

Exploring the outcomes of digital marketing on historic sites' visitor behaviour

Digital
marketing and
historic sites'
visit

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Abstract

Purpose – Digital communication and social media have an increasing importance in society and in tourism boosting. This study aims to analyse the role of digital marketing in the destination image and visitor loyalty of historic sites.

Design/methodology/approach – Using a mixed-method approach combining survey data from 318 respondents and three in-depth interviews. Using structural equations modelling results reveals experience, satisfaction, image and loyalty are concepts to be considered by the destinations' digital marketing promotion, as well as the increasing use of digital marketing by tourists, in the sense that tourists are increasing the habit of checking the opinion of others before scheduling their trip and gives them more importance, and a growing importance is given by tourists to the web/social networks of places they intend to visit.

Findings – This study contributes to the theory on tourism digital marketing which can be transposed to organizations management in order to encourage discussion on the processes of capture, retention and loyalty of target audiences.

Research limitations/implications – To enhance the importance of digital marketing in the process of the tourist development of the city, it is fundamental to define a clear strategy for attracting and responding to the greatest demand from cultural tourists who are increasingly interested in actively participating in learning experiences.

Practical implications – The results show that digital communication and social media have an increasing importance in society and in tourism boosting and economy recovery.

Social implications – The paper presents digital marketing as a possible factor in tourism development and social inclusion, advancing practical measures aimed at social justice through a fairer distribution of tourism revenues and the defence of historic centre residents' way (i.e. Barcelos'), and quality of life.

Originality/value – The authors suggest the development of a strategic digital marketing plan applied to the development and promotion of tourism in the city of Barcelos (Portugal), to complement the research presented here, thus contributing with a more practical perspective of the subject under study.

Keywords Digital marketing, Historic sites management, Destination marketing, Destination image, Visitor loyalty

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

The global use of the Internet and the consequent increase of users of the most diverse online platforms are a fertile ground for the growth and evolution of digital marketing over the years. In fact, in the last 20 years the concept of digital marketing has massified, thus allowing to realize "new forms of advertising, social networks as a new advertising vehicle, growth of



online commerce, click stream data, online analytics data and greater computing power” (Ratchford, 2020, p. 16).

Digital marketing is developed in the online environment and consists of a set of strategic actions developed by a company or brand to achieve certain desired objectives; according to the American Marketing Association (AMA) this type of marketing can be used in social networks, search engines, Internet and mobile devices, among others, allowing a closer, personalized and two-way communication between companies and different audiences. In this line of thought, it is possible an involvement and interaction between a brand/company and consumers, mainly through social networks (Winer, 2009), which would not be feasible without the Internet, which reveals the growing importance given to integrated strategies of digital marketing (Hughes and Moscardo, 2017). By using digital marketing, it is possible to bring customers closer and understand them better, add value to products, expand distribution channels and boost sales through digital marketing campaigns using digital media channels, such as marketing research, online advertising and affiliate marketing (Chaffey and Smith, 2017).

Currently, tourism is considered an industry of relevant importance, contributing positively to the economic development of several countries, through job creation and in the development of rural, peripheral and less developed areas; however, it is necessary to invest in development strategies in other sectors (e.g. transport, education, industry and agriculture). Indeed, tourism is essential in Portugal and in the World, since it is through cultural consumption by tourists that regional and local development is fostered (Ferreira *et al.*, 2019).

The development of tourism promotion strategies that include digital marketing allows a communication with tourists or potential tourists, which privileges the differentiation over the massification allowing, also, to combat a recurrent problem of tourism, the seasonality (Sousa *et al.*, 2019). Therefore, this study combines two constructs, digital marketing and tourism, based on theories presented by several authors that allow the understanding of the phenomenon to be studied, i.e. the problem of digital marketing applied to tourism in the Barcelos region.

Thus, the purpose of this study is to understand and analyse the use of the various online tools available to tourists, either before or after their visit to the city of Barcelos. As such, the following research question was formulated: What is the importance given to the use of digital marketing by tourists visiting the city of Barcelos? In order to answer this research question, ten hypotheses were formulated.

In order to identify the purpose and relevance of the study, six objectives were defined to be achieved with the research and on which considerations are made in the conclusion of the study; they are the following: (1) to understand how tourists acquire knowledge about the Barcelos region; (2) to understand the use, by tourists, of the various online platforms prior to their visit; (3) to analyse the nationality of tourists visiting the city of Barcelos; (4) to analyse the importance that tourists give to the opinions of other tourists, whether in relation to the city or the accommodation chosen; (5) to understand and evaluate the contribution of tourists to the comments about the spaces visited during their stay in the city; and (6) to understand the positioning of the city of Barcelos.

As regards the structure of this study, it is composed of four parts, namely, the literature review on digital marketing and tourism; the methodology adopted, where the methods of collection and analysis of quantitative and qualitative data are presented; the analysis and discussion of results; and, finally, the general conclusions of the study with the respective limitations and suggestions for future research.

Theoretical background

Digital marketing and visitor tourism

Digital marketing is a field that uses digital and social channels, such as digital media, mobile devices (e.g. *smartphone*), Internet, among others, i.e. technologically able to allow companies

to reach consumers and/or promote a brand and thus communicate, create, deliver and sustain a set of values for stakeholders (AMA, 2021; Alford and Jones, 2020; Dias *et al.*, 2021). In a more practical perspective, digital marketing allows increasing companies' databases, because it is through it that it is possible to obtain customers in real time and create a communication with value for customers effectively. Moreover, digital marketing highlights the customer using different online communication channels (Low *et al.*, 2020). It is noteworthy that with digital marketing the need to understand its impact on consumer behaviour is an important element.

Areas of study and development have emerged in digital marketing as brand communities created by its users, privacy concerns, creation of recommendation algorithms based on personal tastes, development of specialized products and customer participation in the product realization, among others (Busca and Bertrandias, 2020). In this way, greater engagement between brand and consumers has become possible, hence the growing importance attributed to the Internet in digital marketing. In addition, the integrated marketing strategies have proven to be more effective for consumers (Appel *et al.*, 2020). In fact, with digital transformations customers/consumers can now interact with companies and with each other through, mainly, social networks (Winer, 2009). This possibility of communication between the various stakeholders, allows the exchange of opinions and experiences worldwide, thus providing new possibilities for marketing, more precisely the digital marketing.

Digital marketing is essential because it allows to bring customers closer and understand them better, add value to products, expand distribution channels and boost sales through digital marketing campaigns using digital media channels such as marketing research, online advertising and affiliate marketing (Chaffey and Smith, 2017). It is also through digital media that consumers can share on companies' websites, social networks or blogs their opinions about products, services, brands and companies (Kannan and Li, 2017).

The implementations of digital marketing strategies by organizations enable the promotion of consumer awareness and engagement, conversion of potential buyers into actual customers, and trust and loyalty by customers (Hollebeek and Macky, 2019). For, it is through digital marketing and the platforms on which it develops that consumers have transformed their buying process, interacting between offline and online (e.g. visiting a particular city is now shared online, seeing online reviews about a product and buying offline) (Teller *et al.*, 2019).

The digital markets, where it is possible to capture and interact with customers, are in constant development which is fundamental to the marketing practice and success of the company. These marketplaces are rich in data, which organizations can access about their customers (e.g. buying behaviour and customer tastes), allowing companies to amplify, acquire and retain more customers (Sridhar and Fang, 2019). Digital marketing performs actions on various digital platforms such as "company website, blogs, social network, virtual groups, mobile applications, etc." (Mathew and Soliman, 2020, p. 3). In fact, it is possible to leverage digital marketing plans and strategies through the interconnection between online and offline communication channels, whether public relations, direct selling, telemarketing, email marketing or others (Appel *et al.*, 2020). Online channels are the precursors of customer support throughout the purchase process, starting in the presale, then the actual sale and after-sale follow-up, providing customer follow-up. Given the multiplicity of available online channels, such as digital media, mobile devices (e.g. smartphone) and Internet, among others, companies need a marketing plan that conveys a comprehensive approach that allows to identify strategically weaker areas and develop future potential (Hughes and Moscardo, 2017).

The use of devices constantly connected to the Internet (e.g. smartphone), and the technological changes change the perspective of the tourism industry, because this constant

connectivity can be seen as a huge use and sharing of online content daily (Mathew and Soliman, 2020). In this sense, the mutations and growth of digital marketing are constant, which allows tracking and accessing multiple data related to tourists (e.g. preferences, ratings and suggestions) that were not possible before (Kontogianni and Alepis, 2020).

With the evolution of information and communication technologies it is possible for the tourist to have a “direct multimedia contact with the cultures, heritage, tourist services and landscapes of destinations” (Jiménez-Barreto *et al.*, 2020, p. 2), which allows us to infer that the communication of tourist destinations has become more complex and has several possibilities, i.e. “producer-consumer, consumer-producer, as well as many-to-one, one-to-many, one-to-one, or many-to-many” (Buhalis, 2019, p. 1). In this sense, the various platforms of tourism destinations are key elements to “provide an online experience with the destination brand, which can stimulate the potential tourist to visit or interact with the destination” (Jiménez-Barreto *et al.*, 2020, p. 2). In this line of thought, the use of digital marketing is relevant, because it is possible to communicate with tourists or potential tourists and privilege differentiation over massification (Sousa *et al.*, 2019), thus enabling a direct communication between the tourist destination and the tourists (Buhalis, 2019).

This communication is possible using several platforms, either paid or free. The use of digital marketing, according to Mathew and Soliman (2020), presents advantages such as the possibility to evaluate the content and perception that visitors develop of the transmitted message, increases knowledge about places and territories, promotes the involvement of the general public (e.g. attachment and feelings) and provides information about the best way to convert tourists to a specific tourist destination.

Digital marketing acquires a high importance for the promotion and growth of tourism, through the understanding of the tourists’ needs and behaviours, allowing improving the tourist experience through the offer of appropriate services at the most opportune moment (Kontogianni and Alepis, 2020). Taking into consideration this importance of tourism, marketing associated with this area of study is increasingly facing “growing challenges in capturing market dynamics such as market fragmentation and diversity. New habits, needs and trends in the global tourism arena create more sophisticated consumers who systematically seek different and specific experiences” (Ferreira *et al.*, 2019, p. 67).

In practice, Casais and Sousa (2019) identify, through a case study, that the tourism promotion of a territory and its socioeconomic development is possible through the reconciliation of “an integrated marketing communication management strategy, with specific investment in digital content on social media to promote a destination” (p. 38). In fact, it is possible, through social media an interactive experience, in real time between the tourist and a tourist destination, which allows the general tourist content, through sharing and personalization of information (Packer and Ballantyne, 2016). In turn, this content created and shared by the user is considered more credible by peers, compared to the content created by the various tourist institutions, which reveals the importance in decision-making and social media planning (Jiménez-Barreto *et al.*, 2020).

Hypotheses development

For this study a set of ten hypotheses was formulated, related to the concepts under study, which are presented and substantiated below.

The tourist experience with the destination. Technological transformations increasingly influence our lives, and the use of technology is constantly present in everyone’s daily life, and in tourism there is a great technological dependence “both in relation to the use of specialized interactive systems or based on systems of general use for the delivery or improvement of services” (p. 478), which influences the experience of tourists on their visits

(Stankov and Gretzel, 2020). Being that the supply of goods and services is not enough, and it is necessary the creation of added value through the experience where the tourist participates (Dias *et al.*, 2020). The experience of a tourist can be evaluated and measured, through several dimensions (Packer and Ballantyne, 2016), namely, sensory dimension, where the various stimuli can be perceived by the senses; behavioural dimension, where the bodily experience originates actions; intellectual dimension, where the imagination and the creation of thoughts are used; and the affective dimension, as the tourist develops emotions and personal feelings (Jiménez-Barreto *et al.*, 2020). The hypotheses of the study that relate to the experience of the tourist in his or her view to the city of Barcelos are presented. Based on this background, the hypotheses are as follows:

- H1. The importance attributed to the city of Barcelos, through a positive experience of the visit, is related to the increased probability of suggesting the city to friends and the family.
- H2. Satisfaction with the visit to the city of Barcelos, through experience, is directly related to the probability of considering the city as a choice to visit in the future.
- H3. It is estimated that there is a direct relationship between tourists checking the opinion of previous visitors and the habit of sharing opinion about the trips made and places frequented, through the visiting experience.

Experience has a positive correlation with satisfaction, as quality tourist experience has a positive effect on tourists' overall satisfaction on their visit (Bayih and Singh, 2020).

The influence of tourist satisfaction with the destination. Tourist satisfaction is the result of the tourist's evaluation of perceived quality. In this line of thought, overall satisfaction is presented as "the extent of overall pleasure or contentment felt by the visitor, resulting from the ability of the travel experience to meet the visitor's desires, expectations and needs regarding the trip" (Chen and Tsai, 2007, p. 1116). Being that in tourism the attributes of the tourist destination need to satisfy the needs and desires of tourists for the visit to be satisfactory, and the involvement of the tourist in recreational activities, measured by different degrees of pleasure, and allow the tourist to develop a positive perception and consequently, satisfaction with the tourist destination they visited (Bayih and Singh, 2020). In order for the likelihood of the tourist considering their visit as satisfactory, several "attributes of the destination in general and the quality of the accommodation, the accessibility of the destination, the beauty of the landscape, the weather or climate conditions and cleanliness" must be met (Bayih and Singh, 2020; Campón-Cerro *et al.*, 2020). Hence, the underlined hypotheses are as follows:

- H4. Tourist identification with the city of Barcelos is related to visit satisfaction.
- H5. The importance attributed to the city of Barcelos, through satisfaction, influences the probability of saying positive things about the city to other people.
- H6. The experience of visiting the city of Barcelos is related to the satisfaction of the tourist's needs.

Therefore, the more satisfied a tourist is with their visit, the more likely they are to revisit and recommend a destination to others (Chi and Qu, 2008; Bayih and Singh, 2020), and there is a positive correlation between satisfaction and quality tourist experience and also with image and service quality (Bayih and Singh, 2020).

The role of destination image for tourists. Tourists develop an image of the tourist destination long before making the trip, through various sources of information, namely, books, television, radio, and opinion of family and friends, by visiting the official website of the tourist destination, but increasingly through the experience of other tourists (Buhalis,

2019; Duan *et al.*, 2020), through their opinions on various platforms, which makes the Internet the first source of information and allows influencing potential tourists (Duan *et al.*, 2020). Consequently, the hypotheses proposed are as follows:

- H7. The priority given to visiting the city of Barcelos rather than another place is related to the loyalty of the image that the city conveys of itself.
- H8. It is estimated that the importance attributed to Barcelos city webpages is related to an increase of information gathering by the tourist about the city before the visit, through the image.
- H9. It is estimated that the importance attributed to the opinions of other tourists before booking a trip, is related to the interest in the lifestyle of the city of Barcelos, allowing to relate the interest in the city with the perceived image of the city.

In this sense, tourists develop the induced image of a tourist destination before starting the trip, being this predictor of the formation of the more comprehensive and complex image after the visit (Duan *et al.*, 2020). The authors present the hypotheses related to the image that tourists develop about the city of Barcelos. The image allows building mental processes that stimulate the visit by the tourist (Jiménez-Barreto *et al.*, 2020), and this set of perceptions and mental associations (Mathew and Soliman, 2020) vary for all individuals. However, they must have a common component to all stability (Mathew and Soliman, 2020), because it is this feature that allows the tourist loyalty to the tourist destination. In this line of thought, the image is a subjective perception that the tourist has about a tourist destination (Chen and Tsai, 2007), so it is imperative that the tourist perceived image is in line with the image that the tourist destination wants to convey (projected image), because it is the junction of the two that will give rise to the image of the tourist destination (Duan *et al.*, 2020).

The importance of tourist loyalty to the destination. Satisfaction with a tourist destination contributes directly to tourist loyalty; in this sense there is a commitment of the tourist to the destination (Chi and Qu, 2008). The study of loyalty applied to tourism, by marketing has proven to be important, because loyalty “promotes sustainable income for destinations through word-of-mouth and lower marketing costs” (Lv *et al.*, 2020; Pereira *et al.*, 2021), namely, with the sharing, by tourists, of their opinions regarding the visited site (e.g. TripAdvisor), which can influence “the reputation, brand and business performance of tourism organizations” (Buhalis, 2019, p. 1). In turn, the tourism market, as analysed previously, is constantly changing and new trends, at the level of tourists’ desires and needs, put marketing in a position of constant challenge which makes the simple satisfaction–loyalty binomial increasingly difficult (Campón-Cerro *et al.*, 2020). Drawing on the previous findings, the hypothesis formulated is as follows:

- H10. Tourist attachment to the city of Barcelos is related to an increased likelihood of encouraging friends and the family to visit the city.

In short, the concepts of experience, satisfaction, image and loyalty influence each other, to the extent that there is a direct positive correlation between them. For example, if the visit experience by the tourist is positive, it will lead to a general satisfaction with the destination; consequently the image or perception that the tourist has with the destination is favourable for the tourist to revisit the destination and recommend it to others.

Methodology

Considering the interdisciplinary and heterogeneous essence of tourism, this branch of activity has been the object of study by several types of investigations, whose objective is to

collect data about the supply or demand of tourism with the influence of several variables (Wei *et al.*, 2020). In this study, the quantitative method was adopted, through the completion of a questionnaire survey, applied to tourists who visited the city of Barcelos. The proposed research model is based on the model presented by Chi and Qu (2008) applied to the territorial marketing that analyses causal relationships between variables such as destination image, tourist satisfaction and loyalty to the tourist destination. However, for the research in question an adaptation was made for digital marketing, and new variables and new possible causal relationships between them were added. Next, the constructs and measures are presented.

Measures

Based on the tourism literature, tourists are characterized as a heterogeneous group of people with totally different personalities, demographics and experiences (Cooper *et al.*, 2008), being an essential element for the achievement of tourism worldwide. These variables are measured through the questions related to the importance and satisfaction of visiting the city of Barcelos and importance tourists give to the opinions of other tourists. In relation to destination satisfaction, respondents were asked to rate their satisfaction with the city through questions such as the experience of the visit, the importance of the city and the identification of the tourist with the city. Regarding destination image, to address the study objectives of identifying the role of digital marketing, the questions were adapted to capture the importance given to webpages, to other tourists' opinions and to the prioritization of the city of Barcelos; in relation to the others it is possible to measure the variables related to the image that tourists develop about the tourist destination they visit. The destination loyalty is materialized in the repetition of the visit or recommendation of the destination to others, and can be measured in two dimensions, either by behavioural loyalty, where the evaluation focusses on the repetition of the visit, or by attitudinal loyalty, where loyalty is measured by the positive attitude of tourists in the recommendation of a tourist destination (Sánchez-Sánchez *et al.*, 2020) In order to measure tourists' loyalty to the city of Barcelos, respondents were asked to answer questions related to their attachment to the city and the likelihood of suggesting the city to friends and the family. All the constructs were measured on a five-point Likert-type response scale, where one means "Strongly Disagree" and five means "Strongly Agree".

Sample design, data collection and questionnaire development

Regarding the sample design, the questionnaire's target audience was made up of national and international tourists over the age of 18 who visited the city of Barcelos, without any restriction, obtaining a convenience sample with a total of 318 valid responses. The city of Barcelos was chosen as the study context considering its strong historical and cultural tradition and vocation for creativity (seeking to assert itself in the current digital context). The municipality of Barcelos built around the tradition in crafts and folk arts, an undeniable history and heritage of great social value. Crafts and folk arts are the core of these people, and creativity is the legacy that the impressive artists of this land cultivated throughout the centuries and today symbolize our great cultural references. The creativity of local inhabitants is well reflected in the craftsmanship work in various arts, such as clay, embroidery, weaving, wood, iron, leather and wicker and in the contemporary arts. For the pretest phase, the questionnaire was made available in its final version, with the purpose of assessing the estimated response time and the clarity of the questions, with a view to avoiding disparate interpretations or doubts that could arise amongst the respondents. From this perspective, the pretest took place between 29 May and 2 June 2020, where 15 answers were obtained online, equally divided between the Portuguese, English and Spanish versions

of the questionnaires. This pretest did not result in any suggestions for improvement or adjustments to be implemented; thus, the survey was considered valid and suitable for application. The questionnaire was composed of three groups (context of the visit, image and evaluation of the tourism offer, and 'Sociodemographic Profile'). Data were collected between 11 June and 11 July 2020, online on the *Google Forms* platform, totalling 30 counted days, obtaining a total of 318 valid responses. Taking into account the limitations imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic, the questionnaire was only available online, and the number of answers obtained was considered sufficient to analyse the hypotheses under the study.

Results

Sociodemographic profile

The sociodemographic profile of the respondents is presented in [Table 1](#). Regarding the nationality of the respondents, and how it would be expected considering the context of the study, a large majority of respondents claim to be of Portuguese nationality (104, which represents 98.1%) and the rest claim to be of Spanish nationality (2, which represents 1.9%). Beyond the nationality it is important to mention the country of residence, because although nationalities are limited to Portuguese and Spanish and 94 (90.6%) of the respondents are residents in Portugal or the rest are from Spain (3.8%), France (0.9%), England (2.8%), Switzerland (0.9%) and the Czech Republic (0.9%).

In relation to the context of the visit ([Table 2](#)), 87.7% claimed to visit accompanied, as opposed to 12.3% who claimed to visit alone. In relation to the length of the visit, more than half of the respondents, 76, corresponding to 71.7%, stated they would stay one day in the region, corresponding probably to those who did not stay overnight, 17.9%, stayed for 4 days or more, probably those who were visiting family and only 10.4%, stayed for 2–3 days.

	Frequency	Valid % Valid
<i>Gender</i>		
Female	111	34.9
Male	207	65.1
<i>Age</i>		
18–24 years	138	43.4
25–34 years	69	21.7
35–44 years	36	11.3
45–54 years	51	16
65 years and over	24	7.5
<i>Education</i>		
Basic education	9	2.8
Secondary education	120	37.7
Degree	141	44.3
Master's degree	24	13.2
PhD	6	1.9
<i>Occupation</i>		
Employee	156	49.1
Student	117	36.8
Retired	21	6.6
Unemployed	24	7.5
Total	318	100

Table 1.
Characterization of the sample

Measures' reliability

The results obtained for the conceptual model under the study present values higher than 0.7, namely the variables related to tourism destination loyalty ($\alpha = 0.782$), which, according to the rules presented corresponds to an acceptable level of reliability. The variables related to destination experience and destination image present values of $\alpha = 0.841$ and $\alpha = 0.804$, respectively, which corresponds to a good level of reliability. In turn, the variables related with destination satisfaction present values higher than 0.9, corresponding to an excellent level of reliability. These results were confirmed using an exploratory factor analysis (Table 3).

Confirmatory factor analysis

The confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was performed using the structural equation model (SEM), by means of Amos, version 24. The final SEM (Figure 1) is composed by the variance extracted from each variable, by the correlations between the constructs, and it is also possible to verify a reduction from 20 items to 15. In this new model after disregarding the outliers, removed the variables that do not present an adequate level of reliability ($R^2 \geq 0.25$), and correlating errors with higher values according to the model modification index continues to present values and root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) higher than 0.05, contained is relevant to highlight that this coefficient tends to penalize more complex models, as is the case of the present of the study (Byrne, 2013). The modification indices were again checked but did not suggest substantial restructuring that would improve the fit of the final model.

Hypotheses testing

For hypothesis testing, we performed a Pearson correlation coefficient analysis, since it allows determining the causal relationship between two variables, bivariate correlation (Marôco, 2010a, b). In view of the data presented in Table 4, with the systematization of the hypotheses, it can be concluded that nine of the ten hypotheses present in the study are confirmed by the Pearson coefficient test.

Discussion and conclusions

Digital marketing is notably marked by the importance of technological developments and the Internet. In fact, several authors highlight the influence that these two factors play in the

	Frequency	Valid % Valid
<i>Conducted the visit</i>		
Alone	39	12.3
Accompanied	279	87.7
<i>Duration of the visit</i>		
1 day	228	71.7
2-3 days	33	10.4
4 days or more	57	17.9

Table 2.
Context of the visit to the Barcelos region

Construct	Cronbach's alpha coefficient (α)	Items
Experience with the destination	0.841	6
Satisfaction with the destination	0.919	6
Destination image	0.804	6
Loyalty to the destination	0.782	2

Table 3.
Measures reliability

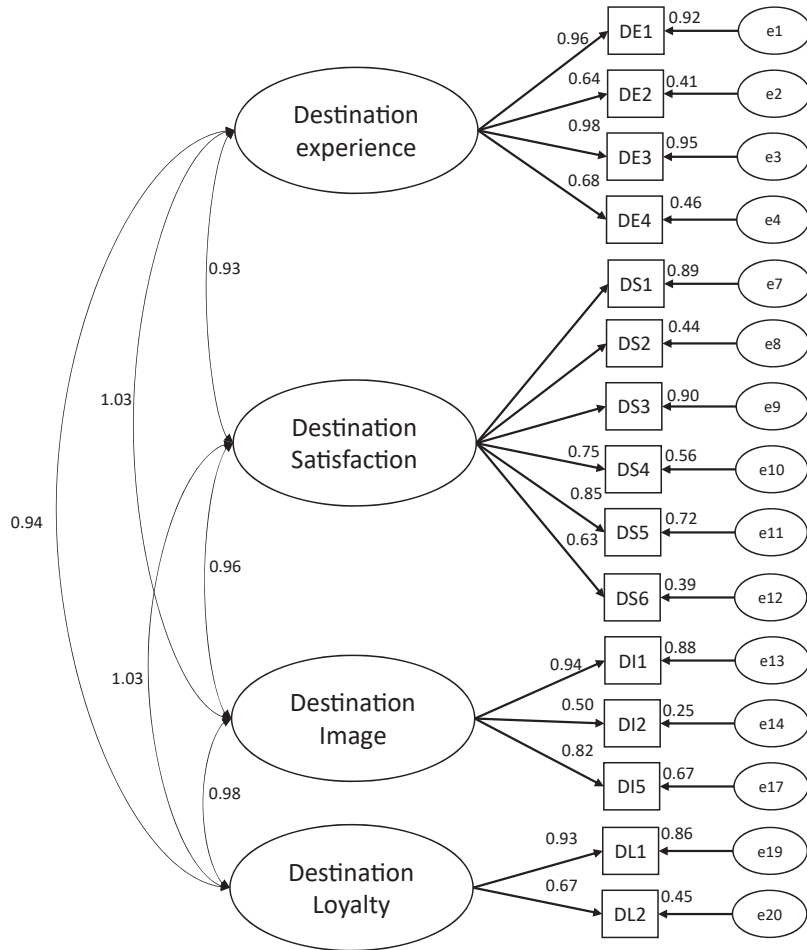


Figure 1. SEM

evolution of digital marketing by bringing consumers and companies closer together, allowing an increasingly close and two-way communication, a greater possibility of sharing content in an increasingly fast and universal way. These transformations represent an unprecedented evolution in the communication of all organizations, as well as an opportunity for linear and responsible interaction between the various players in the transaction and competitive market.

Indeed, as argued by [Palhais et al. \(2020\)](#) marketing professionals can and should explore and develop the potential that the Internet and social networks can offer for the development and knowledge of an organization, which can be enhanced by the involvement of organizations with diversified distribution channels and communication channels. It should be considered the production of content in a way adapted to each of the various platforms that are within the reach of consumers, including smartphones, tablets and computers, which enables more diversity and dissemination of information, but on the other hand the requirement for incessant evolution on the part of organizations, because consumer behaviour is constantly changing and evolving. Thus, the use of digital marketing in tourism

Hypotheses	Correlation value	Hypothesis confirmed
H1: The importance attributed to the city of Barcelos, through a positive experience of the visit, is related to the increased probability of suggesting the city to friends and the family	0.629**	Yes
H2: Satisfaction with the visit to the city of Barcelos, through experience, is directly related to the probability of considering the city as a choice to visit in the future	0.657**	Yes
H3: It is estimated that there is a direct relationship between tourists visiting who check the opinion of previous visitors and the habit of sharing opinion about trips taken and places frequented, through the visiting experience	0.430**	Yes
H4: Tourist identification with the city of Barcelos is related to visit satisfaction	0.668**	Yes
H5: The importance attributed to the city of Barcelos, through satisfaction, influences the probability of saying positive things about the city to other people	0.701**	Yes
H6: The experience of visiting the city of Barcelos is related to the satisfaction of the tourist's needs	0.610**	Yes
H7: The prioritization for visiting the city of Barcelos rather than another place, through experience, is related to the fidelity of the image that the city conveys of itself	0.556**	Yes
H8: It is estimated that the importance attributed to Barcelos city webpages is related to an increase of information gathering, by the tourist about the city before the visit, through the experience	0.812**	Yes
H9: It is estimated that the importance attributed to the opinions of other tourists before booking a trip, is related to the interest in the lifestyle of the city of Barcelos, allowing to relate the interest in the city with the perceived image of the city	0.216**	No
H10: Tourist attachment to the city of Barcelos is related to an increased likelihood of encouraging friends and family to visit the city	0.707**	Yes

Note(s): ** significant at $p < 0.001$

Table 4. Summary of correlations

is increasingly pressing, because it allows “to arouse the interest of individuals to travel and experience different cultures and places, and at the same time allows them to search and buy all the services and products that are needed to make the trip” (Leite and Azevedo, 2017, p. 89).

In the specific case of the city of Barcelos, it has been verified that there is a constant search in the improvement of the city's strong points; it has recently received several international (Creative City by UNESCO and National Geographic). Various events are also held with the aim of promoting tourism in the city, namely the possibility of undertaking various creative experiences as part of the city's positioning as a creative destination, such as clay modelling, ceramic modelling workshops, handicraft experiences in wood, iron, embroidery, wines, folklore, gastronomy, painting of the Barcelos Cockerel and the possibility of undertaking various walking routes (e.g. the Cockerel Route).

Although in the interviews needs for improvement in the scope of digital marketing for the city of Barcelos were mentioned, in view of the above, it is possible to verify that the city has made a remarkable effort and commitment for its development and tourism positioning. Being that we can highlight the identification of the image of a tourist destination and the target audience as part of a communication strategy; however, this “is a challenge, both for destinations and for tourism products, considering that we are working on a market where a very diverse set of *stakeholders* intervene, with differentiated interests” (Peres and Rita, 2017, p. 7). Within the scope of tourism in the city of Barcelos, it is necessary to analyse the external environment, as well as the profile of the tourists, in order to be able to adequately plan its

communication and digital marketing strategy, and thus achieve a desired strategic positioning.

Six objectives were defined at the beginning of the study for which we intend to present an answer during the investigation. The first objective was to understand in what way tourists acquire knowledge about the region of Barcelos. In this sense through the answers to the questionnaires, it is possible to understand that most respondents have knowledge of the region through friends and family, while 15%, have knowledge of the city through the Internet and only 2%, through agents/tour operators. These results can be seen in two different ways, on the one hand the notorious lack of international respondents which may alter the response rates, and on the other, the need for investment and coordination with agents/tour operators for the dissemination of the city's tourist offer to its public.

The next objective was to understand the use, by the tourists, of the various online platforms before making the visit; in this sense it was asked if the tourists had the habit of collecting information about the tourist destination in the various web pages/social networks before scheduling the trip. Based on the answers given it can be deduced that it is not yet a widespread practice since 26% neither agree nor disagree with the statement and 23% totally disagree.

The third objective was to analyse the nationality of the tourists who visit the city of Barcelos. It is relevant to mention that the great majority of the answers correspond to respondents of Portuguese nationality lacking more international respondents; however, in view of the data collected we can conclude that 91% of the respondents reside in Portugal as opposed to only 9%, who reside abroad.

The subsequent objective was to analyse the importance that tourists give to the opinions of other tourists, whether in relation to the city or the accommodation chosen, so to measure this objective the respondents were asked if the opinion of other tourists was important before scheduling the trip, and it was possible to see that the vast majority attributes relevance to the opinions left by those who have already visited the destination, with 37% agreeing with the statement and 32% totally agreeing.

The fifth objective sought to understand and evaluate the contribution of tourists to the comments about the spaces visited during their stay in the city, where we can deduce that in general this is not a common practice since the answers are divided between neither agree nor disagree with the statement (26%) and totally disagree (23%), as opposed to the respondents who have the habit of checking the opinions shared before scheduling a trip with answers that oscillate, in its great majority, between agree (40%) and totally agree (38%) with the statement.

Finally, the aim was to understand the positioning of the city of Barcelos. Based on the interviews carried out and the research carried out throughout the research, we can state that the city of Barcelos has not only developed and asserted itself worldwide as a city of creative tourism and experiences, due to its distinction as UNESCO Creative City, but also due to the initiatives and actions developed with the aim of influencing tourist attraction, the role played by the city's Tourist Office in supporting tourists and the attention paid to the arts and crafts developed in the region, especially with the Pottery Museum.

Ten hypotheses were defined to be tested in this research, and nine of them were confirmed. This allows us to infer that the more positive the visiting experience is, the greater the importance attributed to the city by the tourist, which results in a greater likelihood of recommending it to friends and the family (*Hypothesis 1*, $r = 0.629^{**}$); the positive experience of tourists during their trip has a positive correlation with the likelihood of revisiting the city (*Hypothesis 2*, $r = 0.657^{**}$); there is a relationship between tourists checking the opinions of others and the habit of making comments about the visiting experience (*Hypothesis 3*, $r = 0.430^{**}$); there is a relationship between tourists' satisfaction with their visit to the city and their identification with the city (*Hypothesis 4*, $r = 0.668^{**}$); positive satisfaction with the

city is also directly related to an increased likelihood of giving positive feedback about the city to other people (Hypothesis 5, $r = 0.701^{**}$); the satisfaction of tourists' needs has a positive relationship with the visiting experience, in the sense that a positive experience means that most of the tourists' needs have been met (Hypothesis 6, $r = 0.610^{**}$); the image that the city conveys of itself is confirmed by the tourist during his trip, i.e. it meets the projected expectations, which leads the tourist to prioritize the visit to the city instead of the others (Hypothesis 7, $r = 0.556^{**}$); tourists are attributing more and more importance to the opinions of others considering their travel experiences, and therefore, there is an increase in the search for information before booking a particular trip, although this is not yet generalized to all tourists (Hypothesis 8, $r = 0.812^{**}$); the last confirmed hypothesis states that the positive link that tourists develop with the city through loyalty leads to an increased likelihood of encouraging friends and the family to visit the city (Hypothesis 10, $r = 0.707^{**}$).

Hypothesis 9 did not show a positive correlation ($r = 0.216^{**}$), so the interest in the lifestyle of the city of Barcelos cannot be explained by the opinions of other tourists about their trips, i.e. the development of an image perceived by tourists is due to other factors.

In short, a positive experience in the visit to the city will trigger a satisfaction with the destination, consequently the creation of a positive perceived image and loyalty to the destination; in this sense it is essential to develop strategies to meet the needs of tourists, provide unique and differentiated experiences and develop a plan of activities that can be customized by the tourist when planning the visit to the city; then it is necessary to evaluate the opinion of tourists about the view, in order to make constant improvements and enhancements.

By contrasting the results obtained with Pearson's coefficient test and the SEM, it was possible to reduce the number of factors that explain the phenomenon under the study, which leads to the restructuring of the conceptual model. In view of these considerations, it is possible to present an answer to the starting question: What is the importance given to the use of digital marketing by tourists visiting the city of Barcelos? Several aspects allow the city of Barcelos to be enhanced as a tourist destination. In addition to its strong ceramic tradition, various events are held, such as the Festival of Crosses, hiking trails and exhibitions, amongst others, and the fact that Barcelos is included in the Portuguese route of the Camino de Santiago, greatly enhances the city (Ribeiro and Remoaldo, 2019).

The city seeks to meet the needs of tourists, and the use of digital marketing tools to promote the city is essential, as tourists are increasingly in the habit of checking the opinion of others before scheduling their trip and attach more and more importance to them, as well as a growing importance attached, by tourists, to the web pages/social networks of the places they intend to visit. However, in addition to all the work already done to enhance the city of Barcelos, it is essential to highlight the need for investment in local culture, such as the traditions of the region that are living elements of the culture, and allow a more active participation of tourists in the culture of the region so that they feel a citizen of Barcelos, such as holding more diversified workshops which can help reducing the problems of seasonality (Ribeiro and Remoaldo, 2019).

In summary, digital marketing applied to tourism is a fast and effective way to reach several people in different parts of the world; however it is necessary that the tourist makes the decision to visit the city, and it is before this decision that several actions can be developed to enhance the loyalty and indirect attraction of new tourists. The positive experience that the tourist has with the destination, allows him to attribute importance and satisfaction to the visit made, since the experience is directly related to satisfaction with the destination; it is imperative that the tourist identifies with the city, attributes importance to the city and feels satisfied with the visit experience. This allows the tourist to develop a positive image of the city and thus gives it priority for future visits amongst other offers; with this the tourist creates a sentimental connection to the city of Barcelos which enables the development of

tourist loyalty to the destination. Thus, it is possible to infer that there is a relationship between tourists' satisfaction with their visit to the city and of their identification with the city; positive satisfaction with the city, also relates directly to an increased likelihood of giving positive feedback about the city to other people; and satisfaction of tourists' needs has a positive relationship with the visiting experience, in the sense that a positive experience implies that the tourist's needs have been met, for the most part.

This study has limitations that should be mentioned, namely the timing in which the study was conducted, in the phase of the COVID-19 pandemic, due to the fact that the surveys were distributed online, which conditioned an even greater scope of the sample size, thus allowing an increase in the reliability of the model, so it is also suggested to apply the questionnaires in peak seasons, being possible to register a greater affluence of tourists, as well as the possibility of spending more time to conduct the research. It would also be relevant to adopt a qualitative approach, through interviews to deepen their perspective about the city. Since the research was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic, a postpandemic data collection should provide important longitudinal insights, specially regarding sustainability and resilience.

Our study focusses on experience, satisfaction, image and loyalty as key constructs competing to develop digital marketing of an historic site. Although, attention should also be paid to eWOM, which should be integrated in future research conceptual models.

Finally, we suggest the development of a strategic digital marketing plan applied to the development and promotion of tourism in the city of Barcelos (Portugal), to complement the research presented here, thus contributing with a more practical perspective of the subject under the study.

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