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The Digital Challenge in Destination Branding: Brief Approach to the Portuguese case

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Abstract (extended version)

The use of branding is by some, considered to be the most powerful tool available to develop tourism destinations (Morgan, Pritchard & Piggott, 2003). Destination branding is focused in lowering costs, changing the type of visitors, changing the nature or behaviour of visitors, but also changing tourism products, integrating stakeholders and communities, avoiding irritations and responding to issues, for instance, created by the present economic crisis, and challenges at the digital level. An understanding of the critical issues involved in the branding and management process of destinations is an essential element to secure the success of the tourism industry (Fyall, Wang & Garrod, 2012).

If place branding has developed as an instrument to differentiate places and create uniqueness, it has also emerged as an activity that seeks to position places in a globalised market environment. Earning a superior position in the marketplace has been encouraged by an increase in competition between countries, regions, cities and tourism destinations. At this point it is fundamental to clarify what is a tourism destination?

The literature, such as Buhalis (2000), Morgan et al., (2011), Pike, (2005; 2009), Caldwell and Freire (2004) give us multiple definitions. Tourism destinations are geographical areas, such as a country, a region, a city, or an island (Hall, 2000; Davidson & Maitland, 1997). Buhalis (2000, p. 98) defines a tourism destination as a “geographical region which is understood by its visitors as a unique entity, with political and legislative framework for tourism marketing and planning”. Additionally, they can be recognised as a perceptual concept, which can be interpreted subjectively by consumers, depending on their travel itinerary, cultural background, purpose of visit, level of studies and past experience (Buhalis, 2000).

Tourism destinations are also composed by a complex range of social, economic, legal and technological policies that affect their appeal, attractiveness, competitiveness and sustainability (Brent-Ritchie & Crouch, 2011). Fyall, Wang and Garrod (2012, p. 11) states that destinations are “inherently complex, inter-related nature and are best understood as composite entities: systems made up of various components that may

work with or against one another". Thereafter, a tourism destination, while communicating the value and strengths of its assets, through a destination brand, integrated in a wide strategy, could earn a better position in the tourism market. Hence, destination branding has become one of the hottest topics amongst place branding research, from Turkey to Portugal, from cities such as New York to Edinburgh (see for instance, Yeoman & McMahon-Beattie, 2011). Multiple destinations rise a range of multiple challenges, in particular related with the contemporary digital environment in a daily progressive development.

The technological developments of the Internet, "namely the rise of the Web 2.0" (Page, 2009, p. 206), has dramatically changed the market environment for tourism destinations (Buhalis et al., 2011). To face the today's competitive environment, it is a challenge for tourism destinations to improve their own features, attributes and unique elements to become more attractive places (Alvarez, 2012). For that, tourism destinations are increasingly spending more on advertising, marketing campaigns and online promotional activities (Yeoman & McMahon-Beattie, 2011) and it's acceptable to mention that destination branding processes that use digital platforms, such as web pages, blogging, travel blogs, social networks has become more complex and 'puzzling' as well (Munro & Richards, 2011). Law and Jogaratnam (2005) mentioned that tourism organizations that are not applying the right approach to communicate and manage their tourism products are able to damage their competitive position.

As every country, city and region offer a certain package of tourism products, some integrated in a destination brand, others only communicated through promotional material, tourism has become saturated with choice, and there are pressure over destination branding. That pressure, together with other ongoing issues, such as economic imbalances and growing number of communication channels, pose a challenge to tourism destinations and the whole destination branding process. Understanding exactly how individuals perceive and use the information communicated by online promotion channels when planning their trips, is a challenge that requires suitable strategies (Alvarez & Asugman, 2006). Reputation management and influencing collective opinion in the contemporary networked environment are also asking for pro-active attitudes (Munro & Richards, 2011).

Networked platforms changed the interface between destinations, their brands and tourism. No longer is the traditional marketing mix strategies but is now the consumer, the traveller, the tourist that controls content and context, what is communicated about particular destination (Yeoman & McMahon-Beattie, 2011). The tourist has assumed the driving seat in brand identity (Green, 2007). Thus, one of the question I rise is if destinations or their organizations are actually using coherent strategies to engage the potential visitors and tourists through the multiple available online channels (e.g. *Facebook, Twitter, Blogs, Tripadvisor*)?

The accelerating and synergistic interaction between Information Communication Technologies (ICTs) and tourism destinations has transformed the nature of tourism products, processes, business and the competitive environment around them. Upgrading their communication channels, articulated with an effective strategy, can fulfil the requirements of the destination stakeholders, allowing more efficient responses, enhanced image, in addition to improving their long-term prosperity and competitiveness.

This research aims to review the literature in destination branding (e.g. Morgan et al., 2011), tourism (e.g. Buhalis et al., 2011) and communication strategies (e.g. Muñiz-Martínez & Cervantes-Blanco, 2009). The developments in branding Portugal as a tourism destination will be taken as a case study. Particular focus is on what the online tourism promotional material is saying about the tourism in the country and connecting it with the way Portugal is actually branding itself, through the online official and unofficial channels operated by the *Turismo de Portugal, I.P.* The *Turismo de Portugal* is the national tourism authority responsible for the Portuguese tourism activities (e.g. coordinate the domestic and international promotion of the country). The *Turismo de Portugal* entity is currently promoting the Portuguese tourism sector under the campaign of *Destination Portugal - The Beauty of Simplicity* (Fig. 1).



Figure 1. Visual identity of the Destination *Portugal - The Beauty of Simplicity*.

Source: <http://www.visitportugal.com>, March 2013.

In terms of methodology, I will use content analysis (Kuster, 2006; Roney & Ozturan, 2006) for online channels used to promote Portugal:

- **Official channels and social media platforms used by *Turismo de Portugal***
 - Visitportugal Web page, <http://www.visitportugal.com/Cultures/nl-NL/default.html>
 - Visitportugal Facebook account, <https://www.facebook.com/Visitportugal>
 - Visitportugal Twitter account, <https://twitter.com/visitportugal>

I aim to analyse the contents such as words they use, the message they communicate and the images and videos widespread about Portugal. Thereafter, compare with the national guide lines for the tourism activity:

- *National Strategic Plan for Tourism*, Turismo de Portugal (2007).

Moreover, I also aim to analyse the contents about Portugal communicated through:

- **Travel blogs from international newspaper and expert in traveling:**
 - *BBC Travel*, <http://www.bbc.com/travel/europe/portugal>
 - *The New York Times Travel*, <http://www.nytimes.com/pages/travel/index.html>
 - *Lonely Planet*, <http://www.lonelyplanet.com/portugal>

The main goals of this empirical analysis is to understand if the message communicated by the *Turismo de Portugal* is articulated with the national strategy. Regarding the case of the specialized travel blogs identify the way Portugal is mentioned in terms of text, words and images used. The main idea is not to analyse the user generated content – the content created by consumers/travellers (see for instance Milan, 2007) but the

content created and the information widespread by institutions and official travel media channels (e.g. social networks, blogs).

My main argument is that the utilisation of ICTs by tourism destinations, such as Portugal, when well-articulated with a destination branding strategy, could be a driving force to improve their strategic positioning and competitiveness, and to optimise the benefits they derive from tourism. ICTs could be used to boost the multiplier effects in the regional economy (Buhalis & Spada, 2000) therefore enhance the tourism destination economic performance. Nowadays, tourism destinations are wishing to perform successfully, while addressing the many limitations, impediments and challenges (Fyall, Wang & Garrod, 2012).

The development of ICTs empowers tourism destinations to enhance their efficiency and to re-engineer their communications strategies (Buhalis et al., 2011). Hence, efficient strategies are required at both strategic and tactical management of destinations. The correct and coherent use of social networks and web pages to communicate the destinations assets and tourism potential will support interoperability, personalisation and constant networking, thus increasing tourism revenues and enhancing innovation and competitiveness (Buhalis et al., 2011). When planning the design of web pages or to use social networks, the organizations in charge of tourism promotion, so called Destination Marketing Organisation (DMO), need to be sure to provide reasons and purposes for a visit (Morrison, 2013). The internet and online platforms become the most important venue for destination branding, as well as being the first option when citizens decided to search for information on destinations (Morrison, 2013). Tourism destinations are now heavily engaged in using social networks such as *Facebook*, *Twitter*, *YouTube* and photo sharing platforms (e.g. *Instagram*, *Flickr*). The objectives of using social network sites are building and maintaining communities of interest, collecting user-generated content, displaying photography and videos, emphasizing events, encouraging word-of-mouth recommendations.

This research opens up new perspectives on the contemporary digital challenges in destination branding, both theoretical and practical. We also intend to contribute to the discussion concerning the best strategies for Portugal as a tourism destination by comparing the messages communicated through the digital platforms and the national strategic spatial planning and tourism planning documents.

Key words

Content analysis

Destination branding

Digital challenges

Portugal

Social Networks

Tourism

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