

THE CONTENT OF TOURIST DESTINATIONS IN SOCIAL MEDIA AND THE INFORMATION SEARCH OF USERS¹

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ABSTRACT

Social media has changed tourist communication, and especially the communication of tourist destinations (Xian & Gretzel, 2010; Huertas, 2014). Tourists can share their travel experiences and their emotions through social media (Henning-Thurau et al., 2004; Senecal & Nantal, 2004). This eases the creation of an image of destinations and their reputation (Inversini & Buhalis, 2009; Xiang & Gretzel, 2010; Marchiori & Cantoni, 2012). Moreover, the participation and the comments of tourists through social media contribute the emotional attachment to the destination, to its identity and to its brand (Algesheimer, Dholakia, y Herrmann, 2005).

On the other hand, the destination brand is a concept that has behaved a great change in the communication of tourist destinations since its emergence. The main contribution of destination brands is the identification of some attributes with the territory and the distinction among tourist destinations (Morgan, Pritchard & Piggott, 2003; Blain, Levy & Ritchie, 2005; Huertas, 2014). This is why destinations try to communicate a single identity, one personality (Govers & Go, 2009) and values that impact in the emotions of users and make they feel attracted by the place (Morgan, Pritchard & Piggott, 2003).

There are several studies about the communication of destination brands and about the role of social media in that communication. The first type of study focuses more on the management of DMOs' (Destination Marketing Organizations) communication and on the role of social media (Roque & Raposo, 2015). The second type focuses on the brand communication through that media (Kasemsap, 2016). Within this second type of studies, there are some research basing on showing the importance of social media in the communication

¹ Este estudio es parte del proyecto CSO2012-34824 "Uso e influencia de los social media y la comunicación 2.0 en la toma de decisiones turísticas y en la imagen de marca de los destinos", que ha sido financiado por el Ministerio de Economía y Competitividad. Investigadora principal: Assumpció Huertas

of destination brands and others centred in the analysis of the brand communication carried out by DMOs. In general, studies show a dominance of the communication in the tangible attributes and a detriment of the communication in the emotional values (Bigné, García & Blas, 2009; Michaelidou et al., 2013).

So that, the objectives of this study are: 1-to know if Spanish tourist destinations use all their potentialities of social media as public relations channels to create dialogue with their stakeholders and to generate a good image, 2-to analyze if they really communicate about their identity and their Brand through social media, with their two main components equally, and finally 3-to know which information look for users in social media and to compare it with the communication that destinations in that media, in order to see if they are coincident and if there is an efficient strategy of online communication.

In pursuance of meeting these research objectives, the study was structured in three phases and there are four methodologies used for the analysis. In the first phase, to know how destinations plan their brand strategy, which contents they share in social media and if they use all interactive potentialities of these media to create dialogue and good image with the stakeholders, we used two methodologies: in-depth interviews with directors of communication of destinations and online surveys to social media managers.

The sample of analysed destinations of the study was structured in 38 Spanish tourist destinations of 5 Autonomous Communities, the most representatives of all the Spanish territory, that correspond to the Nielsen Areas in market research: Andalusia, Canary Islands, Catalonia, Galicia and Madrid. For each Autonomous Community, 7 different types of destinations were selected: Autonomous Community, Large Town, Large Coast, Patrimonial City, Coastal Destination, Indoor Destination, Medium City and High Mountain Destination. This typology of destinations comes from the Manual of Management Models of Local Tourism of the Spanish Ministry of Industry, Tourism and Commerce (FEMP and TourSpain, 2008), to be representative of all types of Spanish destinations. So, one delegate for each Autonomous Community was selected if the geographical characteristics is adequate.

In the second phase of the study, to know the brand communication carried out by Spanish destinations, with their attractions and their emotional values, we accomplished a content analysis of the last 25 publications from their official social media channels. In total, 2.759 publications were collected, particularly 943 in Facebook, 781 in Twitter, 542 in YouTube, 329 in Flickr and 155 in blogs.

With regard to carry out the content analysis of social media, we focused on both elements forming the destination brands: one functional or tangible and another emotional (Baloglu & McCleary, 1999). The functional elements are the tourist attractions that destinations have and the emotional elements are the values that represent their personality. To analyse the functional elements we took some lists used by other authors previously (Beerli & Martin, 2004; Wenger, 2008; Marina-Roig, 2013). These elements are nature, leisure, culture, tangible heritage, intangible heritage, transportation, accommodation, activities/escapades, shopping, sun and beach, sport, technology, services, etc. However, to analyse the communication of destination brands we also had to analyse if emotional values were communicated. For this purpose, we used the Brand Personality Scale of Aaker (1997) that has been also used by other authors to analyse destination brands (De Moya & Jain, 2013; Huertas, 2014).

Finally, in the third phase of the research, an online survey was carried out by a users panel of NETQUEST. Their target were residents in Spain that had travelled in the last two years and for that, they had consulted the Internet. The selected sample were 800 users stratified by gender, age and geographical areas (Nielsen areas). It was carried out from April 24th to May 4th 2015.

In respect to the communicative strategies, despite the importance of directors of destination communication confer on the Brand, results show that the Brand is poorly communicated among the contents published in social media, especially the brand emotional values, that are little communicated and in an undifferentiated way. This is surprising if we take into account the studies that show that brands behave a relationship value with stakeholders and help consumers to identify with their personality (Hankinson, 2004). Moreover, if it is known the potential social media have to communicate brands (Kasemsap, 2016) and achieve users establish emotional relationships with them (Zaglia, 2013), the little communication of the brands and their emotional values by destination it is even more surprising.

To improve planning, all destinations have different regulations of action: strategic plans of communication and marketing plans. This was confirmed in the surveys by Community Managers. However, only a quarter of the contents that are shared has its origin in strategic plans. So that, it seems that communication strategies and strategic plans are more documents of the image than useful tools of action to guide the communication management of social media. It is also surprising that although many studies affirm the necessity to know the performance of brands in social media (Habibi et al., 2014) and to establishes strategies as the creation of brand contents (Park & Kim, 2014), the strategic planning does not apply in the management of social media.

Facebook, Twitter, Youtube, Flickr, Foursquare and Google + are the main social media where the analysed destinations are present although the most used are Facebook, Twitter and Youtube by this order, as the results of other studies show (Roque & Raposo, 2015). The reasons by these channels were selected are: to improve the diffusion of the brand, to have followers or fans and because they require less investment than other media. Destinations and users coincide in using the three main social media, but they differ in the less used. Thus, for example, while most tourist destinations have Flickr accounts, users prefer mainly Instagram.

In general, the information that users look for in social media coincide with content communication of destinations, but there are some topics looked by users like accommodation, gastronomy or shopping that are little communicated by destination's social media channels. Consequently, the communication strategies of DMOs should be more adjusted to the communicative necessities of users or tourists.

Finally, in respect of destination brand communication through social media, we can affirm that in many occasions the brand is not present in the contents published by DMOs although almost all destinations have communication strategies. However, the brand strategies do not abound and finally, tourist attractions are more communicated than emotional values. DMOs should promote strategies of brand communication establishing clear guidelines of communication to achieve that emotional values were equally communicated through social media. This is important if DMOs want to have got destination brands well positioned and with a good reputation.