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# Content, context and co-creation: Digital challenges in destination branding with references to Portugal as a tourist destination

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## Abstract

Content generated by tourists, travellers, professional travel bloggers and travel journalists who post, comment and share information on social media channels is arguably the greatest digital challenge of destination branding today. The tourist-/traveller-generated content is likely to generate brand value if integrated into the destination branding strategy. There is, however, a lack of theoretical awareness and empirical research into the role of social media content in shaping destination brands. By taking Portugal as a case study, this exploratory research is aimed to show how content analysis can be used to identify and understand the way tourists and travellers perceive the country as a tourist destination. The application of this methodology on online material could contribute to a refined destination branding initiative for Portugal by integrating user-generated and travel experts content into the strategy. It applies textual content analysis by using qualitative data analysis software (i.e. ATLAS.ti 7.0), within an interpretative paradigm, on tourism-oriented online publications in which the tourism potential of Portugal has been discussed. The findings highlight the tourist/traveller as an opinion maker with access to a plethora of information communication technologies to act as co-creators of brands. Therefore, it is wise to engage them and strategically integrate the content they generate into the whole destination branding effort.

## Keywords

Co-creation, content analysis, destination branding, digital challenge, Portugal, tourism

## Introduction

Technological advances and the rise of the empowered tourist/traveller suggest that in the future the most successful destinations will be those that abandon the traditional top-down approach in favour of bottom-up and co-created branding strategies. Therefore, a simple tourist or traveller is an active creator of the destination brand. According to Moutinho et al. (2013), the advancement of technology can without doubt be viewed as a threat for tourist destinations and their branding

process. Developments on the Internet and social media have allowed the acquisition of immeasurable amounts of information, from landscape descriptions to pricing, accommodation rating and also scandals with influence on the image of destinations (Moutinho et al., 2013). It is

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widely accepted that digital destination branding has become more complex and challenging (Munro and Richards, 2011). At this point, it is important to differentiate between a traveller and a tourist. According to the World Tourism Organization, a traveller is someone who moves between different geographic locations, for any purpose and any duration. A visitor is a particular type of traveller and consequently tourism is a subset of travel. A tourist is classified as a tourist (or overnight visitor) if his/her trip includes an overnight stay in a particular place.

Travellers and tourists, of all ages, increasingly use digital technologies to research, explore, interact, plan, book and ultimately share their travel experiences. There is an extensive array of online channels available to use for this purpose (e.g. blogs, weblogs, virtual communities and social networking sites). These channels, together with the shift towards traveller empowerment, are demanding new strategies in destination branding initiatives. According to Pan et al. (2007), the impact of word of mouth on tourists'/travellers' decision-making process is uncertain and needs to be investigated through new methods. In addition, digital communities and the traveller-generated contents are creating great opportunities to unobtrusively obtain data to investigate the realm of tourists'/travellers' experiences and sentiments (Volo, 2010).

Those who interact with tourist destinations, they stay overnight (tourists) or not (visitors and travellers), have the possibility to quickly generate content regarding their travel and vacation experiences and spread it in the blink of an eye. A destination brand conveyed by a destination marketing organization (DMO) is likely to engage in a two-way conversation. Likewise, networked platforms have changed the interface between destinations, their brands and visitors. In fact, it is no longer the traditional vacation marketing mix that dictates the promotion rules; it is now the tourist consumer and the traveller who control the content, influence the context and determine what is communicated about a particular destination (Yeoman and McMahan-Beatie, 2011). The traveller has taken the driving seat in brand identity (Green, 2007). Given these facts, DMOs, such as Visit Portugal, would achieve better results (e.g. increase the number of visitors and tourist revenues) by using coherent strategies to engage with (potential) visitors through the multiple online channels available. In addition, the Internet and social media platforms are the optimal platforms to spread a narrative, a story and a message. The

common citizen that becomes tourist/traveller for a period of time and then becomes non-professional/professional travel bloggers and travel journalists who are no longer mere information seekers but co-creators of information, generating opportunities for them to conveniently share content despite being separated by sociocultural differences and geographical distances (Volo, 2010). Among a range of social media platforms, travel blogs are becoming a more important mechanism for exchanging information among tourists and for destinations and businesses to learn about the attitudes of their markets (Wenger, 2007). Accessing these freely written libraries of content, therefore, represents an occasion for strategic tourism planners to look at the tourist/traveller in his/her natural mental environment and to explore their experiences.

In today's competitive environment, in which visitors can only be attracted by unique attractions (Eriksson, 2013), it is a challenge to improve destination's features, attributes and unique elements to become attractive places to visit (Alvarez, 2012). Innovation, decentralization, engagement, involvement and having a unique voice are the keywords for successful destination branding. In addition, destination brands to survive in a savvy environment, where tourists/travellers are literate individuals, branding strategies should fit their desires (Moutinho et al., 2013). However, it is not an easy task to assert strategies with divergent narratives produced on the same destination. Thus, a challenge remains – how should destinations respond to it? This subject has been covered at length by Destination Marketing Association International and others, but the academic literature remains unclear. According to Reilly (1990), the focus of tourism-image research has been understandably pragmatic and marketing based and requests new thinking in tourism planning and destination management.

Tourism planners and destination managers now have the opportunity to connect with customers at many more communications and experience touchpoints than ever before to influence visitor satisfaction, loyalty and word of mouth (e.g. by social media). The digital world is truly interconnected, interlocked and interpersonal. It allows disparate items – ads, articles and social experiments – to converge on one page as if they were magic. A destination brand can be defined as the sum of all narratives and experiences. But who defines them? Are there any inequalities in sharing content (e.g. by gender)? To what extent

gender influences the design of destination branding strategies for example? There are power relations that should be carefully analysed. Destinations are socially constructed and the content produced by travellers is only a part of that process. The better response is to use real-life stories and engage with the content by identifying and interpreting patterns across the narratives in order to achieve consistency in brand positioning.

According to Young (1999), tourist destinations are socially constructed and a negotiated phenomenon. However, the question of how places are socially produced and consumed lies at the core of the geography of tourism (Young, 1999). The social construction of tourist destinations consists of two general subsystems. The first is place production by the tourist industry. In this context, place producers communicate place meanings through promotional, interpretative and market research strategies. The second subsystem is place consumption, which refers to the tourists' own construction of place. Tourists create place meanings using their actual knowledge, travel history, motivations and preferences. Where the constructions overlap, there exists the negotiated reality of the consensus zone. Which places are selected to be branded for tourism purposes, how and why they are given particular meanings and how these meanings are communicated to create convergence between these two perspectives of place are key aspects of the spatial dimension of social construction (Young, 1999).

The notion of perceived authenticity is also of particular interest because constructivists, tourists and travellers are indeed in search of authenticity (Wang, 1999). However, what they quest for is not objective authenticity (i.e. authenticity as originals) but a perceived authenticity which is the result of social construction. Destinations and the 'tourist attractions' are experienced as authentic not because they are originals or reality, but because they are perceived as the signs or symbols of authenticity (Culler, 1981) nowadays influenced by digital platforms. Perceived authenticity is more often than not a projection of certain stereotyped images held and circulated within tourist promotion platforms, particularly within the mass media and destination marketing campaigns (Wang, 1999). Understanding exactly how individuals perceive and use the information spread by both online and traditional promotion channels when planning their trips is a challenge that requires suitable strategies (Alvarez and

Asugman, 2006). By not understanding it, there is the risk of damaging the perceived integrity and transparency of the destination's brand and reputation (Munro and Richards, 2011).

The accelerating and synergistic interaction between information communication technologies (ICTs) and tourism destinations has transformed the nature of tourism products, processes, business and the competitive environment around them. Among the range of ICTs, the Internet is the number one source of information for travel and tourism (Munro and Richards, 2011). Websites are incredibly important for the business of destinations (Buhalis et al., 2011). Factors including a fresh wave of web-based communities, known as web 2.0 and social media (e.g. *Facebook*, *Twitter*, *Instagram*, *YouTube* and *TripAdvisor*), have changed market conditions for DMOs (Buhalis et al., 2011; Page, 2009). Furthermore, social media has become a highly effective way to reach out and engage with the masses. In particular, social media allows a DMO to develop an online voice, which should be consistent with its destination brand (North, 2013a). Therefore, a resilient and strategic approach to digital channels should be a corner stone of a strong destination branding strategy. Recent literature on tourism planning as Moutinho et al. (2013) and on place branding as Pareja-Eastway et al. (2013) suggest that organizations in charge of designing branding strategies shall concentrate their effort on:

- Content:
  - focusing on the interaction between traveller/tourist and destination;
  - engaging traveller/tourist with the destination branding process;
- Context:
  - tailored approaches and context-sensitive strategies;
  - integrate traveller-generated content;
- Co-creation:
  - co-creating value through traveller/tourist and the destination;
  - destination branding through co-creation (i.e. traveller as active participant in the branding process).

Some studies reflect upon tourism communities (Wang et al., 2002), users' reviews and recommendations (Yoo and Gretzel, 2008), electronic tourism (Buhalis et al., 2011), perceived authenticity (Wang, 1999), and others on social media strategies for tourism destinations

(Munar et al., 2013) and ICTs in tourism destination management (Buhalis and Matloka, 2013; Leung et al., 2013). However, there remains a gap in knowledge which investigates the relevance of tourist-/traveller-generated content on the destination branding process.

By taking Portugal as a case study, this exploratory research is aimed to show how content analysis can be used to identify and understand the way tourists'/travellers' perceive Portugal as a tourist destination. The application of this methodology on online material could better support a destination branding initiative for Portugal by integrating tourist-/traveller-generated content (i.e. narrative, stories and vacation experiences) and travel experts content into the strategy, that is, co-creating tourist destination branding strategies.

To this end, a qualitative methodology has been applied. The implication of qualitative methods emerged from the principal approach of this research to obtain in-depth understanding of how travellers perceive, interpret and communicate the social reality of the destination visited. An inductive approach was adopted to address the research aims that are subjective in nature and within an interpretative paradigm. According to Decrop (1999), interpretivism in tourism-related studies is better approached by qualitative methods. The qualitative approach used in this exploratory research is in line with the methodology of various studies that focus on the meaning and understanding of destination image (Echtner and Ritchie, 2003; Govers et al., 2007; Pike, 2002 and Tasci and Kozak, 2006). In addition, embracing previous studies on virtual destination image (Govers et al., 2007), e-tourism (Buhalis et al., 2011), communication strategies and city marketing (Díaz-Luque, 2009; Muñoz-Martínez and Cervantes-Blanco, 2009), which mostly use qualitative techniques, are fundamental to enhancing arguments and justifying the present research methodology. Specifically, a textual content analysis was conducted on 20 international tourism-oriented online publications from distinct, distinctive and neutral sources, all referring to Portugal. The articles/texts were examined and findings presented, aiming to capture holistic components of Portugal as a tourist destination. The selection of Portugal as a case study is justified by the personal and academic backgrounds of the author of this article and his academic positionality. It is of relevance to underline that the present study is part of a 4-year doctoral research project exploring

the theoretical and practical paths towards a place branding strategy for Portugal.

As the objective is to interpret the content of publications where Portugal is reference, a content analysis will be a more valuable tool. Similar studies on destination image apply the same methodology (Volo, 2010; Wenger, 2007). The content analysis approach is a form of scientific inquiry that has commonly been regarded as a useful method for social science studies, especially in consumer research (Kassarjian, 1977). In addition, content analysis has been used in several studies to analyse research articles in hospitality and tourism management (see e.g. Singh et al., 2007).

The results from the content analysis of both the computer-aided and human judgmental methods were then integrated and conceptually graphed to map meaningful findings that were logically precise, humanly readable and computationally tractable (e.g. ATLAS.ti 7.0). The reason for using this software is twofold. One, because with today's computerized neural network content analysis software such as CATPAC, NVivo 2.0 or ATLAS.ti, the reliability of the results is more guaranteed (see e.g. Govers et al., 2007). Second, according to Lewis (1998), ATLAS.ti emerged as the clear winner in the overall product comparison with other qualitative software such as NVivo 2.0.

ATLAS.ti is a self-organizing artificial neural network software package used for content analysis of text. The software is able to identify the most important words in a text and determine the patterns of similarity based on the way they are used in the text (Govers et al., 2007). In simple terms, this software produces a frequency table and proximity matrix for the most often used words in the text, based on their co-occurrences in one unit of analysis (Züll and Landmann, 2004). Even though it requires the researcher to use human judgment in making decisions about the data, the decisions must be guided by an explicit set of rules. The findings must have theoretical relevance and be generalized (Kolbe and Burnett, 1991).

The application of this methodology on online material could better support a destination branding strategy for Portugal by integrating tourist-/traveller-generated content and travel experts content into the strategy, as a back office task. In particular, it helps us to better understand a new, emerging phenomenon, the co-creation of branding strategies. As such, the article will contribute to the interplay between theoretical

awareness and methodological sophistication in the integration of digital channels, including traveller-generated content platforms. Bearing in mind the best practices in dealing with the changing digital landscape (e.g. *Tourism Australia*, *Visit Sweden* and *Penang State Tourism in Malaysia*), this study reflects on digital strategies to respond to the digital opportunities and threats in destination branding.

In the context of futuristic thinking in destination branding and futurecasting mega trends in tourism, it has been argued that the ever-evolving channels of social media and the consumer shift represented by the new e-generation are now inevitable factors in destination planning (Moutinho et al., 2013). By 2013, social media engagement has become the top Internet activity, a higher time spend than any other major Internet activity (GWI, 2014). Within this context, the main contribution of this article arises from the integration of social content analysis into destination branding strategy. The findings add to destination branding practice and advocate that DMOs or tourism agencies are requested to co-create effective destination branding strategies to deal with the growing number of digital platforms, tools and devices and satisfy tourists'/travellers' expectations.

## Literature review

### *Tourism, geographies and branding tourist destinations*

Tourism has often been seen as a key element in the development of places, which are adopting branding strategies – meant to gain a competitive position and assert their identity – in their communication with potential tourists (Morgan et al., 2011). Branding is considered a powerful tool to develop tourism destinations (Morgan et al., 2003). Cities such as Amsterdam (Kavaratzis and Ashworth, 2006), Manchester (Ward, 2000) and Bradford (Trueman et al., 2004) have already reinforced their image among visitors, investors, entrepreneurs, researchers and, desirably, among residents. Countries such as Thailand (Nuttavuthisit, 2007), Costa Rica, Moldova (Florek and Conejo, 2007), Ireland (O'Leary and Deegan, 2003) and Turkey (Kemming and Sandikci, 2007) have undergone the processes of destination branding and promoting a positive tourist-oriented image. Regions such as Wales (Pritchard and Morgan, 1998), Western Australia (Crockett

and Wood, 2000) and Florida (Brayshaw, 1995) have also been branded, primarily as tourist and investment destinations.

According to Buhalis, a tourist destination is a 'geographical region which is understood by its visitors as a unique entity, with political and legislative framework for tourism marketing and planning' (2000: 98). Saarinen (2004) cited in Morgan et al. (2011: 4) interprets a tourism destination as 'socioculturally produced space in a constantly evolving discursive practice'. Tourism images reflect people's geographical imagination and contribute to the making of imaginative geographies, which refer to generally held ideas about particular places and regions. This representation of tourism destination is a fundamental part to define what a destination is. Narratives, discourse, tourist/traveller opinions changes through time, context, gender and cultural background. In order to be successfully promoted in the targeted markets, a destination must be favourably differentiated from its competitors, or positively positioned, in the minds of the consumers and potential visitors. A key component of this positioning process is the creation, management and communication of a distinctive and appealing image (Echtner and Ritchie, 2003). In addition, tourism destinations are inherently complex. A range of social, economic, legal and technological policies affect their appeal, attractiveness, competitiveness and sustainability (Brent-Ritchie and Crouch, 2011).

Destination branding is focused in lowering costs, changing the type of visitors and changing the nature or behaviour of visitors. Destination branding also plays a core role in changing tourism products, integrating stakeholders and communities, avoiding irritations and responding to issues posed to places. For instance, those issues are created by the present economic crisis or the fluctuating process of exploring, researching, confirming and sharing travel experiences. However, branding places is not a magical solution.

Given the complex nature of destinations, it is rather difficult and time consuming to persuade visitors to change their perceptions about a destination. An extensive network that brings visitors and destinations closer to each other composes the technological environment. Ultimately, the goal is to engage visitors with destinations. It is also to create strategies for communicating assertively about the kinds of experiences potential visitors may expect. Setting out a destination branding strategy and integrating it with ICTs



**Table 1.** The methods used for booking by European travellers in 2013 compared with 2003.

Methods	2003	2013
Internet	13%	76%
Travel agent	65%	18%
Telephone	22%	5%

emerges with the need for coordination of front-end and back office applications (Muñiz-Martinez and Cervantes-Blanco, 2009). Marketers, strategic tourism planners and DMOs play a major role in turning communities and cultures into tourism destinations. There is also a case in which tourism destinations flourish without cultures, communities or identities (e.g. Las Vegas). The branding process of a destination requires a strong vision, focus and commitment of time. In addition, it also requires qualified human resources, engagement with stakeholders, financial resources and changes in decision-making, culture and mindset (Balakrishnan, 2009). The Internet and the social media channels have generated numerous online user (traveller/tourist) reviews. According to Ye et al. (2011), previous studies have revealed the influence of user-generated content on the sales of products. However, the influence of online user-generated reviews in the tourism industry is still largely unknown to both tourism researchers and practitioners (Sigala, 2011; Ye et al., 2011). Therefore, there is a need for theoretical awareness and empirical research with regard to the role of the web 2.0, the empowerment of the traveller/tourist and the content they generate in shaping destination brands (Buhalis et al., 2011; Munar, 2011).

Besides the acknowledged value of the user-generated content in branding tourist destinations (Munar, 2011), the literature (Pareja-Eastway et al., 2013) suggests tailored branding strategies, which focus on local realities, assets, tangible and intangible elements. Context-sensitive approaches, as opposite to *one strategy fits all*, are required to achieve effective, sustainable and long-term success in particular in times in which the digital realm is contributing to a borderless world.

### **Digital evolutions, revolutions and destination branding**

With the growing importance of the Internet for travel planning, understanding the online domain

of tourism is vital in order to identify the challenges and potential solutions for effectively branding travel destinations. Travellers seek inspiration online, anticipate more trips or holidays and want to stay connected while travelling. The Internet is now as essential for inspiring new travel as it is for planning them (Google Think, 2013). Moreover, the Internet has revolutionized the travel planning process. According to the Digital Portal of the European Travel Commission, nearly 183 million European Internet users visited travel websites in March 2013 (Travel Daily News, 2013) (Table 1).

According to the survey Attitudes of Europeans Towards Tourism (European Commission, 2013), the most frequently used sources of information for trip planning are:

- recommendations from friends, colleagues or relatives – 56%;
- Internet websites – 46%;
- personal experience about a destination – 34%;
- travel agencies and tourism offices – 21%;
- tourism brochures and catalogues – 11%.

The lower values of the more traditional mechanisms to plan holidays, such as travel agencies and tourism offices (21%) and catalogues (11%), clearly highlight the increasing digital challenges in destination branding. Digital revolutions are demanding conceptual, methodological and strategic evolutions on destination branding (Morgan et al., 2011). According to Balakrishnan (2009), managing a destination's international image and reputation requires strategies capable of leaving a clear and unique image in the minds of tourists. The messages should be consistent across all digital media channels.

Moreover, travellers are now socially connected during the entire travelling spectrum. Moutinho et al. (2013: 317) refer to it as 'New Socioquake'. In response, Javier González-Soria has underlined that the tourism industry should use social media much more intensively (see ITB World Travel Trends Report, 2013). In addition, the travel industry has to respond honestly and transparently to problems or criticism regarding their assets, values and tourism potential – where tourists should be active participants, not passive audience (Moutinho et al., 2013). Integrating the content they generate into the process is actively engaging them with the branding process of a destination (e.g. city, region and country).

Tailored context-sensitive approaches to destination branding, integration between online tourist-/traveller-generated content and branding strategies, the core points of this article, bring novelty to the literature on destination branding, destination management and vacation marketing (Moutinho et al., 2013; Pareja-Eastway et al., 2013). Furthermore, virtual communities, blogs, social networking sites and tourism review pages give a platform for online opinion leaders from anywhere across the globe express their opinions. As a consequence, they influence the public realm and co-create destination brands (Moutinho et al., 2013). The traveller is now empowered to create and tailor the brand themselves; it is the traveller who now won the brand (Moutinho et al., 2013).

### *Digital trends, technologies and best practices in destination branding*

DMOs and public entities encounter tough international competition and so the adoption of information communication technologies in branding processes has become a strategic imperative.

Every country, city and region offers a certain package of tourism products, some integrated into a destination brand, others only communicated through promotional material. Because of this, the tourism activity has become saturated with choice. Given these facts, there is pressure for destination branding to focus on applying the right set of digital tools rather than the technicalities of the tools themselves.

Internet, websites and social media have now become mainstream in the tourism industry (Digital Tourism Think Tank, 2013). Furthermore, the ITB World Travel Trends Report (2013) states that social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube, in recent years, are increasingly being used for travel and tourism purposes. Travellers are using ICTs to exchange pictures and videos from past vacation experiences; to share ideas about possible holiday trips and to seek opinions and reviews of destinations, hotels, attractions and countless other travel-related activities (Buhalis and Matloka, 2013).

The ITB World Travel Trends (2013) reports that:

- 40% of travellers said social network comments influenced their travel planning;
- 50% actually based their travel plans on other people's reviews and experiences.

The European Digital Landscape (2014) reports that:

- The average European social media penetration is 40% (considerably higher than the world average);
- Portugal, with 48% is one those 21 European countries with a higher than average social media penetration rate.

A considerable number of DMOs consider social media either as the key ingredient to their destination strategy or at least as one of their main digital tools. In reality, if the tourism website of a destination does not display the territory or destination brand, but instead uses the brand of the promotional agency or DMO, it may reflect the fact that the destination brand needs further development (Roig et al., 2010). Among the tools to measure the performance of country brands, the Bloom Consulting Country Brand Ranking (2013) provides insights into how countries use social media to interact with the public.

However, DMOs are aware of the values and advantages of using social media (together with websites and weblogs) to promote their assets, distinctive competency and address challenges that result in achieving strategic performance objectives. One of the best examples in the world that harnessed the power of Facebook and Instagram to engage with a global audience is *Tourism Australia* (North, 2013a).

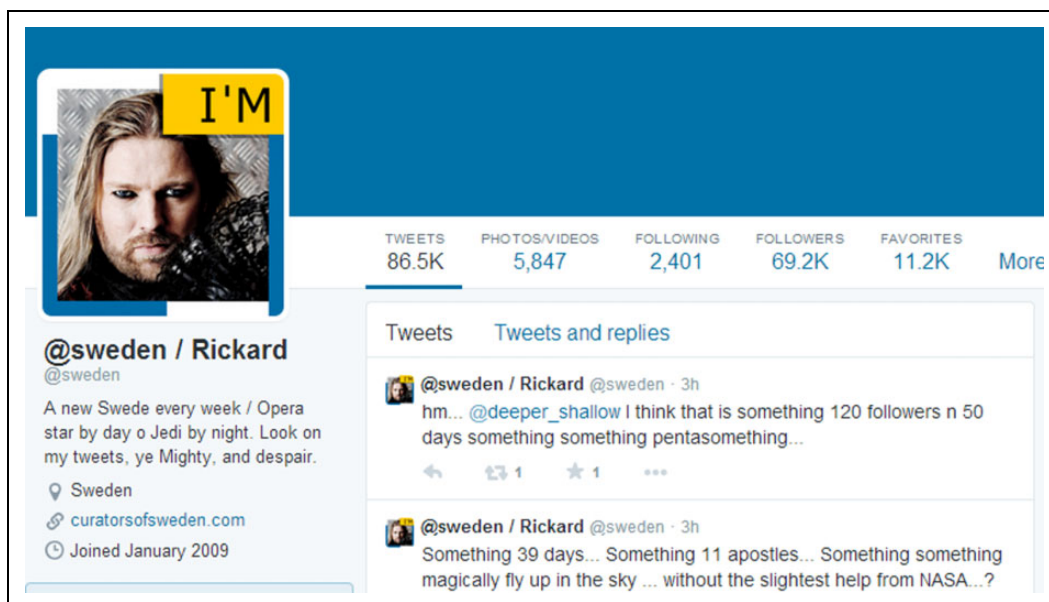
*Tourism Australia* (Figure 1) has the most popular destination page in the world (O'Neill, 2013). Their Facebook page has 5.7 million followers/likes (information collected on 30 May 2014). The use of social media by *Tourism Australia* DMO strengthens Australia's nation brand and promotes the country as a tourism destination. Portugal could learn from the *Tourism Australia* digital dynamic in giving visibility to their tourism potential, in particular the way it engages with the traveller.

*Visit Sweden* (Figure 2) conducted another concrete case of how a DMO can successfully handle digital challenges in destination branding. *Visit Sweden* started a frenetic and innovative campaign on Twitter (followed by 69,200 users; information collected on 30 May 2014). The aim of the campaign was to present Sweden to the world as democratizing national speech, strengthening the nation's brand and hopefully, as increasing tourism revenues (North, 2013b). *Visit Sweden* handled its national Twitter account by selecting a different Swede every





**Figure 1.** Tourism Australia Facebook page.  
Source: <https://www.facebook.com/SeeAustralia>.



**Figure 2.** Visit Sweden Twitter account.  
Source: <https://twitter.com/sweden>.

week to curate the Twitter feed by tweeting their thoughts to the world. The Curators of Sweden campaign sought to prove this and reinforce it by being ultra-progressive on Twitter (North, 2013b). Portugal could learn from these two examples, taken as best practices in integrating user-generated content and dealing with digital challenges in the branding process. The

way both breakthrough digital channels could inspire *Visit Portugal* to craft a destination branding strategy to put together the voices of visitors, the content generated by travel bloggers, normal tourist/travellers, shared through social media (e.g. <https://www.facebook.com/Visitportugal> and <https://www.facebook.com/InsidePortugalTravel>), the objectives of tourism

stakeholders and the goals of the organization (Oliveira, 2013a, 2003b).

### *Using hashtags in pursue of innovativeness in destination branding*

Nowadays, there is a kaleidoscope of mobile applications and start-ups, which are making waves in the travel industry and developing a smarter way of travelling (Way and Scoble, 2013). Many major DMOs now have Twitter accounts to communicate and promote their destination. Some of them create hashtags to promote specific events, campaigns or the destination brand itself (Oliveira, 2013c). The use of hashtags on social media channels often increases the influence of content (making it public). Hashtags are those short links preceded by the pound sign (#). They are used to mark keywords or topics (e.g. #visitportugal and #heritage). A destination should create their one set of hashtags (Hiscott, 2013).

The hashtag was created organically by Twitter users as a way to categorize messages. Now it is also linked to content on Facebook, Google+ and Tumblr and is an extremely powerful tool on Instagram and Pinterest (photo-sharing tools). Hashtags are integral to the way we communicate online, and it is important to know how to use them (Hiscott, 2013). Clicking on a *hashtagged* word in any tweet, message, photo or post shows all other tweets, messages, photos or posts marked with that keyword from all around the world. In seconds, they become a piece of knowledge on the global sphere. Figures 3 and 4 show the *Penang State Tourism Twitter* account (followed by 7796 users; information collected on 30 May 2014) and *Visit Penang Instagram* feed (followed by 4200 users; information collected on 30 May 2014). In both accounts, it is possible to follow similar content by clicking on the *hashtagged* word (e.g. #georgetown and #penang). This action will open another page with all the pictures and tweets marked as #penang. *Penang State Tourism* is the tourism organization of the Malaysian island state with the same name. We use *Penang State Tourism* as an example, because our recent research demonstrated that it is more active among the DMOs using *Instagram* connected to Twitter and it allows interaction with the traveller. In addition, Malaysia ranks among the top 10 world tourist destinations in terms of international tourist arrivals (United Nations World Tourism Organisation, 2013).

DMOs already acknowledge that social media tools are no longer in their embryonic stages and therefore (potential) visitors need to be supplied coherently with relevant material on these channels. This in turn requires digital strategies. The way *Penang State Tourism* uses *hashtagged* words, to communicate content, works as a best practice for the Portuguese branding process and destination branding. A hashtag used successfully across channels is a marketer's and tourism planner's dream. If used well, an offline campaign can be tracked using the online platforms that make digital branding strategies so compelling. Hashtags increase the relevance of *electronic word of mouth* and are a valuable tool to share tastes (e.g. #delicious #portuguese cuisine), attitudes (i.e. #inlove with #sunnyportugal) and experiences (i.e. had great #holidays in #southportugal). Moutinho et al. (2013) argue that those persons, who share tastes and attitudes, are the only trustworthy source of information in the 'new e-generation' of the tourism sector (2013: 318).

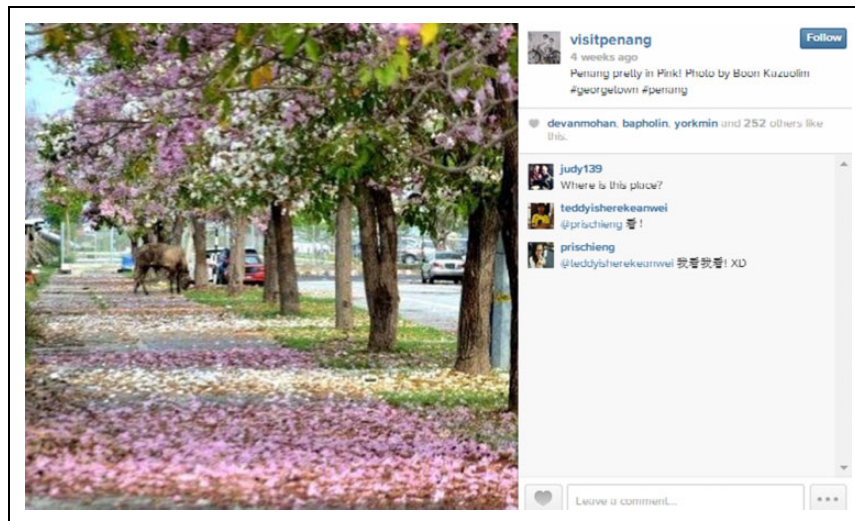
### *The need for a digital strategy in destination branding*

The growing competition in the global marketplace puts, on one hand, intense pressure on tourism destinations to guarantee long-term economic success as well as sustainability (Kastenholz et al., 2013). On the other hand, the complexity of the destination branding exercise requires digital strategies to face the advancement of digital and online technologies. The digital atmosphere provides extraordinary levels of direct engagement of travellers with one another (Kavaratzis, 2012). Travellers can now create content that can influence future visits to a destination. Taking an Instagram picture of one destination asset (e.g. *Torre de Belém*, in Lisbon, Portugal, by focusing on the case of this study or the *Twin Towers* in Kuala Lumpur) and sharing it via social media has changed the way the world accesses destination information.

Traveller-generated content affects the way a destination is communicated to the outside and inside territory alike. According to Florek (2011: 83), 'web 2.0 provides services that invite users to engage in direct and strong participation' and 'with the advent of user-generated content, every individual might potentially influence the way in which [a territory] is perceived and evaluated'. Therefore, implementing digital strategic thinking in destination branding is paramount.



**Figure 3.** Penang State Tourism Twitter account.  
Source: <https://twitter.com/VisitPenang>.



**Figure 4.** Example of hashtags on Penang State Tourism Instagram feed.  
Source: <http://Instagram.com/visitpenang>.

Digital channels provide forums for travellers to discuss the places they have visited, write about travel experiences and upload photos and videos. The travel experience starts with a dream. Potential visitors will use the Internet to plan and book their vacation. Afterwards, they will share their thoughts and feelings by using online means. The new luxury in tourism is not related to wealth but the use of time, simplicity and richness of experience that create long-lasting memories (Moutinho et al., 2013).

In practice, a digital strategy should integrate traveller-generated content into the destination branding process and thinking in advance the

right tools to engage with it (i.e. digital branding strategic thinking). Destination branding experts could work in an integrative way with social media and electronic tourism experts in a coherent way, maintaining communities of interest, collecting content, displaying photos and videos, emphasizing local events, and encouraging electronic word of mouth (eWOM) recommendations. Understanding that content, qualitative and diverse information are the key to successful destination brand should be a key part of any destination branding strategy.

A destination brand is likely to be more effective if it is part of the destination's overall

branding effort and that is much more than creating a logo, a tag line or opening a social media page (Díaz-Luque, 2009). The process should consider the community's needs, staying clearly focused on objectives. In addition, engaging with stakeholders and building the destination brand with them in an active and participatory way will positively benefit the process. Communication of the brand image consistently and coherently with the strategy is fundamental to maintain and/or improve the brand reputation and give visibility to the place/destination (Munro and Richards, 2011). The destination brand reputation should be moulded by dialogue and branding strategies crafted (see Mintzberg, 1987) to the social and spatial context. If the DMO involves the visitors, they will be more likely to keep the message in mind, talk about with their friends and relatives and spread it around the world using online channels. Travellers become co-creators of the brand (Moutinho et al., 2013). However, we acknowledge the difficulties of managing collective online opinion and discourse (i.e. generated content) and how to engage across the variety of channels in an integrated way (i.e. tools in strategy).

Organizations in charge of a destination brand are recommended to eavesdrop on all the information/content created/generated by tourists/travellers. Researching with effective methodology and understanding how the destination is perceived and communicated will provide compelling, timely and relevant paths to a successful destination branding strategy.

## Research methodology

### *Justifying the qualitative approach employed*

Tourist destinations are not ontologically pre-given but, instead, socially constructed (Saarinen, 2004 cited in Morgan et al., 2011). And yet, the investigation highlights that tourist destinations do not constitute a structure of ontologically prearranged places but rather are the outcome of ongoing narratives among tourist/traveller through which content is constantly reproduced and nurtured during the staging of the branding process. The epistemological assumptions in these instances determine extreme positions on the issue of whether knowledge/content is something which can be acquired on the one hand or is something which has to be personally experienced on the other. How we come to know tourist destinations? Is it about reading

and interpreting content generated by tourists/travellers or by experiencing them? In addition, how to integrate this knowledge into the destination branding strategy? Bearing these ontological and epistemological assumptions, this study employs a qualitative framework within an interpretative paradigm.

Qualitative methods are widely used in market research and are gaining large acceptance in the social sciences (Decrop, 1999). However, Riley (1996) notes that other majority of tourism marketing research has relied on structured surveys and quantification. Qualitative research as an alternative methodological approach has gained acceptance in many fields, such as education, anthropology, and consumer behaviour (Riley and Love, 2000). Qualitative research is often qualified as *bricolage* or *art*, in contrast with quantitative research, which is honoured as being rigorous and scientific. If we accept the principle that science is not a question of numbers but of reasoning, a qualitative study can be as sound as a quantitative one in tourism studies (Riley, 1996). However, studies that employ qualitative methods in tourism research and assessing destination image are rare (Govers et al., 2007). Those studies lack a deeper understanding of the holistic nature and subjective perspective of the individual, not the destination's unique image features (Echtner and Ritchie, 2003; Govers et al., 2007).

Being a timely and dynamic issue, the digital challenge in destination branding requires pluralistic approaches. According to McDougall and Fry (1974), the use of unstructured instruments, followed by content analysis and coding, is more appropriate in image research. Further in time, Echtner and Ritchie (2003) suggest a combination of structured and unstructured methodologies to measure destination image through travellers' narratives. Recently, an increasing number of researchers in tourism studies (see Hannam and Knox, 2005), hospitality (see Singh et al., 2007) and destination image online (see Govers and Go, 2005; Govers et al., 2007; Hsu and Song, 2013) are using specific research methods that are often conveniently grouped together under the term discourse analysis, for instance, text mining and content analysis when faced with qualitative or textual forms of data, such as written documents (e.g. strategic plans) or visual materials (e.g. photographs; videos) (see e.g. Hannam and Knox, 2005; Singh et al., 2007).

Following the application of qualitative methods (see e.g. Tasci and Kozak, 2006) and content



analysis in tourist destination studies (see e.g. Govers and Go, 2005; Govers et al., 2007) and bearing in mind the complexity of the digital challenge, the novelty of this research lies in the application of content analysis of written signs/text (Dann, 1996) from tourism-oriented online publications. The advantages of applying this unconventional methodology is that by using the right qualitative research software, and coding (e.g. ATLAS.ti), the process of getting the information is easier, faster and dynamic. Moreover, it allows researchers and tourism organizations/DMOs (data seekers) to keep up to date their studies and reports. Daily, the World Wide Web publishes information relevant to keeping higher levels of dynamism in destination branding exercises (generated content) and also to fit, sharply, the experiences offered with the tourist expectations and needs and get the message across. Tourists satisfy their personal needs by consuming enjoyable experiences (Urry, 1990).

### Content analysis

Content analysis is an empirical technique, which involves the counting, identification of issues and interpretation of the content of a text, which is assumed to be significant (Hannam and Knox, 2005). Content analysis calls for the categorization of the various elements or components to help researchers explain trends (Kassarjian, 1977; Krippendorff, 2003). Our argument is that content analysis is suited to contribute to a better understanding of the paths for effective and reliable branding strategies for Portugal as a tourist destination. This is justified because several authors were pioneers in the research topic of travel blogs and other free tourism-oriented online publications. Moreover, they have published research that actually analysed content written by traveller bloggers (Pan et al., 2007; Pudliner, 2007; Tussyadiah and Fesenmaier, 2008; Volo, 2009; Wenger, 2007; Woodside et al., 2007). Their research is very valuable in insights about traveller-generated content and shows potential power in the co-creation of brands (Volo, 2010). For instance, Pan et al. (2007) analyse 40 travel blogs on South Carolina, USA, using a combination of semantic network analysis and content analysis. Recent studies that intended to investigate online channels' usage and social media involvement to promote Portugal as a tourism destination, content analysis has been applied on online newspaper (Oliveira, 2013a, 2013b). The present article

explains further the application of this methodology in travel blogs and travel review pages.

### Content analysis with references to Portugal as tourist destination

By taking Portugal as a case study, this exploratory research applies a textual content analysis on 20 tourism-oriented online publications in which Portugal has been referenced.

The selection followed the author's own decision, after careful analysis of the links shared on the official Facebook page of the Portuguese National Tourist Office in New York, USA – *Inside Portugal Travel* with support from *Visit Portugal* (Figure 5). The content analysis was conducted on 20 relevant articles published between 1 September 2013, and 20 February 2014, in specific websites (Table 2). Out of 20, 14 texts constitute the sample that has been analysed within and interpretative stance.

The text of the 20 publications was content analysed and research findings are presented (Table 3). The software ATLAS.ti 7.0 was used. ATLAS.ti is designed to offer qualitative-oriented social researchers support for their activities involving the interpretation of signs (written and visual). One very early and important design decision was to leave creative, intellectual tasks with the human interpreter. The tool *WordCruncher* was applied to set out the frequency of words (that supports our interpretation of the content, context and co-creation and to identify potential hashtags and suggesting tools; Table 3). Content generated by travel bloggers and tourism reviewers was analysed and potential relevant elements to integrate a destination brand for Portugal identified.

### Research findings

Table 3 summarizes the findings of the textual content analysis. Particular emphasis is given to the tourist-/traveller-generated content (content column). The context refers to the geographical unit referred on the publication and the tourist product emphasized. As underlined in the introductory part and literature review, the content generated by the tourist/traveller could support a design of effective and efficient destination branding strategies (i.e. co-creation of the brand) and boost existing tourist products of Portugal. We also highlight the words that could be 'hashtagged' and communicated via digital channels, such as Twitter, Facebook or other social networking sites and mobile apps, drones and digital





**Figure 5.** Official Facebook page of the Portuguese National Tourist Office in North America.  
 Source: <https://www.facebook.com/InsidePortugalTravel>.

**Table 2.** List of online articles' content analysed from September 2013 to February 2014.

- 1) Head for the Hills  
<http://monocle.com/magazine/issues/69/head-for-the-hills/> (December 13/January 14)<sup>a</sup>
- 2) The Cool Hunter – Culture and design website  
<http://www.thecoolhunter.net/article/detail/2219/grahams-1890-lodge—douro-portugal> (11/11/2013)<sup>a</sup>
- 3) Personal travel blog – Julie Dawn Fox in Portugal  
<http://juliedawnfox.com/2013/11/21/rock-art-foz-coal/> (21/11/2013)<sup>a</sup>
- 4) Parents: Let the Azores save your New Year's Eve  
<http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/wonkblog/wp/2013/12/31/parents-let-the-azores-save-your-new-years-eve/> (31/12/2013)<sup>a</sup>
- 5) 10 Delicious Reasons Why You Should Visit Portugal!  
<http://catavino.net/10-delicious-reasons-why-you-should-visit-portugal/> (12/12/2013)<sup>a</sup>
- 6) Honeymoon Islands – Madeira – Portugal  
<http://www.azores-adventures.com/2013/12/honeymoon-islands-madeira-portugal.html> (20/12/2013)<sup>a</sup>
- 7) Europe's 10 Best Adventure Destinations  
[http://www.huffingtonpost.com/minube/europes-10-best-adventure\\_b\\_4315349.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/minube/europes-10-best-adventure_b_4315349.html) (21/11/2013)<sup>a</sup>
- 8) The Ten Most Beautiful Places in Portugal  
<http://www.viator.com/Porto-and-Northern-Portugal/d219/top-attractions#feature> (December/2013)<sup>a</sup>
- 9) For your consideration – Portugal  
<http://www.eturbonews.com/42543/your-considerationportugal> (07/02/2014)<sup>a</sup>
- 10) The top European destination for 2014: Porto, Portugal  
<http://www.themalaymailonline.com/travel/article/the-top-european-destination-for-2014-porto-portugal#sthash.Rsoz5xcH.dpuf> (18/02/2014)<sup>a</sup>
- 11) New summer holiday temptations in Portugal, Turkey and Ibiza  
<http://metro.co.uk/2014/02/19/new-summer-holiday-temptations-in-portugal-turkey-and-ibiza-4309006/> (19/02/2014)<sup>a</sup>
- 12) Porto Elected 'Gastronomy Destination 2013' By The Wine Magazine  
<http://greatwinecapitals.com/news/general-news/1556> (03/02/2014)
- 13) 25 Most Photographed Cities in Europe  
<http://www.touropia.com/most-photographed-cities-in-europe/> (02/02/2014)<sup>a</sup>
- 14) Portugal summer holidays guide: 2014  
<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/travel/destination/portugal/125200/Portugal-summer-holidays-guide-2014.html> (20/02/2014)<sup>a</sup>
- 15) Lisbon, Portugal – Baixa, Heart of the City  
[http://www.huffingtonpost.com/illeana-hoffman/lisbon-portugal-baixa-hea\\_b\\_4731044.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/illeana-hoffman/lisbon-portugal-baixa-hea_b_4731044.html) (06/02/2014)
- 16) 6 affordable European capitals to conquer  
<http://www.bankrate.com/lite/travel/affordable-european-capitals-2.aspx> (Jan/2014)
- 17) Where to Eat in Lisbon  
<http://stylecartel.com/restaurant-hotspots-lisbon-portugal/> (20/01/2014)
- 18) Europe's Best Hidden Beaches  
[http://www.huffingtonpost.com/jetsettercom/europes-best-hidden-beach\\_b\\_4612036.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/jetsettercom/europes-best-hidden-beach_b_4612036.html) (16/01/2014)
- 19) Rockin' River Art In Portugal  
<http://www.globaltravelerusa.com/add-oporto/> (Feb/2014)
- 20) Travel tips: La Graciosa, 2014 hotspots and the Cotswolds  
<http://www.theguardian.com/travel/2014/jan/19/travel-tips-la-graciosa-canary-island-greece-portugal-cotswolds> (19/01/2014)

Source: *Inside Portugal Travel*: <https://www.Facebook.com/InsidePortugalTravel>. Date format (day/month/year) and it corresponds to the day of publication.

<sup>a</sup>Sample – see Table 3.

kiosk (i.e. tools). Subjectivity and personal creativity based on the literature and previous research (e.g. Oliveira, 2013c) support the hashtag/tool suggestions (Table 3).

## Discussion and practical implications

This study content analysed 20 publications and presented detailed digital strategies to deal with

14 that could inspire *Visit Portugal*. But is *Visit Portugal* – the national tourism authority – integrating content generated by travel bloggers, travel journalists and normal visitors into their campaigns or strategies? The literature highlights that it is wise to engage travellers and strategically integrate the content they generate into the whole destination branding effort (Wang et al., 2002).

In addition to the analysis of the content of the mentioned 20 links, we follow *Visit Portugal*

**Table 3.** Research findings for 14 of the 20 online articles' content analysed.

N <sup>a</sup>	Content <sup>b</sup>	Context	Co-creation	Hashtags	Tools
1	Shopping Gastronomy Old-fashioned city	Lisbon <i>Chiado area</i>	Highlight shopping and gastronomy	#shoppinginlisbon #lisbonifashion #lisbontaste	Twitter Instagram Foursquare
2	Wine tourism Gastronomy Port Wine ( <i>Vinho do Porto</i> )	Douro Valley Porto Northern Portugal	Port Wine as product Porto City Breaks Regional touring	#portwine #vinhodoporto #portugueseastronomy #stylisicity	Twitter Instagram Wine review blogs
3	UNESCO Rock art World Heritage Site. (-) <i>There isn't a great deal of information in English</i>	Douro and C�a Valleys Porto Foz C�a Northern Portugal	UNESCO World Heritage in Portugal Improve informational material	#ancientinportugal #unescoinportugal #portugueserockart #rockart #worldheritage #culturaltourism	Twitter Instagram Digital language platforms YouTube (using drones for video-making) Mobile apps with UNESCO heritage in Portugal
4	A string of islands about 1000 miles west of Portugal	Azores (A�ores Island)	Targeting American travellers Seasonal vacation packs	#azores #newyearsvevdestination #visitazores #portugueseislands	Twitter Weblogs in USA Invite travel bloggers
5	Portugal as home away from home Ten delicious reasons to take vacations in Portugal	Portugal	Wine Food Gastronomy as product	#portugal #yourhomeaway #foodiedestination	Facebook Wine Magazines Food & Wine websites
6	Igniting the flames of love Madeira – Island of flowers <i>Laurissilva Forest</i>	Portugal Madeira Island Botanic and Orchid Gardens <i>Laurissilva Forest</i>	Romantic destination Madeira Wine UNESCO World Heritage Travel packs Portugal- Madeira-Portugal	#unforgettablesuntsents #romantic #romanticmadeira #romantichoneymoon #madeiraportugal #islandflowers #madeirawine	Twitter Facebook Instagram YouTube Weblogs dedicated to honeymoons
7	Madeira, along with the Azores, is one of Portugal's Atlantic Adventure Destinations archipelagoes and as classified as one of the as Europe's Best Adventure Destinations	Madeira Volcanic ridges Stunning trails Arrieiro rocky peak	Adventure Destinations Adventure tourism Wine tourism Climbing activities	#madeiraisadventure #climinmadeira #climbing #adventure #traveladventurous	Twitter Facebook YouTube Drones for video-making Mobile apps with trails and where to climb

(continued)

**Table 3.** (continued)

N <sup>a</sup>	Content <sup>b</sup>	Context	Co-creation	Hashtags	Tools
8	Palaces and cathedrals Golfers or sun worshippers Tawdry delights of the Algarve. Beautiful towns and regions it's hard to pick ten most beautiful places in Portugal	Portugal Lisbon Sintra Óbidos Évora Porto Braga Algarve North Douro Valley Madeira Azores	Multipack Regional and city touring  History, built heritage Nature and River Valleys Landscape	#portugal #sun #sunnydestinations #golfinportugal #visitsintra #portugueseislands #visitazores #visitmadeira #portugalnature #bragaugusta	Twitter Instagram Facebook  Weblogs open to comments
9	If Portugal is on your list of places to visit in the upcoming months. Palace hotel as luxurious and romantic	Bussaco Palace Casa de Sezim Palácio de Seteais Palacio Belmonte Solar Monfalim	Multipack Regional and city touring Romantic destination Romantic tourist packs	#portugal #romanticdestinations #forlovevisitportugal #portugal #palaceparadise	Twitter Instagram Facebook Hotel booking platforms Mobile apps with hotel palaces
10	The top European destination for 2014: Porto, Portugal Porto city of street festivals, fireworks and barbecued sardines and meats	Portugal Porto	Gastronomy Fish experts Sardine Ethnography Folklore Traditions	#porto #besteuropeandestination #portugueseof #fishisinportugal #fish	Twitter Instagram Facebook YouTube Foursquare Mobile apps Free download of traditional music Digital kiosk
11	A high-end surfing lodge with on-site teaching has opened in Peniche, one of Portugal's most renowned surfing spots	Portugal	Surf Waves	#portugal #surf #surfdestination #bigwaves #portugaladventurous	Twitter Instagram Facebook YouTube Weblogs dedicated to surf
12	At the awards 'The Best of the Year' by the WINE magazine, the city of Porto was distinguished as 'Best Gastronomy Destination 2013'	Portugal Porto	Wine tourism Port Wine Gastonomic destination Enhance traditional food spots	#portwine #winedestinations #porto #portugal #portugalgastronomy	Twitter Facebook Weblogs Mobile apps Integrated booking platforms

(continued)

**Table 3.** (continued)

N <sup>a</sup>	Content <sup>b</sup>	Context	Co-creation	Hashtags	Tools
13	25 Most Photographed Cities in Europe Douro River in northern Portugal, prized for both its natural and architectural beauty	Porto Lisbon	Douro River Douro Valley Multipack Regional and city touring Nature Landscape Architecture	#portwine #winedestinations #porto #portugal #portugalgastronomy	Twitter Facebook Instagram
14	There is much to discover in Europe's most westerly country, for while golfers and sunseekers flood to the southerly Algarve, swathes of the rest of Portugal remain unexplored	Lisbon Narrow streets Sintra <i>greener landscape, heartier food and heavy granite architecture</i> Porto Coimbra Alentejo <i>white-washed, blue-rimmed houses</i> Algarve	Music (boost Fado as an asset) Fado is the Portuguese soul Music Gastronomy White Wine Fish Healthy food destination Multipack Regional and city touring	#lisbon #yellowtrams #sintra #sintraarchitecture #algarve #portugal #sun #beach #whitealentejo #alentejo #alentejomedieval #healthyfood in #portugal #fishparadise	Twitter Facebook Instagram YouTube Mobile apps to support Fado music sharing

Authors' own based on results achieved by using ATLAS.ti 7.0 and authors' personal interpretation.

<sup>a</sup>Following the order of Table 2.

<sup>b</sup>Traveller/tourist-generated content.



official Facebook page (<https://www.facebook.com/Visitportugal>) and *Visit Portugal* official Twitter account <https://twitter.com/visitportugal>, and we have noticed a permanent sharing of the mentioned links and the application of hashtags in key content. In addition, there is consistency between sources and both, and the Facebook page and Twitter account keep the same layout and the content is shared simultaneously. There is a considerable interaction after posting one of the analysed weblogs (Table 2) and the 'normal/average visitor', which is the biggest challenge in destination branding in today's digital environment.

Discussing the findings (Tables 2 and 3), which could inspire Visit Portugal and generally other DMOs, the main cities of the country were identified more frequently and their tourism potential revealed (i.e. Porto, Lisbon, Coimbra and Braga). However, cities as Braga (post number 8), Sintra (posts 8 and 14) and Madeira (posts 6, 7 and 8) and Azores Island (posts 4, 7 and 8) also deserve special comments from bloggers and reviewers. The portuguese gastronomy and the variety of wines, such as Port Wine, White Wine and Madeira Wine are often described for its excellence and quality. The recent achievements of Porto as the best European destination 2013 (see post 10, table 2, page 14) was several times reported and links shared (with large engagement through Facebook likes and Twitter retweets). At this point, it is also fundamental to underline that those publications, shared through a weblink, facilitate *sharing platforms* where the reader can also spread the content through their one social network (the *e-word-of-mouth* effect).

The *posting* and *sharing* processes value traveller/tourism content, despite the fact that *Visit Portugal* can develop this exercise by applying content analysis (in a larger scale than in this article) and taking the content as the heart of the destination branding process. The traveller-generated content supports targeting niche markets and the co-creation of the brand. Although ICTs and the content shared throughout the Internet are not necessarily a source of sustainable competitive advantage, its integration into tourism organizations is one of the key to success as discussed in Gretzel et al. (2000) cited in Buhalis and Matloka (2013).

The research findings have shown that the content generated by those who interact with destination Portugal belong either to professional bloggers or to 'normal/average visitors'. Content analysis can be used to identify and understand

the way tourists/travellers perceive Portugal as a tourist destination. Tourists/travellers are opinion makers and storytellers with access to a plethora of information communication technologies to act as co-creators of brands (e.g. weblogs, blogs, virtual communities and social networking sites). Tourists and travellers are the new architects/creators of the destination brand. Therefore, it is recommended that the tourism sector takes a much more active role in engaging with them, for instance analysing their perceived emotions, desires or past experiences, and facilitating platforms upon which tailored, context-sensitive and co-created offering can be developed (Moutinho et al., 2013).

As the main contribution of this article goes to *Visit Portugal*, they are recommended to look on the Internet to find the backbone for a potential destination brand to position Portugal as tourist destination. Tables 2 and 3 show only a small part of a large number of publications where Portugal was mentioned. It means that travellers who experience Portugal are generating content about it. *Visit Portugal* and regional tourism entities can embrace their narratives, comments, opinions, suggestions, positive and negative aspects in favour of a strong, effective and customized brand. Although those narratives can contradict the Portuguese *National Strategic Plan for Tourism 2013–2015*, the Internet offers dynamic tools for tailored programmes and products.

Overall, the findings provide a preliminary foundation for future research to investigate how travel websites, travel blogs and tourist experts refer to Portugal as a tourism destination. Content analysis attempts to reach a better understanding of which products are enhanced and to compare with the national tourism strategy.

## Conclusions and future research

Content generated by average/non-professional travellers, professional traveller bloggers and travel journalists who post, comment and share information in social media channels is the biggest digital challenge posed to the branding process of destinations. This study concludes that tourist/traveller-generated content could support the design of a destination branding for places, such as Portugal as tourist destination. With the economic and financial breakdown, tourism destinations, as Portugal, have less funding for luxury in destination branding and further sophisticated online marketing campaigns. Tourism-oriented publications are all around and

for free. Therefore, tourism organizations can build their online presence through social media where they are invited to present themselves to an audience without costs. *Tourism Australia* and *Visit Sweden* are doing it well, as exemplified. The ultimate goal is to meet travellers' expectations (i.e. before, during and after the visit), travellers' experiences, including experiences from *expert travellers* (e.g. travel bloggers and travel journalists) and the content/narratives they have generated.

Efficient destination branding depends upon a strong, visionary leadership, a brand-oriented organizational culture, compatible partnerships, departmental coordination and process alignment. Coherent communication with the destination stakeholders is vital. The digital domain has emphasized the co-creational process of territorial brands in general and, at the same time, made participation in this process more freely available and more desirable. Moreover, ICTs give DMOs the tools to facilitate a virtual dialogue between residents and tourists before they arrive in and after their departure from the destination. Pre- and after-trip interactions enrich tourists' virtual experience, enhance their destination image through strong virtual presence and cultivate their loyalty toward the destination. This is where DMOs must play a more active role in designing, facilitating and monitoring experiences across destination participants and touch points.

This article, however, concludes that instead of extending their brand communications to the World Wide Web by simply digitizing the logos, tag lines and other elements, tourism destinations, including Portugal, can build consistent destination branding strategies digitally in an Internet-mediated environment where virtual experience takes place. Co-created destination brands are the future successful stories. Tourists and travellers can be animated to co-create the brand content and support the destination branding process (the content of the final output will be the result of the content generated by travellers and interested public opinion). This in turn increases the chances that consumers will share the content with their own social networks – the *high-tech traveller* will only respond to trustworthy, perceived as authentic brands, thereby increasing the reach and visibility of the destination brand, which *Visit Portugal* has been doing it.

This research, the methodology employed, opens up new perspectives on the digital challenges in destination branding trends that

could warrant future conceptual inquiries and empirical investigations. It sheds some light on digital strategic thinking on destination branding literature, with particular focus on Portugal. This article is a pioneer in applying content analysis to integrate content, engage travellers and co-create destination brands for places. However, as future research the number of webpages and weblogs should be extended. In addition, future research could also employ in-depth interviewing or focus groups with destination marketers and managers on how to integrate the results of social media content analysis on their destination branding exercises.

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