

Digital Communication Strategy and Tourism: Examining Spanish Media Coverage About Portugal as a Tourist Destination



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Abstract Online media can influence tourists' decisions and help build the image of destinations, so monitoring media coverage is a crucial aspect of tracking a destination's reputation and evaluating the effectiveness of a digital communication strategy. Considering the relationship with international media is part of the Portuguese communication strategy to project its destination image and increase awareness in priority markets, this paper examines Spanish media coverage about Portugal as a tourist destination. For this purpose, the present study scanned Spanish online news over one year, identifying 81 mentions. Different types of online sources (e.g., news portals, online magazines, blogs, and Websites) were analyzed and then described based on several indicators, such as geographic reach, media names, type of coverage, and key messages. Results point to the fact that, although Portugal has been making online media efforts to reinforce its image as a diversified destination in terms of products and places, Spanish media coverage still associates Portugal with sun and sea tourism, mainly referring to destinations such as the Algarve. Therefore, this study aims to bridge the gap between theory and practice by discussing the relevance of digital media to tourism and describing the case of a destination communication strategy.

Keywords Digital communication strategy · Tourist destination · Online news · Media monitoring · Portugal · Spain

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1 Introduction

The development of communication plans, marketing campaigns, and social media engagement are some strategies that can help build the relationship between tourists and destinations. Through communication, especially digital communication, destinations, monuments, hotels, and cultural attractions can capture, motivate, and retain consumers. Thus, digital communication plays a significant role in the marketing and promotion of the tourism industry worldwide [1] not only because digital communication represents a dynamic source of online travel information but also because it can influence travelers' decision-making process [2].

Since many travelers search for information online, digital channels stimulate consumers' desire to travel. Therefore, investing in digital communication, be it through apps, social media, Websites, or any other digital platform, with an appealing and transparent message is a crucial asset for a destination communication strategy. Furthermore, monitoring a destination's online communication, which results in tourism destination promotion, is crucial to track the reputation of places and to assess whether the communication strategies used are effective or not.

The digitalization of society is one of the foremost contemporary trends shaping consumers' behaviors and attitudes and driving businesses to change. Likewise, the tourism sector was leveraged by digitalization, mainly in the past years due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Although that was a decrease, tourism is now recovering worldwide, especially in destinations with relaxed sanitary rules. After two years of global losses, the World Travel & Tourism Council (WTTC) estimates a recovery scenario for many destinations, including Portugal, where WTCC points toward numbers equivalent to pre-pandemic levels, forecasting a growth of 4.8% in 2023 [3].

The Spanish market has driven part of this recovery. According to the Portuguese Tourist Flows Report [4], Spain was the first tourist market in 2021, representing 19.5% of guests and 14.3% of overnight stays. Recent data from April 2022 refer to a total of 1.97 million Spanish traveled abroad, mainly to France, Portugal, and Italy, the top destinations of preference, respectively [5]. That means one in four (24%) Spanish tourists traveled to Portugal, representing approximately 474,000 people, and a growth of 24% compared to the same month of 2021. Those tourists accounted for 1.27 million overnight stays (an increase of 15.8% compared to the same period in 2021), with an average stay of 2.7 days in Portugal.

Considering the increasing relevance of digital media to tourism and that online communication is a crucial part of destinations' strategy, the present paper aims to analyze how Portuguese communication strategy spreads online by examining Spanish news coverage since this is a priority market for the country. The need for research on the topic lies in the fact that recent research has focused mainly on the influence of social media on destinations [6], neglecting somehow the role of online news in influencing public opinion and tourist perceptions [7].

2 The Influence of Digital Communication and Media on Tourism

In 2001, the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) stated that the link between the Internet and tourism would be crucial for strengthening the market. Since then, digital media, supported by the Internet, have provided tourism consumers with immediate access to information about the destinations they were interested in, while companies in the tourism sector can use digital tools to promote their products and services in order to have a more significant impact on their potential consumers [8].

According to the European Travel Commission [9], digital communication has revolutionized how consumers make their destinations' decisions, becoming fundamental in this process. Digital communication is, in a generic way, the digitalization of information media. It can also be defined as the strategy and communicational actions carried out on the web and digital platforms [10].

Nowadays, this type of communication has assumed an essential role in the strategies of companies and brands [11] because they offer different ways to communicate with consumers. In the tourism sector, there is also a need to invest in online communication strategies, mainly because some of their benefits include they are cost-effective and reaching a wider audience [8].

Regarding the role of media on tourism, some studies refer to a moderating effect of media exposure on destination image and behavioral intention [12]. For example, Butler [13] stated that various media sources could influence the information about and images of destinations shaping international travel patterns. Accordingly, the study by Llodrà-Riera et al. [14] claims that various Web platforms are needed for determining the images of tourist destinations.

Papadopoulos et al. [15] point out that tourists depend more on visual media, which favor the evocation of emotions and are the best resource for branding a destination [16]. Under this perspective, visual and online media emerge as an active platform that tracks the footprints of millions of users, allowing valuable insights into tourist decision-making and destination image [17]. News media, for example, play an essential role in a communication strategy as they can provide up-to-date information that other sources, such as brochures, cannot [18].

Early studies about destination image considered news media as one of the different image formation agents, as Gartner in 1994 [19] divided them into three types: (i) organic agents, such as word of mouth and destination experience; (ii) induced agents, such as promotional materials; and (iii) autonomous agents, such as news and articles.

Within that framework, the study of Gabbioneta and De Carlo [20] showed that the number of news articles individuals read is positively associated with their image of the destination, that news involvement enhances the influence of the news articles on destination image formation, and that this influence holds even after controlling for prior destination experience.

News media appear in tourism studies under different perspectives, for example, to predict tourism demand [21], to evaluate resident's perceptions and attitudes [22]

or to explore specific topics such as medical tourism, sustainability, or safety in tourism [23–25]. However, most studies focus on exploring the negative association between news media and the destination [26], describing cases of violence, terrorist attacks, disasters and, more recently, the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic [27–30]. Considering that different agents interact in the image formation process and that news media are relevant, more studies are needed to explore its impact on the online communication strategy of a destination.

3 The Portuguese Tourism Communication Strategy

A communication strategy is to plan products or services so that they can be disseminated to an external or internal audience, according to a previously established strategic planning. To promote Portugal and increase its notoriety as a tourist destination, a list of continuous actions, which include communication strategies, has been developed by Turismo de Portugal, the Portuguese Destination Marketing Organization (DMO). These actions, defined according to the proposals of the Sales Support Department of Turismo de Portugal, are articulated with the Regional Tourist Promotion Agencies (ARPT) and with foreign teams operating in 25 strategic markets [31], Spain being one of them.

Using online campaigns, branding actions, fairs, roadshows, workshops, and training offers, Turismo de Portugal has invested in value growth, digitalization, and sustainability as critical objectives for competitiveness in the sector. These three objectives also mark, in operational terms, the Strategic Council for Tourism Promotion Abroad (CEPT) planning for the year 2022. The tourism segments that will materialize these goals are those with higher added value, namely Wine Tourism, Gastronomy, Art, Architecture, and Literary Tourism [32].

Among the main actions in terms of communication strategies for promoting Portugal as a tourist destination is the digital platform VisitPortugal, an example of how digital communication can assert the purpose and value proposition of the destination of Portugal. VisitPortugal is on social media, such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter, with appealing content to stimulate interest in visiting the country, maintaining interaction with more loyal tourists and fan communities. On other social media, such as Pinterest and the VisitPortugal Blog, news and articles of interest are posted to point out the growing interest in the country and publicize its worldwide recognition as a tourist destination of excellence.

In addition to social networks, the official tourism promotion portal, VisitPortugal.com, offers thematic visit suggestions with helpful information for planning a trip to the country. The official portal can be accessed in ten languages (Portuguese, English, Spanish, German, French, Italian, Dutch, Russian, Japanese, and Mandarin) and includes a tourist assistance service. Any licensed tourist company may integrate VisitPortugal's database, which currently includes 12 thousand of tourist resources throughout the Portuguese territory.

As for the online campaigns, this promotion strategy, in a determinant way, increases Portugal's notoriety in the international markets. Among the primary online campaigns, four stand out.

- Can't Skip Portugal was the campaign with the highest number of views compared to the others, totaling 10 million views since its launch in 2017. Despite being implemented in 20 countries, it has reached more than 200 organically. In four films, the focus was on promoting Portugal as an authentic and unique destination.
- Can't Skip Hope was a campaign made in the context of the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic, whose goal was to keep Portugal as the dream destination in postponed travel plans.
- Can't Skip Tomorrow was a campaign launched in early 2021 to promote responsible and sustainable tourism with environmental concerns, respect for local cultural and natural heritage, and focused on changing the attitude of tourists.
- Tempo de ser/Time to Be is Turismo de Portugal's most recent campaign, launched in June 2021 and has the international market as its central focus. The campaign's goal is to keep the intended destination at the top of the tourists' preferences, valuing the national tourist attractions.

Along with online campaigns, brand actions are periodic with communication strategies that highlight specific communication themes of the destination (Portuguese Brands). The main themes of these actions are nature tourism through walking and cycling (Portuguese Trails), literary tourism (Ler Portugal/Read Portugal and Viagem a Portugal Revisited), religious tourism (Caminhos da Fé/Paths of Faith), surfing (Portuguese Waves), golf (Portuguese Greens), wine tourism (Wine Tourism), and music festivals (Portuguese Music Festivals).

Besides thinking of the potential tourism consumer, the communication strategies also encompass social communication and public relations actions aimed at journalists in the written press, television, radio, and online media. Keeping the media professionals informed and interested in Portugal are promotional actions with a significant impact on foreign media.

Another communication strategy Turismo de Portugal uses corresponds to the participation of Portuguese tourism sector companies in the leading international tourism fairs and generalist and thematic events that affirm the country's image and promote these companies' products and projects. The Fairs and Events Portal, managed by Turismo de Portugal, contains the world's calendar of the most critical tourism sector events and fairs and the ways and conditions of participation.

The communication strategies also turned to foreign tourism professionals and operators, with the organization and accompaniment of those professionals on trips to get to know the territory and approach the tourism products. In coordination with the Tourism Teams and with the participation of national companies, actions are organized to reach foreign markets, including road shows, workshops, fam trips, and training for travel agents about the destination.

Finally, the Cinema and Tourism Support Fund, implemented through a partnership between Turismo de Portugal and the Institute of Cinema and Audiovisual, is a strategy to support film and audiovisual production in Portugal. This support

program aims to increase the country's notoriety in the international film production market, positioning it as a location for filming and post-production and as a tourist destination.

Besides seeking the consolidation of the country's notoriety, all communication strategies aim to extend its benefits to other sectors of the Portuguese economy and society. Furthermore, the focus on digital, with a continuous presence on social media, is the most direct approach to attract and capture attention to the country as a tourist destination.

4 Methods

Online sources were extracted from the Google News database, with samples extending from May 2021 until May 2022, when the analysis commenced. All sources that emerged, in Spanish, from the search for the keywords 'Portugal', 'travel', 'tourism', 'destination', were considered, resulting in the analysis of 300 links. The first screening was done to exclude repeated links or sources from countries other than Spain. Then, a second screening, more qualitative, restricted the sources only to news addressing Portugal as a tourist destination. Finally, Evernote's Web clipping software was used to create a database with all the identified links.

In order to examine how was Spanish media coverage of Portuguese destinations in the past year, 81 articles were analyzed based on the following measures:

- Date of publication: identifying each news by month and year of publication.
- Type of media: categorizing the online media vehicles in a set of the news portal, online magazine, Website, or blog.
- Media names: referring to the name of the online media where the article was published.
- Geographic reach: evaluating each media to check if they have a regional, national, or international reach.
- The tone of coverage: verifying whether the article conveys a positive, neutral, or negative message.

Data analysis followed a qualitative-descriptive approach that presupposed the conduction of a content analysis based on the reading and examination of the headlines and body of each article identified, followed by the description of the above-mentioned indicators. Even though Evernote has been used to systematize data, no coding software was used for the content analysis phase.

The systematic collection and analysis of information follow a press clipping approach, a tool of media monitoring largely used in the communication field that in the digital age extends to monitoring online sources via digital search. The assessment of the results makes it possible to verify whether the media strategy is effective to improve the decision-making process [33].

5 Results and Discussion

5.1 Period, Media Type, Names, and Geographic Reach

During the whole period analyzed, it was identified at least one article published in the Spanish media per month, with most of the articles published in May 2022 (22 articles), followed by December (8 articles) and July 2021 (9 articles). The publication period is aligned with the seasonality characteristic of the travel industry, with many articles published during the European summer and Christmas break, which used to be peak season for Spanish travelers. However, media communication has also highlighted other periods as examples of the following headlines ‘The five secret destinations for a Valentine’s Day vacation in Portugal’ and ‘Easter 2022: These are the COVID requirements for travel abroad and return to Spain’. It shows that other periods of the year can be used in communication strategy to generate interest in traveling to Portugal in the off-season and take advantage of commercial and national holidays from Spain.

The 81 articles analyzed were published in 44 different media vehicles, which shows the diversification of the online channels where Portugal has been communicated to Spain. Among the 44, 12 are on top for having at least two articles published in the past year. Hosteltur, a tourism news portal for professionals, Hola Viajes, a travel magazine and ABC, a general news portal, can be highlighted with 12, 7, and 5 articles, respectively, as shown in Fig. 1.

Regarding the type of online media, most articles (40) were published in news portals, which are online communication media that publish general news (e.g.,

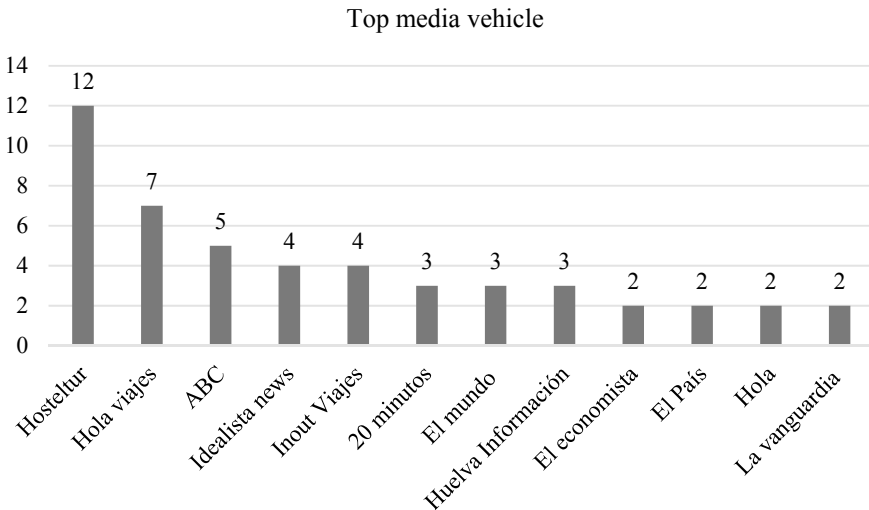


Fig. 1 Number of published articles by media vehicle

World, Business, Sports), usually reaching a broader audience. Online magazines are the second most relevant, with 30 articles published. This type of media usually covers a specific theme reaching the target audience or readers interested in the topic, in this case, travel magazines. Blogs and Websites are the online media with the fewest articles published, 6 and 5, respectively.

The flow of information in the news media may change in geography, so it is common for some media vehicles to have a more extensive geographic reach than others. For the case analyzed, 45 articles were published in online media with national reach (e.g., Inout Viajes), followed by 23 with an international reach (e.g., El país) and 13 with a regional one (e.g., Huelva Información). Although these results indicate that the published articles potentially reached a larger audience, working with a regional reach media benefits from having greater proximity to their audience.

5.2 Tone of Media Coverage and Key Messages

The tone of media coverage can influence the audience's behavior; therefore, it is important to assess whether the coverage was positive, neutral or negative, according to the message the article is trying to convey. From the sample analyzed, 59 articles convey a positive message, while 18 are neutral and 4 negative. This result points to the fact that most articles present Portugal as a destination worth visiting by Spanish travelers, often emphasizing the inclusion of Portuguese destinations and attractions in lists of the world's best. Some examples are headlines, such as 'The best destinations in Europe in 2021 are...' or 'The Algarve, 'Europe's Best Beach Destination' for the eighth time', recognizing the increasing relevance of Portugal as a destination. On the other hand, all the negative articles refer to travel restrictions because of COVID, as in the headlines, 'Portugal reimposes travel restrictions, will other countries follow?' or 'Portugal tightens measures against COVID during the Christmas holidays'.

Concerning the key messages, in the analysis of the headlines some words, such as 'algarve', 'summer', 'beaches', 'oportó', 'gastronomy', 'hotel', 'luxury', 'wine', 'azores', and 'nature', highlights, as shown in Fig. 2. Moreover, the in-depth analysis of the body of the articles unveiled several aspects.

Algarve is the destination most mentioned by the Spanish media, with a particular focus on natural assets (e.g., sand, weather, waves). Several news refers positively to this destination as a paradise for those seeking sun and beach. Another reason the Algarve is mentioned which is the luxury tourism and the new openings in that segment, as in the headline 'The luxurious debut of W Hotels in Portugal already has a date'. However, suggestions for different routes are given, and coastal villages and sports activities are frequently mentioned.

Lisboa and Porto used to have good reviews and numerous recommendations in magazines and blogs. Facing other European cities, Lisbon is described as a cheap destination, while the news referring to Porto mentions the wineries, especially the recent World of Wine (WOW) complex, and the connection with the Douro Region.

6 Conclusion

This paper discussed the role of digital communication in tourism, focusing on the effects of an online media strategy on a destination. For that aim, the study examined the case of Spanish news media coverage of Portugal, considering media monitoring indicators, such as type of online media, period of publication of the news, geographic reach and tone of coverage.

The analysis of 81 articles from 2021 to 2022 unveiled that Portuguese destinations are regularly mentioned by the Spanish media, with at least one article being published per month. The news is released on various digital platforms such as news portals, online magazines, blogs, and Websites, especially national publishers, reaching a broader audience. The media's message coverage is primarily of a positive tone, which helps position Portugal to the Spanish audience as a destination worth visiting.

According to the Portuguese Tourism Strategic Plan, Spain is a priority market due to its proximity, growth, and high share, so efforts have been made to segment the different regional realities and to develop specific offers, to reduce the seasonality of demand. Although some Portuguese assets such as heritage, gastronomy, wines, and nature are referred to in the news, the evaluation of media coverage evidenced that Spanish media still associates Portugal mainly with sun and sea tourism. Based on that fact, there is still an open field to flow information about the diversity of Portuguese types of tourism and products, considering there are destinations and attractions which are still undiscovered by the Spanish audience.

Results evidence that news media are relevant to the flow of key messages to specific targets; thus, monitoring media must be considered an essential step in measuring the effectiveness of an online communication strategy. Moreover, the results align with other studies which refer news media could affect the destination's image and that positive media coverage can impact tourists' awareness for future traveling. Online media offer the possibility to engage with potential travelers and provide valuable information. The diversity in information delivered is crucial and ensures that the audiences constantly receive up-to-date information about the destination. In that sense, online news is important because it presents relevant content to actual and potential tourists, as well as electronic word of mouth and social media. However, DMOS and communication advisors can consider online media vital and still work in complementarity with traditional media to achieve communication objectives.

The present study was based on the analysis of online news extracted from the Google database, published in Spanish, covering one year and considering solely one strategic tourist marketing. Future studies can use multiple databases and sources (e.g., social media), a wider time frame, and a broad geographic reach to further expand the research findings. Finally, content analysis and sentiment analysis softwares are suggested as valuable tools that can help media monitoring studies, for example, in what concerns text mining and to automatically characterize the tone of media, especially for a larger amount of data.

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