were text.

In Table 2, we can observe that the most frequent category present on Facebook is "Sport event", followed by "Organization promotion", followed by "Religious events" and "Sport events". Only the category "Natural heritage" was not considered in any post.

Additionally, we observed that there were other hashtags used in the publications. In total, we observed the use of 163 additional hashtags, although there is any pattern in the kind of hashtags used.

The results from Vila do Conde Instagram showed that 51 publications were made by Portuguese persons, 2 from Brazilian, and 1 Italian. Forty-one were made by organizations and 12 were made by individuals. All the Instagram publications had 39 comments and 1456 likes. Regarding the post publication date, all of them were made in 2023. The majority were made during December (n=28) and November (n=19), but there were also posts in April, June, August (1 per month), October and May had 2 posts per month.

Regarding the kind of publication, we observed one video, 19 photos, and 34 GraphSidecar photos. GraphSidecar has the functionality of a carousel, a collection of multiple permanent photos. It appears in Instagram layout, in the same place as the photos and videos.

Regarding the content analysis of the post published in Instagram, the most frequent categories were "Organization promotion", "Sport event" and "Cultural events" (Table 2). The categories "Cultural heritage" and "Religious events" were not considered in any post.

Table 2 | Distribution of categories per social platform for Vila do Conde

Categories	Instagram	Facebook
Gastronomy	4	6
Cultural heritage	--	1
Natural heritage	3	2
Geographical location	6	--
Traditions	9	1
Sport Event	11	35
Cultural Event	9	8
Religious Event	--	1
Organization promotion	14	29
Other	3	4

Source: Own elaboration.

The results from Póvoa de Varzim showed that on Facebook 73 are Portuguese publications, 25 were made by Brazilian, 2 from Pakistan, and 1 from Indonesia. Fifty-eight are organizational publications and 43 are individual publications. All the publications had 2836 comments and 62409 likes. We observed posts in 2022 (n=7) and in 2023 (n=93). Regarding the months, most of the posts were made in December (n=36), eleven posts were made in July and November, and 10 posts in August. The months with fewer posts were January and February with only one post each. We also observed that 77 posts were videos, 22 were photos, and only one was text.

In Table 3, we can observe that the most frequent category present on Facebook is "Organization promotion", followed by "Religious events" and "Sport events". Only the category "Natural heritage" was not considered in any post.

Moreover, we observed the use of 168 other hashtags. In 21 cases it was the use of the official hashtag but written with accent mark or capital letter, ie, #ébomviveraqui or #EBomViverAqui. Regarding the other 147 hashtags, there was not any pattern in the hashtags used.

On the platform Instagram, 32 are Portuguese publications and 8 are from Brazilian. Regarding the profile of the person who made the publication, 32 are organizations and 10 are individual publications. All the Instagram publications had 11 comments and 617 likes. All the posts were made in 2023, 28 during December, and 12 posts in November. Regarding the kind of publication we observed 1 video, 27 photos, and 12 GraphSiidecar photos

In Table 3, we can observe that the most frequent category present on Instagram is “Organization promotion”, followed by “Sport event” and the category “gastronomy”. The categories “Cultural heritage”, “Natural heritage”, “Cultural event”, “Religious event” and “Other” was not considered in any post.

Table 3 | Distribution of categories per social platform for Póvoa de Varzim

Categories	Instagram	Facebook
Gastronomy	6	3
Cultural heritage	-	1
Natural heritage	-	-
Geographical location	1	1
Traditions	3	1
Sport Event	8	8
Cultural Event	-	3
Religious Event	-	13
Organization promotion	26	25
Other	-	7

Source: Own elaboration.

5. Discussion and conclusions

This study aimed to characterize the kind of attributes that are associated with the promotion of the tourism destinations: Vila do Conde and Póvoa de Varzim analyzing their official social media platforms. In this digital era, where social media is fundamentally changing the way travellers and tourists search, find, read and trust, as well as collaboratively produce information about tourism

suppliers and tourism destinations. The findings suggest that both municipalities underutilized their Instagram and Facebook accounts. This underutilization contrasts with Mariani et al.'s (2016) assertion that consistent social media engagement is crucial for effective destination marketing. Our results indicate that while social media is a powerful tool, its potential is not fully realized due to inconsistent use. Moreover, most of the posts were made during 2023.

Concerning the date of the post, the vast majority were made in December and November, although in the case of Póvoa de Varzim, there were a significant number of publications in August. This finding is very strange if we take account that, as Magano and Cunha (2020) support,

understanding digital marketing and harnessing the power of digital marketing tools is crucial to achieving success in the tourism industry.

Additionally, the publisher profile was analyzed, in most of the cases the posts were made by organizations, and only a smaller number of posts were made by single persons. Regarding their nationality, most of the posts are made by Portuguese persons or organizations. In the case of Póvoa de Varzim, there are a significant number of posts made by Brazilian persons. These results might suggest that most of the posts are made by residents and local organizations. Moreover, nowadays North of Portugal has a huge Brazilian community living in these cities.

The most frequent category used on Instagram of Vila do Conde and Póvoa was "Organization promotion" followed by "Sport event".

More specifically, in the case of Vila do Conde, the categories "Traditions" and "Geographical location" are also relevant. The first category is associated with the local traditions, and the second category is associated with the sea and the Ave River. In the case of Póvoa de Varzim, the category "Gastronomy" is also used, suggesting that food and gastronomic products are associated with this region.

These results suggested that this platform is being used to promote other local organizations, reinforced also by the profile of the publisher, instead of promoting their attractions, traditions, and heritage. Although, in both cases, associated with the huge local sports dynamic, "Sport event" is also a relevant category. Therefore, it seems that this platform is not used as a tool for tourism destination promotion instead with other aims.

The main limitations of our study are related to the few number of posts on each one of the social media platforms despite the fact that we have considered a large period. Additionally, we only used the hashtags defined in the platform's profile, and the content analysis was made only the text written, images, and videos were not analyzed. In this exploratory study, it was used only two cities

Further studies should integrate other hashtags to select the sample and the analysis should considered also images and videos. It would be also interesting to develop a qualitative study with the local decision-makers in order to understand what the tourism destination promotion strategy is namely with the use of digital brand strategies. Moreover, this study should be replicated in other cities.

Based on our research, we can argue that these platforms should be better integrated with the other online channels of the respective destinations. In the future, destinations should pay more attention to social media management to better exploit the possibilities provided by platforms like Instagram, Facebook, or others. Fundamentally, if we take into account that these two social platforms are mostly used for organizational promotion and not just by the individual user. Associating the management of the destination with the various agents in the territory will certainly be an asset in terms of tourism promotion.

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