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A stakeholders take on brand image congruency – Azores case.

Daniela Lourenço do Canto

Master's in International Management

Supervisor:

PhD Ana Margarida Mendes Camelo Oliveira Brochado, Associate Professor with Habilitation,

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Acknowledgments

With this thesis, I mark the end of my academic path, at least for the moment. These were years of hard work and mainly self-growth, that made me believe in my work and in my capability to surpass myself. It was many times challenging, especially being out of my comfort zone, away from home and my family, but persistence prevailed, and it has brought me to the beautiful journey I am in now.

All of this I owe to my family, my mother, and my father, who have always encouraged and supported me to follow my dreams and aiming for a brighter future. More than this, invested in me and in my future, helping me succeed in my academic journey, but especially in life. Thank you for everything you do for me, everyday of my life, since I was born. Thank you, mom, for always pushing me to the next level and not settling for the sufficient but striving for the best possible.

A special thank you goes to my grandmother, who is my role model and had a big part in raising me, who is always there to listen to my complaints, who is a force of nature and lives life to its fullest. And especially thank you for always making my days better. I am proud of you grandma, thank you for having a big role in turning me into who I am today.

Couldn't go without recognizing the unconditional love, support, and motivation from Simão, who is always there for me, with a positive attitude and kind words, to reassure me that I can, even when I'm ready to give up. Especially thank you for all the tasks you took over so that I could manage everything else, and the infinite patience, I really appreciate having you in my life.

I would also like to thank my friends, for their words of encouragement when I needed them, and always showing their pride and how much they believe in me. Especially, Rakesh, who believes in me the most when I'm doubting myself the most and makes the impossible seem possible through his borderline insane statements with a bottom of truth and a lot of encouragement.

Finally, a great appreciation and thank you to my supervisor Professor Ana Brochado who always showed great empathy, yet discipline in the whole process, and gave me the final push I really needed to pull through. All your support, guidance and help were crucial. Thank you very much Professor Ana.

Abstract

This dissertation aims to determine what Azores' brand image is, as a touristic destination, through the perspective of different stakeholders. In essence, the study aimed at understanding if the brand image desired when developing SMPAT, matches the actual perception of the foreign visitors who visit the region. Furthermore, the goal was to analyse the previous marketing plan for tourism in Azores, get best practices and understand what didn't go so well, in order to develop a guide for the development of the future strategy.

In order to achieve the main goal and fully understand if there is congruency in brand image regarding tourism in the Azorean region, a deep analysis of the established marketing plan was made to understand what government officials envisioned for the region. In parallel, reviews from international visitors were analysed, in light of a few chosen variables, to afterwards compare between the government's expectation and the actual perception, of Azores brand image as a touristic destination.

The main result of this analysis is the positive answer to the research question. There is congruency between the stakeholders' perceptions, especially regarding the beauty and exclusivity of the destination, being considered an exuberant, preserved, natural island destination, with a unique way of welcoming and genuine hospitality.

This study is valuable to the region insofar as it points out the positive and negative aspects of the SMPAT, as well as compares the desired brand positioning with the consumers perceptions of the archipelago, serving as a basis for the tourism.

Resumo

Esta dissertação tem como objetivo determinar qual é a imagem de marca dos Açores, enquanto destino turístico, através da perspetiva de diferentes stakeholders. Em essência, o estudo teve como objetivo compreender se a imagem de marca desejada ao desenvolver o PEMTA, é congruente com a perceção atual dos visitantes estrangeiros que visitam a região. Além disso, o objetivo passou por analisar o plano de marketing redigido para o turismo nos Açores, obter as melhores práticas e melhorias, como referência para a estratégia futura.

De forma a atingir o objetivo principal e perceber se existe congruência na imagem de marca relativamente ao turismo na região dos Açores, foi feita uma extensa análise do último plano de marketing, de modo a compreender o que o governo pretendia para a região. Paralelamente, foram analisadas as opiniões de visitantes internacionais, à luz das variáveis escolhidas, para posteriormente comparar entre a expectativa do governo e a perceção atual, da imagem de marca dos Açores como destino turístico.

O principal resultado desta análise foi a resposta positiva à questão de pesquisa. Há congruência entre as perceções dos stakeholders, principalmente quanto à beleza e exclusividade do destino, considerado exuberante, preservado, insular natural, com um modo único de acolher e uma hospitalidade genuína.

Este estudo é valioso para a região na medida em que aponta os aspetos positivos e negativos do PEMTA, bem como compara o posicionamento pretendido com as perceções dos consumidores relativas à imagem de marca do arquipélago, servindo de base para o desenvolvimento do turismo.

Palavras-chave: Açores, Branding de Destino, Imagem de Marca, Avaliações Online, Análise de Conteúdo.

Classificação JEL: L83 – Turismo; Z33 – Turismo: Marketing e Finanças.

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1. Introduction

Before the pandemic, tourism worldwide was thriving, getting more accessible and awakening in people the desire to see more of the world and get to know other cultures. Travelling was not only an important part of people's lives, but a crucial sector for the world economy, especially for tourism-dependent countries.

By 2019, the number of people who went on international trips had gotten up to 1,5 billion, impressive numbers for the tourism sector, reflecting an era of interconnectedness and high efficiency on the sectors' services (Behsudi, 2020).

The following year, 2020, was also a year that impressed, giving to the tourism sector the worse results ever registered. According to the UNWTO, when compared to the previous year, there was an average decline of 74% regarding the number of international tourist arrivals worldwide, reaching percentages of 80-90 in many developing countries (UNWTO, 2020).

The beginning of 2021 didn't improve, showing an average decrease of around 88% comparing to pre-pandemic levels (UNWTO, 2020), and a 40% decline if compared to 2020 (Interview: Time to Rethink Tourism, an Economic Lifeline for Millions, 2022).

With the pandemic, travellers felt unsafe to travel, especially to destinations where tourists went in masses, the ones who have the tourism sector most developed, and therefore more dependent from it. This resulted in a major crisis in the sector, putting over 100 million jobs at risk. The sector suffered a setback of 30 years (COVID-19 and Tourism - an Update | UNCTAD, n.d.). This damage is perceived to be a long-term problem, tourism receipts are not expected to return to the same levels as of 2019 until 2023 or later (Behsudi, 2020).

In the months of June and July of 2021, the vaccination rates and consequent ease on travel restrictions, slightly lifted consumers' confidence in travelling and gradually started restoring the perception of safe mobility, especially in Europe. Some smaller destinations recorded excellent performances in these months, close to pre-pandemic levels (Interview: Time to Rethink Tourism, an Economic Lifeline for Millions, 2022). Although, it mildly improved in comparison to the homologous period of 2020, Europe and Americas performance was still 63% below pre-pandemic levels, in average. The economic contribution of tourism in 2021 was estimated at US$1.9 trillion, above the US$1.6 trillion in 2020, but still well below the pre-pandemic value of US$ 3.5 trillion ("UNWTO World Tourism Barometer and Statistical Annex, September 2021," 2021).

Consumer's behaviour is believed to have shifted for the indetermined time, giving now preference to domestic trips or closer to home, open-air activities and nature-based destinations and products (Behsudi, 2020). More and more, the proportion of vaccinated people will be a crucial indicator for travellers choosing a destination country (UNWTO, 2020). These trends are seen as an opportunity to rethink the sector and invest in rural tourism (COVID-19 and Tourism - an Update | UNCTAD, n.d.) and domestic tourism ("UNWTO World Tourism Barometer and Statistical Annex, September 2021," 2021).

The new tourist profile is a perfect fit with what Portugal, and more specifically the Azores region has to offer. Being a destination with major nature-based assets, both close to the European and American markets, mostly offering open-air activities and dazzling nature landscapes, and being one of the countries with the highest vaccination rates (89,1%) (Staff, n.d.).

Regarding the tourism context, Portugal wasn't too different from the rest of the world, showing a growth of around 7.9% regarding non-resident tourist arrivals in 2019, compared to the previous year (Barometer | UNWTO, n.d.). With the pandemics effect, 2020 suffered a drop of 73.7% in non-resident tourist arrivals to Portugal (Statistics Portugal - Web Portal, n.d.).

Some data from 2021, suggests that the non-resident stays totalized 3,5 million, tripling the registration of October of the previous year (+216,6%), being the highest number since October 2019, still 26,7% below that month. When in comparison to the homologous period of 2020, the first 10 months of 2021 showed an average increase of 31% on the total of stays. Highlighting the Azores Region with the highest increase between all the regions, of 114%. Nonetheless, when compared to the same period pre-pandemic, the stays in the country decreased around 49,9% (Statistics Portugal - Web Portal, n.d.).

Specifically, regarding Azores, in 2019 records were being made in the tourism sector, being registered more than 3 million stays. Unfortunately, the pandemic brought a decrease of over 70% in these stays. In this time, Azores were the first archipelago in the world to be internationally recognized as a sustainable destination, which was an advantage to fit the new profile of tourist, concerned for the environment (Statistics Portugal - Web Portal, n.d.). Adding to this, Azores was also awarded with the "European Safest Destination" to visit in 2020 (Castanho et al., 2021).

As for 2021, the arrivals rose by 53,44% comparing to 2020, the most significant growth being in Flores (122,09%), Pico (93,22%) and Faial (84,69%) islands, and the lowest rises in São Miguel (42,12%), Santa Maria (49,10%) and Terceira (53,28%) islands (Azores - Visit Azores, n.d.).

Nonetheless, the values achieved in 2021 are still 48,95% below the arrivals registered in 2019. When compared to this year, the islands who are recovering faster are Flores (-19,17%), São Jorge (-25,77%) and Graciosa (-27,09%), which is consistent to the level of tourism-dependency and development. São Miguel (-55,24%), Terceira (-46,01%) and Faial (-44,60%) being the ones with a still significant decrease when comparing 2021 to pre-pandemic times (2019), and the ones where the tourism sector is most developed. Also, in consistency with the world and national panorama, the best months registered for 2021 were June and July (Azores - Visit Azores, n.d.).

The relevance of the tourism sector to the Azorean region didn't start now, tourism has been growing in Azores for the last two decades, except for the pandemic times where it also didn't perform that poorly in comparison to other destinations and is recovering quite rapidly, especially due to the type of tourism it represents.

Fruit from this rise since 2000, in 2011 there was seen the necessity to build a marketing plan for the development of the region's tourism aligned with the international tendencies. This plan, named SMPAT (Strategic Marketing Plan for Azores Tourism) was elaborated to take action between 2015 and 2020, and its main objective was to grow the destinations number of tourists whilst maintaining its identity and authenticity (Plano Estratégico E de Marketing Do Turismo Dos Açores, n.d.).

In line with this new plan, which defended a sustainable growth for the region, the process to get an international certification as a sustainable touristic destination was started, being awarded the recognition in 2019, as the first archipelago in the world to get it (Dashboard Passageiros Desembarcados, n.d.), as mentioned above.

Looking to become more competitive, the regions' creation of the plan was complemented with the creation of "Marca Açores" in January 2015 (Marca Açores, n.d.), has a rebranding of the destinations' brand image, with a whole new visual identity, signature, and seal, aiming to give visibility to the products and services that reflect Azores' most distinctive characteristics. These goals resulted in the incredibly reflexive expression "certified by nature" signature of the brand and seal of "Marca Açores", perfectly describing the regions' pillars of environmental sustainability and nature-based tourism communication, products, and services (Staff, n.d.).

The new brand image was created in an inside out perspective, in the way that it boosts both internal and external promotion of the autonomous region (Marca Açores, n.d.). On the two axes that the branding aims to fulfil, it for one stands as the origin seal where nature is the starting point and the brand represents the locals who live there creating an emotional connection to them (A Nova Marca Que Quer Ser a Imagem Dos Açores Para Fora E Para Dentro, 2015), and on the other axe it

stands as a destination where nature is the arrival point making the region appealing to the ones coming from outside borders (Oliveira, 2016).

This reflects the crucial importance of stakeholders' involvement in the process of a successful destination branding (Santos & Campo, 2013). In this case, the internal stakeholders (locals) inputs were imperative to get the desired perception and feedback from the external stakeholders (tourists) (Oliveira, 2016).

Branding became a key tool for tourism destinations, that were looking to get tourists to perceive the experience they could get in that destination as a whole (Pereira et al., 2012). Destination branding is, therefore, a derivation of branding applied to places and leveraging the emotional power of travelling (Marca Açores, n.d.). It is a means to communicate the credibility of the promise that tourism delivers to tourists regarding a specific destination (Pereira et al., 2012).

This relatively new concept combines the standard marketing activities of services and products with people's culture and environment, having the creation of emotional links with tourists at its core (Morgan et al., 2004), and developing a unique identity and personality as a competitive trait within all destinations (Morrison & Anderson, 2002), in the end resulting in a memorable experience for the traveller (Blain et al., 2005).

Destination branding is often confused as being the same as place branding, however one is part of the other. Place branding being the application of a brand strategy to the economic, socio-political, and cultural factors to a city, region, or country (Anholt, 2004), and destination branding being a part of that, as an aspect of place branding, seen through the perspectives of tourists and the tourism industry (Blain et al., 2005; Hankinson, 2005; Hosany et al., 2006; Hanna & Rowley, 2008).

A crucial concept for the success of a destination branding strategy is brand image, which is the representation of the consumers perceptions about the brand, how they feel and the associations they make to the brand that stay in their memories (Keller, K., 1993). This affects their consumer and purchasing behaviour, which evolves and changes over time (Fan, X.; Chen, J. Nankai J. 2002, 03).

When "brand" is associated with "image" it relates to the set of feelings, ideas and attitudes that consumers have about a brand. When "brand" is associated with "personality" it refers to the human characteristics of a brand which differentiate it from its competitors.

The main purpose of this study is to test the congruency between the destination brand image planned positioning and the perceived image by international tourists, targeting Azores tourism as the

research context. This topic is relevant to the region's future once it determines whether Azores tourism is being marketed in the right way and gives further suggestions for improvements.

Along the study, the SMPAT (Strategic Marketing Plan for Azores Tourism) will be the main point of analysis, from where the planned positioning for the region is identified, as well as the perceived positioning/ destination image through the international tourist's perspective.

Furthermore, there is a literature review on fundamental concepts as destination branding and brand image, to fully understand the theoretical behind the pal, and there is also an analysis on web reviews from international tourists, collected through buzz mining on travel blogs. This data will be treated through narrative, word cloud and Leximancer analysis.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Tourism

The travel & tourism sector grew 3.5% in 2019, turning it into one of the most important industries for the world economy. It is especially important for governments regarding employment, since it creates 1 in 10 jobs around the world, close to 330 million jobs in 2019. Referring to the same year, this sector contributed US $8.9 trillion to the world's GDP, representing around 10.3% of the global GDP. (Almeida-Santana & Moreno-Gil, 2018).

In general, the concept of tourism is the combination of the different agents influencing the travel experience, namely the transport companies, lodging entities, catering establishments, shopping, entertainment and activity facilities, or other hospitality services for tourists travelling alone or as a group (Goeldner & Ritchie, 2009).

Consumers in general are more and more seeking unique and authentic experiences, in the tourism sector this is especially true. Tourists' expectations about the destination and its activities are increasingly demanding, which forces the destinations to strengthen their brand identity and strategies, in a consistent way, in order to differentiate themselves from the competitors and stand-out from the market in the time to choose (Guerreiro, 2017).

The secret to grow tourist destinations nowadays is to turn the location global, valuing its local characteristics and marketing them as the most authentic experience in the international market. For this reason, all destinations must emphasize their distinctive positioning in the market when

in comparison to the competition, always monitoring the real perception of their positioning and re-evaluating their strategy (Guerreiro, 2017).

Furthermore, it is very important to have the support, commitment, and involvement of the complex network of stakeholders from whom the tourism activity depends on (such as the government, municipalities, associations, operators, visitors, owners, investors, community), to properly promote the destination and deliver the promised experiences (Fraga, 2014).

Taleb Rifai, former Secretary General of the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), stated that adventure tourism has become a high trend in the tourism experience, due to the need and search for authenticity from the tourists coming from a globalized world. In fact, adventure tourism and active nature are currently two of the fastest growing tourism segments (Guerreiro, 2017).

2.2. Island Tourism

As a response to the need of uniqueness from the tourists ("UNWTO World Tourism Barometer and Statistical Annex, September 2021," 2021) and the trending of the adventure and active nature sectors (Guerreiro, 2017), as mentioned above, grows the concept of island tourism (Uysal & Modica, 2016), which is a specific and differentiated form of tourism (Sharpley, 2012), defined as "visiting a destination specifically because it is an island, and perhaps a member of an archipelago" (Butler, 2016). Being exclusive and charming destinations, islands gain an advantage towards mainland destinations, being more and more attractive to tourists (Nunkoo & Gursoy, 2012).

Furthermore, the natural environment (Lee et al. ,2015), the beautiful scenery ("UNWTO World Tourism Barometer and Statistical Annex, September 2021," 2021), climate (Santos & Campo, 2013), natural resources, water-based activities, exoticism, and related recreational experiences (Prayag & Ryan, 2012), together with the local culture and history and accommodation specificities in islands, turn them into major attractions to visitors ("UNWTO World Tourism Barometer and Statistical Annex, September 2021," 2021), for both recreational and touristic purposes. All these factors make the islands a striking and desirable destination in contrast with their everyday locations (Santos & Campo, 2013). However, the tourism starts increasing in islands once the infrastructures and educational attributes of the destination are improved (Eugenio-Martín et al., 2004).

There are over 180,000 islands worldwide, each with its peculiarities in terms of political, socioeconomic, and natural features (Oliveira et al., 2019). By 2015, islands had collectively

become one of the most visited destination categories in the world (Naidoo & Sharpley, 2015), which is an increasing phenomenon, even with Corona-19 which turned some of the island destinations into the top safest destinations to travel to.

Almeida-Santana and Moreno-Gil, 2018, studied the importance of Island destinations within the total holidays taken by European tourists, finding that 32.1% of these had been to at least one island, during the period of three years. Additionally showing a high rate as tourists' favorite destination (1.5 vs 0.75 to mainland destinations) and having 17.9% of total respondents choosing island destinations as their dreamy, ideal destinations (Hanna et al., 2020).

Back in the days island's main economic support came from the agriculture, fishing, and handicraft (Oliveira et al., 2019). Nowadays, tourism is a high economic driver for many places, which is especially relevant for small islands, that mainly depend on tourism to develop and grow their economy (Almeida-Santana & Moreno-Gil, 2018), even though sometimes the local communities don't see tourism as a positive thing, instead disrupting their region. This new shift for tourism from small islands is only logical, once they have natural resources, peripheral locations, and unique attractions to offer (Oliveira et al., 2019).

Islands attract a significant volume of tourists from the mainland areas (Baldacchino, 2016), but also from other islands, creating a complex relationship and interactions between themselves and with the mainland areas (Almeida-Santana & Moreno-Gil, 2018).

According to Almeida Santana and Moreno-Gil's (2018) study and due to the island's high dependency on tourism and its mainland areas, it is crucial that tourist related entities understand how to position their island in the tourist market, how to manage coopetition and brand architecture within the archipelago, or with different islands or mainland areas (taking into consideration the more beneficial source markets), learning how to promote themselves in these markets (Hanna et al., 2020).

Due to islands size and isolation, it often happens that the tourism related amenities (lodging, food, transportation…) are more expensive comparing to mainland destinations, since there are fewer options and therefore less competition in islands, prices stay higher (Oliveira et al., 2019).

Island tourism has been studied from different perspectives, the research on the topic has been made majorly on Cyprus, Mauritius, Barbados and Aruba, as individual islands, and in the Canary Islands, Madeira, and Azores, as archipelagos. The regions most focused on have been Latin America, the Caribbean, and Europe, once these are the regions with higher tourism development, leaving Africa and Oceania as understudied regions (Oliveira et al., 2019).

Oliveira et al. (2019) identified as some of the topics that research was made on: the identification of influencing factors for hotel managers in Cyprus (Kilic & Okumus, 2005), the impact of FDI on the island's economic growth comparing it with domestic private and public investment in Mauritius, the relationship between tourism and international trade in small islands in the Canary Islands (Santana-Gallego et al., 2011), the profiling of rural tourists in Madeira (Almeida et al., 2013), and the reasons behind repeat visits to Azores (Moniz, 2012).

According to the study of Oliveira et al. (2019) – Mapping Island Tourism Research, the journal that addresses the topic the most is the Tourism Management journal. In the total of research studied it was found that the most used keywords were tourism, island, destination, development, sustainable, small, tourist, community, management, marketing. Accordingly, the main topics researched were islands as tourist destinations, tourism development and sustainable tourism. Papers discussed on themes such as tourism destination, development, impacts, industry, and management, leaving visitor's experience as one of the least studied themes.

Due to the challenges faced by small islands, as their fragilities as isolated locations, limited resources, and high dependency on tourism, these were also a focus of research. Deepening the small islands research, the main five topics found were sustainability, governance, innovation, seasonality, and local communities (Oliveira et al., 2019)

Studies have been mainly based on primary data, privileging quantitative data, addressing both supply (managers and businesses) and demand (tourists) perspectives, including the communities (residents) (Oliveira et al., 2019).

The growth and rapid development of tourism in islands, which generates increased employment and improved infrastructures (Oliveira et al., 2019), consequently resulting in a high economic dependence, has several effects on the communities and natural environment it interacts with (Fraga, 2016), both positive and negative ones. Being that both residents and the tourism activity depend on the same ecological resources (Sinha & Bushell, 2002). The only fact of being an island, with clear geographical limitations (Oliveira et al., 2019), already presents a set of difficulties and restraints in terms of economic and social development. (Fraga, 2014). Due to its fragile environment and limited resources and given the intensive resource consumption of the tourism industry, island destinations wearing out is way faster (Oliveira et al., 2019). Its sensitivity to internal and external factors and the fact that it involves several actors and plays a significant role, make it essential to have an adequate tourism policy, stimulating, but also protecting, all the actors and elements involved (Fraga, 2016).

All destinations, but especially island destinations that have natural resources has a base to its attractiveness, must have a responsible attitude towards the protection of its regions, taking a position towards sustainability and ease of access, internationally (Guerreiro, 2017). Twining-Ward and Butler (2002) saw sustainable tourism development in small islands as a real need. A study by Cheng et al. (2013) showed that an environmentally responsible behavior influences the destination attractiveness in island tourism.

These destinations must try to predict the adverse effects that tourism development may bring to their region, such as over-crowding, which leads to higher prices and loss of exclusivity and tranquility previously offered by the destination (Guerreiro, 2017). For these reasons, balance is the key, which is obtained through an adequate regulation on the tourism sector, that prioritizes sustainability.

2.3. Branding

For many, a brand is the name or mark associated with people, places, things, ideas products or services (Calder & Reagan, 2001), which represents different things to consumers based on their perception (Stern, 2006). How consumers perceive and feel about a product and its performance is, for them, what the brand represents, giving a meaning besides a name or a logo to the brand, being that consumers will relate to it everything the product means to them (Pereira et al., 2012).

For others, it consists of both visual and verbal representations of a product or service, including the name, term, sign, symbol, and design which combined aim to identify and differentiate the product or service within competition, suggesting that the brand's logo and visual characteristics were the main differentiating factor (Santos & Campo, 2013).

There was also the belief that a brand is a representation in the consumers mind which has functional and psychological attributes (Martineau, 1959). More than this, brand names are considered to represent a promise given by the company to its consumers (Armstrong & Kotler, 2014), building a relationship with them by honouring that promise (Schallehn et al., 2014).

From the word "brand" comes the verb "branding", which consists in the processes taken by a company in order to turn their products or services meaningful for the consumer (Calder & Reagan, 2001), this effort may include marketing activities such as naming, targeting, positioning, communication and much more (Santos & Campo, 2013).

In a summary way, Kotler & Keller (2015) described branding as a strategy to create a perceived image, which would be the brand itself, of the product/ service/ idea that one is selling (Almeida-Santana & Moreno-Gil, 2018).

Mearns (2007) claims that branding is much more than a strategy to be perceived as meaningful to your customer, it is the definition of a differentiation point and an organization culture and communicating these internally and externally, enabling the business to be competitive in the marketplace.

Branding is both beneficial to companies and consumers, in the way that it gives an identity to the product and a possibility to communicate its guarantee of quality and consistency, but also allows to attribute responsibility of performance to a specific manufacturer, simplifying decision-making and reducing perceived risk for consumers (Pereira et al., 2012).

Furthermore, branding gives more transparency about the source of the product to the costumers and protects them, as well as the producers, from misleading competitors who offer identical products (Aaker, 1991). For the producer especially, branding is a process that bring many benefits, from added financial value to legal protection, proper segmentation and building a story around the product features (Armstrong & Kotler, 2014).

In the end, if the branding process is successful and effective, a good customer relationship is created, and a loyal customer base is formed (Pereira et al., 2012).

2.4. Place Branding

It was early defined by Anholt (2004) as simply as the application of branding strategy and other marketing techniques to the economic, socio-political, and cultural factors of a city, region, or country.

It was also later considered as the creation of network of associations in the consumers mind towards the place, based on visual, verbal and stakeholders' behavior of that same place. Always being dependent on the consumers' attitude and behavior regarding the place (Zenker & Braun's, 2017).

Although being a concept that has developed from branding, place branding is more dynamic, multifaceted, and complex, than corporate brands, as it cannot be easily manipulated, and the place is not created from scratch as products usually are. In this complexity, comes the importance of place identity as the core of the place branding process, and consequently the role of brand

personality and the reality of the place (Hankinson, 2004), in order to position the brand as desired.

This concept if well put in practice leads to optimal results, due to its close relation to civic pride and social acceptance of tourism, in the way that it builds on the self-identity of locals and portrays a popular recognizable image abroad, through market drive business techniques.

The place brand identity is mainly driven by the place's functional and experiential attributes, their regeneration and the stakeholder's engagement, which is claimed by Hanna and Rowley (2011) in their ´strategic place brand management model'.

Place branding is specifically challenging when it comes to a national wide branding, as it is hard to identify the country's total portfolio of offers, from a diverse pool of political, social, economic, natural, and cultural elements, that diverge from one region to the other (Santos & Campo, 2013).

The creation of a national identity and branding requires that the country's essence as a whole is captured, so that it can be communicated as a unique image (Santos & Campo, 2013), making it relevant to a targeted diverse stakeholders' group (Herstein, 2012).

Even though the concept is widely studied and documented, it lacks having in account other factors, especially negative ones and how to deal with these cases. For instance, there is little support on how to deal with different dynamic place contexts, with struggles regarding economy, resources, natural environment (such as propension for natural disasters) and even image. Giving a special focus to places that are for some reason more difficult to promote, rather than only focusing on place's attractiveness and reputation (Almeyda-Ibáñez & George, 2017).

2.5. Destination Branding

As an aspect of place branding, but mainly considering the perspective of tourists and the tourism industry, there is the destination branding concept (Blain et al., 2005; Hankinson, 2005; Hosany et al., 2006; Hanna & Rowley, 2008). This concept was brought up by the need to have a more effective competitive approach towards other destinations, establish a decision-making framework that would help consumers choose the best destination and increase consistency and accountability within stakeholders, putting in place a uniform identity for the destination (Biel, 1992; Morgan et al., 2014).

Many experts tried to apply the core branding theory to tourism destinations (Boo et al., 2009; Koçak, Abimbola, & Özer, 2007; Konecnik & Gartner, 2007; Konecnik & Gartner, 2007; Pike et al., 2010; Pike & Page, 2014). Yet other authors, like Ritchie & Ritchie (1998) were already conscious regarding destinations' attributes that distinguished them from traditional products and services, in this case developing logos and taglines was not the core activities in building a destination brand (Pereira et al., 2012).

It is important to highlight that even though destination branding has plenty of common ground with traditional branding and obviously being based on it, it also has some challenging peculiarities. Developing a destination brand is a complex process, comprising the experiential element with a deep understanding of the tourists' decisional process. Requires that managers have an extensive understanding of the macro-environment, economically, politically and socially wise, as well as being fully aware of the stakeholders' perceptions of the destination brand (Khanna, 2011).

It is a combination of many elements that represent a multiplicity of autonomous service businesses, both public and private (Hankinson, 2009), that are not in a single person's or entity's control.

Therefore, in order to provide a complete and appealing offer to the market, it requires a set of partnerships within all stakeholders, including public and private sector organizations (Warnaby, Bennison, Davies & Hughes, 2002).

As Gartner (2014) said, "destinations are places of life and change" (p. 1), unlike product brands, destination brands lack stability and are consumed by several market segments in simultaneous, who create their own unique product from it. This makes it extremely hard to have control over the full brand experience (Hankinson, 2009), making it even more important to have an integrated communication with a consistent message.

Different consumers can get different experiences (Gartner, 2014), and do not have the possibility to return the "product" if they are not satisfied, which is why it is vital the destination brand is created based on the perception of tourists, so that no one is deceived.

The fear of deception is many times the reason why a destination is not chosen, since it is for the consumer a complex decisional process, usually attached to a high price tag for a bundle of goods and services (Cai, 2002) and no possibility to test what they are buying (Cai, 2002; Eby, Molnar & Cai, 1999; Gartner, 1989; Martins, 2016). This is translated in a high uncertainty and the need to make an extensive information search, in order to gather all the data necessary to

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understand whether the potential destination fits the needs, through a mental construct, so that the perceived risk is reduced.

In the end, "Destination brands, therefore, are higher risk as much of what constitutes the brand can easily be sometimes modified purposively and sometimes by natural or human-induced influences" (Gartner, 2014).

Ritchie & Ritchie (1998) defined destination branding as: "…a name, symbol, logo, word mark or other graphic that both identifies and differentiates the destination: furthermore, it conveys the promise of a memorable travel experience that is uniquely associated with the destination: it also serves to consolidate and reinforce the recollection of pleasurable memories of the destination experience." (p.18) This definition comprises the traditional steps of the branding process with the importance of highlighting the promise of a memorable and unique experience that cannot be lived in any other destination, being a characteristic specific to destination branding (Ritchie & Ritchie, 1998).

Many authors have given their own definition of destination branding. Blain, Levy and Ritchie (2005) enhanced the previously presented definition revising it with a more holistic approach including the following themes: identification, differentiation, experience, expectations, image, consolidation, reinforcement, recognition, consistency, brand messages and emotional responses.

All of this combined led to a more complex definition by Blain et al. (2005), who proposed destination branding as a combination of marketing activities, such as name creation, symbol, logo, word mark, that served to easily identify and differentiate a destination, so that it creates in consumers mind the expectation of having a memorable travel experience, in a consistent way, that leads to it being uniquely associated with the destination. With this, an emotional connection to the destination should be consolidated and reinforced, so that a destination image that positively influences the consumers choice is created.

Most recently, and not as theoretically, Tom Buncle, former chief executive of Visit Scotland, defined it in the following way: "Destination branding is about identifying the destination's strongest and most competitively appealing assets in the eyes of its prospective visitors, building a story from these that makes the destination stand out above its competitors, and running this narrative consistently through all marketing communications." meaning that a destinations' brand is not created, it is rather a reflection of the tourists perception, enhancing the already seen

attributes of the destination and communicating them in a way that invokes certain feelings, values and mindsets when people experience when visiting (Oliveira et al., 2019).

It is largely focused on the consumer, looking to highlight a set of elements that appeal to the tourists, as an easily identifiable yet distinct destination, that creates unique memories for the traveler exclusively associated with that specific destination and what was experienced there. In the end, the goal of a destination branding strategy is to consolidate and reinforce the emotional connection that the visitor has with the destination, whilst reducing his search costs and perceived risk' (Blain et al, 2005).

More and more, tourists seek experiences and lifestyle fulfillment rather than settling only for tangible elements, such as accommodations and attractions, making destination branding an incredibly powerful marketing tool to turn these experiences into the real differentiating points that will be recognized and valued by visitors (Morgan & Prichard, 2004).

To obtain this, there is a crucial factor, already mentioned above, which is the involvement and collaboration of all the stakeholders within the destination when constructing a destination branding strategy (Br & ing?, 2015). Residents of the destination, in particular the ones who represent the workforce of the service industry, are vital to the destinations brand values, experience, reputation, and mindset. But also, can contribute to the perpetuation of a good impression left in the visitors regarding the destination and its people, building customers loyalty and trust, ensuring that tourists like their visit and talk about their great experience to others (Oliveira et al., 2019).

Applying this marketing strategy to a destination, helps it to be particularly notable and strongly position itself within the competition. If the strategy is based in a good storytelling of the destination, broadcasting its personality traits, there may be a consequent impact on brand relationship perceived quality and word of mouth communication, affecting both the level of satisfaction from tourists as well as their future behavior towards the destination (Santos & Campo, 2013).

Destinations incur in the greatest untapped branding opportunities, since they appeal to the emotional power of travel (Morgan et al., 2004), and the more cultural heritage and historical traits are included in the process, the most likely it will be for consumers to create a relation of trust and belief towards the destinations' identity and promises.

Diving into the destinations' cultural background transmits that it has a distinct personality associated to it, which helps the travelers relate and create unforgettable memories that have no

comparison with other destinations. Recurring to local culture and history also serves as a valid visual communication that represents the core values and unique characteristics of the destination (Walker, 2010).

When the destination being branded is a country, the goal remains to build a simple and clear idea from emotional attributes, that can be represented verbally and visually, and are created to be understood by different targets who find themselves in different situations (Olimpia, 2008; Olimpia et al., 2011).

These emotional attributes come from the spirit of people, the nation's citizens beliefs and what they believe about themselves, as well as the purpose they might share. This spirit can be influenced by various external factors, as culture, resources, and economy (Gilmore, 2002).

In order to do this, understanding the environment, namely the political, cultural, business and sports environments (Olimpia, 2008), and positioning, along it the country's strengths and weaknesses, is crucial to adequately position the country in the destinations market (Kotler & Gertner, 2011).

It is harder and harder to obtain a differentiation advantage through hard factors only, being that many destinations already have excellent infrastructures, economies, accessibilities, and availability of financial incentives. This makes soft factors as the way to become a unique destination within a wide market, meaning that tourists and investors give nowadays major importance to the environment, the friendliness of the locals, art, culture traditions and leisure activities, a bet on these factors is the true key to destination branding success (Morgan et al., 2011).

A way to achieve this desired positioning is by amplifying what the country destination already has to offer, rather then fabricating it. Creating a positioning rooted in reality and on the destination's truth, opposed to creating an artificial positioning (Gilmore, 2002).

The major challenges brought to marketing organizations by destination branding are derived from the fact that destinations have many stakeholders involved in the process of brand building, who have different perspectives and perceptions, which ends up making it quite hard to keep balance. Other challenges can be the little management control and the under-development of the destination's identity (Morgan et al., 2002).

Furthermore, the process presents other challenges, yet also related to the involvement of many stakeholders, for instance the misunderstandings between the experts on nation branding and the government of that country, who lack knowledge at most, and are only interested in

enhancing internal cohesion, economic and political developments and reducing costs, ignoring the destination branding process (Olins & Hildreth, 2011).

Keeping authenticity is many times hard, due to the lack of resources and politics influence (Hornskov, 2014), nonetheless the resources that destinations do have should be maximized to the fullest, developing in stakeholder's minds and respective markets a sustainable reputation for the destination (Fyall, 2011). Authenticity has for the longest time, been a key asset in branding, since it was established that a successful brand that sells is an honest and valuable brand (Hornskov, 2014).

Finally, the measurement of the effectiveness of brand-building is a major challenge faced by the marketeers, being a critical process (Blain et al., 2005; Ritchie & Ritchie, 1998) to understanding visitors' perceptions and the success of their marketing efforts. This final step of the destination brand-building is crucial to keep evolving the brand according to its performance in the marketplace, by continuously monitoring and evaluating the communication strategy (Hudson & Ritchie, 2009).

Depending on the effectiveness of the brand measured, brand managers must be willing to look at their brand through a different perspective and change their strategy accordingly (Srivastava, 2009). Although a very important step, it is sometimes overlooked by the Destination Marketing Organizations, due to the lack of knowledge on what to measure and how to measure it (Blain et al., 2005).

2.6. Brand Image

Brand associated with image is the result of a combination of feelings, ideas and attitudes consumers have regarding a brand (Pereira et al., 2012). In summary, it is the actual perception that consumers have of the brand, in this way, it is not something the brand can control, but only wish that it matches the image they are trying to pass on.

Brand image is a multidimensional construct that comprises both cognitive and affective dimensions. From the cognitive dimension, it is mainly related to the beliefs and knowledge regarding the physical attributes of the destination, whereas when it comes to the affective dimension, one should look at the appraisal of quality and feelings towards the attributes and surrounding environment (Baloglu & McClearly, 1999).

In the end, brand image is the reflection of the brand associations held in the consumers' minds (Keller, K., 1993). Having an already established image of the brand in their memory, helps the consumer in the decision-making process, starting by the recognition of its needs and wants in regarding of the brand and in distinguishing the brand from all its competitors (Anwar, A.; Gulzar, A.; Sohail, F.; Akram, S., 2011).

This concept is formed in consumers memory though the association of different kinds of information they get in contact with regarding the brand (Keller, K., 1993), and it represents the consumers overall perception and evaluation of the brand, influencing how they purchase as well as their consumer behaviour (Fan, X.; Chen, J. Nankai J. 2002)

Being that the consumers perceptions and evaluation of brand depends of the different things they associate to it, their perception evolves with the different stimulus, and therefore the brand image also evolves and changes over the time (Kort, P.; Caulkins, J.; Hartl, R.; Feichtinger, G., 2006).

The more competitive the market, the more importance should be given to the evolution of the brand image, being vital to have a favourable brand image that effectively positions the product in the market (Hosany, S.; Ekinci, Y.; Uysal, M., 2006). When there is a high level of congruency between the company's message and the potential costumer's positive perception of their brand (Hsieh, A.; Li, C., 2008), the more value is added to the product and loyalty is enhanced, fruit of the influence that brand image has in the consumers purchasing attitude and behaviours (Kala, D.; Chaubey, D., 2018).

3. Contextualization of the Study

As mentioned previously, the SMPAT is the Strategic Marketing Plan for Azores Tourism, which was elaborated to be in force between 2015 and 2020. The elaboration of a plan became necessary once tourism started growing to a higher rate in the region, and there was a need for cohesion between all the islands, so that the region could communicate to the markets as one, maintaining its identity and authenticity. The main expected result being to keep growing the destinations' number of tourists in a sustainable way.

In this plan a set of strategies is defined, based on the territory's and stakeholders needs, for the region as a way to reach the following results: sustainable development and qualification of the tourism sector, preserving the environment and developing tourism activity as a tool of dynamization of the regional economy in all the nine islands.

The plan is divided in 3 main sections, from the analysis of the environment and definition of global strategies, going on to the definition of specific marketing policies for tourism in Azores, and finally concluding in a concrete action plan and management of its implementation.

To define global strategies for the region many different analyses were performed, the sources of the information of these analyses are inquiries and surveys made to many stakeholders (local trade, touristic operators, residents), combined with document analysis on statistical and non-statistical data from several relevant entities (government departments, public companies, airlines). These data analysis served as a foundation for all the phases of the plan that are presented.

For starters, a PEST analysis was made, taking into account the political, economic, socio-cultural, and technological factors of the region until 2015. In this time, the points that stood out were the incentive on entrepreneurship, innovation, technological development and business competitiveness, increased importance of tourism for the regional economy as well as a fair investment on the sector, and the fact that the resident population is receptive to the tourism development.

This was followed by a description of the situation point regarding the performance of the destination and what the region had to offer tourism wise until that time. Which at the time (until 2015), was presenting a positive evolution on the volume of guests and stays, together with the overall average stay, especially from foreign tourists, was also on a positive growth. Furthermore, the data showed that, in 2015, the main islands (São Miguel, Terceira and Faial) represented 90,7% of the region's volume of stays. The seasonality rate is fluctuating but showed to be decreasing in the

previous two years, to the 42,4% rate in 2015. Finally, the number of arrivals, by air or sea, was also on a positive raise.

In consequence, a consumer profile was developed, as well as a characterization of the touristic markets. As a result, the built persona is on the age range 26-60 years old, married, employed, educated and with a wage on the range 1.001€ to 5.000€. Its main motivation is nature and the leisure segment, doesn't travel in organized groups or acquires touristic packages, researches information online, mainly looks for hotels for accommodation and wants to do activities such as visiting geo-touristic places and walks.

A benchmark was made on the competition, concluding that other Portuguese regions and Spanish ones are the destinations' main competition, other competitors that stood out were France and Italy.

The attractiveness of the destination was established by taking into account the perspectives of the supply and demand. In the end, the positive attractive factors were physical characteristics of the territory, destinations' singularity, safety, tranquillity, localization, environmental quality, gastronomy, historical and cultural heritage, soft weather, and overall quality of the destination. In general, visitors are satisfied and want to recommend the destination as well as pretend to come back at some point. On the less positive side, failing to be attractive, some factors were pointed out, such as climate's instability, tourisms' seasonality, destinations' cost, bureaucracy, night life and entertainment. In the overall, it was expected that the, at the time, new transportations model would contribute to the improvement of the destinations attractivity.

From all the information collected, there was enough to perform a swot analysis, identifying the internal and external factors. Internally, the destination has strengths as its natural resources, biodiversity and preservation of the places, its history and cultural offer and being a safe place. As well as some weaknesses, such as its prices, human resources training, quality of the offer and products, destinations' communication, the climate, and its image within the market. On the external side, one can find the opportunities to diversify resources, nature tourism having a growing tendency as a market niche, the potential of nautical tourism, the demand for rural tourism and the entry of low-cost companies allied to the new model of accessibilities. Unfortunately, threats are also a reality, namely the mass tourism, representing a potential harm for the natural resources sustainability, level of competitiveness of competing destinations, and the fact that the price policy is not adjusted to the market.

From this it was possible to build a vision and mission for the tourism sector in Azores, grounded on the assumptions that Azores main product would be nature tourism leveraging it natural resources and biodiversity, the possibility to visit all islands would be assured based on the improvements on the transportation network, its proximity to the market, singularity, each islands authenticity, landscape, safety and tranquillity, would be the destinations' differentiating aspects, the incentive of continuous improvement of the touristic areas development, and finally to work on Azores sustainability, conserving and preserving its places and local communities.

From these assumptions was built the vision to be "A European destination in the middle of the Atlantic, recognized internationally as preserved volcanic islands, of exuberant nature, exclusive, of a mystical beauty, where the visitor is welcomed has a special guest who, in safety, as at his disposal a variety of activities of land and sea which will leave him dazzled and with longing for the destination." Alongside this vision, the mission to "Attain the real sustainability through tourism, providing to our visitors a special guests experience in a natural environment, receiving them with genuine affection and courtesy, so that the Azorean experience leaves them with longing and makes them come back. In this way, we assume the commitment of working our destination closely with our communities so that, in an integrated and inclusive way, we can reach the social, economic, cultural and environmental balance."

Even more, it all fomented the definition of both general and specific objectives regarding an integrated development of tourism in the region, looking to improve and enrich the visitor's touristic experience quality, to contribute to the preservation e conservation of cultural and natural places, as well as to the economic development of the region, and to improve the performance of touristic activities.

As a result of all the forehead mentioned, specific strategies were delineated regarding the strategic and complementary products that the region was going to offer, the identification and selection of the target markets that were crucial for the region to expand as a touristic destination and its positioning by island, product, and market.

As a second step, the 4 Ps of marketing were applied to define concrete marketing policies for the sector in the region.

Product, defining the main, complementary, and secondary products, is meant to reinforce the nature tourism as the development engine of the destination together with the complementary between the islands. Complementing the nature tourism, as the main attractive, are the nautical tourism, cultural and landscape tourism, and the health and wellbeing sector. When developing the

forementioned products, the inherent characteristics and offer of each island should be taken into account, assuring that the potential of the offer of each island is dynamized and directed at specific market segments.

Price, the strategy for the price policy can go two ways, either through a premium strategy, broadcasting high prices to reflect the quality and exclusivity of the destination, or through a competition strategy, deliberately setting prices above the competitors as a differentiation strategy.

Place, regarding the distribution of the Azores destination, the strategy starts by prioritising the online channel, for the obvious reasons, but keeping the approach mixed, considering that traditional channel still represents a considerate reach, especially regarding niche markets, that are communicated in specialized touristic operators, such as birdwatching, diving or canyoning.

Promotion, the destination is meant to be presented and promoted as a whole, highlighting the richness of its offer coming from the particularities brought from each island, in this way leveraging the notoriety of the destination in the international markets that present potential of growing. The communication motto is now beyond B2B, and is directed essentially to B2C market segments that fit the profile of the region's supply, looking to transmit that messages that it is by excellence a nature destination, exclusive, hospitable, that permits an enormous variety of land and sea activities.

These were extensively detailed, adding one of the components of the 7 Ps theory as well, emphasizing on people, as one of Azores' assets, as an integral part of the touristic experience and, alongside the nature factor a differentiating element for the region. To achieve this, it is fundamental that the society is sensible to the importance of tourism for Azores, being aware that welcoming well its visitors is fundamental, along with watching over the protection of the destination.

In the end, the final step of the plan was the definition of a specific plan of action, programming and calendaring all the different activations and involving several different stakeholder entities. Obviously, in order to be successful, this must be combined with a good implementation management, structuring the whole process, updating tools and monitoring the control KPIs.

The creation of such a plan was thought by the government, to develop the region having a close link to tourism, and conceived by a contracted consultant, expert in destination marketing, who has developed plans for many other regions nationally and internationally.

Several proposals and recommendations are presented in this plan as a way to leverage Azores notoriety with the final consumers, promoting cooperation between private and public stakeholders throughout the implementation, improving the destinations' competitiveness,

increasing the touristic flux, and most importantly positioning Azores as an exclusive destination of exuberant nature.

4. Methodology

4.1. Objective

The main goal of this dissertation is to test the congruency between the destination brand image planned positioning and the perceived brand image by international tourists, targeting Azores tourism as the research context.

Stakeholders are at the centre of the study, having as a basis of comparison the SMPAT developed by Azores government, taking into account the perspectives of different stakeholders of the region, namely local trade agents, outside touristic operators, residents, public and private entities, visitors and even non visitors. On the other hand, the comparison is made to the perceptions of international tourists who have visited the islands in the last decade, in order to find if there is congruency in brand image between these two perspectives.

In addition to the determination of congruency between perceptions, there are complementary objectives to this study, specifically, the identification of the planned positioning of the Azorean region as a touristic destination, and consequent comparison to the perceived positioning from international tourists regarding a set of different variables.

In the end, the goal would be to determine whether the plan was implemented as it was planned and to suggest improvements over what didn't go as planned, as well as what made sense on paper but didn't get to the implementation phase.

Furthermore, this topic is relevant to the region's future once it determines whether Azores tourism is being marketed in the right way and gives further suggestions for improvements.

4.2. Method

As a primary information source, web reviews were the chosen, extracting web reviews regarding the Azorean region mainly from TripAdvisor, as well as from personal blogs in a much smaller quantity. From this source of information, the objective was to understand how the consumers perceive the region, in terms of brand image and taking many dimensions into account.

Through these reviews, understandings regarding the expectations of the visitors and their actual experience once in the region were collected, as well as which dimensions were most mentioned and if there is a positive or negative association to those specific dimensions. We were able to this concerning the region as a whole, also due to the fact that many tourists visit more than one island, but also concerning each island.

When combining these perceptions, collected from the reviews, with the desk research, it is possible to do comparisons and take further conclusions. Desk research being the secondary source of information, was based on the analysis of the SMPAT (Strategic Marketing Plan for Azores Tourism) put in place by the government, as well as the search for important concepts on the literature, for a better understanding of the theoretical basis on the elaboration of such a marketing plan.

In the end, this data gathering approach started with desk research, with a full extent analysis of the SMPAT and identification of the positioning and main messages that the government wishes to pass to the tourists. This step was followed by the deep understanding of the concepts enclosed in a marketing strategy for a destination, and in specific for as island/ archipelago destination, this was a crucial phase to recognize the importance of adapting the basic general marketing theories to the specific context. Finally, the web reviews extraction, which was a vital part of the study to determine whether the plan is successful through the existence or non-existence of congruency between desired and perceived brand image for the region.

4.3. Data Collection

Regarding the collection of all the data, concerning the desk research, the process started by mastering the context of the study besides the existent perception as a resident. This was achieved by researching on the tourism sector's performance in the last seven years, on an extensive analysis of the region's strategic marketing plan (SMPAT) as well as by researching news respecting the creation of the plan and the developments in relation to what was proposed on the plan.

This phase was followed by the identification of which concepts surrounding the research hypothesis should be approached and their relevance to the rest of the study. It was clear that the tourism concept should be the starting point, followed by the funnelling of the concept to island tourism, in this way being able to grasp the development of tourism in general and main trends, as well as how island tourisms fit the general concept but also has its specificities when it comes to managing coopetition and brand architecture within an archipelago, added to the lack of competition in respect of amenities and consequent high prices.

Another main concept that was crucial to have a deep understanding of was branding and its variations as place and destination branding. Being destination branding a key concept to this study, due to its relevance in the elaboration of the SMPAT. Together with the brand image concept, these are the ones who take the consumers perception into representation the most, therefore being the basis for the whole study.

In regarding to the web review data collection, the first decision was related to the fundamental information that should be extracted, namely the review itself together with its title, the date of the trip, the nationality of the visitor and the islands visited. Secondly, was the decision on whether to tackle the region as one or do a segmentation by islands, being that there aren't many reviews on the region as a whole, the extraction was made on both angles, a few reviews from the region and a few reviews on each island. This was followed by the uncertainty on what to take reviews on, being that the islands themselves are not a specific category one can review on in TripAdvisor, the choice was made to extract reviews on specific TripAdvisor categories on each island.

In the end, 426 reviews were collected, even though at start we considered that 200 reviews would be enough to take conclusions, when finding that the review was not made by the localization itself (Azores, Terceira or São Miguel) but instead by category, the decision was made to double the amount of extracted reviews. Therefore 398 reviews were extracted from TripAdvisor, segmented by the following categories:

- Restaurant_Review, which consists of reviews on the "explore" page for a location under "eat" category, there were 106 total reviews, considering visits to all the nine islands.
- Attraction_Review, related to the "do" section, specific locations which are attractions, with a total of 107 extracted reviews, throughout all the islands.
- Hotel_Review, portrayed as "stay" in TripAdvisor "explore" categories but specific to hotels, reviews were extracted on eight of the islands, excepting Faial, making up a total of 63 reviews.
- VacationRentalReview, regarding different accommodations as rural housing, from this category, 61 reviews were extracted, in respect to two islands (Terceira and São Miguel).
- AttractionProductReview, respecting activity attractions, where there was of total of 33 reviews extracted, contemplating 5 of the islands (Terceira, São Miguel, São Jorge, Santa Maria and Faial).
- ShowUserReviews, comprises reviews on the region "Azores", where a total of 25 reviews were extracted, mentioning seven of the nine islands, in exception of Graciosa and Corvo.

The rest, accounting for 28 reviews were extracted from entity pages such as azores.com and portugal.com, travel blogs, namely tworestlesshomebodies.com, onemileatatime.com and fathomaway.com, as well as from Instagram posts of international visitors, covering 5 islands, excepting Corvo, Graciosa, São Jorge and Santa Maria.

Overall, there were extracted 178 reviews on São Miguel, 93 reviews on Terceira, 57 reviews on Pico, 20 reviews on Santa Maria, 15 reviews on São Jorge, 10 reviews on Faial, 10 reviews on

Graciosa, 10 reviews on Corvo and 10 reviews on Flores as well. There are some reviews mentioning more than one island, totalizing 13 reviews, and mentioning seven of the islands, in exception of Graciosa and Corvo.

The extraction was made with no time limit, due to the fact that in some islands it is difficult to find a significant number of reviews as well as it being important to have an idea regarding the evolution of the perceptions. It was done manually and resulted in a Excel file with all the data complemented.

4.4. Data Treatment

Finally, an analysis on all the extracted data was made, in order to better understand which dimensions were mentioned the most in the web reviews. But before any type of analysis, all the data was checked for spelling errors and uniformized. Sometimes the island(s) visited was not clear, so the review had to be read in order to take that information, unfortunately some of the reviews had no date, which was not possible to retrieve.

Starting with the elaboration of word clouds from the web reviews collected, attempting to form visual maps in representation of the words that were more utilized across the reviews. There was a map created as a representation of the region as a whole, which is pictured as a whale to link to the cetaceans' observations, characteristic of the Azores.

But also, by island, creating a map with its own meaning for each island as well as the attributed colour, São Miguel being the green island and recognized by its pineapples, Terceira with the characteristic lilac and pictured through a cow, Faial blue as the sea full of sailors, Pico famous for its imponent grey mountain, Flores as a pink flower after its name, Santa Maria being the yellow sun island, São-Jorge recognized by its cheese and brown in colour, and finally the black volcanic lava Corvo.

Besides the visual map, through the word cloud tool we were also able to collect the absolute frequency of the number of times that those words were used, supporting the visual part.

A last analysis was performed using the web reviews and the Leximancer tool, which analysis all the text from the reviews automatically and provides high-level concepts and highlights the main keywords. From this analysis, is also possible to get visual maps, but going into detail regarding where the most used words pend to and having the possibility to see examples of sentences from reviews where those words were used.

5. Data Presentation and Discussion of Results

Having established a context and structure for the study, as well as researched in depth the theoretical concepts supporting the existing analysis and collected the necessary data to reach the final goal of the study, it is time to present our findings and take conclusions. This moment starts with an analysis of the SMPAT contrasting with the current days and comparing with the results of the WordCloud analysis. Followed by the description of the findings of the Leximancer analysis.

5.1. SMPAT Analysis

The first part of the plan was dedicated to understanding and conceptualize the situational panorama of the region, starting by the PEST analysis, describing the situation point of Azores within the four factors, until 2015, to give better context on the political, economic, socio-cultural and technological status. Within the situational analysis, many other aspects were considered, namely the performance of the touristic sector and service/ infrastructure supply offered by the destination, as well as analysis on the demand, on the competition including benchmarking and on the destinations' attractiveness within the market. All of these topics were briefly discussed in the above section of contextualization.

We will now look at the identified consumers' profile and the touristic markets characterisation, which can be found as part of the demand analysis and were based on an inquiry made to visitors and non-visitors of the region on the summer of 2014. On this topic, we stand out the rate of 89,6% of inquiries who visited São Miguel Island, followed by Terceira, Faial and Pico, leaving São Jorge, Santa Maria, Flores, Graciosa and Corvo as the islands with a lower visitation rate, on the scope of the respondents to the survey at the time.

Furthermore, in this sector of the region's marketing plan we can also see that the tourists who visit Azores, choose the destination for its nature and natural resources (82%), because they are looking to relax and rest (50%), enjoy walking tours (32,5%), and many of them have always had the wish to know and visit the archipelago's islands (65,6%). Some of the reasons mentioned that many times make it not viable to visit the destination, are the lack of opportunity, the travel cost, the unfamiliarity with the destination, together with financial motives.

The overall average rate of the destination, given on the mentioned inquiry, on a 1 to 7 scale, was 6,14, which is equivalent to "very satisfied", meaning that most respondents were highly or totally satisfied with the destination (77,9%). The main competition tourists put into consideration alongside Azores when choosing their travel destination are Madeira, mainland Portugal, Iceland, USA and Spain, which we also could tell in our analysis, especially regarding Madeira, which popped up many times as a comparison in the reviews.

As the final analysis made to support the strategic vision and goals, a SWOT matrix was performed, summarizing the archipelago's strengths and weaknesses, as well as the opportunities and threats as external factors, which was described above (contextualization). Having all the above-mentioned analyses into consideration regarding the strategic context, five major challenges were identified as a consequence of a sustainable growth and development for tourism in Azores.

These challenges are deeply related to the accessibilities and mobility, which as long been an issue for the archipelago and was wished to be changed by the new model of accessibilities that enclosed the liberation of routes to new airlines and low-cost companies, hoping to significantly reduce the value of air fares boosting the capture and growth of touristic fluxes; seasonality, which represents a problem to every island in the world that depends on tourism, being seen as a summer destination, increasing the need to bet on niche markets and develop complementary products and services; the territory's vulnerability, is a main worry for the region's stakeholders, being that natural resources and its nature are the main arguments to capture visitors, it is imperative to develop environmentally conscious strategies to every step of the tourism sector development, incentivising and investing in projects that have a sustainable, integrated and continuous approach; the quality of the service, is of crucial importance, being that the warm welcoming and hospitality are one of the two main pillars of this plan, this being said, the strategy is to train and qualify human resources, together with a sensibilisation campaign to emphasize the importance that tourism has to the region close to the local actors, so that the destination stands out for its quality touristic service and high added value; and the balanced touristic development of the nine islands of the archipelago, which consists of the ultimate and deeply rooted issue of the archipelago, where the majority of stakeholders considers that investment is not made in an equal and fair way throughout the nine islands, being that one of the island has the most exponential growth, and together with two to three others, represent most of the development, visitors intake and revenue of the archipelago. On this point, a major turn was meant to be the new transportation model that facilitates visiting other islands, which historically hadn't had many access, along with the strategy of complementary products that focuses on emphasizing the best attributes on each island and monetize them.

Based on the set of performed studies as part of the plan's diagnosis, it is evident that nature tourism is the central product of Azores, which served as a foundation to define the strategic and complementary products for the region. The centrality of nature tourism as the anchor attraction of the region enables the reinforcement of this type of tourism as the polo of development of the destination and being the common attribute to all islands, it also reinforces the complementarity between them.

The definition and organization of such products aims to seize and enhance the territory's characteristics, as a way to foment complementarity and value the touristic experience, whilst recognizing each of the islands, as being part of the whole that Azores is, but with very much concrete and valuable specificities.

Priority on development and investment is subsequently given to nature derived activities, such as hiking and walking tours, equestrian tours, birdwatching, geo-tourism, BTT, kayaking and canoeing, downhill, paragliding, trekking, abseiling and climbing, canyoning, as well as to activities related to the biosphere reserve and tourism in rural spaces.

All the islands were attributed priority, secondary and complementary products, supposedly based on their offer, touristic vocation, specific target markets and regarding their potential and existing companies/ infrastructures.

The primary products and markets, for each island, were delineated as follows:

1. *Santa Maria* – specialist in diving with manta rays and fossil related geo-tourism. Target all markets* except Switzerland. Another primary product, non-specialist, is related to sun and sea.

2. *São Miguel* – specialist in hiking and walking tours, equestrian tours, birdwatching, geo-tourism, BTT, kayaking and canoeing, downhill, paragliding, surf, windsurf, yachting and golf. Targets all markets*. Also has as primary products activities related to tourism in rural spaces and to sun and sea, boat tours, whale watching, diving, bodyboard, gastronomy and wines, religion, congresses and incentives.

3. *Graciosa* – specialist in activities related to the biosphere reserve, birdwatching, thermae due to its Termas do Carapacho, and geo-tourism. Target markets are the same*, in exception of Belgium. Only has one more primary product which is diving.

4. *Terceira* – specialist in world heritage, having one of its city downtowns recognized as UNESCO's patrimony, culture, religion, gastronomy, and wines. Targets similar markets*, minus Belgium and Switzerland. Some of its other primary attractions are hiking and walking tours, equestrian tours, geo-tourism, boat tours, whale watching, diving, windsurf, entertainment and events, patrimony, and religion.

5. *São Jorge* – specialist in canyoning, sport fishing, hiking, and walking tours, as well as geo-tourism. It follows the target markets* pattern, in exception of Switzerland. In addition, surf and bodyboarding are also primary products, besides the specialization.

6. *Pico* – specializes in trekking, being home to the highest mountain in Portugal, hiking and walking tours, kayaking and canoeing, and whale watching. In line with São Jorge, it only

doesn't target Switzerland in the target markets list. Other primary attractions are equestrian tours, birdwatching, boat tours, yachting, diving, sport fishing and world heritage, for its vineyard scenario, as well as activities related to tourism in rural spaces.

7. *Faial* – specialist in geo-tourism, whale watching, yachting, and sailing, famous for its marina. Except for Switzerland it targets the same markets as the other islands. Furthermore, it has hiking and walking tours, boat tours, diving, sport fishing, congresses and activities related to tourism in rural spaces, as primary products too.

8. *Flores* – specialist in activities related to the reserve of biosphere, birdwatching, canyoning and geo-tourism. Targeting all the same markets, except for Belgium and having as an extra primary product hiking and walking tours.

9. *Corvo* – specialist in the same products in exception for canyoning and targeting the same markets as Flores. It has no additional primary products.

*Markets transversal to all the islands: Germany, United Kingdom, The Netherlands, Scandinavia, France, Spain, Belgium, Italy, Switzerland, Portugal, Canada and United States of America.

São Miguel, Terceira, Pico and Faial being the largest, most developed, more accessible islands, it is only natural that these are the ones with more potential and existing capital, companies, and infrastructures. This being said, it is clear that the investment even knowledge wise is not balanced or fair within the nine islands, regardless being approached on the plan, this is a topic that persists with no solution, due to centralization policies.

The above descriptions reflects exactly that, attributing a larger number of primary products in most of the categories to the most developed islands: São Miguel (19 primary products), Terceira (14), Pico (13) and Faial (10), and giving way less importance to the smaller, less developed islands: São Jorge (5 primary attractions), Flores (5), Graciosa (5), Santa Maria (3) and Corvo (3). Besides having a lower number of primary products to communicate, the smaller islands development is once more jeopardized by the fact that the primary products attributed as their specialization were also attributed to one of the biggest islands as a specialization. This makes it hard for a tourist to choose to travel to a smaller island, if there is nothing exclusive about it, and the larger islands are communicating to be specialists in the exact same thing.

A flagrant example of this is: Geo-tourism and birdwatching being a specialization for Corvo, the smallest island of the archipelago, whilst also being a specialization for Flores, Graciosa and São Miguel. In fact, geo-tourism is a specialization primary product for 8 of the 9 islands, in exception for Terceira, which is not even understandable being that Terceira is home to one of the two unique visitable volcanic chambers in the world.

Furthermore, Corvo and Flores have the exact same specialization, primary products and target markets, except for canyoning in Flores which is a common specialization with São Jorge for instance, which results in none of them offering unique attributes and added value to the tourists.

In the end complementarity is not achieved, when the larger islands are communicated as specialists in many products throughout the different categories.

On a secondary level, complementary products were defined as well, from nautical tourism, involving all type of activities from cruises, boat tours, whale watching, yachting, diving, sport fishing, surf and bodyboard, sailing and windsurf; to cultural and scenic tourism, focusing on events and entertainment, wines and gastronomy, patrimony, religion, culture and world heritage; and finally, tourism related to wellness and health, recognizing the benefits of the many thermae that the archipelago has to offer, appealing to the consumers' need to unwind, relax and rest.

As the least prioritised, but still very relevant, are the secondary products deriving from specific attributes that represent a potential of diversifying the range of products that the region has to offer, these attributes being sun and sea, congresses and incentives, and golf.

The alleged complementarity between the primary products reflecting each islands specifies, resulted in the organization of thematic circuits to give niche segment tourists the opportunity of performing their liked activity while visiting more than one island. The specialized circuits categories created were Cetaceans circuits, hiking circuits, diving circuits, birdwatching circuits, geo-tourism circuits, BTT circuits, and surf and bodyboard circuits.

Although the logics behind the complementarity as a way to facilitate the development of tourism, enriching the visitors experience and enlarging his motivations to come visit made sense in theory, in practice the differentiation of each island offer within the set of islands, wasn't implemented in the best way possible.

The target markets where these products should be communicated were selected based on a matrix that identified the American, French, English, Canadian and Italian markets as the untapped priorities, being the ones with a highest probability of success due to their high population size together with their promising potential of growth, also being a potential solution for the region's dependency on the Portuguese and German decisive markets. Therefore, these are the markets where communication efforts will be largely allocated to.

Nonetheless, the German market leads the chart as a decisive market for the destination, creating an excessive dependency, followed in the top performances by Spain, who comparatively presents a lower potential due to its population size. These two markets combined with the Dutch

market, are strategic markets where the region intends to maintain and increase the performance through communication efforts, specifically regarding that the German and Dutch markets highly appreciate nature products.

Obviously, the Portuguese market still has a big weight on the region and some potential to grow, being kept has a decisive market but lowering the promotion efforts, also as a way to fight dependency. Showing high propensity of consumption of the destination, the Finnish, Danish and Swedish markets stand out, representing a good bet for the region to diversify and lower its dependence on decisive markets.

The final recommendations regarding communication to markets presented on the plan, suggest that B2C communication is going to prevail in comparison to B2B which was prioritised until here, a major implementation communication wise will be to promote the region close to the diaspora, as these are considered to be the real ambassadors of Azores.

This communication shall be elaborated having in mind the desired positioning for the destination, which follows the assumption that "Azores is a natural destination, of rare beauty, with no external influences and no vocation for the masses, being directed to very specific visitor niches who want to have one in a lifetime experiences".

Messages being communicated to the markets regarding the region should ultimately focus on the localization and consequent proximity to the markets, the type of destination, being islands, and their natural volcanic, preserved, exuberant characteristic attributes, representing the perfect harmony of the four elements (water, earth, fire and air) and giving them their exclusivity and mystic beauty, as well as allow a variety of quality activities in land and sea. Valued qualities close to the consumer that the region also has, and can must communicate are its safety, personalized welcoming and genuine hospitality, which make the visitor feel like a special guest.

5.2. Web Reviews Analysis

5.2.1. Word Cloud Analysis

Looking to analyse and further understand the narrative of the reviews from the visitors, these reviews were combined into word clouds, using a platform named "WordCloud Generator", by importing the text both from the title and from the actual reviews on to the software, and choosing the shape and colours to be used, the software developed the following figures, as the representation of the frequency of times a word was used in the reviews and in the review titles.

The larger the word appears in the figure, the most frequently it was used by the traveller in the web reviews.

Figure 5.1. – Generated word cloud for the Azores region

This first figure, is regarding the Azores region as a whole, represented as a whale, a known creature of the islands, and painted in blue, as the sea that surrounds them.

In accordance with this output, the words most frequently used by visitors to describe, review or rate the region were "Island" (437), "Beauty" and "View", highlighting the type of tourism and the attributes that best describe the islands' reality. This is combined with some of the touristic sector's services "Hotel" (307), "Stay" (300) and "Restaurant" (248), representing the relevance of having high quality services, being some of the things that tourists pay more attention too and review the most. Besides this, some adjectives such as "Great" (379), "Good" (299) and "Nice" (273) also stood out as positives within the reviews throughout the region.

Figure 5.2. - Generated word cloud for the Island of Flores

This second figure concerns the Island of Flores as a whole, represented as a flower, which is something that exists in great quantity and variety, painting the island pink as it is in the figure.

According to this result, the words most used by visitors to describe, evaluate or evaluate Flores Island were "Place" (42), "Food" (28), "Stay" (16) and "Tour" (19) , representing the relevance of having high quality services and a typical gastronomy, being some of the things that tourists pay more attention to and review the most.

In addition, some adjectives such as "Nice" (42), "Good" (31), "Beauty" (26), "Great" (25) also stood out as positive in the evaluations of this island, which for many tourists is the most beautiful of the Azores.

Figure 5.3. - Generated word cloud for the Island of São Jorge

The third figure concerns the Island of São Jorge, represented as a traditional cheese of the island, the ex-libris of Jorgense gastronomy, being also appreciated by all the locals and tourists who visit the island.

It is represented in yellow because it is the color of this cheese so tasty and of such quality. According to this result, the words most used by visitors to describe, evaluate or evaluate São Jorge Island were "Island" (25), "Place" (23), "Fajã" (22) and "View" (20).), representing that São Jorge, its fajãs and the views that can be seen from that island deserved the praise of visitors.

In addition, some adjectives such as "Well" (21), "Great" (18), "Good" (17), "Nice" (13) also stood out as positive in the evaluations of this island that has many particularities.

Figure 5.4. - Generated word cloud for the Graciosa Island

This fourth figure concerns Graciosa Island, represented as a windmill characteristic of the island, and it is possible to see numerous examples around the island.

It is represented mostly in white as it is the official color of the island, representing the white stones of the island.

According to this result, the words most used by visitors to describe, evaluate or evaluate Ilha Graciosa were "Room" (18), "Hotel" (16), "Day" (15) and "Recommended" (10), representing that Graciosa has quality services that allow its visitors to enjoy daily what the island has to offer, and recommending it to other potential visitors.

In addition, some adjectives such as "Great" (12), "Nice" (11), "Well" (9) also stood out as positive in the evaluations of this island that has many qualities that make it, despite being small, an island with a lot of potential.

Figure 5.5. - Generated word cloud for the Corvo Island

This fifth figure concerns Corvo Island, represented by a mountain in black, referring to the Caldeirão, being the main attraction of the island.

According to this result, the words most used by visitors to describe, evaluate or evaluate Corvo Island were "Place" (25), "Friendly" (15), "Comforts" (8) and "Manuel" (8) , representing that the population demonstrates the great sense of knowing how to receive tourists, and that they are grateful, referring to the name Manuel, one of the island's tourist guides.

In addition, some adjectives such as "Good" (12), "Great" (12), "Nice" (11) also stood out as positive in the evaluations of this island that has many qualities despite being the smallest in terms of size and population.

Figure 5.6. - Generated word cloud for the Santa Maria Island

This sixth figure concerns Santa Maria Island, represented by a yellow sun, since the island is known for being the island of the Sun.

According to this result, the words most used by visitors to describe, evaluate or evaluate Santa Maria Island were "Hotel" (46), "Room" (44), "Stay" (38) and "Staff" (34).), representing that the island has good services available to visitors.

In addition, some adjectives such as "Good" (48), "Great" (47), "Nice" (32) also stood out as positive in the evaluations of this island that has many qualities and is increasingly being explored for tourism.

Figure 5.7. - Generated word cloud for the Island of Faial

This seventh figure concerns the Island of Faial, represented by a boat in blue, since the island is known for its Marina that receives visitors from all over the world who dock their boats in what is the most peculiar bay of the Azores.

According to this result, the words most used by visitors to describe, evaluate or evaluate Faial Island were "Island" (34), "Room" (33), "Day" (38) and "Place" (25), representing that the island has good services and, at the same time, places that enchant the day to day of those who visit it.

In addition, some adjectives such as "Good" (31), "Nice" (31), "Great" (22) also stood out as positive in the evaluations of this island, which despite being small, is a special island.

Figure 5.8. - Generated word cloud for the Pico Island

This eighth figure concerns Pico Island, represented by Pico do Pico in grey, referring to Pico Pico, the highest point in the country, and grey representing basalt.

According to this result, the words most used by visitors to describe, evaluate or evaluate Pico Island were "Pico" (65), "Hotel" (46), "Restaurant" (38), "Wine" (33) , representing that the island has great services available to its population and to those who visit Pico, Pico do Pico, being one of the ex-libris of the Azores, is one of the great attractions and the Pico wine is one of the best in the country.

In addition, some adjectives such as "Good" (37), "Beauty" (30), "Well" (23) also stood out as positive in the evaluations of this island that grows annually, becoming an increasingly touristy island.

Figure 5.9. - Generated word cloud for the Terceira Island

This ninth figure concerns Terceira Island, represented by a cow and the colour lilac, referring to the enormous presence of this animal in the pastures of Terceira Island and the lilac being the official colour of the island.

According to this result, the words most used by visitors to describe, evaluate or evaluate Terceira Island were "House" (105), "Stay" (75), "Hotel" (56), "Place" (55) representing that the island has great accommodation services for those who visit Terceira Island, the existence of magical places and the desire to want to return.

In addition, some adjectives such as "Great" (91), "Beauty" (56), "Amazing" (54) also stood out as positive in the evaluations of this island that has evolved immensely in terms of tourism, being also a magical place to visit. who lives there.

Figure 5.10. - Generated word cloud for the Island of São Miguel

This tenth figure concerns the island of São Miguel, represented by a pineapple and the colour green, referring to this fruit that is grown in São Miguel, being immensely exported to mainland Portugal and abroad, and green for being the official colour of the island. due to pastures and landscapes.

According to this result, the words most used by visitors to describe, evaluate or evaluate Terceira Island were "Hotel" (119), "Place" (102), "Stay" (97), "Restaurant" (82) representing that the island has excellent accommodation and catering services for those who visit the island, the existence of places where you can breathe nature and the desire to want to stay or return.

In addition, some adjectives such as "Beauty" (126), "Great" (92), "Amazing" (3) also stood out as positive in the evaluations of this island, which is the most advanced island, in terms of tourism, and for having an area much superior to the others, they have a diversity of places to visit and a breath-taking beauty.

5.2.2.   Leximancer Output Analysis

The Leximancer analysis elaborates the following figure, starting with the extraction of the content of the reviews on to an excel file, with specific categories. To reach such a result the content was extracted for the following categories: date of travel, name of the reviewer, nationality of the visitor, traveller type (for the ones possible), destination specifying the island or islands visited, overall rating of the review, most valued characteristics and their rating as well, review title, review content, TripAdvisor review category and source.

Being unable to manually analyse such an amount of data, this excel file was imported to the Leximancer platform, which further categorizes all the content per theme and concept, finally delivering insightful ideas, which give us the tools to take action from.

The analysis was performed with the goal of having an overall vision about the Azores as a touristic island destination and the real perceptions of tourists who visit the archipelago, regarding its brand image.

The broad analysis performed on the regions' reviews, with data from all the 9 islands, revealed the following 13 themes: "Island" (hits = 1112), "Place" (hits = 887), "Beautiful" (hits = 678), "Stay" (hits = 640), "Room" (hits = 600), "Day" (hits = 537), "Wonderful" (hits = 453), "Food" (hits = 440), "Tour" (hits = 338), "House" (hits = 322), "Staff" (hits = 267), "Recommend" (hits = 264), "Take" (hits = 260). Bellow is an extensive and detailed analysis on each of the mentioned themes that were identified by the Leximancer software.
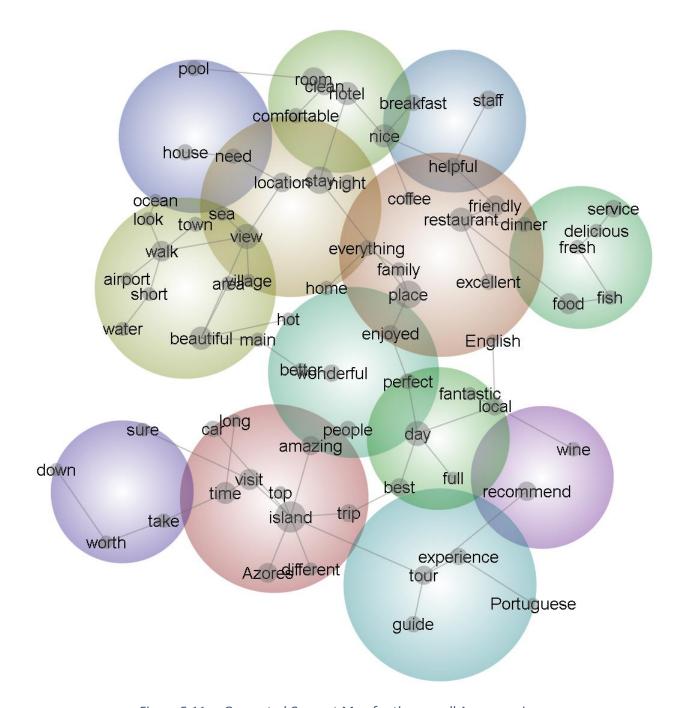
Figure 5.11. – Generated Concept Map for the overall Azores region

The main theme identified in the whole analysis is "Island", being the type of tourism that represents the destination. Within this theme there were identified concepts as "Island" (count = 359, relevance = 83%), "Time" (count = 211, relevance = 49%), "Visit" (count = 185, relevance = 43%), "Azores" (count = 176, relevance = 41%), "Amazing" (count = 149, relevance = 35%), "Trip" (count =

133, relevance = 31%), "Car" (count = 102, relevance = 24%), "Different" (count = 57, relevance = 13%), "Top" (count = 54, relevance = 13%), "Long" (count =40 , relevance = 9%).

A typical review on this theme would be, "Quick trip down memory lane. My parents and I headed here while in St. Espirito for a quick stop. The museum was filled with different artifacts from life long ago, before technology and internet took over our lives. Having cars on all the islands allowed us to really get around and explore. It was fascinating how different each island was." (Destination: Santa Maria). Another traveller commented "It is strange that the Azores islands are not included in the top beach destinations, but one of the most beautiful panoramas here are the beaches. All beaches are united by a common volcanic past and each is unique due to different shades of sand and bizarre rocky formations, stone reservoirs with lagoons. The top of the top attraction of Corvo island is its Caldeirão, the huge and magnificent crater. I drove up there three times within 24 hours and can only say that it is spectacular! I will do a trip advisor entry for Adegas de Pico, the Pousada (so) on Faial which was a highlight of that island, and Azores.com. On Faial we explored the lava tubes amazing." (Destination: São Miguel).

Regarding the "Place" theme, the included concepts were "place" (count = 315, relevance = 73%), "restaurant" (count =88 , relevance =20 %), "everything" (count =90 , relevance =31 %), "family" t =214 , relevance =50 %), "friendly" (count =163 , relevance =38 %), "excellent" (count =58 , relevance =13 %), "English" (count =49 , relevance = 11%), "coffee" (count =48 , relevance =11 %).

Related to this theme, a traveller wrote "Nice, well located touristic coffee and restaurant! We went as a family of 6 members. That is amazing and so, so important! Me, my family and some friends who came with us in the last years are fascinated by everything you showed us. Again the atmosphere, like everything associated with Corvo, was friendly and relaxed. The owners didn't speak a word of English, but we were lucky enough when a family member (we think) showed up who did." (Destination: Pico). Another visitor stated "The coffee is good, Nunes' family are really nice! This is a local family doing their coffee and explaining the process." (Destination: São Jorge). Both these examples, represent reviews of restaurants or cafes, which means that theme "place" is strongly correlated to the concepts "restaurant" and "coffee".

The third most relevant theme was "Beautiful", which involves the concepts "beautiful" (count =210 , relevance =49 %), "walk" (count =155 , relevance = 36%), "town" (count =71 , relevance = 17%), "area" (count =73 , relevance =17 %), "main" (count =61 , relevance =14 %), "water" (count =74 , relevance =17 %), "look" (count =67 , relevance =16 %), "short" (count =57 , relevance = 13%), "airport" (count =52 , relevance =12 %) and "village" (count =41 , relevance =10 %).

In relation to this theme, there was a very complete review that stood out by describing the beautiful islands of Flores and São Jorge "The bar is a hit and miss, a bit short on stock and sometimes they didn't have what you were looking for. It's a few minutes to the airport, and a good half hour walk to the centre of town (Vila do Porto). Its peaky and craggy and packs some truly stunning mountain and coastal cliff scenery into its small area. The main town (really just a big village), Santa Cruz where the airport (presently being totally rebuilt) is, is one of the less nice of comparable Azorean towns and is not the best introduction to the island. The lookout is just a short walk up from the parking area, which is a short drive off the main road leading from Lajes das Flores to Fajã Grande, definitely worth a stop. The brand-new Café Acore restaurant on the main square of Velas, a pretty little town, was good as also was the restaurant Furnas de Lava (noteworthy for having pleasantly small and digestible portions!), a 10-minute taxi ride away in the neighbouring village of Santo Amaro." (Destination: Flores and São Jorge).

Moving on to the next dimension, the theme "stay" encompasses the concepts of "stay" (count =258, relevance =60%), "view" (count =205, relevance =48%), "location" (count =138, relevance =32%), "night" (count =87, relevance =20%), "home" (count =60 , relevance =14%) and "sea" (count =63 , relevance =15%).

And it can be illustrated in reviews like "Perfect home for our family of four. We stayed 6 nights in this home. The host is as accommodating as We have ever experienced, and the home is well appointed and extremely stylish." (Destination: Terceira), "Outstanding - 100% Great location, great view - the apartment had everything you could want - minutes from the beach, and the café and the marina. All the comforts of home. Its rural location and frontal sea view is ideal for resting! However, for a 4-star hotel one expects a bit more. We would definitely stay here again! Great location and views!!" (Destination: São Miguel), or "Lovely location It is located at a lovely quiet location on the foot of the mountain overlooking the cliffs and sea. Each cute cottage got a little porch." (Destination: São Jorge), which are good examples on the positive reviews given to accommodations in the region.

When it comes to the "Room" theme, the concepts were mostly related to the conditions offered, being "room" (count =188relevance =44%), "hotel" (count =201, relevance =47%), "nice" (count =207, relevance =44%), "clean" (count =104, relevance =24%) and "comfortable" (count =71, relevance =17%).

These concepts are present in the following reviews: "We had 11 rooms in this hotel. The rooms are really nice, clean and well lit. The room was clean and comfortable, but bathroom was quiet small and they didn't leave enough towels. Their Bed and Breakfast facility as very nice, well apportioned and comfortable. It gives a nice homey feel after hotels on the other Islands."

(Destination: Unknown), "OK for a short stay This hotel is close to all facilities. We had a good room, which was clean, comfortable and quiet." (Destination: Pico) and "Nice Stay We stayed a few days at this hotel in August 2015. We found it to be clean, beds could be a bit more comfortable, and it would be nice to have some decent pillows." (Destination: Santa Maria).

The "Day" theme includes the concepts "day" (count =245 relevance =37%), "local" (count =129 relevance =30%), "best" (count =131 relevance =30%), "fantastic" (count =54 relevance =13%) and "full" (count =41 relevance =10%).

Some review left on TripAdvisor regarding a fantastic and full day in the triangle island is "We had grilled grouper and it was fantastic. The sangria was left over from the day before. The ice creams were delicious too, prob the best I have tasted. The servings were pretty big so we would always leave pretty full! If you have the opportunity: do a night dive: fantastic experience and upon surfacing, you'll see the night sky in its full glory! In this case, we had a 3-chorizo pizza with local cheeses. It was honestly one of the best pizzas I ever had. We visited Faial and Pico in March 2018, which is not the best weather to visit the Azores, but compared to Boston weather in March, it was fantastic. We loved every minute of it." (Destination: Pico and Faial).

The "Wonderful" theme suggests the overall appreciation the visitors have for the destination, going through concepts as "wonderful" (count =109 relevance =25%), "enjoyed" (count =103 relevance =24%), "people" (count =104 relevance =24%), "perfect" (count =96 relevance =22%), "better" (count =53 relevance =12%) and "hot" (count =41 relevance =10%).

Great reviews were left mentioning this theme and concepts and showing how much the visitors enjoyed their destinations, "On Sunday the Church was packed! We also enjoyed the hot springs which were less than 10 minutes from Casa dos Barcos. While beef is a featured dish on Terceira (cows outnumber people here significantly), Frank and his wife put a unique spin on this staple. The generous sized portion of tender beef is served to you sizzling atop a rectangular block of piping hot basalt (volcanic rock). We really enjoyed the backyard and hot tub which were perfect for relaxing after a long day hiking and exploring, Check-in/ checkout was flawless." (Destination: Terceira), "Wonderful waterfall Wonderful waterfall at the end of Maia. Such a lovely spot with a perfect picnic table to enjoy it. The views are wonderful, but the lack of privacy (as mentioned by others) means you can't really enjoy them fully. The housekeeping was slapdash, the hairdryer didn't work, we didn't manage a hot shower in three days and breakfast was basic (hardboiled eggs and sliced tomatoes as the only cooked option?" (Destination: Santa Maria).

On the "Food" dimension, there is a range of concepts from type of food, to appreciation of the food, these concepts are "food" (count = 176; relevance = 41%), "service" (count = 136; relevance =32%), "dinner" (count = 80; relevance =19%), "fish" (count = 70; relevance =16%),"fresh" (count = 61; relevance =14%) and "delicious" (count =57 relevance =13%).

About the "food" theme, tourists have written good things "Exquisite cocktails! Wonderful service, cocktails to die for and delicious food. The service was great. The food was delicious and reasonably priced." (Destination: São Miguel), "Great Food and Great Service I hosted a dinner here for 12 guests and both the food and the service was exceptional. Each guest was able to order from the menu and I ordered hors d'oeuvres for sharing." (Destination: São Jorge), "The service was good Our hostess spoke English and helped with my choice of fish. We went to lunch and dinner twice (they are closed on Tuesday)." (Destination: Corvo), but also bad notes "Poor food and overpriced We went for dinner here and the food was really poor! The fish was fresh, but the tomato rice was probably done by lunch time and beaten on microwave after 2 min was cold." (Destination: Flores). These reviews show how fish is a highly appreciated food in the islands, always fresh from the sea, it also emphasizes the importance of quality service.

"Tour" is also a relevant dimension, highlighting the "experience" (count =132 relevance =31%), "guide" (count =103; relevance =24%), "Portuguese" (count =43; relevance =10%) and "tour" (count =138; relevance =32%) concepts.

The majority of the tours taken on the region are guided and usually there are many comments of appreciation towards the guides in the reviews, which is representative of the Portuguese, and especially Azorean hospitality, these reviews amazing examples of that "Our guide Antonio tailor made our experience since we had participated in two tours already, one of which was with him. We saw the sulphur fields, the oldest church, the ruts in the lava road that are centuries old." (Destination: Terceira), "Great sights, caring tour guides and a wonderful overall experience. 10/10" (Destination: São Miguel), "Awesome experience the experience was great and well planned. Eric is an awesome tour guide and took his time explaining the scenery and some historic facts in detail." (Destination: São Miguel) and "Wow, the canyoning level 1 tour with Marco was an unforgettable experience! He is an experienced guide and helps you relax with lots of jokes. It is one of those things you have to experience for yourself! AND our guide was not too embarrassed to be around us when we took out our travel pig!" (Destination: Flores).

When it comes to the "House" dimension, the "need" (count =85; relevance =20%) of a "pool" (count =104; relevance =24 %) or to be by the "ocean" (count =49; relevance =11 %) are perfect "house" (count = 107; relevance =25 %) concepts.

In light of this some travellers left reviews describing the houses they stayed in, which were highly appreciated, "All equipment you need is there. If you are Lucky and you have a day of cold weather, you can heat the house with the stove in the kitchen." (Destination: Unknown) and "An experience not to miss! We were met at the house by Fatima, at 10:00 as she knew our flight arrived early that morning and she thought we might like to rest a bit. Really thoughtful and greatly needed! He was nice enough to meet us at Bar Caloura and lead us to the house. There was a washing machine you could use but we did not need it. At the far end of the pool, the ocean water continuously enters and leaves the secluded body of water. When we visited, the skies were overcast and the periodic rays of sun blessed the water and surrounding cliffs... The hosts were very responsive, including letting us coordinate dropping off our luggage early. The house was well equipped with everything we needed, including towels, linens, pots and pans, seasoning for food, and even a few laundry pods! the bedrooms were as described, although we are seeing that most European beds are harder than we are used to (not unique to this rental)." (Destination: São Miguel).

On to the next dimension, the theme "staff" relates to "staff" (count =128, relevance =30%), "helpful" (count =97, relevance =23 %) and "breakfast" (count =90, relevance =21 %), these resonate with a pool of helpful staff in the tourism service entities of the region.

And it can be illustrated in reviews like "The staff was very friendly and helpful. Good breakfast. You could also order prepared eggs. Another highlight of this property is the very kind and helpful owner and the lovely lady who serves breakfast." (Destination: Unknown), "Staff is very attentive and helpful. Great breakfast" (Destination: Unknown), "A very chilled atmosphere is provided by all the staff who are so attentive and helpful. Ignore the knob hammer that gave a 1 star review he clearly was the recipient of over strict potty training." (Destination: Unknown), or "The staff (reception, housekeeping, breakfast) is very helpful. Very nice view on the harbour and Pico Mountain from the shaded large balcony." (Destination: Pico), which are good examples on the positive reviews given to accommodations in the region.

The "Recommend" theme suggests the willingness tourists have to recommend the region and its products, going through concepts as "recommend" (count =189; relevance =44%) and "wine" (count =78 relevance =18%).

Great reviews were left mentioning this theme and concepts in appreciation of the regional wines "We highly recommend the local Terras de Lava Reserva red wine. Amazing local wines card. The waiter was really nice and smiling and is able to recommend wine to pair with your menu. The ribs were soft but too salty. We drank red wine by the glass - I won?" (Destination: Unknown), "Will request the slow cooked beef stew in wine as my last meal on earth The Caneta Restaurant has a great

country atmosphere. The slow cooked beef stew in wine is one of the finest dishes I have ever had anywhere. I had read other reviews that spoke to the cost, I found it very reasonable. Just try finding a meal of that quality with entrees, wine and dessert for 4 for $100 in the US." (Destination: Terceira).

The last main theme identified in the Leximancer analysis was "Take", related to concepts such as "take" (count =76 , relevance =18 %), "sure" (count =67 , relevance =17 %), "worth" (count =68 , relevance = 18%), "down" (count =68 , relevance =16 %), this dimension is usually related to activities performed by the tourists, that take time but end up being worth it.

A typical review on this theme would be, "The lake was engulfed in a serene atmosphere of quiet and isolation, with bird calls and tress rustling in the wind being the only sounds. Hiking down to the lake takes a mere 10-15 minutes." (Destination: Flores), or "Secluded black volcanic beach It's a steep slope getting down to the beach and even steeper coming back up! taking me 25 and 35 minutes respectively. But the beach is very quiet and there is a unspoilt vista of the Atlantic to the south. We have been in the newer part of the complex so there it does not look to bad, but sure the older part looks run down as hell! Graciosa has a charm all of its own and it surely is worth a visit. A gem inside a gem inside a gem is the Graciosa Hotel and Resort. It was so totally worth it! We decided to hike down the road back into town and the landscape on the other side was breath-taking!" (Destination: Graciosa).

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

Brand image is a multidimensional construct that results from a combination of cognitive and affective dimensions. Comprising beliefs, knowledge, feelings, ideas, and attitudes that consumers have regarding a brand. This concept is formed in consumers memory though the association of different kinds of information they get in contact with regarding the brand, this helps the consumer in the decision-making process, starting by the recognition of its needs and wants in regarding of the brand and in distinguishing the brand from all its competitors.

It is the actual perception that consumers have of the brand, in this way, it is not something the brand can control, but only wish that it matches the image they are trying to pass on.

Regarding the research question "Is there congruency between the stakeholders' perspectives?", the conclusion is yes, there is congruency between both parts, although not completely, and the plan still has a set of not so well achieved points.

The main aspect of the plan that should be revised, as mentioned above, is in regarding of the balanced development of tourism throughout the nine islands of the Azores archipelago, which seven years into the plan and many into history, still wasn't achieved. Nonetheless, the pandemic brought the region onto the spectrum, giving some attention to the most remote islands once isolation was for once considered a plus.

Although Covid-19 helped when it comes to the seasonality, this is still an issue, and a really hard to fight being that it is common to most of the worlds island destinations, which are automatically linked to sun and beaches in consumers minds.

Accessibilities is a topic that varied a lot since the plan was implemented, but also is highly influenced by the political factor, which isn't as stable these days as it was when the plan was elaborated. Nonetheless, islands are way more accessible nowadays than they were in the past, so this is considered a reached goal.

Furthermore, in relation to having a sustainable destination, Azores are in the right track after being the first archipelago in the world to be internationally recognized with an award as a sustainable destination, which was an advantage to fit the new profile of tourist, concerned for the environment.

Regardless of the plans strengths and weaknesses, the main result of this analysis is the positive answer to the research question. There is congruency between the stakeholders' perceptions, especially regarding the beauty and exclusivity of the destination, being considered an exuberant, preserved, natural island destination, with a unique way of welcoming and genuine hospitality.

In the word cloud and Leximancer analyses it was clear that the consumers brand image is linked to the desired positioning of the region, this was notable by the strong use of words like "island", "beauty", "amazing", "view", "place", "great", highlighting especially the fact that the destination is seen as a singular island destination with a mystic beauty and amazing natural landscape views.

Furthermore, concepts such as "place", "stay", "hotel", "room", "experience", "service", "local" and "staff" are mentioned and connected to other concepts such as "recommend", "nice", "friendly", "clean", "enjoyed" and "helpful". This falls in line with the strategic objectives of staff training and improving overall service quality. Even though it is in the right path, it is not yet one of the most mentioned characteristics when describing the Azorean region.

In addition, gastronomy was also a highlighted theme, as it was proposed in the plan as a theme to bet on. The words "restaurant", "food", "breakfast", "dinner", "wine" and "fish" were frequently used and in some reviews associated with words as "recommend", "excellent", "family" and "great", highlighting how much visitors have enjoyed going to restaurants in family contexts in the region and how much they enjoyed the food. A concept that also popped up related to "restaurant" was "English" due to the fact that tourists appreciate that their waiters speak English. In this topic, the word "restaurant" was the 9th most used word when describing Azores, especially in reviews from the island Pico, where it was the 4th most mentioned word after "island", "Pico" and "hotel".

In the end, the positive attractive factors were physical characteristics of the territory, destinations' singularity, safety, tranquillity, localization, environmental quality, gastronomy, historical and cultural heritage, soft weather, and overall quality of the destination. In general, visitors are satisfied and want to recommend the destination as well as pretend to come back at some point. On the less positive side, failing to be attractive, some factors were pointed out, such as climate's instability, tourisms' seasonality, destinations' cost, bureaucracy, night life and entertainment. In the overall, it was expected that the, at the time, new transportations model would contribute to the improvement of the destinations attractivity.

In the end, the recommendations would be to review the measures regarding the balance between all the islands, to make it actually balanced and with more fairness to the smallest islands. In this way, the islands should present at least one exclusive primary products, so that the island is recognized as an absolute specialist on it. A great example is Santa Maria presenting its main product as diving, and being exclusive on it, not having the spotlight stollen by other major islands.

For the islands where it is harder to find an exclusive primary product, the activity they present to be best at should be identified and projects should be drafted so that all the infrastructures and services regarding that activity receive investment to be improved and become the main attraction of that island. In this way, real complementarity, balance and equality will be achieved. For this it is crucial to understand each islands specificities of territory, to further develop its touristic sector.

Finally, the last recommendation is related to measuring, defining performance goals to reach is very important, but keeping track of them is equally as important, so it is crucial to keep studying and measuring the development of the touristic sector in the region as well as per island, to fully understand if they are going in the right track and make adjustments in real time when something seems to be deviating from what was defined in the strategy.

Research regarding the development of this sector in the islands is not abundant, specifically for Azores, it would be important to further study the associations that tourists do, in order to determine a more accurate brand image for the region, but also for each island. As listening to the consumer himself is the best way to adapt the communication.

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