Marketing and Communication of Tourism Organizations on Social Media: A Case Study of Porto and the Northern Region of Portugal

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Introduction

This report is based on a case study12 about the impact of social networks on tourism organizations' marketing and communication in the Northern region of Portugal and especially in the city of Porto. The methodology applied in this study was based on a selection of relevant entities (mostly public) that are responsible for the promotion of tourism in Porto and in the Northern Region of Portugal, which have a good SEO reputation: they appeared on the top positions on the Google search. The selected entities were Turismo do Porto e Norte de Portugal (a public entity of the central administration with a regional focus on the North of Portugal); Visit Porto. (a public web interface of the local administration dedicated to the promotion of the city of Porto); Guimarães Turismo (a public web interface of the local administration dedicated to the promotion of the city of Guimarães); Douro Valley (a public-private partnership dedicated to the promotion of the Trás-os-Montes and Douro regions) and CIM Alto Minho (a public entity of the local administration with an inter-municipal focus).

The Turismo do Porto e Norte de Portugal (TEM) is the main statist institution dedicated to the management and promotion of tourism in the Northern region of Portugal; it was created in 2012, resulting from a reform of the tourism sector, which divided continental Portugal into five main tourism regions. TEM has a tourism promotion strategy aimed at seven major segments: business tourism; city and short breaks; gastronomy and wines; nature tourism; religious tourism; cultural, heritage and landscape tourism and well-being and health tourism. The TEM is present on the web through their institutional website3, that has content in Portuguese, Spanish and English, but also on Facebook, Twitter and YouTube.

Visit Porto. is the web interface of the Municipality of Porto directed exclusively at the promotion of tourism in the city of Porto, which is clearly the main touristic destination of the Northern region of Portugal and the 'gateway' for most of the tourists that visit the region. Its web presence includes a website4 and social media profiles on Facebook, Flickr, YouTube and Twitter.

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1 - The full version of the case study (coordinated by Professor Paulo Faustino), which served as the basis for this report can be found at: Faustino, Paulo, coord. (2018). Marketing e Comunicação nas Redes Sociais em Organizações do Turismo: o Caso do Porto e Região Norte, Lisbon: Media XXI Publishing.

2 - This report is a part of the ongoing research project ITRACTUR (Initiative of Transfer of Knowledge in the Online Promotion of Tourism) held at the CEPESE – Research Centre for the Study of Population, Economics and Society of the University of Porto under the scientific coordination of Professor Paulo Faustino.

3 - http://www.portoenorte.pt/

4 - http://www.visitporto.travel/Visitar/Paginas/default.aspx

Guimarães Turismo is the web interface of the municipality of Guimarães, which is both a hinterland tourism destination and a city of great historical importance (linked with the foundation of Portugal), thus it is also representative of cultural and heritage tourism. Its web presence is mostly based on their website[5] that has content in Portuguese and English, having also a profile on Facebook and Flickr.

The Douro Valley project focuses on the touristic promotion of the Douro wine-growing region (wine tourism), originating from a partnership between seven public and private entities. Its web presence is mainly assured by the project's website[6], but also through social media: Facebook, Twitter and YouTube.

The Inter-Municipal Community of Alto Minho, founded in 2008, is responsible for the main resource for web communication related to the Alto Minho region[7], having also a website linked to it, titled Alto Minho[8], that is aimed at the promotion of local tourism; along with profiles on Facebook and YouTube.

Methodology

The main goal of this case study was to characterize the tourism communication of the above mentioned entities, focusing on their websites and their social media profiles on Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and Flickr, as well as to 'diagnose' the quality and efficiency of their communicative performance in promoting tourism. Methodologically, this study applied both a qualitative method of direct observation (simple description and qualitative interpretation of the websites and social media profiles) and a quantitative one: a content analysis of the entities' publications in the social networks, considering verbal and visual messages.

In order to measure the success of the entities' social media communication strategies, the following analytical criteria were adopted: number of followers (which refers to the number of likes or followers of the entities' social media profiles); number of visualizations (which refers to the number of views of the entities' videos hosted on YouTube); likes (which refers to the number of likes in the entities' social media profiles); dislikes (which refers to the number of 'dislikes' in the entities' social media profiles); sharing (which refers to the number of times the entities' posts were shared on social media); positive comments; negative comments and other comments.

The sample of messages used to study the tourism communication performance of the entities in the social networks were the last 100 messages published before the 28th of August 2016 on Facebook, YouTube, Twitter and Flickr. The thematic categories used to classify the messages published by the entities were, among others: towns and regions in general; sun, sea and beach; nature, rurality, parks, gardens, nature trails, cycle lanes; gastronomy and oenology; festivals and spectacles; popular culture, folklore and traditions; religion/religious tourism; business opportunities/business tourism; museums, galleries and cultural exhibits; commercial and technological exhibits and fairs; contests; shopping, markets and stores; technology; nautical sports; winter sports; golf; running; hunting and fishing; equestrian sports; health and well-being.

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5 - http://www.guimaraesturismo.com/

6 - http://www.dourovalley.eu/

7 - http://www.cim-altominho.pt/

8 - http://www.altominho.pt

Empirical findings:

1 - Turismo do Porto e Norte de Portugal (TEM)

The website of Turismo do Porto e Norte de Portugal (TEM) has an adequate and clear design. Among other features, the site has a header that integrates the name of the entity and a menu to access its subpages, divided according to six tourist segments: business tourism; city & short breaks; gastronomy; nature tourism; religious tourism; cultural and landscape touring; health and well-being. A lateral menu, on the first column of the site, grants access to institutional subpages (presentation, interactive tourism stores, e-books and institutional links), which also includes a gallery of photos and videos, a schedule of events and a link to print maps of Porto and the North of Portugal. This menu also allows the user to access information on what to visit, where to stay and where to eat.

A global assessment of TEM's website led to the following positive conclusions: it is easy to read and navigate, it facilitates interactivity, is well structured and it's also easy to find information there; the negative aspects of this site are the excessive presence of institutional information instead of information related to tourism (sometimes both are mixed), the overuse of the English language (the site is clearly aimed at a sophisticated and well-read elite that understands the meaning of phrases such as 'city & short breaks' and not at the 'masses') and of galleries of images that often are irrelevant to inform the tourists. Furthermore, the website has a lot of outdated information, operating almost as a random repository of tourist and institutional content (also in pdf format). 62% of the 522 messages (379 of which are related to the promotion of tourism) published on this site consisted of small pieces of text and photography, mainly produced by the TEM's team. The majority of these messages was destined to the promotion of gastronomy and oenology (21% of the total); hospitality industry and event centres (17%) and guides for things to do/what to visit/organized tours (17%).

TEM has been on Facebook since 2009, it had as of August 29, 2016, 130 930 likes, the users classified the profile with 4.5 out of 5 stars and the average number of posts per day were 3.2. The majority of the posts concerned information about events, destinations and "things to do" that may interest the tourists, amounting to 89% of the publications; they were all written in Portuguese and thus directed at internal tourism.

2 - Visit Porto.

The website Visit Porto. is easy-to-read due to its white background and a design structure that has proved its worth; it is available in Portuguese, English and Spanish. Its heading consists of a menu with the following subpages: "Visiting", "Living" (with information for those who wish to spend a time in Porto), "Business" (information for those who travel on business and are looking for new business opportunities), "What's On" and "More Porto" (containing information about the history, traditions, culture and other aspects of the city of Porto). In general, the information is very accurate, well-organized, allowing the user to communicate and ask questions in real time with technicians of Visit Porto.; most of the information available in various forms on this website (text, image, audio-visual or a combination of these) is quite useful for the tourists that wish to visit Porto. The only major flaw detected on this

website was really the enormous amount of information (with 2244 messages identified) and hyperlinks available.

A little over half (51%) of the messages identified consist exclusively of text, all of which are found on the 227 subpages dedicated to the news archive. The main pages and subpages, including the homepage, have many messages consisting of text and photos (42% of the total); almost half of the messages (49%) concerned five main topics: the city's monuments (16%), local museums and cultural exhibits (9%), gastronomy/oenology (9%), schedule of events (8%) and other categories and routes (7%).

The Facebook page of Visit Porto. had, as of August 29, 2016, 36 247 likes and the average number of posts per day was 0,75. Most messages published on this page were aimed at highlighting and promoting the city (18%) as a touristic destination, but also as a place to live, study and work; followed by 11% of messages that concern the parks and gardens of the city, 10% dedicated to its monuments and heritage, another 10% to street events and yet another 10% related to the festivals and spectacles that take place in Porto, gastronomy and oenology amounted to 7% of the posts; other categories had a smaller share of the publications, with the exception of "Other sports" (12%), most likely due to the then ongoing European football championship.

3 - Guimarães Turismo

This website is one of the few exclusively dedicated to the promotion of a city as a tourist destination (Guimarães) in the Northern region of Portugal and it has valuable information for the tourists that wish to visit this historical city. In the white background, the main elements of the site are displayed in six horizontal areas, having a *fake* heading that mixes several elements. On its left side, there is a menu that grants access to a handful of options, including a traveller's section, a map with free municipal Wi-Fi, a gallery of photos and videos and a link to their Facebook page. The first horizontal stripe connects with five vertical menus that contain relevant information for the tourists: "Get acquainted" (submenus: how to arrive, gallery, downloads and useful information); "Stay" (submenus: hospitality industry, inn, rural tourism and local lodging); "Visit" (submenus: museums, centre, outside the centre and parks and gardens); "Go" (submenus: routes and trails, fun, sports and festivities and visits) and "Eat" (submenus: restaurants, recipe collection, gastronomic menu and taste Guimarães). At the time of this analysis, the content of this website was divided into the following topics: hospitality industry (21% of all messages), museums and exhibits (13%), monuments (12%), the gastronomy and oenology offer (12%) and the city and the region in general (6%). Therefore, the content is aimed at the occasional tourist that briefly visits the city, including its museums and monuments. The Facebook page of Guimarães Turismo had a total of 4778 likes as of August 29, 2016 and the average number of posts per day was 0.28. Most of the publications concerned spectacles (59% of them) and festivities/events (12%) that take place in the city; followed by messages which highlighted various features of Guimarães itself (11%).

4 - Douro Valley

The web portal Douro Valley is the main interface of communication on a project that gathers several entities with the goal of promoting the touristic sub-region of

the Douro Valley. This site has a white background, its contents and hyperlinks are displayed in other colours overlapping it, facilitating the readability. Its design is built on six horizontal stripes and in a variable number of asymmetrical vertical columns, being framed with a photo of the region. The second horizontal stripe includes a slideshow and the main menu of hyperlinks, which do not differ from the other examples found in this study: "what to see", "what to do", "where to tour", "where to stay" and "where to eat". The third horizontal stripe has, among other features, hyperlinks to contents such as landscape, culture and heritage, wine and wine tourism, lodging and gastronomy and entertainment and leisure. A large number of messages (5286) were identified on this website during the period of analysis, mostly focused on information about the region, gastronomy, nature, heritage and the hospitality industry.

The Douro Valley's Facebook page had a total of 15 147 likes as of October 12, 2016 and the average number of posts per day was 0.4. Most posts focused on finding reasons to attract visitors to the Douro (the proposals for routes amount to 28% of them); regarding its communication, the Douro is presented has a region filled with beautiful landscapes, a welcoming people and world class wines and gastronomy.

5 - The Inter-Municipal Community of Alto Minho (CIM Alto Minho)

The website of the Inter-Municipal Community of Alto Minho is directed at tourists and travellers, but also at current or potential residents of the Minho region. Its design is simple, with a white background and three horizontal stripes, including a heading and footer, along with a clean central stripe, where it is presented in two asymmetrical columns, the links to the

subpages of content, such as "Alto Minho to Live in", "Alto Minho to Visit" and "Alto Minho to Invest". A key flaw found on this website lies on the fact that when the option for the content in English is clicked, the content of the site vanishes and thus the site is only available in Portuguese. The site had only 197 individualized messages, largely consisting only of text, focused on the region in general (amounting to 36% of all messages) and particularly on the infrastructures that serve both the tourists and the local citizens. Other messages concern the rich natural and cultural heritage of the region, proposing activities to the tourists (8% of them dedicated to water sports) and 10% are oriented to business opportunities and business tourism.

The Facebook page of CIM Alto Minho had 5535 likes as of November 8, 2016 and the average number of posts per day was 0.2. The content of the page is essentially of a political-economic nature, along with reminders about the initiatives of the municipalities that are a part of this Inter-Municipal Community, thus it really isn't aimed at tourism communication.

Conclusion

This report aimed at summarizing an important and innovative study (especially in the Portuguese context) about tourism communication on social media in an ever growing international destination: Porto and the Northern Region of Portugal. In a time marked by the overwhelming cultural, social and political importance of social networks, their study becomes of a paramount importance. The recent economic rise of the tourism sector in Portugal grants further relevance to this study, which intended to contribute to the analysis of the new dynamics in promoting tourism on social media and institutional websites.

Alto Minho
www.altominho.pt

www.portoenorte.pt

Douro Valley
www.dourovalley.eu

Guimarães
www.guimaraesturismo.com

Porto
www.visitporto.travel