Social Media as a Communication and Marketing Tool: An Analysis of Online Activities from International Key Player DMO

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Introduction

Social Media applications allow potential travelers to collect a wide variety of multimedia information from different sources and use the experiences shared by others to their own advantage tourism wise. Based on this, we may say that the tourism industry has gone from a labor-intensive industry to an information-intensive industry (Buhalis, 2003; Sheldon, 1997; Werthner & Klein, 1999).

Accordingly to Xiang and Gretzel (2010), todays travelers prefer to get the information they need online by: (i) using social media applications, and (ii) through search engines, instead of using the traditional tour operators or travel agencies. Due to this, social media applications which include various forms of User Generated Content (UGC), like blogs, virtual communities, wikis, social networks and media files, shared in platforms like Facebook, Youtube or Flickr, have gained enormous popularity with online communities of travelers. In fact, tourists were previously limited to keeping records of their travels in traditional forms, from personal diaries to photo albums, which they shared with their personal networks. Thanks to social media technologies, tourists can now organize their content and publish it on the Web, making it available to millions of people around the world (Munar, 2012). Given this new paradigm, the Internet, and in particular social media, have reshaped the way how tourism related information is distributed to travelers and the way how travelers plan their trips (Buhalis & Law, 2008). The Destination Management Organizations (DMO), in their role as dynamic organizations in the promotion of tourist destinations, has had to adapt to this scenario in order to fit this new reality.

This study seeks to understand the usage of social media by some top international DMO, from five different continents, with principal predominance of European DMO, in their communication process. More specifically this study aims to observe the content produced by a number of international DMO in its social media platforms, according to a set of quantitative indicators and their systematization, so that the same can be used as future reference to other similar analysis

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and also to try to identify practices shared across different applications of social media between different DMO.

The aim is to identify possible patterns of publication and to determine what generates more interaction with users. In this case, interaction is understood as, the actions that users develop with publications, in the various social media applications, based on the options that the applications provide for users to express their opinions.

Methodology

The methodology used to collect the information produced by the different DMO was based on the direct observation and registration, on an observation grid, of the activity developed by DMO on their official social media applications.

The criteria used to select the different international DMO was based on the following criteria:

(i.) all continents must be represented at least by one DMO;

(ii.) European DMO closer to Portugal;

(iii.) DMO from north, center and south of Europe must be represented.

Accordingly to the criteria defined above, the following DMO were selected: Australia (Oceania), South Africa (Africa); Malaysia (Asia) and Brazil (South America). As to Europe, two countries were selected representing the north, Norway and United Kingdom (UK), two countries representing the center, Austria and Germany, and two countries representing the south, Greece and Italy. Due to their proximity to Portugal, Spain and France were also selected.

To determine the official websites of the different European DMO, the European Travel Commission (ETC) was used as a reference for it provides these addresses on its own website (ETC, 2012). The following are the official websites of European DMO considered: (i) Portugal – http://www.visitportugal.com, (ii) Spain – http://www.spain.info, (iii) France – http:// www.rendezvousenfrance.com, (iv) Italy – http://www.italia.it, (v) Greece – http://www.visitgreece.gr, (vi) UK – http://www.visitbritain.com, (vii) Germany – http://www.germany.travel, (viii) Austria – http://www.austria.info, and (ix) Norway – http://www.visitnorway.com. To determinate the other websites, namely the websites of the Malaysia (http://www.tourism.gov.my), Australia (http://www.australia.com), South Africa (http://www.southafrica.net) and Brazil (http://www.visitbrasil.com) DMO, Google search engine was used and then checked that website accessed was indeed the official one.

Subsequently it was determined which social media applications would be observe for each DMO. Two selection criteria were used, namely:

(i.) the use of the social media applications by at least two DMO in its communication strategy and

(ii.) the social media applications referenced in the official website of the DMO.

The analysis determined for observation the social media applications listed in Table 1.

Table 1 – Social media used by the DMO.

DMO name	Twitter	Facebook	Google+	Flickr	Youtube	Pinterest	Foursquare	Blog
Portugal (PT) *(http://www.visitportugal.pt)*	x	x		x	x	x		x
Spain (ES) *(http://www.spain.info)*		x	x		x			
France (FR) *(http://www.rendezvousenfrance.com)*	x	x	x	x	x	x		
Italy (IT) *(http://www.italia.it)*	x	x	x		x	x	x	
Greece (GR) *(http://www.visitgreece.gr/)*	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
United Kingdom (UK) *(http://www.visitbritain.com)*	x	x		x	x	x		
Deutchland (DE) *(http://www.germany.travel)*	x	x						x
Austria (AT) *(http://www.austria.info)*	x	x						x
Norway (NO) *(http://www.visitnorway.com/)*	x	x	x	x	x			
Malaysia (MY) *(http://www.tourism.gov.my)*	x	x		x	x			x
Australia (AU) *(http://www.australia.com/)*	x	x		x	x			
South Africa (ZA) *(http://www.southafrica.net)*	x	x		x	x			
Brazil (BR) *(http://www.visitbrasil.com/)*	x	x		x	x			

x - uses the application

The observation was done over two 7 day periods. The first period took place between 16.November.2012 and 22.November.2012, a low tourism season, and the second period took place between 14.December.2012 and 20.December.2012, high tourism season.

The observation and daily measurements of the different social media applications were made each day roughly between 10:30 and 1:00 am. The registered indicators, regarding the use of each social media application, were all observable without the need of any backend access and easily read by visiting the area provided by each of the applications used by the different DMO. The observed values for the different indicators were recorded on an observation grid created for this purpose.

Results

The average use of the 8 social media platforms considered, in the observed DMO, is 4,77 that corresponds to 59,62%, which means that all of the DMO

The platform mostly used is Facebook with 13/13 and the less used are Google+ and Pinterest with 5/13 and Foursquare with 2/13.

The number of users following the Australian DMO on Facebook was 4.005.238 by the 20th of December 2012, making it the most followed DMO on Facebook among the ones considered within this study. The Austrian DMO, on the other hand, is the least followed on Facebook with only 4553 followers by the 20th of December 2012.

In this study, interaction we defined as the use of the options available to show interest in the publication, in the cases of Facebook and Google+, the options available are: (i) like, (ii) comments and (iii) share (Boyd & Ellison, 2008; O'Connor, 2011; Stankov, 2010). The calculation of the interaction was performed using the formula, established by us and because we believe that it is the one that best reflects the intended goal. In the following formula the same weight was assigned to the options: like, comment and share.

$$(total\_like + total\_comment + total\_share) \Big/ (number\_posts)$$

The activity on Facebook is summarized in Table 2.

Table 2 – Facebook interaction.

		Portugal		Spain		France		Italy		Greece		UK		Germany		Austria		Norway		Malaysia		Australia		South Africa		Brazil		total			
		P1	P2	P1	P2	P1	P2	P1	P2	P1	P2	P1	P2	P1	P2	P1	P2	P1	P2	P1	P2	P1	P2	P1	P2	P1	P2	P1	P2	TOTAL	%
p_text	number	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	0,26%
	like	0	0	0	0	24	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	24	0	24	
	comment	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	
	share	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	
interaction	p_text	-	-	-	-	24,00	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	24,00	0,00	24,00	
p_image	number	29	38	10	11	3	3	23	28	22	17	8	5	5	5	3	2	5	13	3	2	6	8	0	1	17	14	134	147	281	73,56%
	like	3755	4195	17726	15071	255	238	2269	2520	11616	11304	39545	32338	717	928	134	73	11419	10007	155	80	208034	492608	0	9	6692	5640	302317	575011	877328	
	comment	149	192	561	466	22	13	117	169	353	262	1091	902	66	96	12	8	269	218	13	4	4839	16460	0	0	213	193	7705	18983	26688	
	share	1038	1192	2469	2445	60	85	435	467	2300	2155	5355	4702	125	199	12	0	2159	1170	29	4	31056	70272	0	0	1323	1227	46361	83918	130279	
interaction	p_image	170,41	146,82	2075,6	1634,73	112,33	112,00	122,65	112,71	648,59	807,12	5748,88	7588,40	181,60	244,60	52,67	40,50	2769,40	876,54	65,67	44,00	40654,83	72417,50	-	9,00	484,00	504,29	2659,57	4611,65	3680,77	
p_video	number	7	8	0	0	1	4	6	12	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	5	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	19	27	46	12,04%
	like	424	470	0	0	23	84	195	342	0	156	0	0	0	0	0	0	2530	633	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	3172	1685	4857	
	comment	10	11	0	0	1	1	7	12	0	4	0	0	0	0	0	0	80	19	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	98	47	145	
	share	215	287	0	0	3	27	66	136	0	42	0	0	0	0	0	0	645	110	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	929	602	1531	
interaction	p_video	92,71	96,00	-	-	27,00	28,00	44,67	40,83	-	202,00	-	-	-	-	-	-	651,00	381,00	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	221,00	86,44	142,02	
p_link	number	10	9	0	0	3	6	0	0	3	1	0	1	0	0	0	0	3	0	9	5	0	0	1	1	2	0	31	23	54	14,14%
	like	353	335	0	0	36	50	0	0	375	92	0	670	0	0	0	0	373	0	57	34	0	0	30	0	90	0	1314	1181	2495	
	comment	14	16	0	0	6	4	0	0	12	3	0	35	0	0	0	0	3	0	5	5	0	0	2	0	5	0	47	63	110	
	share	196	154	0	0	5	4	0	0	89	0	0	112	0	0	0	0	31	0	14	7	0	0	11	0	13	0	359	277	636	
interaction	p_link	56,30	56,11	-	-	15,67	9,67	-	-	158,67	95,00	-	817,00	-	-	-	-	135,67	-	8,44	9,20	-	-	43,00	0,00	54,00	-	55,48	66,13	60,02	
p_TOTAL	number	46	55	10	11	8	13	29	40	25	19	8	6	5	5	3	2	13	15	12	7	6	8	1	2	19	14	185	197	382	100,00%
	like	4532	5000	17726	15071	338	372	2464	2862	11991	11552	39545	33008	717	928	134	73	14322	10640	212	114	208034	492608	30	9	6782	5640	306827	577877	884704	
	comment	173	219	561	466	29	18	124	181	365	269	1091	937	66	96	12	8	352	237	18	9	4839	16460	2	0	218	193	7850	19093	26943	
	share	1449	1633	2469	2445	68	116	501	603	2389	2197	5355	4814	125	199	12	0	2835	1280	43	11	31056	70272	11	0	1336	1227	47649	84797	132446	
interaction	p_TOTAL	133,78	124,58	2075,60	1634,73	54,38	38,92	106,52	91,15	589,80	737,79	5748,88	6459,83	181,60	244,60	52,67	40,50	1346,85	810,47	22,75	19,14	40654,83	72417,50	43,00	4,50	438,74	504,29	1958,52	3460,75	2733,23	

Period 1 (P1) - 16 to 22 november 2012
Period 2 (P2) - 14 to 20 december 2012

It is clearly visible that the publications that generate more interaction with users on Facebook, consist of image publications and it is also quite clear that text publications generate less interaction with users (Table 2).

Considering the activity analyzed on Facebook and Google+, in the case of DMO that use both social networks, the posts that also promoted more interaction/engagement with the followers, were the ones in which photographs were shared (Table 3).

Table 3 – Facebook vs Google+ activity.

		France				Italy				Greece				Norway				total				Facebook		Google+	
		P1	P1	P2	P2	P1	P1	P2	P2	P1	P1	P2	P2	P1	P1	P2	P2	P1	P1	P2	P2	TOTAL	%	TOTAL	%
p_text	number	1	0	0	0	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	1	3	0	0	1	0,62%	3	2,29%
	like	24	0	0	0	0	40	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	6	0	0	24	46	0	0	24		46	
	comment	0	0	0	0	0	16	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	6	0	0	0	22	0	0	0		22	
	share	0	0	0	0	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	0	0	0		2	
interaction p_text		24,00	-	-	-	-	29,00	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	12,00	-	-		23,33	0,00	0,00	24,00		23,33	
p_image	number	3	0	3	0	23	21	28	29	22	5	17	11	5	18	13	8	53	44	61	48	114	70,37%	92	70,23%
	like	255	0	238	0	2269	2385	2520	2619	11616	758	11304	1052	11419	221	10007	133	25559	3364	24069	3804	49628		7168	
	comment	22	0	13	0	117	480	169	367	353	114	262	72	269	9	218	10	761	603	662	449	1423		1052	
	share	60	0	85	0	435	402	467	315	2300	136	2155	164	2159	12	1170	18	4954	550	3877	497	8831		1047	
interaction p_image		112,33	-	112,00	-	122,65	155,57	112,71	113,83	648,59	201,60	807,12	117,09	2769,40	13,44	876,54	20,13	590,08	102,66	468,98	98,96	590,08		100,73	
p_video	number	1	0	4	2	6	6	12	10	0	1	1	1	5	10	2	0	12	17	19	13	31	19,14%	30	22,90%
	like	23	0	84	4	195	184	342	311	0	52	156	73	2530	79	633	0	2748	315	1215	388	3963		703	
	comment	1	0	1	0	7	35	12	20	0	4	4	2	80	0	19	0	88	39	36	22	124		61	
	share	3	0	27	1	66	44	136	46	0	10	42	7	645	6	110	0	714	60	315	54	1029		114	
interaction p_video		27		28,00	2,50	44,67	43,83	40,83	37,70	-	66,00	202,00	82,00	651,00	8,50	381,00	-	295,83	24,35	82,42	35,69	295,83		29,27	
p_link	number	3	1	6	1	0	1	0	0	3	0	1	0	3	3	0	0	9	5	7	1	16	9,88%	6	4,58%
	like	36	3	50	1	0	21	0	0	375	0	92	0	373	12	0	0	784	36	142	1	926		37	
	comment	6	0	4	0	0	3	0	0	12	0	3	0	3	0	0	0	21	3	7	0	28		3	
	share	5	0	4	0	0	7	0	0	89	0	0	0	31	0	0	0	125	7	4	0	129		7	
interaction p_link		15,67	3,00	9,67	1,00	-	31,00	-	-	158,67	-	95,00	-	135,67	4,00	-	-	103,33	9,20	21,86	1,00	103,33		7,83	
p_TOTAL	number	8	1	13	3	29	30	40	39	25	6	19	12	13	32	15	8	75	69	87	62	162	100,00%	131	100,00%
	like	338	3	372	5	2464	2630	2862	2930	11991	810	11552	1125	14322	318	10640	133	29115	3761	25426	4193	54541		7954	
	comment	29	0	18	0	124	534	181	387	365	118	269	74	352	15	237	10	870	667	705	471	1575		1138	
	share	68	0	116	1	501	455	603	361	2389	146	2197	171	2835	18	1280	18	5793	619	4196	551	9989		1170	
interaction p_TOTAL		54,38	3,00	38,92	2,00	106,52	120,63	91,15	94,31	589,80	179,00	737,79	114,17	1346,85	10,97	810,47	20,13	477,04	73,14	348,59	84,11	408,06		78,34	

Period 1 (P1) - de 16 a 22 de November de 2012
Period 2 (P2) - de 14 a 20 de December de 2012

Concerning the interaction/engagement with their public, the Australian DMO stands out apart from all the rest. In Facebook, for example, the interaction/engagement generated by the Australian DMO in average for each of their photo posts is 52009 likes | 1210 comments | 7764 shares.

In terms of the language used, the DMOs also present different behaviors. In regards to Facebook the strategies used by each DMO are very different. The Brazilian and Spanish DMOs always publish in both in English and in their native tongue although according to two different concepts. The Brazilian DMO always publishes two different posts, one in English and another in Portuguese while the Spanish DMO only publishes a single post in which both languages, Spanish and English, are used. The Portuguese DMO in return publishes different posts in different languages. In this case the languages most used are Portuguese, Spanish and English. The Australian DMO posts are solely in English.

Conclusions

The different DMO considered in the study include representatives from all continents, predominantly DMO from the European continent.

In terms of representation on the Internet through their websites, it was found that does not exist a uniform rule, used in this context, as to the names used to mark their presence on the web. Addresses, such as the official tourism board website for Germany (http://www.germany.travel),

the UK (http://www.visitbritain.com), Malaysia (http://www.tourism.gov.my) and South Africa (http://www.southafrica.net) present striking differences with little of no identifiable rule except the inclusion of the country's name with the URL.

All the DMO analyzed use social media applications in their communication and marketing processes.

The names used (tags) by DMO in their social media applications, in most cases do not follow a common nomenclature. Germany and South Africa are good examples of this commonly observed behavior. In the case of Germany: Blog – Germany.travel/en/news/news_startseite.html; Twitter – @GermanyTourism and Facebook – facebook.com/visitgermany. In the case of South Africa: Twitter – @GoToSouthAfrica; Facebook – facebook.com/MySouthAfrica; Flickr – flickr.com/photos/south-african-tourism and Youtube – youtube.com/user/southafricantourism.

All DMOs considered in the study, are national DMO and therefore with similar missions. However, it was found that the results obtained for the same applications and respective indicators results were quite different. The social media applications most used by the sample of analyzed DMO are Facebook, Twitter and Youtube and the less used are Google+, Pinterest and Foursquare.

From the observations made during the two periods that comprised the study, (16th to 22nd of November 2012 and 14th to 20th of December 2012) in regards to the Facebook application, DMO had similar behaviors with respect to the number of publications and developed interaction with their users. In terms of the number of publications made, there was no distinction between the high and the low season.

As to the use of Google+ and Facebook the one that generates more interaction with users is Facebook. Even in the case of the DMO from Italy and Greece, where Google+ holds a larger number of followers than Facebook, it is Facebook, with a smaller number of followers, which generates greater interaction with users.

Finally, in relation to the use of Youtube, there is not what one may call a widespread use of this video-sharing platform among the observed DMO. This fact is may be linked to the fact that producing a video is still too money and time consuming than producing a set of photographs or texts.

Just out of curiosity it is interesting to note that most of the DMO do not publish on its social media platforms during the weekend.

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