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Not only the picture to foster tourism: the interplay role of destination area hashtags on Instagram posts

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PURPOSE

Hashtags use has become an important social input in tourist purchase decisions (Popescu and Popescu, 2016; Ibba et al., 2015). Their presence in a post adds information and allows travellers to instantly search for topics of interest (Budnik et al., 2019; Page, 2012). In fact, it has been shown that hashtags are important in enriching the content of posts and in obtaining more engagement (Messina, 2007). This study aims at analysing the impact of the combination of the small destination name hashtags with hashtags mentioning the wider destination area, thus combining names of the province, the region or the nation. To reach the described objective, the following research questions are formulated: (RQ1) Which are the territorial hashtags used in the small destinations pictures capture? (RQ2) Do the mentions of the wider area through territorial hashtags impact on small destination post's engagement?

RESEARCH METHODS

A specific protocol is developed to collect and analyse data about pictures of small destinations posted on Instagram. Based on hashtags' destination names, a sample of 13217 posts of 18 Italian small destinations (cultural, mountain and seaside ones) are retrieved identifying the period of higher tourism turnout during the year 2019. These destinations are called Borghi. The term does not have a specific translation but it refers to small territories with defined features (less than 2.000 inhabitants and a remarkable urban and architectural heritage). This is a unique case worldwide due to the Italian history (Goffi and Cucculelli 2019) and the Borgo definition ensures a certain common structuring in the sample. Using Instagram API, for each picture, the time, the URL, the caption with hashtags and mentions, the user's identity, likes' and comments' numbers are collected. For the analysis of textual information, a content analysis on Instagram textual posts is run to verify the use of mentions about the main destination area (RQ1). Then linear regression models are also developed to identify the impact of area destination hashtags on the post engagement through the use of R software for statistical computing (RQ2).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Scholars have analyzed factors motivating people to use the hashtag on Instagram while traveling, but they have never focused on the link between the engagement of a photo and the hashtags related to specific or wider territories. The research returns some valuable insights on the role of hashtags in shaping the image of a small destination and its macro territory. Based on the textual analysis we can state that people use hashtags referring to the wider destination area and in particular they combine the use of the region and the nation, both as single words and creating new hastags with the combination of the territorial words and emotions or other information (i.e. #pugli lovers or #umbriatourism). Results show that combining the hashtag of a small and niche destination with the hashtags of the region, specific

and more famous territory or a macro destination area as the nation, can improve the engagement of the related picture in terms of number of likes. Therefore the visibility of the small destination is enhanced.

IMPLICATIONS

From the academic perspective this study confirms the role of the hashtags in enhancing a picture's engagement, but it also contributes to the literature about the consumers' feedback on online picture adding a new and understudied variable: the territorial dimension. This new variable is important when the objects of the research are small and thus less known destinations. From a managerial perspective, it suggests how destination management organizations should consider hashtags preferences in Instagram, in order to improve their offerings in line with the soul of a small destination and the needs of tourists. Results suggest to use hashtags related to the region, the nation and other more famous destinations in the area in order to promote the small destination. Due to these findings, further studies could put together the analysis of hashtags use and image content to reinforce the insights found in creating or enhancing engagement.

KEYWORDS

hashtag, small destination, tourist area, Instagram

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