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Making Strategies in Destination Branding: What is the online tourism promotional material saying about Portugal?

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Abstract

The need for strategic thinking in destination branding has been demanded regarding the challenges tourism destinations are facing nowadays, such as at the digital level. The utilization of Information Communication Technology by tourism destinations, when well-articulated with a destination branding strategy, could be a driving force to improve their strategic positioning, competitiveness, and to optimise the benefits they derive from tourism. The aim of this paper is to explore developments in branding Portugal as a tourism destination, namely what the online tourism promotional material is saying about the country. We intend to contribute to the discussion concerning the best strategies for Destination Portugal.

Introduction

In today's competitive environment, it is a challenge for tourism destinations to improve their own features, attributes and unique elements to become more attractive places (Alvarez, 2012). Understanding exactly how individuals perceive and use the information spread by both, online and traditional promotion channels, when planning their trips, is a challenge that requires suitable strategies (Alvarez and Asugman, 2006).

Since the 1980s, Information Communication Technology (ICT) has been transforming tourism globally and presents a challenge for tourism destinations. Factors including development of the Internet, a new wave of web-based communities known as Web 2.0 (e.g. facebook; twitter; instagram; youtube, tripadvisor), have changed market conditions for tourism organisations and destinations (Buhalis et al., 2011; Page, 2009).

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

Among the range of ICTs, the Internet is the number one source of information for travel and tourism. Web sites are incredibly important for business communication, namely for the business of destinations (Buhalis et al., 2011). The internet has revolutionised the way in which consumers make their travel decisions, however there is a lack of statistical information to prove it so. The European Travel Commission (ETC) through the New Media Trend Watch, the World Tourism Organization, the digital marketing agency eMarketer and recently the report "Attitudes of Europeans towards Tourism" conducted by TNS Political & Social at the request of the European Commission (EC) are publishing statistics regarding the ICT usage in travel and tourism.

According to eMarketer (2013) US digital travel sales, which include leisure and unmanaged business travel purchased online and via mobile devices, will increase between 2013 and 2017, achieving a 5.36% compound annual growth rate. Digital travel sales accounted for more than 40% of total travel sales in United States (US) in 2012. In their May 2012 Consumer Barometer survey, Google, Interactive Advertising Bureau (IAB) and TNS Infratest found that 81% of US internet users who had booked travel in the past 12 months had researched their trips online, while 74% of respondents had booked online (Consumer Barometer, 2012).

According to ETC New Media Trend Watch nearly 183 million internet users visited travel web sites in Europe in March 2013 (Travel Daily News, 2013)

The methods used for booking by European travellers in 2013 compared with 2003:

- ✓ Internet: 76% (up from 13% in 2003);
- ✓ Travel agent: 18% (down from 65% in 2003);
- ✓ Phone: 5% (down from 22% in 2003).

The most up to date data concerning the main sources of information for planning holidays in Europe comes from the mentioned report/survey - "Attitudes of Europeans Towards Tourism", March 2013. The report underlines that **recommendations from friends**, colleagues or relatives are considered most important when making decisions about travel plans (**56%**), while **46%** mention **Internet web sites**, following by the **personal experience** about a destination (**34%**), **21%** prefer **travel agencies** and **tourism offices** and **11%** mention **catalogues**.

The Internet web sites are the most important source of information for respondents in seven countries: The Netherlands, Finland (both 63%), Iceland (60%), Denmark (57%) Luxembourg (51%), Malta (46%) and Cyprus (42%). The Internet remains the most common way to arrange holidays (preparation stage), with 53%.

The use of the internet to plan the holidays is most mentioned by respondents in Norway (80%), the Netherlands (75%) and Ireland (73%). The growth of new ICTs challenges suppliers and destinations to enhance their efficiency and to re-engineer their communication strategies. Hence, devising agile and effective strategies for tourism destinations is required, either at a strategic level, or at tactical and operational management levels (Buhalis et al., 2011).

The present research applies the methodologies of text mining (e.g. Lau et al., 2005; Singh et al., 2007) and content analysis (e.g. Hannam and Knox, 2005; Govers and Go, 2005) to understand what is going on in terms of the utilization of the online channels to promote Portugal as a tourism destination (e.g. by searching key words on online sources such as Visit Portugal web site, available at <http://www.visitportugal.com/> and the facebook page, available at <https://www.facebook.com/Visitportugal>). Additionally, an analysis of the contents of well-known travel blogs, such as the New York Times, available at <http://www.nytimes.com/pages/travel/index.html> and The Guardian, available at <http://www.guardian.co.uk/travel> was conducted. Thereafter, compare with what is written on the main National Strategic Plan for Tourism, the main document for the tourism in Portugal (Turismo de Portugal, English version 2007). Understand the way Portugal is actually branding itself through the online channels is a central part of this paper. The novelty of this paper lies in providing deep analysis the contents communicated about Portugal, and to contribute to the discussion concerning the best strategies for branding Portugal as a tourism destination.

Setting the Context

It is a difficult and time-consuming task to persuade tourists and costumers to change their minds/perceptions about a place or a tourism destination. Nowadays, there are a large number of channels to communicate the tourism potential of places (e.g. social media). Every conceivable tourism destination wants to improve, reverse, adapt, or in some way manage its international image (Morgan et al., 2011). Manage its international image and reputation asks for the design of strategies capable to leave a clear and unique image in the visitors and tourists mind and they should have consistency in all media choices (Balakrishnan, 2009).

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

Images of destinations are promoted, and it is acceptable that many different images associated with a destination can create confusion, making it harder to take a decision to visit (Balakrishnan, 2009). Furthermore, to improve their long-term prosperity and competitiveness the quality of the experience and service must live up to the promised level (the communicated content/message) or it will lead to dissatisfaction (Balakrishnan, 2009). The growth of ICTs is challenging suppliers and destinations to enhance their efficiency and to re-engineer their communication strategies. Hence, devising agile and effective strategies for tourism destinations is required, either at a strategic level, or at tactical and operational management levels (Buhalis et al., 2011).

My argument lies in the importance and impacts of the ICTs for tourism destinations, such as Portugal. The use of ICTs, when well-articulated with a destination branding strategy, could be a driving force to improve their strategic positioning and competitiveness, and to optimise the benefits they derive from tourism. The use of ICTs facilitates the tourism experience throughout the whole spectrum of preparation; during and post-visit. ICTs could be used as a tool to coordinate stakeholders more effectively (Buhalis, 1997), as well as to boost the multiplier effects in the regional economy (Buhalis and Spada, 2000). For better economic performance and split them through the host communities is necessary to make strategies. Destination branding strategies requires a strong vision, focus and

commitment of time, people, resources and changes in policies, culture and mindset (Balakrishnan, 2009; Balmer, 2001; de Chernatony and Riley, 1998).

Successful destination branding strategies in the globalized and 'networked' world relies on a collaborative approach among destinations stakeholders (i.e. public and private sector) and harnessing the power of the online contents, "the community, and like-minded brands where the overall effect is greater than the sum of the individual parts" (Munro and Richards, 2011, p.151). The need to implement successful strategies in tourism destinations is mostly linked with the common value of the tourism as a driver of economic and social dynamics.

Making Strategies in Destination Branding

In order to be successfully promoted in the targeted markets, a destination must be favourably differentiated from its competitors, or positively positioned, in the minds of the consumers and potential visitors. A key component of this positioning process is the creation, management and communication of a distinctive and appealing perception, or image of the destination (Echtner and Ritchie, 2003). Hence, the use of branding is by some, considered to be the most powerful tool available to develop tourism destinations (Morgan, Pritchard and Piggott, 2003). Destination branding is focused on lowering costs, changing the type of visitors, changing the nature or behaviour of visitors, but also changing tourism products, integrating stakeholders and communities, avoiding irritations and responding to issues, for instance, created by the present economic crisis, and challenges at the digital level. An understanding of the critical issues involved in the branding and management process of destinations is an essential element to secure the success of the tourism industry (Fyall, Wang and Garrod, 2012).

Destinations are subject to increasing market complexity (e.g. globalization, internal and external government policies, foreign exchange fluctuations and natural environment instability, such as earthquakes or floods) and increasing marketing and promotion costs. Destinations are advised to pursue the uniqueness of their tourism potential, hence to define the best strategies to enhance competitiveness. Thus, develop points of attractions and/or highly specialized competencies in terms of specific tourism products and processes are fundamental. As financial resources for destination branding processes are scarce it is advisable to lower the high dependence on public funding by identifying business partners and alternative rationales and revenue mechanisms able to make a destination branding initiative financially sustainable by themselves (Laesser and Beritelli, 2013). Making strategies for destinations, being aware of the challenges, must be designed to leave a clear and unique image in the target customer's mind having consistency in all media choices (Munro and Richards, 2011).

The paper highlights the key issues in the use of the online promotional channels to communicate a destination. The case study is Portugal and provides a starting point for future discussions of a strategic thinking in place and destination branding. My way of thinking follow the destination branding literature and is close to the writings in strategic spatial planning or spatial strategy making (Healey, 2008). Understanding that planning involves the translation of knowledge into action (Friedmann, 1987). In this paper, 'knowledge' that embodies power relations, and becomes embedded in the complex interrelation between discourses and practices (Rabinow, 1984) is the National Strategic Plan for Tourism (Turismo de Portugal, 2007). The actions are the practical activities/the communication of the destination Portugal through the online channels. If Munro and Richards (2011, p.151) says that an effective social media strategy should "tactically deploy and instigate stories that address the destination negatives points" my argument underlines the need for a strategic thinking in whole destination branding process. Thus, one of the question I raise is if destinations and their organizations are actually using coherent strategies to engage the potential visitors and tourists through the multiple available online channels? Web sites must allow easy interactivity and give a holistic view of the destination.

Methodology

Deepen the knowledge about what is going on in certain destination both in terms of strategies or tactical interventions is necessary for a resilient approach able to enhance competitiveness and boost the economy of the destination. An increasing number of researchers in the field of tourism studies (e.g. Hannam and Knox, 2005), hospitality (e.g. Singh, Hu & Roehl, 2007) and destination image online (e.g. Govers and Go, 2005) are using text mining and content analysis when faced with qualitative or textual forms of data, such as written documents, or visual materials such as photographs and brochures (e.g. Hannam and Knox, 2005).

Similar to data mining, text mining explores data in text files to establish valuable patterns and rules that indicate trends and significant features about specific topics. Text mining works with an unstructured or semistructured collection of text documents (e.g., corporate documents, web sites, newsgroup postings, e.g. Berson et al., 2000). Text mining can be used as a tool for online text analysis (Buhalis et al., 2011).

Content Analysis is an empirical technique which involves the counting, identification of issues and interpretation of the content of a text which is assumed to be significant (Hannam and Knox, 2005). Content analysis is a quantitative approach concerned with categorizing and counting occurrences of aspects of content (Hannam and Knox, 2005).

To sample the data, an online search was conducted on:

- ✓ Web site, available at <http://www.visitportugal.com/>
- ✓ Facebook page, available at <https://www.facebook.com/Visitportugal?fref=ts>.

I also developed a content analysis of well-known travel blogs, despite the fact that there are other interesting and respected travel blogs such as the Lonely Planet and National Geographic Traveler Magazine, by taking the three most read articles that mention Portugal between 1st of February and 15th of May. Due the limitation of space in this article I only analysed three articles/blog posts but I aim to expand the content analysis to a large number of articles about Portugal, bringing them to the stage of the discussion:

- ✓ The New York Times, available at <http://www.nytimes.com/pages/travel/index.html>
- ✓ The Guardian, available at <http://www.guardian.co.uk/travel>.

Thereafter, link the content analysis with what is written on National Strategic Plan for Tourism, the main document for the tourism in Portugal (Turismo de Portugal, 2007). Is the information widespread by online channels connected with the National Strategic Plan for Tourism? The findings will attempt to some clarifications.

Study findings

While several limitations were acknowledged during this study, overall the findings provide a preliminary foundation for future research to investigate online channels usage and social media involvement to promote Portugal as a tourism destination and therefore attempt to design effective destination branding strategies. Future studies could, for instance, follow the developments occurring in other destinations with regard to technology adoption in the form of social media or web site usage and its maximisation to make them more competitive and improve the way Portugal is branding itself .

The findings of the content analysis to the travel blogs are stated on the table 1. The selection of keywords, in order to avoid subjectivity, is the result of a frequency analyse of the three articles by using the software Atlas.ti7, used in qualitative data analysis. Words such as ‘in’, ‘the’, ‘to’, ‘for’ were ignored after applying the operation – Word cruncher that creates an Excel file with the frequency of words.

Table 1. Content analysis of articles that mentioned Portugal between 1st of February and 15th of May

Article title, date, citation, link	Key words frequency
<p style="text-align: center;">The New York Times</p> <p><u>On Portugal Beach, Riding a Wave That Hits Like a Quake,</u> <u>February 24</u> “Despite its charm and a stunning 14th-century church, Nazaré, Portugal has seen some bad times, with the decline of its once-prosperous fishing industry and an exodus of local youth. Thanks to a photo that electrified the world last month - showing a big-wave surfer named Garrett McNamara” (...) http://www.nytimes.com/2013/02/25/world/europe/on-portugal-beach-riding-a-wave-that-hits-like-a-quake.html? r=0</p>	<p>4 times</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Nazaré (place) ✓ Portuguese ✓ Surfing <p>8 times</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Norte (north) ✓ Praia (beach) <p>12 times</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ McNamara (the surfer) ✓ Waves


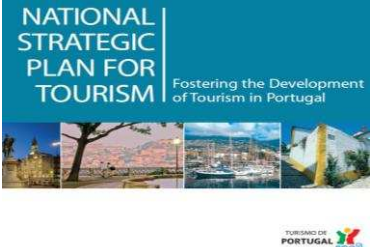
<p><u>On Trails Less Traveled, April 19</u></p> <p>“For explorers seeking quiet pathways, a few outfitters offer pioneering routes and a comfortable place for you to put up your feet at day’s end”.</p> <p>http://travel.nytimes.com/2013/04/21/travel/on-trails-less-traveled-in-europe.html?_r=0</p>	<p>4 times</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Vicentina (name of the route) ✓ Mountain ✓ Rural ✓ Travelers <p>8 times</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Route ✓ Walks
<p><u>Haute Hostels Put to the Test, April 26</u></p> <p>“Portugal has turned out a stream of stunning hostels. Every year the country scoops up armfuls of Hoscars — annual international awards presented by the booking site Hostelworld.com. (...) This year Lisbon hostels claimed the top four spots in the Best Worldwide Hostels (...).</p> <p>http://travel.nytimes.com/2013/04/28/travel/haute-hostels-put-to-the-test-in-europe.html?pagewanted=all</p>	<p>4 times</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Paris ✓ Young <p>8 times</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Barcelona <p>12 times</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Lisboa

theguardian

Article title, date, citation, link	Key words frequency
<p><u>10 family trips in Europe for the school summer holidays, May 9</u></p> <p>“Looking for an affordable and interesting getaway when the schools break up?”(...) “Set within the Rio Formosa, nature reserve, Quintamar offers a refreshing alternative to the Algarve's bland package holiday hotels”. The stunning sand-spit beaches of the eastern Algarve are just a short boat ride away and the local fishing village of Santa Luzia is renowned for its seafood restaurants”.</p> <p>http://www.guardian.co.uk/travel/2013/may/09/10-family-holidays-summer-school?INTCMP=SRCH</p>	<p>4 times</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Algarve ✓ Alternative <p>8 times</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Beaches ✓ Families <p>12 times</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ EasyJet ✓ Children ✓ Sleeping
<p><u>10 trips during the school holidays – without kids, May 10</u></p> <p>“Sintra, Portugal its air of genteel decay, exotic vegetation and fairy-tale palaces, the hill town of Sintra offers a cool respite from the sun-baked streets of nearby Lisbon. Explore the ramparts and towers of Pena Palace, the medieval splendour of the National Palace of Sintra and the lush, botanical gardens” (...)</p> <p>http://www.guardian.co.uk/travel/2013/may/10/summer-school-holidays-without-kids?INTCMP=SRCH</p>	<p>4 times</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Sintra ✓ Summer ✓ Breakfast <p>8 times</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Medieval ✓ Marseille
<p><u>Day trips from Lisbon, Portugal: readers' travel tips, May 4</u></p> <p>“Sintra, Cascais and Portinho all offer tempting holiday excursions that are a short drive or train ride from Lisbon” (...) “The Convento de Cristo in Tomar is probably one of the most spectacular places in Portugal”. (...) “For a cycling day trip, check out Sintra-Cascais natural park“ (...) “Portinho da Arrábida is a tiny village on a white sandy beach about 45 minutes' drive south of Lisbon. The calm sheltered bay is great for snorkelling. Behind it rise steep limestone mountains, part of the Arrábida natural park”(…)</p> <p>http://www.guardian.co.uk/travel/2013/may/06/day-trips-from-lisbon-portugal-sintra?INTCMP=SRCH</p>	<p>4 times</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Arrábida (place) ✓ Portugal ✓ Tomar (place) ✓ Natural <p>8 times</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Cascais (place) ✓ Portinho (place) <p>12 times</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Sintra ✓ Lisbon

From the content analysis to the travel blogs, Portugal image is commonly associated with relaxing holidays between sand and mountains with stunning landscape and historical buildings. The cities of Lisbon, Sintra, Porto and Algarve region are the places more often described. My argument is that a successful future destination branding strategy should be structured also based in the way the world sees a destination. The way they characterize, the assets the media channels underline. By taking those elements a destinations will reach specific target markets, enhance the competitive position and attempt to a better economic and social performance of their communities. The table 2 summarize the main findings of the content analysis to the online channels more frequently used by Visit Portugal and text mining analysis of the National Strategic Plan for Tourism.

Table 2. Content analysis of official online channels used by Visit Portugal (1st of February - 15th of May)

 <p>Visual identity of Visit Portugal and Destination Portugal The beauty of simplicity</p>	
<p>The facebook page has a covered with the tag line of – “Happy to have you here”;</p>	<p>“Happy to have you here” is not mentioned;</p>
<p>Visit Portugal logo assumes currently a different lettering; “The beauty of simplicity” is used as a current tagline;</p>	<p>There is no brand identity stated on the document; “The beauty of simplicity” is not mentioned;</p>
<p>The publications between 1st of February and 15th of May mostly spread information published by other sources, such as online newspaper:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ The islands with green fingers: A blooming marvellous horticultural break to the Azores via Daily Mail; ✓ Ben Fogle reports on surfing in Portugal, via The Telegraph Travel; ✓ Lisbon, Portugal is one of the Best-value destinations in Europe for 2013 according to Lonely Planet; 	<p>The contents generated by others:</p> <p>Contents:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Islands; ✓ Azores Island; ✓ Surfing; ✓ Lisbon as best value destinations. <p>Text mining:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Exploring the communicated nature, landscapes, history and built heritage <p>This analysis is relevant to prepare future destinations branding strategies.</p>
<p>The Visit Portugal also use the facebook to spread images and events about Portugal bases in what is going on in different cities of the country:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Viseu Arts Festival, 1st of June to 13th 2013; ✓ 10th Edition of Roman Braga – Relive Bracara Augusta, 22th of May 26th 2013; 	<p>The PENT underlines:</p> <p>“It is necessary to make a commitment to the implementation of 1-2 mega events in order to contribute towards improving the tourism offer and increasing the destination's projection and notoriety”;</p> <p>Events as strategic development lines</p> <p>“Fostering a national calendar of events that will guarantee the destination’s notoriety and enrich the tourist's experience”</p>
<p>The Visit Portugal time to time (a mean of 6 posts a day) highlight the city’s tourism potential:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Romance in Coimbra captures the imagination with its fado, black capes, and stories of passion; ✓ Historic centres of Portugal; ✓ Lisbon of the Discoveries; ✓ Enjoy a short break at Porto and Northern of Portugal; 	<p>The PENT underlines:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Romance - not mentioned; ✓ Historic centres – “In the framework of this product, circuits that incorporate and foster locations that have unique natural, landscape, historical and cultural heritage value in Portugal should be promoted”. ✓ Create thematic routes (e.g. Discoveries)

Conclusions

It is of common agreement that the development of Information Communication Technology empowers tourism destinations to enhance their efficiency and to re-engineer their communications strategies (Buhalis et al., 2011). Specifically, the Internet is utilized as a system of electronic intercommunication and a way of processing and presenting digital information. With help from people's imagination, it brings together unlimited opportunities to enhance the brand of a place, such as a tourism destination (Muñiz-Martínez and Cervantes-Blanco, 2009). Hence, the correct and coherent use of social networks and travel blogs to communicate the destination assets and tourism potential will support interoperability, personalisation and constant networking, thus increasing tourism revenues and enhancing innovation and competitiveness (Buhalis et al., 2011). When planning the design of web site or to use social networks, the organizations in charge of tourism promotion, such as Visit Portugal, need to be sure to provide reasons and purposes for a visit.

Communicating a consistent message about destination assets becomes exciting when it engages a network of content generators, such as travel bloggers. Making strategies in destination branding requires the right people, the right mindset, the right internal structures, and the right stakeholder and industry relationships where, across all of those things, innovation, decentralisation, and collaboration/networks are all important (Morrison, 2013). The dangerous of not designing the destination branding strategies is visual and sound confusion from the outputs, such as logos, slogans and video promotion and the fail of fulfil the expectations of the visitors. All contacts between destination marketing organizations and tourists should be directed to the satisfaction of their expectations (i.e. before, during, and after the visit), for they will also determine the image of the destination perceived by the tourist.

This paper has provided a preliminary step for researching the way Portugal is branding itself as tourism destination. Additionally, research what the main travel blogs are saying about the country tourism potential. From the findings, Portugal is characterized as a less crowded and relatively cheap destination with a mix between nature and historic centres where activities such as hiking, surf and cultural itineraries are possible. Those elements should be integrated in a future destinations branding strategy. Due the limitations of time and space I could not explore all the possibilities of using text mining and content analysis to design strategies in destination branding and specify all the impact of the ICTS in destination branding. Hence, opportunities for future research remains open.

Full reference

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