

Digital marketing in the tourist resorts of Terras de Trás-os-Montes

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ABSTRACT

Tourism in rural areas has experienced an evolutionary demand, considering new needs and trends in tourist consumption. The promotion of the various rural tourism enterprises must, like other businesses, be accompanied by using digital strategies and tools. Thus, the main objective of this research is to assess the use of digital marketing and its tools for promoting rural tourism enterprises in Terras de Trás-os-Montes. We opted for a qualitative methodology with semi-structured interviews with the managers of the enterprises in the study region, to find out their point of view on the application of digital marketing. The results reveal that the entities recognize digital marketing as an essential tool for business survival and growth. They consider that they use social networks in a "superficial" way to promote regional events, publicize seasonal activities that can be practiced by guests and promote the enterprise. Their weakness is the lack of knowledge they have in digital marketing to apply more tools and optimize the ones they already use.

Keywords: Digital marketing, Tourism in rural areas, Terras de Trás-os-Montes.

INTRODUCTION

Rural tourism has enabled the global development of tourism, creating new forms of tourism, namely sustainable tourism, and playing a key role in the regeneration and revitalization of rural areas (Lane et al., 2022). In this sense, tourism has become an asset for the development of regions, especially inland ones (Labanauskaitė et al., 2020). The promotion of territories and tourism agents must be considered as a strategy for the development and sustainability of regions. Thus, considering current communication trends, digital marketing allows digital tools to be used in the most diverse sectors of activity. Tourism, like other economic sectors, has undergone a business transformation due to the growth of digital technologies and the availability of tools (Buhalis & Sinarta, 2019).

The Lands of Trás-os-Montes region, located in the north-east of Portugal, is a level III statistical sub-region comprising nine municipalities. It is a territory of rich natural heritage, its main differentiating element, which ensures environmental and landscape quality. The three natural parks in the region contribute to this: the Montesinho Natural Park, the Douro International Natural Park, and the Tua Valley Regional Natural Park. The region is also part of the largest cross-border Biosphere Reserve: the Iberian Meseta, and the Lands of Cavaleiros Geopark, both classified by Unesco. The region has rural tourism enterprises (RTE) to welcome both domestic and foreign visitors. As with the various tourist agents, the demand for the resorts involves promoting them through conventional or digital media. In this context, the purpose of this study is to assess the perception of digital marketing for the promotion of RTE in the Lands of Trás-os-Montes.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

DIGITAL MARKETING

The concept of digital marketing has taken different forms, considering the marketing of a product/service through digital channels. Digital marketing is a process in which people and

companies use the new digital media to attract new and existing customers and promote brands and businesses (Costa,2021; Kannan & Li, 2017). In this line of thought, Yoong and Lian (2019) and Rizvanović et al. (2023) state that the main objectives of digital marketing strategies are to reach a specific target audience, increase customer engagement, and generate profit. According to Desai (2019), digital marketing includes all marketing actions carried out using the Internet and electronic devices. In this sense, digital marketing makes use of digital technologies through tools such as digital platforms, search engines, websites, blogs, e-mail, social networks, and mobile applications (Kulkarni et al.,2020; Ravi & Rajasekaran, 2023). Digital marketing makes it possible to monitor the success of communication campaigns and get to know the preferences of the target audience, through indicators such as i) the audience; ii) the platforms used; iii) the technology used; iv) the interactions (Balaji, 2021). Santos (2020) reinforces the advantages of digital marketing, considering its low cost and ability to attract customers 24 hours a day. Digital marketing removes obstacles to digital illiteracy and the existence of a dispersed market, facilitating online commerce (Pandit & Chauhan, 2020).

RURAL TOURISM

Lane (1994), one of the most referenced authors in the literature on rural tourism, argues that this type of tourism must have some specific characteristics, namely, be in rural areas, be functionally rural with the region's natural resources and a traditional nature, be small-scale and, fundamentally, evolve in a controlled manner. Kastenholtz (2010) reinforces this idea when he says that rural tourism requires some particularities of the rural environment, such as the geographical, social, and cultural space where tourists and residents experience tourism. Rural tourism should be understood as a rural area that values and appreciates the authentic and genuine, with its ancestral traditions and customs, offering activities and experiences capable of satisfying visitors' needs. (Eusébio et al., 2017; Lane & Kastenholtz, 2015; Paresishvili et al., 2017). Accommodation in rural areas, referred to in the legislation as "Tourism in Rural Areas," considers it to be the type of accommodation with typical architecture and high accommodation quality requirements to exploit the natural and cultural resources of these territories (Kastenholtz, 2013; Silva,2007). Thus, according to Decree-Law 80/2017, "Rural tourism enterprises are considered to be all those intended to provide accommodation services to tourists in rural areas, preserving, recovering and enhancing the architectural, historical and natural characteristics of the respective regions where they are located." These enterprises can be divided into three categories: Country Houses; Agrotourism and Rural Hotels.

DIGITAL MARKETING IN RURAL TOURISM

According to Rocha et al. (2024), digital marketing in tourism positively influences communication and distribution processes. Marketing applied to rural tourism has not been the subject of much study, and marketing policies in rural accommodation units have also been considered, except for communication policy (Pato & Kastenholtz, 2017; Polo-Peña et al., 2012). Secondly, Cordeiro (2021), the adoption of marketing would allow for business growth, customer satisfaction, the reduction of seasonality, and the development of the local economy. Digital marketing in rural tourism has some weaknesses, as evidenced by studies by Cheuk et al. (2018), Pato and Kastenholtz (2017). In the study of Cheuk et al. (2018), Malaysian rural accommodation managers are willing to apply digital marketing strategies and recognize their importance for business growth. However, they point to threats, such as illiteracy in digital marketing, low skill levels, and a lack of tourist attractions that can be promoted. The study of Pato and Kastenholtz (2017) segments rural accommodation according to its digital marketing practices. The segments (Table 1) are defined considering

the intervention/application of digital marketing in terms of market research, needs and trends, positioning strategies, and the definition of marketing-mix policies.

Table1 – Segments rural accommodation

Cluster name	Digital marketing	Features
Passive inward-oriented suppliers	Nothing active	Amateur management of accommodation
Poorly active suppliers	Little or very little active	
Moderately active suppliers	Moderately active	
Active market-oriented suppliers	Active	Market-oriented: defining the target audience, the positioning of the enterprise, and the marketing-mix.

Source: Authors construction

METHODOLOGY

The primary objective of the study was to evaluate the utilization of digital marketing and its tools for promoting rural tourism enterprises (RTEs) in NUT III – Terras de Trás-os-Montes (TTM). Thus, specific objectives were defined to respond to the general objective of the research, namely: i) to identify the digital media used by RTEs in NUT III – TTM; ii) to analyze the digital media used by these enterprises; iii) to understand the views of the managers of these enterprises on digital marketing and its use; iv) to propose some suggestions for improving communication for the RTEs included in the study.

As a first step, the National Tourism Register was consulted on the rural tourism enterprises in Terras de Trás-os-Montes, totaling 175 enterprises, categorized as “Country Houses”, “Agrotourism”, and “Rural Hotels”. In a second step, they were filtered, considering only those enterprises with an online presence, namely with a website and on the social networks Facebook and/or Instagram, since they are among the most widely used social media platforms in Portugal (Kemp, 2023). Of the 23 RTEs identified, five belong to the same group, resulting in a total of 18 enterprises to be considered in the study.

As the research adopted a qualitative methodology, using a semi-structured interview, all enterprises were contacted to participate in the data collection. The interview script was structured to address the specific objectives of the study and, consequently, the overall objective.

All the enterprises were contacted to take part in the data collection via an interview. Eight interviews were conducted online, from February 22 to March 18, 2024, through the Zoom platform, except for one enterprise, where the interview was conducted by email. The interviews were transcribed using Microsoft Word's transcription engine, and then an exploratory content analysis was carried out.

RESULTS

To maintain the anonymity of the interviewees, the sequence I1; I2; ...I8 was chosen for the analysis of the information. The results presented follow the order of the questions asked and the themes under study.

As far as the “concept of digital marketing” is concerned, the interviewees associate it with advertising and publicizing a product or service online, social networks and websites,

demonstrating from the outset a restricted view of the potential of digital marketing, as well as the various tools associated with it.

Digital marketing is everything that involves planning and publicizing strategies in the online environment (...) (I1). From my perspective, digital marketing is online advertising (I2). For me, digital marketing is all about digital tools for promoting and publicizing the business (...) (I3). (...) digital marketing is all about promoting online, through social networks, starting with a website, and then comes from the website all the dynamics that are done on the Internet through social networks (...) (I4). Well, digital marketing covers everything related to social networks, Google Ads, everything that can be done and used to advertise, whether applied to tourism or any other area (...) (I5). (...) I see it as a fundamental tool nowadays to cover the so-called current social networks, right? And that's especially true and knowing how to use them, knowing how to be present (...) (I6). Digital marketing is advertising on the web (...). When we promote our products, what we have to offer its online advertising (I7). Digital marketing is a tool for selling the company's products and services through digital media, social networks, and the website (...), marketing covers the company's website, social networks associated with the company, namely Facebook or Instagram, and WhatsApp (I8).

The concept of digital marketing, from the perspective of RTEs managers, is in line with the vision of Desai (2019), Kulkarni et al. (2020), and Ravi and Rajasekaran (2023), regarding the use of various digital tools to promote products and services and the business itself. As for the "importance attributed to digital marketing", all the interviewees were unanimous in their opinion that it is essential for the survival of any business, and that it allows the company to reach more of its target audience, while also giving the company visibility.

(...) I think it's very important for small companies, even if it's the minimum, because it's cheaper, (...) I think it's important, because it's a way of promoting your company (...) and it's an excellent way of reaching the target audience more quickly (I1). I think it's very important, isn't it? Those who aren't seen aren't remembered, and if we use the tools properly, we can reach a larger audience and when we reach a larger audience, they're potential clients of the house (I3). (...) nowadays consumers are increasingly demanding, they need to have all the information they need and so we have to be present on the digital side, whether it's through a presence on institutional websites, (...) or on social networks, it's a way of trying to reach the target audience and disseminating all the necessary information (I5). (...) I'm perfectly aware that it's important, (...) of course it is. A lot of business is done through digital media and even the company's own visibility is increased through all digital media (I8).

The testimonies to this question confirm the line of thought of authors such as Costa (2021), Kannan and Li (2017), and Rizvanović et al. (2023) on attracting customers. Digital marketing is important in promoting brands and the business itself, as in the study by Cheuk et al. (2018) and Moniz et al. (2024).

About the "evolution of the use of digital media for promotional purposes", there was a disparity in the responses, with more or fewer measures adopted.

(...) the fact is that in the beginning, it was very much by word of mouth, the most traditional. Then we also joined the networks, Booking and Airbnb, which also gave us some visibility and promotion. But in the meantime, about a year and a half ago, we started to have more constant activity and more presence, both on Facebook and

Instagram (I3). Look, we opened in December 2011, so we created a website straight away, it started working straight away and we joined the Booking platform as well. Then we registered at the hotel on other platforms (I4). (...) we made the first websites here in the Trás-os-Montes region, it was one of the first websites to appear as a promotional tool. (...) We renew our website almost every two years, because we really value it (I6).

Among the most frequently mentioned measures are membership of booking platforms such as Booking and Airbnb, membership of social networks such as Facebook and Instagram, considered by Rocha et al. (2024) to be the digital media most used by digital tourism consumers, and the institutional website, as in the study by Moniz et al. (2024). The managers of RTEs have gradually adapted their operations using digital tools, as mentioned by Desai (2019), Kulkarni et al. (2020), and Ravi and Rajasekaran (2023). When asked about the “benefits of digital marketing”, the interviewees’ answers focused on business sustainability and contact with different audiences.

(...) If it hadn't been for digital marketing, we would probably have closed by the end of the first year without a doubt (I4). Digital marketing is very important, but there must be a service behind it, obviously. (...) Because with all this digital stuff it brings a lot of benefits, but we also have the other side, which is the guest, who eventually, if things aren't in accordance with what they requested, obviously this will then be reflected in the comments (...) Whoever depends on social networks and all the digital marketing stuff, this whole process has to be constantly fed (I5). I think so, it's clear that if it's used well, first, we'll probably reach a much wider audience, even internationally (I8).

As far as “communication objectives” are concerned, the managers want to make the region known, give visibility to the business, increase sales and focus on customer loyalty.

(...) to bring in more customers, to retain the customers we have (I1). (...) the aim is to showcase the region from a point of comfort where you can also relax and experience farming life in Trás-os-Montes (I2). (...) when we launch into digital marketing (the goal) is to attract more customers, and these customers represent actual bookings (...) and to get the space out there, especially in the Nordic countries (I5). (...) it's about bringing in more customers and reaching the largest number of potential customers (I6(...)) reaching as many customers as possible and converting customers (I7). (...) to make ourselves known, to reach an ever wider public, to reach the international public. And that would be our main goal to boost sales, to be able to increase our sales volume (I8).

Of the intended objectives, business growth, customer satisfaction, and the development of the economy, with the promotion of the region, confirm Cordeiro's (2021) line of thought. The answers obtained reinforce the ideas of Costa (2021) and Kannan and Li (2017), with digital marketing attracting new customers and promoting business.

As far as “digital communication management” is concerned, this is carried out internally by the directors themselves, who consider this form of management to be inefficient, but possible. In two cases, the institutional website is managed by the company that created it.

I do the social media part (...) and the basics on the website, like changing prices, some photos (I1). We manage our digital communication ourselves; we don't work with any company or have anyone just for that purpose (I2). We have a friend of ours (...) and

she manages our social networks (I3). There's the company that made the site for us, and they maintain it for me (...) so in partnership or as a team we do it (I4). (...) it's very expensive and it has to be done in stages and now I'm doing it myself (I5). (...) we have the domain of the site which is awarded to an entity that maintains the site for us (...) then we do the work here (I6). I'm the one who does it, I basically do everything (...) I try to publish every 3/4 days (I7). (...) it's us, but we haven't managed to organize ourselves in such a way as to have a constant presence on social networks. (...) I'm basically the one who makes the website more dynamic, putting a few things on there, but for the rest we're not managing to do it very effectively (I8).

The results of this research corroborate the studies by Cheuk et al. (2018), in which managers recognize the lack of qualification for the application of digital marketing, and by Pato and Kastenholz (2017), in which the clusters Passive inward-oriented suppliers and poorly active suppliers show little active intervention in the digital communication of accommodation. As for the "potential of digital tools", managers are aware of the advantages associated with applying them to bring growth to the business. However, as with the answers to the previous question, they highlight the lack of qualifications for more efficient use of digital marketing tools and the lack of time for greater dedication and exploitation of their potential.

We are taking advantage of this form of advertising, but we are a long way from the potential that digital marketing could bring us (I2). I think we can get a lot more out of it (...), I'm pretty sure that if we were using the tools in a more professional way, we'd get a lot more out of it in terms of users and occupancy rates (I3). Without a doubt, (...) it could be better if I had more time to devote to this, it would be ideal, and I would certainly get more results (I5). Yes, because we're getting more direct bookings, so that's the realization of what we're doing, isn't it? And even in publications, we have more reach in publications (I7).

Concerning the "benefits of social media", the interviewees were unanimous in highlighting the target audience that could be reached through the accommodation's presence on social media. This form of communication is also a more economical way of promoting and boosting business.

(...) digital marketing on social networks is very good (...), because then I publish it, people share it (...) and attracts more people. I think it has more impact and helps a lot in that respect, because I don't spend so much money (...) and I end up using social media (I1). The benefit of using it is the number of target audiences we can reach (I2). Yes, (...) if we reach the target audience, we can convey our image and our message and that message is fundamental to being able to promote and sell our business (...) customers who stay also share it on their own social networks. We also try to promote it ourselves (I6). (...) can benefit in terms of national and international visibility, of publicizing our accommodation, our products, both in terms of stays and other associated products, and even some programs that we do can be publicized more quickly, in good time, if we use them well (I8).

The answers to this question corroborate the line of thought of some authors. A form of communication that attracts customers (Costa, 2021; Kannan & Li, 2017) and increases their level of involvement (Rizvanović et al., 2023) when you share on your social networks. The low investment cost of using social networks is also mentioned by Santos (2020).

Regarding "content planning", it was found that in most cases there is no planning for publications, but that they take advantage of regional events and seasonal activities that

clients may engage in to create content. One interviewee mentioned that they adjust the timing of content publication according to regional events.

(...) there is no defined planning (I1). There is no generalized planning, but as a rule, we only advertise events that take place, from regional events to activities in our agricultural area in which our clients can take part (I2). Yes. (...) I can give you the example of the Butelo Festival and the Caretos Carnival, which were promoted in advance by publicizing what they were and what was going to happen. (...). This planning is done on a weekly basis, based on these seasons (I3). It's not very structured planning. We define it according to the time of year, but it's not very structured and we could also benefit from this structure, so we don't lose focus (I4). It's random, only as they come up, if something more than special comes up, we publish it, sometimes even more for publicity purposes (...) but it's nothing absolutely programmed (I8).

The last question sought to assess the main "challenges of digital communication". Lack of knowledge about communication/digital marketing and mastery of the tools are the most frequently mentioned challenges. Having a constant digital presence and knowing how to reach potential customers are other concerns identified by respondents.

(...) it's my ignorance (...), lack of knowledge, lack of money too, and lack of means to hire someone or to get more training in this area (I1). The biggest challenges are knowing how to navigate social networks and other digital platforms to make the most of digital marketing (I2). (...) I would like to have more knowledge and more tools to be able to use them daily (...). I know that there's already a lot of online training, (...) I'm aware that a good digital marketing base does a lot of business (I3). Perhaps the biggest challenges are the lack of mastery and knowledge (I4). It's undoubtedly about always being able to keep up with the new things that are coming out at the moment, we have artificial intelligence, it's not like we have to be constantly training (...) make a post to get views, to get guests, to create some engagement or to get where I want to go (I5). (...) I feel that we needed someone who was more available and who could, let's say, accompany us with these tools in a more professional way (...) because more knowledge means more speed, more capacity to reach (I6). (...) one of my biggest difficulties is getting to the ideal persona (...). We know what our personalities are, the niche, we're positioned there, the question is how do we reach them so they know we're here (I7). (...) organize ourselves so that we can have a constant presence and be able to properly advertise our products (...) I think that hiring an outsourcer just to manage social networks is not appropriate for us now (I8).

One of the obstacles to the use of digital marketing is the lack of knowledge, as in the study of Cheuk et al. (2018). In addition, the leaders say that keeping up with new trends and market developments, such as artificial intelligence, is also a challenge for promoting their organization in digital media. Moniz et al. (2024) point out the main challenges of digital presence as being the lack of training in human resources, budget constraints, lack of information on the strategies to be used, and limited technical information for monitoring.

CONCLUSION

Tourist consumers are increasingly looking to the digital world for information on organizing their trips. This trend has led the various tourism agents to adopt digital marketing through the various tools available, be they institutional websites, social networks, or others. The rural tourism enterprises, like other agents, seek to promote and expand their business

using digital marketing strategies. This study, carried out among the managers of RTE in Terras de Trás-os-Montes, shows some results in terms of the perception of digital marketing. Based on the analysis of the interviews, it was found that the managers recognize the importance of digital marketing for business, and that it allows them to reach a wider audience both nationally and internationally. The digital media used for promotion includes the booking platforms Booking and Airbnb, the institutional website, and the social networks Facebook and Instagram. The managers' objectives in using digital marketing include promoting the region, giving visibility to the business, and building customer loyalty. The management of digital communication is carried out by the managers themselves, who, due to their lack of qualifications and availability, hamper the efficiency of communication. The content published is not planned but merely adjusts to the timing of regional events and seasonal activities for guests. The challenges of digital marketing, identified by the interviewees, highlight the lack of knowledge and mastery of the tools available. In short, for the various RTEs managers, a constant presence in the digital world and reaching out to target audiences are top priorities for the business. Therefore, we recommend a greater frequency of publications, with content planned according to the organization's objectives, and keeping the various digital communication channels up to date.

This research reinforces the importance and use of digital marketing tools for business visibility, performance, and growth. It also fills a gap in studies from a digital marketing perspective in rural tourism. The main limitation of the research was the lack of cooperation from all the RTEs in the study region. As future lines of research, it is suggested that a comparative study be carried out with the traditional hotel industry to determine the main differences between the digital marketing strategies adopted by these entities. Another suggestion would be to replicate this study with other types of tourist agents, such as tourist entertainment agents in Terras de Trás-os-Montes, or in other low-density territories, and analyze the differences and/or similarities between the results obtained. Additionally, we propose analyzing guests' perceptions to adjust the digital marketing strategies for accommodation offerings.

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AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS (CREDIT)

Conceptualization, MR, EPM, EE; methodology, MR, EPM, EE; formal analysis, MR, EPM, EE; investigation, MR; data curation, MR; writing—original draft preparation, EE; writing—review and editing, EPM, EE; supervision, EPM, EE; Funding acquisition: EE.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data supporting the findings of this study are available upon reasonable request.

ETHICS STATEMENT

This study did not involve human participants or animals and therefore did not require ethical approval.

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