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IMMERSION IN THE DIGITALIZATION OF SOCIAL NETWORKS IN TOURISM AND HERITAGE: A PARADIGM SHIFT

Inmersión en la digitalización de las redes sociales en turismo y el patrimonio: un cambio de paradigma

Imersão na digitalização das redes sociais em turismo e patrimônio: uma mudança de paradigma

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ABSTRACT

With this research, we intended to analyse the different social networks involved in tourism evolution and heritage enhancement, particularly in the last two decades before the COVID-19 pandemic broke into our lives. A qualitative longitudinal bibliographical study of the defined topics and a crossing of the results obtained was carried out. We conclude the analysis with a quantitative assessment of the evolution of the number of tourists and the income



from travel and tourism in specialized magazines. The results, based on bibliographical analysis, led to an increase in the number of tourists and the evolution of income from travel and tourism, although with a slight non-significant drop in 2018. However, we cannot confirm a reality different from what we expected. The significantly rising curve at the pivotal point in the study (2020) reverses with no expected recovery date due to national and international restrictions on tourism.

Keywords: Digital communication; social networks; tourism; travellers.

RESUMEN

Con esta investigación nos proponemos analizar diferentes redes sociales involucradas en la evolución del turismo y la potenciación del patrimonio, particularmente en las últimas dos décadas, antes de que la pandemia de la COVID-19 irrumpiera en nuestras vidas. Se realizó un estudio bibliográfico longitudinal cualitativo de los temas definidos y un cruce de los resultados obtenidos. Concluimos el análisis con una valoración cuantitativa de la evolución del número de turistas y los ingresos por viajes y turismo en revistas especializadas. Los resultados, basados en análisis bibliográficos, llevaron a un aumento del número de turistas y a la evolución de los ingresos por viajes y turismo aunque con una ligera caída no significativa en 2018. No obstante, no podemos confirmar una realidad diferente a la que esperábamos. La curva significativamente creciente en el momento fundamental del estudio (2020) se revierte sin una fecha de recuperación prevista a causa de las restricciones nacionales e internacionales al turismo.

Palabras Clave: comunicación digital; redes sociales; turismo; viajeros.

RESUMO

Com esta investigação, pretendemos analisar os tipos de redes sociais envolvidas na evolução do turismo e valorização do patrimônio, particularmente nas duas últimas décadas, antes da pandemia de COVID-19 irromper nas nossas vidas. Realizou-se um estudo bibliográfico longitudinal qualitativo dos temas definidos e um cruzamento dos resultados obtidos. Concluímos a análise com uma avaliação quantitativa da evolução do número de turistas e das receitas de viagens e turismo em revistas especializadas. Os resultados, com base na análise bibliográfica, levaram a um aumento do número de turistas e à evolução dos rendimentos das viagens e turismo, embora com uma ligeira queda não significativa em 2018. Entretanto, não podemos confirmar uma realidade diferente da que esperávamos. A curva significativamente crescente no ponto crucial do estudo (2020) inverte-se sem data de recuperação esperada, devido às restrições nacionais e internacionais ao turismo.

Palavras-chave: comunicação digital; redes sociais; turismo; viajantes.



Over the centuries, men have travelled according to existing means, acquired knowledge, and beliefs of the times. Regarding means, knowledge, and convictions, it is necessary to consider the conceptual perspectives based on these factors, which provide different definitions for the tourism phenomenon. Their understanding presupposes, on a large scale, knowledge of the leisure phenomenon since they are closely interconnected situations. This is the main characteristic of tourism in modern societies: people plan a good part of their free time to travel somewhere for leisure purposes. Over the years, there have been more and less favourable times for traveling. One of those expected to be favourable is the current due to the trend experienced in recent years, despite the crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic (Orte et al. 2020).

Travel as leisure is part of most people's programming, especially for those who live in developed countries. However, often trends cannot be considered certainties. Some factors exceed the predictions and plans the human beings. If, until the end of the last century, current times could be seen as moments of great expansion of tourism due to the history outlined by the trend of previous decades, the coronavirus SARS-COV-2 pandemic installed an economic and social imbalance that affected all potential tourists' plans with actualized data on travel limitations, both internal and external in most countries, compromising current economic activities, namely professional travel and the programming of vast leisure events (Barrientos-Báez et al., 2022). We are experiencing a setback concerning the foreseen development with the transformations provided by the Industrial Revolution when tourism became part of nations' lives and the consequences, not yet predictable, of the current conjuncture, like the effects on the environment and how to better deal with them (Díaz Cuevas et al., 2021), and the social consequences, like the effect on the natives' way of life and rent fees (Liang et al., 2021; Mikulić et al., 2021).

Tourist Activity Is the Protagonist

Due to the relative novelty of tourism as a socio-economic activity in general and its complex character, there is not a clear and exclusive definition of the concept that delimits tourist activity and distinguishes it from other sectors. Strongly present in the development of several countries, it is often misunderstood by most people, who see it only as displacement and travel. It is essential to clarify the vitality and the various types of tourism when discussing economic development because it has generated millions in foreign exchange for several years in different countries around the world through different perspectives of action (Nakashima & Calvente, 2016).

There is a wide academic debate about what exactly is tourism, what elements are part of it, and who should be considered a tourist, which originated multiple definitions that highlight different aspects of the same activity (Barrientos-Báez et al., 2021). Visitors (also known as Sebarit) are those who voluntarily move to a place other than their home and workplace for no profit and stay there for a time equal to or greater than twenty-four hours. Hikers, on the other hand, are also considered visitors, who may even be from the same place, but do not stay overnight.

Social and Digital Communication

Social networks are a structure that connects people according to their interests and values and understand the relationship between those people, which can happen environment online or offline (the concept has become more known in the former). An example of offline social networks is organizations that defend a common cause. They



have existed since men discovered the need to relate, that is, since Prehistory. A representative moment is found in ancient Greece with Aristotle's (384-322 BC) statement: "sociability as an essential property of man (...) being necessary to create social bonds to satisfy his own needs and wills" (Mota Freitas, 2010). According to Quintana-Gómez et al. (2020), the tourism industry is part of a (growing) group of sectors that need new technologies to continue growing and offering bids to retain and reach a larger number of potential customers. Social networks are tools for the dissemination of the content of the service or tourist product, with increasing importance.

Traditional Communication

Traditional communication happens outside the Internet and uses tangible means such as pen and paper. Mail is one of the oldest means of communication. The Egyptians already used it to send documents and letters. The telegraph appeared in the eighteenth century that allowed sending messages over long distances. It was possible thanks to the invention of electricity. A great revolution in the means of communication was one of the first modern communication systems using the Morse code, invented in 1872. In the nineteenth century, radio and telephone were the principal means of communication. The radio was created and used to spread information, and it served as entertainment with music and radio soap operas. Innovative means proved to be important in the evolution of the telegraph since it is an instrument connected by wires that emits voice messages over long distances in real-time. Telegraphs only sent drawings or text messages. These are means that have expanded technologically, particularly the telephone, through digital means, which are still widely used today. However, there are logical limitations and difficulties considering the need for digital literacy, as highlighted by Barrientos-Báez et al. (2017) and Zaleha et al. (2019). Furthermore, it is a social responsibility, according to Catalonia-García (2019), since, as Tur-Viñes (2020) says, we have not even achieved total media literacy.

Media versus Types of Communication

Means of communication, also known as communication channels, are tools that enable communication between individuals with the transfer of information individually or in bulk. They have evolved in society. There are individual means, such as the telephone, the letter, etc., and mass media, such as television, newspaper, the internet, etc., which can also be called media.

Types of Communication. Often confused with media, types of communication are ways for individuals to express themselves, from oral communication to writing, to postural, to gestural and mime, to a simple look. Over time, equipment and strategies have been developed so that communication becomes increasingly efficient between individuals and relationships. Humankind has been improving technology, and with it, the forms of communication (verbal, visual, or written) have evolved. Nowadays, they are widely present, and some have increased their technological equipment to assist them in the communication process (Diana, s/d), but that has also brought new forms of disinformation, as highlighted by Mayoral et al. (2019) and Salas-Abad (2019).



a) Internet

The basic concept for all virtual communication is composed of a large set of interconnected digital networks worldwide, which, in an integrated way, enable connectivity regardless of the type of instrument used and allow connected users to enjoy information services with a global reach. Internet communication can be of several types: data, voice, or video (BBC News, 2019). These means have facilitated the transformation of public opinion, as pointed out by Mut Camacho (2012), into a supranational entity with its own life.

b) Digital Age

The forms of communication have evolved, and the large and distinct technological equipment developed helps the communicational process (Gómez-Galán & Miranda, 2019). The technological era brought the popularization of social networks and new forms of relationships. This evolution and the creation of new ways of attracting consumers' attention were key in light of their increasing selectivity due to the abundance of options in the market. Salaverría (2019) speaks of the realization of an era after 25 years of digital media and technological innovations, equally relevant, that the next quarter-century guarantees.

c) Digital Communication

It is the communicational expression derived from the Internet (web 2.0) or that uses it as an operating platform. It is directly linked to the internet and digital social networks, and it addresses a new concept of interaction-based communication. Hernández Rubio (2019) demonstrates that, once again, technology's advancement places the ethical responsibility of the production and consumption of content in the hands of the end-user, particularly spreading rumours, as Mazo Salmerón (2016) points out. Palomo and Sedano (2018) state that technology is not neutral, while Soengas-Pérez et al. (2019) warn about the lack of interest in verifying sources among the digital native generation. Finally, Díaz-Cuevas and Becerra-Fernández (2022) have pointed clearly at their potential as analysis tools in the touristic sector.

d) Digital platforms

Conceptually speaking, "Digital platforms are business models based on technology" (blog.hotmart, 2022). They are tools that allow communication through electronic devices such as computers and smartphones. These communicational platforms encourage personal and business interaction. With them, companies can communicate with the whole world without any cost. Peribáñez (2017) warns that these platforms obscure user's consumption habits by diverting them more and more towards the content created by other users. Technological innovations bring along the full range of stakeholders in the tourism service ecosystems (Law et al., 2014; Buhalis, 2020).

e) Web versus Internet

The word 'web' has an English origin and has been used since the 1990s. It means web or network, in the broadest sense of connection. It is a system of interconnected information that allows access to infinite and varied contents through the Internet (BBC News, 2019). What we access is the web as a platform and not directly the Internet, which is situated in a broader plan.



Digital Social Networks and Digital Communication

Digital social networks (usually called social networks) operate in the virtual world. They are websites and applications that operate at different levels with their characteristics and objectives. With them came the need for transparency and consistency; digital communication requires relationship and interaction. They are generally grouped into four types: relationship, entertainment, professional, and niche (Mlabs, 2018). We highlight the niche social or segmented social network, which is usually geared towards specific audiences.

According to our perspective, we believe that digital networks have come to configure digital communication. In such a technological era, combining elements that generate empathy and connection is essential for marketing. Integrating technology into business strategy increases the complexity of marketing communications, and the need for advanced marketing performance analytics is urgent (Buhalis & Volchek, 2020). In this context, a traditional communicative tool that has adapted to the digital scenario of the company-client relationship is highlighted: Storytelling, one of the best examples of the maximum inbound marketing: “writing quality content to attract followers” (Mateus, 2019).

Social Digital Networks versus Social Digital Media

Media is a means of mass communication, platforms that connect people around the world, while social networks are focused on the interaction between people. On social media, the main objective is to share information and content. That is why they have a mandatory presence in the strategy of any business. A very particular example of social media, simultaneously digital, is Facebook. It allows interacting with friends and companies. There you can broadcast a video, publish an informative text, or play a song. By definition, every social network is social media, but not all social media are social networks. The public of the digital age influences the audience itself. Navarro and Romer (2017) talk about the collective responsibility of the public.

Methods

We carried out a qualitative longitudinal bibliographic study and crossed the obtained results accordingly. Said analysis was aimed at creating a reliable and complete quantitative assessment regarding the evolution of the number of tourists and travel and tourism revenues in specialized journals. Thus, gathering meaningful information that may allow us or our fellow researchers to extract solid conclusions based on them and advancing the state of the art.

Results

With the numbers of tourism increasing with each passing year, the flow of people is greater and, thus, the range of potential customers.



The Benefits of Using Social Networks in Tourism

Several authors demonstrate that the predisposition to use social networks in the organization and realization of vacation trips is directly related to the user's perception of the benefits that social networks provide (Wang et al. 2002). In this sense, it is believed that some advantages will be fundamental for the positive expectations of tourists.

Functional benefits: the relationship between functional benefits and participation in social networks proves to be a key element in determining the use of social networks when organizing holidays since some investigations have shown that tourists are highly motivated to obtain information for their travels. Hagel and Armstrong (1997) and Wang and Fesenmaier (2004) argued this information exchange is significantly more efficient in the online environment and proves to be necessary for planning a trip.

Social benefits: according to Wang and Fesenmaier (2004), social benefits allow travellers, through social networks, to keep in touch with other people with the same interests on holiday travel (Teodoro de Rezende et al. 2018). Relationships with people with similar motivations to yours become more interesting. Social networks create a strong sense of belonging, as highlighted by Bustos Martínez et al. (2019) and Zuckerman (2017).

Psychological and hedonic benefits: Wang and Fesenmaier (2004) consider the psychological and hedonic benefit factors that can generate great advantages with the use of social networks when deciding, organizing, and taking holidays as they have a great impact on the visitor's participation in technologies.

Ferreira's 2012 study demonstrated that psychological benefits are linked to individuals' trust in social networks and belonging to groups. Direct communication between elements on social networks is also enjoyable and fun. Individuals who participate in collaborative environments to express their opinions and share their tourist experiences are proud to do so.

The Evolution of the Web and Its Consequences for Tourism

In the 1980s, Web 1.0 emerged with static content sites—without interactivity between Internet users— and access to computers and visibility of a website on the network. In a somewhat precarious view and without some advantages and objective relations concerning other economic activities, from the beginning, it played an important role for tourism: it allowed the absence of intermediaries and distributors, which allowed to be in direct contact with the customers. With a privileged economic situation due to the absence of complex technologies, Web 1.0 allowed the preservation of a direct and important relationship for customer satisfaction in the 1980s. Together with television and telephone, it was responsible, among others, for the advent of the “information society.” It is the age of e-mail, simplistic search engines, and a time when the entire site features a section of recommended links. It also addressed only an informative panorama that extended through the 1990s. The term “inform” proves to be unidirectional, addressing a passive consumer to change his/her behaviour, particularly allowing tourists to discover alternative leisure.

By 2004, we started talking about Web 2.0. It is a concept created by Tim O'Reilly to designate the second generation of communities and services, having as a concept the “Web as a platform,” which created the model of the direct social relationship between customers and suppliers. These are companies like Booking or TripAdvisor, directly dedicated to tourism and hospitality; social networking starts here based on a digital network.



The Web 3.0 internship, also known as the semantic web, allows organizing all the information available on the Internet by specific subjects to help the human being in answering questions with a concrete, personalized, and ideal solution. Information that humans can understand, but mainly machines, using specific programs—software agents. It represents the organization and the most intelligent use of knowledge and tools available on the internet. It is the change in the use of an infinite number of documents, characteristic of the World Wide Web (world network), to the Worldwide Database (world database); a new way of doing and providing tourist services, where the protagonist becomes the tourist. For Ribeiro (2015), tourism 3.0 now allows geographically identifying customers and directing products to the profiles and contexts where they are located; it allows to automatically identify and cross information from social networks and, through them, influence the use of products or services. With the knowledge of the profiles of potential customers, through the use of social networks, the anticipation of demand is developed with campaigns aimed at their interests.

When we refer to Web 4.0 or the symbiotic web, we are not talking about a new era but about an alternative version appropriate to the current reality. To the evolution of Web 1.0, 2.0, and 3.0, today, we add mobility and ubiquity to mark the birth of Web 4.0. The main difference between these eras and Web 4.0 is that it can do much of the work automatically based on a complex artificial intelligence system taking advantage of sophisticated new tools, like Instasights heatmaps (Martí Ciriquián et al., 2020).

Travelers look for personalized solutions and quick responses. We have seen the use of Artificial Intelligence, the Internet, Big Data, Cloud Computing, and Robotics. Airlines, hotels, operators, and technology companies have used these means. The investment in digital is a decisive factor in competitiveness, with new opportunities for renewal and sustainable evolution of the sector, empowering players with tools and strategies that disseminate destinations within and beyond borders. The sector's new approach makes it possible to work on the international promotion of companies and innovation that is carried out in Portugal, as well as anticipating changes in the future.

We are at the threshold of Web 5.0, an almost emotional web that is more aware of your feelings. It is the position of several authors with whom we agree and whose contributions here we will limit ourselves to reproduce. Jennings Harris (2006), on his website, tracks and catalogues emotional phrases on the web and records the frequency and location of clusters of feelings. The company Emotive Systems created, using neurotechnology, headsets that allow the user to interact with the content that responds to their emotions or change the facial expression of an avatar in real-time. If it is possible to “personalize” interactions to create experiences that move users, Web 5.0 will undoubtedly be more affable than its predecessors and more manipulative. Web 5.0 will address the (emotional) interaction between humans and computers. Quoting, once again Kambil (2008): “On Web 5.0, the next managerial challenge will be to truly adapt interactions to create rich and emotionally resonant experiences for users.”

Although we live in an increasingly digital world, there is a growing importance of the so-called consumer experience, which reflects in costumers demanding more services, as is the case with tourism and all related activities. It cannot be overlooked that most offline shoppers are often influenced by online information, a large amount of research they do there, and information that reaches them. The power it acquires with the potential of mobile technologies, and the speed with which information spreads through the Internet, grant it this facility. If it is true that, over the past 40 years, consumer subjugation to the commandments of the Web and technology has taken place, we now live in an era the Web must surrender to the demands of consumers through the development of digital technology. With the advantage of the digital instruments at hand, the consumer is now able to demand.



Tourists make their choices according to the greatest facilities offered by the brands. You can save time and the hassle of travel and related factors. We must not forget that a large part of the tourist offers targets an economically privileged public, who more than looks for it, waits for the offer to reach them directly. And if these conditions are maintained, the customer is loyal, and the brand has managed to impose itself. Companies are aware of this and how they can anticipate their stance and outperform the competition. And one word says it all: digital. Its use allows you to show what you have to offer in the widest possible way but simultaneously aimed at the customer you want to reach.

Conclusions

It is necessary to understand the connection of digital communication with tourist activity and emphasize that the different discourses and behaviours of this relatively recent search, and its social and economic consequences, are not yet properly explored, particularly, at the academic level. There is a need to understand how the transversality effect of digitalization has amplified and specified them by exponentially increasing the people involved in each tourism related phenomenon. Even with the contribution of the World Trade Organization's definition that tries to reconcile the positive aspects of the various definitions and formalize tourist activity, positions that are not very consistent are found due to political, economic, cultural, social, and religious divergences. The fact is heritage and leisure destinations are increasingly sought after by city tourists due to their attraction and originality. They have a growing search for leisure moments as a providential alternative to their daily life, often monotonous and tiring. With the gradual development of virtual media, communication has been enhancing knowledge and approximation in the search for this reality as well as awareness of the consequences linked to its commercial exploitation, such as environmental damage, effects on the host societies, the local housing markets, commodity markets, work market, political landscape, criminality, police pressure, etc., amplified by generalized use of new digital technologies aimed at simplifying and improving the public's access to a growing offer of products and services, both in the general and touristic environments, making the client prone to demanding an ever-increasing amount of attention and commodity which he or she is getting used to in the medium he/she has immersed in, even without realizing it.

Although it is necessary to consider the great approximation of citizens' interests through virtual social networks, the fact is that there has been a personalized distance from individuals. Most people, especially up to the age of forty, become part of a technological structure where the virtual commands the emotions of their lives. It is not uncommon for people to communicate within the same house through computers or tablets, passing messages received from abroad among themselves. It is a verifiable trend nowadays that will probably increase its top of age as digital natives take over the population pyramid. But virtual reality makes you think, and not everything is predictable. In fact, with the use of virtual media, digital rules. However, due to the observable trend from the last 20 years, we believe in the possibility of communication to present users with different personalized and emotional choices. With the use of social networks that intersect with the knowledge obtained by the essential virtual and traditional communication and the relationships that are innate to them, hope lies in the personalized relationship in response to the new, growing demands of individuals as human beings, clients, tourists, and locals.



The idea is to contribute feelings and emotions to interactions. And tourism is a particularly sensitive area to this aspect since the objective of tourists is to find entertainment during their stays. But that is not why the role of digital technologies will be less important. With its tendency of analysis and communicative interpretation by the contributions of technologies, particularly digital, the Web presents more and more new and diversified instruments of a more playful and friendly nature to tourists to provide them with the options that best suit them, in a faster and less tiring way. It is the era of Web 5.0 in which technology will begin to mind and account for our emotions and feelings in order to better perform its duties and programming.

Author Contributions

Conceptualization, methodology, validation, formal analysis, investigation, resources, data curation, writing-original draft preparation, B. B.-A. and D. C.-D and F. M. -A.; writing-review and editing, visualization and supervision, B. B.-A., D. C.-D, F. M.-A. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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