

Social Media as a Communication Strategy for Regional and Local Tourism: A Portuguese Case Study

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Abstract: Investing in social media should be seen as a strategic asset in communicating and publicising tourism. In fact, more and more social media, especially social networks, are a winning bet for communicating and publicising tourist destinations. Based on these premises, this research aims to answer the following research question: "What is the importance of social media, especially social networks, as a local tourism communication strategy?". To answer this question, we analysed the communication of two local institutions: on the one hand, a local authority, a public institution; and, on the other hand, a local accommodation, a private institution, seeking to analyse how local authority policies use social media to communicate and publicise local tourism. To complement this, the opinion of the tourist public on the impact of social media on their choices was analysed. In this way, we sought to answer the following objectives: 1) to understand the importance of social media for communicating and publicising tourism; 2) to describe the main digital platforms used for communicating and publicising tourism; 3) to ascertain the importance of social media as a strategy for communicating and publicising tourism in Portugal. The data obtained showed that social networks are increasingly being used by institutions as a strategy for communicating and publicising tourism. On the other hand, they are also a source of advice and decisions when it comes to choosing a tourist destination. On this last point, the opinions shared on social networks and the role of influencers as determining factors in the final decision and choice are particularly important.

Keywords: Social media, Social networks, Communication, Strategy, Tourism

1. Introduction

Tourism is currently an activity that is completely "rooted in society" and in the world. As a human activity, tourism is one of the areas that has attracted the most interest and different perspectives (Almeida, 2003). Tourism is studied by various sciences and each has its own point of view on the concept. Generally speaking, tourism can be defined as all the lawful activities carried out by visitors as a result of travelling, the attractions and means that give rise to them, the facilities created to satisfy their needs and the phenomena and relationships that result from one or the other (Cunha, 2010). According to the same author, Cunha (2010), tourism has become one of the most dynamic activities in the world, not only economically but also culturally and socially.

In Portugal, the tourism sector is one of the fastest growing in recent years, having contributed significantly to the development of the territory, the growth of the economy and the valorisation of culture and traditions. According to the official website of Turismo de Portugal (2022), the tourism sector is a fundamental economic activity for generating wealth and employment in Portugal, given that in 2019 it accounted for 15.3% of GDP (Seguro, 2021a). However, in 2020 this figure fell to 8.0% (Seguro, 2021b), as a result of the arrival of the COVID-19 virus, which forced the temporary closure of various tourist services such as accommodation, catering, air transport, among others. Fortunately, in 2021, some of these restrictions were eased, which allowed some tourist activities to be more active. For this reason, in 2021 the tourism sector accounted for 10.1 per cent of national GDP, a significant increase on the previous year, but still far from the figure reached in 2019.

Bearing in mind the importance of tourism in Portugal and, therefore, the need to strategically plan communication to promote and publicise tourism, social media has increasingly emerged, especially after the Covid-19 pandemic, as a key strategy in promoting tourist destinations. This exploratory study therefore aims to demonstrate how social media has been used to promote local tourism in Portugal. In fact, regional and local tourism is booming in Portugal, and so we started with a case study in the city of Fafe, in the north of Portugal, as a way of exemplifying and portraying how social media has been used as a tool for publicising and promoting regional and local tourism.

2. Theoretical Framework - the Potential of Social Media in Tourism Promotion

Strategic communication planning for the promotion of tourist destinations aims to make them stand out from their competitors by promoting unique experiences, telling the stories of the people and the places, thus presenting their culture. In this way, it aims to captivate future visitors through difference, uniqueness, "personality" and hospitality. Therefore, the ultimate goal of tourism communication strategy will always be to

influence or persuade the behaviour of potential tourists so that they visit and contribute revenue to the economic growth of the destination (Mendes and Teixeira, 2019).

In this sense, according to Blichfeldt (2017), tourist destinations are understood as places where tourists travel, at the centre of this concept lie commercial interests received in the form of revenue that tourism can generate for the destination through its ability to attract tourists who will spend money on the various products, services and experiences during their stay. Thus, according to Teruel and Viñals (2012), the strategic communication plan can serve local communities as a comprehensive tool for managing, planning and promoting tourist destinations, achieving the level of development desired by the community.

That said, the company/institution or tourist brand has the task of building loyalty or captivating tourists, influencing the decision-making process and making a lasting impression on the experiences they have had, with the aim of getting them to recommend and return. In view of this, resorting to more emotional strategies is likely to be more effective, since tourists seem to have some resistance to making choices based solely on rational elements. Therefore, according to Mendes and Teixeira (2019), the tourism communication of a destination should adopt rational argumentative elements, but also emotional arguments that stimulate sensations.

Strategic communication in the tourism context is primarily a question of identifying the many existing stakeholders and including all the relevant voices in the plan that is being communicated about a particular place, a particular destination or a particular subject (Blichfeldt, 2017).

On the other hand, the internet, which has given rise to a new space for communication, sociability, organisation and transactions, but also a new market for information and knowledge (Levy, 1999), has become a focus for the tourism sector, playing an increasingly important role in the strategic promotion of destinations. In this sense, tools such as a website and social networks are essential for developing an effective plan to publicise local recreational assets. The purpose of these tools is to provide visitors/users with a range of information that might make them want to visit the physical place they are seeing virtually. Following this line of thought, López et al. (2016) state that new communication technologies are a cross-cutting element in the evolution of tourism and have therefore become indispensable tools for the promotion and dissemination of tourist destinations.

The consumer is currently considered the protagonist of social media, since blogs, opinion forums, social networks (such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, etc.) enable direct and instantaneous communication, without geographical or time barriers, without intermediaries and without filters (Wichels, 2014). In this context, consumers/users become creators of multimedia content, giving a new dimension to public opinion, which encourages interactivity, sharing, hypertextuality, without hierarchical structures, without traditional gatekeepers (Wichels, 2014). Therefore, the consumer of tourism products or services should be seen as an agent integrated into a network of relationships, with the ability to transmit opinions and complaints.

What's more, with the help of the Internet, consumers/tourists have become "experts" on certain subjects or products through a simple Google search (for example). Following the same reasoning, Xiang and Gretzel (2010) state that due to the huge amount of information available, searching has become an increasingly dominant mode in travellers' use of the Internet. However, according to the same authors, with the huge amount of information available, the Internet becomes an important platform for the exchange of information between the consumer and industry suppliers (e.g. hotels and tourist attractions), intermediaries (e.g. travel agents), "controllers" (e.g. governments and administrative bodies), as well as many non-profit organisations, such as destination marketing organisations.

According to Wichels (2014), the internet has led to the "democratisation" of tourist information on networks such as Facebook and Instagram, since, for example, large hotel chains are now living in the same "space" as small hostels, something that would otherwise not be possible due to their limited marketing and communication budgets. Although this social media terrain is somewhat unstable, many authors and communication agencies recognise the advantages of good positioning on social media. In fact, it is the "utopia" of communication turned into reality, i.e. companies have at their disposal a network of consumers who adhere to advertising campaigns, promote and share products, making them go viral.

TripAdvisor, Booking and Airbnb are the best examples of user-generated content management platforms specialising in the tourism sector, with great worldwide prestige. These platforms have a high number of participants and contributors, so many tourists consult the comments and evaluations made by other users before making a final decision about their trips (Amaral *et al.*, 2015). These platforms therefore guarantee the credibility of the reviews they provide and are currently essential tools in travel planning. However, of the three

platforms mentioned, TripAdvisor is the most comprehensive, as it gathers the opinions of millions of people on various tourism products and services, such as accommodation, catering and airlines. In this context, the concept of "word of mouth" applies, which, according to Hennig-Thurau *et al.* (2004), consists of any positive or negative statement made by potential, actual, or former customers about a product or company, which is made available to a multitude of people and institutions via the Internet. On the other hand, from the point of view of tourism product and service companies, Wichels (2014) points out that TripAdvisor offers the possibility of interacting directly with consumers and also identifying problems/weaknesses in their products and services, allowing them to take measures to correct, improve and also make adjustments to communication and marketing campaigns.

As far as municipal organisations are concerned, ICTs can offer a range of potential, since they build a kind of grand information structure capable of covering all the themes, spaces and actors of the city; from its history and heritage to the most trivial information on accommodation and catering (Moragas, 2015). In view of this, in the local context, Jiménez and San Eugenio (2009) state that there is an emitter who, consciously or unconsciously, creates a certain image of a place. It acts as an antenna that emits concepts, attributes, values, impressions, smells and visual impacts that configure the image of a space.

Town halls and local/regional tourism promotion organisations use their websites to attract potential visitors by promoting a cultural and recreational offer. In other words, websites are tools that help the managers of a destination to attract tourists to their localities, whether through the provision of information, the establishment of dialogue between interested parties or the systematisation of the tourist service offer, including access to links to hotels and tour operating companies (Alencar *et al.*, 2011).

In fact, in the last decade, the tourism industry has grown dramatically and now occupies a very important place in the economic and social panorama of many countries. This has happened due to a number of factors. Among them, according to Piñeiro-Naval and Serra (2018), there are two that seem to be particularly important: the increase in supply and diversification of tourist services (with cultural and natural tourism as the main "rivals" of mass tourism), as well as the use of ICT and the Internet in the strategic promotion of destinations, a fact that allows tourists, who use them, to plan their trips and select their leisure experiences autonomously, based on their own interests and motivations.

In fact, Web 2.0 applications, in particular social networks, are powerful platforms for connecting with, attracting and retaining customers, as well as transforming communication strategies in the tourism sector. In fact, social networks, more than a technology, are a reality that has grown and gained a multidisciplinary action that is difficult to assimilate in all its sectors of intervention. Social media has a notorious and progressive influence on numerous development sectors, especially the economic sector, which includes tourism. Therefore, active and efficient communication and information management are, in fact, the main factors for its operation and success. To complement this, Gonçalves *et al.* (2021) state that today, access to the Internet and the ever-increasing use of social media applications has led to a change in the strategy used to promote tourist destinations, with most of the information about them now being user-generated content.

Therefore, the number of users of social networks is gaining more and more ground, consequently, tourism consumption through virtual means has increased. According to Mendes and Teixeira (2019), the applications that most influence e-tourism are social networks, Facebook, Instagram and Twitter, as well as TripAdvisor, Expedia, Rumbo and Booking.

According to Zeng and Gerritsen (2014), the most significant actions most exploited by social media users are: making informed decisions about travelling, searching for trips, interacting with other tourists and service providers and sharing personal experiences.

Following the same line of thought, Gonçalves *et al.* (2021) state that social media have become for tourists: a) reliable sources of travel information; b) influencers in decision-making; and c) interfaces for interaction with service providers.

Over time, consumers have become more demanding when it comes to information about the service or product they want. They therefore turn to social networks because they offer tourists greater comfort and flexibility. In this sense, the promotion of a destination through social media has become a marketing opportunity for the place to be visited since Web 2.0, through digital platforms, provides mechanisms for direct participation, thus transforming visitors into the main agents of choice for their destination. Therefore, according to Toffler (2006), the tourist has gone from being a consumer to playing the dual role of consumer and producer, the "prosumer".

According to Sousa (2014), the sharing of experiences on social networks among tourists guarantees the credibility of tourist destinations, but it can also jeopardise the lack of success of others. In other words, promotion/advertising via social media has strengths as well as weaknesses. That said, it is essential to develop an effective and objective strategy in which the brand is strong, persuasively highlighting the offers. However, according to Bolotaeva and Cata (2011) Issues such as aggressive advertising, lack of e-commerce abilities, invasion of user privacy, and certain legal pitfalls, among others, can be major disruptions to social network advertising.

In short, the connection between tourism and social media makes up a perfect system for working together, since tourism combined with social media generates manifestly positive progress (Mendes and Teixeira, 2019). What's more, tourism without the Internet or digital networks/platforms was somewhat limited, its reach was more restricted and it didn't have the strength to encourage tourists to travel to previously unknown destinations. So, these platforms/networks are an efficient contributor to global tourism, as they facilitate the promotion of products and services, and consequently influence the composition of an image that is more desirable to future/new tourists who are looking for destinations that are talked about and distinctive.

3. Methodology

This exploratory study takes the following research question as its starting point: "What is the importance of social media, especially social networks, as a local tourism communication strategy?". To answer this question, we analysed the communication of two local institutions from Fafe: on the one hand, a local authority, a public institution; and, on the other hand, a local accommodation, a private institution, seeking to analyse how local authority policies use social media to communicate and publicise local tourism. To complement this, the opinion of the tourist public on the impact of social media on their choices was analysed. In this way, we sought to answer the following objectives: 1) to understand the importance of social media for communicating and publicising tourism; 2) to describe the main digital platforms used for communicating and publicising tourism; 3) to ascertain the importance of social media as a strategy for communicating and publicising tourism in Portugal.

To achieve these objectives, we carried out a case study analysis of the tourism communication of the Municipality of Fafe, in comparison with the two neighbouring municipalities - Vieira do Minho and Póvoa de Lanhoso, in the north of Portugal. Firstly, we carried out a content analysis of its social media: website and social networks. Secondly, we analysed social media presence of a local accommodation in that municipality. And finally, questionnaire surveys were administered to residents, with a convenience sample of 116 individuals, in order to ascertain the effectiveness of the tourism communication strategies adopted. We chose for convenience the municipality of Fafe as a case study, comparing it with neighbouring municipalities, as it exemplifies the panorama of regional and local tourism in Portugal.

4. Results

4.1 Analysing Social Media: Website and Social Networks

The comparative analysis of the websites of the municipalities of Fafe, Póvoa de Lanhoso and Vieira do Minho evaluates factors related to accessibility, ease of use of the websites, type and quality of information, appearance, reliability and interactivity. To do this, the "Website Quality Framework" developed by Mota and Losada (2018) was used. Table 1 below shows a comparative analysis of the three municipalities mentioned above.

Table 1: Analysing the quality of websites (Self elaboration)

Items	Fafe	Póvoa de Lanhoso	Vieira do Minho	
	Nr.	Nr.	Nr.	
Accessibility	Nr. of idioms	0	0	1
	Adapted to different devices ¹	1	1	1
	Adapted for people with special needs ¹	0	1	1
Facility of use	Navegability ²	1/2	2/3	2/3
	Internal search (search engine) ¹	0	1	1

Items	Fafe	Póvoa de Lanhoso	Vieira do Minho	
	Nr.	Nr.	Nr.	
	Direct link tourism ¹	1	1	1
Type and quality of information	Links to other companies ¹	1	1	1
	Tourism enquiry ¹	1	1	1
	Online virtual graphic materials ¹	1	1	1
	Downloadable virtual graphic materials ¹	1	1	1
	Videos/audios available online ¹	0	0	1
	Useful advice (visit/accommodation/how to get there) ¹	1	1	1
	Tourism maps ¹	0	0	1
	Events diary ¹	0	1	1
	Appearance	Aesthetics ²	1/2	3
Logo/brand image ¹		1	1	1
Logo <i>Slogan</i> ¹		0	0	0
Fiability/ <i>trust</i>	Programming errors ¹	1	1	1
	Maintenance/Update ¹	0	0	0
Interactivity	Nr. of social networks	2	4	4
	Nr. of active social networks	2	4	4

¹0: No; 1: Yes

²1: Hostile/Bad; 2: Fair; 3: Very Intuitive/Good; 4: Very Good

With regard to analysing the social networks Facebook and Instagram of the Municipality of Fafe, the first three months of the year 2022 (January, February and March) and three summer months (June, July and August) of the same year, in order to understand the uses of social networks in communicating with the public. Table 2 shows the accounting and division of publications by category, as well as the number of followers on the social networks (Facebook and Instagram) of the Municipality of Fafe.

Table 2: Analysis of the Social Networks of the Municipality of Fafe (Self-elaboration)

Categories	Fafe			
	Facebook		Instagram	
	From January to March	From June to August	From January to March	From June to August
Nr. of followers (19/12/2022)	31 mil		5647	
Total of posts	178	396	63	49
Tourism	8	3	18	-
Culture/Events	59	188	28	27
Initiatives	3	42	1	9
News	27	49	9	3
Public utilities	9	10	-	3
Awareness	5	18	1	1
Commemorative	9	-	2	-
Newsletters/Announcements	15	19	2	1
Others	43	67	2	5

The Municipality of Fafe currently has around 31,000 followers on the social network Facebook and 5,647 followers on the social network Instagram. In terms of activity, the municipality analysed is more active on Facebook than on Instagram, considering the number of posts made.

As far as categories are concerned, there are three that stand out in terms of the number of posts on both of the analysed municipality's social networks: culture/events, other and news.

With regard to the "Tourism" category, another table 3 was created for this one, in order to understand the types of posts made by the Municipality of Fafe regarding the tourism sector. However, before that, it is important to mention the total number of publications in this category. So, from January to March there were 8 posts on Facebook and 18 on Instagram and from June to August there were 3 posts on Facebook and none on Instagram.

Table 3: Analysis of posts in the "Tourism" category (Self elaboration)

Tourism Posts				
Sub-categories	Fafe			
	Facebook		Instagram	
	From January to March	From June to August	From January to March	From June to August
Videos	1			
Promotional images	2		16	
Suggestions		2		
Support / Initiatives		1	1	
Attendance at trade fairs	5		1	

4.2 Case Study of a Local Accommodation

With regard to the presence of Casa da Avó local accommodation on social media, this local accommodation's social media commitment began in 2018 on the Facebook platform, seeking to promote this tourist destination. At the time of the research, this local accommodation has a website and the social networks Facebook and Instagram. The period of analysis was between 1 July 2021 and 1 April 2022. The main data that stand out are:

- The website was mostly accessed by mobile phones, with around 90 clicks, which corresponds to 66.7% of accesses from this device. It is therefore vital to pay attention to the layout of the website elements for this type of device. The number of accesses from computers represents around 33.3%, with 45 clicks.
- The number of accesses to the website at the end of the analysis was around 160, the majority of which came from Instagram, leading with 41.3% (66 clicks) of accesses.
- Social networks were the main stage for promoting the local accommodation website.
- The website is like a shop window that showcases what's on offer, giving visibility to products and services, thus avoiding geographical boundaries.
- Increased investment in local accommodation's social platforms, including: creating a routine of posts, interacting with followers, identifying the location, sharing news on the website and answering messages on social media accounts.
- The increase in posts on social networks has brought with it an increase in interactions and visits to social networks. The creation of content and the regularity of posts may be responsible for these results.

4.3 Survey Main Results

The questionnaire was answered by 116 people from the municipality of Fafe, with the aim of finding out how well they know their municipality is publicising tourism on social media. Of our sample, only 22 people don't follow any of the municipality's social networks, the most followed being Facebook. 53 individuals believe that the municipality's social networks are being well managed, as opposed to 43 individuals who do not believe that they are being well managed. Nevertheless, the overwhelming majority agree that Fafe's social networks are a good way of promoting the municipality for tourism (65.5 per cent of respondents (76 individuals) agree and

20.7 per cent (24 individuals) agree completely). Likewise, the vast majority of respondents agree that the municipality should invest more in social media as a way of promoting the municipality for tourism (62.6% (73 individuals) agree and 19.8% (23 individuals) completely agree).

The same results do not apply to the website, since the majority of respondents (66 individuals) do not visit the municipality's website regularly, only 43 individuals visit it frequently, and 7 individuals have never visited the municipality's website. Similarly, the majority of respondents agree that the Fafe municipality's website is a good way of promoting the municipality in terms of tourism (53.4% (62 respondents) agree and 9.5% (11 respondents) completely agree). As a result, 85.3 per cent (99 individuals) of those surveyed believe that social networks are a more effective way of promoting the municipality for tourism. However, only 14.7 per cent of respondents (17 individuals) consider the website to be a more effective medium.

5. Discussion of Results

As organisations, municipalities play a leading role in the social, economic, environmental and cultural planning of their municipalities, and consequently make an influential contribution to local and regional development, not just by providing public services. In fact, the main missions of communication in municipalities are to inform citizens, work on the positive image of the municipality, boost the municipality in the economic and social spheres, promote tourism, encourage culture and sport, and commit to residents that the name of their municipality is taken across borders thanks to its distinctiveness and the primacy of complementary strategic actions (Pinto, 2016).

Consequently, local councils and local/regional tourism promotion organisations use their websites and social networks to attract potential visitors by promoting their cultural and recreational offerings. Or rather, they use these tools to provide visitors/users with a range of information that might encourage them to want to visit the place. In particular, websites build a kind of information structure capable of covering all kinds of issues, places and actors/agents in the city, such as its history and heritage, but also more common information such as accommodation and catering (Moragas, 2015). The website of the Municipality of Fafe proves this, as it provides the contact details (email, telephone and postal address) of local businesses such as restaurants, hotels, tour operators, among others, as well as other useful information such as opening hours, the average price (in the case of restaurants) and their geographical coordinates.

In this sense, according to Fernández-Poyatos *et al.* (2012), with the development of new technologies, organisations' websites have become "business cards" which, as well as communicating, are important access tools for users. That said, the aesthetics of a website's homepage is a factor to be taken into account, as it is the user's first contact with the site. In this respect, the website of the Municipality of Fafe is somewhat neglected and could have presented its information and content in a more attractive way. However, it is interesting to note that it has a contemporary logo, not limited to using the traditional coat of arms, but it does not have a slogan next to its logo. The existence of these elements (slogan and logo) is indispensable when creating any brand, in this case a territorial brand.

Therefore, the information made available online is a decisive factor in choosing a tourist destination, so websites must be easy to access, intuitive, allow simple navigation and be adapted to users' criteria and needs. The website of the Municipality of Fafe fulfils some of these requirements since, in general, its navigability can be classified as regular. However, as far as accessibility is concerned, it doesn't provide a personalised translation of the content into other languages and, consequently, it doesn't take into account the possibility of a visit from an international audience, limiting the use of the website to a national audience or Portuguese readers. On the other hand, the website moulds itself to different devices such as smartphones and tablets, but does not adapt its content according to the standards developed by the W3C. In fact, in the context of public administration, municipal websites have become, in part, the official tourist representatives of the locations, as recognised by the majority of respondents, even though many of them do not regularly visit the Fafe Municipality website.

On the other hand, when it comes to social media, the Municipality of Fafe uses the social network Facebook more than Instagram, which can be seen in the total number of posts made (Facebook - 574 posts; Instagram - 112 posts) in the periods analysed above (January to March 2022 and June to August 2022). This trend is also reflected in the number of followers, as the Municipality of Fafe has 31,000 followers on Facebook and 5,647 followers on Instagram.

With regard to tourism, social networks play a central role as they are a great resource for promoting the destination and, consequently, are a powerful marketing tool for the place, as the respondents and the local accommodation case study showed. In this vein, Mendes and Teixeira (2019) point out that "the link between

social media and tourism is an impeccable system for working together, as tourism propagates clearly positive progress when it is linked to social media".

Events, according to Marujo (2012), act as promotional tools for the image of the place or region as a tourist destination to be consumed, "in other words, when well planned and well publicised, they create a positive image, thus promoting the destination". In addition, special events provide the opportunity for a leisure, social or cultural experience that can be enjoyed together by the resident community and tourists (Marujo, 2014). It should also be noted that the promotion of events/culture is one of the categories that received the most attention on the Fafe Municipality's social networks.

Tourist destinations use communication in order to stand out from their competitors, promoting unique experiences, telling the stories of the people and places, and thus making their culture known. In fact, it is relevant to compare the municipal communication in the tourism sector carried out by the Municipality of Fafe with other municipalities in the region with similar characteristics, in this case with the municipalities of Póvoa de Lanhoso and Vieira do Minho. Inevitably, there were both similarities and differences. That said, all the municipalities analysed use social networks and institutional websites as a means of communication and tourism promotion. However, unlike the municipality of Fafe, the municipalities of Póvoa de Lanhoso and Vieira do Minho have exclusive digital platforms for tourism promotion.

6. Conclusions

Tourism is one of the sectors that needs this communication capacity to generate revenue, emphasising the dissemination of information using communication tools. In local tourism, the use of social media can often guarantee a company's notoriety and survival. In fact, as our research shows, both public institutions, municipalities and private institutions are increasingly relying on social media as a strategy for publicising and promoting tourism. On the other hand, as our sample recognised, citizens, fully integrated into social media and the digital universe, increasingly use and value what is published on social media, not only by tourism promoters, but also by other tourists, their peers.

The data obtained showed that social networks are increasingly being used by institutions as a strategy for communicating and publicising tourism. On the other hand, they are also a source of advice and decisions when it comes to choosing a tourist destination. On this last point, the opinions shared on social networks and the role of influencers as determining factors in the final decision and choice are particularly important.

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