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CAN DIGITAL MARKETING ON INSTAGRAM HELP TO PROMOTE SUSTAINABLE TRAVEL? Abstract

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CAN DIGITAL MARKETING ON INSTAGRAM HELP TO PROMOTE SUSTAINABLE TRAVEL?

Abstract

The contribution of digitalization and digital platforms to tourism sustainability is a timely topic. In this research we analyze if a digital platform such as Instagram could contribute and be used as a tool to promote sustainability by destinations and by travelers. To this aim, we implement a methodology comprised of four steps: identifying the most recognized sustainable destinations in the world (i.e. Slovenia, New Zealand and Costa Rica), downloading and analyzing the last posts from the official accounts of the DMOs of these destinations, identifying the most frequently used hashtags related to sustainable tourism (#ecoturismo, #ecotourism, #sustainabletravel, #ecotravel and #sustainabletourism), and downloading and analyzing 500 posts from these accounts. Our results are mixed, and show some opportunities but also significant challenges and puzzling outcomes. In general, there does not seem to be a consistent use of sustainability concepts in the publications analyzed.

INTRODUCTION

The demand in popular tourism destinations in Europe is only hesitantly increasing. Latest statistics of the UNWTO Tourism Recovery Tracker that compiles relevant data worldwide show significant shortfalls compared to the pre-crisis period. For example, the data for the Top 10 destinations worldwide still show declines of between 16% (Turkey) and 96% (Thailand) for international arrivals in January 2022 compared to January 2020 (UNWTO 2022). So there is currently strong competition and a struggle to attract new visitors. Destination management organizations (DMOs) respond with various digital recovery campaigns.

Against this background, there has been a call for a more sustainable and conscious travel. This paper investigates on whether digitalization in the form of digital marketing on Instagram can have a positive effect on sustainable travel. As the application of digital platforms via websites, social media and video platforms has proven to be a good and effective means of addressing customers in the pandemic, DMOs target travellers with digital campaigns. Especially in the pre-trip phase of the customer journey, digital touchpoints are suitable to send up-to-date information or promotional stimuli to potential travellers (Brysch & Stengel, 2021). In fact, social media plays a key role in tourism communication and the strategic importance of social media for tourism competitiveness has been widely discussed (Leung et al., 2013; Királ'ová & Pavlíčeka, 2015). However, so far there is little evidence on how digitalization in the field of digital destination marketing can concretely influence sustainability in tourism. As social media has an increasing influence on the awareness of destinations and the subsequent decision for a destination, the interface between digitalization and sustainability needs to be examined in more detail.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The relation between digitalization and sustainability in tourism has been subject to discussion (e.g. Filipiak et al., 2020). The main question is whether digitalization of the tourism industry will contribute to improve its sustainability or if, on the contrary, it will make it worse.

On the positive side, digitalization has been found to increase sustainability assessment (e.g. Gössling, 2020; Haseeb et al. 2019; Saseanu et al., 2020); to allow users to choose sustainable options; to reduce traveling footprint with virtual reality traveling (Fernell & Cooper, 2020; Gössling, 2020); and to promote more sustainable food options (Gössling, 2020; Vila et al., 2020).

On the negative side, digitalization has been found to be one of the main enablers of low-cost models; a precursor of the substitution of the workforce for IT; a cause for more travel (Saseanu et al., 2020); a reduction of economic benefits for destinations in the case of virtual travel (Gössling, 2020); and one of the sources of fake news that question climate change (Treen et al., 2020).

Some recent research has pointed out that maybe digital tools have become standard and play a less important role in this issue (Filipiak et al., 2020; Gössling, 2020). However, with the diffusion of concepts such as big data, AI and metaverse, the impact of digitalization in the tourism industry could be more than significant. This paper will investigate whether the use that is being made of Instagram by tourism stakeholders is suitable to promote sustainable behaviors.

Therefore, and based on this literature review, our research question is to analyze whether the use that is being made of Instagram by tourism stakeholders, and more specifically DMOs in their official accounts and by travelers in their posts tagged with keywords associated with sustainability, is helping to promote sustainable behaviors.

METHODS

In order to answer our research questions and understand if digital marketing on Instagram can help promote sustainable travel, we developed a methodology that consists of four steps. In the first step, we identified the most recognized sustainable destinations in the world by using several rankings and awards (see Table 1). Three stand out for being part of most of them: Costa Rica, Slovenia and New Zealand (Table 1).

Table 1. Evaluation of selected travel recommendations to sustainable destinations

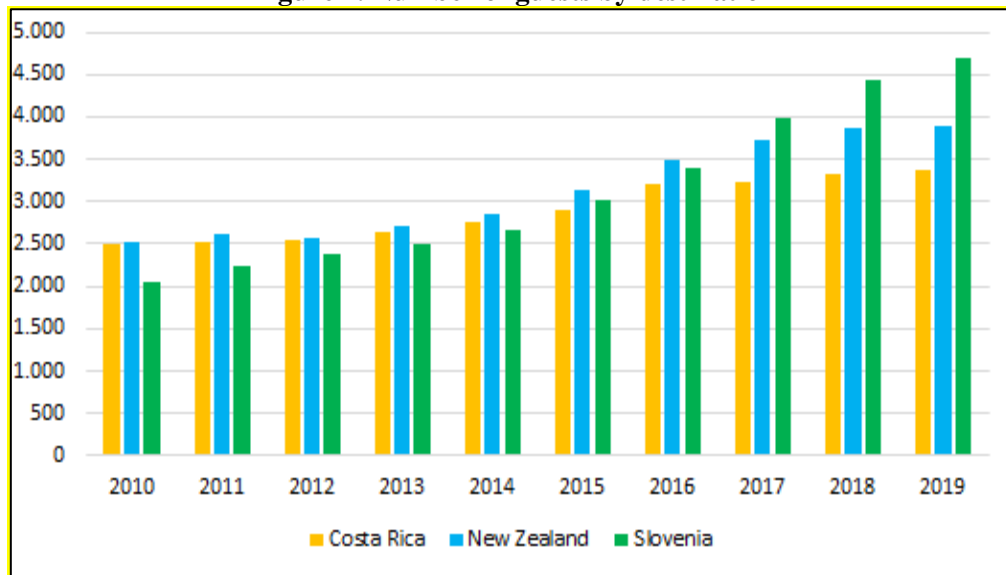
| Award/Ranking | Slovenia | Costa Rica | New Zealand |
|----------------------|-----------------|-------------------|--------------------|
| The Times (UK) | | 1 | 1 |
| Verdict | 1 | 1 | 1 |
| TimeOut | 1 | 1 | |
| SkyScanner | 1 | | |
| Sustainable Top 100 | 1 | | |
| Euromonitor | 1 | | |
| Me Time Away | 1 | 1 | 1 |
| Go Adventure | 1 | 1 | |
| Drink Tea & Travel | 1 | 1 | 1 |
| <i>Total</i> | <i>8</i> | <i>6</i> | <i>4</i> |

Source: Drink Tea & Travel (2021), Edwards (2021), Euromonitor (2021), Go Adventure (2021), Green Destinations (2022), Kinsman (2021), Me Time Away (2021), Shubbuck (2020), Smithers (2017).

In the second step, we identified the official accounts of the DMOs of the three sustainable destinations. These are *visit_costarica* (2,100 publications, 385,000 followers, as of 15.2.2022), *feelslovenia* (4,100 publications, 244,000 followers) and *purenewzealand* (1,300 publications, 1.1 million followers). For each account, we

downloaded the last postings (only photos, no videos, period of 1.1.2022 to 31.1.2022). To show the importance of tourism in the three destinations, the number of guests are compared (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Number of guests by destination



Source: UNWTO, 2022

In the third step, and to find the most frequently used hashtags related to sustainable tourism, we tried several combinations of words (e.g. ‘sustainable’, ‘green’, ‘responsible’, ‘eco’, ‘travel’, ‘tourism’). Once we detected a hashtag that was being used, we analyzed publications with that hashtags to check if any other possible ones were used. The data were analyzed between the 10 and the 15th of January 2022. The results are shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Most commonly used hashtags around sustainable tourism

| Tag | Number of publications |
|------------------------|------------------------|
| #ecoturismo | 2,028,753 |
| #ecotourism | 1,129,381 |
| #sustainabletravel | 362,816 |
| #ecotravel | 341,193 |
| #sustainabletourism | 338,944 |
| #responsibletravel | 289,661 |
| #responsibletourism | 180,739 |
| #travelwithpurpose | 131,121 |
| #greentravel | 116,411 |
| #biospherereserve | 34,475 |
| #communitybasedtourism | 18,612 |

Source: Own elaboration

Of this list, we decided to analyze in further detail the five that were most used: #ecoturismo, #ecotourism, #sustainabletravel, #ecotravel and #sustainabletourism.

In the fourth step, we performed three operations with these five hashtags. First, we downloaded the 500 top posts for each of the five hashtags and picked the 100 that had been liked the most. Second, we extracted all the hashtags that were used in these 500 posts, in order

to create a word cloud of the hashtags that were most associated with the five reference hashtags. Third, we also downloaded all the images associated with the hashtags and classified them, to understand which type of images were being published more frequently regarding the hashtags.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Table 3 compares the contents of the official accounts of the analyzed destinations. The images were classified following Iglesias-Sánchez et al. (2020), Ozdemir and Celebi (2015) and Nixon et al. (2017). The imagery shows a clear focus on the landscape. Thus, only the ecological aspects of sustainability in terms of intact or largely untouched nature are widely used in communication. The social dimension of sustainability is neglected in Costa Rica's and New Zealand's one-dimensional visual communication via the images chosen. Slovenia also uses images in the "Cities and Attractions", describing the cultural strength of the destination.

Table 3. Classification of postings

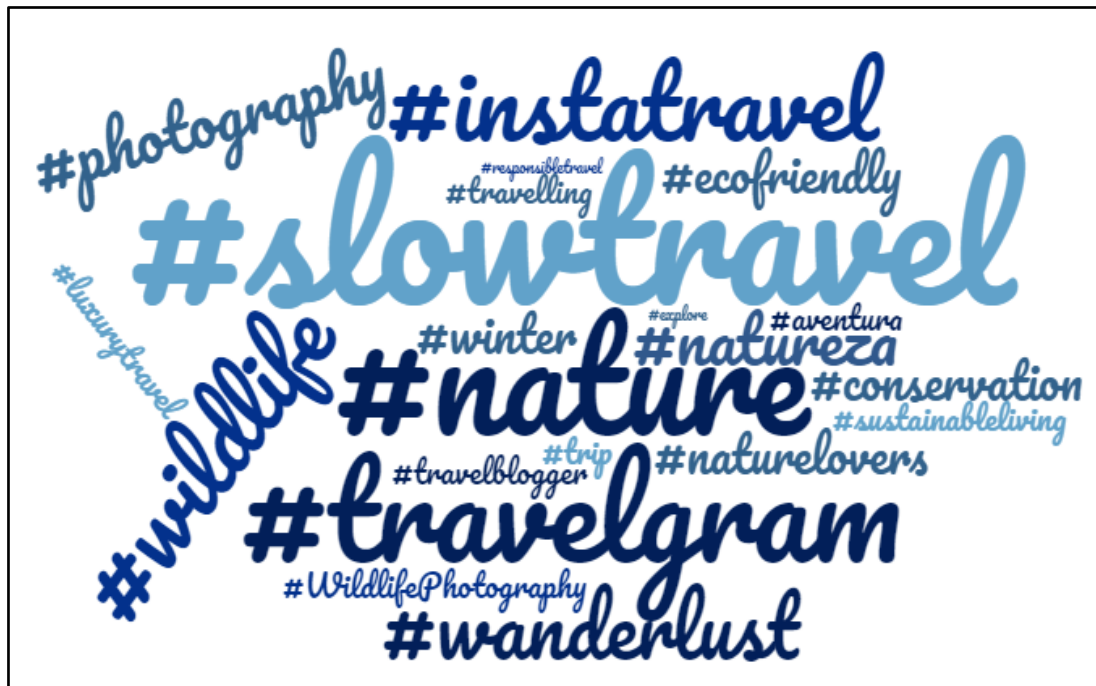
| | visit_costarica | feelslovenia | purenewzealand |
|----------------------------------------|------------------------|---------------------|-----------------------|
| Postings (1.1.2022 - 31.1.2022) | 21 | 49 | 7 |
| Classification of images | | | |
| Landscape: Coast | 6 | 0 | 5 |
| Landscape: Countryside | 15 | 31 | 4 |
| Cities and Attractions | 2 | 18 | 1 |
| Culinary | 1 | 2 | 0 |
| Events | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Experiences | 7 | 12 | 2 |
| Categories of content | | | |
| Nature | 15 | 31 | 9 |
| Culture | 2 | 16 | 0 |
| Food and Drink | 1 | 2 | 0 |
| Various | 4 | 4 | 2 |

Source: Own elaboration

If we now look at the reactions of users (as of February 4, 2022) to the postings in January, the quantitative differences between the campaigns are surprising. New Zealand made only 7 postings with an average of 15,800 likes and about 100 comments. Costa Rica, on the other hand, posted 21 posts with an average of 4,000 likes and 33 comments. Slovenia has at least one post a day, with 49 posts, but less than 3,000 likes and only 15 comments.

It is noticeable that no explicit references to sustainability aspects are placed in the content of the captions, nor are hashtags used with a reference to this. Uniquely, Costa Rica often uses the artifice of deliberately creating direct and indirect references to sustainable terms and activities with its own comments with over 20 hashtags. Hashtags such as #wanderlust or #travelwithtime are chosen to communicate a sustainable narrative for the destination through the digital marketing campaign. Furthermore, they address direct questions to the users in the captions like "What are your best eco-friendly habits" (Post 25.1.2022). This underlines their approach to target and interact with potential or existing customers who perceive themselves to be sustainable tourists. Regarding the fourth step, we present in Figure 2 the word cloud of the hashtags associated with the five reference hashtags.

Figure 2. Word cloud of hashtags associated with the five reference hashtags



Source: Own elaboration

As can be seen, sustainable and ecological travel and tourism are associated with slow tourism, wildlife, landscapes and nature. Table 4 presents the main types of images associated with the five reference hashtags. We did not use the same classification as in Table 3 since the types of pictures found had a much more varied spectrum.

Table 4. Categories of images associated with the reference hashtags

| Categories | Frequency |
|---------------------------------------------|---------------|
| Landscape | 37.0% |
| People (instagrammer or at the destination) | 18.1% |
| Accommodation and services | 14.1% |
| Animals | 11.9% |
| Signs | 6.0% |
| Women in bikini | 4.7% |
| Sailing boats | 3.0% |
| Miscellaneous and 2+ categories | 5.2% |
| <i>Total</i> | <i>100.0%</i> |

NOTE: n=403 (some posts include several of the analyzed hashtags; posts that include videos are not considered), Source: Own elaboration

As can be seen in Table 4, once again landscapes are the pictures that predominate, closely followed by posts of people and services available. Regarding the pictures with people in our dataset, we created a specific category for women in bikini. Surprisingly enough, this category accounted for almost 5% of all the pictures published under the sustainability hashtags that were analyzed and that had been liked the most.

CONCLUSIONS

The contribution of digitalization and digital platforms to tourism sustainability is a timely topic. Our main question in this research was to analyze if a digital platform such as Instagram can and is being used as a tool to promote sustainability, by destinations and by travelers. Our results are mixed, and show some opportunities but also significant challenges and puzzling outcomes.

In general, the most prominent conclusion of this research is that sustainability is not considered a topic as such in Instagram. Tourist destinations do not seem to leverage the concept to promote their destinations as sustainable ones, while the use of the hashtags associated with sustainability seems to be random and connected to pictures that have little to do with sustainable travel and tourism. However, many of the posts that were analyzed seemed to use sustainability hashtags just as a lever to promote content that has little to do with sustainable tourism.

We believe that digital platforms, and more specifically social networks such as Instagram provide a great opportunity to promote sustainability. An opportunity that is currently not being profited by destinations or by travelers. Sustainability is a growing topic across all social spheres. As such, DMOs of renowned sustainable destinations and of DMOs that want to place themselves in this sector could post content showing why their destinations are sustainable and engaging in the conversation about sustainability. Also, by providing best practices that can then be imitated by other destinations. Travelers could also help in this area by posting sustainable and non-sustainable behaviors found at destinations, as well as traveler best practices in this area.

Last, we would like to make a short reference to the fact that sustainability has, at least, three main pillars: economic, social and environmental. In the analysis that we have done there seems to be a predominance of the environmental aspect of sustainability. However, the economic and social dimensions seem to have little or no importance at all. We believe that these other two aspects should also be considered when promoting sustainability.

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